

***Making the American Team: Sport, Culture, and the Olympic Experience*** by Mark Dyreson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998). Reviewed by Gordon MacDonald, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada.

The back cover of *Making the American Team* contains laudatory statements from two well-known historians of sport. While concurring with noted scholarly authorities may be seen as being the least controversial course to take in a book review, in this case I believe it is the correct one. I concur with their opinions and will offer some of my own reasons for why I believe this volume to be an impressive piece of scholarship. Dyreson's work is well written, well researched, and convincing in its arguments. It should become a benchmark not only for future historians of American sports, but also for those interested in the political and social culture of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Dyreson contends that sport and republican ideology in the U.S. became intimately intertwined in the years between the American centennial in 1876 and the end of World War I. A number of American intellectuals and writers (he calls them a group), concerned about the Republic because they perceived it to be in decline, looked for ways to make it robust and vital. Dyreson suggests that the most significant way they did this was through sport. He argues that they believed literally that sport was a tool that could be used to revive and inculcate republican virtues in the American populace. Sport could be utilized to restore equity and a sense of fair play, reconstitute popular representative government, rejuvenate public virtue, and create a common set of values. In short, says Dyreson, "American thinkers conceived of sport as a social technology. They invented a sporting republic."(p.3).

After the end of the American Civil War, the onset of modernity was one of the major threats to "the commonweal on which the republican experiment depended."(p.5). As American society changed from being primarily rural and agrarian to primarily urban and industrial, some writers believed that the republic was being weakened because the vitality of its citizens was being sapped by the transition. An industrial, urban world was fragmenting the supposed community that had existed amongst Americans. Sport was seen to be one of several ways of re forging community amongst American citizens. Furthermore, it provided a common language to communicate ideas about the society (whether for control or resistance purposes depended upon who happened to be using it). Given this scenario, Dyreson argues, sport in its many forms was utilized in an attempt to strengthen the republic. However, he feels that the newly reconstituted Olympic Games were given a privileged role, stating that "[w]ithin the process of inventing a sporting republic, the Olympic Games provided the most important symbols for making sport the nation's common civic language." (p.5).

Dyreson has divided this volume into nine chapters. In the first chapter he builds his argument that sport was a social technology used by republicans to construct a sporting republic. Here he defines the idea of the republic and the intellectuals' perceptions thereof. Then he proceeds to define who the builders of the sporting republic were, and how they constructed links between sport and their political ideas about the republic. The medium for this group, who, as Dyreson states, tended generally to be

middle class and urban, was the mass publication magazine. Hence, Dyreson relies heavily on sources such as *The North American Review*, *The American Review of Reviews*, *Outing*, *The Outlook*, *The Atlantic monthly*, etc. for information about what, exactly, the sporting republicans were promoting and discussing.

Chapters two to four are devoted to the first three modern Olympic Games in Athens (1896), Paris (1900), and St. Louis (1904). Here Dyreson shows how the Games were constructed by American writers and presented to the American public. The inaugural games in Athens attracted the attention of a small proportion of the public, being limited to the northeast. Yet, even here, the American athletes' successes were hailed already as victories for the American system. Dyreson also shows how winning at the games became the main issue for Americans because this was seen as proof of the superiority of their republic.

The Paris Games attracted more attention in America, not all of it positive. Because of the wrangling among the French over the staging of the Games, American advocates of the sporting life were quick to criticise the organizers, blaming them for national short-comings that were not present in the United States. The Americans were also irritated with the French for their failure to change some of the competition times which were scheduled for Sundays. This led to conflict on the American team as members debated whether to take part anyway. In the end, as Dyreson notes, some participated and some did not. Those that did were chastised by the American press, but their victories were lauded anyway.

The 1904 St. Louis Games were mostly an American affair run by and for Americans. The International Olympic Committee was barely involved. These Games did attract the attention of much of the American populace and were trumpeted as displaying the superiority of its athletes. Only a few non-Americans appeared to compete, but the organizers stated that even if they had, they would have been defeated by the American athletes. Dyreson provides evidence of the growing 'scientific' interest in athletics during these games. The sporting republicans would soon proclaim that scientific training was yet another way that the American system was superior to other nations.

In the fifth chapter, Dyreson breaks his chronology of the Games to insert some thoughts on the limits of the universal claims forwarded by the 'sporting republicans'. Here he looks at how factors such as class, gender, race, and ethnicity shaped the sporting republic. While the proponents of the sporting republic continuously claimed that sport was a field of endeavour open to all, Dyreson shows how certain groups were excluded. Thus, women, minority groups, and the lower classes all had less opportunity to participate in sport and the Olympics than did white, middle class males of primarily Anglo-Saxon extraction. Yet, by 1904, Dyreson suggests, the promoters of the sporting republic had to begin to come to grips with the fact that some members of the groups previously excluded had appeared in the Olympic Games, and won. Henceforth, their victories had to be explained in terms of the success of the American political and social system.

