

Amateurism, Elitism and Noble Savagery: The Formation of the American Intercollegiate Lacrosse Ethos, 1895-1920

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By outlining the cultural world view of American lacrosse advocates from roughly 1895 to 1920, this paper explores the ideology of the American eastern sporting elite. During the Progressive Era, many well-to-do sportsmen at private clubs, university campuses and schoolboy playing grounds from Boston to Baltimore adopted the modernized version of an old Iroquoian game brought to the United States by Canadian immigrants. Indeed, some affluent American athletes separated themselves from their socio-economic inferiors by advocating a game that stood as an alternative to the commercial and democratic "national pastime" of baseball. This paper examines the construction of tradition and community loyalty at elite educational institutions, adherence to the late nineteenth-century ethos of gentlemanly amateurism, the relationship between university undergraduates and alumni, and upper-class attitudes toward physical education, violence and Native American Indians. The research is based upon evidence found in student newspapers and yearbooks at Johns Hopkins University, Syracuse University and Hobart College; major metropolitan dailies such as *the New York Times* and the *Baltimore Sun*; sporting periodicals; and the writings of intercollegiate lacrosse coaches.

Early twentieth-century lacrosse men defined their social class in cultural terms contrary to the larger mass democratic society by adhering rigidly to the ethos of gentlemanly amateurism and celebrating the perceived "noble" qualities of the "savage" old Indian game. Central to the appeal of lacrosse was the belief of participants and spectators alike that it was a pristine amateur sport exclusively for gentlemen. When those enthusiasts in Maryland, the New York City area, upstate New York, and New England assessed lacrosse, they underscored a commitment to the manly character-building qualities the sport allegedly inculcated. Indeed, much like their counterparts in other sports, advocates of modern lacrosse believed the old Indian game improved the relationship between body and mind, taught crisis-resolution skills, developed team and "college spirit," and fostered notions of self-control and fair play.

Unlike baseball, lacrosse advocates made little pretence of trying to recruit new adherents from all rungs of the American urban social order. While baseball supporters assumed their game promoted community pride and acculturated newcomers to American values, lacrosse enthusiasts believed the old Indian game unified the sons of affluent families at their university settings by teaching them an elite value system that cut across national boundaries within the anglophone world. Moreover, university coaches, players and alumni also established informal feeder systems with preparatory schools to insure the survival and prosperity of the ideology.

Recognition of the Native origins of what many white sportsmen saw as a gentleman's game during the Progressive Era reveals upper-class white views toward Indians that were inconsistent with the rank and file of American society. While many white Americans continued to view the Indian as an object of amusement, contempt and fear, the lacrosse community's appreciation of the Indian dominance both on and off the field. Through their preparatory school and university education, lacrosse advocates saw a far more objective picture of the Indian than among the general public. Confident and secure of their socio-economic superiority, this upper class community did not feel threatened by Native Americans. Instead of ridiculing and scorning the Indian, white lacrosse advocates accepted him as a fellow human being, so long as he knew his place. Indeed, this reflected the elite's view of society as naturally hierarchical.

These gentleman sportsmen believed learning from the "noble savage" was acceptable, but the lessons should be made to conform to notions of progress. They thanked the Indian for his game and transformed it to suit their social needs. In doing so, gentlemen lacrosse players saw themselves as having inherited the nobility of the ancient savages of North America. By turning to the distant past of their adopted game, university athletes at Johns Hopkins and elsewhere validated what they perceived to be notions of tradition, continuity and permanency at their institution. These elite athletes from New England to Maryland fused gentlemanly amateurism with the perceived nobility of American Indians to provide themselves a useful yardstick for measuring masculinity.

By focusing on the peculiar question of upper-class white attitudes toward Native American Indians, the paper provides historians with a better understanding of how and why some well-to-do American men rejected the emerging commercial and democratic culture of the early twentieth century.