

The State Fair and the Development of Modern Sports in Late Nineteenth Century North Carolina*

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In the latter part of the nineteenth century the North Carolina State Fair was the most important venue for organized sports in the Tar Heel state. The annual agricultural fair, held in mid to late October in the capital city of Raleigh, was an important site for the development of modern sports in the overwhelmingly rural state. Beginning in 1873, when the fair moved from its first, small site in east Raleigh to a relatively spacious fifty-five acre second tract in west Raleigh, the fair hosted a veritable potpourri of sports, including horseracing, target shooting, trap shooting, baseball, football, bicycle racing, pedestrianism, gymnastics, track and field, and even Cherokee lacrosse.

It was during this period that the folk sports of the early American republic evolved into the modern spectator sports of the twentieth century. Sports became increasingly sophisticated and organized. Nascent bureaucracies established standardized rules, promoted equality of competition, and plugged local sports into a national framework. Local and national media paid increased attention to sports, while role differentiation between spectators and participants increased, as did the skill levels of the increasingly specialized players.¹

This transition was largely fueled by urbanization. It was in the burgeoning cities of post Civil War America that spectator sports developed. The cities provided the population density necessary for the business of professional sports. The cities also provided superior facilities, unprecedented newspaper exposure, interurban and intraurban transportation networks, and ready made rivalries. Perhaps most importantly the cities provided a middle class of businessmen, merchants, and professionals with the leisure time, financial resources, and inclination to support spectator sports.²

This was not the case in late nineteenth century North Carolina, however. For a variety of reasons, mostly having to do with geography, transportation

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1. Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Sports* (New York, 1978), 15-55; Melvin Adelman, *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise Of Modern Athletics 1820-1870* (Urbana and Chicago, 1986), 6.

2. Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1983), 46; Adelman, *A Sporting Time*, 73, 101.

shortcomings, and internal politics, the state was late in developing cities of consequence. In 1880 Wilmington, with seventeen thousand, was the only city in the state with a population in excess of ten thousand, while as late as 1900 less than ten percent of the state's population was classified as urban.³

North Carolina's sporting scene therefore remained largely unorganized, rural, and isolated. For example, although baseball was enormously popular throughout the state in the 1880s and 1890s the first formal minor leagues did not appear until the early twentieth century and minor league ball did not gain a permanent foothold until 1908. The state's colleges and universities were small and poor and were unable to fill the vacuum. Sports such as golf and tennis were largely restricted to a relatively small leisure class while the almost totally native born population lacked the immigrant input that in other states gave impetus to such sports as boxing and gymnastics.⁴

The North Carolina State Fair during this period filled a void in the recreational fabric of the state. The fair was founded in 1853 by the North Carolina Agricultural Society, a group of enlightened planters including such members of the state's antebellum elite as former North Carolina Supreme Court Chief Justice Thomas Ruffin, newspaper editor John Tompkins, Lexington physician-turned-planter Thomas Holt, Whig congressman Kenneth Rayner, and wealthy Orange County planter Paul Cameron.⁵

Like most agricultural fairs it was founded to promote scientific, progressive agriculture. The Society used premiums, contests, exhibits, speakers, and educational displays to further this goal. The fair also promoted industrial development in the state, although to a lesser extent than agriculture. After the Civil War, when North Carolina, like the rest of the South, was in the thrall of New South rhetoric, the fair was increasingly used to publicize North Carolina's textile, tobacco, and furniture manufacturing concerns. Likewise many of the fair's leaders "invested in agriculture, industry, transportation, and commerce."⁶

The fair's blend of agricultural and industrial, rural and urban was relatively

3. Hugh Talmage Lefler and Albert Ray Newsome, *North Carolina: The History of a Southern State* (Chapel Hill, third edition, 1973), 576, 715; *Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1900. Population Schedule, North Carolina*, (Washington, 1901), 780-781.

4. Jim L. Sumner, "The North Carolina State Professional Baseball League of 1902," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 64 (1987): 247-273; Bill Beezley *The Wolfpack: Intercollegiate Athletics at North Carolina State University* (Raleigh, 1976), 3-5. For a discussion of North Carolina leisure activities during this period see Sydney Nathans, *The Quest for Progress, The Way We Lived in North Carolina, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill, 1983), 85-94.

