

## Disputed Diamonds: The YMCA Debate Over Baseball in the Late 19th Century

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Long before the culmination of Albert G. Spalding's early twentieth century campaign to enshrine baseball as the national pastime, a general secretary of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Cleveland, Ohio, lauded the game as "the only one worthy of being called our 'national game.'" In quintessential muscular Christian terms, he deemed baseball "clean, healthful, invigorating and recreative, both to the player and the spectator." From the popularity of the game in YMCA circles in the 1890s, it appears that Y leaders everywhere agreed with him.<sup>1</sup>

The appearance was deceiving. Some YMCA people staunchly opposed baseball, and freely aired their views in various Y periodicals of the day. YMCA arguments for and against the game occurred within a larger cultural debate in which the diamond became "a contested terrain" rather than simply "a verdant patch of pastoral nostalgia," as sociologist Michael Kimmel colorfully phrases the issue.<sup>2</sup> According to Kimmel, "the reconstitution of American masculinity" was played out in conflicts of class, race, and gender on the baseball field. The waspish YMCA certainly stood at the center of any definition of American manhood.

To no historian's surprise, however, the real world of YMCA argument over baseball refuses to divide cleanly into the predictable sociological categories of class, race and gender. The loudest voice of opposition came from those people who lost the great YMCA battle of the 1880s and early 1890s, about whether or not the Y should promote *any* kind of competitive athletics. Robert J. Roberts, physical director at the Boston YMCA, led a small but steady chorus against the Y's patronage of sport. He saw the gymnasium as a center of healthy "safe,

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1. *Young Men's Era* 17 (October 8, 1891): 633. On the reference to Spalding, see Peter Levine, *A. G. Spalding and the Rise of American Baseball: The Promise of American Sport* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 112-21. The best general history of the YMCA—C. H. Hopkins, *History of the YMCA in North America* (New York: Association Press, 1951)—is now almost half a century old, badly in need of revision and updating. For "physical work" and athletics, see Elmer L. Johnson, *The History of YMCA Physical Education* (Chicago: Association Press/Follette Publishing Company, 1979).

2. Michael S. Kimmel, "Baseball and the Reconstitution of American Masculinity, 1880-1920," in *Sport, Men, and the Gender Order: Critical Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Michael A. Messner and Donald F. Sabo (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics Books, 1990), 65.

short, easy, beneficial and pleasing” exercise largely based on the use of dumb bells, light pulleys, and calisthenics untainted by competitive games. “I would advise youths never to enter competitive sports,” wrote Roberts in 1891. From sixteen to twenty-two years of age, young men should bide their time, build “upright, strong and enduring” bodies, and turn to sports only under the watchful eye of a medical director or athletic trainer. Obviously not in step with the athletic craze of the late-nineteenth century, Roberts denounced baseball and all other kinds of competitive athletics as illegitimate intrusions upon YMCA ideals.<sup>3</sup>

At least Roberts was explicit in his reasoning against sport. Another Y physical director, R. L. Weston of St. Paul, Minnesota, veiled his assumptions with stern judgment and harsh prescription: “I believe the whole tone of the base ball as played today is demoralizing and should be rated with the second class theater,” Weston told *Young Men’s Era* readers in 1891. “Physical directors and all association men should do everything in their power to discourage and keep young men from attending [baseball games].”<sup>4</sup> A theater provides a “play,” and the disparaging comparison of baseball with the theater furnishes a clue to the source of some YMCA misgivings about baseball. The language of older Y leaders was *work*, not play. They always referred to “physical work” in the gymnasium. A peculiar phrase that is still in vogue, “working out,” probably derives from that earnest Victorian era of organized, deliberate exercise as promoted by the YMCA. Like Sunday sermons and castor oil, perhaps it was not fun, but it was good for you. Baseball lacked that regimen. It was too much fun for muscular Christians of the Roberts and Weston kind.

