

The Emergence of Consumer Culture and the Transformation of Physical Culture: American Sport in the 1920s*

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The decade of the 1920s witnessed a fundamental reshaping of the ideology of sport in American civilization. During the birth of an "Age of Play," as essayist Robert L. Duffus labeled the Twenties, Americans increasingly understood sport as a vehicle for entertainment—one of the many items available for amusement in a culture which glorified consumption. Duffus declared that Americans had discovered that "the right to play is the final clause in the charter of democracy."¹ But, despite Duffus' claim, the connection of sport to a definition of leisure which made play an end-in-itself obscured the relationship between physical and political culture, and raised new questions about the role of sport in modern society.

The conception of athleticism as an important element in the new "natural right" of leisure, or as a dangerous social narcotic, which emerged in the 1920s through observations of the sporting life by social critics and the mass media marked a sharp departure from the athletic ideology created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—an ideology which championed athletics as a key element in the plans of social and political reformers to construct their version of liberal modern civilization. The new cultural and social realities of the 1920s, the rapid emergence of a consumer-driven economy, a fully-developed mass society, the waning of the spirit of reform, and the rejection of physical culture by the self-described intellectual class, altered the expectations which many Americans held of the role of sport in the evolution of modern society.

The Twenties have often been referred to as a "golden age" of sport. A fascination with athletic spectacles gripped the nation during the decade. In his impressionistic and insightful survey of the period from 1919 to 1929, *Only Yesterday*, the journalist Frederick Lewis Allen asserted that sport "had become an obsession." In Allen's account the multi-million dollar bouts in professional

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1. Robert L. Duffus "The Age of Play," *The Independent* 113 (December 20, 1924): 539.

pugilism, Babe Ruth's prodigious exploits on the baseball diamond, the college football craze, the rise of professional golf and tennis, and a host of other athletic activities captured the nation's attention. Anyone in the United States, through newspaper accounts and nationwide radio broadcasts, could participate in the sporting craze. Spectatorship marked one of the new sets of behaviors which knit the nation together into a mass society.²

Sport, particularly in the eyes of the American intellectual class, seemed to play a different role in the "Big Society" of the Twenties from that which it had played in the previous industrial epoch.³ Modern American sport had been "invented" to preserve the concepts and institutions of liberal republicanism and to form a unified national culture in a world transformed by the forces of industrialism, urbanization, rapid and massive immigration, increasingly complex and interconnected markets, and the nationalization of social and political relations.

"Athletism is one of the distinctive forces of the nineteenth century," an American observer of social change had written in 1888, adding physical culture to the list of energies which many commentators declared were forging a "modern" world. "And of all the forces, acting upon the social, moral and physical life of the century, it is probably destined to be the most permanent in its effects."⁴ An odd comment perhaps, considering what the techno-industrial economy and the rise the modern nation-state wrought on the history of the nineteenth century. But not quite so odd as one might at first think. Making athletics one of the modern "isms"—like industrialism and nationalism—indicated the belief held by Americans who occupied important positions in "progressive" political culture that the "force" of sport could be used to order modernity.⁵

During a period of rapid social change American "ministers of reform" claimed that "athletism" offered the nation a tool for preserving their "traditional"

2. Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the Nineteen-Twenties* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1931), pp. 79-80.

3. Paul Carter coined the term "Big Society" to refer to the mass culture of the 1920s in *The Twenties in America* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), pp. 50-51.

4. C. Turner, "The Progress of Athletism," *Outing* 13 (November, 1888): 109. The colloquial term "athletism" is used in this essay to describe the corpus of ideas about athletics which were utilized in a variety of American efforts to smooth the transition to modernity. David Mrozek, in *Sport and the American Mentality, 1880-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), described the variety of competing ideologies concerning sport during the "search for order." But he also stressed that the contending notions of physicality sought to answer some common concerns. Americans looked to athletics to reunite contemplation and action and to reconnect the material and spiritual universes. "Athletism" refers to whole group of athletic strategies which sought to control and explain modern energies. The Progressives feared that failure to control those energies would end in civilization gyrating toward chaos. See especially Mrozek's chapter entitled "Sport and Mentality," pp. 225-236.

5. The Progressives were a diverse group of American political and social reformers who sought to create climates of opinion which supported their agendas and to identify their interests with the "public interest." Progressives wanted to rationalize and control the new order emerging in turn-of-the century America. Progressive political culture championed the uses of the mass media, the intellectual authority of science—particularly the new social sciences—and campaigns to persuade the public to battle selected "enemies," in their crusades to engineer political solutions to the problems associated with the rise of an urban-industrial state. See particularly, David Helen, "Social Tensions and the Origins of Progressivism," *Journal of American History* 56 (September, 1969): 323-341; Howard Mumford Jones, *The Age of Energy: Varieties of American Experience, 1865-1915* (New York: Viking, 1970); Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1887-1920* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1968).

values—a cosmology which sprang from a combination of the Protestant ethos, the ideology of liberal republicanism, and a competitive but socially beneficial individualism—in an institution which they promised would promote efficiency and support progress under the conditions imposed by the national industrial state.⁶ The reformers who invented “athletism” for those purposes, a diverse group of journalists, politicians, educators, settlement house workers, academicians, social critics, scientists, writers, and professional soldiers, preached the value of sport to the emerging industrial state’s “new middle class.”⁷

Crusading under the progressive banner, the athletic reformers found an audience eager to hear their claims that sport could integrate liberal republicanism and genteel standards into a context which stressed the primacy of the gospel of scientific progress and commanded the rational application of knowledge to social processes.⁸ The inventors of the ideology of “athletism” pitched it to the new middle class as a crucial component in a political culture which promised to help realize the dream of an American civilization unified by ideology and ethos—in spite of the fact that vigorous debate consistently raged among the advocates of consensus about just what kind of ideology and ethos ought to prevail.⁹

The self-styled Progressives conceived of modern sport as a social “technology,” designed to adapt people to the new human environment.¹⁰ Progressives

6. Robert M. Crunden, *Ministers of Reform: The Progressives' Achievement in American Civilization, 1889-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). See also, Wiebe, *The Search for Order*; David Noble, *The Paradox of Progressive Thought* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958) and *The Progressive Mind* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970); John D. Buenker, John C. Burnham, and Robert M. Crunden, *Progressivism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1977); and Morton White, *Social Thought in America: The Revolt Against Formalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). Louis Hartz's *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955) remains one of the most insightful essays on the paver of liberalism in American political culture. Paul A. Carter's *Revolt Against Destiny: An Intellectual History of the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), offers important reinterpretations of the concept of republicanism in American history.

7. Descriptions of the leaders of the Progressive doctrines of athletes can be found in Mrozek, *Sport and the American Mentality, 1880-1910*; Dominick Cavallo, *Muscles and Morals: Organized Playgrounds and Urban Reform, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981); Don S. Kirschner, “The Perils of Pleasure: Commercial Recreation, Social Disorder and Moral Reform in the Progressive Era,” *American Studies* 21 (Fall 1980): 27-42. Robert Wiebe describes the nationally-conscious, reform-minded professionals and specialists who animated the Progressive movement in his chapter, “A New Middle Class,” in *The Search for Order*, pp. 111-32.

