
From the Cradle to the Playing Field: America's Emphasis on Highly Organized Competitive Sports for Preadolescent Boys

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The growth and development of highly organized competitive sport programs for young boys was indicative of the fact that sport had penetrated all levels of the population. In fact, sport competition for children has become an important phase of the total involvement of Americans with sport. The provision of these sporting opportunities for children below the age of twelve accompanied by further opportunities and facilities for all young children, was one of the significant social trends of the twentieth century.

Two separate but interrelated developments in the social and cultural milieu of American society during the early twentieth century provided the most direct influence upon the rise and growth of boy's competitive sport programs. The first of course was the rise of sport itself in all parts of the country and subsequent desire to participate and spectate by large numbers of the population. More specifically though, the inclusion of sport in the school curriculum brought organized sport closer to the youth of the nation than ever before. Along with school sports came the rationale for their acceptance and promotion. This was most often provided by professional physical educators, recreational people, playground leaders, and athletic coaches who were responsible for the majority of competitive sport situations during the first three decades of the twentieth century. But, when philosophies changed within this group during the 1930's, they dropped any sponsorship of children's sport they had previously provided and refused to condone high level competition for preadolescents. This change of outlook by professionally trained educators who were deeply involved with the early stages of sport competition for children was the first important development in conjunction with the overall rise of sport. Although it seemed to be antagonistic to the growth and development of children's sport, the alteration of philosophy would eventually lead to bigger, better, and more highly organized programs.

The second development influencing the growth of boys' competitive sport programs was that Americans began to realize the need and importance to protect and provide varied

opportunities for children. Childhood became recognized as an important stage in the development of an adult and measures were taken by concerned individuals and organizations to insure a happy and profitable period of growing up. By means of a variety of national, state and local laws and policies, children were provided with an abundance of free time, parents took a different view of their offspring, and national programs were organized to look out for the child's welfare. An entirely new branch of social welfare, that which was called boys' work, originated in the early 1900's. Boys' work groups, originally composed of all voluntary members, were organized specifically to provide wholesome leisure time pursuits for young boys and to keep them out of trouble. They began using sports and other recreational activities very early in their work for many of the same reasons that the schools turned to sport. But, when the schools refused to sponsor competitive sports for the young boys, the task was left to the voluntary boys' work groups. Therefore, the linkage of the overall popularity of sport and its believed values, many of which were established by school personnel in the early twentieth century, and the sport sponsorship by boys' work agencies, along with their own modifications and gradual growth, did more to promote boys' sport competition than any other factors and led directly to America's emphasis on highly organized competitive sports for preadolescent boys.