

# The WPA and Public Recreational Sport in New York City: The Recreation Service Program, 1935-1943

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Historians of both the New Deal and American sport have concluded that the WPA accelerated the development of publicly funded recreation in progress since the 1900s. According to this view, federal programs maintained the nation's traditional commitment to democracy expressed as expanded opportunities to participate in recreational sports, especially in many small towns where federal funds promoted recreation programs for the first time.

WPA recreation programs were essentially the fruits of the study and propaganda reformers who had long viewed recreational sport as a vehicle for inculcating in youth traditional values such as cooperation, order and democracy. As justified by reformers since the beginning of the century, society would benefit from publicly provided sound and well-supervised recreation for urban dwellers - especially for children. In essence the WPA recreation programs continued and expanded the basic tenets of the earlier playground movement.

The WPA also initiated several changes in the conduct of public recreation. The government's new expanded role in public recreation was the major change. The WPA's Community Organization for Leisure (COL), later the Recreation Division, resulted from the two-fold need to provide employment for professional and white-collar workers and to stimulate wide-spread participation in recreation. WPA organizations ultimately contributed to a shift from regarding recreational sport as a social control mechanism to viewing it for its own sake as a desirable part of the good life. Although local agencies often sponsored WPA recreation projects with the hope of preventing juvenile delinquency and accidents, the ideology of the national program consistently advocated enjoyment, individual interest and voluntary participation. By virtue of its vast resources of funds and its supervisory network, the WPA could demand compliance to its rules and policies. Its recreation program thus influenced the nature of public recreation most particularly in areas where it was the only service available to communities.

For the first time, through the WPA, the government thoroughly studied adult leisure time, its use and its place in American life. Concern about the increasing number of non-working hours and depression-induced unemployment, was reflected in the WPA's philosophy of public recreation. It emphasized a shift from emphasis upon the leisure of youth to that of adults. Consequently in New York City, the WPA's demonstration and experimental programs enhanced public recreation which nearly always included sports for adults as well as children.

This paper examines the basic principles constituting the WPA recreation programs, the program's general organization and how it trained leaders. Focusing then on these recreation programs in New York City, it demonstrates that through its recreation programs, the WPA stimulated provision for public recreation as part of the good life rather than as social control, and that it enhanced the democratization of public recreational sport.