5. Cornelius Oliver Cathey, *Agricultural Developments in North Carolina, 1783-1860* (Chapel Hill, 1956), 80-84; Melton A. McLaurin, "The Nineteenth Century North Carolina State Fair as a Social Institution," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 59 (1982): 213-229; Donald B. Marti, *Historical Directory of American Agricultural Fairs* (New York, 1985), 135-136. There is no published history of the North Carolina State Fair. The most comprehensive overview of the nineteenth century fair is Melton Alonza McLaurin, "The North Carolina State Fair, 1853-1899" (Unpublished master's thesis, East Carolina College [now University], 1963).

6. McLaurin, "The North Carolina State Fair," 73-86; Paul D. Escott, *Many Excellent People: Power and Privilege in North Carolina, 1850-1900* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 199. Paul Cameron is an example of the diverse interests of the fair's founders. The richest man in antebellum North Carolina and a model planter, Cameron owned some thirty thousand acres and almost two thousand slaves. He was also, however, a banker, an investor in industries, and a railroad investor and director. William S. Powell, ed., *Dictionary of North Carolina Biography* (Chapel Hill, projected multivolume series, 1979-), I: 312-313.

free of controversy. There was another side of the fair, however. From its inception, bands, parades, horseraces, and political oratory competed with agricultural contests and educational displays for the attention and affection of its patrons. This duality was more problematical. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the fair's original educational function was increasingly submerged to its social, recreational, and entertainment functions. Entertainment became crucial to the prosperity of the fair as fairgoers, both rural and urban, were "encouraged . . . to spend both day and night in the pursuit of pleasure."⁷ Sports at the fair were part of a larger trend to entertain rather than educate fair patrons.

The recreational component of the fair got a major boost with the construction of new facilities on the larger site in 1873. One of the cornerstones of the new site was a three story grandstand measuring 300 feet by 44 feet and possessing a seating capacity of some 6,000. The grandstand overlooked the half-mile race track.⁸ Such a facility was hardly necessary for promoting agriculture but was highly useful for recreational activities. At a time when North Carolina sports crowds were measured in the hundreds this impressive facility gave the fair the opportunity to seat crowds well in excess of what the average Tar Heel sports enthusiast was accustomed to. Weather permitting, the grandstand was routinely filled on Thursday, traditionally the biggest day of fair week. Crowds of ten, twelve, or fifteen thousand were common during the 1890s.

The track was designed by a New York civil engineer under the direction of George Wilkes, editor of the *Spirit of the Times*, and was presented free to the Society by an anonymous friend.⁹ After the first races in 1873 Virginia horse-racing expert John Belcher told a Raleigh newspaper that the new facilities were the "finest fair grounds in America and the best half mile track he ever saw."¹⁰ Although not all later assessments agreed with Belcher's accolades, it was generally agreed that the track was at least the finest in the state. Most sporting events at the fair took place either on the track or on its infield, in easy view of the crowded grandstand.

The fair provided more than just superior facilities and large crowds for sporting activities. At a time when even the largest North Carolina community could look forward only to a four to eight page newspaper and the formal sports page was decades away, the fair received abundant publicity. Truly a statewide event, the fair was routinely covered by virtually every newspaper in the state, although the Raleigh newspapers gave it the most extensive coverage. Raleigh

7. McLaurin, "The Nineteenth Century North Carolina State Fair," 227. The North Carolina Fair was hardly unique for accenting recreation over more "serious" pursuits. See Wayne Caldwell Neely, *The Agricultural Fair* (New York, 1935), 185-215.

8. *North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet for 1873* (Published annually in Raleigh under varying titles; hereinafter cited as *North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet*, with appropriate year.). IX.

9. *North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet for 1873*, IX-X. Announced attendance figures were general admission figures. Admission to the grandstand bleachers was free with a general admission ticket, although an extra twenty-five cents was charged for a seat in the reserved section. Announced attendance figures were total figures for a given day. It is not possible to determine attendance for a particular event.

10. *Daily Sentinel* (Raleigh), October 17, 1873.



Grandstand overlooking race track. 1884 (Courtesy of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History).

had better rail connections than most other communities, and special cars and special rates were available to the fair from most towns. “Meet me at the fair” became a cry for many North Carolinians, as the event offered sportsmen from different parts of the state a rare chance to meet in athletic competition in front of large, enthusiastic crowds.

