

Roberta J. Park
University of California, Berkeley

‘A Physician’s View of Exercise’: Science and the Genteel Tradition in Anglo-American Sport, 1870-1952

In 1887, Lippincott's Magazine published a lengthy article entitled “A Physician’s View of Exercise and Athletics.” The author, physician J. William White, was one of a three-member committee representing the faculty, trustees, and undergraduates of the University of Pennsylvania that had been formed to address various allegations that were then being directed at intercollegiate athletics. Noted Philadelphia physician S. Weir Mitchell, one of the few Americans then engaged in experimental work in physiology and a founding member of the American Physiological Society (established in 1887), was also a committee member. White’s article was striking for several reasons. In some two dozen pages, he skilfully and accurately sketched both the views of Classical authors and important new developments in the biomedical sciences regarding how and why the body should be exercised and the effects (real or presumed) of athletics upon the moral as well as physical aspects of a man.

As was the case with many of his contemporaries, White’s views were an amalgam of Victorian ideals that found particular-albeit not exclusive-expression in the vaunted genteel constructions of the “gentleman-amateur” and newly-emerging concepts derived from the expanding physiological and biological sciences. By the 1920s a “science of the body” in relation to athletics had emerged in several countries-led, especially, by developments in Germany. (The work of John Hobermann and various German scholars is instructive on the point.) Americans (in relatively small numbers, to be sure) increasingly began to approach athletes and their training from the standpoints of science.

These developments notwithstanding, aspects of the genteel tradition persisted. This was especially apparent in British, especially English, attitudes toward sport. Remarks that Sir Stanley Rous made in the *Forward to Fitness and Injury in Sport* (1950) illustrate this: “For a people to whom sport is a serious matter, the British, compared with many other nations, usually go about their games in a surprisingly un-serious way...who cares about...the chemical structure of a certain muscle.” Using sources ranging from the scientific literature, to the medical press, to newspapers and literary magazines, this paper explores these themes in a Transatlantic context.