

educated few ('the speaking aristocracy') who exerted influence on a large public, is not sufficient. It is as important to determine what the common man was thinking and doing. What did New England really look like and how did it operate below the ideational level? Did the people practice what the sermons and laws constantly urged them to do?

An interpretation of the jeremiads (1650 to 1700), which is corroborated by some records of the towns, courts, and churches, shows that the impact of dogmatic theology upon the population has been vastly exaggerated. Even the church members indulged in physical recreation whenever there was an opportunity. The prohibitive laws did not have a great influence since they were not sufficiently enforced.

The historiography of American sport will probably have to reconsider some of the judgments passed on the early Puritans in New England.

Reaction

by

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A revisionist is one who advocates a departure from any authoritative or generally accepted doctrine or theme. Rational and disinterested historical revisionism is the essence of the profession. The host of scholars that followed Herodotus and Thucydides must have given serious consideration to the need for fresher and more accurate interpretations. Wars, saints, despots, ideas, and ideologies, all have undergone revision. For example, Adolf Hitler has received new credentials every decade since his death in 1945. This is as it should be. The danger lies in the revisionist who calls Hitler a good man and Albert Schweitzer a devil. Fortunately, Dr. Wagner, in his study of sporting practices among seventeenth century New England Puritans, does not allow such extremism in his paper.

But, on occasion he comes close. Robert Lee's quotation that "there is evidence enough to indicate that the Puritans were not opposed to diversion and recreation, provided it was truly refreshing, was not a waste of time, was not done in excess, and was not immoral or sensual," is not evidence at all! What a left-handed compliment of Puritan attitudes toward fun and games! To cite the muted support of physical activities by Baxter, Burkett, Shepard, Cotton Mather, Wigglesworth, and Sewall is only to show how few spokesmen for games there were during the seventeenth century. Still, Professor Wagner does us a service, as have several other contemporary writers, in rendering a very early New Englanders as eminently human—occasionally dancing, singing, playing unobtrusively, and throwing themselves into the camouflaged recreations of house and barn raising, hunting and fishing, and the traditional husking bees of the period.

I do not mean to be over-pedagogical, but from a visual, rhetorical, and substantially scholarly view, the paper appears uneven. While there are many excellent, primary sources cited, the paper begins with back-to-back quotes from Charles Hackensmith and Norma Schwendener. Reliable but still secondary sources follow rapidly, i.e., Dulles, Carlson, Gabriel, Davis, Brightbill, Durant and Bettman, Van Dalen and Bennet. This is no way to footnote the first three pages. Eye-witness accounts do, of course, strengthen the paper

later. By the way, to me, the 4000 word essay is a “machine-gun” of forty paragraphs—far too many. And, unfortunately from my point of view, some of the very best material in the paper appears in overly long explanatory footnotes.

Honestly, I’m pleased that Peter Wagner chose to explore this fascinating and important topic. Puritan attitudes only began to radically change in the last decade of the seventeenth century. That’s why I think the study would have been significantly more germane if he had looked at the eighteenth century. Wagner has clearly pointed out that these early and brave New Englanders, even those self-elected, starchy leaders—Calvinists to the core—did not hate fun and games per se. It was their maniacal (to many of us) “detestation of idleness” that turned them inexorably away from significant play involvement. The record seems clear to me. Seventeenth century New Englanders did, on occasion, indulge in physical recreation—and sometimes in surprising ways. Yet their great joy and passion was working hard in the vineyards of the Lord. My own research has convinced me that the simplistic approach of the first two generations of New Englanders is wrong; they did, on occasion, play in a fretful way. I still must go along with the clever analogy that in the seventeenth century “sport grew up in New England like a flower in a macadem prison yard.”



Sports and Games in New England Schools and Academies, 1780-1860

by
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Ideas concerning the value of games and sports for school children changed gradually in New England between 1780 and 1860. Early in the period, instruction in these activities was not considered part of the school’s responsibilities. Samuel Moody, Timothy Dwight, and William Alcott advocated providing instruction in games and sports during recess for physical and moral development. Other educators debated the merits of supervised sports participation for providing moral guidance during recess periods. Few indications were found that these educators considered the enjoyment aspect of sports, though sports of a utilitarian nature were advocated as wholesome activities to pursue during non-school hours.

During the later part of the period some sports were advocated as healthful, useful, and pleasurable physical activities for both boys and girls. The need of physical activity for girls was increasingly stressed in women’s magazines. Horseback riding, swimming, battledore, badminton, bowling, and skating were recommended as healthful activities that permitted young ladies to maintain their decorum. Resistance to sports in school exercise programs decreased by 1860, but it was not until after the Civil War that educators began to consider sports and games as appropriate activities in supervised physical exercise programs.

Between 1780 and 1840 there was a gradual increase in the number of schools and academies that included sports in their school programs. Prior to 1800 swimming was