

Action as Moral Necessity: Reflections on Vigorous Health and ‘‘Wholesome’’ Sport, 1825-1915

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Nineteenth century Americans exhibited a marked concern about the relationship of body and spirit. They broadly assumed that proper moral behavior depended upon the proper, harmonious, and healthy condition of each of the ‘‘faculties.’’ The health and morality of the entire social order therefore depended upon each individual achieving physical and moral ‘‘perfection.’’ As the century progressed and the findings of science began to encroach on traditional Protestant theology, the belief that salvation could be achieved through improvement of the physical body became increasingly pronounced. From 1825 to 1915, then, a substantial number of Americans viewed vigorous exercise and ‘‘wholesome’’ sport as important means to and expressions of moral virtue.

In the early 1800’s the reciprocal actions among the tripartite (physical, intellectual, moral) nature of man warranted much concern. The July, 1827, *Boston Medical Intelligencer*, for example, lamented the lack of exercise taken by Americans and suggested that a decline in the nation’s health had already set in. In order to make possible the regeneration of the human race, it was necessary to make physiological knowledge, as well as the word of God, accessible to the ordinary citizen. From the 1830’s to the end of the century, a multitude of books, guides, and health reform journals appeared. Newspapers, periodicals, and journals of all types discussed health, hygiene, diet, dress reform, physical education, simple outdoor pursuits, vegetarianism, the water cure, and a host of similar topics.

To be sure, most such writings were aimed at an educated middle class. Yet, the lower classes also suffered from lack of exercise, albeit in different manners. In a speech entitled ‘‘On the Elevation of the Laboring Classes,’’ William Ellery Channing declared that the remedy to much disease and debility was to be found in better knowledge of the laws of the human body and an improved system of physical, intellectual, and moral education. Others of the so-called Transcendental group, such as Emerson, acclaimed the symmetry between the physical and intellectual powers and advocated healthful outdoor sports. Vigorous manly endeavors were seen as a means to develop self-reliance (or inner strength), a quality vital to Emerson’s view of right conduct.

By the 1840’s a multitude of works, especially those concerned with ‘‘Sanitary Reform,’’ combined science with all sorts of moralizing. The biological aspects of evolutionary theory, especially when combined with other developments in the rapidly expanding science of physiology, also had a significant impact on attitudes toward healthful exercise and ‘‘wholesome’’ sport. The ideas of Darwin, Thomas Huxley, and especially Herbert Spencer attracted considerable interest in the United States. Taken together the various theories suggested that out of struggle and brutal competition, progress - both biological and social - could eventuate.

Nineteenth century Americans had been concerned for several decades that the health and stature of each generation had failed to reach that of preceding generations and seemed particularly concerned that the American physique was not equal to the English. When one combined the assumption that each generation failed to reach the standards of their fathers

with the concept of “hereditary transmission ,” the consequences for the future of the nation seemed dire indeed. The preservation of health could be interpreted as a moral civic duty.

In his pioneering work “The Technological Revolution and the Rise of Sport: 1850-1900,” John Rickards Betts pointed to the myriad and sometimes seemingly contradictory elements which have surrounded the development of American sport. The last three decades of the nineteenth century, the so-called “Gilded Age,” especially sparked both optimism and uncertainty. Theories derived from discoveries in the physical and natural sciences combined with economic and technological expansion to intensify belief in the possibility of progress, success, and the self-made man. Old modes of behavior and belief became suspect, as the pursuit of individual success often came into conflict with social and religious ideals. The result was often uncertainty about the ends of life and the moral duties of the individual.

The contradictions of the age were clearly apparent in the events and controversies which surrounded the rise of both intercollegiate athletics and professional physical education. While sharing many concerns, physical education and intercollegiate athletics, as each had come to be conducted by the 1890’s, diverged in a number of highly significant ways. The traditional view of the moral necessity of vigorous health and “wholesome” sport came into direct confrontation with the evolving concept of sport as an exemplar of the self-made man and the business/success ethic. The frequency with which athletics were criticized for fostering “immoral behavior” and lauded for developing a “proper moral tone,” as well as the intensity and duration of the debate, suggest that the interrelationships among healthful exercise, wholesome sport, and morality raise issues more profound than we sometimes realize. It was suggested that players were simply agents of their colleges, which was seen by some as removing responsibility for moral judgments for the realm of the active participant.

Those who criticized and/or lamented the status of intercollegiate athletics at the turn of the century, were really lamenting the demise of an ideal — an ideal which may never have been capable of being fulfilled within the sphere of activities which, by their very nature, depend upon demonstrable contests for victory. Nonetheless, it was an ideal which clearly sought to wed the mental, physical, and moral together on the “highest plane,” and saw action as a moral necessity.



Roberta Park (left) talks with Mary Lou Remley and Betty Spears prior to her Seward Staley address.