
Sports in the South Since 1865

by

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At the close of the Civil War sports in the South still reflected social class divisions. Democratization had not seriously begun. However, the start of urban life in cities like New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, St. Louis and others enlarged opportunities for sport and led to organized participation through sport clubs. The war had little effect on religious attitudes, on assumptions concerning racial stratification, or in the use of leisure time.

This paper is limited to four topics: baseball, football, New Orleans as unique city, and the general development and regional characteristics of Southern sport.

Baseball spread widely and rapidly throughout the South following the war, and seven cities had major league teams before 1900. Since 1900 the South has made a major contribution in the production of players and in its support of minor league baseball. For example, 17 Alabama communities had professional teams in 1950. Six of these towns had populations of less than 10,000. Six Southern cities had professional teams for black players. Only in the last 25 years has major league baseball expanded to other Southern cities in addition to St. Louis and Washington.

Southern College football finally achieved national recognition in the 1920s when Centre College upset Harvard and Alabama defeated Washington in the Rose Bowl. Football was stimulated by the initiation of the Orange, Sugar, Sun, and Cotton bowl games in the mid- 1930s. Huey Long, the Louisiana politician, used football at Louisiana State University to promote his political fortunes and to improve the university. Today the five

leading states in the country on a per capita basis for producing professional football players are Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Alabama, and Georgia. Football has become firmly entrenched in the Southern life style.

New Orleans is unique among Southern cities because of its multi-racial population mix, the dominance of the Catholic religion, and its location as an international seaport. This has resulted in a more tolerant attitude toward sports. Sport competition was interracial until 1890. long after rigid segregation patterns were imposed elsewhere. The national growth of boxing in the 1890s was related to its popularity in New Orleans. Clara Baer at Newcomb College was a courageous pioneer in combating social opposition to physical activity for women. Louisiana was the fourth state in the Union to require the teaching of physical education in the schools.

Most Southerners, however, did not share the permissive attitudes of New Orleans' residents toward sports before the 1920s. Play was for children; outdoor exercise was suitable only for laborers and roughhouse men; the direct rays of the sun were considered hazardous to beauty and health by Southern women; golf was a game for wealth and effete Northerners; the playground movement was ignored. Segregation was a hindrance to sport activity.

The national wave of mass participation in sports which occurred after World War I lapped over into Southern states and attitudes began to change. This progress was associated with economic growth, better transportation and communication, a growing leisure class, and increasing urbanization — all of which accelerated after World War I also.

The militaristic spirit which enveloped Southern states from pre-Civil War days is still evident in the 1970s. The popularity of football may be closely identified with this militarism by the common factors of teamwork, obedience to command, careful planning, precise execution, contempt for softness, and a strong desire for victory. There is also a strong sense of religion and conservatism which has influenced Southern sport. The puritan restrictions implanted by Baptist and Methodist missionaries in the later 18th century have not completely disappeared. Few Southern colleges were disrupted by the radical student outbreaks in the late 1960s and 1970s. and the Vietnam War was staunchly supported. Sports are viewed as an effective way to teach discipline and moral values.

Nevertheless, the South is changing. It is moving into the age of space and technology. The election of Jimmy Carter as President has elevated the South to new political heights. Many Southerners gave up segregation barriers to accept professional teams and to recruit black athletes in colleges. The construction of modern facilities such as the Astrodome and the Superdome and the rapid growth of many cities have fostered professional teams in not only football and baseball but also soccer, basketball, ice hockey, and tennis. The new South may be epitomized by the example of the son of a Texas football hero, Kyle Rote, Jr., who has become a star in his own right as a professional soccer player. In years past this would have been considered treasonous and disloyal! Yet even in today's technological era the Southerner still receives as much pleasure from hunting and fishing as his ante-bellum ancestors.