

Playing Fields And Battlefields: Sport And The American Military, 1890-1920

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Between 1917-1919 most American servicemen participated in organized sport. This was unprecedented in the history of American sport. On the playing fields at home and in Europe “narrow-chested clerks made three base hits on the same ball teams with college athletes and lean-visaged philosophers learned how to use their fists.” marveled a *Scientific American* editor. “Uncle Sam had created not only an army of soldiers,” the writer thought, but an “army of athletes.” As a well-respected state institution, the military was ideally-suited to popularize the cause of physical vitality and the American sporting spirit.

The goals, ideology, and organization of the new American military were profoundly altered by the Spanish-American war experience. Military officials assumed a moral commitment to the soldiers’ welfare and used sport initially to combat desertion, alcohol and the lure of prostitution. Maintaining close intellectual and political ties with other preparedness advocates, military officials later embraced sport and athletics as the most efficient means to cultivate national vitality, citizenship, and the fighting spirit. Military training infused with a heavy dose of sport and athletics would not only train American men in the “soldierly values” of obedience, citizenship and combat, it would also usefully restore class schisms, social order, unity, and patriotism to the country.

The success of military sport surpassed all expectations. Thousands of men were introduced to sports for the first time and became converts to the cult of strenuousness. The military's extensive use of sport did much to legitimize it in the public mind - both at home and in Europe. The mission of spreading American sport throughout Europe reached a crescendo during the Inter-Allied Games of 1919. The War Camp Community Service recreation programs initiated during the war multiplied thereafter, and focused national attention of government funded sport for the masses. The war experience brought sports into high school and college curriculums - between 1919-21 alone seventeen states passed physical education legislation. But perhaps most importantly, the military legitimized boxing and football as bona fide American spectator sports. In short, the war experience proved a potent impetus for the maturation of a national sporting tradition.