

Kirsch, George B. *The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-72*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989. Pp. xiv, 277. Notes, index, illustrations. \$27.50.

George Kirsch examines the rise of team sports in America by focusing on the early years of cricket and baseball. He seeks to show how these sports were influenced by and fit into the social and cultural events of the time and to naturally explain their divergent fates. While Kirsch investigates baseball and cricket developments nationally, his study concentrates mainly on events in six large northeastern cities, as well as in Chicago and Cincinnati. He thoroughly mined the sporting journals of the era, the local newspapers of the cities which he focused on, and significantly augmented his analysis through the use of census material.

Kirsch concedes that some excellent accounts of the emergence of America's national pastime already exist and readily acknowledges his debt to earlier historians of this subject. Nevertheless, he maintains that baseball's amateur era and its transition into a commercial-professional sport deserve more detailed consideration than it has received in existing works. However, Kirsch's analysis and the terrain he covers is generally a familiar one, although he offers several new insights into baseball developments. Kirsch expands our understanding of townball in Philadelphia and the rise of the Massachusetts game of baseball. He also provides another plausible explanation for why the New York version of baseball triumphed over these rival forms, insisting that it was an extension and expression of the urban imperialism of the Empire City.

What distinguishes Kirsch's study from its predecessors is the far greater attention given to club formation, his treatment of spectators and his analysis of the social composition of the players. Kirsch also places considerably more emphasis on the recreational side of baseball. While he recognizes and traces the trend at baseball's highest level to become more work-oriented, commercialized and professionalized, he correctly notes that for the overwhelming majority of baseball participants the game was bound up with a "playful" spirit, and appreciated because it temporarily took players away from daily business and other concerns.

Since little has been written about the history of cricket in America, Kirsch's treatment of this sport is far more innovative. He clearly demonstrates its

growth and viability in the years prior to the Civil War. Kirsch claims that by 1860 there were approximately 500 cricket clubs in at least 22 states and in more than 125 cities and towns. He provides an interesting discussion of the problems cricketers confronted and the efforts some made to adapt the sport to American soil. He also effectively points out how the progress of cricket was severely hindered by the unwillingness of English-born cricketers living in New York to popularize the sport, the conflict between New York's two leading cricket clubs, and especially by the failure of northeastern cricketers to take into account the needs and interest of their midwestern counterparts.

Kirsch merges previous explanations with the addition of some new wrinkles to create his own interpretation of the divergent fates of baseball and cricket. He shows that baseball enjoyed an advantage over cricket because it did not require the well manicured playing field of its rival. However, I remain unconvinced by his effort to resurrect the older notion that the length of time it took to complete a contest was critical to these sports' divergent destinies: Neither space nor propriety allows an elaboration on our differences. It is sufficient to state that Kirsch examines this theme under the rubric of how structural differences between the sports affected their respective popularity. Yet the issue of the amount of "time" was a cultural construct rather than a structural one inherent in the nature of the respective sports. Kirsch in fact notes that at times Americans completed cricket contests in one day by avoiding the unnecessary delays which were common to how the game was socially constructed in England. What is particularly ironic is that Kirsch clearly indicates that American objections to cricket revolved mainly around the importation of English customs and practices surrounding the sport rather than to the rules of the cricket contest itself.

The strength and significant contribution of Kirsch's book rests unquestionably with his usage of census material to establish a demographic profile of baseball and cricket players. His evidence confirms that baseball was a broadly-based sport although few participants were drawn from either extreme of the social spectrum. Kirsch's data reveal that baseball players were overwhelmingly native born and that they were more prosperous than the native white population as a whole. He adds to our knowledge about black baseball players and clubs. Kirsch shows that while blacks were not as well off financially as white players, they were generally more prosperous than other blacks. Kirsch details how such factors as age, wealth, residency and occupation intersected to impact on club formation. He also indicates how the social characteristics of cricketers differed from their baseball counterparts. In fact, Kirsch reveals two different cricket patterns. In Philadelphia, wealthy white-collar workers dominated the sport, but in New Jersey the sport had a strong working-class immigrant tinge to it. Kirsch further argues that in some of the artisan based clubs, factory owners were either officers or influential members and that such organizations "did not enhance a feeling of shared working-class consciousness," but "probably strengthened the ties between bosses and their hired men" (p. 155). However, the potential use of sport to foster artisan indepen-

dence and class consciousness did exist in those blue-collar clubs where wealthy patronage were absent, although Kirsch is not certain to the extent to which it was used to achieve these objectives.

While Kirsch's demographic analysis of baseball and cricket players in and of itself makes this book worthwhile, the study is not without its limitations. A major one is his treatment of the connections between sport and society. Kirsch describes quite well how urban, industrial and social change in mid-nineteenth century America influenced cricket and baseball, but too frequently the new social forces are explored as background and milieu rather than context. The result is the repetition of well-established arguments about their impact and, more importantly, this orientation does not enable him to demonstrate the ways in which societal alterations were linked to how those involved in these sports attached and extracted meaning from them. Another limitation with Kirsch's work derives less from what is in it, than what is not. Given the existing literature on baseball, Kirsch would have provided a greater service if he concentrated less on developments in the large urban centers and offered a more detailed exploration of the growth and meaning of baseball in small-sized communities. Interestingly, what is striking about Kirsch's examination of the backgrounds of baseball and cricket players is that he uncovers differences, in degrees although not kind, between those who played in New Jersey and the evidence he and others have provided on ballplayers in large commercial cities. While Kirsch correctly relates these variations to the more industrialized nature of New Jersey cities, his data indicate that historians need to begin turning their attention to other kinds of cities and communities if they are going to expand our comprehension of ball games in nineteenth century America.

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