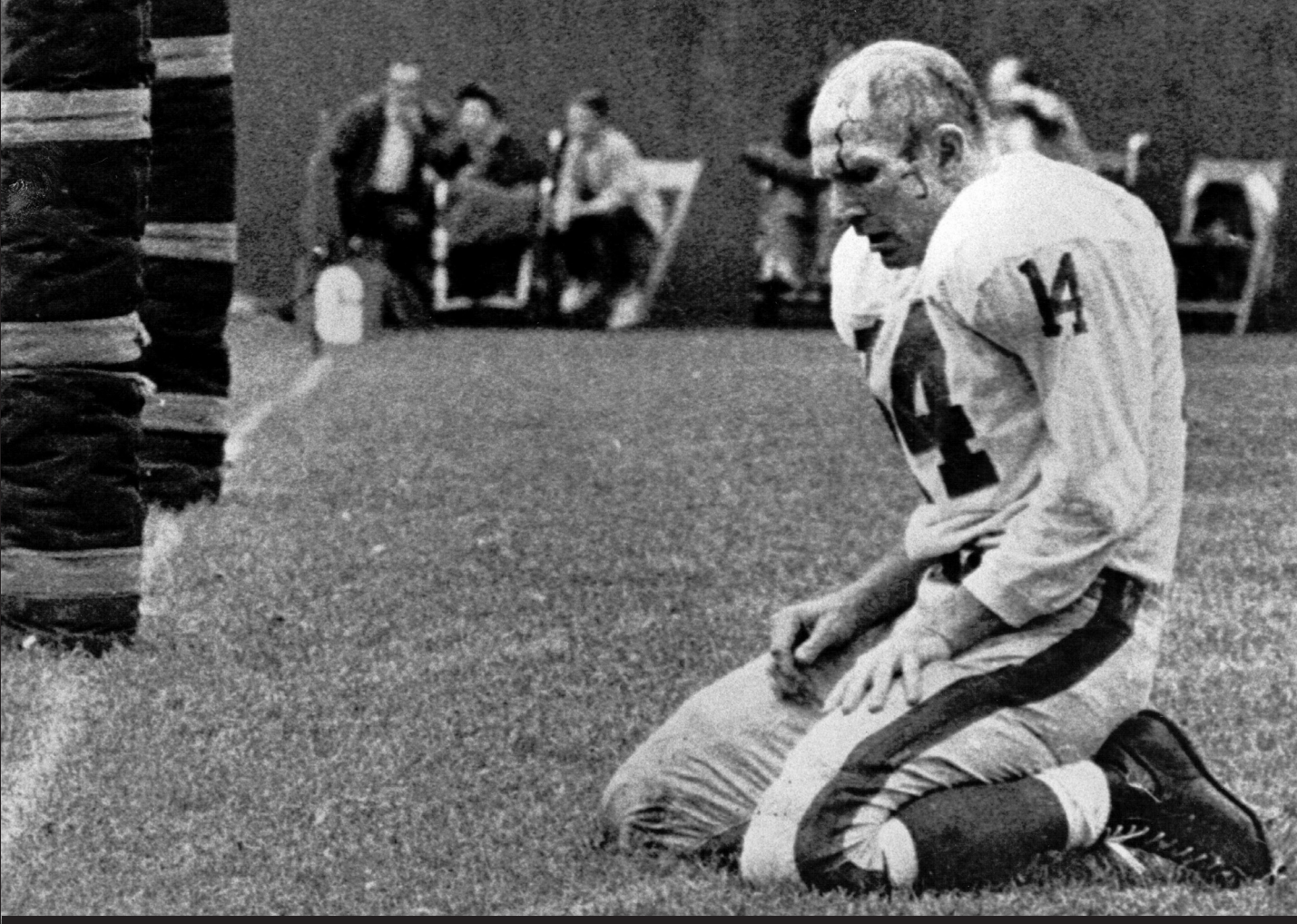

Sports in American Life

A History

Third Edition

Richard O. Davies

WILEY Blackwell

SPORTS IN AMERICAN LIFE

Cover photo

Thirty-eight year old New York Giants quarterback Y. A. Tittle kneels in the Giants end zone in September 1964 after throwing an interception returned for a touchdown by the Pittsburgh Steelers. Tittle was ferociously hit as he released the pass by 270-pound defensive end John Baker and slammed to the ground, suffering a cracked sternum and a concussion on the play that left him dazed and disoriented. This iconic photograph is one of the most famous football photographs of all time because it encapsulates the violence and humanity of the game. It was taken by *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* photographer Morris Berman, and ironically was not published by the newspaper because it was not an "action" shot. Tittle returned to play the following weekend, his concussion symptoms not considered of medical importance. He retired after the season, bringing to a close a 17-year career in professional football, much of it spent with the San Francisco 49ers. Traded to the Giants in 1961 he led the team to three consecutive Eastern division titles and was named the league's Most Valuable Player. He was elected to the Professional Football Hall of Fame in 1971 based upon a record-setting career that included 242 touchdown passes and 2427 completions that gained more than 33,000 yards. In 2016, at the age of 89, the former NFL star resided in the Bay Area suffering from dementia.

SPORTS IN AMERICAN LIFE
A HISTORY

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For Sharon, Jenny, and Bob

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History, and this, the third edition of *Sports in American Life,* symbolizes for me the capstone of an academic life well lived. Throughout my career my family has provided a rock-solid foundation, and it is to those three very special people that I dedicate this book.

Richard O. Davies
University of Nevada, Reno

Introduction

During the early years of the nineteenth century, the word *sport* carried a much different connotation than it does today. To be a sporting man in the mid-nineteenth century was to be someone who flouted the rules of social acceptability by gravitating toward activities deemed inappropriate for a proper gentleman. The term *sport* was, in fact, used to identify men who embraced the bachelor culture of the tavern, where amid a haze of cigar smoke and the odor of stale beer and cheap whiskey, they watched cockfights and dogfights, bet on an upcoming horse race or baseball match, and won or lost money on the toss of the dice or the turn of a card. Upon special occasions they might even watch pugilists bloody each other in a bare-knuckle prizefight.

