

# Colonial Sport: More Questions Than Answers

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The meaning of sport to the southern mainland colonials of seventeenth and eighteenth century Anglo-America is difficult to recapture. Their individual experiences were many, diverse, and seemingly divergent. Collectively, however, such experiences do suggest that change, and probably significant change, occurred in their sporting behaviors, perceptions, and expectations over time. What one might offer as the central theme in the colonial sporting experience deals with this change. Divergent notions of sport, diversion (connoting a “carrying away from”) and re-creation (a “carrying toward”) - both of which were involved in the cultural controversies of Elizabethan and Stuart England and were transported by first generation colonials —, were gradually resolved into a single conception of sport as useful recreation. This notion emerged as relations between sport and other behaviors were redefined.

As evidenced primarily from work on Massachusetts and the Chesapeake, the history of sport in what became the United States involved three major stages. The first covered the years from the debarkations of colonials to approximately the 1670’s, a period during which both English-born notions of sport existed, despite efforts of authorities to eliminate diversion. The years from the 1670’s through about the second decade of the eighteenth

century constituted the definition stage, the period in which sport became useful recreation and in which recognizable sub-cultures, agencies through which this definition occurred, were structured. The following period, from the 1730's until the late 1760's, was one of elaboration; changes in style rather than substance occurred. Eventually, a fourth major period, extending from the late 1760's to about 1810, will probably be conceived. In the case of the generic set behaviors recognized as sport, the "colonial" era did not end with the political changes of the Revolution.

During the second of these stages, the definition stage, several kinds of evidence suggest that re-definition of sport was occurring, i.e., the gradual appearance of sport as useful recreation. First, few new laws were passed; behavioral restrictions enacted either by the assemblies or by smaller local units of government were essentially restatements of previous enactments. Second, sport forms themselves began to suggest a regularizing and stabilizing of participation. Third, people of many occupations and ranks justified and rationalized sport; they both directly and indirectly invoked sport for some purpose. Fourth, conditions and human choices/decisions precipitated the formation of sub-cultures, somewhat simplistically conceived of as small groupings of individuals with shared values and views. The example of the sporting sub-culture framed by the rising native landed gentlemen of the Chesapeake suggests two major points about the complex and interrelated processes which occurred after 1670. One, through the agency of the sub-culture, the large landowners (as well as others in the two colonial regions) established sport as useful recreation. Two, this research tentatively confirms Peter Burke's findings about the popular base for the evocation and transmission of European popular culture - it neither hinged on the upper classes nor appeared by proscription.

A thesis which purports to describe and analyze the sporting culture of a people, such as this does, ultimately raises more questions and uncertainties than answers and certainties. In the case of the Anglo-American colonial sporting experience, much more work needs to be done on the notions of diversion and re-creation. Also, what happened and why during the period of irresolution, the initial stage in the colonial experience, remains elusive; and especially intriguing is how colonials worked out relations between sport and other behaviors. A second major set of questions involves the phenomenon of gambling. Gambling was a persistent behavior among Anglo-Americans and one which undoubtedly had some role in or other relationship to the sporting culture(s) which developed. Unfortunately, the "right" questions to ask are not yet defined.

Another set of questions may be even more significant: whether what happened among Anglo-Americans occurred among other ethnic and racial groups in the southern mainland colonies. Obviously, if historians are to define and explain the making of colonial sport, rather than just Anglo-American sport, we shall have to examine native Americans and other immigrants (both free and in various states of bondage) and their interactions with one another. Only by looking at a host of variables - ethnicity and race, geographic location, economic or occupational status, and sex - will be able to determine whether the persisting instrumentality underlying sport was as fundamental and definitive as this work has suggested, whether the interdependent relations between sport and other behaviors were as important as this explanation maintains, or even whether the proposed stages and theme as outlined are accurate.