The Beginning of Organized Collegiate Sport
Author(s): Guy Lewis
Source: *American Quarterly*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Part 1 (Summer, 1970), pp. 222-229
Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2711645
Accessed: 08/09/2013 23:54

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *American Quarterly*.

http://www.jstor.org

All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

GUY LEWIS
University of Massachusetts

The Beginning of Organized Collegiate Sport

AFTER STUDENTS ORGANIZED IT, COLLEGIATE SPORT REVOLUTIONIZED campus life, turned institutions of higher education into athletic agencies, brought changes in the curriculum and influenced administrative policy. It was the object of state legislation and the expressed concern of congressmen, senators and presidents. In many ways, sport contributed to the destruction of the isolated academic world and helped make the nation more conscious of its colleges. In view of its impact upon the college and university when, where and why the informal games of students were transformed into highly organized enterprises are questions worthy of consideration.

Educational historians, Henry D. Sheldon,[1] Frederick Rudolph,[2] and John Braubacher and Willis Rudy[3] have devoted attention to these questions. Each author assumed the position that sport was only one of many activities students organized during the second half of the 19th century, and that the development coincided with changes in the nature of the student body and the purpose of the college. They concluded that the new type of student was gregarious and organizations provided him with an opportunity to identify with the group. Thus, students came to accept participation in extracurricular activities as an extremely important part of their educational experience.

The ante-bellum campus was almost devoid of sport. Students had not learned to play with seriousness of purpose and faculty had not discovered that the collegiate experience should consist of more than intellectual development and moral improvement. Student life was dull, Spartan, well-regulated and academically rigorous. Austere faculty members, usually former clergymen, exercised complete control over every aspect of the lives of their charges. They generally regarded play as a waste of time but permitted it unless the activity became too offensive.[4] But then, students were not very interested in playing games. Their major concern was that of devising ways to harass the faculty, whose position of absolute authority made them a natural enemy. Riot and disorder were frequent, and each school year was marked by cases of personal assault upon members of the faculty, overturning of stoves and breaking of windows and doors. On occasion, dynamite and fire were used to destroy buildings. Most disturbances, often rebellious, grew out of disagreements over regulations, food and class procedures. Resentment over the emphasis on study gave rise to the first campus traditions.[5]

---

[1] *Student Life and Customs* (New York, 1901).

[2] *The American College and University: A History* (New York, 1962).

[3] *Higher Education in Transition, An American History: 1636-1956* (New York, 1958).

Not all educators were entirely unaware of the fact that students had needs other than accomplishment in letters. Following the suggestions of philosophers, educational innovators, and physicians of the Enlightenment, they encouraged the institution of the first organized physical activity programs.[6] Gymnasiums were established at Harvard, Yale, Amherst, Williams, Brown, Virginia, the College of Charleston (South Carolina) and Dartmouth prior to 1830. Health was the primary concern but in at least one instance strenuous exercise was also viewed as a means of preventing campus disorders. The activity, it was proposed, would work off the excess energies.[7]

Interest in physical training was not confined to the college campus. Gymnasiums were opened in Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore, and owners of the revolutionary Round Hill School at Northampton, Massachusetts, accorded its exercise program a prominent place in the curriculum. Support for the establishment of physical education also came from editors of *The American Journal of Education*. But despite the efforts of educators and community leaders to interest students in formalized exercise, the gymnasium movement came to an end during the 1830s.[8]

Formalized physical training failed to generate sufficient interest and sports had not attracted the attention of students. However, in the 1840s, students were participating in a wide variety of ball games: football, baseball, townball, cricket, wicket, fives and shinny, among others. Each student body had its own favorite activities but associations had not been organized for the purpose of promoting participation, and therefore contests were staged infrequently.

---

[4] Two excellent accounts of ante-bellum student life are Andrew P. Peabody, *Harvard Reminiscences* (Boston, 1888) and Sheldon, *Student Life*.

[5] Benjamin H. Hall, *A Collection of College Words and Customs* (Cambridge, Mass., 1851), pp. 27–32, 45–49, 55–66.

[6] John R. Betts, "Mind and Body in Early American Thought," *Journal of American History*, LIV (Mar. 1968), 793.

[7] *Annual Report of the President of Harvard University to the Overseers, 1825–26* (Cambridge, Mass., 1827), pp. 35, 42, 52; *Report of a Committee of the Overseers of Harvard College, January 6, 1825* (Cambridge, Mass., 1825), p. 47.

[8] Fred E. Leonard and R. Tait McKenzie, *A Guide to the History of Physical Education* (Philadelphia, 1923), p. 250.