8. According to Wiebe the “heart of progressivism was the ambition of the new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means.” *The Search for Order*, p. 166.

9. Most scholars recognize the diversity of Progressive thought and goals but few go as far as Peter Filene did in arguing that the very diversity of the movement called its existence into question. Peter Filene, “An Obituary for the ‘Progressive Movement,’” *American Quarterly*, 22 (Spring 1970): 20-34.

10. In his *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics, 1820-1870* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), Melvin L. Adelman used modernization theory to describe the evolution of modern sporting structures in New York City. He successfully explained *how* modernization shaped new sports institutions. But he was not clear in defining *why* sport became an agent of modernization. Modernization theory—a catch-all concept for urban-industrial growth and change—simply portrays sport as one of the institutions a “modernizing” society inevitably constructs. The idea of sport as an “invention” and a “social technology” is an attempt to understand the ways in which sport played an active role in the emergence of the “modern” order. Such a concept considers sport not merely as an activity on which social change acted, but as an important agent in the modernization process itself. Sport was a technology in the true sense of the word; a technique for manipulating the environment—the “human” environment. An interesting essay on the structure of modern technologies is Elting E. Morison, *Men, Machines, and Modern Times* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1966).

attempted to utilize sport as an instrument for directing modern energies in efficient directions, inculcating the democratic ethos, teaching respect for law and constitutionalism, assimilating immigrants into American culture, assuaging the evils associated with cities and factories, and insuring the vigor of the nation.¹¹ The Progressive historian Frederick L. Paxson, remarking in 1917 on the "rise" of modern athletics, wrote that "between the first race for the America's cup in 1851 and the first American aeroplane show of February last, the safety valve of sport was designed, built and applied."¹² Designed, built and applied, Paxson fully understood that "athletism" was a technology. He believed that it was a "safety valve," engineered to steer the enormous energies of American civilization in productive directions in the years after the New World's "natural" safety valve-the frontier-had disappeared.

The American architects of "athletism" thought that modern sport would contribute to the creation of a national culture, binding the diverse interests of the industrializing country into a unified, coherent entity. They hoped that through athletics they could forge a link between activity and contemplation, between material necessity and moral principle. Playgrounds, YMCAs, public school athletic leagues, and collegiate sport programs were constructed to prepare individuals for citizenship in an industrialized, urbanized America. Perhaps the most popular and certainly the most politically successful American minister of reform, Theodore Roosevelt, epitomized in the popularized versions of his doctrine of the strenuous life the American belief in "athletism" as a necessary ingredient of modern nationhood. Roosevelt preached that the playing field provided the new age with a forum for moral education, an arena for building "character," and a vital testing ground of national will.¹³

Certainly the Progressive idea of "athletism" was not the only ideology of sport which existed in the industrializing United States. The "manly art" of bare-knuckle boxing offered working-class males dramatic depictions of a social reality which differed greatly from the realities expressed through "athletism." Prize fighting symbolized the triumph of "manly" skill in a brutal, primal world. The rowdy bouts in saloons, dance halls and mining camps underscored a working class ethos which rejected the middle-class creed of genteel athleticism.¹⁴ In many industrial towns and cities working-class men

11. Popular periodicals and political and religious journals from the Progressive era offer a wealth of insight into the reform character of "athletism." See for instance, Price Collier, "Sport's Place in the Nation's Well-Being," *Outing* 32 (July, 1898): 382-388, Caspar Whitney, "Outdoor Sports-What They Are Doing For Us," *The Independent* 52 (June 7, 1900): 1361-1363; John Corbin, "The Modern Chivalry," *Athletic Monthly* 89 (April, 1902): 601-611; William Frederick Dix, "The Influence of Sport in American Life," *The Independent* 55 (September 3, 1903): 2090-2095; and Jacob Riss, "Fighting the Gang with Athletics," *Collier's* 46 (February, 1911): 17.

12. Frederick L. Paxson, "The Rise of Sport," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 4 (September, 1917): 145.

13. Roosevelt enunciated his athletic gospel in numerous writings. Perhaps the seminal statement of the code, and its connection with nationalism, can be found in, Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life," a speech before the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899; cited in Herman Hagerdon, ed., *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, Vol. 13: *American Ideals, The Strenuous Life Realizable Ideals* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 331.

14. Elliott J. Gem. *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986).

and women, having lost much of their power over their vocations to machines, corporations and new techniques of production, resisted the reformers' attempts to create a hegemonic national culture and created leisure-time "alternative cultures" shaped by a variety of ethnic, class and political agendas. Interestingly, working-class groups sought to employ modern sport for reasons similar to the rationales espoused by Progressives. Both groups viewed sport as a technology for ordering communities confronted with the dislocations fostered by industrialism and urbanization.¹⁵

The Progressives waged battle against not only the working class "amusements" but also against that they considered the idle recreations of the "leisure class." They condemned rich and poor alike for indulging in leisure solely to seek pleasure. Progressive sporting enthusiasts declared that entertainment was a by-product of, and not the purpose for, physical culture. Outing insisted that leisure time activities which only the wealthy could afford, like yachting, were not really in accord with the American notion of sport. On the other hand, *Outing's* editors argued that devices which were within the economic reach of the "common man," like the bicycle and the canoe, should be incorporated into the Progressive definition of sport.¹⁶

Advocates of social reform through athletics also found enemies among businessmen whom they accused of "commercializing" sport. The intriguing possibilities of new amusement and entertainment technologies, like the great "playground" constructed at Coney Island in the 1890s for the residents of New York City, attracted the attention of both the middle and working classes. Condemned by the true believers in the gospel of Progressive athleticism as a false idol which sucked away energies from their constructive and uplifting pursuits, the entrepreneurs who ran amusement parks nevertheless drew many customers and encouraged revolts against the genteel creed of leisure."

The contest to define the role of sport and recreation in the social life and political culture of the United States spawned a host of Progressive attacks on what they defined as the unhealthy and immoral "amusements" created by the working class counter-cultures and the new commercial enterprises which sold leisure-time diversions. Of course the companies who manufactured bicycles, canoes and other athletic implements profited from their commerce in equipping the nation for the "strenuous life," but boosters of "athletism" sanctioned their sales in much the same fashion as Theodore Roosevelt drew lines between "good trusts" and "bad trusts."¹⁸ The central issue in defining "athletism"

15. Stephen Hardy, *How Boston Played: Sport, Recreation, and Community, 1865-1915* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1982); Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

16. "Editor's Open Window," *Outing* 4 (June, 1884): 222-223.