Lest one succumb to caricature, it is essential to note that the oft-repeated goal of YMCA physical programs was symmetrical attention to the lungs, muscles, and total health of gymnasium participants. Sports and games-Y leaders agreed — should similarly add to physical fitness and well-being. As a speaker told a New England conference of general secretaries in 1892, “the only system of athletics which our association can conduct with helpfulness to its main purpose are such as tend to the all-around development of the human body.”<sup>5</sup>

Some Y men simply thought baseball unable to contribute to that end. In 1892, for example, L. B. Smith depicted baseball as “a general favorite . . . decidedly in the lead of other sports” within Association circles, but registered his discontent with the game because it seemed “no longer worthy the title of all-around developer.” Smith indulged in a bit of nostalgia, recalling days of old when batting of the ball produced more running around the bases and in the field, requiring players to expand their lungs and to work their muscles and limbs. “But time has transformed it,” lamented Smith, “from a game of running

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3. Robert J. Roberts, “Hints to Competitive Workers,” *Young Men’s Era* 17 (February 5, 1891): 90; cf. Roberts, “The Boston Gymnasium,” *Young Men’s Era* 18 (February 11, 1892): 182. For Roberts’ conflict with other YMCA leaders over this issue of competitive sport, see Johnson, *YMCA Physical Education*, 51-58.

4. *Young Men’s Era* 17 (October 8, 1891): 633.

5. O. E. Ryther, “Athletics,” *Young Men’s Era* 18 (June 16, 1892): 758.

to practically a game of standing; from that of hitting the ball to that of hitting at the ball; from scores of one hundred to scores of nothing.”<sup>6</sup>

Most of these changes had occurred within the previous decade, the 1880s. Overhead pitching became standard procedure and the traditional practice of the batter calling for a high or low pitch was abolished, tilting the game decidedly in the pitcher’s favor. Moreover, throughout the 1880s the pitcher’s distance from the batter was only fifty feet (compared to today’s sixty feet, six inches, introduced in 1893).<sup>7</sup> So while the pitcher and catcher did most all the work, complained Smith, “the basemen stand at their posts like statues and watch the game of ‘fan out’ at the plate, while the fielders like sentinels stand and grow cold for the want of exercise.” \*So much for Mark Twain’s famous gush (delivered just three years earlier) about baseball being “the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging, tearing, booming nineteenth century.”<sup>9</sup>

By contrast, football developed a man “*all around*,” argued another YMCA man in the autumn of 1891. “Legs are at work, running and pushing, all the time” on the football field. “Lungs are called into most vigorous action. Neck and arms and back and loins, in the writhing and twisting and pushing of the rush line all are exercised”—and “not of one or two men but of all.” Thus the inevitable comparison: “In base ball two men do the work while the rest look on. In football all the men are at work the greater part of the time.”<sup>10</sup> Just two months after these words appeared in print, James B. Naismith invented basketball as yet another, less physically dangerous game that would keep an entire team of young men “at work the greater part of the time.” Baseball, on the other hand, seemed an exaggeration of the tendency of competitive athletics to attend to the “contest skills” of the few rather than to the physical well-being of the majority.<sup>11</sup>

Worst of all, baseball was the one American team sport that went explicitly professional in the nineteenth century, and that fact alone disqualified it for unanimous approval within YMCA circles.<sup>12</sup> In its transatlantic passage from

6. L. B. Smith, “Baseball,” *Young Men’s Era* 18 (June 2, 1892): 692.

7. David Quentin Voigt, *American Baseball: From Gentleman’s Sport to the Commissioner System* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 205-8; cf. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 172-88: “The Game on the Field in the ‘Eighties.”

\*. Smith, “Baseball,” 692. President Charles Eliot of Harvard also thought baseball “a wretched game” because there were “only two desirable positions—pitcher and catcher”: Voigt, *American Baseball*, 205-6.

9. Quoted in Harry Clay Palmer, “The ‘Around the World’ Tour,” in *Athletic Sports in America, England, and Australia*, ed. Harry Clay Palmer (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1889), 446-47.

10. Paul C. Phillips, “Rugby Foot Ball: Its Value as a Sport for Young Men’s Christian Associations,” *Young Men’s Era* 17 (October 8, 1891): 632. For YMCA views on football, see “Football at the Association Training School, Springfield, Mass.,” *The Triangle* 1 (February, 1891): 6-8; H. L. Chadwick, “Outdoor Athletics: Their Object and Relative Value,” *Young Men’s Era* 17 (April 21, 1891): 499-500; “Physical Department,” *Young Men’s Era* 18 (February 25, 1892): 246.

