

The Emergence of Organized Sports, 1607–1860

There is substantial evidence to indicate that games and contests were an integral part of everyday life in colonial America, but it was not until the nineteenth century that the playing of games began to reflect the structure and organization that we associate with modern American sports. Colonists participated in a myriad of activities that are best described as folk games, meaning that they were characterized by their spontaneity and absence of standardized rules and bureaucratic organization. Many varied games were played in the English colonies, but the most popular spectator event in colonial America was horse racing, much of which occurred in the Tidewater region of Maryland and Virginia. Colonial games and recreations were characterized by their casual nature, more or less governed by informal rules of local origin and subject to constant revision and argument. Team games were unheard of, and participation in any activity that included physical competition was limited to a small percentage of the colonial population.

Although the many games and contests that absorbed the attention of colonial America incorporated many New World variations – including adaptation of Native American games – their roots could be found in rural England. Immigrants to the New World naturally brought with them the customs, values, and vices of the Old World. The Puritan leaders who came to Massachusetts Bay Colony were determined to build a new order – a shining “city on a hill,” as John Winthrop eloquently expressed it in 1630 – that placed emphasis on the creation of a theocratic state in which pious men and women responded to God’s calling to a life of discipline and productivity as farmers, seamen, and craftsmen. Similarly, the Anglicans who gravitated to the Chesapeake Bay region were equally determined to replicate the social norms of the landed gentry of rural England, replete with the pleasures of lavish balls and banquets, riding to hounds, the playing of billiards and card games, and hell-bent-for-leather horse races, all of which were accompanied by gambling.

The era of folk games began to give way to a new era of organized sports in the decades following the American Revolution, but it was not until the 1850s that

a new era of organized team games, complete with written rules, structured play, and measurable outcomes, became commonplace. These changes reflected the vast technological and economic changes that trended toward urbanization, manufacturing, and heavily capitalized commercial development. By 1860, a vast network of canals and 30,000 miles of railroads had connected a burgeoning urban network that stretched from Boston and New York to as far west as Chicago and St. Louis. Telegraph lines made it possible to send and receive messages with incredible speed, and coal-powered ships carried raw materials and finished products up and down America's rivers and across the Great Lakes.

The Census of 1860 revealed just how far the young nation had come since the presidency of George Washington. In 1790, over 95 percent of the people derived their livelihood from agriculture, and New York City and Philadelphia were the two largest cities with populations of 33,000 and 28,500 respectively. By 1860, 20 percent of the American people lived in urban places and New York City had a population in excess of 1 million. In 1830, fully 80 percent of the American people were classified as farmers, a figure that fell to just 53 percent 30 years later. The urban and industrial transformation of America, however, was barely visible in the South, a region hamstrung by the "peculiar institution" of slavery that slowed social and economic innovation and discouraged the development of manufacturing and the building of vibrant urban centers. The United States entered a new modern era characterized by standardization, organization, hierarchical decision-making, mass production, efficiency, and electronic communications.

Games in Colonial New England

The harsh environment of colonial America was not conducive to playing games. Mere survival was an everyday fact of life. Puritan skepticism about the worth of nonproductive games was inevitably intensified by the unrelenting frontier environment in which colonists found themselves. What they referred to as the "howling wilderness" proved to be a powerful influence upon their thoughts and actions; in such an environment, the development of a substantial leisure ethic was necessarily circumscribed. If a game encouraged participants to shirk their essential obligations for work and worship, then it was deemed inappropriate. Focus on the serious nature of life was especially pronounced in New England where powerful public pressure gave primacy to the importance of an individual's dedication to a life of productive labor and worship. The Puritans did not abolish games and recreational activities, but they made clear distinctions between games and other diversions that tended to restore clarity of mind and refresh the body so that one could return to the field or shop reinvigorated. Actually, much of the Puritans' concerns about games and play grew out of memories of England, where unseemly social behavior routinely occurred in conjunction with activities that were closely associated with excessive drinking, and gambling. As historian Bruce Daniels concludes, "colonies did not pass laws against ball and blood sports; public contempt sufficed to bar them." As he observes, the

pervasive lack of attention to ball games by New Englanders in their sermons, diaries, correspondence, and newspapers throughout the entire colonial period “speaks volumes” about their absence from the daily lives of colonists of New England.¹

To their credit, the Puritans adamantly sought to suppress “butcherly sports” such as the brutalizing of animals that regularly occurred in England. Puritans struggled to control and even abolish animal baiting, cockfighting, and violent human competitions such as pugilism and a primitive game of “foot ball” that revolved around the advancement of an inflated pig’s bladder across a goal by the means of kicking or running. These contests sometimes involved hundreds of participants and serious injuries were not uncommon. New England leaders, however, permitted practical activities that promoted fitness and health, such as hunting and fishing. New England’s massive forests contained a bounteous array of game that provided food for the family table. However, the successful hunting of big game – bear, deer, and moose – proved a difficult task due to the lack of accurate firearms, so New Englanders tended to focus their attention on the many ponds, lakes, and streams that teemed with fish. Fishing enjoyed widespread popularity as an approved recreational activity; it was, in fact, one of a small number of recreations that Harvard College officially sanctioned for students. Given the considerable attention devoted to fishing in the writings of colonial New Englanders, it is safe to conclude that most males at one time or another cast a line into the streams and lakes of the region. And of course many adults made their living as fishermen in the waters of the North Atlantic. Fishing was, as Daniels concludes, the “ideal pastime for men and boys” because of its utility and lack of association with untoward social behaviors.²

The relatively diverse and cosmopolitan population of the New York City region dictated a less constrictive view of games and recreation. Originally settled by the Dutch, the city of New York provided an environment in which residents found time to relax and play games suggestive of modern-day croquet, cricket, tennis, lawn bowling, and badminton. To the anguish of many, animal baiting and cockfights were also instituted – often at fairs and other community-wide social events – and they enjoyed widespread popularity among the lower classes in part because these sports were conducive to wagering.

The dominant Quaker population of Philadelphia and its environs resulted in the banning of most forms of leisure activity, including dancing, card playing, animal baiting, and maypole celebrations. Young people were encouraged to learn to hunt and fish as part of the struggle for subsistence in the rugged colonial environment, and such activities as running and swimming were seen as helpful to the physical development of young girls and boys. Like the Puritans, the Quakers of Pennsylvania viewed the playing of games within the larger context of whether the activity promoted general community welfare, economic growth, military skills, physical fitness, and spiritual growth.

Thus recreational activities in the colonies north of the Chesapeake Bay region generally had to be rationalized within the context of the larger issues of protecting the Sabbath, preventing cruelty to animals, responding to one’s secular calling, providing food for the table, and maintaining health and fitness. Gambling in the

regions controlled by the Puritans and Quakers was generally minimal and not a matter for serious concern. In fact, churches, schools, colleges, and other public agencies themselves encouraged a widely accepted form of gambling to finance major projects. Public lotteries were frequently offered by authorities to raise monies to build new churches, school buildings, or other public facilities, a practice that local governments would abandon early in the nineteenth century after a wave of scandals discredited the integrity of lotteries. In the latter half of the twentieth century, political leaders in 37 states resurrected the lottery as a means of raising revenue for such purposes as funding public education and to avoid the political risk of increasing taxes.

In both New England and the Middle Colonies, colonists interacted regularly with Native Americans. This interaction, however, does not seem to have greatly influenced the development of games and recreations engaged in by the colonists, although some of the games played by Indians were similar to those enjoyed by the colonists, and included ample symbolism related to fertility, healing, and warfare. Often the games played by Native Americans included preparation through elaborate rituals, dances, and sacred chants intended to ward off evil spirits and to help ensure victory in the upcoming contest. The most common of the games played by the natives was a game involving the use of a small ball and sticks equipped with small leather nets. The Cherokee called their version of the game “the little brother of war” because it involved hundreds of players engaged in advancing the ball over several miles of rugged terrain. Some games could last for days. Because of the vast numbers of players it was difficult for many of them even to get close to the ball, so they contented themselves with attempts to injure their opponents with their sticks. In what is now upper New York and Ontario, early French explorers witnessed a similar game being played by the Iroquois, although typical sides numbered about 20 with two goals set up about 120 feet apart. The French thought that the sticks resembled a bishop’s crozier, spelled *la crosse* in French, so the name of the game that remains yet today an important sport in the eastern United States carries the name given to it by the French.