17. John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978).

18. Some of the biggest boosters of "athletism" had financial interests in their crusades to convert Americans to the "strenuous life." Albert Pope and Caspar Whitney wanted to sell copies of *Outing* as well as selling the new gospel of athleticism. Perhaps the outstanding example of athletic experts and proponents who also had entrepreneurial goals in mind were A. G. and Walter Spalding. As the heads of A. G. Spalding & Bros.'s athletic

against competing ideologies rested in the belief that certain sporting practices would produce the kind of national culture the Progressives desired. The reformers adamantly refused to accept compromises in the battle to control and shape physical culture. Indeed, even Progressives who like the University of Wisconsin sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross admitted that the "labor question" posed by industrialism precipitated "class struggle" which could only be solved by an effort to "balance the claims and interests of contending groups," refused to perceive the struggle to define sport in the same terms. "The disposition of leisure time is preeminently a conscience matter," claimed Professor Ross. "A youth submits perforce to the conditions of his work, but he chooses his recreations in freedom."¹⁹

If, according to Progressives, the patterns of work under industrial conditions did not conform as neatly as they might have hoped to the blueprints of liberalism sketched by Adam Smith and Thomas Jefferson, they asserted that the realm of recreation was still connected to an ideologically-charged realm of "freedom" untainted by the forces which had diminished liberty in the urban-industrial order. Progressive minds connected sport directly to the ideals of the political culture which they championed. "Athletism" served as one of their most important arenas of freedom and they invested a great deal of effort in defending it against alternative definitions of leisure.

"Athletism" enjoyed an enormous advantage over its rivals in the contest to define the nature and practice of physical culture in modern America. The nationwide community of discourse created by the revolution in communication and journalism techniques played a central role in reform efforts. Both the "high brow" and the mass market media overwhelmingly endorsed the Progressive ideology of sport against competing claims. "Athletism" was presented to the reading public as an acceptable and necessary modern institution, while editors and sportswriters railed against the decadence of "leisure class" pursuits and the brutality, backwardness and immorality of the working class athletic ideology.²⁰

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the inventors of "athletism" defined the mainstream idea of modern sport. They shunned games which they believed were escapist, aristocratic, commercial, or "uncivilized." For the supporters of "athletism," sport had little to do with either play or leisure. The games and exercises which they favored were supposed to have a

equipment and publishing empire they were the business leaders in their field. They also promoted baseball, track and field, and other sports, and served in various capacities on the American Olympic Committee. Allen Gunmann, *The Games Must Go On: Avery Brundage and the Olympic Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 12-22; and John Lucas, *The Modern Olympic Games* (New York, A. S. Barnes, 1980), pp. 64-73, document the Spalding's Olympic service. Peter Levine's A. G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) connects Spalding to the promotion and commercialization of the "national pastime." John Rickard Betts' chapter, "Sporting Journalism and the Technological Revolution," in *America's Sporting Heritage, 1850-1950* (Reading, MA.: Addison-Wesley, 1974), pp. 52-85; discusses the role of *Outing* in the development of American sport.

19. Edward Alsworth Ross, "Introduction," in Richard Henry Edwards, *Popular Amusements* (1915; rep., New York: Arm Press, 1976), pp. 5-6.

20. For an insight into the origins of the process see Adelman's chapter entitled "The Press and the Ideology of Modern Sport," in *A Sporting Time*, pp. 269-296.

direct influence on political and social life. Theodore Roosevelt succinctly identified the central premise of the Progressive athletic code when he proclaimed that “athletic sports are a means and not an end, and he who puts them out of their proper place and diverts them from their proper and wholesome purpose is their enemy.”²¹ There was some debate in Progressive circles over just what kind of exercises and sports should constitute “athletism.” But there was general agreement on the role that sport should play in society. Roosevelt and Dudley Sargent, Harvard’s pioneering physical educator, certainly disagreed over which games comprised “athletism,” and in what spirit those games should be undertaken. But they both insisted that sport was a means and not an end, a preparation for life but not life’s purpose.

The Progressive boosters of the “athletism,” proclaimed that sport prepared nations and individuals to meet the challenges of modern life. In one cogent anecdote, the *Ladies Home Journal* captured the essence of the Progressive vision of sport in American life. The popular magazine related a tale in which a lad, “divided between the love of books and love of sports,” got a chance to meet President Roosevelt. The President, despite the fact that he had urgent business with his cabinet, took the time to ask the boy what was his favorite sport. When the boy replied that he preferred baseball, the President lamented that he himself had never been proficient in that game owing to his miserable eyesight. “What an awful pity, Mr. President,” replied the lad, while a roomful of anxious power-brokers restlessly waited for the pleasantries to end so that the business of the nation could be taken up. The President smiled, and revealed that if baseball was not his forte, when “it comes to riding or shooting or tennis, I can hold my own, I think; and do you know jiu-jitsu?” The boy related he did indeed. And then, in the presence of the rich and powerful, the President and the American youth shared their knowledge of the finer points of that strenuous activity.

A few months later the lad undertook, at considerable risk to himself, a mission to save a valuable government launch befouled by its own anchor. Emerging with a few bumps and bruises, he was confronted by his mother. “‘Why did you do it?’ his horrified mother asked. ‘What did I learn to dive for?’ he asked. ‘The President made me feel, when I saw him, that sports were intended to make men.’” *The Ladies Home Journal* averred that “the President’s ideas of sports were fitly expressed in these words of the boy.”²²

The mass circulation monthly’s fable underscored the Progressive belief in the moral and political power of sport. The social reformers had designed “athletism” to “make” modern men-and women.²³ The Progressive mind

21. Theodore Roosevelt, “Commercialism, Hysteria, and Homicide,” *The Outlook* 99 (October 21, 1911): 409-410.

22. “The Resident’s Ideas About Sports.” *Ladies Home Journal* 23 (August, 1906): 17.

23. “Athletism” was not solely a male institution. Progressives believed that women could benefit from organized athletics. Athletic boosters stressed the contributions which sport could make to “women’s roles” in society. See for instance, Anne O’Hagan, “The Athletic Girl,” *Munsey’s* 25 (August, 1901): 728-738; Christine T. Harrick, “Women in Athletics,” *Outing* 40 (September, 1902): 713-721; Dudley Sargent, “Are Athletics Making Girls Masculine?,” *Ladies Home Journal* 29 (March, 1912): 11; A. de Koven, “Athletic Woman,” *Good Housekeeping* 55 (August, 1912): 148-157; J. N. Laurvik, “The American Girl Out-of-Doors.” *Woman’s Home*

linked sport directly to political culture. "Athletism" was supposed to produce good citizens and able leaders, inculcate liberal tenets and convert immigrants into "Americans." Progressives believed that modern sport, political reform, and rational social action could be used to construct a harmonious national culture. But the "end of American innocence," the revolt of the intellectual class against political activism and social engineering, and the catastrophe of the Great War, combined to doom their optimistic visions.²⁴ In the "Big Society" which emerged after the First World War, sport lost much of its association with politics and social reform. "Athletism" took on new roles.