There also emerged during the same time period a group of men referred to as *sportsmen*. These were men of good social standing who found outlets from their pressing business and professional lives as participants and spectators in such activities as sailing, swimming, horse racing, foot racing, rowing, and baseball. By century's end they likely had also gravitated toward popular new activities such as tennis, bicycle racing, football, golf, basketball, and volleyball. As these sports grew in popularity, sportsmen (now joined by a small but growing number of sportswomen) mimicked trends within the professional and business worlds by striving to achieve order and stability. They established amateur and professional leagues and associations, published statistics, developed and marketed specialized equipment, and enforced written rules governing athletic competition.

Although sports and games revealed a distinctly provincial quality in 1800, by the beginning of the twentieth century spontaneity and informality had been replaced by formalized structures, written rules, and bureaucratic organization. Befitting the growing specialization within the emerging national marketplace, a small number of skilled athletes were even able to work at play, earning their living as professional athletes. Several of the new sports provided women opportunities to participate, although under carefully constrained conditions. In this rapidly changing environment, the word *sport* lost much of its negative connotation. Now, to be a sporting man or woman was to be involved in a robust new American lifestyle. By the early twentieth

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century, organized sports had assumed a prominent place in American life, reflective of the exuberant capitalistic and democratic spirit of a rapidly maturing society.

This book traces the evolution of American sports, from its unorganized and quaint origins to the present time. The narrative is organized around the argument that sports, for good or for ill, have been a significant social force throughout the history of the United States. In recent years, historians have come to recognize that games have revealed many of the underlying values of society. Rather than being irrelevant diversions of little consequence, such activities provide important insights into fundamental values and beliefs. The games people played may have provided a convenient means of releasing tensions or a means of escaping the realities of the day, but they also provided rituals that linked generations and united communities.

