

---

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

---

### SPORTS IN AMERICA

Eighty years ago, American economist Thorstein Veblen solemnly argued that play, or sports, had become one of the four "occupations" of the leisure class. The other three: government, warfare, and religion.

Yet, during the republic's earlier days, sports—especially those that encouraged betting—were regarded as frivolous, or worse.

In **Sport—Mirror of American Life** (Little, Brown, 1963), an analysis of the social factors (increased leisure and income, urbanization) that fostered sports, Robert H. Boyle notes that when the first Continental Congress met in 1774, anti-sports feeling ran high. One of the Articles of Association called for the discouragement of "every species of extravagance and dissipation, especially all horse racing, and all kinds of gaming, cock fighting. . . ."

Sports flourished in America nonetheless. In her brief but thorough **American Sports 1785–1835** (Seeman Press, 1931; Porcupine Press reprint, 1975), Jennie Holliman writes that, in addition to the "blood sports" (hunting, fishing, cock fighting), swimming, boxing and wrestling, and track and field had been brought over from England and avidly enjoyed by the colonists long before Independence.

Regional differences soon became apparent. Opposition to horse racing, primarily because it promoted gambling, was strong in Puritan-minded New England. The sport thrived in the South. Diomed, the first American racing steed to gain wide renown, was brought from Eng-

land in 1798, and the *American Turf Register*, launched in Baltimore in 1829, was America's first sporting magazine.

In the splendidly illustrated **200 Years of Sport in America: A Pageant of a Nation at Play** (McGraw-Hill, 1976), Wells Twombly quotes John Quincy Adams on the National Course, which opened with fanfare outside Washington in 1802: "Many scores of American legislators went on foot from the Capitol . . . [and] they found not only grog but 'sharks' [bookmakers] at the races." If horse racing began as a gentleman's sport, it was soon democratized, although the rich still own most of the horses. Wagers on the Kentucky Derby alone now exceed \$3 million each year.

Later, the well-to-do spent many of their dollars on big racing sailboats. America won the Royal Yacht Squadron Cup in 1851 in a race around the Isle of Wight. When the trophy was deeded to the New York Yacht Club in 1857, notice was sent to all foreign yacht clubs that it was open to challenge. The Civil War intervened, and the first race took place in 1870 in New York harbor. The American schooner, *Magic*, won, and the United States has never since lost possession of the America's Cup.

Some of yachting's flavor can be sampled in **The Sea Chest: A Yachtman's Reader** (Norton, 1947; reprint, 1975). Editor Critchell Rimington's selections range from the humorous (James Thurber's sailing experiences, which gave him a new appreciation for the "simple, boomless bicycle") to the instructive

(Gardner Emmon's essay on determining the strength of wind at sea). Now "yachting" has become "sailing," a small-boat sport open to tens of thousands of Americans.

Professional boxing has traditionally served as a route to fame for the less privileged. Tom Molineux (1784–1818) was raised a Virginia slave, yet he became America's most celebrated boxer of the time. In 1810, he fought the English champion, Tom Cribb, in London for the world championship; it was the first battle for a world crown between a black and a white. The event was held outdoors in a chilling rain and heavy wind, and a badly battered Molineux had to be carried from the ring—at the end of the 33rd round. A description of that fight, and of many subsequent bouts, can be found in **A Pictorial History of Boxing** (Citadel, 1959; rev. ed., 1975) by Nat Fleischer and Sam Andre. The book also contains an extensive collection of black-and-white photographs (dating from the mid-19th century) and drawings.

The time when some sort of ball game was not played in America is unknown. In a readable history, **Four Centuries of Sport in America, 1490–1890** (Derrydale Press, 1931; Arno reprint, 1968), Herbert Manchester points out that the pre-Columbian Aztecs enjoyed a form of football/soccer. North American Indians originated lacrosse. Tennis, devised by Major Walter Wingfield in England in 1873, arrived in the United States in 1875. Manchester says that the lawns of the few existing U.S. cricket clubs were easily adapted for tennis, much to the chagrin of a few old Anglophiles. The upstart sport soon became firmly established.