Recreations in Southern Colonies

In 1686, an aristocratic Frenchman visited Virginia and recorded his observations of everyday life in his diary. Durand de Dauphine noted that in Jamestown many members of the House of Burgesses began to play high-stakes card games immediately after dinner. About midnight, one of the players noticed the visitor from France intently watching the action and suggested that he might want to retire for the evening, “For it is quite possible that we shall be here all night.”³ Sure enough, the next morning, Durand found the same card game still in session. As historian T. H. Breen has explained, what Durand observed was certainly not an aberration but rather a normal aspect of life among the Virginia elite. In sharp contrast to social norms in the North, the planter class that controlled life in colonial Virginia and Maryland was

strongly committed to high-stakes gambling as a form of entertainment; gentlemen regularly bet on cards, backgammon, dice, and horses.⁴

The tobacco planters in Maryland and Virginia found special meaning in their gambling obsession, which seemed to fit well into the culture in which they lived and worked. Gambling enabled them to translate into their lives the values by which they operated their plantations, where risk-taking, competitiveness, individuality, and materialism were paramount. During the seventeenth century, the first generations of planters utilized white indentured servants to help solve their need for unskilled labor in the tobacco fields, but that system proved unreliable. In order to assure an adequate and continual supply of field hands, they readily adopted the alternative of human slavery. The widespread use of black slaves – the first group of 19 being brought to Virginia in 1619 – shaped the social order of the South forever, creating a complex social mosaic that commingled the emotionally charged issues of class and race.⁵

As a result of the increasing number of slaves imported from the Caribbean and Africa, white males assumed a social status that was determined by whether or not they owned slaves, and if so, the number. Whites who did not own slaves and had to work in the fields themselves were considered commoners with whom true southern gentlemen – slave owners all – did not associate on a social basis. A gentleman of a high social level supervised the operation of his plantation and his slave labor force, but physical labor was considered beneath his social status. This new Virginia upper class naturally gravitated toward a life that demanded expression of their social ranking – in their proclivity for large and richly appointed houses, their stylish clothes, their lavish entertainment style, and their expensive material possessions. Because both men and women of the elite were considered to be above the performance of manual labor, they were inevitably forced into a situation where they were expected to work very hard at serious leisure activities. For women this meant a constant social whirl of teas, receptions, and visits, while their men's lives were punctuated by high-stakes gambling, a widely accepted avocation that in and of itself connoted wealth and stature within Virginia society.⁶

These men were fiercely driven. Caught up in the immense uncertainties of the tobacco trade characterized by widely fluctuating markets, the planters often found themselves helpless pawns in an intensely competitive and turbulent economic environment. Simply put, in the tobacco-growing regions of Maryland and northern Virginia, one could only improve their social standing by increasing one's wealth. Truth be known, the planters' high status was often at risk, and their lives and finances were often imperiled by forces beyond their control. Too much or too little rain wreaked havoc with harvests; ships carrying their precious crops to European markets sometimes disappeared in the storms of the Atlantic Ocean; a succession of good harvests could drive down the market price, and poor harvests carried serious economic consequences. White indentured servants and black slaves remained an uncertain, unreliable, and often troublesome source of labor. Prone to work slow-downs, their numbers were often decimated by devastating epidemics and short life expectancies. A prominent Virginia planter, William Fitzhugh, warned an English correspondent whose son was contemplating migrating to Virginia to take up the life

of a tobacco planter, that “even if the best husbandry and the greatest forecast and skill were used, yet ill luck at sea, a fall of a Market, or twenty other accidents may ruin and overthrow the best industry.”⁷

In such a precarious environment, gambling became a natural expression for men caught up in the system. For some of the more desperate, perhaps, it held out the hope of improving their financial status, but for most it was an essential form of social interaction that was consistent with the lifestyle they pursued. Their willingness to risk large sums on horse races, cockfights, or table games provided tangible evidence that they had sufficient affluence to withstand heavy gambling losses, as befitting people of high social status. While table games provided popular indoor recreation – and many a fortune often hung on the turn of a card or the toss of the dice – it was horse racing that held the greatest fascination for the southern gentry. In this rural environment, horses were held in high esteem because they provided the essential means of transportation. Ownership of an elegant, high-spirited horse was not unlike ownership of an expensive, sporty automobile in twentieth-century America – it set a gentleman apart from the middling and lower classes. As a tangible extension of the planter’s ego, a powerful and handsome horse was a source of pride and a symbol of lofty status. Virginians bred muscular horses with strong hindquarters that enabled them to run at high speeds for a relatively short distance. Popularly called the quarter horse, they were trained to run all out in races measured to a quarter-mile in length.⁸

While some races, such as those held in conjunction with fairs or the convening of the local courts, were scheduled weeks or months in advance, many were impromptu affairs that resulted from the offering and acceptance of a challenge between gentlemen. Stakes in these races were often high: sometimes an entire year’s tobacco crop might ride on a single mad dash by two horses down a dirt road. Spectators eagerly flocked to these exciting events and made their own bets. While many commoners as well as slaves might attend, they were normally excluded from entering their horses. For one thing, the high stakes involved usually precluded their participation. But more importantly, horse racing was a sport largely reserved for the gentry, and it simply was not acceptable for a gentleman to lower himself to compete with a commoner, let alone be the loser in such a competition.

In these races, the owner sometimes rode his own horse, thereby intensifying the competitive factors at play; others might have one of their slaves trained as a jockey. Devious tactics – attempts to bump a rival horse off his stride, for example – were commonplace, or at least frequently alleged. The races were brief, exciting events, with the two horses often crossing the finish line neck-to-neck, thereby producing many a dispute as to the winner. Because of such disagreements and allegations of unsportsmanlike riding, the outcome of a race could be the beginning of a rapidly escalating dispute. The accepted method of resolution, however, dictated that it be settled without recourse to dueling pistols. Rather, the courts of Virginia developed a substantial body of case law regulating the payment of horse race wagers. Custom required that large wagers be made in writing, and colonial courts considered these documents legally binding. Often these agreements included promises by both

parties to affirm that they would not attempt to bump the rival horse, unseat his mount, trip or cut off a rival's horse, or otherwise employ dangerous or devious tactics. As T. H. Breen observes, these high-stakes races provided an apt metaphor for the highly speculative business in which the tobacco planters found themselves.⁹

By the eighteenth century, the Virginia racing culture had matured sufficiently that a few oval racetracks began to appear. Some of the more affluent sportsmen now imported thoroughbred horses. These elegant horses, capable of running long distances, slowly but surely replaced the quarter horse in popularity. These expensive horses were handled by skilled trainers, ridden by professional jockeys (not uncommonly slaves) wearing the bright-colored apparel signifying the owner, and raced at week-long events scheduled for special occasions at the colonial capital of Williamsburg. Historian Elliott Gorn aptly summarizes the value system of the southern gentry who "set the tone" for this "fiercely competitive style of living." In a constantly fluid social and economic system, he writes,

Individual status was never permanently fixed, so men frantically sought to assert their prowess – by grand boasts over tavern gaming tables laden with money, by whipping and tripping each other's horses in violent quarter-races, by wagering one-half year's earnings on the flash of a fighting cock's gaff. Great planters and small shared an ethos that extolled courage bordering on foolhardiness and cherished magnificent, if irrational, displays of largess.¹⁰

