

DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNITY

Metropolitan Athletic Clubs and the Proliferation of American Football: The Case of the Louisville Athletic Club

Brian S. Butler

University of Louisville

Throughout the late nineteenth century, Americans increasingly took to organized sport. Much of this popularity can be attributed to a greater reliance on sport by colleges. By the 1890s, football was the most popular sport on campuses. However, the development of the college game inadequately explains the increased popularity and subsequent proliferation of football in cities in the Midwest. In Midwestern cities the role of metropolitan athletic clubs in the development of organized football can not be underestimated. This paper is an examination of the role played by urban middle and upper middle class men within the Louisville Athletic Club in bringing football to Louisville in the 1890s.

The urban professionals who introduced Louisville to organized football were, for the most part, what Robert Wiebe referred to in *The Search for Order* (New York, 1967) as the “new” middle class. These men were generally college educated and returned to Louisville with new business and professional skills as well as a desire to continue playing the game they learned at school. Lawyers, architects and small business owners, to name a few, the men who played football with the Louisville Athletic Club were well respected within Louisville “society.” As such, their games became social affairs for both the young social elite and city elders.

At a time when cities were facing problems associated with vice, economic stagnation and population growth, the civic boosterism the LAC provided was immeasurable. Yet the LAC afforded more personal attractions for those who joined and played football. On one level, the club supplied an atmosphere for fraternalism where men could develop personal relationships with other men of their social class. perhaps more importantly, playing football for the LAC provided a public stage upon which men could exploit their maleness; by doing so these men were able to disseminate middle-class male values—courage, self-denial, resourcefulness in the face of adversity, etc.—values associated with the new industrial order.



NASSH members reunite the first day at Loyola.

The LAC was able to implant a greater understanding and appreciation of the game in all parts of the city. By the middle of the 1890s Louisville could turn to several sources for organized football. Local high schools, neighborhood clubs and the local Y.M.C.A. had all developed teams by the end of the decade. It is clear that this development owed more to the local metropolitan athletic club than to colleges outside of the city.