

David B. Welky
Purdue University

***The Leading Sporting Journal in Existence:
Sports, the Working Class, and the
National Police Gazette***

The *National Police Gazette* was the most popular sporting journal of the late nineteenth century. The weekly paper, which has been derisively dubbed the “barber’s bible.” reached its readers through such outlets as volunteer tire houses, hotels, saloons, and yes, barbershops. At its peak, from 1880-1900, the *Police Gazette* sold about 150,000 copies across the United States. This, however, seriously underrepresents its actual readership. As dozens of people read each copy, it is likely that the paper reached an audience of millions.

Most of the paper’s readers were members of the native, white working class. These people played an active role in determining the character and content of the sheet.

The public submitted many of the *Police Gazette's* stories and illustrations. Subscribers also used it as a post office, trusting it to forward their letters to prominent athletes, and called upon it to answer questions concerning sports, games, and wagers. All of this suggests that the *Police Gazette* was in tune with its audience, and that the themes and concerns it raised were also present in its readers' minds. Because of this, the paper's sports coverage can provide insights into the private thoughts of America's working class.

This research identifies five major themes that ran through the *Police Gazette's* sports coverage. These themes add up to what Elliott Gorn has called a "hodgepodge of modernity and antimodernity." This mix reflects readers' struggles to adjust to modern, industrial life, while maintaining selected elements of the tradition rhythms of the pre-industrial world. An obsession with individualism and a need to transcend the anonymity and impersonality of modern life and what I call a "democracy of sport," for example, are each "anti-modern" themes found in the paper. Even so, being a product of modern times, and produced with modern technology, the *Police Gazette* inevitably stressed some "modern" themes as well, for example, the need for order in sport. The paper worked to rationalize boxing and to systematize sports by creating and promoting standardized rules and regulations for activities ranging from wrestling to club swinging. Like the Progressives of the early twentieth century, Richard K. Fox and the *National Police Gazette* tried to control and direct the sprawling changes of the late nineteenth century. An obsession with science and skill and an emphasis on patriotism and nationalism are also modern themes evident in the paper's reporting. It urged its working-class readers to remain loyal and patriotic to industrial America.

The *National Police Gazette* thus shows the working class standing on the brink of modernism, yet stubbornly clinging to their traditional values. While most studies of the American working class focus on work and other public activities, an examination of the *Police Gazette* allows us to explore a more private world that has been largely inaccessible to historians. It also provides an opportunity to investigate the relationship between sport and society.



"I know where I've seen you before-Ohio State, 1973!"