

# James Brendan Connolly and the Modernization of American Sport

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Born in South Boston, of Irish parents, James Brendan Connolly (1868–1957) is best remembered as America’s foremost writer of maritime tales. Author of 25 full-length works and more than 200 contributions to a variety of journals, including *Scribner’s*, *Collier’s*, *Harper’s* and the *Saturday Evening Post*, he ran for Congress on the Progressive Party ticket in 1912 and later served as Commissioner to Ireland for the American Committee for Relief in Ireland. However, it is a lesser-known chapter of Connolly’s life upon which this study focuses.

As the first modern Olympic victor, at Athens in 1896, Connolly went on to enjoy a revered status and freedom of movement within the frequently aristocratic bastions of American amateur athletics at the turn of the century. Repeatedly voicing his support for the old-fashioned virtues of courage, justice and honesty, Connolly vehemently opposed the forces that were moving to change the nature and purpose of sport in the United States. Beginning with the appearance of his first romantic novelette entitled *Olympic Victor: A Story of the Modern Games*, in 1908, and throughout his literary career, Connolly staunchly defended the simplicity of sport and the amateur ideal together with the relationship between sport, national pride and national character, concepts which were clearly philosophically opposed at times. He became a constant thorn in the side of bureaucrats who sought to commercialize amateur sport in America and who, in Connolly’s mind, readily exploited the athletes to further their own political and monetary gains. Furthermore, Connolly found time to examine what he perceived to be a troubling problem among the new breed of specialist athletes, the use of substances as ergogenic aids to performance.

Utilizing Guttman’s (1978) framework for explaining the modernization of sport, this study seeks to uncover the nature of Connolly’s deep and diverse concern and to evaluate the impact of his sometimes fragmented critique of the powerbrokers of American amateur athletics. Evidence is drawn from an extensive, critical and careful examination of Connolly’s literary works, autobiographical and biographical records, newspapers, correspondence found in the *James B. Connolly Papers*, and interviews with his daughter.