11. *Young Men’s Era* 18 (September 29, 1892): 1238: “What the association needs in athletics is not a few men training for contest work, but the work adapted to the majority of our members.”

12. Prior to 1900 a few regionally-confined professional (or what we would now call semi-professional) football and basketball teams appeared, but not until the 1920s did professionalism make any appreciable impact on those games. On the early tacit professionalization of college football, however, see Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 165-74; for the professionalization of basketball, see Robert W. Peterson, *Cages to Jumpshots: Pro Basketball’s Early Years* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

England, Y baggage included an idealization of amateurism as well as bundles of religious tracts and high-minded ideals. Fortunately, the more loosely-defined American class system made it impossible for Americans to denounce a professional athlete in the severe class terms employed by British elite sportsmen: as a person “who is or ever has been by trade or employment for wages a mechanic, artisan, or labourer or engaged in any menial duty.”<sup>13</sup> Yet one critic of professional baseball thought the problem might well lie “in the class of men who participate.”<sup>14</sup> In more general terms, middle-class YMCA spokesmen in the United States harbored negative images of professionals that rivalled the most bigotted of all upper-class British attitudes.

New England Y leader O. E. Ryther, for example, associated political corruption, social immorality, and demon rum with professional sport, and concluded that all tended to destroy a nation’s character. According to Ryther, the decline of ancient Greece began when professionals first carried off Olympic prizes. Americans should take warning, suggested Ryther, “alive to the lessons of history.”<sup>15</sup> Actually, his history was bad, however good his intentions.<sup>16</sup>

Other YMCA men saw the professional issue in more subtle but no less alarming terms. “The professional baseball players and shot putters and runners were not always professional,” warned the editor of the *Young Men’s Era* in 1892. The decline was supposedly gradual. When an amateur baseball player found that he could outshine his competitors, he turned to competing with semi-professionals; doing well at that level, he went still further “and before long, instead of competing for prizes in the shape of umbrellas and books, he is induced to try for money.” At one level, YMCA spokesmen depicted the taking of money by an athlete as an evil in and of itself; at another level, the problem had to do with the effects of that money. “Professionalism aims at money and even sacrifices health and morals to obtain it.”<sup>17</sup>

For those Y men who were concerned with morals as much as health, professional baseball was a veritable garden of iniquity. Puritans of old castigated sport for its irreligious catering to the supposed pleasures of the flesh,<sup>18</sup> and YMCA neo-Puritans did much the same. By the late-nineteenth century, however, they could have their sport and criticize it too: applauding the “pure” amateurs, ignoring shamateurism, and rejecting the professionals. In the words of S. D. Gordon, the state YMCA secretary of Ohio, professional baseball’s “pernicious habits, such as Sabbath playing, betting, drinking and the like” set the ball park off-limits unless those “evil practices” were curtailed.

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13. Quoted from Herbert T. Steward, *The Records of the Henley Regatta, 1839-1902* (London: Grant Richards, 1903), 229-30, in Smith, *Sports and Freedom*, 166.

14. Smith, “Baseball,” 692.

15. Ryther, “Athletics,” 758-59.

16. See David C. Young, *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years* (Chicago: Ares, 1984).

17. *Young Men’s Era* 18 (September 22, 1892): 1204.

18. On the historical debate about older Puritan attitudes, see Allen Guttman, *A Whole New Ball Game: An Interpretation of American Sports* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 23-34; cf. William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 72-84.

Gordon happily took himself off the hook of abstinence, however, noting that two Ohio cities had clubs in the National League, which banned such practices.<sup>19</sup> George T. Coxhead, a general secretary in another National League city, St. Louis, also sang the relative merits of the National League, “which does not play on Sunday.”<sup>20</sup>

Ultimately, this ambivalence characterized the entire debate over baseball within the YMCA. Praise was often tempered with misgivings, and *vice-versa*. Educated middle-class leaders sometimes recommended one thing, and socially heterogeneous Y members did something else. National debates and directives often failed to make an impression on local activities. From its inception in 1881, for example, the YMCA in Bangor, Maine published a four-page *Monthly Bulletin* of information on Y philosophy and local programs, problems, and aspirations, without a single mention of any philosophical or practical misgivings about baseball. Happy to find “considerable interest” in the game, a new physical director in 1893 predicted that the Bangor YMCA would field one of the best baseball teams in central Maine, capable even of beating the State College club at Orono. His only complaint was against a train engineer who refused to wait for the team to complete its turn at bat in the ninth inning against Bucksport, the one loss of the season for the Bangor Y squad.<sup>21</sup>