On the other hand, the fair never developed a coherent, consistent policy towards sports. Newer sports, such as baseball and football, lacked tradition and were generally not taken as seriously as older sports such as horseracing or shooting. Nor was any distinction made between competitive sports and the other forms of entertainment which became popular after the war—the midway, freak shows, hot air balloons, and so forth. With the exception of horseracing, sports were never part of the fair’s permanent structure. Thus there was little to keep the newer sports at the fair once new avenues opened up.

Horseracing was the most popular sport at the fair. Virtually every agricultural fair of any size in the United States offered some horseracing during this period. In fact critics argued that some fairs were little more than excuses for horseraces. In the words of historian Wayne Neely “Horse racing . . . possessed the peculiar power of providing pleasure which was justified in terms of utility.” This was particularly true of trotters who were considered “a more utilitarian animal suited to the farmer’s needs.”¹¹ Horses were both a tool for

11. Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*, 191; John Rickards Betts “Agricultural Fairs and the Rise of Harness Racing,” *Agricultural History* 27 (April, 1953): 74.

agriculture and a product of agriculture. It was easy for devotees of horseracing to justify the sport as a means of improving the quality of horses and validating theories of scientific breeding, while enjoying the visceral thrill of the race and the everpresent friendly wager. The fact that horseracing was intimately associated with the state's economic and political elite—the same men who made up the leadership of the Society—further insured that horseracing would maintain a privileged spot on the fair's schedule.

Some of the popularity and flavor of the sport can be seen in contemporary accounts. In 1894 a Raleigh newspaper described the fair's races: "There sat the great array of people, some standing soberly among the men . . . most of them sitting; young fellows with their sweethearts, families, debutantes together, the same blush over them all." Four years later the same paper wrote:

A horse race appeals to more men perhaps than any other one thing, a dog fight always excepted, and it is not at all to the discredit of the men. When the horses faced the flag yesterday, accordingly the fence for nearly half the track length was lined with men to see the trial of speed while the grand stand held numbers of the feminine lovers of horse flesh.¹²

Horseracing at the fair was not only an annual event but was almost a daily event. Since horseracing was crucial for good gate receipts races were generally held on every fair day. Rather than have a few races with a large number of entries the Society preferred to have a large number of races with relatively small fields. A typical year would have around fifteen races, usually with three to five horses per race. The races were about equally divided between running and trotting. Steeplechase races were tried during the 1870s but were not popular and were discontinued. Many races were run in heats with two or even three victories necessary to claim first prize. Purses varied, generally ranging from \$50 to \$350. There were some \$500 purses and one \$800 purse in 1873. The latter was too rich for the Society and even the \$500 purses disappeared by the 1880s. The winning horse always won at least half but never all of the purse. Distances ranged from one quarter mile to two miles, with one mile the most common.¹³

Horseracing differed from other fair sports in structure as well as popularity. It was easily the most bureaucratized sport. The running contests were held under the rules of the American Jockey Club and the trotting under the regulations of the National Trotting Association. More importantly the Trials of Speed Department was a permanent department of the fair, with a regular director. The purses were technically considered premiums, not unlike the premiums given for mechanical arts, horticulture, and other, more mundane activities. This was an important distinction. Permanent departments were a fixed part of the fair's structure, with a venue, schedule, and structure that were established well in advance of the fair and printed in the annual premium book.

12. *News and Observer* (Raleigh), October 25, 1894; October 26, 1898.

13. Information on race lengths and purses is from *The North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet*, 1873–1900.

By contrast other sports were scheduled in a relatively casual, ad hoc manner, were comparatively underpublicized, and went on and off the fair's schedule in no discernible pattern.¹⁴

Horsereading was the only fair sport that routinely attracted entrants from outside of North Carolina. Most out of state horses were from Virginia, but horses from New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, South Carolina and other states were shipped to Raleigh. However, the majority of horses were from North Carolina, such as in 1894, when racers from Raleigh, Graham, Reidsville, Durham, Goldsboro, Greensboro, New Bern, Asheville, Salisbury, Winston, and Tarboro were joined by a handful of out-of-state horses. Many of the North Carolina horses were owned by locally prominent Tar Heels, such as Alamance County textile magnate L. Banks Holt, Raleigh attorney W.P. Batchelor, and Paul Cameron's son Bannehan Cameron.¹⁵

