

Sport and the Redefinition of Middle Class Masculinity in Victorian America

Steven A. Riess

Northeastern Illinois University

At the outset of the Victorian Era, middle class American males had little interest in sport or physical culture. They were shopkeepers, professionals, agents, clerks, and farmers, hard working, devout, future oriented individuals who had little precious free time to take away from the serious business of earning a living. With the exception of clerks, generally young men learning the business with the expectation of a future partnership or an entrepreneurial career, middle class men were competitive workers who were their own boss. They frowned upon the popular mass sports of the day as a waste of time, immoral, and debilitating, which should be avoided at all costs. Yet by mid-century a respectable middle class sporting culture was beginning to evolve, and it would boom after the 1870s. The purpose of this essay is to explain how middle class concerns with their masculinity contributed to making sport an integral part of their lives. Sport redefined for them their sense of manliness and provided mechanisms to achieve it.

I argue that sport in Victorian America helped redefine the criterion of middle class masculinity, moving beyond man's relationship to his work and family, to include his character and physical self. Then once sport redefined the attributes of respectable manliness, it was employed to indoctrinate proper bourgeois values in succeeding generations. Whereas sport in the early 1800s was totally antithetical to middle class behavior, promoting a manly ethic congruent with life in pre-modern societies such as mining camps, the frontier, and rough urban neighborhoods, it was a poor fit for life in settled communities or the workplace under industrial capitalism. However, important changes came at midcentury, when the respectable urban middle classes learned from immigrants, health faddists, social critics, evangelists, and other social reformers that physical culture could be enjoyed free of nefarious influences, and that participation could be fun and uplifting at the same time. A new sports ideology emerged that promoted team sports and other athletic pastimes that were consonant with the social values of hard working, religious, future oriented Victorians and promised to improve health, morality, and character (i.e., manliness). Sedentary workers and students were drawn to sports to improve their health and gain respect for their manliness. Sport was no mere child's play, but would produce muscular Christians, rugged, disciplined, manly gentlemen, instead of effete childlike youths. These men would be responsible, physically fit, moral adults, who continued to live within traditional middle class norms, abstaining from premarital sex, living within the virtues of domesticity, and serving as good providers.

In the late 19th century, sport boomed as a middle class recreation and contributed significantly to the redefinition of middle class manliness. The rise of bureaucratization, the threats posed by the new immigrants, an uncertainty of measuring up to brave ancestors, and the feminization of culture encouraged middle class young men to test their manliness through vigorous physical activity, especially team sports. Participation in strenuous, if not dangerous, clean outdoor sports would develop strength, courage and virility, while restoring self-confidence. Sport tested one's mettle and got one ready for adulthood. Followers of the strenuous life would grow up to become self-controlled, disciplined men of action who were team players at the workplace, bearers of the white man's burden, and protectors of the race, who would surmount the feminization of American culture.