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Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal Policies on Sports, Recreation, and Leisure

At the height of the Depression, unemployment affected almost a quarter of the American civilian labor force. When Franklin D. Roosevelt became president in 1933.

the top priority of his domestic agenda was to rebuild the economy and to this end Congress established many agencies and programs. Of particular relevance to sports, recreation, and leisure were the CCC, the CWA, and the WPA. The CEC and WPA construction projects provided employment for tradespeople and laborers and benefited the profession of recreation. They also extended support and recreation opportunities to many Americans.

These New Deal agencies had another consequence as well. Federal funding provided only for particular facilities and recreational opportunities, which incorporated and supported a relatively narrow range of the leisure practices enjoyed by Americans. Activities traditionally popular among working class citizens- practices such as tavern games, blood sports, horse racing, and story-telling-had no place in federally funded work projects. Thus, it is probably not coincidental that organized sports emerged as core practices in public recreation programs, including those sponsored by labor unions and industries in subsequent years. Underlying this implicit approval of particular organized sports and other leisure practices was a rationale that had been constructed and promoted during the Progressive era when public policy makers argued that organized athletic sports especially were important tools for the improvement of individual-and hence, society's—health, discipline, and character. Organized sports thus became a means to an end; they were seen as wholesome physical activities that complemented honest work, and Progressive reformers did much to promote such sports in schools and colleges and on public parks. Importantly, for the future, the people who became the New Deal policy makers were themselves products of these institutions, they had been youths on the playground of the progressive era, and they may have adopted the Progressives' arguments about organized sports and outdoor recreation.

This paper uses the papers of the New Deal's most powerful policy maker, Franklin D. Roosevelt to examine the possible connections between Progressive Era and New Deal policies regarding organized sports, outdoor recreation, and work-leisure relationships. What were Roosevelt's attitudes toward and views of sports, work and leisure? What kinds of activities did he condone, which ones did he condemn, and what accounted for his judgement? How did his attitudes and view take shape between his youth and adulthood, and how did his views affect the federal policies and programs enacted during his presidency? A second set of questions explored here involves the process of policy making. As president, Roosevelt had substantial power to develop and implement policy, the system of checks and balances among the government's branches notwithstanding. Still, he had to convince the Congress of the validity of his policies, and this paper examines how this occurred. What were the options considered by Roosevelt and his advisors for economic recovery and employment programs, and why did he (and they) come to decide on the ones they did, especially the CCC and WPA? Is there evidence that Roosevelt's views of organized sport bore on the administration's policy decisions about these agencies?

This paper, then, has two goals. One is to explore the relationship between the state and popular sports, especially given that the New Deal clearly represented a break from previous governments' hands-off policies towards citizens' private domains. The second objective is to add to our knowledge about the process of policy making.