In 1927 the historians Charles and Mary Beard commented on the shape of the new national culture. They asserted that the "machine process" had stamped every facet of American life with a rigid standardization. Mass production and mass consumption had created a new reality, joining the nation together in a myriad of interlocking lifeways. Mass culture meant that "within the week of their announcement the modes of New York, Boston, and Chicago became the modes of Winesburg, Gopher Prairie, and Centerville and swept on without delay into remote mountain fastnesses." In the nation which took shape during the Twenties, the Beards reported that the "technology of interchangeable parts was reflected in the clothing, sports, amusements, literature, architecture, manners, and speech of the multitude."²⁵

Sport, from the Beards' vantage, had become a manifestation of Big Society, an item which the masses consumed with an insatiable appetite. In the new order the relentless hammerings of the machine process pounded every aspect of life, "material and spiritual," into the routes which the utilitarian commandment that governed the system prescribed. Nothing was exempt from the machine's maw. Education, the arts, social reform, and every other human activity fell under the sway of mass culture. "All these tendencies, springing naturally out of the whirl of business, were encouraged by the conscious struggle for efficiency in every domain, by the discovery and application of the most economical apparatus for the accomplishment of given ends."²⁶

In the world which the Beards sketched sport offered only a temporary, and illusory, escape from the rigid routine of the machine process. The escape allowed the process to continue by providing a momentary respite from the inhuman conditions of mass culture. Social critics who had found something of value in more traditional conceptions of sport, like Johan Huizinga, Lewis Mumford and Arnold Toynbee, were horrified by the change in physical

Companion 39 (August, 1912): 17-18; "The Girl and Her Sports," *Ladies Home Journal* 32 (July, 1915): 9-11.

24. The intellectual revolt began before World War One. The new perspectives spawned by the revolt against accepted philosophies spread to the general public during and after the war. Many of the new breed of intellectuals came from the same middle class which had produced the Progressive social critics. See particularly, Henry May, *The End of American Innocence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959); Robert W. Crunden, *From Self to Society, 1919-2941* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1972); and Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America, 1889-1963: The Intellectual as a Social Type* (New York: Vintage, 1965).

25. Charles A. and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2 Vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 2: 727-729.

26. *Ibid.*

culture.²⁷ As the Beards described it, Americans “sat on the bleachers at games, in vicarious playing, to cheer their favorite teams,” free for a moment from hard realities.²⁸ In the eyes of the Beards, and a great many of their intellectual contemporaries, sport had become an opiate which allowed the average person to cope with Big Society. It offered an arena in which the masses could turn their eyes away, if only briefly, from the grim political and economic realities of the modern world. The Beards themselves were hopeful that mankind could rise to the challenge of the machine age—although they described no transcendent role for “athletism” in the process. But much of the intellectual class, in the wake of the Great War and new criticisms of human rationalism, abandoned the optimism of the Beards and their Progressive forebears. The social critics of the 1920s detested sport because they felt that it hid the true nature of modern civilization.

Frederick Lewis Allen disliked the sporting craze for precisely those reasons. “More Americans could identify Knute Rockne as the Notre Dame coach than could tell who was the presiding officer of the United States Senate,” grouched Allen. He found all the “ballyho” a befuddling commentary on an America out of touch with the important issues of life. Allen pictured the 1920s as an era in which a nation tired of reform and social change seized on a bunch of “new toys,” sport among them, and ignored the larger political and economic issues of the age.²⁹ Of course, sport was not a “new” manifestation of the Twenties, but it did take on new and “spectacular” forms during the decade. Clearly Allen understood sport in different terms than had the ministers of reform who invented “athletism.”

That athletic spectacles seemed more popular with the masses than the great questions of political life greatly annoyed intellectuals. Radicals detested sport because it prevented the masses from recognizing their plight and thus blocked a true revolution. More traditional thinkers were upset that what they deemed a frivolous orgy consumed attention better directed toward more important issues.³⁰

“More profound blah has been scribbled and spoken about the significance of our national vogue for sports than upon almost any topic, including Fundamentalism, Freud, the League of Nations, and the hot weather,” fumed George S. Brooks in an article which epitomized the intellectual disdain for the new version of the “athletism.” He equated the Roman descent into an orgy of “bread and the circus” with the current American fascination with “gas and the games.” “‘Gas and the games’ has become the motto of these United States,”

27. See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: Beacon, 1938); Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934), p. 303; Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, 6 Vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 4: 242-243.

28. Beard and Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization*, 2: 729.

29. Allen, *Only Yesterday*, pp. 206-211.

30. John M. Hoberman's *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), documents the disenchantment of both the Left and the cultural conservatives with the sporting spectacles of consumer society.

Brooks protested. "Contrary to the opinions of professional and amateur sport-promoters," he surmised that it was "doubtful the tremendous furor over motors and sports proves anything-except that our civilization has reached a highly artificial state, and that most of our citizens are bored with their jobs." Brooks, like the Beards and most of American intellectuals, blamed the sporting craze on the rise of mass society. "As the cities fill with routine workers, whose each day is a monotony of repetition, so fast does the desire for motor, movies, and sports increase," he observed. "Business and occupation become duller as the central control increases. Motoring, motion-pictures, camping out, playing or watching games are merely an escape from the circumscribed routine of factory, store, or office." Clearly, Brooks linked the sporting culture of the 1920s with the other amusements available to consumers. His criticisms indicated that important shifts were taking place in the role which sport played in American life.³¹

But it was not only academically-inclined critics like Brooks who regarded the escapist ideology of athletics with disdain. Commentators in the mass media reacted in a similar manner. Even a few sportswriters found all the attention paid to athletics a little too much to stomach. W. O. McGeehan, the sports editor of the New York *Herald*, coined the term "ballyhoo" to refer to the excessive attention on the trivial. McGeehan, and others, often used the term to refer to sporting style of the Twenties. McGeehan insisted that publicity agents and the press had manufactured a star system in athletics which rivaled that of Hollywood. "How much of their fame is pure metal and how much of it is mere ballyhoo does not matter as long as they add to the gaiety and credulity of nations," observed the *Literary Digest* of the new sporting stars. In mass culture sport belonged to the sphere of leisure.³²

Even some of the sport stars wondered about the intensity of the adulation which they received from a fervently devoted public. In an article in *Success*, three-time American tennis champion Mary K. Brown complained that Americans were "sports-mad idiots." "Why should I have become elevated to a position of first-page importance merely because I am somewhat more dexterous than most in manipulating a contrivance of catgut and wood which is commonly called a tennis racquet?" she wondered. "It will be for the future to find the answer to the present sports hysteria that is gripping America to the exclusion of other and greater matters."³³

Perhaps the harshest critic of American sporting habits in the 1920s, John R. Tunis, was himself a practicing sportswriter. Tunis loved the beauty of informal athletic games, and the escape from the daily grind which sport could provide. He thought that play was the true essence of modern sport. Tunis reveled in the existential moments in which one drove a golf ball well and truly, or executed a perfect groundstroke on the tennis court. "All that is best in sport can be found-and what is more, is found-in these friendly encounters upon the golf

31. George S. Brooks, "Gas and the Games," *Scribner's Monthly* 84 (August, 19'28): 189-193.

32. "How the Ballyhoo Makes the Athletes," *Literary Digest* 95 (November 19,1927): 62-65.