While the Tidewater gentry went about their gentlemanly pastimes, the lesser members of southern society participated in a leisure culture that revolved around tavern life. Taverns were located in towns and along country roads where they offered shelter for travelers, plain food, and plenty of drink. Here locals mingled with travelers for conversation and played a wide range of card games, pitched quoits, and displayed their talents at lawn bowling. The games were inevitably made more spirited by wagering. As in England, blood sports were quite popular, and enterprising innkeepers promoted these events as a means of attracting business; most popular were cockfights and animal baiting, as well as an occasional bare-knuckle prizefight. The most popular sport by far was the cockfight, and these events often attracted an audience that saw men of all social stations lining the pit elbow-to-elbow while cheering, drinking, and betting. Occasionally reformers, more often in northern colonies, sought to regulate these businesses by fining innkeepers who permitted gambling, revoking licenses of repeat offenders, and making it difficult for individuals to recover gambling losses in local courts. In 1760, for example, the Massachusetts General Court passed a resolution that stipulated, "Games and Exercises although lawful, should not be otherwise used than as innocent and moderate Recreations," and proceeded to outlaw gambling that occurred in taverns. Whatever the law, gambling remained an integral part of the life of American people of all social stations; the single variable seemed to be that the larger one's income, the greater the wager.¹¹

Along the colonial Virginia frontier and extending into the trans-Appalachian area of Kentucky and Tennessee, the realities of daily life were reflected in the preference

of recreations. Shooting contests that determined local marksman champions were popular, reflecting the importance of hunting in securing meat for the dinner table. Fairs and other social gatherings often featured running and jumping contests. Of course, cockfighting and dog-baiting contests were favorites, as was quarter horse racing. The southern back country, however, was known for its emphasis on a particularly violent form of human combat that was part wrestling, part fisticuffs, with a couple of particularly gruesome elements thrown in for good measure – eye gouging and attempts at severing delicate body parts. These gruesome fights, called “rough-and-tumble,” were occasionally held at community celebrations, but they also occurred as a means of concluding an argument or obtaining satisfaction for a perceived personal insult. Spectators placed wagers on the combatants, and the contest was conducted with a pronounced absence of rules – any tactic to gain an advantage was acceptable, including hitting, biting, kicking downed opponents, kneeling in the groin, and scratching with sharply filed fingernails. In the rugged male-dominated environment of the frontier, personal “respect” was of great importance. For young men, historian Elliott Gorn concludes, “rough-and-tumble fighting demonstrated unflinching willingness to inflict pain, while risking mutilation – all to defend one’s standing among peers.”¹²

In the years after the American Revolution, this no-holds-barred form of fighting emphasized the gouging of an opponent’s eye as the ultimate objective. Among those most likely to participate were uncultured young males who lived on the fringes of civilization along the trans-Appalachian frontier – hunters, trappers, stevedores, drifters, unskilled laborers, hardscrabble farmers. Rough-and-tumble grew in popularity during the late eighteenth century in the sparsely settled regions of western Virginia and the Carolinas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The emphasis of these fights was, Gorn writes, “on maximum disfigurement, on severing body parts.” The primary objective was to extract an opponent’s eyeball by the use of sharply filed and heavily waxed fingernails. Teeth were sometimes filed to severe points as another means of attack, although some local champions specialized in other brutal tactics. One traveler noted, “these wretches in their combat endeavor to their utmost to tear out the other’s testicles.”¹³ Travelers through the region after the Civil War reported their shock at seeing a large number of aging men with missing eyes, or rough facial scars from fights held in the distant past. Rough-and-tumble – a phenomenon in a frontier region where life was frequently harsh and brief – was a widespread practice that slowly died out as a more genteel civilization slowly encroached upon the backwoods towns of the mountain country of the Southeast.

The Revolutionary Era and Beyond

The patterns of informal sporting events and leisure activities that existed in colonial America continued essentially unchanged well into the nineteenth century. These traditions, however, began to give way to a much more organized and formalized structure of sport. The emotional fervor associated with the Revolution tended to

dampen interest in recreation because it was widely believed that the future of the new country depended upon a hard-working, serious-minded people who were not easily distracted by idle amusements. In fact, on the eve of the American Revolution the Continental Congress took official notice of this sentiment, urging the various colonies by resolution to “encourage frugality, economy, and discourage every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse-racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock fighting, exhibition of shows, plays, and other expensive diversions and amusements.”¹⁴

Following the War of 1812, the American economy entered a period of rapid expansion, fueled in part by the transportation revolution that saw the introduction of steam-powered shipping on internal waterways and the construction of a network of canals and toll roads. The introduction of railroads during the 1830s set off a period of frenetic construction of new lines, producing what historians named the “transportation revolution.” In the decades before the Civil War, the United States was transformed by innovations in mining and manufacturing, mass merchandising, heavy immigration, sustained urban growth, expansion of international trade, and the establishment of companies that served regional and even national markets. It was within this context that sports – which for more than two centuries had been a localized and unorganized phenomenon – took on the structured appearance that would be recognizable to the American sports fan of today.

Indications of significant changes in patterns of leisure activities were visible by the 1830s, especially in northern cities. Individuals interested in playing competitive games often insisted upon the use of agreed-upon standards and rules of play. These rules were frequently the product of committees working within the structure of clubs and other organizations designed to bring order and conformity to the rules governing a particular sport. It was inevitable that the first major reforms leading toward standardization of rules and policies would apply to the most popular of sports – horse racing. Throughout the South and into the frontier West, informal racing remained popular, but in and around New York City, men interested in the turf introduced reforms that pushed the sport toward a modern identity. In 1821, the New York legislature voted to legalize horse racing, prompting the creation of formal organizations designed to bring consistency within the sport. Rules governing races were adopted and enforced, and construction of oval tracks with wooden grandstands soon followed that permitted patrons to watch the races from elevated seats.

Improved flow of information provided a significant precursor of changes to come. In 1831, the popular *Spirit of the Times* was first published by sportsman William T. Porter. Although he reported on many activities, Porter focused attention upon horse racing. He established and published odds, encouraged equitable betting policies, advocated the adoption of standardized rules regarding the conduct of races, promoted prominent racing meets, and, most important for gamblers, reported in detail the records of individual horses. The growing popularity of the turf was revealed in the rapid increase in annual racing meets, which normally lasted three days: 56 such events were reported in 1830 but that number more than tripled in the next two decades.¹⁵

Concurrently there emerged a movement to encourage standardization of the sport through the creation of jockey clubs. The premier antebellum organization was the New York Jockey Club. Its hefty \$10 annual membership fee meant that only men of substantial social consequence applied for membership. For its spring and autumn meetings at Union Course on Long Island, the club established rules that would assure fair competition and prevent the sport from being manipulated by “sharps.”¹⁶ The club’s announcement of its fall 1842 meeting, for example, included a detailed list of 64 rules, including the appointment of four stewards who were required to wear an “appropriate badge of distinction” and were responsible “to preserve order, clear the track, keep it clear, keep off the crowd of persons from the horses coming to the stand.” Three judges were charged with overseeing the start and finish of each race. Even the uniform worn by jockeys was covered: Rule 35 stipulated “No rider shall be permitted to ride unless well dressed in Jockey style. To wit, Jockey cap, colored jacket, pantaloons, and boots.”¹⁷

