

In what ways did sport reflect american society in the 19th century

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In what ways did sport reflect American society? This essay will concentrate on looking at the ethnic and class divide within the sports subculture of American society, and how it reflects American Society as a whole. When examining any society there is always a broad area to cover, while looking at America's society I will be looking at the arguments that it is the 'land of the free' a 'new nation' which immigrants flocked to start a new life in a country of much 'opportunity'.

I will be using the sport in the 19th century to examine just how much America was a land of opportunity and of the free, and whether it differed from the attitudes in countries from around the rest of the world. When looking at sport in American society in the 19th century, first we must look at the origins of the sport and games that were played, to see how they were seen within a new growing society.

Before the birth of the American colonies, it has been argued that sport in America was a cultural practice for the most part associated with Native American ceremonies and religion, colonisation brought the idea of sport and games for leisure. The English brought with them recreational ideologies, it was not just the particular games and sports but the attitudes and practices in which leisure activities were rooted. The Native Americans had many sports/games similar to that of Europeans before colonisation but they had independent cultural contexts that gave them different meanings.

Often the activities accompanied fertility ceremonies, burial rites, healing practices, and attempts to control the weather. It was reported in the American Anthropologist (1890) by James Mooney that Cherokees who

played stickball (Also known as Lacrosse) must not engage in intercourse for a month before a game. Also, prior to games they would build fires and dance to the sound of drums, rattles and sacred chants. Players were prepared before games with prayer's, pipesmoking, body painting and many other rituals designed more to enhance spirituality rather than to ensure them victory.

Participation in these games was not voluntary as the reasons they were played were for crucial tribal concerns. Indeed, the English who came and colonised America also played games for similar cultural reasons, though these reasons were not as crucial of a concern for the whole nation, but for smaller areas of society. In general, the British played for leisure, in Europe this formed the counterpoint to the necessity of daily labour, and the ideal of playing sport for leisure is still very strong today all over the world.

The English leisure ethic more so than its work ethic became idealised by Virginian plantation owners. They acted like English gentlemen, followed English press, fashion and played English sports such as Cricket, they did this in search of a class distinction. It was mainly for this reason that sporting displays became a big preoccupation among the Virginian gentry; they were some of the few that had the time and money to occupy themselves with such tasks. Due to this, leisure became a very class restricting custom, and the English educated gentry endeavoured to keep it this way.

One such example of the class distinctions at this time within American society is that of James Bullocke who was a tailor, he defeated Mathew Slader a ' gentleman' in a 1674 horse race on which each man had placed a

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bet of two thousand pounds of tobacco. However, after this victory the county court told the men that it was “ contrary to law for a labourer to make a race being a sport for Gentlemen”, and fined him one hundred pounds of tobacco. The court also confined Slader (the gentleman) to the stocks for an hour for his loss to a working man.

A leading factor in the pursuit of leisure for whites was that slavery made it difficult for them to value hard work, and easy for them to appreciate sport and games. The logic of this was simple, if enslaved blacks had to work; play was proof of freedom and elevated social status. Labour was a burden of blackness, leisure was the prerogative of whiteness. The institution of slavery, in fact, compelled the vast majority of African Americans to “ steal” time for leisure and recreation, just as they stole a certain kind of knowledge when they learned to read and write.

The civil war however painful it was, had a good side to it as well, this being that it helped to bring a stop to slavery. This meant freedom, citizenship, and constitutional protections from the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments, however this did not mean too much to America’s black population. The good that came from the end of slavery was overshadowed by institutionalised racial segregation and repression that treated African American’s as second-class citizens. Many African Americans turned to sport and leisure to help cope with the racial discrimination, however this was not as easy as one may think it to be.

Sport was used as a point of interest that brought many blacks together, Baseball was one of the most unifying of sports for African Americans with

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many early Black baseball teams, one of the earliest being the Pythian Baseball Club of Philadelphia, they consisted of four teams with players coming from the higher ranks of Black society. The Pythian's played other black teams from around Philadelphia, including one of the most famous, the Excelsiors (the oldest black team in the city).

