**Sports and the Academy In US Colleges: Another English Story**

How did athletics become such an integral part of US colleges and universities?

As in so many big US history questions, our answer lies in the traditions developed in Britain which were then exported, for better or worse, over the ocean and to the New World. Given that the first colleges in the US were in the East, the schools that later became the Ivy League created a model for college athletics that then spread to other parts of the United States. Therefore, this story has what historian Ronald Smith in his book Sports and Freedom, calls “an East Coast flavor.”

Harvard and Yale more than any other two colleges gave form to intercollegiate athletics. They and other eastern institutions were the first to form inter-collegiate teams. Eastern colleges brought forth both commercialized and professionalized athletics. They began the practice of paying professional coaches to turn out winners. They inaugurated the huge, permanent stadiums. The eastern colleges set the standards for each of the sports, including the playing rules. The rest of the nation’s colleges inevitably looked eastward to athletic leadership— and continued to do so even after athletics were no longer dominated by eastern schools. (Smith, Ronald A., Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big-Time College Athletics, Preface. Page ix.)

The current framework of athletics in US colleges was established in the five decades between the first intercollegiate rowing race between Harvard and Yale in 1852 and the formation of the NCAA as a response to the football crisis of 1905. Athletics and other extra-curricular activities were created by students as a push back against the stifling and rigid latin and greek based curriculum imported primarily from Oxford and Cambridge. Most of the pre-revolutionary schools were influenced by either the Protestant Reformation or the evangelical Great Awakening. The institutions were characterized by the concept of “in loco parentis”, where the administrators and faculty of the schools felt duty-bound to act as parents for the boarding students and made sure that they discouraged behavior that would detract from the purpose of the schools— which was to produce clergy and young men who had the right moral leanings and character to become sober leaders.

In their push against the “in loco parentis” ethos of the schools, students in the 1700s and 1800s formed extra-curricular activities that included sports, music clubs, student government, choirs, bands, fraternities, orchestras, debating societies, poetry clubs, religious clubs, and literary magazines. Of all of these, athletics quickly came to be the most important. Over time, most of the extra-curricular activities were absorbed into the academic structure of various departments such as music, religion, english, and history. Only athletics was kept separate, and evolved into a stand-alone activity with it’s own extensive and expensive administrative structure.

The Civil War (1861-1865) marked a crucial turning point for athletics in colleges. While there was a competitive nature to sports in US colleges before the Civil War, “college sport competition for institutional purposes, however, would await a post-Civil War change when attitudes toward sport became more relaxed.” (Sports and Freedom, pg. 10.) Students had created self-organized sports as a way of pushing back against what they saw as excessive control by administrations and improving their social life. Right from the beginning it became clear that, unlike the class bound culture in Britain, the climate for sports in the US encouraged competition and winning over the ideals exemplified by sporting Oxford and Cambridge gentlemen rowing against each other on the Thames River. American university students professionalized sports from the start, paying for coaches, receiving prize money for races, setting up separate training tables, playing professionally as baseball players during the summer at Catskills resorts, encouraging and even paying for "tramp" athletes to come and compete for their schools. After the Civil War, university administrations deemed that athletic performance was the epitome of character and co-opted control of athletics from students.

Interestingly, right from the moment that students began organizing, support for athletics was not universal. This theme of pushback against athletics by faculty, some administrators, students and alumni, and outsiders has also become a hallmark of sports in US high schools and colleges. Some faculty and presidents attempted to limit practice time and games because they felt it took student attention from their studies. Students from different schools also fought bitterly over rules of play and eligibility. Some faculty were troubled by the practice of paying coaches, who sometimes earned more money than professors. In the early 1900s, muckrakers had exposed how Ivy League schools paid athletes. They found that Yale had an athletic slush fund of $100,000 ($2,696,710 in 2018 dollars!) that they used to promote the program. When we read current stories about troubles and controveries in college sports, we have to keep in mind that this is in fact an old story.

In short, athletic scandals were invented by our most elite Ivy League schools in the 1800s. By the time the NCAA was founded in 1905, the framework for the modern day structure of athletics in the US was set.

