

Roosevelt and Doubleday: Myths That Fact Cannot Dispel

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A major problem confronting teachers of sport history is convincing students of historical facts in those instances where long-held beliefs in myths and half-truths continue to be perpetuated by ostensibly reliable sources. Two outstanding examples concern the respective roles of Abner Doubleday in the “invention” of baseball, and of Theodore Roosevelt in the reforms of collegiate football. It is the purpose of this paper to identify the relative availability of correct and incorrect information regarding these events and to ascertain probable causes for the continued perpetuation of and belief in myth rather than fact.

In 1902, Church identified Alexander Cartwright as the originator of “American Baseball,” making no mention of Abner Doubleday. In 1908, the Mills Commission, sponsored by A. G. Spalding, published the famous “Doubleday’s Myth,” making no mention of Cartwright. The Baseball Hall of Fame was established in Cooperstown, New York, in 1939 to commemorate Doubleday’s achievements. In 1947, Henderson clearly refuted the Mills report and proved Church’s original thesis correct. Since that time, the “baseball establishment,” such conservative, baseball-oriented publications as *The Sporting News*, as well as sports writers and sport and physical education historians have attempted to clarify the record. Nonetheless, as late as 1976, publications including the highly regarded encyclopedia *Britannica III*, daily newspapers, as well as museum exhibits continue to link Doubleday with the origin of baseball.

In 1969, Lewis reported that historians were uncertain of the specific role of Theodore Roosevelt in the reform of collegiate football. Some stated that he merely called a meeting of interested schools, while others reported that he threatened to abolish the sport if it were not made safe. Lewis’ exhaustive research clearly identified Roosevelt’s contribution as siding with the reformers against the establishment, thus ensuring the success of the National Collegiate Athletic Association and the subsequent rules changes.

In 1977, this investigator surveyed all available literature concerning college football, Theodore Roosevelt, and sport history published since 1970. Thirty-five undergraduate students in sport history were assigned to survey encyclopedia, Sport Encyclopedia and general sport literature published since 1970 for the purpose of determining the role of Theodore Roosevelt in College football. Only one reference to Lewis’ 1969 study was located. Essentially, the situation described by Lewis at the time of his study has remained unchanged.

The failure of Sport Historians to effectively communicate their findings would appear to be the major difficulty in both cases. The prime perpetrators of the Doubleday Myth are historians writing for encyclopedia, museums, and area Historical Societies. The correct information regarding Roosevelt apparently has not reached any significant number of appropriate authors, journalists or historians. Until sport historians are able to effectively communicate their findings and integrate them into the mainstream of American culture, convincing students of historic truth in face of continued publication of popular myth will remain a major challenge to teaching.