The essential assumption of this book is that throughout American history the form and purpose of sporting events have been closely connected to the larger society from which they arose. As but one recent example: during the days immediately following the terrorist attack upon the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, on September 11, 2001, Americans found reassurance in expressing their national unity and resolve through highly symbolic patriotic exercises conducted prior to the start of baseball and football games. National leaders urged the resumption of sports schedules as soon as it became apparent that no more attacks were imminent, viewing the playing of games as an emphatic statement of national resolve that the terrorists would not disturb the rhythms of everyday American life.

Sports in American Culture

Organized sports in the nineteenth century grew naturally with the new systems of transportation, manufacturing, and commercial organization. During the twentieth century they grew exponentially, propelled to prominence by the new communications mediums of radio, motion pictures, newspapers, and television. In contemporary America, sports have become an enormous multibillion-dollar enterprise. Professional football and baseball franchises are valued at between $500 million upwards to $3 billion, and nearly every major American city has in recent years spent hundreds of millions of dollars to build sports arenas and stadiums to accommodate professional teams. Most major professional teams operate on annual budgets that exceed $200 million, and major college athletic programs have annual budgets ranging between $30 million and $150 million. An oft-overlooked ancillary economic activity attests to the importance Americans place upon sporting events: conservative estimates are that gamblers bet at least $4 billion a year on sporting events, a figure larger than the gross national product of several less developed countries. At least 20 percent of the news reported in any daily urban newspaper is devoted to the activities of a small handful of that city's prominent residents who dribble basketballs, hit baseballs, or knock each other to the ground with intense ferocity. Radio and television networks provide 24-hour coverage of America's sports to a seemingly insatiable

audience, and a complex infrastructure of social media web sites and blogs have in recent years added a new and increasingly influential layer to the communications mix.

My first effort to examine the role of sports in American life presented the argument that a broad swath of the American people were obsessed with sports; at the time I thought my interpretation would engender considerable criticism, but instead it resonated with general readers as well as those in academia.[1] In many ways, America's obsession with sports and the men and women who play the games has intersected in unsuspected ways with larger issues of public policy. For example, in many cities students attend public schools in dilapidated buildings with leaking roofs and outmoded classrooms and laboratories, and are taught by underpaid teachers using tattered out-of-date textbooks. City streets go unrepaired, libraries close, and public hospitals struggle to deal with patient loads, but in these same cities, civic leaders eagerly cater to the demands of professional teams. The owners – multimillionaires all – enjoy a special kind of public welfare through their lucrative agreements with local governments. Crucial social services might go untended, but time and again, taxpayers vote in favor of a tax increase to build a new arena or stadium and public officials placate team owners by granting tax breaks, sweetheart deals on rental fees, and control of concessions and parking. For the fortunate few franchise owners, their costs have been socialized through active government subsidies, their profits privatized.

Between 1980 and 2010, nearly every major American city constructed lavish new sports venues for several professional teams, often to the serious neglect of other community needs. Just as the citizenry of medieval European communities revealed their essential values by constructing imposing cathedrals in the town square, so too have modern American cities given expression to their priorities and values by erecting enormous sports facilities.

Sports and American History

The pages that follow examine the role of sports within the broader context of the major themes of American history. This book is an extension of major trends of the last quarter century that have reshaped the way historians look at the past. The historical profession, which had long focused its attention on political, economic, and diplomatic themes, was fundamentally affected by the social upheavals of the 1960s. A new generation of students, who questioned many of the existing myths about the "Establishment," demanded courses in African American, Hispanic, and Native American history, and fresh perspectives on the American experience written from the vantage point of the poor, women, and the working class.