While still lauding the gymnasium and the primacy of healthful indoor exercise, physical directors supervised the formation of teams and leagues and the purchase or lease of athletic fields for outdoor games. Of the 327 branches that promoted athletics in the 1880s, half (180) sponsored baseball teams. In 1889 the New York City Y organized a baseball league of thirty clubs.<sup>22</sup> Within the same year the Nashville YMCA signed a lease for part-time use of a local baseball stadium owned by a Southern League professional team, and the Indianapolis Y welcomed 800 people to the opening of its new Athletic Park. At the center of the park was a baseball diamond, surrounded by a bicycle track and tennis courts. The festivities ended with a baseball game between local lawyers and ministers, with the lawyers winning, 5-3.<sup>23</sup> Two years later, Indianapolis YMCA officials proudly announced an Association baseball league of four teams.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to the geographical diffusion represented in New York, Nashville

19. But for the complex case of Cincinnati’s “wooden shoe” (Dutch) population and Sunday baseball, see Voigt, *American Baseball*, 212-214.

20. *Young Men’s Era* 17 (October 8, 1891): 633. Coxhead finally dropped the distinction between amateur and professional baseball, concluding simply that “Base ball is a healthful, manly sport, and to witness a good game is splendid recreation for a tired and over-worked secretary or any other man.”

21. Bangor, Maine, Young Men’s Christian Association, *Monthly Bulletin* 11 (March, 1893): 2; (June 1893): 1.

22. Harold Seymour, *Baseball: The People’s Game* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 46.

23. *The Watchman* 15 (September 19, 1889): 571. In the early 1890s, YMCAs all over the United States rushed to secure leases or to purchase athletic fields and baseball parks. For Beaver Falls and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, see *Young Men’s Era* 17 (March 26, 1891): 202; for Bath, Maine, and Kansas City, Missouri, see *Young Men’s Era* 17 (April 12, 1891): 218; for Lewistown, Pennsylvania, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, see *Young Men’s Era* 18 (May 25, 1892): 663. For shrewd comments on the use of sports grounds, see Luther Gulick, “The Future of Athletics in the Y. M. C. A.,” *The Triangle* 1 (June 15, 1891): 70.

24. *Young Men’s Era* 17 (March 26, 1891): 202.

and Indianapolis activities, YMCA baseball enjoyed a remarkably broad cultural distribution in the late nineteenth century. Random scores listed under "Association Baseball" in the *Young Men's Era* indicate opponents as diverse as college teams Washington and Jefferson, Trinity College (Hartford, Connecticut), and Cincinnati University; schools like the Augusta Military Academy of Virginia and a "high school nine" in Chicopee, Massachusetts; and private local teams such as Fuller & Son's Jewelers in Pawtucket, tube works clerks of McKeesport, Pennsylvania, the Shamrocks of Kewaunee, Illinois, the Atlanta Infidels, and the Quicksteps of Paterson, New Jersey.<sup>25</sup> By the early years of this century, the YMCA was assisting municipal governments, churches, industries, and schools to organize baseball teams and leagues.<sup>26</sup>

One of the diamond's most effective advocates was a young man better known for his gridiron exploits: Amos Alonzo Stagg, a former star pitcher at Yale. On the staff of Springfield Training School in the early 1890s, each weekend Stagg carried the gospel of sport to churches and civic groups. In early March, 1892, he addressed a packed house of 2,200 people at the Central Presbyterian Church in Rochester, New York, on "Christianity on the Diamond." At the top of the church bulletin that Sunday morning were the words, "This service is held in the interests of muscular Christianity."<sup>27</sup> Before secular sponsors took over, much baseball was played-and debated-under the banner of muscular Christianity.

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25. *Young Men's Era* 18 (June 10, 1892): 760.

26. Seymour, *Baseball*, 90.

27. "Stagg at Rochester," *Young Men's Era* 18 (March 10, 1892): 310.