Fast forward to the April 24, 2018 press conference by former Secretary Condoleeza Rice, who was asked by the NCAA to chair the Commission on College Basketball in reaction to an FBI investigation into corruption and fraud in college basketball and recruiting. Investigators had detailed how apparel companies and players agents secretly paid coaches, players and their families to ensure that coveted athletes signed with schools that had contracts with the companies. Rice, a former Secretary of State in the George W. Bush administration and a rabid college sports fan who also serves on the committee that seeded football teams for the NCAA national championship football games, said that “We need to put the college back in college basketball.” This sentiment echoes the core belief of the NCAA that college sports epitomize the concept of the amateur student athlete.

Rice’s appealing idea is that there was a golden time when athletics in colleges were perfectly balanced— when athletes were students first, athletes second, and being on a team was an integral part of their education. Athletic boosters are an optimistic bunch and have evoked this happy vision since the mid-1800s, in spite of a constant stream of examples that point out that schools, under pressure to win, regularly act in unethical ways that prioritize winning over the ideals of student athletes that Rice espouses.

The ideal is encompassed in the term that the NCAA and supporters of high-level athletics in colleges insist on using— “student athlete.” In my four years of photographing for the Yale Summer Session, I’ve encountered numerous “student athletes” taking summer classes to fulfill requirements so that they can have more time during their busy playing seasons. I asked every athlete to tell me about themselves and they invariably identify themselves by their sport. “I’m a soccer player, swimmer, etc.” For them, that’s their core identity. It’s only much later in the conversation that they will tell you about what they are studying. This isn’t surprising, since they were all on coaches lists and knew that the schools were primarily interested in them as athletes first. In addition, given that the level of youth, high school, and college sports continues to climb, getting onto the coach’s recruiting list usually represents an intensive, often expensive, years-long effort. No surprise that their chosen sport becomes the essential part of the student-athlete’s core identity.

Clearly, there’s a disconnect between the NCAA student athlete ideal and the reality of athletics in US colleges and how it impact admissions policies. No other developed country has tied athletics into their system of higher education. To understand why and how this occurred, it’s useful to dive into how attitudes towards sports developed in England in the 1800s, particularly the Victorian Era (Marked by the reign of Queen Victorian from 1837-1901).

The roots of current state of sports in US schools go to England, and the way that sports was developed at Oxford, founded in 1167, and Cambridge, founded in 1209, and elite public high schools such as Eton. (In England, public high schools are actually private, the equivalent of US prep schools such as St. Paul’s and Groton.) Unsurprisingly, British emigrants brought attitudes formed by their own experiences in their homeland, from the public schools and universities. Many of the first US colleges were founded by religious groups dedicated to training ministers and the very first elite New England prep schools were profoundly influenced by the experience of leaders who had attended British public schools and universities and used these as a model for the new US schools. The attitudes towards the role of sports in education forged in Britain in the late Edwardian and Victorian eras profoundly impacted US schools, where athletics was woven into the central fabric of the schools, creating admissions standards that by the first decade of the 1900s would be very familiar to any student applying to US colleges today.

The concept of the well-rounded student, so important in most US colleges, was created on the playing fields of Britain. Education was more than just ensuring that students learned academic subjects. Schools were more than just institutions of higher learning. In fact, they would fail to fulfill their missions— creating leaders of the future— if they focused too much on the intellect. Success in life was about much more than simply academic achievement. Students had to be physically challenged in a way that hardened them, or else they would be overwhelmed by the sometimes brutal world. Leaders needed more than brains. They had to be physically toughened through children-led hazing rituals that sometimes crossed over the torture line and rigorous physical games, preferable ones that featured at least some level of violence. The link between physical hazing and sports runs through the public schools and elite British universities, crosses the Atlantic Ocean, and continues on to US New England prep schools and universities. As we will see, the most important US sport, American football, in part grew out of violent hazing rituals where Harvard classes would viciously fight each other one day in the fall in what became called “Bloody Sunday.”

**A Short History of Sports in Britain in the Late Edwardian- Victorian Era**

The profusion of academics studying the role of sports in society today, from economists to lawyers to sociologists to anthropologists, is a relatively recent phenomena. Some of the intellectual framework for this recent work dates to 1958, when anthropologist Clifford Geertz and his wife moved to a Balinese village to do fieldwork. Initially, he is incredibly frustrated that he can’t get past his outsider status. The villagers ignored them. “For them, and to a degree for ourselves, we were nonpersons, specters, invisible men.” (Geertz, Clifford. “Deep Play: notes on the Balinese cockfight” Daedalus, Fall 2005. Pg. 56) Geertz’ classic essay about the meaning of cockfighting in Balinese culture became part of his 1973 book The Interpretation of Cultures. (Geertz, Clifford. The Interpretation of Cultures, Basic Books, 1973.) In the end, his study of cockfighting, an illegal sport, ends up breaking the ice for Geertz and easing the way for fieldwork.