The most ardent horseracer, however, was well known Orange County planter James Norwood. An enthusiastic supporter of virtually every fair activity Norwood had forty-seven entries in various fair exhibits in 1875, including "a number of fine horses." Norwood entered eight thoroughbred race horses in 1879, while in 1890 it was reported that he entered "some of the finest blooded horses . . . to be seen anywhere in the country." Yet horseracing was not the sport for which Norwood was best known. He was also a highly successful breeder of fighting gamecocks. Although not yet illegal in North Carolina during this period cockfighting was sufficiently distasteful to most that it was not one of the fair's offerings.¹⁶

Horsereading was not without its critics or problems, however. The pervasive gambling that was so closely associated with the sport troubled many fairgoers. North Carolina, in the middle of the so-called "Bible Belt," did not have formal pari-mutuel gambling or indeed any provision for official gambling. Yet there is little doubt that gambling was widespread. One account discusses "the most important feature of the fair—the races . . . enough to make you rich if you are a betting man and get on the right side or enough to break you if you happen to be among the unlucky ones." Men such as L. Banks Holt were concerned with this problem but were unable to totally control it. The fair, however, did escape the kind of major scandals that rocked New Orleans in the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁷ Most

14. *News and Observer*, October 16, 1886; October 15, 1898.

15. *News and Observer*, October 14, 1894; Holt was also typical of the diversified leader of the fair. A member of one of North Carolina's leading textile families, he also owned several large farms across the state and raised thoroughbred racing horses on his Oak Grove farm. Samuel A. Ashe, ed., *Biographical History of North Carolina From Colonial Times to the Present* (Greensboro, 8 volumes, 1915-1927) VII: 204-210.

16. *Daily Sentinel*, September 27, 1875; *News and Observer*, October 6, 1879; October 15, 1890; B.W.C. Roberts, "Cockfighting: An Early Entertainment in North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 42 (1965): 307.

17. *News and Observer*, October 20, 1896. Also see Ida B. Anyell to Annie Lewis, October 21, 1876, Kenelm H. Lewis Papers, North Carolina Archives, Division of Archives and History, Raleigh; *Daily Sentinel*, October 21, 1876; L. Banks Holt to Bannehan Cameron, August 11, 1896, Bannehan Cameron Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill. Holt, Cameron, and other fair officials were apparently little concerned with the morality of gambling but were worried by the potential for bribery and fraud. For an account of the problems in New Orleans see Dale A. Somers, *The Rise of Sports in New Orleans, 1850-1900* (Baton Rouge, 1972), 106-107.

fairgoers apparently heeded the plea of one racing fan who pleaded for tolerance: "if the highly moral people would only stand back and give us sinners a chance to see there would be less grumbling and more charity and good will."¹⁸

There were other concerns. In 1895 a Maryland critic wrote Bennehan Cameron, who had recently been elected president of the Society: "The greatest objection (to horsemen) to racing in North Carolina has all ways been the smallness of the purses, incompetent judges, confliction of dates and the fair's bad track." For these reasons horseracing suffered a slight but noticeable decline in popularity during the early 1890s. In 1892 one disgruntled observer wrote:

The visitors at the fair do not seem to appreciate racing as much as they do the Wild West performance and side show amusements. The grand stand was crowded when the exhibition by Pawnee Bill concluded but when the judges tapped the bell for the . . . race the audience dwindled down to a small number. They departed to see the mysteries in the tent, the homed lady or the two headed man."¹⁹

Cameron, a noted horse lover, worked hard to overcome these problems, but met with only mixed success. He was able to add to the fair a higher quality of judges in 1896, men like W. J. Carter of Richmond, Virginia. This improvement was quickly noted by fairgoers who commented that for the first time in years there were no disputes, no false starts and no delays.²⁰ Cameron also placed the North Carolina Fair in a Southern circuit which included races in Baltimore, Richmond, Norfolk, and Columbia, among other sites. However, Cameron was only able to allot a small sum for track improvements and was unable to increase the purses and attract better out of state horses.²¹ Thus Cameron and his



Cartoon from (Raleigh) *North Carolinian*, 31 October 1895 (Courtesy of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History).

18. *News and Observer*, October 17, 1878.

19. R. E. Biggs to Bennehan Cameron, December 11, 1895, Cameron Papers; *News and Observer*, October 20, 1892.

20. *News and Observer*, October 23, 1896; John Nichols to Bennehan Cameron, August 7, 1896, September 1, 1896; L. L. Slaton to Cameron, August 5, 1896; John Nichols to Wood Martin, September 29, 1896; W. J. Carter to Cameron, November 3, 1896, Cameron Papers. W.J. Carter, a writer for the *Richmond Times*, was a highly regarded judge in races throughout the South.

