

The Early Days of the Country Club: 1882-1920

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Between 1882 and the end of World War I the upper-middle and upper-classes created the country club as a common feature of the American landscape. This development is, for the most part, unstudied. As sport's historians have increasingly focused on the late nineteenth century as the era in which sports took root in American life, they have also focused on a predictable array of sports and sporting institutions. The mass spectator sports of the twentieth century have been explored with increasing zeal. "Minor" sports, such as golf and tennis, have received much less attention for reasons that are not wholly understandable.

My paper addressed two questions. First, why did American elites in city after city create country clubs at a frantic pace between 1882 and 1920? Second, why did the country club movement, at first not connected with golf at all, turn to golf with such fervor? Answering such questions is not easy; country clubs did not, and do not, generally leave much in the way of public records. Yet there are ways into the country club movement. The upper-classes around the turn-of-the-century had evoked a small set of magazines aimed at serving the needs of an emerging leisure class. I have drawn much of my information from this periodical literature. In addition, my paper also draws on club histories (an exotic genre), memoirs of key people in the country club movement and, to a small extent, the records of the United States Golf Association, founded in the 1890s by an elite group of country clubs.

By World War I the country club and golf had assumed a clear place in American sporting and leisure life. My paper attempted to show how and why those roles evolved and what this evolution says about American elites between 1882 and 1920.