At his very first observation of a cockfight when he began his fieldwork in the 1950s, a police raid forced Geertz and his wife to flee and hide with the participants. They follow a man into his home, where his wife quickly sets the table for afternoon tea and they all sit down and use the tea party excuse to profess innocence when armed policemen burst through the door. The villager explains that they were discussing cultural matters all afternoon, and didn’t realize that a cockfight was even happening. This experience allowed Geertz to build trust and bond with the villagers and conduct extensive interviews. “The whole village opened up to us, probably more than it ever would have otherwise…” (Daedalus, P. 59) He realized that the rituals of cockfighting, particularly the rules of betting on fights, provided a window into how the Balinese viewed themselves, and a way to better understand the web of social kinship relationships in the village that exemplified traditional Balinese culture. Sport, then, becomes a reflection of the culture— illuminating gender roles, attitudes towards violence, and cultural norms. Rules are carefully written down and passed down, along with tales of great cocks and cockfights, from generation to generation. “Attending cockfights and participating in them is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education. What he learns there is what his culture’s ethos and his private sensibility (or, anyway, certain aspects of them) look like when spelled out externally in a collective text…and the disquieting part— that the text in which this revelation is accomplished consists of a chicken hacking another mindlessly to bits.” (Daedalus, pg. 83)

Clearly, sports came to encompass considerably more than competitions with animals such as cockfighting, fox hunting, and horse racing. Richard Holt, who wrote a history of sports in Britain, posits that Geertz’ notion of “deep play” can be applied to all sports, in which “the innermost values of a culture may be expressed. Sport is not just a gratuitous expenditure of energy determined by the immediate physical environment; sports have a heroic and mythical dimension; they are, in a sense, ‘a story we tell ourselves about ourselves’, the nature of which may differ markedly between countries with broadly similar levels of economic development.” (Holt, Richard. Sports and the British: A Modern History. Oxford University Press. 1989. Pg. 3) In the Victorian era, British attitudes towards sports were woven into a sense of patriotism that dovetailed perfectly with the colonial era. For modern day evidence of this, look no further than the 2017 International Cricket Council cricket ( the quintessential British colonial sport), rankings — in the top 10 test ranking are England, former British colonies India, the West Indies, Zimbabwe, Australia, and New Zealand, and Bangladesh and Pakistan, which became independent countries after Britain negotiated an end to their India colony. (<https://www.icc-cricket.com/rankings/mens/team-rankings/test>)

During the Victorian Era, sports became more organized and codified. Up until this time, sports had been becoming steadily less violent, as the economy became more mechanized, intellectuals began to formulate a more modern notion of the animal world, and state control became more organized and the aristocracy become less militarized. (Holt, pg. 30) In the 1700s, activities with tethered animals came to be condemned by the upper classes as unnecessarily cruel. Some of the criticism of animal sports spilled over into other sports, particularly the more violent sports such as wrestling, boxing, and cudgeling. A good deal of this criticism came from concern from factory owners, who were afraid that the new mechanized economy that they were building was threatened by their workers having too much leisure time to play and watch sports. Owners worried that their workers would get hurt in the violent games and feared that the raucous popular contests featuring betting and beer would have a negative effect on workers, and might even cause them to skip work on Saturdays. (Holt, pg. 37) Sports critics allied with some religious groups to try and regulate public sports. In this way, local sports contest, once characterized by violent contests between towns, were moved from the town centers to specific fields outside of town.