A book that captures the grace and rigor of tennis is John McPhee's

**Levels of the Game** (Farrar, 1969). McPhee writes an elegant chronicle of the complex rivalry that developed during a single tennis match—the 1968 United States Open's semifinal at Forest Hills, N.Y., where Arthur Ashe defeated his Davis Cup teammate Clark Graebner.

Imported from Scotland, golf was played in Charleston, S.C., as early as 1790; the Savannah (Georgia) Golf Club held meetings until 1819. However, golf didn't really catch on in the United States until the late 1870s. Herbert Warren Wind, in **The Story of American Golf: Its Champions and Its Championships** (Knopf, 3rd ed., rev. 1975), sums up the sport's chief appeal: one does not have to be a "young, fast, beautifully coordinated athlete to play it acceptably."

A few other specialized books are worth noting. The *New Yorker's* Roger Angell is probably the most evocative baseball writer now working. He combines a journalistic attention to detail with relaxed reflection in **The Summer Game** (Viking, 1972, cloth; Popular Library, 1973, paper) and **Five Seasons: A Baseball Companion** (Simon & Schuster, 1977, cloth; Popular Library, 1978, paper). Anyone who thinks that baseball is just a matter of swatting a ball around with a stick might want to read Leonard Koppett's **All About Baseball** (Times Books, rev. ed., 1974). Koppett's main interests lie in the subtle psycho-intricacies of the game (e.g., the many functions of a manager and the importance of statistics to fans).

**The NFL's Official Encyclopedic History of Professional Football** (Macmillan, 1963), edited by Tom Bennett and others, provides a vivid overview of the world of pro football through a mixture of brief team histories, capsule biographies, accounts

of key games, club standings, rosters, rules, and play diagrams. Sportswriter Larry Merchant's **The National Football Lottery** (Holt, 1973, cloth; Dell, 1974, paper) is an offbeat, anecdotal examination of the vast amount of (mostly illegal) betting on pro football.

In **The City Game** (Harper's Magazine Press, 1970, cloth; Pocket Books, 1971, paper), journalist Pete Axthlem writes about basketball as it is played from the asphalt playgrounds of the inner city to the 50,000-seat palaces that host the pros. Focusing on New York City's Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant, he interviews neighborhood "stars" who excel in basketball but who never make it to the big time.

The most perceptive basketball memoir is Bill Bradley's **Life on the Run: A Career in Basketball** (Times Books, 1976, cloth; Bantam, 1977, paper). Bradley's career, however, is far from typical. A star for both Princeton University and the New York Knicks, he was also a Rhodes scholar. He is now the junior U.S. Senator from New Jersey.

For the generalist, a one-volume reference guide, providing histories and records for more than 50 sports from angling to yachting, is Frank G. Menke's **The Encyclopedia of Sports**

(A. S. Barnes, 6th rev. ed., 1978).

Two of the best anthologies of sport are John T. Talamini and Charles H. Page's **Sport and Society: An Anthology** (Little, Brown, 1973, paper) and Henry B. Chapin's **Sports in Literature** (McKay, 1976, paper). *Sport and Society* contains essays ranging from Lewis Mumford's critique of mass sports (too much regimented spectacle) to a reflection on self-trial by English physician (and first four-minute miler) Roger Bannister. *Sports in Literature* includes (mostly) fiction by such fans as Irwin Shaw, John Updike, Ring Lardner, and James Thurber.

The dean of American sportswriters, Walter Wellesley ("Red") Smith of the *New York Times*, has collected his favorite sports accounts in **Press Box** (Norton, 1976). His 18 choices include W. C. Heinz (on football), Stan Fischler (hockey), and Edward J. Neil (bobsledding). Smith's favorites also include the Big Dramas, such as Boston Red Sox star Ted Williams' last game (he hit a home run in his last time at bat) and the knockout of Nazi Germany's Max Schmeling by Joe Louis in 1938. They reveal the powerful emotional impact a sports event can have on even its most sophisticated observers.

---

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Some of the books mentioned in this essay were suggested by David Altheide and sports commentator Heywood Hale Broun.*