

Great Wasn't Good Enough: The Black Sport Experience in Chicago

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The presentation described and analyzed the pattern of development in black sporting experiences from 1900–1920. Initial sporting ventures occurred within the mainstream white, middle class institutions and organizations, but followed separate and parallel paths of development with the demographic changes of the twentieth century. These changes were analyzed within the context of labor developments, racial attitudes, and social reform movements.

The status and role of free African-Americans in the post-Civil War period remained somewhat ambiguous in the northern states. Progressive ideology relevant to people of color required a period of crystallization. This transitional period allowed an historical window that provided initial opportunities for black athletes and reinforced the perceptions of opportunity and a relative meritocracy. This transitional period can be traced in the careers of Sam Ransom, the first great black high school athlete in Chicago; Rube Foster, and Jack Johnson. Johnson, a Chicago resident and black heavy-weight champion, challenged white society and excited white fears with his flamboyant lifestyle. Employers, in conjunction with the Urban League, arranged to hire the increasing number of blacks as strikebreakers during periods of labor conflict after World War I. Such factors contributed to ethnic factionalism, segregated housing patterns and misdirected social programs that fostered a separate, yet parallel black sporting culture. Within this structure black athletes continued to compete in their own leagues and versus whites within the limits designed by the dominant white society. Although somewhat dependent on white philanthropy and white promoters, black athletes and athletic entrepreneurs found the means to direct their own enterprises and achieve success and profit in a manner befitting their own values. Similar to the slavery experiences of their parents and grandparents, they learned to use the established systems and white assumptions of racial inferiority to their own advantage in confronting discrimination and racial prejudice.