

Premature Modernization and the Failure of Cricket in America: The New York Experience, 1840- 1865

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Cricket's failure to emerge as a popular American sport derived from three interrelated historical processes: the nature of American society and social structure and their influence on this country's ballplaying tradition; a host of social and cultural developments; and, the impact of the institutionalization, modernization, and maturation of cricket in England and its relationship to the transplanting of the sport in this country.

Cricket was introduced into the American colonies by the start of the eighteenth century, but by 1840 the sport remained a novelty played almost exclusively by English immigrants. The primary reason for the different status of the sport in England and America was their respective ballplaying traditions. Whereas the English had a long heritage of ballplaying by young men and adults by 1840, ballplaying in America began to emerge as a popular pastime only at the start of the nineteenth century. Even then, it was basically an amusement for children and young boys.

Differences in the social structure of the two countries were the major cause of the divergent ballplaying traditions. In England, the traditional, ritualistic, and communal society nurtured and provided the context for the presence of ballgames. In America, the entire process of colonial settlement had delivered shattering blows to the basic traditional structure even by the end of the seventeenth century. In this weakened form, the American social structure could not provide the setting and meaning that ballgames had in England, with the result that they could not be easily transplanted here.

Between 1840 and 1860, urbanization, economic growth and other modernistic elements stimulated the creation of this country's ball-playing heritage. These forces established the physical setting conducive to the growth of ballgames and were influential in shaping newer attitudes towards ballplaying. Cricket, as the more mature and advanced of the two ballgames, was the first to respond to the changing social conditions. By 1855 cricket was still more frequently played and attracted more public attention than baseball, but their respective position changed dramatically during the subsequent decade. By the end of the Civil War, baseball had become America's national pastime, while cricket, as a popular sport, passed into oblivion.

The decline of cricket derived from four interacting elements: skill level, sponsorship, the structure of the sport, and the modernization and maturation of the ballgame. Since cricket required more skill at this time, Americans did not engage in this sport because with

their limited ballplaying tradition they lacked the talent to participate enjoyably in this complex sport. Control of cricket by Englishmen further inhibited the growth of the sport in this country. Since cricket clubs functioned as a means of preserving English identity, little effort was made to popularize the sport among Americans. Two structural differences-the batting system and the length of an inning -made baseball a more action packed sport and a better spectator and participatory sport. Finally, that cricket had emerged as a modern and mature sport with well established institutional structure made it virtually impossible for the sport to be modified to meet American needs and conditions.

In conclusion, cricket failed in America by 1865 because it was too mature and too modern a sport for a society which lacked a manly ballplaying tradition. Lacking this heritage, Americans drew from the only ballplaying tradition they had -that of the child's game of baseball - and gradually transformed it into a modern and mature sport.