The dimension added to sport which brought about the change in student attitude and practice was the intercollegiate contest. Following the establishment of competition between schools, organizations were created and sports participation conducted on a regular basis. The transformation began when undergraduates at Yale and Harvard formed the original sports clubs and later engaged in America's first intercollegiate athletic event. It was due to their efforts that intercollegiate competition developed into an activity which led to the establishment of organized sport at other colleges.

A boat club was formed at Yale in 1843 and at Harvard one year later. During the next few years additional groups were organized at both colleges. They did not engage in competitive rowing, but confined their activity to recreational boating and social outings until 1852, when the one existing Harvard club and two of Yale's three crews raced on New Hampshire's Lake Winnepesaukee.[9] Values which later made such events so important were not attached to the first contest, or to the second one in 1855. However, the meetings did have a measure of influence upon the sport. There was increased involvement and a modification in the nature of participation. News of the regattas prompted students at Brown to revive the sport and boating clubs appeared for the first time at the University of Pennsylvania, Trinity and Dartmouth. New clubs were formed at Harvard and Yale. In 1853 Yale's six crews united as the Navy, and boatmen belonging to Harvard's five clubs adopted a similar plan two years later. The commencement regatta was inaugurated but competitive rowing continued to be less attractive than social boating. No contest between Harvard and Yale crews took place in 1856 or 1857, but by the late spring of 1858 students had found a reason for staging another one. It was to serve as evidence of the collegians' interest in virile pursuits.

In the 1840s and 1850s students had been frequently accused of being inferior to their British counterparts in manly qualities. A British Consul to Boston wrote:

> A Boston boy is a picture of prematurity. It can almost be said that every man is born middle aged in every city in the Union. The principal business seems to be to grow old as fast as possible. He enters college at fourteen and graduates at seventeen into the business world. The interval between their leaving school and commencing their business career offers no occupation to give either gracefulness or strength to body or mind. Athletic games and bolder field sports being unknown . . . all that is left is chewing, smoking, and drinking. . . . Young men

---

[9] James M. Whiton, "The First Harvard-Yale Regatta," *Outlook*, LXVIII (June 1901), 286-89.

> made of such materials as I describe are not young men at all . . . They have no breadth either of shoulders, information, or ambition. Their physical powers are subdued, and their mental capability cribbed into narrow limits.[10]

An American writer declared that American boys were "an apathetic-brained, a pale pasty-faced, narrow-chested, spindle-shanked, dwarfed race—mere walking manikins to advertise the last cut of the fashionable tailor."[11] They could, he concluded, improve themselves and change the habits of the nation if they would subscribe to the attitude of British students toward sport.

Another critic proposed that the fault could be corrected only if American students would realize that commonplace essays in turgid language or poems in halting verse with borrowed thought were not evidences of intellectual accomplishment and sport was not a waste of time. The academic achievements of the British are far superior to those of American students, and the leading scholars in their institutions are often the most outstanding athletes, he wrote. "Our magazine," he continued, "had rather chronicle a great boat-race at Harvard or Yale, or a cricket-match with the United States Eleven, than all the prize poems or orations on Lafayette that are produced in half a century."[12] His observations brought pleas for the adoption of sport and prompted one student editor to challenge his fellow classmates with the question: "Will a kind fortune ever bring the day when the first scholar of his class can also claim the high honor of being the stoutest oarsman of the College?"[13]

Pleas for the establishment of sport also came from ministers and literary persons. Thomas W. Higginson, a muscular Christian who was both, wrote the most effective American work in support of sport during the ante-bellum period, "Saints and their Bodies."[14] Following the 1860 intercollegiate regatta, a reporter for the New York *Tribune* expressed the opinion that Higginson's influence was primarily responsible for the recent great change in the attitude of college boys toward sport.[15] Higginson's article also prompted Oliver W. Holmes to present his thoughts on the subject. Holmes was convinced that greater participation in sport would improve everything in American life from sermons of the clergy to the physical well-being of individuals. The result of the negative attitude toward sport, in his view, was the propagation of forms which were unworthy of membership in the human race. He wrote:

---

[10] Thomas C. Grattan, *Observations of a British Consul, 1839–46* (London, 1859), as reprinted in Allan Nevins, ed., *American Social History as Recorded by British Travellers* (New York, 1923), pp. 250–51.

[11] "Why We Get Sick," *Harper's Magazine*, XIII (Oct. 1856), 646.

[12] "College Life in New England," *Harper's Weekly*, I (Aug. 1857), 488–89.

[13] "Editor's Table," *Harvard Magazine*, IV (Apr. 1858), 134.

[14] *Atlantic Monthly*, I (Mar. 1858), 582–95.

