

The Prep Bowl: Football as Civic Theater and Acculturation Ritual

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This paper involves an interdisciplinary analysis of a series of championship football games in Chicago by invoking historical, sociological and anthropological methodologies. The interleague, city championship, or Prep Bowl, as it was variously called, started in 1927, and received official sanction in 1934. It brought together the Catholic champions, who operated in a separate league, isolated from the mainstream athletic culture, and their counterparts from the public high school league in a civic spectacle, replete with rituals, symbolism, and deep cultural meanings for both groups. Within four years of its civic sponsorship, in 1937, a crowd of 120,000 Chicagoans witnessed the contest for athletic, and implicitly, cultural supremacy.

The Prep Bowl provided Chicago, a largely ethnic and Catholic city, with much more than entertainment. This study utilizes Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony to examine why the Prep Bowl was so successful. It analyzes the historical period in which the game originated, the structure imposed on it by promoters and civic officials, and its meanings to participants, their supporters, and the larger constituencies that each represented, i.e., Catholics versus Protestants. Ultimately, the analysis focuses on the of the contest as a cultural spectacle that addressed tensions both within the Catholic community and with the mainstream American culture.

The evidence to support conclusions is derived from an analysis of both Catholic and secular media accounts, game films and photos, interviews and

questionnaires administered to participants, and primary documents. From such sources the study concludes that the city high school football championships between the Catholic and public league representatives served a critical role in the Americanization process. It did so by creating a ritual of inclusion that recognized the pluralistic nature of American society. While publicly reinforcing the established civic hierarchy and the perception of cultural cohesion in its structure and patriotic symbolism, it allowed for the celebration of an alternative culture within the mainstream. Even as Catholics assimilated more closely with that mainstream, “Catholic” football served as a means to display distinct values and a limited adoption of the dominant ideology.

This paper provides greater understanding of the intricacies of the complex cultural process, by enhancing our knowledge of the means by which subordinate groups negotiate with dominant powers. In particular, it provides greater insight into the use of sport in that negotiated process of culture formation, as a means of bridging cultures as well as a means of resistance to dominance.