

# A Moment of Relative Purity

by  
Tracy Mehr  
Amherst College

In no other nation is school and college sport as visible or important as in the United States. In many nations enthusiasm for both education and sport is at least equal to that found in America. However, sport/athletics, while present on these foreign campuses is not prominent. The United States is unique in the important role accorded organized athletics and sport in education. This fact and its uniqueness has been accorded little attention or explanation by historians of the period. They give the impression that intercollegiate athletics is a facet of higher education that suddenly appeared on campuses with little relation to changes within the educational system.

Organized sport did not suddenly appear on the college campus. Organized sport of the mid-19th century met a definite student need and was the natural byproduct of an educational evolution in which the primary function of higher education evolved from a desire to graduate young men and women of Christian character to a desire to meet the social and practical needs of a new society. Not only did organized sport for this brief moment in history, 1850-1880, meet a definite student need, but also reflected a relative purity in its relationship to the educational process which may have been lost forever and from which we might learn.

In the colonial period higher education emerged as a reflection of colonial culture. A colonial paradigm for education emerged; higher education was important, but it was to be the education of men of piety and character who would preserve the past and promote the future. This accepted theory was suitable to its age. However, over the next one hundred years American Society changed and education's classical tradition was threatened by the emergence of anomalies from within and from outside. Faculties, students administrators, and industrialists initiated an irresistible tide of reform within education after the Civil War. A new paradigm emerged; higher education was important, but its primary function was to meet the social and practical needs of a new society.

This transition from one accepted theory to another was not made without a price. The worst aspect of emerging industry and technology became a part of the college environment and student lives from 1860 to 1880 — depersonalization. To offset this aspect of change and to meet basic social and personal needs, many students turned to extracurricular forms of activities including organized sport. Even the type of sports fostered by the students reflect this need for identity—crew, baseball, track and field, and football within varied social settings. For a brief moment in our educational history sport/athletics stood by itself without need of interpretation, a natural byproduct of the problems resulting from the transition of education from one paradigm to another, relatively free from commercialism and exploitation.