33. "'We're Sports-Mad Idiots!,'" *Review of Reviews* 75 (January 6, 1927): 422-431.

links and tennis courts of the country,” he wrote. But the rise of the highly organized spectacles which garnered so much attention during the 1920s bothered Tunis immensely.

Tunis rejected the notion that organized sport was a morally edifying institution. He blamed the press for blowing up the importance of athletics to the point where “there has grown up in the public mind an exaggerated and sentimental notion of the moral value of these great competitive spectacles of sport, a fiction which may be termed The Great Sports Myth.” He complained that “the sporting heroes of the nation are our gods” and worried that the amount of energy devoted to athletics would have detrimental effects on society. “Man has always, I suppose, been a hero worshipper,” Tunis admitted grudgingly. The United States had no religious prophets to exalt, nor a royalty admire, nor even a Mussolini to erect as a national icon. “Consequently we turn hopefully to the world of sports,” he theorized. People in mass society needed to identify with individuals who had risen above the bleak routines which marked modern life. Sports stars became the heroes and heroines of consumer culture.³⁴

The national culture which the Progressives had labored to bring into existence had in fact become a reality during the 1920s. But it did not take the shape which Progressives had hoped for. Instead of a nation united by liberal ideology and a commitment to social reform through rational methodologies, the national culture which emerged during the Twenties was bound together by Madison Avenue, marketing techniques, new consumer goods, and the machine process. Beneath the surface of “Business Civilization” lurked enormous tensions. The United States was divided by numerous political and cultural conflicts. Abandoned by the intellectuals and the reform-minded politicians and professionals who during the Progressive era had sought to engineer progress, “athletism” mutated into new forms.³⁵

The consumer culture of the Twenties had its roots in the social and economic transformations of the previous epoch. The national market, the new communication and transportation systems, the assembly line technologies which produced consumer items, had all been pioneered in the years before the First World War. Scientific management, time-and-motion study designed factories, and the gigantic corporate dimensions of the big businesses designed to serve a consuming public had also begun to take shape before the war. In 1907 Henry Ford had announced his dream of manufacturing a motor car for the “common man.” Ford’s efforts revolutionized the relationship between the mode of production and the masses. But it was not until the 1920s that the full impact of those changes became readily apparent to Americans, and that consumer culture emerged fully developed in American life. It was only after the war that

34. John R. Tunis, “The Great Sports Myth,” *Harper’s* 156 (March, 1928): 422-431.

35. Revisionist histories of the Twenties which stress cultural conflict include Paul A. Carter’s *The Twenties in America and Another Part of the Twenties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); and Roderick Nash, *The Nervous Generation: American Thought, 1917-1930* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1970). See also, Henry R. May, “Shifting Perspectives on the 1920s,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (December, 1956): 405-427; and Don S. Kirschner, “Conflicts and Politics in the 1920s: Historiography and Prospects,” *Mid-America* 48 (October, 1966): 219-233.

American civilization became aware of the cultural transformations which decades of industrial innovation and social engineering had produced.³⁶

The appearance in quick succession during the Twenties of mass-produced and mass-marketed motor cars and home appliances, radio networks, a thriving motion picture industry, revolutionary advertising techniques, chain store empires, credit and installment purchase plans, and numerous other technological and business innovations designed to spur consumer purchasing produced the impression of the sudden birth of a new social order. The relentless pitchings of professional sales agents who promised the members of mass society the ever-multiplying fruits of the machine process served as the battle-cry of the consumer revolution. New technologies and new forms of production fundamentally altered society. Sears-Roebuck had provided goods to the masses in the late nineteenth century. But much of their inventory consisted of implements to improve the productive capacity of farmers, artisans and homemakers. The consumer culture of the 1920s made consumption, rather than production, the fundamental motif of economic action.³⁷

The new America took a far different form than its predecessor. Society began to abandon much of the Protestant ethos that had served it for so long and assumed the ethics of affluence. In his studies of popular biographies Leo Lowenthal charted the change in ideals, as they shifted from the worship of the idols of production to the idols of consumption. In mass culture the baton of fame and fortune passed from the Horatio Algiers of the world to those individuals who happened to be in the right place at the right time. He noted that the biographies of the Progressive era "are written—at least ideologically—for someone who the next day may try to emulate the man whom he has just envied." In the Twenties a new type of life history replaced those of the characters whom Lowenthal labeled productive-politicians, the captains of industry, serious artists. The new stories concerned people whom, "almost every one of them is directly, or indirectly, related to the sphere of leisure time." Lowenthal discovered that the ideology of the newer biographies celebrated the lives of "the heroes of the world of entertainment and sport."³⁸

The new glimpses into the who was who of consumption culture revealed individuals conditioned from childhood by a sort of "vulgarian behaviorism"

36. Warren I. Susman, "Culture and Civilization: The Nineteen-Twenties" and "Culture Heroes: Ford. Barton, Ruth," in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 105-124 and 122-149.

37. On the rise of mass culture and its connection with the "second industrial revolution" see William Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); George Soule, *Prosperity Decode: From War to Depression, 1917-1929* (New York: Rinehart, 1947); Adolf Berle and Gardiner Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property*, rev. ed (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968); James W. Prothro, *The Dollar Decade: Business Ideas in the 1920s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1954); George E. Mowry, *The Urban Nation, 1920-1960* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); and Paul Carter, *The Twenties in America and Another Parr of the Twenties*.

38. Leo Lawthat, "The Triumph of Mass Idols," in *Literature, Popular Culture, and Society* (Palo Alto, Cal.: Pacific Books, 1968), pp.K-140. Lowenthal's theory, which first appeared in *Radio Research* in 1944, predated the work of David Reisman and other 1950s adherents of the "other directed" school of the sociology of mass society.

for success if, and only if, the persons were lucky enough to get a break. Lowenthal discovered that the newer biographies portrayed a universe in which the work ethic no longer held sway. People no longer believed that they controlled their social and economic destinies. The focus of the success stories turned from examinations of will and motivation to superficial observations of an individual's connection to mass society. The biographies revealed in minute descriptions of mundane personal habits and preferences. "The real battlefield of history recedes from view or becomes a stock backdrop while society disintegrates into an amorphous crowd of consumers," wrote Lowenthal. He drew a frightening picture of an America in which the machine process had triumphed with totalitarian results. "Our people could occupy an imaginary world of technocracy; everybody seems to reflect a rigid code of flexible qualities: the rigid and mechanized set-up of a variety of useful mechanical institutions." In the new order, the individual could only identify, socially and psychologically, with the community. The primacy of individual will and action in the pattern of American culture had been replaced by an "other-directed" code of behavior.³⁹

