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The Triumph of Amateur Athleticism at Johns Hopkins University, 1933-1937

This paper explores how and why the faculty at Johns Hopkins University effectively brought an end to commercialized intercollegiate athletic activity on their campus during the years of the Great Depression. Aside from the general conclusions offered by Howard Savage's Carnegie Report of 1929, an inquiring Hopkins faculty committee pointed to student apathy toward participatory athletics and possible inconsistency between the explicit intellectual mission of their university and the reality of campus athletics as fundamental problems.

During the 1920s Hopkins athletics had been administered first by an alumni club, then by a campus athletics council headed by a physical education professor. In response, the university created in 1933 a new Department of Physical Education and Athletics, which was perceived to be not unlike the institution's other, more academic departments. In fact, to reinforce the new commitment to amateur athleticism, the university's new coaching staff included faculty from several academic disciplines, graduate student and alumni volunteers. Later, in 1937, the university eliminated the collection of gate receipts.

While the decisions to de-professionalize the coaching staff and eliminate gate fees may appear to have evolved from the austere conditions of the Great Depression, such was not the case. Since the university was now forced to pay directly for the new athletics program, without any gate fees streaming into university coffers, this reform should not be seen as a cost-saving scheme. Indeed, the reform-minded Hopkins faculty was most concerned with what they regarded as the harmful spectres of student apathy, spectatorism and the possibility of a jock culture

However, since Hopkins lacked a big-time football program to attract spectator dollars, the decision was not a controversial one. After all, it was the quasi-aristocratic sport of lacrosse that dominated the image of Hopkins athletics. Although this nationally successful program did attract large crowds to home contests, there was very little concern for gate receipts. Based primarily on the Hopkins student newspaper and a history of athletics compiled by one of the university's psychology professors, this paper is part of a broader study of the history of lacrosse in North America during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.