

# Sport and Spectacle: The New Masses, The New Heroes, And New Social Goals In Interwar America

DONALD J. MROZEK

Kansas State University

In the first several decades of the twentieth century and especially after World War I, a new thrust appeared in the direction of American culture. Despite the tremendous importance of promoters, franchise-owners, college coaches and athletic directors, and others, the spectators emerged to new impact and significance in their role as consumers in a mass consumer culture. Without having to respect them as fans, commercial promoters had to develop these spectators as a reliable audience, using techniques shared with other components of mass consumer culture. For example, the development of attractive baseball parks paralleled the intentional transformation of the movie theater from a converted generic storefront to a “palace of the masses” - as “golden” in its ornate interior as sport was in its showy exterior of public performance. Among documents of the period seeing sport in the context of mass cultural developments was the important US government study **Recent Social Trends**; and a recent commentary on non-sport aspects of this culture is Lary Mary, **Screening Out the fast**.

Although it has been common to speak of the interwar years (and especially of the 1920s) as a “Golden Age” of sport, it is time to assess more carefully how much was really gilt, tinsel, and “hype” - a parallel in public athletic entertainment to the “star-making machinery” of film and music. In fact, the sport heroes’ success lay more in a general movement in American culture toward accommodating mass taste and gradually toward the emergence of what Warren Susman has called a “culture of abundance.” The heroes succeeded, as cultural emblems, more for what they said about their own time and the near-term future than for what they actually represented from the mythic American past.