
POPE, S.W. *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination, 1876-1926*. Sports and History Series. New York Oxford University Press, 1997. Pp. xi, 212. Notes, index, illustrations. \$39.95.

The amazing staying power of what author S.W. Pope terms the “myth of amateurism” launches this inquiry into the development of American ideas about sports. Pope asks why it is that, even in the late twentieth century, sports enthusiasts continue to debate the role of materialism in sports, and why the *myth* of amateurism, of “ ‘pure’ sport played only for ‘the love of the game’ ” (p. ix), continues to constitute a kind of nostalgic standard against which contemporary sports are measured and found wanting. This query propels *Patriotic Games* into a study of the origins and ideological function of the concept of amateurism, as well as the related concept of nationalism.

Pope argues that although sports have always been linked with commerce, most clearly through the practice of wagering, in late nineteenth-century America, a small yet influential group of sports enthusiasts encouraged the belief that amateur sports, unsullied by monetary interests, reflected the highest ideals of pure athleticism and personal character. Historicizing this idea of athletic purity as a legacy of the ancient Greeks, these enthusiasts limited amateurism to collegiate athletics and, later, Olympic competition, thereby claiming it as accessible only to the privileged classes. At the same time, however, this group endorsed the

increasing commercialization of these sporting activities. Thus, Pope argues, the myth of amateurism functioned ideologically both to consolidate middle-class status and to mask capitalist profit-making. Moreover, Pope connects this myth of amateurism to the growth of American nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century, demonstrating that the claim to amateurism as a distinctively American characteristic fostered connections between sports and the achievements of the American nation. These links are revealed in rhetoric glorifying American athleticism during Olympic games; in declarations of baseball as the “national pastime”; in the association of sporting events with national holidays like Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July; in beliefs in Anglo-American athletic superiority and the marginalization of nonwhite athletes; and in the integration of sports into the United States military. Ultimately, Pope feels that because the amateurist ideal was so closely linked to U.S. nationalism, Americans today have inherited a kind of patriotic obligation to preserve it.

Combining cultural studies concepts with social history methods, Pope claims that these amateurist and nationalist ideas about sports functioned as “invented traditions,” or “sporting traditions,” in his parlance. A theoretical concept popularized by Eric Hobsbawm, “invented traditions” are selective interpretations of the past formed to legitimize present situations. Associating distinctively American sports with the supposedly classical ideal of pure athleticism constituted, in Pope’s estimation, a late nineteenth-century “attempt to draw class lines against the masses, and to develop a new bourgeois leisure lifestyle as a badge of middle- and upper-class identity” (p. 19). Like the political association of American republicanism with that of ancient Rome, this new view of sports could be used to justify contemporary social and political ideologies.

For the most part, Pope concentrates on demonstrating that the amateur and nationalist “sporting traditions” were indeed present and linked in sport rhetoric at the turn of the century and that those who advanced them represented bourgeois interests. Despite an early pronouncement that the process of creating cultural meaning is widely negotiated among a variety of groups, this study does not contextualize the development of these “sporting traditions” within the multiplicity of meanings associated with sports during this period, but instead focuses exclusively on the views of a handful of journalists, administrators, equipment manufacturers, and politicians—a group Pope refers to as “sports bureaucrats”—who promulgated these ideas in print and in sports organizations. Although he does analyze some feature articles written by such well-known late nineteenth-century figures as Caspar Whitney and James Sullivan, Pope’s evidence of these bureaucrats’ notions consists mainly of turn-of-the-century newspaper reports and analyses done by other scholars. Lacking sufficient primary material, the conclusions regarding the linkages between these ideas prove to be more tantalizing than persuasive. Furthermore, these bureaucrats’ ideas are assumed to be widely held during the period, a proposition that is not sufficiently supported. Indeed, as an approach that minimizes the possibility of alternative meanings and interpretations, this assumption reconceptualizes the cultural role of the “invented tradition” as a totalizing, top-down construction capable of imposing one group’s perspective upon everyone.

Some further inconsistency in Pope's conceptualization of the "invented tradition" also compromises its full potential for revealing the significance of these developing notions. In his efforts to associate our own contemporary discussions of amateurism and nationalism as they relate to sports with these late nineteenth-century "sporting traditions," Pope assumes that what developed as time- and class-specific ideological reconstructions of the past evolved into actual "traditions," i.e., that they were handed down from generation to generation to become predominant understandings. The "invented tradition" concept thus loses its historicity and becomes an ongoing, hegemonic way of thinking. An intriguing proposition, this assumption is neither interrogated nor acknowledged. As does the characterization of the readily achieved hegemony of sports bureaucrats' ideas, this reconceptualization of the "invented tradition" minimizes the role of other voices in the creation of cultural meaning.

Patriotic Games does reveal, however, some clear instances in which middle-class moral and political ideals informed the meanings associated with sports in American society. It challenges sport historians to look more closely at the ways in which sports rhetoric weaves national, social, and personal agendas into a tightly knit fabric. In so doing, it offers a provocative perspective on the ideological function of sports that will help to advance this growing area of sports scholarship.

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