

# Reaction

by

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Dr. Barnett's paper is based upon a provocative chapter from his recently completed doctoral dissertation. It should prove stimulating to students of sports history by suggesting further avenues of inquiry that when pursued, ought vastly to add to our knowledge of sports history and of its social significance.

Barnett's study compares the shaping events of the 1920's and 1930's and their effects upon Ohio collegiate athletic offerings. The changes in the athletic programs of 39 Ohio colleges in these years were the result of an era of national prosperity followed by national depression and the changes reflect events that go far beyond mere local history. What one gets from this comparison is in the best tradition of scholarship, namely a mirroring of important cultural trends as seen in the mirror of a sports history study. Some of the trends are so interdisciplinary in their manifestations that I warrant Prof. Barnett is himself unaware of some. Nor for that matter am I, nor could any single observer be. But I am persuaded that this paper is unusually laden with hypotheses crying out for further study.

Consider the following revelations that crop up in this comparative study. In the 1920's the athletic history of these Ohio colleges mirrors the broadening of America's sport spectacular trend. What Bil Gilbert calls the Big Sport trend is reflected, a trend of increasing scale and variety of commercialized spectacles. A major catalyst of the trend is commercialized college football which is a vehicle for expanding and diversifying college sports outlets. Money realized from football promotion went for broadening and varying collegiate sport and recreational offerings.

But a dysfunctional note is sounded by the 1929 Carnegie report. Here critics attacked collegiate football as the tail wagging the academic dog. The report struck at recruiting scandals, at the divisive pitting of academic interests against academic concerns, at the football proponents wrongheaded claim that the game stimulated enrollment increases, and at athletic departments for becoming independent baronies—a sort of Richelieuan state within a state on a campus. And yet, admittedly, football was seen to serve as a vehicle for widening athletic opportunity structures.

Enter the national depression. Football initially declined especially at smaller colleges where revenue losses hurt other sports, especially baseball. But at larger universities, increased promotion, such as the institutionalizing of Bowl game spectacles, continued to pay off. There was an 11% increase in intercollegiate teams in Ohio between 1928-38. More significantly football proved to be a depression-proof catalyst for growth. As a result, after 1934, college sports grew despite the continuing sag in the national economy which lasted until World War II. In short, Big Sport is seen as a depression proof industry—a trend observable under today's recessional conditions which deserves further comparative study.

Unless somebody beats him to it, this notion of big sport as a depression proof industry could lead to Barnett's next paper. A simple design could contrast the depression of the thirties with the later Eisenhower and Nixon-Ford recessions (Note the political objectivity in this labeling!). A *Sports Illustrated* article of March 31 told of Big Sport suffering less financially than business in general. Horse racing, college football, auto racing, major league baseball either gained or lost insignificantly. Great gains for pro and college hockey, for boxing, wrestling, soccer, tennis and dog racing are recorded. The only casualties of the 1974-75 Nixon-Ford recession were college basketball (off in live spectators, but gaining

by increased TV exposure), and pro football (off in live fans, but still expansive). This is just a sweet hint of what could be a meaty comparison of Big Sports growing in ages of depression and recession, and this paper generates the idea with all of its additional social implications.

Other tantalizing topics for further study are triggered by this historical excursion. The decline in intercollegiate baseball in the Ohio area mirrors the general upheaval in major league baseball's feeder system. I'd like to see a study tie this to the erosion of the minor leagues and toward the majors turning to universities and colleges situated in such favorable ecological climes as Florida, Arizona and California for current feeders. Naturally baseball's lowering profile in Ohio colleges and in other northern sites has implications for the game's claiming to be the "National Pastime." What the Ohio trend of the thirties reflects, I think, is the game's proper place as one of America's favorite pastimes, rather than its foremost.

Another hot hypothesis is the increasing number of individual performance sports that arise in the era studied. Sociologically this is interesting for its insight into our changing national character, reflecting the current trend toward what is tortuously called "the institutionalization of individualism" in America. To pursue this might show sports reflecting the general cultural trend of approving and accepting varied life styles, each judged worthy for enhancing one's ego. No longer after 1935 would it seem, in the words of that trite football band song (which I could never play well on my baritone horn) do you "gotta be a football hero to fall in love with a beautiful girl."

The proliferation of more varied and honorable roles and statuses is a significant social trend. Sociologist Talcott Parsons calls this "increasing differentiation" and Barnett's study has the trend mirrored in college sports offerings. What you get in the Thirties are more and varied leisure/sports outlets, especially for individual participants. And as more college students turn to these outlets we come to understand better a diversifying America with ever more varied communities of interest.

Lastly Barnett's brief mention of changes in female sports participation is fraught with significance. His note that women's collegiate sports after gaining in variety in the 1920's came to be stunted and arrested in growth during the Thirties. Not that it proves much, but I have a clipping that shows that Delta State College of Cleveland, Mississippi (conquerors of the Mighty Macs of Immaculata in this year's woman's basketball championship) responded to ideological changes in women's sports by 1933 by dropping the game as too rough for females! We ought to know more about such ideological shifts in the Thirties or any eras. But those of you who know Betty Friedan's pioneer work *The Feminine Mystique* will recall that she calls attention to the general reversal in women's equality trends in the Thirties, and points to the ideological thinking that stalled equality until the decade of the Sixties. Apparently changing norms of the Thirties prescribed a return to traditional roles and Barnett's work caught a whiff of this trend as mirrored in the Ohio college athletic policies of the decade.

These are a few suggestions that Barnett's paper suggests as good prospects for further study. A mark of a good paper is its ability to provide launching pads for further research and Barnett's paper does this in spades. To follow these leads would be to clarify the broad scope of American sports history which I am persuaded is the hoped for result of all our studies.