

# Gender, Class, and Sports in Late 19th Century America

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As sports historians know, games, play and athletics were troublesome categories in antebellum America. Sports like baseball were just becoming popular, and had to struggle for respectability among the Victorian middle class; activities like boxing remained an outrage for decades. But even provisionally acceptable pastimes were held at arm's length, for all sports gave off a whiff of sloth, licentiousness, drinking, swearing, and gambling, making them suspect in the eyes of Christians and the bourgeoisie.

This situation changed drastically by late in the nineteenth century. While voices still occasionally were raised in opposition, American men across class lines had become interested in sports. Certainly sports remained stratified; the New York Athletic Club had a class-specific constituency, and so did the *National Police Gazette*. But while particular athletic activities were still identified with discreet ethnic or economic groups, sports as an overarching concept had become associated with masculinity across such categories. Not only athletic endeavors themselves, but also spectatorship were more than common among men; they had become incorporated into the very definition of American manhood. By the twentieth century, male gender solidarity expressed through sports obscured the presence of other social divisions, and I examine how this trans-class, trans-ethnic gender identity was constructed.