

SPORT IN AUSTRALIA, BRITAIN, AND CANADA

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Whose hegemony? The Origins of the Amateur Ethos in Nineteenth-century English Society

The Amateur Ethos involved a series of superior motivations and behaviors that supposedly placed the amateur athlete on a higher social, and even moral, plane than his professional counterpart. The driving force behind the development of this ethos was the desire to reform traditional sporting practices, to regularize and respectabilize sport during the last third of the nineteenth century. Though often expressed as an objective set of values, the ethos was highly subjective and subjectivity rested on social class, gender, nationality and even regional identity. It is the problematic of relating the nineteenth century code of amateurism to the class relationships prevailing in English Society at that time which provides the primary, but not exclusive, focus of this paper.

Beginning with some critique of John Hargreaves Sport, Power and Culture, my attempt to locate the social origins of the amateur ethos rests in part on the analysis provided by Harold Perkin in his Origins of Modern British Society. Perkin argues that the middle-class ideal came to predominate in nineteenth century English Society but that, from mid-century, it came to be split between entrepreneurial and professional values. It is the latter, which involved a belief in some form of regulation as necessary to the maintenance of an orderly, stable society, which came to prevail during the late decades of the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth. Negotiation rather than confrontation could resolve differences to the mutual benefit of all.

The primary challenge to the amateur ethos came from the increasing appeal of professionalized and commercialized sport for a large segment of the English population. Nevertheless, while representatives of the patrician hegemony continued to dominate many sporting organizations into the second half of the twentieth century the amateur ethos held significant sway. Its accelerated decline from the mid-1970s was paralleled by the diminished

influence of the professional ideal consequent upon an intensified sense of economic decline.
