
Reactions to “Interest Groups in American Sports”

HARRY JEBSEN, JR.
Texas Tech University

The ideological role of sport was brought into sharp controversy by the radical critique of the 1960's, which argued that sport had been subverted by society. Sport, these critics believed, had been used to accomplish other goals. The papers in this session point out that the various interest groups used sport to accomplish at least twenty-one different tasks which were not part of athletics.

The idea that sport could be a means of accomplishing many disparate goals broadened in the early twentieth century. It became obvious to progressives that sport could or would solve many problems. Protestantism had dropped the last vestiges of resistance, leaving Gulick, Roosevelt, and others to promote sport and active play as a problem solver. Urban promoters realized that sport could expand the visibility of their cities. And the military saw sport as an excellent vehicle for teaching the traits needed to defeat the Japanese and the Germans.

Though one must not attribute to other papers the qualities or the deficiencies of others, Luther Gulick's comment that “We can use the drawing power of athletics a great deal more than we are doing at present” is the theme which permeates all three papers. Sport became a vehicle for transforming people from one status to another. Playground supervisors used baseball to create model citizens. Teachers used basketball to gain control of unruly classrooms. A realtor in Los Angeles increased his land values along Wilshire Boulevard by

bringing the Olympics to his home city. Thomas Hamilton imparted the anger required to defeat an enemy through crossbody blocks and punt returns.

It is unlikely that all of the goals which any of the interest groups desired could be accomplished via sport. It may also be unimportant whether they were accomplished. The fact that society absorbed these sports into the mainstream became a crucial reality. The populace came to believe in sport as a positive and necessary facet of American life.

These programs remained a part of American life despite substantial criticism. Gulick late disapproved of competition for youngsters. But volunteer organizations had already absorbed and perpetuated the philosophy which Gulick had started. Similarly when Gene Tunney questioned the value of the V-5 programs, Hamilton had already intellectually conquered the armed forces. He had convinced the populace that sports contributed to a winning war effort. While it is impossible to prove which expert was correct, it is obvious that sports became popular with those who underwent V-5 training. While Los Angeles received the 1932 games, it is most difficult to ascribe that city's rapid growth to that event.

Separating motives and accomplishment is a task which a historian can undertake. And the success of the sport boom of the twentieth century came not because the goals of interest groups were achieved, but rather because the interest groups promoted sports to achieve those goals. The final inhibitions which existed against sport deteriorated because, whether the goals were achievable or not, the solution was basically consistent with American culture. The success of sport came not because sport accomplished these goals but because sport proved to be a stimulating aspect of American life.

Sport historians must continue to probe these interest groups in order to measure their impact on the development of sport. They obviously convinced an increasing segment of American society to unashamedly participate in and watch athletic events. Thus, while one might conclude that all of these interest groups used sport immorally or for incorrect purposes, it is also possible to see that sport was made an acceptable part of American life by these interest groups.



Ben Rader spoke on Luther Gulick and Boy's sports.