Porter championed order and efficiency, writing at one point that it was the responsibility of “gentlemen of standing, wealth, and intelligence” to provide leadership of this sport so that it would not be overtaken by “lower-class ruffians and ne’er-do-wells.”¹⁸ One person who heeded Porter’s clarion call to “the very Corinthian columns of the community” was the scion of a wealthy Hoboken family, John Cox Stevens. In 1823, he and his brother Robert Livingston Stevens helped produce one of the first great sporting spectacles in American history: a match race between a powerful nine-year-old thoroughbred, Eclipse, that had for several years dominated the New York City racing circuit, and the leading southern thoroughbred, Sir Henry, a premier horse out of the stable of James J. Harrison of Petersburg, Virginia. Each horse was backed by the substantial sum of \$20,000. The nation’s attention became riveted upon the race, with the growing political conflict over slavery providing an ominous backdrop. The two horses ran three four-mile heats before a cheering crowd estimated to be in excess of 50,000 at the Long Island Union Course, with Eclipse winning the third and deciding heat and taking home the prize money. Substantial sums of money changed hands between gamblers that exciting day. The *Niles Register* estimated \$1 million in wagers, although that large sum and the size of the crowd were probably overstated.¹⁹

As tensions between the slave states and the North intensified, promoters took advantage of sectional feelings and promoted other races with strong North–South overtones. One of the more memorable of these was the 1842 match between a Virginia horse owned by Colonel William R. Johnson that was curiously named Boston, and the pride of the New York area, the sensational filly Fashion. She won the first four-mile heat by less than a length and in the process set a record of 7:32.5 minutes. The second heat was close until the nine-year-old Boston showed his age and faded during the last mile, losing by some 60 lengths to the filly. The northerners’ joy in their horse’s victory, however, was muted by postrace criticism led by William T. Porter in his *Spirit of the Times*. He directed his ire at the Union Course promoters, who charged what Porter (and many others) viewed as an exorbitant \$10 admission charge.²⁰

Another North–South challenge occurred in 1845 at the Union Course before a large and enthusiastic crowd “of race-going blades” that created a scene of “tumult, disorder, and confusion,” according to one newspaper account. In addition, the *New York Herald* reported that the audience included a motley collection of “indescribable camp followers, sutlers, loungers, rowdies, gamblers, and twenty other species.” Before a crowd estimated to number 30,000, probably once more in substantial exaggeration, since the grandstands only seated 3,000, the southern filly Peytonia narrowly defeated Fashion in two heats. Again, strong sectional sentiments provided a dramatic backdrop to the race, as reported by the *New York Herald*: “In addition to the sectional feeling and the strong rivalry of sportsmen, and in one sense partizans – the vast sums of money pending on the race, attached a degree of absorbing interest to the result.”²¹

The Democratization of Racing: The Trotters

Although the general public took great interest in the occasional high-profile thoroughbred race, the sport was largely dominated by the wealthy – slave holders in Virginia and mercantile leaders in New York City. The less affluent found other outlets to engage their passion for racing. Although it has received relatively little attention, prior to the Civil War large numbers of working- and middle-class Americans became fascinated by harness racing. This uniquely American sport began early in the nineteenth century along the urban corridor between Baltimore and Boston. Informal races between horse-drawn buggies over public roads and streets gained popularity in northern cities, especially New York City. According to historian Dwight Akers, the five-mile stretch of Third Avenue that ran northward from the Bowery was “consecrated ground” for the “roadites.”²²

There emerged a large, informal fraternity that raced their “roadsters” in the evening hours after work. The horses, which the men used for their daily business travel, came from the common stock and lacked the bloodlines of the thoroughbreds. Central to the popularity of harness racing was that it permitted wide participation; anyone with a horse and buggy could try his hand, and unlike thoroughbred racing where professional jockeys were utilized, the owner and the driver were one and the same. Along Third Avenue, competition naturally grew, especially among the younger “blades” who enjoyed a spirited race. One lady, however, observed that some of these young men “spent their afternoons trotting from tavern to tavern along the highways.” Apparently, she sniffed, “they live for alcohol and horses!”²³ The appeal of harness racing was that it was open to all comers. Oliver Wendell Holmes noted that the trotting horse served a useful purpose as an everyday source of transportation, while the thoroughbred did not: “Horse racing is not a republican institution; horse-trotting is.”²⁴

By 1850, harness racing had become an organized sport that surpassed thoroughbred racing in popularity. The first enclosed racing oval for trotters was constructed in 1815 on the north side of Manhattan. In 1824, the New York Trotting Club was



Figure 1.1 Trotters Mountain Boy and Lady Thorn head for the finish line at Prospect Park in Brooklyn in 1869. Trotters and pacers captured the imagination of working- and middle-class Americans during the mid nineteenth century as a democratic alternative to the perceptions of thoroughbred racing as elitist. The sport developed strong roots throughout America and became a main attraction at state and county fairs. *Image* © Bettmann/Corbis

established and another oval track was constructed on Long Island. Over the next quarter-century, the sport continued to grow in popularity, but its common roots precluded the newspaper coverage reserved for thoroughbreds. Because the trotting horse came from common stock, rapid commercialization was feasible. Promoters recognized that the investment in such a horse was minimal when compared to the thoroughbred, a fact that enabled them to offer much smaller purses (often less than \$50, sometimes as little as \$10) and still attract a competitive field. The sturdy composition of the trotting horse also meant that they could be entered in races more often than a thoroughbred.²⁵

Harness racing engendered widespread public interest. Its unpretentious aura appealed to spectators who were put off by the snobbery and exclusiveness associated with the thoroughbreds. In 1856, a journalist observed that thoroughbred racing “will never succeed in New York until it and its

attended arrangements are put on a more democratic basis – something approaching the order of the first class trotting races. Then like the trots, it will get the support of the people.” Oliver Wendell Holmes was struck by the bond between harness racing and everyday American workers: “Wherever the trotting horse goes, he carries in his train brisk omnibuses, lively bakers’ carts, and therefore hot rolls, the jolly butcher’s wagon, the cheerful gig, the wholesome afternoon drive with wife and child – all the forms of moral excellence.”²⁶

The unlikely exploits of a four-year-old gray mare, purchased by an Irish peddler in 1837 for \$12.50, spurred the sport’s popularity. For a time Lady Suffolk pulled David Bryan’s butcher cart through the streets of New York City, but in 1838 Bryan entered her in a harness race on Long Island. She won her first race in a flat three minutes along with a purse of \$11. Over the next 14 years, Lady Suffolk was entered in 162 races and won an estimated \$50,000 for her owner. She was eventually retired at the age of 19, but even then demonstrated her amazing strength by participating in 12 races during her final year on the track.²⁷ She was memorialized by the popular song “The Old Gray Mare.” By the eve of the Civil War, harness racing had moved from an informal means of entertainment on the streets of New York to a successful commercial enterprise that was national in scope. As such, harness racing set the pace, so to speak, for many other commercial sporting ventures soon to come.

The popularity of trotters spread across the United States. Seven tracks operated with regularity in the New York City area by the mid-1850s, and an additional 70 tracks had opened elsewhere. The operators of county fairs found harness racing an appealing attraction, and the relationship of the sport with state and county fairs remains an American tradition in the twenty-first century. Harness racing lost much of its fan base during the decades following the Second World War, but the famed Hambletonian begun in 1926 that became trotting’s equivalent of the Kentucky Derby still endures. After a long residence at the Illinois State Fair in Du Quoin, it has been held at the Meadowlands Race Track in East Rutherford, New Jersey each August since 1981.

