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When Chicago Was Ready for Reform: The Demise of the Turf and the Prize Ring in 1905

At the end of the nineteenth century Chicago was one of the leading centers of sport and one of the most liberal American cities. It was one of the great centers of major league baseball, the home of softball, the site of outstanding athletic programs of the University of Chicago, a center of pugilism, and the major locus of western thoroughbred racing. The reputation of the latter two sports was at best checkered. Prize fighting was illegal in Chicago, but bouts were openly held at popular gymnasiums. Horseracing was extremely popular in Chicago, with over a half dozen tracks in the metropolitan region. The Washington Park Jockey Club was still one of the most prestigious turf clubs in America, and the American Derby was among the most important races in the sport. On the other hand, several tracks were proprietary enterprises owned by professional bookmakers. Moral reformers had sought since the early 1890s to halt the sport, primarily because of the gambling nexus. Furthermore, Chicago was second only to New York in illegal off-track gambling. Rival organized crime syndicates with their own political protection controlled hundreds of bookmakers and dozens of betting parlors that operated with little interference from the authorities. One police official estimated that \$400,000 a day was daily bet in Chicago. Its citizens, eighty percent of them of foreign origin, were largely free of the social control that WASP Americans imposed on eastern and southern urbanites. Local machine politicians, in consort with their constituents, and their underworld associates, supported the concept of social freedom.

Gambling sports in metropolitan Chicago were a target of progressive reformers at the turn of the century. In 1905, they succeeded in closing down thoroughbred racing and prize fighting. However, they were unsuccessful at completely halting off-track gambling. Horse racing never resumed in Chicago, and was not fully restored in the suburbs until 1927 when the state legislature legalized on-track gambling, the same year it legalized prize fighting in time for the Dempsey-Tunney rematch. The purpose of this paper is to explain how and why prize fighting and horse racing was halted in 1905 in Illinois, and why handbooks and poolrooms continued to operate in the absence of local racing.

My research indicates that there were several reasons for the ending of the gambling sports in 1905. A big factor was the long-term efforts of local moral reformers including church leaders, member of good government groups, and journalists, especially the Chicago Daily News, who had been active since the 1890s in trying to close up the sport. Their efforts were unwittingly abetted by the actions of the gamblers. Rival gambling syndicates had engage in a racetrack war during 1902-03 that included bombings of rival tracks and betting parlors. In early 1905, bombs were tossed at the Worth Racetrack located in a distant suburb. Track owners also contributed to the situation. The local tracks

had a history of not cooperating with each other, exacerbated by the competition between the region's two major racing associations, the Western Turf Association, and the American Turf Association. Track owners like John Condon of the Harlem Racetrack, Edward Corrigan of Hawthorne, and the elite leaders of the prestigious Washington Park Jockey Club fought with each other over racing dates and the supervision of the sport, and actively tried to harm their rival's business rather than work collectively for the welfare of the sport.

Another factor was the role of local governments. No new laws against gambling sports had been enacted, but local officials were under pressure to halt vile sports under the existing penal codes. In 1905 Mayor Carter H. Harrison, II, the son of the former mayor who had served five terms, finished his fourth term in office, and rode off into the sunset. He and his father had both been supported by the local democratic political machines, which were closely tied to syndicate crime. Carter II, like his patrician father, was a strong believer in personal freedom, and made little effort to clamp down on victimless crime and control personal morality. That is, until 1904 when he stopped open gambling at Washington Park, which led to the track closing up on its own violation. He also began to support the closing of prizefights in Chicago. Harrison then had ambitions on higher office, and tried to present himself as a reformer with hopes of capturing the democratic nomination for vice president. He even authored an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* in which he suggested nation-wide reform of the poolroom menace by acts of Congress. Harrison was replaced as mayor by Edward Dunne, a reform democrat with no ties to the machines or the crime syndicates who was seen as an enemy of the gambling sports. There was also a major effort, not fully successful, by the state's attorney and a special squad of the Chicago police to bring down the poolrooms with raids and wholesale indictments, which were thought, would wear down the underworld. Finally, the grand jury put a lot of pressure was placed on the Cook County sheriff to do his duty and halt boxing and horseracing.

Finally, the closing of the turf was also the product of national and local pressures against the sport. Throughout the United States, reformers had succeeded in curtailing the sport, dropping the number of active tracks from over 300 to fewer than thirty. Eventually tracks in every notable racing state except Maryland and Kentucky, along with the tracks in Canada were closed for at least a period. Similarly, boxing, which had been nearly universally prohibited in the nineteenth century, was again under severe attack in the early 1900s. Boxing in New York had been banned again in 1900, and by 1905 the sport was barely hanging on, primarily in San Francisco where it was protected by the local Democratic machine, and obscure western cities like Goldfield, Nevada.