

Tom Brown Abroad: Athletics in New England Schools, 1860-1910

AXEL BUNDGAARD

Department of Physical Education

St. Olaf College

Northfield, Minnesota 55057

American boarding schools made distinctive contributions to the growth of athletics in the latter half of the 19th century. Boarding schools emerged at a time when public secondary education had not yet assumed a significant role in American culture. The prep school attained stature through its mission of training for entrance into prestigious universities and colleges such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, and Amherst. Wealthy parents sent their children to the boarding schools for a classical education and also for training in the art of being a gentleman.

Origins of athletics, although not entirely clear, appear to result from two factors. First, the prep schoolboy, like the college student of the late 19th century, yearned for fun. The isolated settings of many boarding schools and the general boredom of campus life served to provide an environment conducive to games playing. Secondly, the growing athleticism in English public schools, no doubt, did not go unnoticed. American prep schools copied many customs and traditions of their English counterparts. Several headmasters visited the Victorian public schools.

The growth and development of athletics was characterized in its infancy by student control. The boys organized their sports by forming associations. They elected captains who served as coaches, and they underwrote costs through solicitation of funds from the student body. Early competition existed with an intramural framework, i.e., usually class or club teams. Students laid out their playing fields. There were no indoor sports, for gymnasias were not common on campuses. Those schools that constructed gymnasias concentrated on space designed for gymnastic apparatus. Then, too, this was a time which preceded the advent of basketball and volleyball.

By 1860 some English schools competed interscholastically. Similarly, with the growing number of American boarding schools coming into existence in the later decades of the 19th century, games with other schools created a new environment for competition. Rivalries emerged, and campus life vibrated due to the focus upon athletic contests. Victories on the playing field led to a campus spirit heretofore unknown.

As athletics proliferated in the boarding schools, sport became institutionalized. The exuberance for athletic excellence led to inroads of professionalism, exemplified by incidents whereby students defrayed the cost of tuition for an athlete of exceptional ability and by fighting between student bodies over the result of a game. The absorbing interest of students in athletics caused headmasters to express concern. They feared that classroom performance might be affected. Thus, headmasters could no longer leave matters in the hands of students. As a result the administration of athletic programs gradually became the responsibility of the headmaster and the faculty.

The growing importance which students placed on athletics led a selected number of headmasters to conclude that sports had to be justified. Peabody, Stearns, and Boyden espoused a Victorian view of manliness which exemplified itself in the playing of sport. Because prep schools saw themselves as institutions which embraced the ideology of character development, sport was fostered as a means of such development. This emphasis culminated in an “athletics for all” philosophy.

Not only did athletics reinforce the objectives of the prep school, but the approach also served to attract students. Boarding schools led in the development of gymnasiums and playfields. Extensive sport programs were good for business. Today the compulsory sports program remains a well-entrenched tradition at most boarding schools.