

Smith, Ronald A. *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988. Pp. 222. Appendix, notes, index.

Those who are familiar with the rapid advances that have occurred in sport history over the last two decades will recognize the name of Ronald Smith, author of *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time Athletics*. Dr. Smith has been the energetic and effective secretary-treasurer of the North American Society for Sport History since that organization's inception in 1972. He is also known to us for several papers in the *Journal of Sport History*, *New England Quarterly*, *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, and elsewhere, and as the co-author (with John Lucas) of one of the more widely-used textbooks *Saga of American Sport* (1978). The author is an acknowledged authority on the formative years of intercollegiate athletics at Harvard and Yale (ca. 1850-1915) and at American colleges and universities more generally. *Sports and Freedom* centers on these decades, although a number of events preceding the 1852 Harvard-Yale crew race are discussed; and an epilogue is included which outlines problems that have persisted into the 1980s.

Professor Smith possesses an extensive knowledge of athletics at Harvard and Yale-and at those institutions which sought to emulate (even as they criticized) the practices of these two leading institutions in the quest for victory on the field, water, and cinder path. As is clearly evident from the "Notes" section, the author has diligently searched a multitude of those late nineteenth and early twentieth century sources that endlessly discussed, criticized, lauded-and frequently reveled in-men's intercollegiate athletics: school and college libraries, archival collections, contemporary journals, newspapers, etc. *Sports and Freedom* is clearly a labor of love, and Dr. Smith, who has his own athletic accomplishments, has the advantage of knowing these phenomena from the "insider's" perspective as well as from that of the historian,

As in dealing with any historical work, the reader will benefit from consulting both the preface and the text to elicit the author's hypotheses, assumptions (unstated as well as stated), and the frameworks that have guided the presentation of evidence and the analyses. As the title indicates, the major thrust of this study centers around the notion of "freedom" as a fundamental tenet of the American way of life. The word appears again and again throughout

the text: "American colleges were born to a system of local autonomy and freedom to develop unencumbered by national or regional standards" (Preface). "The freedom of students to participate was being jeopardized, but only after a degree of liberty from an earlier stringent period had been relaxed to allow intercollegiate athletics to grow" (p. 58). "The desire to win, and the freedom of students (and eventually alumni) to pursue that goal, brought about the rise of the professional coach" (p. 152). "A dominating nineteenth-century American ideology, based upon freedom and equality, would not allow the British upper-class concept of amateur sport to permeate American college sport" (p. 176).

The emphasis is upon the freedom of students to construct and oversee their own activities (in this case athletics); increasing encroachments first by managers, then coaches (some of whom, like Cornell's Charles Courtney, could be extremely autocratic, p. 157); and then faculty, presidents and/or boards of control. The question must be asked, however: are there important distinctions to be made between "freedom" and "license"? When does one become the other? Professor Smith explicitly acknowledges this in closing his chapter (15) on "The Swarthmore Case." A question that long has been debated by philosophers is: what are the relationships between *freedom* and *responsibility*? Few individuals are ever truly "free" to act however they wish. All social institutions are governed by norms that establish the values by which the particular system is structured and define expected behavior. This is as true of educational, as it is of economic, political, and other institutions. We should not expect less of the athletic enterprise. The various constituencies (e.g., students, alumni, faculty, the press) did frequently hold different views, and major debates over the when, where, how-even why-of intercollegiate athletics occupied a very considerable amount of turn-of-the-century time and energy.

The nation's oldest college, Harvard, and arch-rival Yale (which quickly gained the ascendancy in athletics) set the trend for numerous other colleges. Professor Smith has cleverly, and not inaccurately, referred to this as "the cloning" of Harvard and Yale. The focus of the study, indeed, is on these two institutions, although events elsewhere (e.g., at Princeton, Cornell, University of Pennsylvania, and Chicago, to mention only a few) are also discussed. The author knows so much about these matters that I, for one, would have liked more detailed information about how athletics emerged at other colleges and universities-even if this had made for a considerably larger book. Careful comparison, after all, lies close to the heart of history.

The material is structured around chapters dealing with the four "big" intercollegiate sports (crew, baseball, track, football), and around major issues that grew out of these forms of agonistic activity. These include, but are not limited to: tendencies toward "commercialization" and "professionalism"; frictions created by students' desires to free "themselves from a rigid and staid curriculum and suffocating college life" by creating a rich extracurriculum (where athletics quickly became supreme) and "the faculty's desire for control and authority"; influences of British (read English), and especially Oxbridge notions of how and why games should be played; paradoxes created by

imported and “elite” concepts of *amateurism* and pragmatic Yankee desires for contest victory; the rise of the professional coach; and the creation of the N.C.A.A. This arrangement makes for a certain redundancy, but it probably cannot be entirely avoided.