Before what we can call the advent of modern sports, English people enjoyed a variety of games and contests and began developing set rules for some sports. In the 17th century, people played “Hand-Ball, Foot-Ball, Skittles, or Nine Pins, Shovel-board, Stow Ball, Goffe [golf], Trol Madam, Cudgels, Bear-baiting, Bull-baiting, Bow and Arrow, Throwing at Cocks, Shuttle-cock, Bowling, Quoits, Leaping, Wrestling, Pitching the Barre, and Ringing of Bells.” (Malcolmson, Robert W. (1970) Popular recreations in English Society 1700-1850. PhD thesis, University of Warwick. Pg. 61) The games were often coordinated with holidays, religious festivities, fairs, harvest times, and wakes. Contests were sometimes part of the traditional rivalry between towns and provided young men, and more rarely, women, a chance to showcase their strength and prowess in front of eligible young men and women. Sports provided an outlet for towns with a long history of conflict to work out those conflicts on the constraints of a playing field. At the same time, these sometimes violent contests were “often a good way of permitting the youth their violent rituals.” (Holt, pg. 16)

Blood sports were widely popular in pre-Victorian Britain. To modern eyes, they were brutal. Throwing at cocks, played on Shrove Tuesday (The day before Ash Wednesday), consisted of tethering birds to a short string and inviting passers-by to throw stones or sticks at the unlucky bird. Eventually the bird was injured or died and the lucky one who killed it got to bring the carcass home. Cock-fighting, bull-baiting, and bull-running also were popular. In bull-baiting, bulldogs were let loose to attempt to grab the bulls and grimly hang on. Sometimes the bulls were set free and frantically ran through the streets of town, where people chased, dodged, and pummeled them with sticks. In 1816, the Reverend Joshua King, of Bethnal Green described the Sunday tradition where “several hundred persons assembly in a field adjoining the church-yard, where they fight dogs, hunt ducks, gamble, enter into subscriptions to fee drovers for a bullock; I have seen them drive the animal though the most populous parts of the parish, force sticks pointed with iron, up the body, put peas into the ears, and infuriate the beast.” (Cunningham, Hugh. Leisure in The Industrial Revolution: c. 1780-1880. Page 7) Somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 men enjoyed this activity, on Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays. (Page. 7)

This blood sport brutality was mirrored in sports contests played by people. Prize fighting was popular, reaching it’s peak fame from the mid-1780s to the mid-1820s. (Cunningham, Page 8) In 1803, a William Fairbairn wrote “boxing was considered a manly exercising, a favorite amusement, and I believed I counted no less than seventeen battles which I reluctantly had to fight before I was able to attain a position calculated to ensure respect.” (Holt, page 18) Another contemporary observer commented that “the manly art of Boxing, has infused that true heroic courage, blended with humanity, into the hearts of Britons, which have made them so renowned,terrific, and triumphant, in all parts of the world.” (Cunningham, page 8) Wrestling also drew crowds of up to 20,000 in the 1820s. (Cunningham, Page 9) Rules were limited. Fighters “mutually agreeing to fight ‘up and down’, which includes the right of kicking on every part of the body, and in all possible situations, and of squeezing the throat or ‘throttling’ to the verge of death… that death often occurs in such battles will not be thought extraordinary.” (Cunningham, page. 23) Fighting was the most popular, whether it meant wrestling, boxing, cudgeling (beating each other with sticks), or fighting with stones. Sometimes various activities were combined, so spectators could enjoy watching men with one arm tied behind their backs trying to brain each other with heavy sticks, using sticks in one hand and a shield in the other, or simply throwing stones at each other.

 After he killed an opponent in the ring, Jack Broughton developed boxing rules in 1743 in what came to be called the Broughton rules. (Holt, pg. 20) At this time, British law considered large spectator sports to be disorderly assemblies. In spite of this, prize fighting became a very popular, and lucrative, betting sport, with a group of professional fighters who regularly fought each other through the late 1700s and early 1800s, and as many as 10,000 would watch a fight. (Pg. 21) Until reform efforts in the later half of the 1800s, football, particularly what was known as street football, was basically a brawl. An 1846 illustration entitled “The last day of street football: Shrove Tuesday.” shows throngs of men, some dressed with fancy top coats, wrestling, kicking, and shoving at each other in what seems to be a loosely organized riot. (Holt, pg. 178. NEED SOURCE)

Other non-fighting sports, particularly cricket and horse racing, in the 18th century became more organized over time, implementing rules and even developing informal championships. Rowing, very popular, was practiced primarily by watermen until the elite schools like Eton, then the colleges like Oxford and Cambridge, adopted the sport in the early 1800s. Early rowing was not the amateur activity it became after it was adopted by elite British schools. Competitors were primarily watermen, although often the coxswain was a member of the gentry. Races were extremely popular and sometimes featured large cash prizes for the winners. By the time of the first Oxford/Cambridge boat race in 1828, rowing lost it’s working class roots and had largely become an upper-class sport.