21. William Owen to Bennehan Cameron, August 7, 1896. Cameron Papers; In 1895 R. E. Biggs wrote Cameron that "most of the tracks in North Carolina are unfit to race over owing to the soil, much of which can be remedied by having the track well worked and cared for." Yet fair officials spent only \$21.85 for race track

immediate successors were able to stabilize horseracing at the fair but were unable to make it fully competitive with the best racing in other states.

Although horseracing was the dominant sport at the fair it was far from the only one. Another popular manifestation of the state's rural heritage was shooting. Guns were as common as horses in North Carolina and hunting was an almost universal rite-of-passage into manhood. After the Civil War drill teams became popular at the fair, a legacy of the 'Lost Cause' mentality that pervaded the South. A logical combination was target shooting contested by drill units. Clubs such as the Fayetteville Light Infantry, the Raleigh Light Infantry, the Wilmington Light Infantry, the Newbern Grays, the Bingham Cadets, the Hornets' Nest Gun Club (Charlotte), the Asheville Gun Club, the Durham Light Infantry, and the Raleigh Artillery regularly contested for a flag presented by the Society to the champion shooters.²²

Individuals also competed in shooting competition, especially trap shooting. A particularly popular variety of trap shooting was glass ball shooting, which was a regular feature of the fair during this period. In 1880, for example, eighteen entrants from across the state competed in the glass ball contest.²³ Although technically amateurs these shooters competed for prizes of some substance. In a typical contest in 1878 marksmen competed for an "elegant double barreled Greene Gun" valued at \$150 and lauded as a "splendid specimen of workman."²⁴

If horseracing and target shooting looked towards the state's rural past the fair had no shortage of newer, more modern sports. Compared to horseracing and shooting, which were relatively well organized, the attitude of fair officials towards these newer sports was somewhat haphazard. The Society had little experience in these sports and wasn't quite sure what to do with them. In 1873 the Waverly baseball team of Goldsboro was scheduled to play a team from Pittsboro at the fair. When they arrived at the fairgrounds the Goldsboro team discovered that "although they were invited to play no arrangements had been made for them, and the players had to pay the expense of preparing the grounds on which they played, and for the drinking water brought them while the game was going on." In 1877 a gymnastics competition was virtually ignored when fair authorities failed to secure a judge or set up the equipment.²⁵ Although flagrant episodes such as these were rare it is clear that these sports were generally regarded as little more than frivolities, or as one official put it, "A Gala Day for the Young People."²⁶

Despite this lack of attention certain athletic enthusiasts did use the fair to

maintenance the next year. Biggs to Cameron, December 11, 1895; North Carolina State Fair Balance Sheet for 1896, *Cameron Papers*.

22. *Charlotte Observer*, October 16-19, 1896; North Carolina State Fair *Premium Booklet for 1878*, 74-75; McLaurin, "The Nineteenth-Century North Carolina State Fair," 216-217.

23. *News and Observer*, October 21-23, 1880. Glass balls were the first trap shooting targets. The balls had a 2½ inch diameter and were released by a revolving trap. By the end of the nineteenth century they had been largely replaced by clay pigeons.

24. *News and Observer*, October 4, 12, 1878.

25. *Carolina Messenger* (Goldsboro), October 23, 1873; *News and Observer*, October 20, 1877.

26. *North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet for 1881*, 46.

promote their sports. Although baseball was a summer sport not particularly well suited for the sometimes cool weather of the autumn fair, it was popular during the 1870s. The aforementioned 1873 Goldsboro Waverly-Pittsboro game is an example. Prior to the game a Goldsboro paper implored its readers, "especially the ladies," to cheer on the local team. The game was well attended but unfortunately was quite one sided with Waverly winning 54–25, scoring 13 runs in the 9th inning. The game caused some ill feelings between the teams. One Goldsboro observer wrote "The Pittsboro boys . . . could not knock those red hot balls as easily as they vanished from the grounds after the game, and not even would they give our boys a cheer."²⁷

