
Sport and Social Stratification in the U.S. 1865-1900

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Many historians and sociologists have been perplexed by the role of sport in the social structure of nations. It has been virtually impossible to determine to what extent sport reflects society and to what extent it takes an active role in shaping or changing social structure. The authors, out of respect for the difficulty of the problem, studied only one small aspect of the problem during a limited time period. Specifically, this study investigated sport and social stratification in the United States during the last third of the nineteenth century.

Research literature is abundant with references to the relationship between sport and

social stratification during the Greek and Roman eras, the middle ages, the renaissance and the modern era. Very few studies, however, have gone into the subject in sufficient depth.

The authors chose the post Civil War period because of its importance in the rise of organized sports and games in the United States. As a result of the study of available primary source literature on amateur athletics and related research in the historical and sociological disciplines, the authors arrived at three conclusions:

(1) The United States during the period studied was stratified. To replace aristocratic birth as a means of class identification many members of the upper classes sought new “distinctions”.

2) The class system that existed in the United States had a strong effect on the constitutions, by-laws and rules of the amateur sports groups which were undergoing their initial organizational struggles.

3) Many of the rules which were instituted in amateur sport during the post Civil War era have been carried over to the present day. The consequences of adopting and following rules and by-laws that were created with class distinction in mind is that sport stratification can become institutionalized.