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Immigration, Ethnicity, and Assimilation in U.S. Sport: Historiography and Issues

This paper discusses three approaches to the subject of immigration, ethnicity, and assimilation in U.S. sport. First, it reviews the historiographical literature on these issues; second, it applies three models of assimilation-Anglo-conformity, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism-to the experience of immigrants and ethnic groups in American sports; and third, it discusses the significance of social class and gender as major factors in shaping the athletic experience of immigrants and ethnic groups in American society. This presentation concentrates on European immigrants and ethnic groups, with some brief references to Canadians, Latin Americans, and Asians; it does not discuss African-Americans or Native Americans.

Historians' views of immigration, ethnicity, and assimilation in U.S. sport are varied, but this paper applies the three models of Anglo-conformity, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism to the problem of assimilation of immigrants and ethnic groups into the American sporting experience. Under the category of Anglo-conformity I discuss the degree to which newcomers participated in the mainstream sports which were either early English imports into the British-American colonies (such as horse racing or aquatics), or were American creations (such as baseball, American football, or basketball). Under the heading of the melting pot I examine the evolution of those athletic forms which combined elements of ethnic games and types of physical education with "Anglo" or mainstream or WASP characteristics, and which became widely popular throughout most levels of American society. Here I consider the examples of gymnastics, track and field,

golf and tennis, but pay special attention to soccer, which has become a major mainstream sport for young children and high school and college students while remaining an ethnic sport for adults. I also discuss briefly the Americanization of the Asian martial arts. Under the model of cultural pluralism I treat those ethnic games which have failed to generate much support in mainstream American society but which persist as pastimes in ethnic communities. Examples are Gaelic football and hurling for the Irish, bocce for the Italians, cricket for West Indians and Asian-Indians, curling for the Scots, etc. I conclude this part with a consideration of the extent to which ethnic groups may be well integrated into the mainstream of American culture, even as they retain their allegiance to traditional ethnic games.

In the final section of the paper I briefly emphasize the importance of questions of social class and gender in analyzing immigration, ethnicity, and assimilation in U.S. sport. Middle- and upper-class immigrants from England, Scotland, Germany, and Canada contributed a great deal to the success of horse racing, aquatics, track and field, gymnastics, golf, tennis, hockey, and lacrosse in the United States. Working-class and less affluent immigrants tended to participate in professional boxing matches and pedestrian and track and field events, but were often barred from middle- and upper-class athletics because of the issue of amateurism. The paper concludes with a few words about how gender roles shaped the immigrant and ethnic sporting experience, especially for working-class males in such violent sports as boxing, hurling, and Gaelic football.