The 1874 fair featured the Raleigh Athletics, a well known amateur nine, and the self proclaimed premier team in the state. The Athletics were challenged by the Elm City nine from New Bern who announced that "If the Athletics of Raleigh sustain their reputation . . . the playing will be unequalled by any game yet seen in the State. It is with the crack Raleigh club that our boys are anxious to measure strength."²⁸ The New Bern team shocked the local Raleigh team, winning by a 22–16 score and claiming the laurels as the best team in the state. Another Raleigh team fared better, however. The Raleigh Swiftfoots humiliated the Farmers Club of Wake Forest 72–9 in a game that probably didn't make any converts for baseball.²⁹

The Athletics and the Elm City club challenged each other in the 1875 fair. Both teams used their local newspapers to snipe at each other in the weeks preceding the rematch. The Raleigh team attributed its loss in 1874 to the absence of a key player while the New Bern team retorted that "a similar inglorious defeat awaits the Athletics as overwhelmed them last year. It is to be hoped that they will bear it better, however."³⁰ Once again the Elm City nine backed its boasts by defeating the Athletics 11–9. The game was described as "long and hotly contested, amid much excitement and cheers and countercheers of the interested spectators."³¹

Despite the popularity of these early baseball games the sport was short lived at the fair. It was apparently not played after the 1875 contest and it is not clear why. Possibly this absence was due to ill feeling over the poor treatment afforded the 1873 teams or a desire not to prolong the season into October. Although the fair continued to offer superior facilities baseball enthusiasts evidently preferred to play in a more congenial atmosphere and season.

The team sport void left by the loss of baseball was partially filled in the next decade by intercollegiate football. Football first made an appearance at the fair in 1888 when a team representing the sophomore class of the University of North Carolina squared off against a team from Wake Forest College. This game was the first intercollegiate football game played in North Carolina,

27. *Carolina Messenger*, October 13, 23, 1873.

28. *New Bern Journal of Commerce* quoted in *Daily Sentinel*, October 12, 1874.

29. *Daily Sentinel*, October 15–17, 1874.

30. *Daily Sentinel* September 25, 1875; *Journal of Commerce*, September 29, 1875.

31. *Daily Sentinel*. October 15, 1875.

although it was not played under the standard rules of the day. The rules adopted for the game included fifteen player teams, two point goals, and provisions which allowed the ball to be advanced by running, kicking, or forward passing. The game was played on a makeshift field inside the oval in front of the grandstand. Wake Forest won 6–4. Despite the hybrid rules one newspaper found it “Decidely one of the most interesting features of the fair. The game was exciting and . . . was witnessed by a tremendous crowd.”³² About a month later a reorganized UNC team met Trinity College (later Duke University) in the first scientific game of football played in the state, while afterwards the three football playing schools formed the North Carolina Intercollegiate Football Association.³³

Despite the apparent success of the 1888 game, football was only an intermittent attraction at the fair during the 1890s. Many educators felt the violent, provocative sport was inappropriate for institutions of higher learning. Therefore the colleges played brief, irregular schedules, making it difficult to schedule games. In 1892 two teams from North Carolina A&M (later North Carolina State) played an intrasquad exhibition for a large enthusiastic crowd.³⁴ The next year, in a particularly well received game at the fair Trinity defeated Wake Forest by a 12–6 score. Ironically, both schools shortly abolished the sport, making this state fair clash the last game between the two schools until 1921.³⁵

With Trinity and Wake Forest out of the picture and UNC apparently preferring to play its games on campus, the fair was left with few options. In 1899 A&M defeated Bingham Academy 18–0 at the fair. The next year A&M lost to Virginia Polytechnic Institute by an 18–2 score.³⁶ This was the first meeting in what would become an important regional rivalry. In the early part of the twentieth century A&M improved their facilities and began to keep their games on campus, although the school frequently scheduled home games to coincide with fair week.

Participants challenged the horses for supremacy at the track in several sports. The most successful of these was bicycle racing, a sport which became

32. *North Carolina University Magazine*, 8 (1888): 85; *News and Observer*, October 19, 1888; *The Wake Forest Student* 8 (November, 1888): 84.

33. *North Carolina University Magazine*, 8 (1888): 85-86; *The Trinity Archive II* (January, 1889): 77. For more on the league and the origin of intercollegiate football in North Carolina see Jim L. Sumner, “The North Carolina Intercollegiate Football Association: The Beginning of College Football in North Carolina,” *The North Carolina Historical Review* 65(July, 1988).