Racing by Land and Sea

Horse racing was not the only form of racing to capture the public’s fancy. For several decades prior to the Civil War, long-distance human foot races captured widespread interest. Popularly called “pedestrianism,” these races appealed to the gambling instincts of Americans. Between 1820 and 1835, several such races held in the New York City area received minor notice in the newspapers, but in 1835 the area’s leading sportsman, John Cox Stevens, attracted widespread attention when he announced a prize of \$1,000 to any person who could run 10 miles in less than one hour. On race day, nine men toed the starting line and took off to the cheers of a large crowd. A 24-year-old Connecticut farmer, Henry Stannard, was the only runner to cross the finish line under the one-hour mark, and he did so with only 12 seconds to spare.²⁸

The novelty of that race inspired many others in the years to come, with promoters of the Beacon Course racetrack even holding foot race competitions as a means of recovering some of their financial losses from the lack of public support for thoroughbred meets. One of the underlying themes of these races was competition between Americans and runners from Ireland and England. An estimated 30,000 spectators turned out in 1844 at Beacon Course to watch a field of 12 Americans (including John Steeprock, a Seneca Indian) fend off the challenges of three Englishmen and three Irishmen. America's pride was severely threatened as the runners approached the final mile with two Englishmen in the lead, but a New York carpenter, John Gildersleeve, took the lead during the final lap that inspired cheers from American spectators. One newsman, probing the reasons for the great interest in the race beyond its sheer novelty, found his answer in conversations with members of the audience: "It was a trial of the Indian against the white man, on the point in which the red man most boasts his superiority. It was the trial of the peculiar American physique against the long held supremacy of the English muscular endurance." As historian Melvin Adelman concludes, "The excitement derived from the fact that the white man beat the red man and the American defeated the Englishmen."²⁹ Future promoters of sporting events would find racial, ethnic, and nationalistic rivalries to be a reliable gimmick to attract paying customers.

The interest in pedestrianism prompted many promoters to stage races, most of which were long-distance affairs with men competing against each other and the clock for prize money. A few professional runners emerged who often put up their own challenge money before match races, and while Gildersleeve ended up accepting invitations to run in many parts of the country, most runners were content to compete in their own locale. The sport did not endure, falling victim to the rise of track and field competitions and the introduction of the bicycle and bicycle racing by the 1880s.³⁰

Americans also showed considerable interest in various forms of rowing contests. As with other sports, informal contests had been held between locals in various American ports during the colonial and early national period; races between longshoremen and local boat owners, sparked by a wager or two, determined local bragging rights. As early as 1824, a rowing contest with a \$1,000 prize was held on the Hudson River between a group of young Americans organized into a rowing club called the Whitehallers and a crew from a British frigate. Newspapers reported that a crowd of upwards of 20,000 watched the four-mile race from the shoreline. An American victory produced a flurry of national pride and encouraged the conduct of races elsewhere.³¹

By the mid-1830s, more than 20 rowing clubs were active in the New York City area, and similar clubs were established in cities stretching from Boston to Savannah. Interest was particularly high in Philadelphia, where the Schuylkill River beckoned generations of dedicated oarsmen. In 1872, the National Association of Amateur Oarsmen was established, with some 200 clubs in existence.³²

Rowing appealed to a wide spectrum of men interested in vigorous exercise and competition, but only the very wealthy could afford to participate in yachting. One

of the first yacht races on record involved the wealthy sportsman John Cox Stevens, whose yacht *Wave* sped to victory over John Cushing's *Sylph* in a highly publicized race across New York Harbor in 1835. In 1844, Cox played a key role in establishing the New York Yacht Club for the express purpose of promoting "health and pleasure, combined with a laudable desire to improve our almost perfect naval architecture." Just as various jockey clubs asserted their goal in holding racing meets was to "improve the breed," so too did the yachtsmen seek to produce faster ships. In 1846, the New York Yacht Club held its first regatta, producing great interest throughout the city.³³

The New York Yacht Club soon became recognized for a membership representing the *crème de la crème* of New York society. Stevens constructed a large clubhouse in Hoboken at Elysian Fields where club members and their spouses and friends enjoyed exclusive social events. The clubhouse was described by New York City mayor, Philip Hone, as "a handsome Gothic cottage in a pleasant grove in the Elysian fields, presided over by that prince of good fellows, John Cox Stevens, who makes the punch, superintends the cooking and presides at the table." The club's annual regatta at exclusive Newport, Rhode Island, became a highlight of the summer social calendar for New York City's high society.³⁴

The club attracted international attention in 1851 when Stevens formed a syndicate to build a sailing ship specifically designed to challenge the best that England could offer. After Stevens retired from his role as a prominent owner of thoroughbreds in the late 1830s, he turned his attention to his "first love," the sea. The son of a wealthy entrepreneur, he had been raised along the water's edge where he developed lifelong hobbies of swimming and sailing. He owned a succession of private vessels, including *Trouble*, built in 1816 of dimensions (56 feet in length) sufficient to be recognized as the first authentic American yacht. Now 65 years of age in 1851, Stevens had come to appreciate the talents of a young ship architect, George Steers, whom he commissioned to build a yacht designed for racing. The result was the *America*, a vessel that Stevens dispatched to Great Britain to challenge the best the English could muster. Initially the English yachting crowd held *America* in contempt because they "did not regard it as of the slightest consequence, or as at all likely to interfere with their monopoly of the glory." When *America* arrived at the Isle of Wight several days before the August 23 race date, however, its sleek profile made Englishmen nervous. One journalist noted, "She sits upon the water like a duck," but is possessed of "a clean build and saucy raking masts." He feared that *America* "evidently looks bent on mischief."³⁵

Indeed. After a slow start against 18 English ships, *America* began to pass the competition, "leaping over, not against the water." Two hours into the 60-mile course around the Isle of Wight, *America* held a two-mile lead against its closest rival, and at the seven-hour mark led the British favorite, *Aurora*, by seven miles! Queen Victoria and the royal family waited at the finish line aboard the Royal Yacht *Victoria and Albert*, and as the first sails came into view, she inquired of a signal master peering through binoculars, "Which yacht is first?" He replied, "The *America*, your majesty." "Which is second?" the Queen asked. "Your majesty, there is no second."³⁶

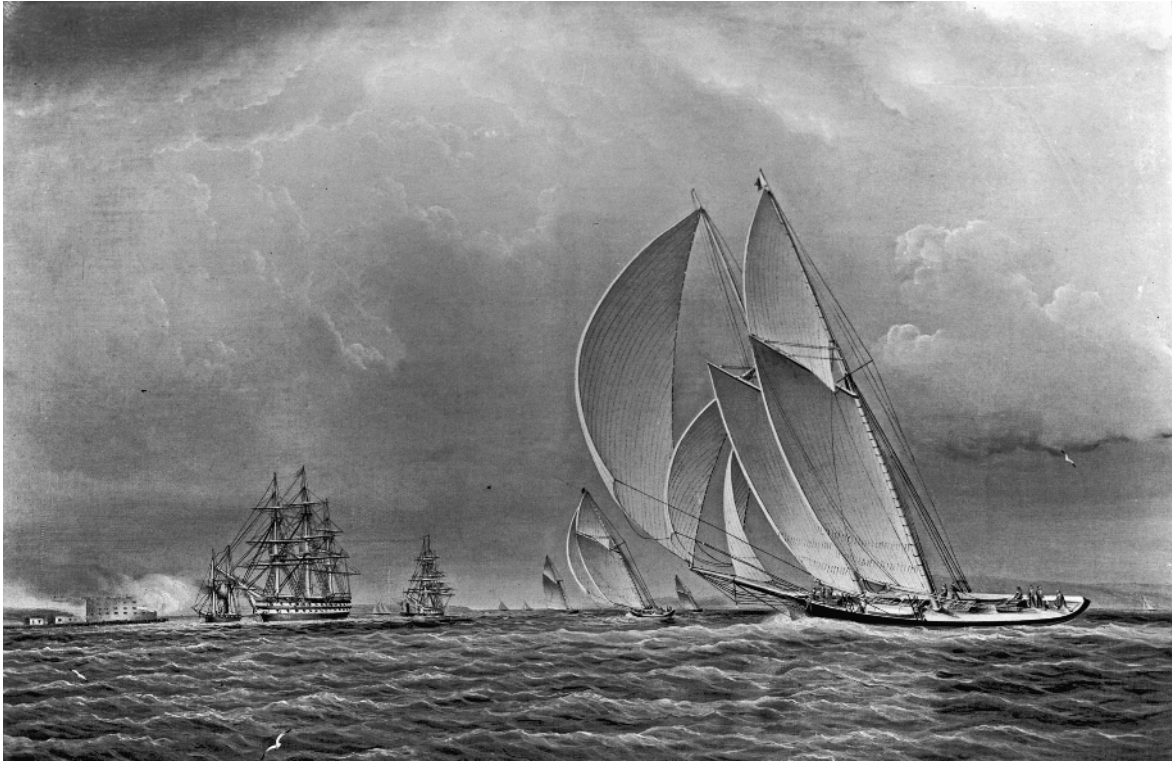


Figure 1.2 The sleek yacht *America* is captured by artist J. E. Buttersworth as it leaves Boston harbor on its way to England for the great race of 1851. Its stunning triumph over the best the British could muster set off a long and loud outburst of American braggadocio. Yet today, the garish trophy – now named the America’s Cup – presented to owner John Cox Stevens by Queen Victoria remains the most prestigious in sailing. *Image* © Bettmann/Corbis

