

American Sport and the Emergence of the immigrant Women

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A dominant element of any given society, and America is not an exception to this rule, is to impose upon minorities and ethnic groups the demand to relinquish, wholly or partially, their ethnic or national heritage-at least its outward manifestations-as a precondition of acceptance. Sport served an important medium for socialization of these groups into American society. One can discern two perspectives in utilizing this process of “becoming American.” On the one hand, the ruling intellectual elite viewed sports, play, and games as one of the most suitable means of assimilation. There was also a desire on the part of the underclasses that newly emerging immigrant and ethnic minorities belonged to, on the other hand, to identify themselves with the middle classes or pursue their quest for social and psychological acceptance by them through sport participation.



“Eyler’s Eagles”

In spite of some advances in the past decade or so, the study of ethnic and immigrant groups in America is still one of the barely charted territories of sport history. The majority of the existing studies dealt mostly with the point of view of the intellectual elite and the role it envisaged to sport and games (See the literature of the Playground Movement for example, etc.). Other segments of research, mostly non scholarly, tried to prove by all means how these

groups came to participate and dominate in sport-they attempted to find the “Einsteins” of immigrant sport. Of course, that is an apologetic view of history. One must look beyond the mere investigation of reasons of why certain ethnic groups participated extensively in sports because it is equally important to find the social, cultural, and psychological factors that might explain why other ethnic groups did not gravitate as intensely, or not at all, toward sports.

The topic of this paper is the role of ethnic and immigrant women in sports. While the participation of ethnic or immigrant men in particular sports is in itself a good index of their ethnic-immigrant groups’ socioeconomic standing, the same not always could be said about immigrant women. The cultural constraints brought with different ethnic and immigrant groups to the Promised Land remained for a longer time with women than with men. The role and participation of women in sports were not determined solely by either societal norms prevailing in society at large or socioeconomic factors but also by the group value system that decreed the role and status of women within particular ethnic or national communities. The words of Jeanne L. Noble, who wrote about Black women in higher education, are very appropriately represent the fate of ethnic and immigrant women who “labored under the double handicap of race and sex-a Negro in in a white world and a female in a male world.”

The assimilation of immigrant and ethnic women and their course of evolution in America is still an enigma in many respects. Their participation in sports, or lack of thereof, is even lesser known. In order to understand these issues, we must look not only toward the social and economic status and role these women played, because these factors provide a rather incomplete picture, but also cultural factors that promoted or retarded their advancement upon their arrival or life in America.

Through a comparative analysis, this study examines the emergence of four major ethnic groups, Irish, Jews, Italians, and Blacks, in American society and sports. A strong connection appears to exist between these groups’ values about such diverse areas of life as education, religion, family and sport participation.