
Sport and the Family: The Carters of Eighteenth Century Virginia

NANCY L. STRUNA

Departments of History and Physical Education

University of Maryland

College Park, Maryland 20742

The Carter family of the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Virginia presents an intriguing opportunity for a re-examination of the development of sport in the culture of the colonial Chesapeake gentry and of the possible effects of family relations upon sporting habits. Over the course of four generations of Carters, previously argued patterns of sport among Chesapeake gentlemen are recognizable. Compared to the gentry mainstream of sport, there are, however, some divergencies in sporting behavior and attitude. Robert “King” Carter did not appear to pursue sport either as regularly or as avidly as did some of his contemporaries. The habits and attitudes of two cousins, Robert Wormeley Carter and Robert Carter of Nomini, were not parallel throughout their lives. Further, among several members of the family, frictions arose which were enhanced by differences in opinion about time and amount of sport. When one closely examines the lives of individual Carters, the generalized patterns of gentry sport become less tenable. One source of explanations for

these changes and alterations, in addition to broad cultural changes, exists in the Carter family itself, in each Carter's perceptions of his life and himself, and in his relations to others.

The first native Carter, Robert "King" Carter, established his family as an elite among the elite through hard work, speculation in land and politics, and a forceful personality. Given the conditions of Virginia and his own acquisitiveness, King Carter undoubtedly perceived limited utility in sport; compared to the challenges and speculative endeavors he found in land and politics, sport and its appendaged gambling were less consequential, both for himself and for his sons of whom he expected so much. Having established the gentry as a distinguished force in Virginia's economy and politics, his generation also laid the groundwork for opportunities to expand sporting activities for the next generation, both as a showcase for and as a proving ground of gentry accomplishments. But, paradoxically, he warned against his successors' realization of these opportunities.

Robert's son Landon might have enjoyed these opportunities and attended events more than he did, as others of his generation wanted to do, but for several factors. His own introspective nature, heightened by his father's educational and moral views, apparently engendered a suspicion of the utility of pleasure and a sense of doubt about man's determination to improve his condition. Then, too, Landon's inability to even match his father's accomplishments and the remorse he felt after the early deaths of his wives apparently left him insecure, lonely, and preferring isolation from his contemporaries. Never an avid or regular sportsman, he withdrew even more in his final years as his ebullient son, Robert Wormeley, sported and gambled and ignored his counsel.

Robert Wormeley Carter, on the other hand, did not follow his father's patterns. He enjoyed racing, cockfighting, and gambling, and he apparently relished opportunities for sport in order to be away from Sabine Hall either to escape Landon's anger or to spite his father. The presence of Landon in the management of the plantation and his unwillingness to turn these responsibilities over to Robert apparently heightened the son's inclination to seek challenges and gambles in sport. Thus, without the natural gambles in land and power which his grandfather had experienced, Robert looked elsewhere - to sport.

On the other branch of the Carter family, Robert of Nomini's life crossed those of both Landon and Robert Wormeley. His early pleasure-filled experiences in Williamsburg and London were not restricted by the firm guidance of either father or grandfather, as Landon's had been less than two decades earlier. The habits and practices evident during his middle years coincided not only with his lifestyle as Councillor but also with the stage of very pleasant family experiences. From then until his death, however, Councillor Carter endured one crisis after another-political, religious, and a reprobate son. Like Landon, he vented his anger and his disillusionment with himself and his son on a tangible symbol of happier days; he turned away from participation in sport and dance. To his dismay, his son Robert Bladen never assumed the responsibilities which Robert of Nomini had offered and expected.

In effect, then, the Carter family's diverse attitudes toward sport seemed to be linked to their perceptions of life and their own senses of security and accomplishment in that life. King Carter established the life, its style and its substance, and he apparently harbored few insecurities and questions about that life. His sport was a positive, additive feature. The later Carters, however, suffered doubts and anxieties which, in themselves, fostered conflicts between generations. Contrasting behaviors, withdrawal from sport and excessive participation, then, were in part at least responses to these family emotions and, in some cases, may have contributed to family disputes.