Lowenthal surmised that "it is some comfort for the little man who has become expelled from the Horatio Alger dream, who despairs of penetrating the thicket of grand strategy in politics and business, to see his heroes as a lot of guys who like or dislike highballs, cigarettes, tomato juice, golf, and social gatherings—just like himself."⁴⁰ The public could purchase products which made them feel like sports stars and helped them to transcend the mundane grind of modern existence. "A Spalding Swimming Suit won't teach you to swim," admitted one piece of advertising copy. "But it will make you feel like an Olympic champion." Spalding also peddled "official Olympic" discuses, throwing hammers, shot puts, hurdles, and a line of "Olympic championship" running shoes. Anyone could feel like an Olympic champion; all they had to do was buy Spalding's products.⁴¹

Of course A. G. Spalding and his company had made a great deal of money selling sporting goods in the decades before the consumer culture of the Twenties had emerged. Despite the disdain for commercialism which "athletism" preached, profits were made through Progressive era exhibitions of "wholesome" sport. But in the Twenties, as never before, entrepreneurs began to recognize the possibilities of marketing athletics to the new breed of American consumers. The mass culture of the Twenties created new categories and definitions of leisure and amusement, climaxing as historian John Kasson noted, the long revolt against genteel standards of civilization and reordering the relationship between sport and political culture in American life.⁴²

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 118-136

40. *Ibid.*, p. 135.

41. Spalding's Athletic Library, *Spalding's Official Athletic Almanac*. 1927 (New York: American Sports Publishing, 1927), pp. 286-300.

42. Kasson, *Amusing the Million*, p. 9.

The public began to understand, and to consume, sport in different ways than they had in the past. The increasing popularity of professional baseball in the 1920s furnishes some instructive insights into the changing role of sport in consumer culture. On one level baseball continued to be identified with liberalism and traditional values. The press, the baseball establishment and the fans perceived the "national pastime" as a realm of democracy and opportunity in which the ideals of individualism and competition were still cherished. But in other areas baseball was undergoing tremendous changes in both its structure and its cultural role. During the Twenties the "home run" was enshrined as the centerpiece of the national pastime's appeal. The press commented that the growing importance of the "long ball" represented the craving for excitement which permeated the "Jazz Age." Some baseball scribes worried about the growing commercialism and sensationalism, and complained that overpaid players and spoiled fans would ruin the game. Their greatest fear was that baseball would degenerate into "mere amusement."

The structure of the teams began to change as well. The Twenties witnessed the beginnings of the farm-system and the application of corporate management techniques to major league franchises. Baseball experienced the growth of a white-collar mentality, in which conformity and predictability were stressed and a "chain store" system of producing and marketing players was developed. Entrepreneurs, advertisers and press agents began to sell the national pastime as an form of entertainment and an avenue for escape. Showmanship, radio broadcasting and hoopla, particularly during the World Series, increased proms and tied baseball to the thriving show business industry of the 1920s.⁴³

The biggest symbol of change, and of continuity, in baseball was Babe Ruth. Cultural historian Warren Susman labeled Ruth the "ideal hero for the world of consumption." Ruth was the "home run king" who provided the sensational feats that fans increasingly demanded. As an "idol of consumption" Ruth served mass culture magnificently. The public never tired of hearing the details of his personal life, and they worshipped his expansive, exaggerated public persona. He merged an unlettered, fun-loving image with his fantastic baseball skills to form the archetype of consumer culture's brand of celebrity. And he made sure to treat himself as a commodity, hiring an agent to take financial advantage of his massive popularity.⁴⁴

Ruth was the biggest name, and baseball the most important game, in the sporting craze of the Twenties. But he was certainly not the only figure from the playing field who was lionized during the decade. The cultural heroes and heroines created during the Twenties symbolized a new understanding of the role of athletics in American life. Where "athletism" had been a political tool for making citizens and rationalizing social relations, the sporting ideology of the Twenties increasingly represented the escape from social realities which

43. Richard C. Crepeau, *Baseball: America's Diamond Mind, 1919-1941* (Orlando: University Presses of Florida, 1980), pp. 24-47 and 102-125.

44. Susman, "Culture Heroes: Ford, Barton, Ruth," pp. 141-149

athletics could provide. The idea of sport was changing, and so was the relationship between sport and political culture.

The changes manifested themselves clearly in professional prizefighting. The “manly art” had begun a slow journey away from a total identification with working class hooliganism and the blue collar saloon to a more mainstream appeal as early as the 1890s.⁴⁵ But it was not until the 1920s that boxing attracted serious attention from the mass public. The rise of Jack Dempsey to heavyweight champion of the world in the early years of the decade coincided with a revolution in sports marketing techniques which transformed professional fighting into one of the major cultural dramas of the Twenties. Dempsey’s bouts with Georges Carpentier, Luis Firpo, and especially with Gene Tunney, were transformed by skillful promoters and the national press into morality plays which highlighted many of the conflicts that rent American civilization during the decade. The boxers themselves became symbols of the age. Tunney stood for the uneasy marriage between the traditions of liberal individualism, scientific efficiency and the corporate ethos which so many Americans in the Twenties desperately hoped could be consummated. Dempsey symbolized the untamed energy of the frontier and the desire to smash through the new structures and strictures of mass society. He became a new version of the old American love affair with images of anti-civilization.⁴⁶

Dempsey and Tunney created popular athletic dramas which were very different from anything which the inventors of “athletism” had espoused-or would have condoned. Their fights sold millions of tickets and newspapers, and large blocks of radio advertisements. The entertainment industry had seized on sport after the social reformers had abandoned it. But that did not mean that the Twenties’ version of “athletism” was completely divorced from political ideology and discourse. Lowenthal’s thesis needs revision. The biographies of Dempsey, Tunney, Ruth and other Twenties sports stars, could be every bit as didactic as a tale about Horatio Alger. A favorite theme of the sports biographies described the triumph of individuals who succeeded against the odds, not simply because they got the breaks, but because of their adherence to the traditional values of perseverance, hard work and clean living.⁴⁷

As idols of consumption, sports heroes and heroines sold lifestyles and values. In that way the role of athletics in the mass culture of the Twenties retained a certain kinship with the Progressive ideology of sport. But the association of athletics in the 1920s with leisure, entertainment and big business, greatly altered the political and social expectations which both the intellectual elite and the middle-class press placed on sport. A different relationship with the culture of athleticism had evolved. Progressive sporting

45. Gem, *The Manly Art*, pp. 248-254.

46. Randy Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979); Elliott J. Gorn, “The Manassa Mauler and the Fighting Marine: An Interpretation of the Dempsey-Tunney Fights,” *Journal of American Studies* 19 (April, 1985): 27-47.

