

The Rise of Interscholastic Athletics in the Chicago Area: The Cook County League, 1889–1913

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There have been several notable regional studies on early interscholastic sports, most notably by Steve Hardy on the Boston high schools, Jeffrey Mirel on the Michigan high schools, Axel Bundgaard on the New England academies, J. Thomas Jable on the New York City public schools, and Gerald Gems on the Chicago schools. These reports have provided valuable documentation and insights that have enriched our understanding of the emergence of interscholastic sports.

Despite these laudable research efforts, what we know of interscholastic athletics is still unsatisfactory and incomplete. This paper's research findings regarding the Cook County League public schools centered in Chicago and its suburbs modifies, adds to, and perhaps overturns some existing understandings regarding the development of interscholastic sports.

The examination of city newspapers, high school newspapers and ephemera, and public documents, has produced a picture of thriving interscholastic competition in Chicago beginning in about 1884. For the first five or six years this competition was a sandlot variety, but during this phase of development the schoolboys and schoolgirls were developing interscholastic competition in the sports of baseball, football, and track and field, all modeled after what they saw in the colleges. The culture in the high schools at the time reflecting their demographic make-up, was thoroughly middle and upper-middle class, and the students were deeply interested in college life and tried to imitate it slavishly in sports and in all other extracurricular activities. Besides the sports such extracurricula included literary societies, after-game banquets, and fraternities and sororities. Central to the formation of sports teams was the formation of the student athletic association that raised money and organized the teams.

The "sandlot phase" of the 1880's came to its end with the emergence of the Cook County League during 1889 and 1890, a development that paralleled the emergence of formal competition and the formation of leagues in other cities of the Northeast. During the 1890's, the "phase of student control," the students had full control over the sports, and modeled after the colleges it was exercised

through the student captain and student manager. The commercial aspects of the operation—athletic clubs that raised money, admission charges for games, and monetary and trophy awards for winners were modeled after the college example. In the 1890's emerged three new sports—tennis, indoor baseball, and basketball—all started by students and organized by student managers. The first regulation of high school sports in the Cook County League came from the students, who as early as the mid-1880's were battling the problem of ringers and later put an end to monetary prizes.

The “institutionalization phase” of Cook County interscholastics began in 1898, with the establishment of a constitution and the bringing in of faculty to form a board of control. Under the lead of Chicago Board of Education Superintendent Edwin G. Cooley, authorities made a concerted effort to take control of high school sports. This effort was part of a campaign that began in 1904 to establish full institutional control over the extracurricula, particularly in the war against fraternities and sororities. These efforts, however, were vigorously opposed and repeatedly undermined by Chicago schoolboys, a reaction quite different it appears from other regions of the country where schoolboys seemed to passively accept and even welcome faculty control of interscholastics. The first battles were over the issue eligibility and the student managers' operational control. Later battles involved such issues as out-of-state travel, alumni coaching, student scheduling, and “professionalism.”

My three-phase analysis and findings of certain distinctive developments in early Cook County interscholastics could be no more than a peculiar regionalism but possibly developments in the area are typical of national trends; other researchers may have not dug as deep and failed to draw the best inferences from the research materials.