

Playground for Patricians: Notes on the Horse Show

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The paper presents a sociological overview of the American horse show, an upper-class sport that has yet to attract much scholarly attention. Material for the overview is based on the author's participant observation of the sport, as well as formal and informal interviews with those involved in the sport, including show exhibitors, officials, and executives of the various equestrian organizations.

Conceptual perspectives for the analysis are derived from the writings of Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen on stratification. Accordingly, Weber's three-dimensional model of stratification is used to conceptualize the universe of horse show participants as constituting a class, a status group, and a party. And, Veblen's now famous concept of "conspicuous consumption" is used to depict the horse show as an arena for the display of wealth and privilege.

Starting with a definition of the horse show, and the nature of the sports that it promotes, the overview continues with brief descriptions of its history, social structure, constituencies, recruitment patterns and subculture. The purpose of these descriptions is to explain why the horse show was started by the upper class, why it became its exclusive playground, and why it continues to dominate.

The central argument of the paper, which provides answers to these questions, is that the horse show is a class-exclusive sport institution. Inspired by bucolic and military traditions, the horse show was brought into being in the latter part of the nineteenth century by wealthy sportsmen who sought to create both a new sport fixture and a social venue for the upper class. Soon after its beginnings, its founders institutionalized the sport by establishing the American Horse Show Association, which from its inception to the present, has defined the sport's normative parameters. Going a step further, this same leadership, has also been instrumental in making the sport's subculture a mirror-image of the values of upper-class life.