The next day, the Queen boarded *America* to present Stevens and his crew with a hideously ornate cup that came to be called the America’s Cup. It remains yet today the most coveted prize in yachting. In a most unsentimental move, Stevens soon thereafter sold *America* to English interests and returned to the United States aboard a steam-powered ship while American newspapers trumpeted the supremacy of Yankee shipbuilding. New York lawyer George T. Strong believed the exuberant nationalistic celebration disturbing: “Newspapers [are] crowing over the victory of Stevens’ yacht which has beat everything in the British seas,” he wrote in his diary, “quite creditable to Yankee ship-building, certainly, but not worthy the intolerable, vainglorious vaporings that make every newspaper I take up now ridiculous. One would think yacht-building were the end of man’s existence on earth.”³⁷

The Formative Years of Prizefighting

While some Americans were thrilled by yachting, a larger and much more diverse group followed the races of men and horses. Bare-knuckle prizefighting also attracted widespread interest despite being illegal and the subject of considerable public condemnation. During the 1820s and 1830s, however, a

group of professional pugilists did battle in public places, most often large saloons where the atmosphere was raucous, the air filled with cigar smoke, and the language coarse as beer and whiskey flowed freely. Money also changed hands as bets on the contestants were settled. Unlike the rough-and-tumble fights on the frontier, these bouts were conducted according to a set of accepted rules. A downed opponent could not be kicked or hit; a round ended whenever a contestant was knocked or wrestled down; a contestant had 30 seconds after being downed to resume the contest by “coming to scratch” or “toeing the mark,” which meant resuming the fight by standing along a line drawn through the center of the ring. A bout ended whenever a fighter was knocked unconscious or conceded defeat by failing to toe the mark. These were popularly known as “fights to the finish.” Consequently, bouts between evenly matched foes could go for scores of rounds, with some bouts lasting more than an hour’s duration.

Promoters found they could attract large crowds if they matched fighters representative of rival ethnic groups; pairing an Englishman against an Irishman assured a large and boisterous crowd. As with other spectator sports, New York City became the center of pugilistic activities, although prizefighting also flourished in such cities as New Orleans, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Boston. It was in New York City and its immediate environs that most major bouts were held. Although illegal, prizefighting captured the attention of a wide spectrum of male New Yorkers. Public attitudes on pugilism were distinctly divided. As historian Elliott Gorn describes the situation, on the one hand boxing appealed to the democratic sensibilities of the nation: two men enter the ring with equal opportunity to achieve victory by dint of their skill, strength, endurance, fortitude, and guile. On the other hand, the fact that men were encouraged to engage in a violent contest that could produce severe physical injury, even death, called into question the underlying humane and civic values of the young democracy. As one critic wrote, pugilism produced “nothing but brutality, ferociousness, and cowardess [*sic*]” that served to “debase the mind, deaden the feelings and extinguish every spark of benevolence.” The violence of the sport stood in stark contrast to the widespread belief that democracy was capable of uplifting the moral character of the American people and, in particular, eliminate violence from the social order. Consequently, as Gorn observes, boxing was a “denial of mankind’s moral progress” that “mocked the more optimistic ideologies ascendant in the early nineteenth century.” Prizefighting seemed to contradict “romantic assumptions of man’s reason triumphing over his passions, of the moral progress of humankind.”³⁸

Violence was only one of many factors that motivated pugilism’s critics. They contended that prizefights encouraged public disorder, heavy drinking, and gambling. Further, it was a sport that appealed to man’s worse instincts that critics contended flourished among the lower echelons of urban society, especially immigrants from Germany and Ireland. The prim and proper middle- and upper-class Victorians viewed the new urban working classes as violent and dangerous, a serious threat to civic order. They believed prizefighting brought out the worst of man’s nature – brutality, cruelty, passion, drunkenness, and gambling. In handing down sentences to

three Irishmen in 1842 who had promoted a fight that led to the death of one contestant, New York City Judge Charles R. Ruggles gave vent to this perspective:

A prizefight brings together a vast concourse of people: and I believe it is not speaking improperly of such assemblages, to say that the gamblers, and the bullies, and the swearers, and the blacklegs, and the pickpockets and the thieves, and the burglars are there. It brings together a large assemblage of the idle, disorderly, vicious, dissolute people – people who live by violence – people who live by crime – their tastes run that way.³⁹

This condemnation came at the sentencing of immigrant Yankee Sullivan, who was the primary promoter for a notorious fight between Christopher Lilly and Tommy McCoy held on a bluff overlooking the Hudson River near the small town of Hastings, located 25 miles north of New York City. On September 13, 1842, an estimated 2,000 spectators witnessed this bout, which had attracted considerable interest. Both fighters weighed scarcely 140 pounds. For a time, the Irishman McCoy seemed to have the advantage, but as the fight progressed past an hour's duration his endurance waned as his opponent carved his face into a bloody mess. Following the rules of the day that stipulated that a knockdown ended a round, the match reached 70 rounds. By this time, McCoy was bravely enduring a merciless pounding: "both eyes were black – the left one nearly closed, and indeed that whole cheek presented a shocking appearance," one spectator wrote. "His very forehead was black and blue; his lips were swollen to an incredible size, and the blood streamed profusely down his chest. My heart sickened at the sorry sight." As McCoy gasped for breath, many spectators called out to the referee and McCoy's handlers to halt the fight as "blow upon blow came raining in upon him." The courageous – if foolish – McCoy refused to quit despite being knocked down a reported 80 times, but at the end of Round 119 and 2 hours 41 minutes later the fight ended when McCoy collapsed and died. The cause of death was later determined to have been from drowning in his own blood.⁴⁰

No wonder many civic leaders were appalled by the popularity that pugilism commanded. One such proponent of Victorian sensibilities – Horace Greeley, publisher of the *New York Tribune* – denounced the "gamblers, brothel-masters and keepers of flesh grogeries who had perpetrated this frightful spectacle." According to this celebrated journalist, the end of American civilization was at hand unless the new urban working classes were brought under control. Philip Hone, a former mayor, took note in his diary that the sport of pugilism threatened American civilization: "The amusement of prizefighting, the disgrace of which was formerly confined to England ... has become one of the fashionable abominations of our loafer-ridden city," he complained.⁴¹ For critics such as Greeley and Hone, prizefighting not only reflected the dangers posed by the new urban working class, but also undercut the essential truth of the Protestant work ethic – with merely a lucky punch or two, a prizefighter could earn more money in one afternoon than a hardworking artisan or clerk could make in a year. Even more egregious, a gambler who bet heavily on that fighter could walk off with large sums without having to expend any effort, rewarded

mightily for his endorsement of an antisocial activity that benefited saloonkeepers and other social misfits.

