
The Star And Others: A Group Biography of Athletes in Late Nineteenth Century Dallas, Texas

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The study of social mobility and sports has become common among sport sociologists, but, with a few exceptions, not many historians have studied the relationship between sports and upward mobility. This study contrasts the experience of three groups in Dallas, Texas during the late nineteenth century. The three groups are Tom Monagan, an identifiable star athlete, a group of athletes who competed in various sports in 1886 in Dallas, and a sample of young men between the ages of 18 and 35 who lived in Dallas in 1880.

Compared to those who participated in sports in Dallas, Tom Monagan was the most successful athlete on the field and in his life career. His rise up the ladder was undoubtedly caused in part by his sports prowess. He was a state championship bicycle racer, played on the city football team, bowled, played golf, roller skated, and, as an older man, officiated college football games. His personal success closely paralleled his sports participation. His first identifiable occupation was as a clerk on the Texas and Pacific Railroad. He then was befriended by one of the most prominent families in the city and entered their investment firm. By 1900 he had opened his own independent insurance business. He became a prominent Dallasite with a fashionable home and money in several businesses. By 1919 he organized the exclusive Dallas Athletic Club.

Monagan was the most prominent and not the most typical athlete. Most of the athletes came from white collar sections of the occupational scale. Ten percent had skilled jobs, while the rest held professional jobs, owned businesses, or worked as clerks. When followed over a fifty year span through city directories and census materials, these athletes displayed an inordinate retention rate which would verify their upper to upper middle class backgrounds. At the same time there appeared to be little upward shift among the athletes. In fact Monagan was the only one in the group to move as many as two rungs on the ladder of mobility. Most of the remainder stayed in the same category, though a few moved up one step and a small percentage moved down one step.

The athletes were not a typical cross section of the young men in the city. Though 90% of the athletes had white collar positions, 71% of the sample had blue collar occupations while another 18% held clerical jobs. The sample group's dispersal through all job categories more closely resembled the occupational structure of a city with a thriving agriculturally-based industrial base. The sample also displayed 20% lower retention rate than the athletes. This confirms the samples' position in the working class sectors of the occupational scale.

Sports in the late nineteenth century Dallas remained a reflection of the existing social stratification rather than serving as a democratizer which propelled persons up or down the ladder of mobility. These nineteenth century participants in organized sport were already entrenched in jobs; they were not participating in organized sports as part of their education. Therefore the high degree of mobility which recent analysts of contemporary sport find in athletes from American universities was not present in Dallas. Thus if sports have become a means of moving up the ladder of success it is probably caused by the downward shift in age and the relationship between organized sport and formal education. Though it is obvious that Tom Monagan's success was not typical, much work remains to be done to see if sports and social mobility have a historically valid relationship.