Horse racing was also popular, and became more so when modern transportation allowed owners to race on more distant tracks. The first horse races were likely to be individual contests between noblemen, who often also rode their mounts. After 1750, horse racing became more organized and by the time the Derby was founded in 1780, became extremely popular, drawing large crowds and significant betting. (Holt, pg. 23) Early cricket was characterized by being the only sport where the upper class would compete with commoners. The first rules were written in 1727, and the game became popular. There were village, as well as regional club teams and numerous cricket clubs were founded in the 1800s.

Sports in Britain before the Victorian era were characterized by several things. First of all, they were part of a culture of local festivals that small communities enjoyed watching. Aside from rowing, cricket, and horse racing, the various physical sports were very violent. So they were festive social events which also featured betting. Second of all, they were loosely organized, with no national standards.

Sports were played by aristocrats in England in the 16th, 17th and 18th century. Elite students with free time enjoyed boating, cricket, horse racing, hunting, tennis, swimming, lawn bowling, boxing, bull fighting, cockfighting and cudgel playing (beating each other with sticks!). (Sports and Freedom, pg. 4) In 1607 an Oxford student wrote about the importance of tennis and social status. “The two marks of his seniority are the bare velvet of his gowne, and his proficiency at tennis, where when he can play a set, he is a Fresh-man no more.” (As quoted, Sports and Freedom, pg. 5)

In the second half of the 1800s, sports became more organized and controlled by national organizations, sidelining local control. The blood sports became less popular over time as social mores changed, and this helped to shape attitudes towards the team games that supplanted them. In a pattern that would be repeated in the US, sport became much more popular with the rise of modern media, technological changes that increased leisure time, and new forms of transportation such as trains that made traveling easier and cheaper.

The upper-class attitudes towards athletics was readily adapted by the middle and even lower classes. Part of this was driven by parents of the newly rich professionals, who understandably wanted their children to attend the elite public schools which fully adopted a culture of athleticism in the 1860s. By the turn of the century, the athleticism movement characterized by team games had become prevalent in the public schools and their "finishing schools", Oxford and Cambridge. ( J.A. Mangan (1984) ‘Oars and the man’: pleasure and purpose in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 1:3, 245-271, DOI: 10.1080/02649378408713551. 245) The 1896 Cassell’s Complete Book of Sports and Pastimes: Being a Compendium of Out-Door and In-Door Amusements (1896) illustrates how the value of athletics became broadly shared. The Preface begins with a simple sentence. “The benefits of athletic and other manly exercises from an educational as well as a recreative point of view, are now very generally recognized.” (Cassell’s Complete Book of Sports and Pastimes: Being a Compendium of Out-Door and In-Door Amusements Casey and Company, Limited. 1896) The authors argue that athletics don’t just promote physical health, but have a crucial moral dimension. It quotes the Honorable Edward Lyttleton, who was the headmaster of Haileybury and later Eton, the most prestigious public school

“A boy is disciplined by athletics in two ways: by being forced to put the welfare of the common cause before selfish interests, to obey implicitly the word of command and act in concert with the heteregeneous elements of the company he belongs to: and, secondly, should it so turn out, he is disciplined by being raised to a post of command, where he feels the gravity of the responsible office and the difficulty of making prompt decisions and securing willing obedience. Good moral results of this sort may be expected from games wherever they have spontaneously developed.” (Cassell’s. Preface. Pg. Iii) There was now a “unanimity that now exists among parents and guardians as to the desirability of encouraging a reasonable pursuit of games and sports…”

However, there were some British who were uneasy about the rise of popular sports. In medieval times, the landed gentry and royal family worried that enthusiasm for animal sports would distract their vassals from the work that funded their lifestyles. In addition, attitudes towards animals began to change as scientists began to better understand the natural world and a vocal animal rights movement began to take shape. These critics were joined by some religious leaders who also objected to animal mistreatment. This led to the formation of The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) in 1824.

