

The Idea of a Sports Record

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The idea of a sports record is very young. The sports record is itself a refined symbol, the product of a complex of ideas and practices unique to a democratic, industrial society and, like that society, is something new under the sun. As a definition: "The sports record is a widely acknowledged, statistically stated, supreme athletic performance of a recognized kind. The record is abstract in that it exists apart from the performance itself and recognizes only what is remarkable about the performance. The record exists apart from chronological time, geography and any social distinction or distinctions of the person or persons who establish it."

The closest approximation of the modern obsession with personal distinction and performance in athletics existed among aristocratic Greeks in the classical period. However, among the Greeks, as with almost all other peoples, victory was always in a proximate contest and was *over* an opponent. The victor lived in history; his performance did not.

The foundations of modern sports record can be found in eighteenth century England which, not accidentally, was also the society that gave rise to the Industrial Revolution. Englishmen re-invented the sports hero who came to be celebrated as a glorious symbol of the democratic accomplishment principle. A quest for superior performance was first apparent in horse racing, but later was extended to track and field competitions and many other activities capable of calibration. Standardized events and rules (themselves paralleling contemporaneous movements to codify laws and organize knowledge) made intercollegiate track competitions possible. Almost all our track records have ancestors no older than the Oxford-Cambridge meet of 1863.

As a sacred symbol in a society where rootlessness, controlled aggression and accomplishment are highly valued, the sports record is far more vivid and valid than those of the ancient church and pre-modern caste culture. Sport has continued to accompany the social changes that bring out disciplined factory work and late, technical schooling. Significantly, the Americans, who industrialized most rapidly, were the most enthusiastic sports spectators and constructors of sporting myths. Even now, ambitious leaders in so-called underdeveloped countries are eager to introduce high-performance sports as antidotes to tradition, as paradigms for the disciplined use of time and energy and to inspire or ennoble accomplishment in the abstract.

Everywhere traditional means for maintaining ones position in society continue to erode. Epics are forgotten. Loyalties are de-localized. On the other hand, as conversational topics, stimulators to the circulatory system and fantasy or unifying rituals for larger political loyalties, sports festivals and great athletes play vastly more intense roles in the inner lives of almost all Americans than art, religion or patriotism do. Sports heroes and singular performances tend ever more to be perpetuated in myths and inscribed "records."