

Thoughts and Activities of Three American Patriots on Sport and Exercise: Franklin, Jefferson, and Rush

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During the latter part of the eighteenth century spectator sports and recreation occupied such a vital place in American life that in 1774 the First Continental Congress discouraged “all Horse Racing, and all kinds of Gaming, Cock Fighting, Exhibitions of Shows, Plays, and other expensive Diversions and Entertainments.” But, exercise for healthful purposes was advocated by colonial leaders including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Benjamin Rush.

Benjamin Franklin, one of America’s first amateur athletes, was an expert swimmer. As a boy he experimented with fins, paddles, and kites to help swim long distances, and in England gave a swimming exhibition. In a letter to Oliver Neave he outlined his various swimming techniques. Believing Americans paid more attention to sickness than health, Franklin advocated active exercises, including walking, horseback riding, boating, wrestling, and running. He suggested children exercise during school to relax mind and body, and gain courage and vigor.

Thomas Jefferson, expert horseman, liked spirited and fast horses. He maintained a stable of horses, frequently entering them in races in Virginia. Jefferson believed exercise was as important as reading. He advocated two hours of exercise each afternoon, suggesting walking as the best exercise because it relaxed the mind. He disliked ball games because they were too violent and not character-building.

Benjamin Rush, noted Philadelphia physician, concurred with Jefferson that ball games were noisy and fostered vulgar manners. Rush did advocate active exercises for healthful and mental vigor. To cure tuberculosis and pulmonary disorders. Rush prescribed walking and horseback riding. He described the healthful aspects of walking, running, fencing, swimming, and golf, and recommended five to seven a.m. as the proper time to exercise.

These colonial leaders were strong advocates of exercise and sports for recreation and health. Their description and pursuit of these activities indicates the importance of sports in the lives of these Founding Fathers.