[15] "The Days of the Regatta at Worcester," New York *Tribune*, July 27, 1860.

> I am satisfied that such a set of black-coated, stiff-jointed, soft muscled, paste-complexioned youth as we can boast in our Atlantic cities never before sprang from the loins of Anglo-Saxon lineage . . . We have a few good boatmen, —no good horsemen that I hear of,—nothing remarkable, I believe, in cricketing,—and as for any great athletic feat performed by a gentleman in these latitudes, society would drop a man who should run round the Common in five minutes.[16]

Henry W. Beecher and Edward Everett were also among the active crusaders for sport.[17]

The campaign of Higginson, Holmes and others was highly effective, and once again the British influence is seen, for it became known as the Muscular Christianity Movement, a term previously used to describe the emerging British attitude toward sport. Charles Kingsley was the chief apostle of Muscular Christianity, but the cult of athleticism first received public expression in Thomas Hughes' novel, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857). Hughes' story about life at Rugby School romanticized sport and glorified the work of Thomas Arnold, its headmaster.[18] Soon after the British novel appeared in America, college boys were actively engaged in efforts to emulate practices detailed by the author.

The impact of the American version of Muscular Christianity and *Tom Brown's Schooldays* was so great that one student boasted: "We are hastening to that millennial day so anxiously desired by one of our editors when the first scholar can also claim the stoutest oar of the college." It was due to the influence of Higginson, Holmes and Hughes, he wrote, that a "multitude from every class are playing at base or cricket, in a manner that would excite the admiration, even if it shocked the taste, of Tom Brown and his fellows of Rugby."[19] Within two years, emphasis on sport had reached such proportions that President Cornelius C. Felton of Harvard took measures to confine it to acceptable limits. In defense of his action, he reminded the Overseers that the Christian religion was based upon scripture, not muscle. "The language of some of the recent discussions," he reported, "seems to imply that muscular development is identical with moral, intellectual, and religious progress. It seems to be thought the panacea for all the evils under which humanity labors."[20]

---

[16] "The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table," *Atlantic Monthly*, I (May 1858), 881.

[17] Arthur C. Cole, "Our Sporting Grandfathers: The Cult of Athletics at its Source," *Atlantic Monthly*, CL (July 1932), 88–96.

[18] Evaluations of the impact of Hughes' novel upon British life can be found in E. G. Dunning, "Football in its Early Stages," *History Today*, XIII (Dec. 1963), 838–47; and Edward C. Mack and W. H. G. Armytage, *Thomas Hughes: The Life of the Author of Tom Brown's Schooldays* (London, 1952).

[19] [Henry G. Spaulding], "Mens Sana," *Harvard Magazine*, IV (June 1858), 201.

[20] *Annual Report of the President of Harvard College to the Overseers, 1859–60* (Cambridge, Mass., 1860), p. 22.

Suggestions for the revival of intercollegiate competition came in 1858 from an editor of Harvard's student magazine. Reports by American correspondents of the Oxford-Cambridge race in which they lauded the British for their display of physical prowess and expressed "lugubrious lament for the entire disregard of exercise among Americans,"[21] disturbed him. His idea was to discredit such observations with a grand regatta in which crews from all New England colleges would compete. "What say ye, Yale, Dartmouth, Brown, Columbia, Harvard," he asked, "shall we introduce a new institution into America?"[22] In response, representatives from Harvard, Brown, Trinity and Yale met at New Haven, Connecticut, on May 26, 1858. They organized the College Rowing Association and voted to stage an annual regatta. The regatta did not take place that year due to a training accident in which a Yale crewman lost his life, but was held successfully in 1859 and 1860. Following the 1860 regatta in which crews from only Yale and Harvard participated, no intercollegiate competition in the sport took place until Yale and Harvard met again in 1864. Through 1870 races were limited to crews from the same two schools. Publicity attending the annual regattas and the 1869 Harvard-Oxford race brought numerous requests from other colleges for permission to enter the competition. Yale's crewmen were opposed to the idea but representatives from Harvard, Brown, Massachusetts Agricultural College and Bowdoin formed the Rowing Association of American Colleges for the purpose of staging an annual union regatta. Organized sport was given additional impetus in 1871, when the crew from Massachusetts Agricultural College won the first race staged by the new association. The victory encouraged collegians on other campuses, and four years later crews from thirteen schools were trying to win recognition on Lake Saratoga for their institutions.

