

Class Stratification and Sport: A 19th Century Example

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Americans, wrote Alexis de Tocqueville nearly a century and a half ago, “settled in the New World in a state of social equality . [being] born equal instead of becoming so.” Americans, said Tocqueville “had no aristocracy to combat.” While America is not and has not been a classless society, it is probably correct to say that America has had the most open class stratification system for upward mobility in the world. This is likely a result of America never having had an established aristocracy. The fact that Americans could move more freely up or down the socially stratified ladder than in England or in European countries had strong implications in the development of organized sport. If a caste-like system had never traditionally existed, as in the European sense of a closed aristocracy. there is a greater likelihood of a frenzied race to move up the social and economic ladder in sport as in the rest of society. As de Tocqueville wrote: “We do not find [in America], as among an aristocratic people, one class that keeps quiet because it is well off; and another that does not venture to stir because it despairs of improving its condition.”

The notion in America of improving one’s condition. of upward mobility, and of striving to reach the top leads to the excitement of competition. One might say that the greater equality of condition in America has thrown the door open wide to universal competition. Competition and a heavy emphasis upon winning has been the result of an egalitarian society in which the freedom to compete has been the expected norm and not the exception. America has been freer to be an achieving society based upon the merit of performance than most countries. Thus one assumes that social class stratification does, in fact, exist and that this is both logical and beneficial to achieving excellence in sport as in other areas of performance. It seems logical to suggest that individuals who have a lower ranking in stratification will have a stronger desire for victory to enable themselves to climb the upward mobility ladder. This theory of a greater emphasis upon winning as a result of the position on the social ladder in a relatively open stratification system was tested during an historical study of women’s tennis championships.

In a master’s study, Elizabeth Herritt looked at “Social Class and the Women’s National Tennis Championship in the United States, 1887-1905.” Of key concern was the question of the social class significance of the early women’s national tennis tournaments held at the Philadelphia Cricket Club. Did social class stratification make a difference between those who won and those who did not? The research showed that the women’s national tennis championship was both socially significant and indicative of social stratification. All of the Philadelphia players came out of the upper class. One might expect that the competitiveness and the need to win was diminished for this upper class national sport event. That undoubtedly was true. But winners did emerge. Of the Philadelphia women participating from 1887-1905, 99 percent lived in upper class fashionable neighborhoods; 90 percent were identified as being members of families found in the elitist Philadelphia *Blue Book*. The upper class players were divided into three groups representing the status of the country clubs from which they held membership. While all the clubs represented were upper class, some were more elite than others.

The results showed that the lowest ranked of the twelve upper class clubs sponsoring women’s tennis, the Belmont Cricket Club, won the only three singles championships

garnered by Philadelphia women over the two decades. Furthermore, it took 26 first or second place finishes in singles, doubles, and mixed doubles. The most elite of the twelve clubs, the Germantown Cricket Club and the Young America Cricket Club, had only five and one first and second place winners respectively. The remaining nine clubs had 19 total winners. The lowest ranked of the twelve clubs had just over half of the winners garnered by the Philadelphia based players.

What this appears to indicate is that the lower orders of the upper class Philadelphia women were better competitors than were their social superiors. Those with lower social standing likely took their tennis games more seriously than did the more elite of the upper class. Winning, it appears, was more valued. It suggests that in a society in which some openness exists in the stratification of classes, there will be a tendency for those below to compete harder in the quest for upward mobility. It seems logical to believe that those on top know that they are superior and do not need to prove to others their believed superiority, at least not in athletics. More research of this type might help us to better understand the nature of social class stratification historically.