Chapter six deals with the interim Olympic Games in Athens in 1906 as well as those in London in 1908. For the first time, Americans sent a truly national team to the Athens Games in 1906. As Dyreson shows, their successes were given much media coverage and were attributed to the 'scientific' training systems used in the United States. Once again, the superiority and robustness of the American republic

was trumpeted by the press. Two years later in London, the American press portrayed the athletes of the United States as being representative of the variety of ethnicities living in the republic. Only in the proverbial great 'melting pot' that was the United States could such a team be formed. Again, Americans were successful in the Games, particularly in track and field, though this time they staged a running battle with the British over the issue of which nation was superior (as shown through athletic performances). Dyreson argues convincingly that the numerous disputes between the British and Americans over rules pointed to a more deeply situated struggle between the two countries over which political and social system was better.

The Games of Stockholm in 1912 are the topic of chapter seven. According to Dyreson, the theme of an American team constructed without regard to race, class, or ethnicity was repeated by the press to an even greater extent than it had been in 1908. Once they had arrived at the Games, U.S. athletes dominated the track and field competitions, enabling the press to claim, as usual, the superiority of the American system. Dyreson notes as well that some of the American commentators believed that other countries were beginning to emulate their (U.S.) methods and to place high national importance upon winning. In contrast, commentators from other countries occasionally took the Americans to task for their excessive preparations and training. The British press, in particular, accused the Americans of being overspecialized and "automatons."

Dyreson gives the reader more context in the eighth chapter as he examines the ideas of the sporting republic in further detail as they evolved over time. Within this chapter he shows how the idea of sports had permeated American consciousness, reaching the level of the office of the President. He discusses three U.S. Presidents of the era (Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson), and reveals how they were portrayed as exemplars of all that was best about the sporting life. Furthermore, these Presidents all linked ideas surrounding sport to their political agendas. Beyond the U.S. President, reformers of various types utilized sports in their campaigns for maintaining social order or promoting ideas of progressivism, both of which were aimed at strengthening the republic. Dyreson notes that the popularity of sport in this period also gave rise to one of the reasons why it would eventually be abandoned as a way of strengthening the republic: the beginnings of the commodification of sport. Nonetheless, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, sport was a tool used by Americans to discuss and promote their republic. The Olympic Games were the key event around which this discussion occurred.

Dyreson concludes the book by discussing the decline of the idea of the sporting republic in a chapter that amounts to an epilogue. World War I had a huge impact on perceptions of sport. During the conflict, sporting metaphors were applied to the combatants to explain their strengths or weaknesses, their moral fortitude, or their lack thereof. After the war, although it was still believed to be a great rejuvenator for individuals, Dyreson argues that sport lost much of its 'political vigor.' He believes that three reasons accounted for this shift: intellectuals abandoned it as an agent for social change; business interests commodified sport; and it was no longer seen as an innovation with great possibilities.

This volume leaves the reviewer little with which to quibble. Only in a few places are there questions to be asked of sources. These occur mostly in places where Dyreson has relied upon American accounts for information about statements made

by Coubertin or the IOC. For example, in Chapter Two, Dyreson states that the Greeks wanted to stage regular games in Athens, but neglects to mention that the Greeks wanted to make Athens the permanent home of the Olympics after the 1896 Games as well. To his credit, he corrects this oversight in chapter six when he discusses the 1906 Games. In Chapter Three, Dyreson refers to an IOC meeting in Paris during the 1900 Games at which the members decided to award the 1904 Games to America. However, the IOC has no record that this meeting ever took place. Rather, the reference to the Games being awarded to the United States likely originated from Coubertin alone. Finally, in chapter six, Dyreson's numbers of participating athletes at the 1906 Games do not quite square with those of other researchers. However, all of these faults are minor failings that do not detract from the main theme of the volume.

All of Dyreson's chapters are meticulously researched and documented, lending great force to his arguments. He has also written an eight page bibliographic essay that will be helpful to scholars interested in delving further into this area. The book also contains a comprehensive index.

As one of the most recent additions to the University of Illinois Press's series on Sport and Society, Dyreson's book deserves recognition for the way in which the author shows how intimately connected sport and culture broadly conceived have been connected in the American experience. It deserves to be read by a much wider audience of scholars than sport historians alone. It also prompts this reviewer to wonder about parallels in other countries. Was this use of sport, and the Olympic Games in particular, as a social technology unique to the American experience? Did groups in other nations use sport and the Olympics during this period to (re)define, (re)vitalize their particular political and social systems? Dyreson has provided a benchmark volume for scholars interested in these types of questions.