

Sport and Social Class in New York City Athletic Clubs, 1865-1915

by
RICHARD WETTAN and
JOE WILLIS
Queens College

Occurring during one of the most important periods in American amateur athletics, 1865-1915, the athletic club movement accounted for much of the increased popularity and social acceptance of athletic competition. This study focused upon the athletic clubs of New York City during an era which included three phases of athletic club development: a period dominated by the large, powerful and exclusive athletic clubs, a period of transition, and the rise of the working class athletic clubs. Of special interest also was the social class make-up of athletic clubs and the struggle among the elite clubs for stature and prestige.

Although predated by numerous boat, cricket and baseball clubs, the athletic club movement in reality began with the founding of the New York A.C. in 1866. After a rather tenuous beginning the club had become a viable organization by 1870 and was the dominant influence in amateur athletics during that decade. Although many other clubs were organized during the 1870's, none could seriously challenge the athletic supremacy and influence of the New York A.C. until after 1880.

During their first twenty years, athletic clubs essentially functioned to promote the athletic participation of their members, but by 1885 they had begun to acquire more and more of the characteristics of social clubs. As this trend accelerated clubs became more selective of membership and developed an insatiable penchant for luxurious clubhouses and other trappings which symbolized wealth and success. The race for status, prestige and the title of the "leading" athletic club centered as much upon property and social prominence as upon athletic distinction. Although none of the other athletic clubs could match the comprehensive facilities of the New York A.C., clubs such as the Manhattan A.C. and the Berkeley A.C. built extravagant clubhouses as well as elaborate athletic fields and running tracks.

A primary reason for the intense interest in the acquisition of property and the inclusion of facilities of a non-athletic nature among the elite athletic clubs was the broadening of scope to include more and more activities of a social nature. The increased emphasis upon the "social element" undoubtedly helped to swell membership rolls by attracting non-athletic applicants. The growing social nature of the athletic clubs also accounted for much of the demand for ever-increasing opulence. Another facet of the broadening of scope had to do with increasing pressures for women to be involved in club activities. The trend toward more social activities disturbed many members who were concerned primarily with athletic competition. The internal dissension brought about by these two basically different orientations was a major source of controversy during the 1880s. But, in spite of opposition, the social feature was too deeply ingrained to be eradicated. This ultimately proved to be one of the primary factors in bankruptcy of several athletic clubs in the following decade.

The elite athletic clubs of the 1880s and early 1890s, seeking the same type of recognition as the leading social clubs, screened applicants for membership carefully admitting only those with "clubbable" qualities. Initiation fees and yearly charges were also kept beyond the reach of the "undesirable" element. Perhaps the ultimate in club snobbery was the practice of screening spectators at certain contests. At the annual athletic games and ladies day events held by the New York A.C. and the Manhattan A.C. attendance was by invitation only.

If the 1880s marked the zenith of the large, exclusive athletic clubs, the 1890s were most noted for club bankruptcies and consolidations. The most notable failure of this period was that of the Manhattan A.C. From its position as one of the largest, wealthiest, and most athletically successful clubs in the city, the collapse of the club came rather abruptly in 1893. The Manhattan A.C. was not alone in its financial difficulties. The Staten Island A.C., also one of the "old line" clubs, succumbed to the auctioneer's gavel in 1893 as did the Actor's Amateur Athletic Association and numerous others. Consolidation and merger was a solution for many financially plagued clubs. One of the more notable mergers of the period was that of the Berkeley A.C. with the newly formed University A.C. The difficulties experienced by athletic clubs during the 1890s can be summarized as consisting primarily of poor management, the overextension of financial resources in the acquisition of property, and declining membership rolls. The financial problems were undoubtedly magnified by the difficult economic times which the country experienced in that decade.

In marked contrast to the three previous decades, the period from 1900 to 1915 was clearly the age of the neighborhood athletic club, the occupational athletic club and other groups which tended to be small and organized expressly for athletic competition. The clubs which developed during this period were, for the most part, without facilities and many of the social preoccupations of the 1880s and 1890s. In terms of social strata represented the clubs increasingly were of lower middle and working class origins. By 1915 seven to eight hundred such clubs, many numbering only ten to fifteen members, were scattered about New York City. One of the most successful efforts to organize athletics for working class boys was the founding of the Intersettlement Athletic Association in 1902. Athletic competition was made accessible to still more lower class youth through playground competition and the formation of the Evening Recreation Center Athletic League. Occupational groups such as municipal workers and postal clerks formed athletic associations as did many employee groups in business and industry. Religious organizations responded to the intense athletic interest by forming the Sunday School Athletic League, the Church Athletic League and the Catholic Athletic League.

Although many of the elite clubs continued to prosper, this period in time belonged to the common man. The sheer number of athletic clubs is probably the most salient feature of this era. Characteristically, most of the clubs of the "common man" had no athletic facilities of their own, relying heavily on public parks and playgrounds. Another common characteristic of many clubs of the day, especially those associated with business and industry, was their transitory nature. Lacking strong financial backing, many of these groups proved to be short-lived. Nevertheless, this was an age of widespread participation and unparalleled democratization of athletics. Never before had so many people from such a broad spectrum of society had the opportunities which were opened by the athletic club movement between 1900 and 1915.