

CULTURE AND SUBCULTURE

Sporting Styles and Consumer Behavior, 1770-1810

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For much of the eighteenth century, two sporting styles, or cohesive patterns of behavior and meaning, existed in the Anglo-American colonies. The more elaborate of the two was the genteel style, which drew much from Britain, involved highly formalized sports in prescribed settings and relationships, and was associated with a distinct discipline, "leisure." The second style collected the practices of ordinary men, and to a lesser extent, women. Vernacular sports remained locally-based and tied primarily to "ordinary" places, but many forms followed distinct conventions, if not genteel-like rules.

By about 1770, however, there seems to have been some movement within colonial sporting life that suggests both a redefinition and a reorientation of genteel and vernacular styles. Impressionistic evidence points to a series of changes occurring in the last third of the century, including changes in the acquisition and consumption of sporting goods. This paper explored questions about consumer behavior, via a particular kind of quantifiable evidence: estate inventories. Estate inventories are the records of holdings of individuals, registered upon their deaths with the county courts by court-appointedees. Such records have numerous problems and biases, and they are not direct evidence of behavior. So this work is as much an experiment in historical method as it is a report on history.

The inventory data from counties in Maryland and Massachusetts suggested several propositions about consumer behavior in late colonial and early national sporting life. First, available sport-specific goods had increased and were more varied. Second, the acquisition and consumption of sporting goods occurred primarily in urban areas, rather than rural ones, a pattern supported by many kinds of impressionistic evidence. Further, with rare exceptions, the consumers were males; a small percentage of women did own goods, but these were married women, women linked to a male-dominated world. Finally, "middle rank" Americans who were engaged in mercantile, artisanal, and service occupations were more likely to acquire goods than were their very poor or wealthy compatriots.

This picture of a distinguishable middle rank, male, commercializing sporting sphere was



Jim and “Benny” Odenkirk, happy hosts at Tempe.

tested in one of the visible public arenas of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the taverns. Though incomplete, the evidence both reinforced and clarified some of the patterns suggested by the personal estates. The taverners’ inventories from two Maryland counties—Anne Arundel, representing the residual rural county with a town, and Baltimore, the emergent entrepreneurial county with a city—reinforced the picture of expanding consumption and the rural-urban differences. Rural taverns tended to have fewer furnishings and to be licensed more irregularly. Further, in both areas, a larger percentage of women were county taverners than city ones, particularly after 1780. Finally, in Baltimore City, unlike Annapolis, three tavern styles appeared to be forming, in keeping with ever-larger working class population, the residual genteel segment, and the emergent bourgeoisie.

Used along with impressionistic evidence, estate inventory data help to produce a picture of late colonial and early national sporting life that differs from that of an earlier period. After about 1770, at the very least, two colonial sporting styles no longer prevailed. In urbanizing areas, especially, an emergent “middle rank,” perhaps even a middle class, pattern had begun to take shape. It incorporated practices of the older gentry, it was male-dominated and exchange-oriented, and it drew upon the experiences of artisans, middling merchants, and the increasing numbers of “middle men”—people whom Charles Steffins has called “mechanics,” and people who were the agents of the broader movement that underlay the redefinition of sporting styles: the transition to capitalism. In fact, perhaps earlier than historians have thought, sporting practice specialized by class and occupation. Sporting goods themselves, or at least the ownership of particular kinds of goods, may even have been a factor in class consciousness.