By 1876 students at eastern institutions had established the sports which would be adopted by collegians throughout the nation. Crew was the first organized sport and the one around which values developed which made intercollegiate competition so important. The first regatta was arranged by a railroad superintendent as a business venture. Students considered it a "jolly lark," and the second race was hardly more important. The question of national honor gave them a reason for planning the union regatta of 1859, but the objectives of rescuing America "from the reproach of being a nation of dyspeptics" or proving the virility of collegians were not ample motivations.

The regatta soon became more than a demonstration of interest in manly pursuits or a contest between rival crews. Students and the public began to regard victory as a measure of an institution's prestige. The amount as well as the type of coverage given the races in public and student newspapers and magazines made contest results measures of institutional merit. In 1852, no editor devoted more than a few inches to the race, but by 1875 accounts of the annual regatta were feature items in nationally distributed magazines and received front-page treatment in the leading newspapers. The increased coverage focused attention on the winning crew to the extent that one partisan reporter thought it necessary to remind readers that despite the victory Yale was still a "little in the rear of Harvard in its *machinery* for eduction . . . ,"[23] and a student declared that championships were "sacredly connected with the glory of Alma Mater herself."[24]

---

[21] "Editor's Table," *Harvard Magazine*, IV (May 1858), 178.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 179.

Crew contributed either directly or indirectly to the adoption and establishment of other sports. Instead of entering regatta competition, students at some schools turned to other sports. They organized teams, issued challenges and entered into intercollegiate competition. In some cases the new sports first gained favor when added to the program of regatta week.

Collegians occasionally engaged in various bat and ball games until they turned in the late 1850s to the recently standardized game of baseball. In 1859, Princeton students formed a baseball society; two years later there were six teams. Amherst and Williams played the first intercollegiate contest in 1859, but the sport grew slowly until it was made a part of the regatta program in 1864 and Yale and Harvard teams began playing each other in 1868. In the 1870s many college teams in the East were playing extensive schedules. In 1870 the Harvard University Baseball Club played 44 games. Following regular season play the team went on a tour of northern, southern and western cities. During the trip, all but one of 26 games were played against professional clubs. By 1879, the popularity of the sport was such that an association to regulate it was deemed desirable and representatives from Harvard, Brown, Amherst, Princeton and Dartmouth founded an intercollegiate baseball league.

Track and field competition on an organized basis had been engaged in by students at only two schools prior to the first intercollegiate contests, at Columbia in 1869 and Yale in 1872. The first athletic meeting featuring competition between schools was held at the time of the 1873 regatta. It consisted of a single-event program in which athletes from Amherst, Cornell and McGill (Canada) ran a two-mile race. The new sport received much additional publicity because it was a part of the regatta program. This made it attractive to aspiring athletes on several campuses, and athletic associations were formed for the purpose of preparing competitors for intercollegiate meets. Of colleges with athletic clubs, only Harvard,

---

[23] "The Regatta," *Worcester Palladium*, Aug. 3, 1859.

[24] "The College Regatta," *Yale Literary Magazine*, XXX (Oct. 1864), 13.

Yale, Amherst, Columbia, Cornell, Princeton, Trinity, Union, Wesleyan and Williams sent representatives to the meeting in 1875 which led to the formation of the Intercollegiate Association of Amateur Athletes of America. The new organization held its first championship meet in 1876. It was a ten-event program.

Football had been played on several campuses as "pickup games" or as "class rushes" for several decades prior to the first intercollegiate contest in 1869. Issuance of the challenge may have been prompted by the outcome of a baseball game the previous spring. Following the Princeton-Rutgers games that year, teams were organized at several colleges, and a few of them were soon involved in intercollegiate play. However, the sport did not actually begin its rise to the position of prominence it attained in the 1890s until the first Yale-Harvard contest in 1875. The next year, at the invitation of the Princeton club, representatives of four football associations met for the purpose of forming an intercollegiate association to adopt a common set of playing rules. Of the schools represented, Harvard, Princeton and Columbia became charter members of the Intercollegiate Football Association.

By 1876, when collegians had created associations for conducting intercollegiate competition in crew, baseball, track and field and football, organized sport was well established at most of the leading institutions in the East. Formalized participation in crew began in the 1840s, baseball in the 1850s, football in the 1860s and track and field in the 1870s, but widespread adoption of these sports as campus activities did not take place until interest in them had been generated by intercollegiate contests. Following their successful establishment, campus organizations expanded. The intensity of activity enhanced the selection and training of college athletes. From this beginning an ever increasing number of students were attracted to organized sport and participation in it soon became popular. Intercollegiate sport was in large measure the product of a favorable press during the decade following the Civil War. This publicity encouraged participation because the outcome of events was considered "sacredly connected with the glory of Alma Mater herself." No other factor was more important in determining the nature and content of organized collegiate sport.