It was within this period of intellectual ferment that scholars first began a serious examination of the role of sports in American history. The extensive body of literature upon which this book is based reveals that most of the writing on the history of American sports before the mid-1970s was done outside the academy, but in recent decades professional historians have produced important books and articles that explore the relationship of American sports with larger social issues. In

1972, the first professional society in the United States devoted to the field of sports history was established, and several pioneering scholars made laudable efforts to provide a meaningful synthesis.[2] A few courses on the history of baseball had been taught previously, but in the ensuing decades more inclusive histories of American sports were introduced. Academic publishers began releasing a growing number of scholarly monographs on the subject of sports. History survey textbooks now included pictures of early baseball parks or college football games along with the more conventional images of soldiers, presidents, and smoke-belching factories and train locomotives. But resistance, or at least persistent apathy, has slowed the integration of sports into broader cultural contexts in the curricula of the humanities and social sciences.

The emergence of sports history as a serious scholarly endeavor is no small achievement, because within any college or university there are faculty members who decry the existence of intercollegiate sports programs. A national survey I conducted in 1999 indicated that the overwhelming number of specialized upper-division and graduate-level American courses in social history still do not include the role of sports, and that history departments remained reluctant to conduct searches for faculty with sports as a focus of their teaching and research.

The rationale for this resistance is not surprising. Many faculty members have rightfully objected to gargantuan athletic department budgets and the simultaneous exploitation and coddling of athletes on their campuses, and have been outraged by the many scandals that have time-and-again besmirched the image of American higher education. Tenured faculty who offer seminars in American social history have built their research programs on other important cultural connections – the arts, labor, motion pictures, literature, immigration, class, gender, and the list goes on. Few graduate programs provide encouragement to graduate students to undertake serious research in sports-related topics, and those that select them are routinely warned that their placement in the academic marketplace could easily be jeopardized. Such was the case of Yale doctoral student Warren Goldstein who in the 1970s opted to present a dissertation on the history of baseball. His *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* became a landmark study that opened up scholarly potentials for future scholars. Nonetheless, he reports that his dissertation topic made his search for a tenure-track university position a difficult and prolonged exercise.[3]

This text will examine many themes, but throughout the roles of gender and race are pervasive. Writing in 1994, two scholars who have made major contributions to the literature exploring the cultural context of American sports, Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard, called for scholars engaged in sociology, literature, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and history to explore the many ways where their cultural studies intersect with sports: "Where is there a cultural activity more freighted with constructions of masculinity than football, more deeply inscribed with race than boxing, more tied in the public mind to the hopes and hopelessness of inner-city youth than basketball?" Taking note of the heavy emphasis being placed upon multiculturalism in contemporary college curricula, they pointed to the pervasive role of sports in the mass media. "It is almost a cliché," they wrote, "to mention that sports are the

lingua franca of men talking across divisions of class and race. Sports can reveal just how interdependent particular subcultures and the larger consumer culture can be. Think, for example, of the symbiotic ties between inner-city playground basketball and the National Basketball Association."[4]

On a superficial level, from the colonial period to the present, sporting events have provided a useful diversion from the pressures of daily life. Just as colonists tossed a ball or watched a horserace to enliven their lives, so too do contemporary Americans follow the ups and downs of their favorite teams, put $10 in the office bracket competition on the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) basketball tournament, enjoy a weekend game of golf or tennis, and play on their church's co-ed slow-pitch softball team. On a more serious level, parents, religious leaders, educators, and moral reformers have used sports to teach new generations the values of fair play, honesty, perseverance, and cooperation. Presidents from Theodore Roosevelt to Barack Obama have interjected themselves into the public debate over sports issues. President George W. Bush was part owner and managing partner of a major-league baseball team, the Texas Rangers, before his election as governor of Texas in 1994.

