

The Animal in Sport: From Low Regard to Highest Esteem, 1778-1866

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From the earliest times there have been philosophers who directly or indirectly attempted to answer the question whether animals had rights. The Buddhist and Pythagorean canons included the maxim “not to kill or injure any innocent animal.” Seneca, Plutarch and Porphyry, the most evident humanitarian philosophers of the Roman empire, preached humanity on the broad principle of universal benevolence. During the churchdom of the middle ages, from the fourth century to the sixteenth and the time of Montaigne, little or no attention was directed to sympathy or affection for animals. Most theologians saw the gulf between man and beast as impassable but a tendency to consider animals as rational began to develop after the tenth century in the criminal trial and punishment of beasts. Then, with the Reformation and the revival of learning, a revival of humanitarian feeling also appeared. But, it was not until the eighteenth century, the age of enlightenment and sensibility, that the rights of animals received more deliberate attention.

Animals were utilized to serve mankind in almost every culture. The variety of their usefulness varied but in most cases animals were treated with the lowest regard. Basically, they were used for food, for doing work, or for providing entertainment and amusement. The animal was basic to many of the early sports such as coursing, baiting, falconry, hawking, dog fighting, gander pulling, cockfighting, bull fighting, horse racing, steeple chasing, fox hunting, and pigeon shooting. Many of these sports were popular as “royal sports” in England and then diffused to the lower classes. They became important aspects of the leisure activities of the inhabitants of Elizabethan England and were subsequently deposited in America as early as the seventeenth century.

Animal sports and animal exhibitions of all kinds were popular in colonial America. A wide variety of wild beasts were seen for the first time by many colonials. Their size, ferocity, dexterity, courage and strength were intriguing and amusing to the general populace. Consequently, sports consisting of the baiting, fighting or chasing of animals were quite popular. Colonials combined their gambling instinct with the animal sports which in turn provided many hours of hilarious and exciting entertainment. Although sports containing cruelty to animals came under attack in England during the eighteenth century, most of the condemnation of these “blood sports” in America did not arise until the beginning of the nineteenth century. There was disapproval voiced earlier

but it rested primarily on moral and religious grounds. Religious leaders and some government officials did not approve of the gambling that often accompanied animal sports or the general “mispendence of time” associated with any amusement.

After 1800, condemnation of cruel animal sports arose because of the death and injury to the animals and as the editor of the *New York Magazine* of 1791 stated, because “spectators of such scenes of cruelty became thoroughly demoralized . . .” One desirable characteristic of human beings was a tender regard with the distresses of fellow creatures and one’s amusements should reflect this belief. This belief found expression in the state of New York, which in 1828 passed the first American anti-cruelty legislation with specific clauses prohibiting animal baiting and fighting.

After 1828, especially during the era of Jacksonian Reform, dissatisfaction with cruel animal sports began to grow. Clergy, moralists, government officials, newspaper editors, and humanitarians pleaded for the elimination of these debasing amusements. Although common thought began to focus on the perfectability of humanity, actual additional legislation prohibiting these sports was slow to come.

Eliminating brutal animal sports was not only a matter of securing proper legislation but also of transforming established moral and religious beliefs. The plea for prevention was characteristic of an age when the humanitarian belief that society could be improved by human effort was at its peak. The social and humanitarian movements during the 1820’s, 1830’s, and 1840’s reflected the belief that each American was capable of moral redemption and ultimate perfection and that the best way to arrive at this end was to change the environment which would in turn lead to an improvement of human nature and the human condition. Similar feelings originated earlier during the Second Great Awakening and were reinforced by Transcendentalism, romanticism, and the antebellum reform movement in general. For the reformers morality and religion were inseparable.

During the first three quarters of the nineteenth century the two figures who contributed most to the reform of animal sports were Henry Bergh (1823-1888) and George Angell (1823-1909), who, at times, cooperated with one another. By 1866, Bergh had succeeded in founding the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, a high point in the Prevention of Cruelty in general. Bergh and Angell fought for laws prohibiting “barbarous” animal sports. They disseminated humane literature, published journals pertaining to cruelty, formed the American Bands of Mercy, and founded the American Humane Education Society among many others. The period after 1866 represented a new epoch in the treatment of animals and in the sporting tradition itself. It is thus my hypothesis that between 1776 and 1866 a change occurred in the American reaction to animals which in turn helped to eliminate or transform some of our traditional sporting pursuits. In most instances, animals were held in the highest esteem by Americans.



Some of the convention participants at a coffee break