

# “For the Benefit of Farmers and Others”: Integrating the History of Rural America in American Sport History

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Sport history as social history has emphasized the importance of historical factors such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and region in recent scholarship. Yet while urban history, emphasizing the city as a key aspect in the study of and rise of sport, has been integrated in sport history, few historical works on sport integrate rural history. In fact, American sport historians need to include the history of the rural majority in the historical analysis and teaching of sport. Most studies focus on urban sporting experiences and include little information about rural sporting experiences.

Examining the ways farming life and sporting life are intertwined in American history and culture suggests the importance of the American agrarian past to the development of a sporting culture over time and place. By exploring the interconnections between rural history and sport history, sport historians can provide a more complete historical presentation of the sporting experiences of past social actors. An urban concentration exists in the sport history literature.

This paper addressed several questions pertinent to teaching sport history drawing on the historical literature in rural history and social history. What is the “new rural history”? What issues in rural history, as social history, are significant for the study of sport history? How do such historical factors such as gender and class shape the study of rural sporting activities? What primary sources, both literary and non-literary, can sport historians use to explore the sport history of rural Americans? What secondary sources seem most useful for contextualizing the sporting experiences of male and female agriculturists? How might farm folks’ exposure to urban culture have shaped their sporting behaviors and leisure pastimes over time?

In addition, topics in rural history significant for integrating the history of rural America in sport history were discussed. These include agricultural reform and health, relationships between work and leisure, the development of public sporting activities such as the agricultural fairs, gender and sport in farm life, and the emergence of a sporting culture in nineteenth century farm life. Analyzing the sporting practices of farming men and women by utilizing an interdisciplinary perspective assist students with understanding the importance of agriculturists, as well as urbanites, in American sport history and American culture. Sport historians thus need to consider the rural majority in the context of American history.