34. *News and Observer*, October 21, 1892. There is a sizable literature on the difficult early years of college football. See for example, John Hammond Moore, “Football’s Ugly Decades, 1893-1913,” in *The American Sporting Experience: A Historical Anthology of Sport in America*, ed. Steven A. Riess (West Point, N.Y., 1984); Ronald A. Smith, “Harvard and Columbia and a Reconsideration of the 1905-1906 Football Crisis,” *Journal of Sport History* 8 (Winter, 1981): 5-19; Roberta J. Park, “From Football to Rugby and Back, 1906-1919: The University of California-Stanford University Response to the ‘Football Crisis of 1905,’” *Ibid.*, 11 (Winter, 1984): 5-40; Betts, *America’s Sporting Heritage*, 124-130; Radar, *American Sports*, 134-144, John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport* (Philadelphia, 1978), 229-244. For college football in North Carolina during this period see Beezley, *The Wolfpack* 3-37; Sumner, “The North Carolina Intercollegiate Football Association.”

35. *News and Observer*, October 15, 18, 1893; Ted Mann, *A Story of Glory: Duke University Football* (Greenville, S.C., 1985), 48-49; Bruce A. Corrie, *The Atlantic Coast Conference, 1953-1978* (Durham, 1978) 11-12;

36. *News and Observer*, October 21, 1899; October 21, 1900.

nationally popular in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This sport was introduced to the fair in 1880 and increased in popularity over the next two decades.³⁷ Competitors were technically amateurs, although fair officials defined the term broadly to include anyone who rode only in their home state or within a 100 mile radius of their home, for prizes not exceeding \$35 in value and did not receive payment or expenses from manufacturers.³⁸ This allowed sufficient leeway to attract riders from neighboring states to compete for prizes that included bicycles, equipment and trips. Although races were contested individually, many entrants were members of urban bicycle clubs.

By the middle 1890s bicycle racing had become popular and relatively sophisticated. Races were run under the rules of the League of American Wheelmen, and for a few years had their own director. In 1897 fair officials planned a particularly ambitious schedule; eleven races were scheduled, ranging from one quarter of a mile to five miles. Perrin Busbee of Raleigh, a former University of North Carolina football and baseball star was named director of the races.³⁹ One newspaper rhapsodically welcomed the “blythe and swift cyclists, the modem wind burners who strike the earth only in high places and who imperil the primacy of horse-racing as the chief attraction of the Fair”⁴⁰

Fate derailed bicycle racing’s 1897 challenge to horseracing. Heavy rains during the week turned the track into a quagmire, cancelling both the horse and bicycle racing. On the fair’s last day the skies cleared and the track was declared usable. A full schedule of horseraces was held, while the bicycle races remained cancelled, clear evidence that the former sport remained the fair’s favorite.⁴¹ Although bicycle racing continued for the next few years the Society never planned a schedule as ambitious as the aborted 1897 schedule. The development of the automobile in the early years of the twentieth century was one of several developments that burst the bicycle bubble in North Carolina and the rest of the country.⁴²

Races that involved more primitive means of locomotion were less popular at the fair. In 1873 well-known pedestrian Edward Payson Weston came to the fair for a combination demonstration/race. Weston impressed observers as “intelligent and modest and gentlemanly in deportment.”⁴³ He further impressed the

37. *News and Observer*, October 22, 1880. Bicycle racing became popular in agricultural fairs across the country in the 1890s, but declined in popularity in the early 1900s. Neely, *The Agricultural Fair*, 210-211.

38. *News and Observer*, October 17, 1897.

39. *News and Observer*, October 16-17, 1897; *North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet for 1897*, V. In 1902 Busbee served as president of the North Carolina State Professional Baseball League, a six team minor league. Sumner. “North Carolina State Professional Baseball League of 1902,” 254-255; *News and Observer*, January 10, 1935.

40. *News and Observer*, October 17, 1897.

41. *News and Observer*, October 21-24, 1897. It is probably not a coincidence that bicycle racing peaked at the fair about the same time as it reached the high point of its national popularity. According to one historian the bicycle craze peaked in 1896, at which time there were some four million American riders. Richard Hammond, “Progress and Flight: An Interpretation of the American Cycle Craze of the 1890s,” in *The American Sporting Experience*, 195, 203.

42. One historian lists the following causes for the decline of the bicycle: the development of the automobile, the country club, and trolley lines to suburbs and the immediate countryside, monopolization of manufacturing concerns, and the collapse of the League of American Wheelmen due to its failure to advertise. Betts, *America’s Sporting Heritage*. 155.

