

Sports in Early America

SOURCE: AMERICAN SPORTS

BENJAMIN RADER

Early tensions

- Earliest settlers faced tensions in regards to sports, which violated the conscience of men like Gov. William Bradford. While many other settlers clung to sporting ways of England.

Sports & early settlers

- Earliest settlers dispersed to faring lands, far from others, so they could not meet and play games as easily as they had in England.
- Games grew in Colonial America only when several factors came into play – increased wealth, increased populations, and growth of towns.
- There were also regional differences in approach to sports during colonial times.

Britain's Festive culture

- Grew out of pagan customs, religious practices and daily circumstances.
- Holidays – May Day, Christmas, Easter, Plough Monday, Shrove Tuesday.
- Other celebrations – annual parish feast, country fairs, Sundays.
- Folk games at these events – stool ball, foot races, quoits (like horse shoes), skittles & ninepins (bowling). Allow single men to show off – and, perhaps – attract a woman.

Britain's Festive culture

- Brits loved violent games, like wrestling, cudgeling, cockfighting, throwing rocks at cocks, and baiting bulls. (p.3)
- These violent competitions “affirmed a masculine *ethos* of **individual prowess** and **physical courage**”
- Football was very popular. Not at all like modern version. Ostensible purpose – to move a ball (inflated animal bladder) across a defined goal line. Actual purpose – to allow players to pound one another.
- Rules varied to emphasize kicking, running or throwing.

Britain's Festive culture

Festivities served three purposes

1. relieved some grimness of daily living (disease, famine).
2. offered mating rituals
3. Allowed for safe expression of resentment about social structures. Better to pound someone in a game than to take up arms and attack the gentry or fellow villagers.
4. Helped promote village unity

Britain's Festive culture

- Sports in Britain mirrored social hierarchy
- Gentlemen proved their standing by eating, drinking and playing. Viscount Conway: “for what is a gentleman but his pleasure.”
- Freedom & wealth to be able to play was **visible** proof of person's superior social standing.
- One's ability to play was more important in one's skills in these contests.
- Other sports emerged in taverns for lower classes -- boxing, cockfights, bear baiting and other blood sports.

Puritan assault

- Puritans broke with Church of England by wiping out all holy days, rituals, pageantry, and symbols of Catholic Church
- Angered by Declaration of Sports in 1618 that encouraged athletic contests
- Puritans tried to exterminate sports in Colonial America
- If sport became all-absorbing activity (end to itself) then should stop playing. *Can you imagine how they would view professional sports leagues today?*
- Felt time was sacred and should not be wasted on sports

Puritan assault

- Puritans condemned blood sports and gambling
- Puritans discouraged horse racing (one reason it may have been more popular in the South)
- Endorsed hunting, fishing if pursued for food, refresh body or rid colony of vermins. These sports had a practical purpose, unlike bowling or bear baiting.
- Kids could play certain sports

Other regions

- New York, with Dutch, was more cosmopolitan with Dutch. They bowled, raced boats, golfed and raced horses.
- Pennsylvania (Quakers) banned boxing, cock-fighting and other such sports. But they encouraged 'useful' and 'needful' recreation like swimming, skating and hunting/fishing. "The best recreation is to do good," wrote William Penn.
- But immigrants put pressure on Quakers here, as they did in New England, which forced changes.

Southern Colonies

- Sports are strikingly different down south. Reason: did not face restrictive religious groups so horse racing and blood sports allowed.
- More gentrified like England. Created class system of sports. Horse racing most popular. Perceived “certain sports as a privilege exclusive to their rank” (p. 10)
- Loved to gamble at cards, dice, backgammon – at anything. But especially at horse racing.
- Developed round tracks where *spectators* could see entire race not just part on a straightaway. Sport evolved from impromptu challenge between two horse owners. Developed bloodlines and kept race records.

Why sports meant more down south

1. Displayed higher rank. Helped achieve higher social position by nurturing different games like more genteel boxing or with calculated duels. (cool restraint). Reinforced gentry values and served as behavioral guides for sporting elites.
2. Promotion of sporting events convinced subordinate groups that gentry life was superior, allowing gentry to also control politics and economics. Sports used to control society.
3. Ritual of manhood. Exhibitions of courage, recklessness and defiance attested to man's worthiness. (Not much different than some earlier cultures.)

South – lower social classes

- Gentry arranged competitions for the lower classes, thus reinforcing their higher status as *patrons*.
- Lower classes participated in other sports – wrestling, cudgeling and running.
- Blood sports – Ganderpulling (jerking hood off greased goose), cock fighting,

Backcountry

- In Appalachia, sports were a *product of* both the rugged frontier environment and of violent traditions of north Britain where most settlers came from.
- *Warrior ethic* – nurtured ferocious fighting skills.
- ‘Rough-and-tumble’ fighting that included gouging out eyes. No rules.
- Other sports – throwing axes, sledges, long bullets and spears as well as running.

Revolutionary period

- *Republicanism* tended to inhibit sports. Founding fathers believed idle amusements, like those they saw in Europe, were decadent. They believed Americans should be more virtuous and should abstain from luxuries (like sports) and carousing, and should practice frugality.
- First Continental Congress discouraged sports.
- But George Washington encouraged games such as bowling, cricket, shinny (field hockey), fives (handball) and form of football. These games allowed soldiers exercise and relief from fighting and living conditions.

Conclusions

- American sports were product of interaction between customs from Europe and circumstances faced in the new world.
- Did not just copy England's games b/c early settlers were more dispersed, needed to work hard to survive, and religious groups tried to eliminate them.
- Regional patterns emerged in South, backcountries, New England, Pennsylvania and New York. Some sports still have a more regional appeal, such as lacrosse (mid-Atlantic.)