The Pythian's played for the unofficial "Colored Championship of the United States" in 1871, they carried a race's pride when they played all be it separating themselves from the lower and middle classes in the African American society. This showing that although it became more acceptable for black players to play white sports, they were separated out from the white's and class was still a divisive factor amongst players. So, 'land of the free' of 'opportunity' it does not look like it, when we see the divide between the players of this sport.

Black athletes were involved in almost every sport by the end of the nineteenth century, however, boxing was one they had a larger representation and became most prominent in. Black athletes were more acceptable in boxing as it was believed that it was more suitable to the black athlete's abilities and there was also a negative stigma attached to the sport. While in baseball black players were cultivating themselves a separate coloured league, boxing was a predominantly white organised sport and black boxers suffered the wrath of much of the white population as well as some from the black population too.

A successful and controversial figure in boxing was Jack Johnson, the first American black heavyweight boxing champion, from a white point of view he

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showed many of the personal qualities disliked of blacks, Johnson was defiant, ill-mannered and incorrigible. Also, he married three white women and he was successful capturing the symbolism of Anglo-Saxon white superiority, the heavyweight boxing crown. Johnson was not just disliked by the whites for his behaviour, many in the black community thought that his actions hindered the progress of the race.

He was a hero to many, but also was considered an embarrassment as he refused to act subservient. The way Johnson lived his life could be argued that he was a true pioneer of the 'American dream', an operator in the 'land of the free' that has taken the opportunity given to him and made it work. His boxing career was a quest for freedom, he formed his own unique style of fighting and his success gained him many of the material things many blacks craved but they would never achieve. Examining boxing, one could argue that this sport showed a truer interpretation of American Society than any of the others, America was supposed to be a 'land of opportunity' where people could emigrate, to achieve things that they would not be able to do in their homeland. However, was this sport mirroring American society or one of very few things that actually fell in line with the belief of the 'American dream'? This being the story of one man, who achieved his own dream, at the cost of being disliked by many, surely a 'land of the free' would encourage his success. In conclusion, it is hard to fully understand American society from how it affected sport, whether it be racism, gender or class distinctions.

One thing that is obvious to any historian looking at this subject, it is that these problems, however much people believe them to no longer be a problem in society, they still are. Class is no longer much of a problem within sport anymore, unless it is stopping you from joining the prestigious tennis or golf club, though these days money will buy you whatever class status you want. However, whether it is gender arguments such as prize funds at competitions such as Wimbledon, or the racism provided by fans to players of all different sports around the world, these problems will never go away.

So is it wrong to judge America for its sporting/sociological crimes of the past? When looking at American society now it is still divided between sports which are seen as black and white, white sports such as ice hockey played in the northern states, and NASCAR in the southern states, black players are few and far between while Basketball is predominantly filled with black players. The truth is sport will always divide, the most recent divide in sport has come with homosexuality, David Kopay, was one of the only American Footballers to come out as gay in 1975.

After he retired he was considered for many top coaching roles though he believes he never landed one because of his sexuality. Kopay is now on the board of the Gay and Lesbian Athletics Association, an organisation whose purpose is to increase acceptance and visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender athletes in the professional, amateur, and recreational athletics communities. You could use this argument to show that sport does not reflect society as whole but more secular groupings.

Modern day racism, homophobia, sexism are all hot topics but society overall is not reflected as any of these things, yet sport still is. To say that trends in sport reflect overall society can be strongly refuted, such as in the army, police force and many working environments these problems have become institutionalised and are a representation of a few minds, not a whole society. However much sport in American society separated and segregated people, the fact is that it has eventually brought everyone together to provide a more sturdy society.

America proved itself for a small period of time to be a 'land of the free' a 'new nation' in which if an athlete was good at a sport it didn't matter if he was different, the opportunity was still there. It may have taken over a hundred years but the class divide has gone and the divide between race and gender is being depleted. Sport is a catalyst for cohesiveness, and it has helped in the development and the creation of American society as we see it today. Bibliography Books Jable, J. Thomas.

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