

The Promise of Sport in Ante-Bellum America

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Between 1820 and 1860 a range of social reformers gave serious attention to the role of sport in developing proper citizens possessed with the character traits necessary to preserve and continue American greatness. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that this interest in sport as a means of developing character was directly related to anxiety over the impact of a modernizing society on the virtues and values of the American republic.

Continued transformation of the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century from a traditional to a modern society engendered both incredible optimism about American potential and deep pessimism about the possibility of realizing it. For many middle class reformers the issue was to create new instruments of social control that would maintain social stability in what appeared to them to be a rapidly changing society. How could one prevent social disintegration while at the same time promote the development of proper citizens capable of participating in and contributing to the growth of a new, modern society?

One answer was to encourage participation in sport and physical recreation. A brief look at the literature of three groups involved in this enterprise - child guidance advisors like the Beechers and T.S. Arthur; health reformers like Charles Caldwell; and the authors of books on sport and amusements like Frank Forester and Robin Carver indicates that efforts to promote sport were clearly related to the sense of anxiety and urgency about American society that existed during this time.

As part of a session devoted to the question "Should Sport History Join the Mainstream?," I tried to show, by example, the opportunities available to sport historians aware of what contemporary historical and sociological approaches have to offer. In this instance, attention to such contributions reveals that fear of social disorder and catastrophe and a conception of reform as a means of social control encourage new meaning for sport in a modernizing society while at the same time portraying a darker side of the American liberal capitalist vision. The solid contributions of a generation of scholars have made us aware of the wealth of information about 19th century American sport. It is time now to exploit these findings as fully as possible by removing sport as an isolated field of study and by placing it in the mainstream of historical analysis.