

Athletic Leagues and Playdays: Sports and Games for School-Aged Children in California, 1900 - World War II

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Although many scholars have written about the history of adult sports and games-playing in American colleges, relatively little attention has been directed to the public schools or other venues in which programs for school-aged youth were offered. O'Hanlon's "School Sports as Social Training: The Case of Athletics and the Crisis of World War I" is one instance of a valuable study of sports programs and secondary education. The several case studies that appear in Hult and Trekell's From Frailty to Final Four is another. Cavallo's Muscles and Morals maintains that the turn-of-the-century playground movement performed a salient role in the socialization of the native-born child as well as the "Americanization" of the foreign-born. However much remains to be done. Little, for example, has been done with respect to the conjunction of religion and youth sport.

In California during the 1890s -- as in many other areas of the United States -- sports for girls and boys became a part of both curricular and extracurricular offerings. By the early 1900s programs of considerable magnitude were being conducted. Shortly after she became Professor of Hygiene and women's Medical Adviser at Stanford University, Clelia Mosher, M.D. deemed it necessary to write to President James Branner in an effort to curtail the basketball games in which Stanford women and the "girls" from San Jose High School engaged. The Academic Athletic League of California, which was organized in 1910, soon supported an elaborate series of contests in a wide array of sports. One of the early competitors, schoolboy Ralph Rose, became an Olympic contender. The Catholic Schools Athletic League of California was initiated in 1909. Under the able leadership of men such as Brother Cyril, it quickly developed extensive athletic and social programs that were of considerable significance both within and beyond the Catholic community. However, especially during the early years, there were different types of involvement among Irish-, German-, and Italian-Catholics.

In 1910, San Diego High School offered an elaborate program of varsity football and both varsity and interclass baseball, track, tennis, and basketball -- the last for girls as well as boys. "Varsity" or inter-school competitions continued for girls even after Winifred Van Hagen (who became known as "the Play Day Lady") arrived at the schools of Pasadena in 1911. By 1912, she had taken a position as director of recreation at Oakland's Mosswood Playground. In 1918, she became assistant to Clark Hetherington in California's newly created State Bureau of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation. In this capacity, she travelled hundreds of miles throughout the State bringing games to rural children. When the women's Division of the National Amateur Athletic Federation moves to implement its "A sport for every girl -- every girl in a sport" program in the 1920s, Van Hagen became a staunch supporter.

Large cities like Berkeley and Oakland (which established some of the earliest playgrounds in the United States), San Francisco, and Los Angeles organized extensive recreational programs and sports leagues during the 1920s, 1920s, and 1930s. In smaller towns and the countryside, the local high school was often a focus for such activities. Within California's richly diverse ethnic populations, sports and games of American origins often performed a significant role in socializing children and introducing them to -- some would say inculcating in them -- "American" values. As Wrynn has shown, young Japanese women were engaged in considerable numbers in softball leagues before the wholesale internment of Japanese-Americans began in 1942. Baseball was a particularly popular sport among Japanese-American males. Within the Chinese-American community, basketball became a popular sport. San Francisco's Chinatown Y.M.C.A. organized boy Scout troops, bugle corps, and similar activities as well as sports. The Y.B.A. (Young Buddhist Association) supported both social and sporting activities for girls as well as boys. In 1920, a group of young men meeting at

San Francisco's Chinese Congregational Church organized the Yoke ("disseminate") Choy ("knowledge") Club for the purposes of promoting Christianity, music, and athletics.

In the instance of Chinese-Americans and certain other groups, sports programs often served the dual purpose of providing a sense of group -- indeed, ethnic -- solidarity while at the same time creating an interface with the wider community. This aspect of the investigation offers particularly rich opportunities to elucidate those circumstances in which sports have served multiple purposes; and what these purposes were.

This paper is a social-cultural history that focuses around a number of case studies set within the larger general framework of sports and games for school-aged children in California from 1900 to world War II. It relies upon a wide array of sources which include, but are not limited to: school yearbooks, publications of the various athletic leagues, the Y.M.C.A., the Catholic schools, newspaper accounts (both the general circulation press and the newspapers and broadsides produced for the purpose of informing a particular ethnic, religious, or other group). It also draws upon brochures, written accounts, and annual reports of various municipal agencies such as the Oakland Recreation Department and the State of California. In the case of girls sports in the public schools during the 1920s and 1930s, the author has at her disposal extensive personal materials that belonged to Ms. Van Hagen.