47. Gem revealed some of the connections between sport and political ideology in the Twenties in “The Manassa Mauler and the Fighting Marine,” pp. 27-47.

ideology had been concerned with the production of a vital citizenry and the adjustment of liberalism to industrial reality. The "idols of consumption" offered escape from mass social relations and an easy and shallow identification with political and cultural symbols. Where "athletism" had been an active component in an ideology or liberal political reform and a technology for effecting social change, sport in the Twenties was increasingly disassociated from the production of a "progressive" civilization.

A combination of factors—the intellectual revolt, the waning of the spirit of reform, and the social transformations engendered by an economy geared toward mass consumption—dragged "athletism" away from its origins as an active agent of social reform. The very groups which propagated and internalized the Progressive ideas of athletics, the "professional" intellectuals, social reformers and the middle-class public, no longer utilized their invention in the traditional fashion. Sport no longer seemed to provide an effective avenue for the construction of political and social relations. In "the Age of Play" athletics were described as an end and not a means. In consumer culture sport had come to be viewed as one of modern life's central purposes.

Robert L. Duffus, who had dubbed the Twenties "the Age of Play," summed up the new mores in a 1924 article for *The Independent*. "The most significant aspect of the Age of Play," he wrote, "is not in its inventions, good and bad, but in an alteration of an ancient attitude—a veritable change in one of the most fundamental of folk ways." Duffus surmised that "for uncounted generations man has survived and made progress . . . only by unceasing industry." But the machine age "struck a fatal blow at the ancestral faith in mere hard work." Duffus did not believe that the mechanization of work was without danger, nor that all the amusements of leisure were wholesome. But he warned that "these evils are not to be curbed by curbing the spirit of play. Reformers and educators must accept this spirit as more sacred than anything they have to give; they can help by guiding, not by restraining." The intellectual class did not fully comprehend Duffus's wisdom. Madison Avenue treated it as the new gospel.⁴⁸

The 1920s witnessed the emergence of mass advertising. The same escapist and entertainment qualities which were changing sport had an enormous impact on the consumer economy. The bards of consumption sold lifestyles and values packaged as products. A brand of toothpaste could make someone into a sex-pot, the right cut of suit created a corporate mover and shaker, and an automobile could turn an urban family into summertime pioneers. Consumption became the national religion—and it profoundly altered the composition of the American mind. A 1925 article in *The New Republic* highlighted advertising's role in modern cognition. "When all is said and done, advertising does give a certain illusion, a certain sense of escape in a machine age," noted the author. "It creates a dream world: smiling faces, shining teeth, school girl complexions, comless feet, perfect fitting union suits, distinguished collars, wrinkleless collars, odorless breaths, regularized bowels, happy homes in New Jersey . . .

48. Duffus, "The Age of Play," 539

charging motors, punctureless tires, perfect busts, shimmering shanks, self-washing dishes-backs behind which the moon was meant to rise.”⁴⁹

Advertising did more than provide escapism. It helped shape a new reality. It gave new meaning to that hallowed American phrase, “the pursuit of happiness.” Madison Avenue thrust visions of the fruits of the machine process into every home in the land, creating a rising tide of affluent expectations which have affected American culture enormously in the decades since the Twenties. The sales pitch contained subtle ideological messages. The advertisers marketed the American dream and promised material plenty without social alienation, new technology without the destruction of traditional values, and “cost-free progress” in the march toward modernity.⁵⁰

Madison Avenue also remade political culture. The shift away from the “idols of production” into an era in which industrial progress seemed to usher in an “age of play” restructured perceptions of the relationship between individuals and the community-or, in current rhetoric, “the system.” As new definitions of the importance of entertainment and amusement in modern civilization reshaped American sporting ideology, they also influenced political life and brought into question the ability of republicanism to cope with the realities of mass society.⁵¹ The new forms of persuasion, in conjunction with the intellectuals’ abandonment of politics, restructured the roles of the bestowers of power and those who sought it. The new electorate began to look at politicians in the same way in which they looked at consumer goods. Walter Lippmann had realized that ideas and political platforms could be sold as easily as automobiles and razor blades.⁵² As the politicians began to recognize the new realities, American democracy changed forever.⁵³

During the twenties the change manifested itself visibly in presidential politics. George Harvey, commenting on the election of 1924, remarked that Calvin Coolidge would not be elected “for what he said or did, but for what he was.” That was a revolutionary thought, a sentiment that could never be used to describe Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln, let alone Theodore Roosevelt or Woodrow Wilson. For if candidates were not what they said and did then they were only the images they represented in the public’s perception. In the new culture you picked a president the same way you picked a brand of toothpaste.⁵⁴

The campaigns of the Republican electees in 1920 and 1924, Warren G. Harding and Coolidge, offered the public no coherent platform beyond a hazy vision of “normalcy,” an amorphous idea which meant many things to many people at a very superficial level. Although the administrations of Harding and

49. Stuart Chase, “The Tragedy of Waste,” *The New Republic* 43 (August 19, 1925): 431.

50. Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*.

51. Carter’s chapter, “A Republican Form of Government,” in *Another Part of the Twenties*, pp. 167-186; and his *Revolt Against Destiny* address the ways in which American political thinkers sought to cope the rise of mass social structures.

52. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1922) and *The Phantom Public* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1925).

53. See Carter’s chapter, “The Folklore of Advertising,” in *Another Part of the Twenties*, pp. 123-144; and Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*.

54. Donald McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President* (New York: Macmillan, 1967). p. 413.

Coolidge did effect a revolutionary restructuring of federal bureaucracies which made the executive branch a much more effective manager of national policies, the public image of the Republican stewardship was characterized by media visions of Harding as a bungling incompetent surrounded by greedy cronies, and Coolidge as somnolently indifferent to the course of history. The "white-collar" revolution in federal management aroused very little passion in a populace titillated by sensationalistic accounts of sex, crime and sporting spectacles, and inundated by a host of exciting new gadgets and services. A few of the numerous scandals which plagued the Harding administration captured the front pages and the radio waves for a brief span, but the bumbling public images of the ascendant Republicans bored a generation which had lost faith in the connection between the political process and personal power. Big Society dwarfed the individual. In the United States it seemed that not even big government could control the awesome energies of the machine process.⁵⁵

It came as no surprise then, that the nation turned to other forms of communal solidarity. If Harding and Coolidge appeared to have no control over the processes of history, at least Gehrig and Ruth, Grange and the Four Horsemen, Dempsey and Tunney, and America's Olympians could control their athletic destinies. Sports stars seemed to be masters, not victims, of fate.

