

Kirsch, George B., ed. *Sports In North America: A Documentary History*. Volume 3: *The Rise of Modern Sports, 1840-1860*. Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1992. Pp. xviii + 390. Bibliography, index. \$72.

The Rise of Modern Sports, 1840-1860, edited by George B. Kirsch, is the first volume to appear in the new multivolume series of documents, *Sports In North America*, and if the standard set by Kirsch is met by the other editors, the series will be one of few indispensable scholarly editions for sport historians. *The Rise of Modern Sports* contains early sports' constitutions, by-laws, rules, and codes, as well as newspaper and magazine descriptions of important sporting events. It captures the tone and feel of the birth of modern sports, and it gives attention to elite sports as well as working-class sports. Throughout Kirsch carefully situates the sports and the sporting experience into the culture of mid-nineteenth-century America, a time when democratic philosophies were attacking older notions of class and station but had yet to

have fully overthrown the more traditional beliefs. Sports often served as an arena where traditional ideas battled new, and as a laboratory for an America beginning to take form.

“The purpose of this volume,” Kirsch writes, “is to present a comprehensive collection of the most important primary source documents pertaining to the development of sports in North America between 1841 and 1860” (p. xii). In order to achieve this end, Kirsch adopts a broad definition of sport: “a competitive game that involves some significant degree of physical activity by the participants” (p. xii). To be sure, baseball, cricket, prize fighting, football, lacrosse, rowing, track and field, racket sports, winter sports, horse racing, and wrestling fall under the definition, but Kirsch also includes field sports, blood sports, pub sports, and work sports in his definition of sporting activity. By casting his net widely, Kirsch is able to show the sporting activities of all classes of Americans. Indeed, Kirsch is particularly careful to detail in his introduction and documents the impact industrialization had on high white-collar workers, low white-collar workers, skilled artisans, semi-skilled workers, and unskilled workers.

Clearly Kirsch believes that the 1841-1860 period marked the start of modern sport. “At the beginning of this era premodern patterns of recreation predominated in both Canada and the United States.” Kirsch writes. “But on the eve of the American Civil War more modern forms of competitive play were developing in both countries” (p. xiii). In his introduction, Kirsch relies on conclusions from his own book (*The Creation of American Team Sports: Baseball and Cricket, 1838-72*) as well as the works of Allen Guttmann and Melvin L. Adelman about the nature of premodern modern sports and the mid-nineteenth century as the vital transition period. And although the modernization approach has come under attack, no one has offered a more comprehensive alternative.

The major limitation to the documents themselves is that many focus primarily on New York City. This is understandable given the importance of the *Spirit of the Times*, the *New York Clipper*, and the New York City daily press coverage of sports. But Kirsch has included documents from other American and Canadian cities. Only the black sporting experience is undercovered, and this is a result of “scarcity of sources.”

The documents themselves contain something for every student of sport history. For historians concerned with the evolution of rules, Kirsch includes the early rules of baseball, cricket, prize fighting, several pit sports, horse racing, football, lacrosse, billiards, and other sports. For historians interested in class issues, the bylaws and constitutions of various sporting clubs provide a fund of information. For historians seeking information about important contests, Kirsch includes accounts on most of the famous games, matches, races, and fights. Class, gender, and other social issues abound in the documents. The selections cover how men trained to fight each other and how baseball was played in the mid-nineteenth century.

Kirsch includes so much that editors of future volumes might be handicapped by his example. For as much as Kirsch claims that his period witnessed the birth of modern sports—and I do not question that point—the primary source material for sport was still manageable. After 1860 the volume of material began to grow exponentially, and after the turn of the century it became unmanageable. I cannot imagine any scholar doing for the 1960s or 1970s what Kirsch accomplished for his era. And perhaps that is the most telling aspect of the 1841-1860 era: For all the incipient modernization, the age had a comprehensible unity, one that George Kirsch has been able to document.

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