

HIGHLIGHTING THE WEST

Nationalist Thinking in the Shaping of Western Sport: America At The Turn of the Century

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Although regional pride and the desire to boost local business development created some impulse toward regionalism within sport, a far greater counterforce centered in the pressure for nationalism and the promotion of the United States as a unitary society. Sport served an important role in “nationalizing” Americans, according to many of its ardent advocates such as Theodore Roosevelt. Imbued with a particular mentality that saw society as if it were a physiological organism, these promoters of sport attended carefully to the specific conditioning effects of the sports that they judged suitable for the American people. In fact, with their particularly concrete understanding of “pragmatic” or developmental philosophy, such spotting enthusiasts fought harshly against the supposedly deviant sports of language-affinity groups, such as the German-American turners, and those of the cultural-affinity groups, such as the Scots highlanders.

By contrast, particular sports, most notably baseball and football, were deemed especially suitable as actual physical molders of Americans. Each sport, however, underwent various tests before it could be accepted as a true national sport; and key among them was a test of geographical extensiveness. The fear of fragmentation that led the likes of Roosevelt to oppose the turners or the highlanders similarly led to the great care to control regional games and sports and keep them in a secondary rank. The truly national games, according to turn-of-the-century Americans, were those that could transcend the specific limits of regional geography and that could consequently become equally the shapers of Americans’ character throughout the country. As a result, the nationalist impulse had quite a detrimental effect on regional sports, placing them into a lower ranking until the time would come for a relaxation of the rigid standards that prevailed at the turn-of-the-century.