By the time of Tommy McCoy's demise, the Victorian element in the nation's leading cities had come to view with apprehension the steady growth and influence of what has been described as the "sporting fraternity," a segment of the larger urban bachelor culture that had developed in American cities. The sporting fraternity, popularly known as the "Fancy," existed largely within the context of the many saloons that lined the streets of American cities. It was here that men could escape their wives and girlfriends and participate in an all-male subculture that focused on drinking, gambling, swapping stories, telling crude jokes, and discussing (and arguing over) matters of great import: sports, politics, and sex. Many of the saloons that catered to this crowd sponsored a variety of events to attract clients. These variously included such popular blood sports as dogfights, rat baitings, and cockfights. Occasionally a prizefight was the feature attraction.

Most professional fighters and their handlers were closely identified with saloons, and future bouts were often arranged at the bar. Cards, billiards, and dice games were a constant in this loosely organized urban brotherhood, and an evening might be topped off with a visit to a nearby brothel. Participation in this urban subculture provided young men with a special sense of individual identity within the larger, impersonal urban complex, bringing with it a modicum of social status and a sense of belonging to a group of one's peers.

For several years, the death of Tommy McCoy put a damper on prizefighting, but the blood sport inevitably made a comeback. Newspapers and magazines found a wide reading audience for their graphic stories about the pugilistic scene, and bouts between popular ethnic battlers began attracting large crowds. Such was the case when Yankee Sullivan challenged Tom Hyer, the leading American heavyweight. Hyer had beaten Country McCleester in 1841 and was popularly proclaimed the heavyweight champion. When Hyer and Sullivan encountered each other in a New York City bar in 1848, they got into an argument that became a scuffle, which led inevitably to a challenge. Each man agreed to put up \$5,000 and for months the match was the talk of the town. Newspapers reported upon the challengers' training sessions, and betting was intense.

Despite widespread public interest, only a few hundred spectators actually witnessed the bout, which was held in a secluded area on Chesapeake Bay. Maryland law enforcement officials attempted to prevent the fight from taking place, but while in pursuit of the boat carrying the pugilists and their entourage, the police boat ran aground. Thus on a cold February day, with a dusting of snow on the ground, a ring was hastily constructed from tree limbs and some rope, and in mid-afternoon the much-hyped battle was on. It lasted less than 10 minutes, as the much larger Hyer knocked his opponent senseless with a barrage of blows to the head. Although the fight was fought in near-isolation, fight fans in New York and other major cities eagerly awaited news of the outcome. Foreshadowing the role that communications would play in the growing popularity of sporting events, news from Chesapeake Bay arrived in newspaper offices across the country via the new technology of telegraph lines.⁴²

The Hyer victory stimulated a demand for boxing matches, and many young men from the lower echelons of urban society attempted to fight their way to fame and fortune. Most, of course, failed, but one marvelous Irishman found that the sport provided his entree to a celebrity's life of prestige and wealth. John "Old Smoke" Morrissey was born in Ireland in 1831 and brought to America by his parents when he was three. Growing up in Troy, New York, he became notorious for his violent temper, his frequent scrapes with the law, and his ability to use his fists. He moved to New York City about 1850 and became an enforcer for local politicians who found his services useful in breaking up opponents' meetings and intimidating voters. He also began earning money prizefighting. In one noteworthy saloon encounter, he was pinned atop a hot wood-burning stove by his adversary. The resulting stench from his severely burned flesh produced his nickname of "Old Smoke."

On September 1, 1853, Old Smoke fought Yankee Sullivan at Boston Corners, a small community where the state lines of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York converge. The sponsors selected this site because they hoped the uncertainty about the state in which the ring was actually located would prevent law enforcement officials from stopping the affair. A crowd estimated between 3,000 and 6,000 converged on the town by railroad and horse and buggy. Serious money was wagered at ringside, but also in cities across the United States. One newspaper estimated that at least \$200,000 rested on the fight's outcome. By far the superior boxer, Sullivan bludgeoned Morrissey for 37 brutal rounds – Old Smoke's eyes were nearly swollen shut and his face was a bloody mess – but then various allegations were shouted between the two men's supporters and a free-for-all brawl broke out among the spectators. When the referee called for round 38 to begin, Morrissey staggered to scratch but Sullivan was busily punching away at one of Morrissey's supporters. The referee thereupon awarded the bout to Morrissey.

Predictably, most prominent urban newspapers denounced the fight as immoral and the behavior of the spectators outrageous, but they also provided their eager readers with detailed descriptions of the event. Morrissey's greatest asset as a fighter apparently was his ability to take enormous punishment. The bizarre ending to the fight added to his growing reputation as a romantic rogue, and he proceeded to win several fights over challengers of lesser ability than Yankee Sullivan. His reputation as someone not to be meddled with was greatly enhanced when one of his associates shot and killed a rival, William "Bill the Butcher" Poole (of English ancestry), who had once whipped Morrissey in a street fight; this shooting intensified anti-Irish sentiment throughout the city.

Morrissey's last prizefight was in 1858 against John Heenan, a formidable up-and-coming boxer from San Francisco. Although both were of Irish descent, the intense prefight ballyhoo portrayed Morrissey as a near-savage Irishman, while Heenan, himself no saint, was somehow cast as a respectable middle-class gentleman. The fight was held on a remote spit off the Canadian coast of Lake Erie, with both men putting up \$5,000 as prize money. Large numbers of sportsmen traveled by rail or boat to Buffalo and boarded special excursion vessels to sail to the "secret" location near the town of Long Point. Fight fans everywhere waited for news of the outcome

because serious money rested thereon. Relying upon his ability to absorb punishment, Morrissey slowly wore down the resistance of his opponent. By round 11, both men were bruised and battered. Only Morrissey had the strength to withstand a punch, however, and when he nailed his opponent's jaw with a punch, Heenan collapsed in a heap.

Thus ended the checkered pugilistic career of John "Old Smoke" Morrissey. But after retiring from the ring his fortunes took an amazing upward trajectory. He owned two popular saloons in New York City through which he became intimately involved with prominent politicians. Morrissey opened a popular gambling hall at 8 Barclay Street that attracted an elite clientele, and his political connections within the Democratic Tammany Hall machine provided protection from law enforcement. He also was part owner of a citywide numbers racket that paid handsomely. In the summer of 1863, he opened a racetrack in Saratoga to attract high roller customers to his lavish new hotel and casino, the Saratoga House. This resort in the Adirondack Mountains soon became recognized as the premier gambling establishment in the United States, often favorably compared to the best that Europe could offer. Morrissey's political career essentially ran parallel to his gambling enterprises; in 1866, he was elected to the United States House of Representatives; he later served two terms in the New York State Senate. Morrissey's funeral in 1878 was one of the biggest the city had seen up to that time and was reported on the front pages of city newspapers.⁴³

The story of Old Smoke was truly amazing. He had what the front-page obituary in the *New York Times* called "a checkered career." The connections he made between his pugilistic, gambling, and political careers were an early and telling example of an emerging pattern for American sportsmen. Not only did prizefighting open up avenues to immediate financial success for those with the ability and willingness to make the sacrifices demanded by the blood sport, but pugilism's close connections to urban politicians, gamblers, and the bachelor culture pointed to the direction that organized sports would take in the decades to come. The main thrust of the emerging pattern of American sports would be to counter the Victorian message of self-restraint and social control with a heavy emphasis on unrestrained masculine expression through sports, questionable political machinations, and gambling.

