

What the Big Boys Ate: The Food of Champions in the Golden Age of Sport

JAMES C. WHORTON

University Washington

The past century's rise of sport to its exalted position in American culture has established athletic conquest as a metaphor for achievement in all walks of life. No group has more avidly exploited that metaphor than have the manufacturers of food products. Recognizing the public's half-informed fascination with food as the fuel, lubricant, and reparative material of the human engine, manufacturers have deftly promoted their cereals and concentrates as guarantors of success on the playing field and, by extension, in the boardroom, the bedroom, and every other arena in which strength, energy, and endurance count toward winning. The roots of the food for victory strategy are in the 1920s, when an unprecedented popular interest in sport coincided with an explosive expansion of the science of nutrition and the maturation of a massive food processing industry dependent on aggressive advertising. This paper will examine the utilization of sports heroes and athletic imagery by food processors eager to capitalize on public awareness of the "newer nutrition" of the 1920s.