

Cambridge University and the Development of Organized Sport: 1800-1860

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Modern games and sports, as Brailsford (1985) has recently reminded us, did not begin life “as means to virtue, nobleness of spirit or even purity of body.” However, by late Victorian England all of these tenets were subsumed under the ideological umbrella of athleticism, the overarching justification for sporting participation. We know that contests between Oxford and Cambridge universities were a significant element in the early growth of modern sport, yet the role of the universities was essentially played out through individuals and groups, clubs and colleges (Brailsford, 1983), none of which have received much serious attention in attempts to chart this “long ideological march.”

In reviewing the early history of rowing and cricket at Cambridge, this paper will concentrate on events at two colleges, Trinity and St. John’s, in an attempt to assess the extent to which the universities, and particularly Cambridge (although we know that sporting patterns developed somewhat differently at Oxford) contributed to the organization and diffusion of these new sporting forms and their supporting ideology.

Old boys (alumni) from the ‘great nine’ public schools, who had been the initiators of intervarsity and much intercollegiate sport, in the early years of the nineteenth century, gradually gave way to a new “establishment.” Power shifted from networks of Old Etonians, Wykehamists, Harrovians, and Westminsterers, whose influence had been based largely on school contacts, to networks established through college contacts. This is seen both in cricket and rowing but perhaps most forcibly in football. The two leading ancient institutions continued to maintain their own footballing traditions in total (and perhaps splendid) isolation at the university, being unable, (or perhaps unwilling) to proselytize their unique games.

The driving forces behind such a shift in power were many; among them the growing use of competition and “an increased desire for proficiency.” Evidence of this shift is to be found both in the educational background of “blues”, and by the growth of a number of college clubs specifically for the old boys of some of the ‘great nine’ schools. It is further argued that the universities acted as centers for the infusion of ideas about sport from a variety of schools, both public and private during the first half of the nineteenth century. The similarity of life-style of Oxbridge and the public schools by the late-Victorian period created a “circular causality” for the spread of an amended version of the *mens sana* philosophy of participation - athleticism (Mangan, 1981). However, only after a distinct pattern of organized and codified activities had been established at the universities could such an ideology be transmitted and diffused, in fairly standardized form, to the public schools by university and college athletes returning to teach in the schools.

Thus, although activities had been amended and codified, and their organization had changed, the reasons for participation altered less, and sports maintained their ‘great school’ philosophy of being training for life. What had changed more by 1860 was not this philosophy of participation but the nature of life itself.