Baseball: the Creation of "America's Game"

Throughout much of the American colonial era young boys played a simple game that utilized a small ball and a wooden stick. Historians have long contended that the game was descended from the traditional English game of "rounders," but historian David Block has demonstrated this to be another baseball myth. He persuasively argues that games played in America well before 1800 that used a stick and ball and were variously called "base-ball," "old cat," "tut ball," "barn ball," "trap ball," and "tip-cat" were the true predecessors of the American game. Block writes, "Given that the name 'base-ball' predated 'rounders' in England by nearly a hundred years, it is time to finally put to rest that tired old axiom that baseball descended from that

‘ancient’ English pastime.” Whatever its origins, the impromptu game as played in America had an infinite variety of informal and ever-changing rules. Boiled down to fundamentals, however, a “feeder” tossed a small ball in an underhanded fashion to the “striker,” who, upon hitting the ball, ran in a counterclockwise fashion around four or five stakes driven into the ground. The runner sought to avoid being “put out,” which occurred when his batted ball was caught on the fly or first bounce, or when he was “soaked” by a defensive player, that is, hit with a thrown ball before reaching the safety of a base.⁴⁴

By the 1850s, however, the game had been transformed by the strong drive for organization and structure that was central to the emerging modern era. Although still popular with youngsters, what was now called “base-ball” appealed to young male adults, and informality gave way to written rules and policies, organized competition, statistical analysis of outcomes, and eventually to the formation of regional and even national organizations. The game resonated with the urban bachelor set. Young adult males who held positions in the expanding urban middle class – artisans, bankers, agents, lawyers, physicians, shopkeepers, accountants, clerks, salesmen, teachers, businessmen – sought both physical exercise and social connections with like-minded men through organized clubs. Among the many activities sponsored by these clubs was playing the game that members recalled from their childhood.

In part, the game caught on so rapidly because of its simplicity. It could be played in a corner of a city park or on a vacant lot; the only equipment required was a wooden bat and a ball. Unlike the more complex English game of cricket, which enjoyed a popularity during the 1850s among a relatively small number of affluent urbanites, baseball did not require a lengthy time commitment and it was not encumbered with complex rules. The game could be played in a relatively short time, which fit busy schedules of upward-bound urban professionals. As one commentator noted, as compared to the rival sport of cricket, baseball “comprises all the necessary elements for affording a pleasing and harmless excitement ... yet can be regularly practiced and even played in the shape of formal matches without interfering unduly with business hours.”⁴⁵ Although the game came easily to those endowed with natural athleticism, it also rewarded individuals who strived to improve their limited skills with diligent practice.

For many years, rules were determined locally. When teams traveled to other cities, the rules to be followed became an issue. Knowledgeable followers of the game during its formative years understood that there was a distinct Massachusetts Game as compared to the Philadelphia Game. The number of bases and the distance between them fluctuated considerably, as did the specifications of the distance that separated the “bowler” or “feeder” from the “striker.” The catcher usually stood 10 feet or so behind the batter and none of the players used protective equipment of any kind, including gloves. The number of participants on a team also fluctuated, sometimes rising to as high as 14. In all versions of the organized game, however, the bowler was expected to help put the ball into play, and not deceive the striker; he was required to toss the ball gently in an underhanded fashion (as in today’s slow pitch

softball). Team captains normally arbitrated disputes over close calls, and the use of an umpire was resisted because the expectation was that the game would be played fairly by gentlemen who could arbitrate disputes without rancor.⁴⁶

The pioneering baseball club was the New York Knickerbockers, a fraternal group organized in 1842. Apparently some of its founding members had been playing ball for several years on a vacant lot at the corner of 27th Street and Fourth Avenue. In 1845, Knickerbocker Alexander Joy Cartwright, a young bookkeeper by trade, suggested the creation of a formal baseball club, complete with bylaws and a \$5 annual membership fee. He also presented to his friends a written set of rules for the game, which were readily accepted, most likely because they incorporated many concepts already in use. With Cartwright's rules providing a foundation for play, the popularity of the game soared in the New York City metropolitan area; this particular version of the game spread rapidly up and down the Atlantic coast. By the eve of the Civil War, most teams had adopted the Knickerbocker rules for what had become commonly known as the "New York Game."

Cartwright's prescience is startling. The only major things he left out that are central to today's game were the nine-inning rule, the use of umpires, and the base on balls. Cartwright placed four bases – now canvas bags instead of stakes – 90 feet apart in a unique diamond configuration, with the "bowler" required to release his underhanded pitch from a distance of 45 feet. The bowler's responsibility was to give the batter a ball that could readily be hit; it would take several decades before the role of the pitcher became that of trying to get the batter to make out with an assortment of overhanded pitches thrown at high velocity. Cartwright set the size of each team at nine. A batter was declared "out" if his batted ball was caught on the first bounce or on the fly, if he swung three times without making contact, or if the ball arrived securely at base before he arrived. He abolished the painful practice of "soaking," and established that three outs ended a team's "at-bat." The first team to score 21 "aces" was the winner.⁴⁷

In keeping with their intent to be seen as gentlemen, the Knickerbockers also adopted rules to encourage good sportsmanship, including fines for appearing at games intoxicated (\$1), criticizing umpires (25 cents), and using profanity (6 cents). The Knickerbockers presented a sprightly appearance when they played their games, outfitted in blue and white flannel uniforms topped by fashionable straw hats, making a sartorial statement consistent with their intent to be viewed as sportsmen of high moral character and considerable social standing. For a time the games were viewed as part of a pleasant social outing with young ladies that might be followed by a picnic or banquet.

It did not take long, however, for the competitive spirit to kick in. Within a few years, many teams had been formed in the New York City area, including those from the laboring classes. Teams increasingly played to win, even if it meant engaging in dubious tactics, and the language heard at games was anything but gentlemanly. The Brooklyn Eckfords, for example, became a top team by the mid-1850s and was comprised of workers engaged in the shipbuilding trade. Baseball

clubs sometimes had strong political connections; the powerful Brooklyn Atlantics was made up of players closely connected to the Democratic Party, and several members of the New York Mutuals were recognized as enforcers for the growing political machine directed by the notoriously corrupt city “Boss,” William Marcy Tweed.⁴⁸

With incredible swiftness, the game took on a new level of seriousness. Competition became more intense and the importance of victory replaced the social aspects of the game. Encouraged by the speed and convenience of railroad and steamboat transportation, the best teams traveled considerable distances to play challengers – to Boston, Baltimore, Buffalo, and Philadelphia, and many towns in between. Improved communications provided by the telegraph also made it possible to send game results rapidly across great distances. Although the game was now played as far west as San Francisco, the hotbed remained the New York City metropolitan region. Several dozen teams now competed regularly for top billing, carrying such colorful names as the Eckfords, Atlantics, Eagles, Mutuals, Morrisianas, Gothams, Empires, Excelsiors, and of course, the Knickerbockers. The quality of play and the development of a spectator base led to the first enclosed field being established on a former ice skating rink in Brooklyn in 1862.⁴⁹

In order to ensure uniformity of rules and patterns of play, 14 prominent baseball clubs joined together in 1858 to form the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP). Its membership grew at an impressive rate as more teams joined each year. The organization adopted a standard set of rules (derived largely from the rules of Alexander Cartwright), but change was inherent as the game developed. The 21-“ace” rule was dropped in favor of a nine-inning contest, although it was not until 1864 that the organization acceded to the Knickerbocker club’s new rule proposal that a one-bounce catch did not constitute an out. In 1858, the New York fans were captivated by a much-anticipated game featuring the best players from Brooklyn pitted against the best of Manhattan (New York, 22; Brooklyn, 18); excitement was so high that promoters for the first time in history charged an admission fee, and rumors abounded that some teams were engaged in the nefarious business of paying top players.

By the eve of the Civil War, the game had reached the cusp of becoming a competitive, modern sport, complete with a formal controlling national organization, compensation of talented players, written rules, a team manager, and the keeping of formal statistical records of games, seasons, and individual player performances. Journalistic coverage continued to expand, and instructional manuals on playing the game were published. Businessmen naturally contemplated various approaches to exploit the game for financial profit; the concept of a professional team was not much distant. In just 15 years, the game had clearly outgrown the modest expectations of Alexander Cartwright and his pioneering band of Knickerbockers. Like other folk games that had been subjected to the powerful forces of modernism, baseball was becoming an integral part of the development of modern America.

Notes

- 1 Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York: St. Martin's, 1995).
- 2 Daniels, *Puritans at Play*, pp.168–9.
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