

The Neighborhood Athletic Club: An Ethnographic Study of the Working-Class Athletic Fraternity

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This study invokes Gramsci's hegemony theory as the basis for investigation of the organic intellectual leadership of the working class and the means by which subordinate groups reject or adapt the dominant cultural characteristics to fit their own needs. Within that framework it may lend greater understanding of alternative cultures, and might best fit into the categories of working class or ethnic sport.

It pursues four questions: 1) What is the nature of working class sporting practices?; 2) How does the working class sporting organization operate?; 3) What are the sociological relationships among its members?; and 4) What are the meanings of sport participation to working class athletes?

Such questions are addressed by means of a case study, providing a descriptive analysis of one working class athletic club over three generations. The study is placed within an historical context of the bachelor subculture of the nineteenth century using both primary and secondary sources. The Burgess Papers at the University of Chicago provide a contemporary context for the

origination of the club circa 1918 and provide comparison with other social-athletic clubs of that period through the Depression years.

The study reveals the membership of such clubs, their ethnic, racial, and gender compositions, activities engaged in, and the purposes of such. Combined with oral histories from surviving members, such sources as club records and scrapbooks, newspaper accounts, etc. provide a rich and detailed story of working class life, perceptions, social organizations, and the role of sport in the continuity of a particular lifestyle.

Unlike other ethnic based athletic clubs, the changing demographics of the neighborhood fostered ethnic assimilation within the group. Sports provided both psychological and economic refuge during the Depression for most members, while others turned to criminal activities. Gambling, trained child-beggars who worked the spectating crowds, or other revenue generating ventures, such as dances brought revenue to the club. Political figures or local bars covered major expenses and supplied a clubhouse or meeting space in return for patronage. Throughout its history the club proved to be a male bastion with females largely fulfilling roles in an auxiliary support network. Two contact sports predominated as the activities of choice, football and boxing, both of which reinforced the centrality of physicality and prowess in the working class lifestyle.

Such activities produced an oral tradition of neighborhood heroes and legends. Sport and religion largely held the community intact as divergent residents of the neighborhood shared such common experiences. All took pride in the athletic successes of neighborhood teams that fostered a particular territorial identity. When the team fractured over factionalism and individual interests an old "coach" emerged as a unifying force among third generation offspring.

Working class rhythms remained fixed around work, the club/bar, and sport. Violence, and by the 1970s, drugs, intervened, bringing death to at least a dozen neighborhood residents. Team members were invariably buried with their football jerseys, symbolic of their central identity within the community. A select few won college scholarships, even fewer graduated and left the community for a middle class lifestyle. A violent murder, and a resultant rampage forced the permanent closure of the club; but did little to change working class members' perceptions. Drinking and sport remained the primary leisure activities. The emphasis on the body as the source of physical pleasures dictated leisure activities and reinforced class differences. Sport provided the means to promote local pride, achieve communal solidarity, affirm class-specific beliefs and principles; while maintaining a traditional existence within a modernizing outside world.