In the United States, Professor Smith argues, the concept of the “gentleman Amateur” had little meaning. It was a foreign concept with “elite” connotations which some, like Harvard’s President Charles William Eliot, tried to graft onto pragmatic and egalitarian Yankee roots. While there certainly is a substantial basis for this argument, caution is called for. The term “amateur” was also somewhat loosely used as a kind of shorthand for values that *many* Americans prized: sportsmanship, virility, courage, muscularity, a kind of manly inner strength, etc. The eminently practical (at least when it came to winning) Walter Camp, for example, endlessly proclaimed football to be of supreme value in developing moral as well as physical courage and strength of will. While some of this was surely rhetoric, the frequency of such utterances suggests that for Camp and many other sports-minded men the term “amateur” took on profoundly important “American” meanings as well. Comparing attitudes that *should* attend American football to “the Eton-Harrow cricket match in England” (*Football*, 1896, p. 50), Camp urged a reform of athletic vices and the retention of the “manly features” of sports. This same aspiration has been a part of all important reports on intercollegiate athletics from those that preceded the formation of the N.C.A.A. (as the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the United States) in 1905-1906; to the 1929 Report of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; to the 1974 Hanford Report. Most men agreed that intercollegiate athletics were intrinsically good, but that certain abuses must be eliminated. (Just what constitutes an “abuse,” of course, has been the topic of heated and repeated debate.)

As Smith aptly points out in the Epilogue: “It has never been [especially] clear who has controlled athletics in individual colleges” (p. 218). Indeed, the more generic question “who-and what-controls intercollegiate athletics in the United States” has never received an especially satisfactory answer. The “openness” of American institutions of higher learning, which Professor Smith clearly points to, makes them vulnerable to a multitude of forces: alumni, athletically-minded students, sportswriters, the media, the general sports fan, and the “professional” (i.e., frankly commercial) teams that benefit from—some would say “prey upon”—collegiate programs. It is not surprising that faculty boards and college administrators have found these programs to be a source of never-ending difficulty and dispute, often ignoring them as much as propriety will permit.

I found the author’s depiction of the actions of Harvard coach William T. Reid, Jr., for example, to be especially fascinating. No wonder Eliot felt he could say that Harvard students would make any game into a rough and cheating one in fifteen minutes. As officers in charge of institutions of higher learning, college presidents and faculties ultimately do have responsibilities for the types of programs that exist on their campuses. Even those who use athletics to build

the reputations of their institutions, as did William Rainey Harper at the University of Chicago and many others (then and now), cannot fully escape criticisms that may arise when something goes publicly awry.

Given the fact that so much has been made of the brutal physical nature of the early form of American football, it is refreshing to see that the author concludes that a concern about "ethics" had as much, if not more, to do with the tenuous formation of the present N.C.A.A. as did the several deaths that occurred in 1905. I would place major criticisms of American intercollegiate athletics somewhat earlier (i.e., the 1880s), but Professor Smith is surely correct in stating the *McClure's Magazine* and the "muckraking" impulses of progressive reform attempts brought a new dimension to the outcries that were directed at collegiate sports—notably baseball and football.

*Sports and Freedom* is told substantially from the side of the students and coaches. It could have been strengthened somewhat and given more balance by the inclusion of more information from the perspective of college boards and presidents, alumni, and the public press. A comparison of Arthur T. Hadley, who became Yale's president in 1899, and Eliot, who had been Harvard's president since 1869—and of these two with other presidents—might have been illuminating. Certainly, the tone of their correspondence, as well as Hadley's private as opposed to public statements about athletics, is suggestive, if not revealing.

There is a great deal of valuable information packed into this slim volume, and the careful reader will be rewarded numerous times. A few more appendices that would have set forth the details of the vast quantity of material the author has amassed would have been helpful. In some places the narrative needs a bit of editing and smoothing; doubtless some of this will have occurred for the final copy. (I was provided an "uncorrected" advance proof.) Ronald Smith has already added appreciably to our knowledge of the life and drama of turn-of-the-century America with his studies of athletics. With *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* he has expanded and extended our information.

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