43. *Doily Sentinel*. October 16, 1873.

crowd by race walking five miles in 58:57, walking every other lap backwards. Four North Carolinians, two from Wake County, one from Johnston County, and one from Alamance County, tried in vain to match strides with the master. Sterling Alston, of Alamance County, was a black man, a rare example of integrated athletic competition in late nineteenth century North Carolina. Weston agreed with the horse fanciers that the new track was “one of the best he had ever walked over.” Despite this promising beginning pedestrianism never caught on at the fair. In 1879 a four hour walking match was planned with a first prize of twenty dollars. Although the contest attracted only two entrants, Thomas Ewell and Jesse Coward, both from Craven County, the race was surprisingly competitive. Ewell walked just under 23 miles, a quite respectable distance and defeated Coward by about 200 yards.⁴⁴

After the lackluster 1879 turnout fair officials apparently gave up on pedestrianism. There were, however, several scattered attempts at hosting running foot races. In 1889 five young men, three from Raleigh and two from Trinity College squared off in a 150 yard footrace. Interestingly the race was run in two heats, as if it were a horserace. T. C. Daniels, one of the Trinity students, won both heats in respective times of 16 seconds and 15^{7/8} seconds. The student pocketed a first prize of fifty dollars for his feat which was “witnessed by a tremendous crowd amid much enthusiasm.” A more ambitious schedule of track and field events scheduled for the 1897 fair fell victim to that year’s incessant rains.⁴⁵

Some sports brought a taste of the exotic to the fair, blurring whatever distinction existed between sports and show. Young Cherokees from the North Carolina mountains demonstrated their ancient sport of lacrosse to an enthusiastic reception on several occasions. After one exhibition “watched by a tremendous crowd from the grandstand’ it was reported that “the Indians played with spirit and created as much excitement and enthusiasm as an inter collegiate foot ball game ever did.”⁴⁶ However, lacrosse at the fair was strictly an exhibition sport played between tribal members. Showing even more pageantry were the periodic sabre and archery contests. In obvious imitation of Sir Walter Scott contestants with such fanciful names as the “Knight of Enderle,” or the “Knight of Ivanhoe,” competed for the chance to escort the Queen of Love and Beauty to the Grand Tournament Ball.⁴⁷

By the early part of the twentieth century the state fair had lost most of its importance as a site for spectator sports in North Carolina. Horseracing was so well entrenched that it remained a state fair staple well into the twentieth century, while target shooting retained its popularity into the early 1900s. Bicycle racing and pedestrianism faded from the national and local sport scene as the automobile changed the American life-style. Other sports left the fair arena as new venues opened up. College campuses, with improved facilities and

44. *Daily Sentinel*, October 17-18, 1873; *Daily Messenger*, October 17, 1873; *59 News and Observer*, October 14, 18, 1879.

45. *News and Observer*, October 13, 19, 1889; October 17, 23, 1897; *North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet for 1897*, V-VI.

46. *News and Observer*, October 17, 1889.

47. *News and Observer*, October 11, 25, 1895; *North Carolina State Fair Premium Booklet for 1881*, 9.

increased interest, became a focal point for football, baseball, and track and field. Likewise, the increased sophistication of organized professional baseball, the growth of North Carolina cities after 1900, and the subsequent development of professional minor leagues gave North Carolina sports fans new options. Since these sports were scheduled at the fair at irregular, seemingly random intervals and were never fully accepted by the fair hierarchy anyway, there was little need for enthusiasts not to leave the fair and take full advantage of these new opportunities. The fair gladly filled the gaps with more midway activities, carnival events, freak shows, and oratory.

Yet for a quarter of a century the State Fair was an important incubator for North Carolina sports. Although ostensibly an institution devoted to agricultural education and promotion the fair was in reality a hybrid of educational and recreational forms, with rural and urban appeal. Many of its sports participants were urban residents or college students, representing prototype sports organizations such as amateur town baseball nines, urban bicycle and gun clubs, and early college football teams. The state's post Civil War sporting scene used the fair's facilities, crowds, goodwill, and bureaucracy to promote their activities, and introduce Tar Heels to novel forms of recreation. The indifference of the fair towards the new sports programs of the state's colleges and cities in the twentieth century should not obscure the important role it played in the development of these programs.