

Sport and Culture in Chicago

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In a city often torn by ethnic, racial and political strife, the Chicago Bears' 1986 Super Bowl season was, perhaps, the greatest display of cultural unity in over a century. The roots of such a phenomenon began to take shape after the Civil War, and sport played a prominent role in the unifying process. The interaction of Chicago's diverse ethnic groups and the native population through the medium of sport had a profound effect on the development of local culture.

By 1940 most Chicagoans had accepted the traditional "American" sports of baseball, football and basketball; but ethnic sporting practices and institutions which proliferated throughout the city prior to World War I had presented a formidable challenge to the established order and the dominant value systems of native Americans. That challenge first appeared in the 1880s, and greatly intensified after the turn of the century, as waves of Southern and Eastern Europeans fled poverty and repression in search of a better life. That search brought many to Chicago, the teeming industrial and commercial center of the Midwest. By 1890, most of the city's residents were foreign-born. Most of the immigrants were Catholic, many were peasants, and all were possessed of an alien culture which confronted the dominant WASP values of Chicago's social structure. This was particularly evident in their leisure-time activities and their reaction to the "Americanization" programs conducted by social reformers.

Contemporary educational theory stressed the necessity of play in the developmental process. Sport was perceived as the medium of physical, mental and moral improvement, and the means to achieve both personal and societal health. Immigrants and their children might be taught the "American" values of order, efficiency, teamwork and self-sacrifice necessary for success. Competitive sports and games were to be instrumental in the inculcation of the commercial values which often conflicted with the immigrants' perceptions of freedom and equal opportunity.

Chicago's commercial and industrial leaders, such men as Potter Palmer, John V. Farwell, Marshall Field and George Pullman, as well as other transplanted New Englanders, were imbued with the Yankee ideals of business and morality. Each supported sport and its incorporation in the assimilation programs of Chicago's parks, playgrounds, settlement houses, and private industry. None, however, personified the value of sport more so than did Albert Spalding. Rising from obscure and lowly origins, his athletic skills and business acumen allowed him to parlay his talents into the Chicago baseball club ownership, the league presidency, and a world-wide sporting goods empire. Spalding's life and his sport publications extolled the virtues and benefits of athletics. The ideology of social mobility and character building which accompanied sport, particularly the "national" game of baseball, was expected to similarly transform immigrants into useful, productive, and patriotic American citizens.

Most immigrant groups, however, had long-established sporting traditions, which revolved around religious or social customs and nationalistic objectives that were not always compatible with the aims of American social reformers. Catholics traditionally enjoyed their recreation on Sundays, and activities were often accompanied by alcoholic indulgence; both violated the Protestant perception of the proper Sabbath observance. Likewise, the German Turners, Czech and Polish Sokols, and other ethnic athletic clubs maintained ties with European parent organizations, which frustrated and slowed the assimilation aims of reformers.

German political power allowed the Turners to introduce their system of physical training to Chicago's public schools, while the formalization of interscholastic and industrial athletic programs included both American and ethnic sport forms. Not until after World War I did the "Americanization" efforts bear some fruit. Hostility toward German-Americans, the attainment of ethnic goals in Europe, the "Americanization" of Chicago's Catholics under Cardinal Mundelein, immigration quota laws, and a second generation of immigrant offspring who did not share their parents ethnic commitments hastened the process of acculturation.

While Chicago's ethnic groups more readily accepted the American sport forms after World War I, they adapted structures more suitable to their class or cultural differences. Ethnic youth continued to identify with the sport heroes and success ethic portrayed by the media in the course of the next two decades; but they often honed their skills in the programs of the Catholic Youth Organization or B'nai B'rith. A Communist sports association, aimed at integrating blacks and women into a class-conscious movement, presented a direct, albeit short-lived, challenge to the capitalist system. The alliance of ethnic religious leaders with the middle-class value system and its business interests curtailed the volatile expressions of disenfranchised workers or disillusioned youth by channeling their energies into expanding recreation programs.

Increasingly, as blacks became more conspicuous in the ranks of professional athletes and sport assumed greater symbolic pretensions of nationalism and cultural supremacy in American confrontations with Fascism and Communism, the various groups found at least one area of common interest. Sport and leisure practices, which had been so divisive before World War I, provided a vehicle for cultural unity thereafter. Although the meanings and uses of sport often differed by class or culture, the interest in sport was a pervasive one.