

Communications

To the Editor of the *Journal of Sport History*:

Professor Dickason's review of my book, *How Boston Played*, and his emphasis on chapter five, underscores the need for continued research into the history of public parks and playgrounds. Despite a recent flurry of books and articles on this subject, we have only begun to scratch the surface. If we are to understand more about these important issues that bring sport history so close to the mainstream of urban and social history, however, we must recognize that concepts like "playgrounds," "parks"—or "sport" for that matter—were not universally understood by the men and women who interacted with their tangible, historical forms.

Professor Dickason chides me for my lack of "an explanation of what playgrounds are." In fact, I spend considerable time differentiating between the "old" idea (open space), visible in public petitions throughout the book's time period, and the "new" (supervised play activities), seen in the writings of the MEHA, of Joseph Lee, and of other reformers. I have, however, purposely steered clear of the rigid categorization that Professor Dickason suggests in his review, precisely because of my belief that "playgrounds" meant different things to different people. Dickason's definition of the "post-1887 playground" was in fact only one form—the one run by the MEHA and its followers. But this was by no means the majority of cases.

Indeed. Dickason's comment that public playgrounds after 1887 were small, fenced-in enclosures for boys and girls four to nine years old, runs quite contrary to the minutes of the parks department, the most comprehensive record of public playground development. The major push for playgrounds came *after 1887*; the object of attention was what Dickason calls the pre-1887 playground! The park minutes throughout the 1890's indicate pressure for open space throughout the city that could be used by "youth" or "boys" or "children" (never clearly defined) for a range of activities.

Unfortunately, Professor Dickason has mistakenly universalized the MEHA's and to some extent Joseph Lee's definition of a playground. This was not what the citizen lobbies, who were the driving force for acquisition, had in mind. As I point out, they had no specific programs in mind, only the need for space for playing—what they called "playgrounds."

As Alan Ingham and I point out in a forthcoming article in *Journal of Social History*, playgrounds as open space won widespread support, no doubt because of the lack of rigid definitions. The next battle, which Dickason's fine dissertation partially examines, was over the control of this public space once it was acquired. Here, as Dickason suggests, there is no doubt that the

MEHA, the Massachusetts Civil League, and similar reform groups were influential in spreading the gospel of supervised play. Moreover, they had direct control over the daily activities at a number of the city's playgrounds. But not over all of them. And, as Dickason points out in his dissertation, the reformers were at times forced to share their control with local "tramps" who ruled the juvenile gangs.

The *MEHA Annual Reports* illustrate the support and influence of one reform group. They did not, however, control the development of playgrounds in Boston. I stand by my contention that neighborhood lobbies were the main force behind the acceptance and acquisition of playgrounds (in the "old" and more widely understood sense). The actual control of activities on these playgrounds remains in need of more research.

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