Sporting venues have often provided a stage on which Americans have dealt with the paramount issues of race and sexual discrimination. Students can learn much about the nature of American race relations by examining the Negro Baseball Leagues, the "fight of the century" between Jack Johnson and Jim Jeffries, the triumphs and tragedies of track star Jesse Owens, or the courage and resolution of Jackie Robinson in challenging the unwritten exclusionary racial covenant of organized baseball. Students interested in the dynamics of the women's rights movement can similarly draw insights from the struggles against entrenched sexism in both amateur and professional sports by such gifted athletes as Gertrude Ederle, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Wilma Rudolph, and Billie Jean King. Political battles over the development of athletic programs for schoolgirls and college women during the past five decades have been, and remain, an integral part of a much larger national struggle against gender discrimination.

For the purpose of this book, the word *sport* entails an organized competitive activity between participants that requires some combination of skill and physical prowess. Thus, such games as baseball, volleyball, and tennis are considered sports; chess, backgammon, and bridge are not. Some competitive games played primarily for pleasure or exercise, such as croquet, badminton, horseshoes, jogging, and aerobics are likewise excluded from this definition, but stock car and marathon races fit comfortably within the definition. Professional wrestling, despite its popularity, is excluded because it is a loosely scripted entertainment spectacle rather than a competitive contest. Similarly, junk sports such as roller derby and motocross are excluded, along with choreographed performance spectacles such as water ballet, figure skating, and ice dancing. In recent years, new sports have emerged out of what were originally recreational pursuits: snowboarding, skateboarding, and mixed martial arts. Although hunters and fishermen refer to themselves as "sportsmen" and while professional fishermen sometimes engage in tournaments, those activities are considered here to be of a recreational nature.

This is an examination of the world of sports as it intersects with the larger themes and issues of American life. American sports, at their best, have provided us with inspiring stories of courage, grace, drama, excitement, and accomplishment. Conversely, they have also brought out for all to see depressing examples of brutality, cruelty, racism, sexism, stupidity, intolerance, homophobia, xenophobia, nationalism, greed, and hypocrisy. Both extremes are on display in the pages that follow. In many respects, these pages present my personal take on the role of sports in American history, a culmination of a lifetime spent as a participant in and close observer of the American sports scene, and, for the past 25 years, as a professor exploring the fascinating saga of sports in the American experience as a researcher and classroom instructor.

For better or for worse, sports have played an integral part in the history of the United States, providing Americans with a venue in which major cultural and social issues have been debated, contested, and, in some notable instances, resolved. In a sense, this book seeks to examine the American past through the prism of sports. It is not simply a story of the winners and losers, nor is it a chronicle of the individual achievements of athletes. This is a book intended for the serious student interested in examining the American past from the perspective of sports.

Notes

1 Richard O. Davies, *America's Obsession: Sports and Society since 1945* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

2 See the *Journal of Sport History* published by the North American Society for Sport History. For the early histories and related studies of the broad expanse of American sports history and American society's embrace of sports, see Foster Rhea Dulles, *America Learns to Play: A History of Popular Recreation, 1607–1940* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1940); John R. Betts, *America's Sporting Heritage, 1850–1950* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1974); John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sports* (New York: Lea & Febiger, 1978); James A. Michener, *Sports in America* (New York: Random House, 1976); Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983; 6th edn, 2009); Douglas Noverr and Lawrence E. Ziewacz, *The Games They Played: Sports in American History* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1988); Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Jay Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1993); and Steven A. Riess, *Major Problems in American Sport History* (Boston: Cengage, 2013). Three authors provide a global perspective on the history of sports: Richard D. Mandell, *Sport: A Cultural History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); William J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982); and Allen Guttmann, *Sports: The First Five Millennia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004). Students might begin their study of the phenomenon of American sports with Michael Mandelbaum's thought-provoking *The Meaning of Sports: Why Americans Watch Baseball, Football, and Basketball and What They See When They Do* (New York: Public Affairs Press, 2004).

3 Warren Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989; Warren Goldstein, "Thirty Years of Baseball History: A Player's Notes," *Reviews in American History* (December 2010), pp. 759–70.

4 Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard, "Taking Sports Seriously," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 24, 1995).

1

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

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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 slowdowns, 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