In September, 1924, Democrat John W. Davis, Republican Calvin Coolidge, and the Progressive Party's Robert La Follette were contesting for the presidency of the United States. But *The Nation*, then under the editorship of Oswald Garrison Villard who proved much more sympathetic to sport than E. L. Godkin ever had, commented that the World Series between the Washington Senators and the New York Giants fascinated the public more than the presidential race. *The Nation's* editors mused that election day would sort out the futures of Coolidge, Davis and La Follette, "but whatever happens to them, we may say already-and with entire confidence-that the popular vote has been cast in favor of sport." Sport pushed the presidential election to the back of American minds. "It has been seated on the American throne," opined the editors. "It has been clothed with almost dictatorial powers." The editors asserted that "this absorption in sports-already so great and apparently on the increase-is both a good and a bad sign of the times." *The Nation* thought that professional games and spectator sports were frivolous. "Yet if these great spectacular events sometimes seemed like an opiate for the people-or the 'bread and circus' of the Roman Empire-one should recognize that they develop and encourage a great growth of amateur sport, of no import whatever to the newspapers but of supreme consequence to the health and spirits of the people," concluded *The Nation*.⁵⁶

The Nation's editorial demonstrated the paradoxical conjunction of traditional and modern patterns in American culture. The editors wanted to preserve

55. Robert K. Murray. *The Politics of Normalcy: Governmental Theory and Practice in the Harding-Coolidge Era* (New York: Norton, 1973).

56. "Sport is Elected," *The Nation* 119 (September 17, 1924): 278.

the traditions of "athletism." And yet they feared the rising narcotic power of spectator sport. Such was the constant paradox of the Twenties, an overwhelming nostalgia combined with a headlong gallop toward new horizons. The decade brought into sharp relief the changing shape of a new America.

But nostalgia could not bring back the old Progressive ideology of sport. The idea of athletics as a social technology designed to effect reform had depended on the belief that sport and political culture were intimately connected. The transformations engendered by the recognition of consumer culture and the realities of mass society had altered both sport and politics. The explicit links between sport and liberal versions of republicanism became murky and imprecise as mass society increasingly consumed athletic spectacles as a respite from the demands of modern industrialism.

Alongside the increasingly popular definition of sport in the 1920s as entertainment and amusement, an institution without any direct connection to politics, a few athletic experts and public figures still clung to the older sporting ideology. One can find many resonances of "athletism" in the writings of Y.M.C.A. leader Elwood Brown and in General Douglas MacArthur's official report from the 1928 Olympic Games.⁵⁷ Odes to the "Americanizing" influence of the playing field still appeared in the professional journals of physical education and recreation science.⁵⁸ In classrooms and pep talks coaches and teachers still celebrated an emotional affinity between the lessons learned through athletic competition and vague conceptions of democracy and patriotism.⁵⁹ Sportswriters still paid homage to the connection between sport as an "American way of life."⁶⁰ But the linkages between sport and politics made in the Twenties were not the clear and calculated explanations of sport as a dynamic tool for social control and the creation of a national culture which the Progressives had espoused.

As the insights of Charles and Mary Beard, Mary Brown, George Brooks, Robert Duffus and John Tunis demonstrated, social criticism in the mass media increasingly interpreted sport in the context of "play," casting it as a symptom of social alienation or an idealized arena separated from the complexities of "real" life. Indeed, two of the more insightful observers of the social shifts in American life between the 1890s and the 1920s Robert and Helen Lynd, lamented that high school basketball rather than some more politically-charged and socially conscious institution was the glue that held together "Middle-

57. Elwood S. Brown. "Teaching the World to Play," *The Outlook* 129 (December 28, 1921): 689-693; Major-General Douglas MacArthur, "Report of the President," in *Report of the American Olympic Committee: Ninth Olympic Games. Amsterdam, 1928: Second Winter Sports. St. Moritz, 1928* (New York: American Olympic Committee, 1920), pp. 1-7.

58. Especially journals like the *American Physical Education Review and Playground*.

59. See for instance, Walter Camp, "Getting the Most Out of Life," *Collier's* 76 (September 12, 1925): 18-19; "Sports and Morals," *Playground* 19 (September, 1925): 336; "To Develop a Nation of Sportsmen," *SchoolLife* 10 (November, 1924): 59; W. M. Malloy. "Athletics and Their Value for Citizenship," *National Education Association Bulletin* (1924): 64-642; W. Burdick. "Educational Athletics," *Playground* 14 (February, 1921): 693-695; "Moral Equivalents for Drink," *Playground* 15 (October, 1921): 443-445.

60. See, for instance, the article by the New York *Evening Mail's* sports editor, Hugh S. Fullerton, "The Ten Commandments of Sport, and of Everything Else," *American Magazine* 92 (August 21, 1921): 54-55, 78.

town”---their cipher for the American “everytown.” The Lynds clearly felt that sport obscured efforts to discuss and solve the important social questions which confronted modern mass societies.⁶¹

The consumer culture of the Twenties changed the nature and structure of both sport and politics. The new dynamics reshaped the cultural perception and role of each institution. In the 1920s sport no longer seemed to offer American civilization the prospect of balancing rational contemplation with the dynamic energies of the modern age. The Progressives invented “athletism” to build a national community. They identified sport with the production of rational social systems. But the “age of play” created a different relationship between sport and political culture.

Even when American sportswriters during the 1920s sought to use athletics to promote nationalism and political cohesion they produced analyses that differed markedly from the Progressive interpretations of the bond between sport and politics. An editorial about the American victory in the Olympic Games of 1924 in Paris illustrated the reordered relationship. “An Ethiopian Takes Notes,” which included an apocryphal interpretation of American success at the Games, attempted to sum up the Eighth Olympics. “A single afternoon spent in the amphitheatre at Colombes is enough to furnish the intelligent observer with a complete picture of the habits and psychology of the American people,” reported the reputed special correspondent of the Addis Ababa *Evening News*.

As I watched those clean-cut American youths acknowledging victory or defeat with the same modest smile, I knew that they came from a quiet sportsmanlike people.

When I saw the silent and magnificent efforts of their runners and their jumpers, I knew that they came from a people that loved action and abhorred palaver.

When I saw the young Americans soar like birds over the bars and the hurdles, I said to myself that this is the way every American surmounts the obstacles in his path.

When I saw on the list of contenders names like SCHOLZ and LE GENDRE, I understood that I was dealing with a people utterly ignorant of the debasing sentiment of racialism and sectionalism.

When I saw the swiftness and certainty with which the young Americans met every emergency as it arose, I said to myself that this is a people who would take orders from no one.

When I saw the splendid devotion of each athlete to the single cause of his country’s victory, I knew that this was a people which sacrificed self to common good.

The editorial followed the pseudo-Ethiopian’s ode to the sporting republic with the comment: “That evening the National Democratic Convention cast its eighty-seventh ballot and adjourned till 10:30 Tuesday morning.”⁶² The juxtaposition of athletic power with political futility underscored the increasing

61. Robert S. Lynd, and Helen Memell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1929), pp. 212-214, 283-285, 485-488.

62. “An Ethiopian Takes Notes,” *New York Times*, July 9, 1924, p. 18.

separation of physical from political culture. The apocryphal anecdote sounded strangely like many of the Progressive paeans to the playing fields. But the Progressives had believed that athletics translated into social efficiency and political strength. Big society had skewed that perspective, and disconnected sport from the realities of civil society. Sport had been elected. But where could the heros and heroines of the playing field lead the nation?