

Sport and White Ethnics in Chicago, 1860-1920

STEVEN A. RIESS

Northeastern Illinois University

This paper examines the nature of organized ethnic sport in Chicago with attention to both the old and new immigrants. The old immigrants brought a sporting tradition with them to the city. The Germans came with an established organization, the *turnverein*, which was reestablished here with many of the same ideals, while the Irish established new institutions contemporaneous with the creation of similar athletic societies in the homeland that sponsored traditional games. In addition, Irish young men formed social and athletic clubs which organized American sporting contests. The new immigrant groups came with either no sporting tradition or one that was just developing in their sections of eastern Europe which were often tied to revolutionary political movements. The new Slavic gymnastic societies flourished as much in the U.S., if not more than in their homelands.

The ethnic sporting institutions provided members and other participants with exhilarating entertainment that sustained and promoted a strong sense of peoplehood for immigrants interested in sports and for those second-generation youth attracted by the sports programs. The clubs provided sites for athletic exercise, meeting places, and organized competition, and were prominent institutions in ethnic neighborhoods. While important in their own right, they must be examined as part of a wide constellation of ethnic community institutions that provided many of the same functions, particularly taverns, frequently parish churches, choral groups, and the foreign language theater. These institutions, many of which were more likely to have existed in the old country than sports organizations, all sought to provide their working class clients with convivial cheap entertainment in a *gemutlich* atmosphere where the old culture (language, traditions, customs) would be sustained, the shock of alienation alleviated, and the accomplishments of the group lauded among themselves and to the broader host society.