As the economy industrialized, new bosses, echoing the landed gentry in an earlier era, worried that enthusiasm for watching sports, coupled with alcohol, might lead workers to miss work, or worse, become injured. (Holt, pg. 37) Churches also were uneasy about some of the more violent popular sports and began to ban people from using church land for athletic contests. In the 1800s Anglicanism became less dominant and it became less common for the sons of the gentry to be ordained in the Church of England. In the mid 1800s the gentry preferred games like cricket to more violent physical contests. “The plain country gentleman who liked to join in village games ritually throwing in the pig’s bladder to start the football match and providing cakes and ale afterwards, had become a figure from the rural past.” (Holt, pg. 47) Of all the animal sports, fox hunting survived because it was seen as less bloody and had a scientific sheen as owners used new knowledge to successfully breed dogs with outstanding endurance and noses that made them formidable fox chasers. (Pg. 51)

Still, in spite of this opposition from some clergy, intellectuals, and business leaders, popular sports didn’t disappear in Britain. Games were relocated to specialized venues outside of the town squares, where sports like football had been traditionally played. In addition, rules were developed and the level of violence in the games and among the spectators began a steady decline. The late Edwardian and Victorian eras saw a steady increase in the popularity of team sports at all levels of society.

The cultural and economic changes in the 1800s changed the nature of sports in Britain and became one of the hallmarks of the Victorian Era. The blood sports were increasingly supplanted by fox hunting, which was seen as less cruel and more acceptable, and which was an expensive undertaking and limited to the wealthy. Young men began to play team sports such as rugby, football, golf, and cricket. (Holt, Pg. 56) Boxing, which featured gloves, replaced the more violent bare-fisted prizefighting. Rules were codified, and sports administration nationalized. Public school graduates formed three major sports bodies in the 1800s— the Football Association (1863), the Rugby Union (1871) and the Amateur Athletic Association (1881).

Rich children had always had the time and energy to devote themselves to athletics. In the first few decades of the 1800s, many public-school teachers didn’t support athletics and sometimes tried to stop their charges from competing. But these teachers and masters couldn't resist the growing interest in games, which grew steadily over time. By the late 1800s, there was widespread interest in games, as can be seen in Cassell’s Complete Book of Sports and Pastimes: Being a Compendium of Out-Door and In-Door Amusements.

The book was a guide for boys (no girls were encouraged to play at this time.) so they could organize and play all sorts of games. The book begins with the “Manly Games and Exercises” of cricket, Football, Fives, Raquets, Tennis, Golf, Polo, Riding, Driving, Skating, Roller-Skating, Sliding, Swimming, Cycling, Athletic Sports, Lacrosse, Knurl and Spell, Skittles, American game of baseball, fencing, broad-sword or Single-Stick, Boxing, Wrestling, Gymnastics, Rowing, Canoeing, and Boat-Sailing. After the “manly sports”, it moves on to “Minor Out-Door Games” such as Balloon, or Bouncing Ball, Bowling, Four Corners, and Rounders. Then it’s onto Field Games, Hoop Games, Kite-Flying, Marble Games, Playground Games, finally ending with Lawn Games. The authors were mindful that some boys “are either physically unable to follow the more virtuous games, or have no inclination to take part in them. “ (Cassell’s pg. Iv) So they included chapters on “Games of Skill” such as Billiards, Pool, and Chess, “Recreative Science” such as Light, the Heliograph, Magnetism, “The Workshop” where lads could learn skills ranging from Carpentering, Wood Turning, or Engineering, “Home-Pets” with guides to raising Poultry, Canaries, Silkworms and other household pets. The book closes with a litany of indoor games for diversions in the evening and with bad weather. (Cassell’s. Contents. Pg. V-xii)

Cricket was the first sport discussed, and probably the most quintessential British sport. “In a moral aspect, no game stands higher…” (Cassell’s. Pg. 28) But Cassell’s loved football as well. There were two versions of early British football— Rugby played with an oblong ball and the Association Game played with a round ball. The Association Game, and early version of soccer, didn’t allow handling the ball or running with the ball. Players kicked the ball under goal posts to score. When rugby was imported into the US, it became the basis for American football. We can hear some of the later enthusiasm for football in the US in the introduction to the Football section.

“Football is the game for the few— the young, and strong, and vigorous— and to those how dear it is! Was there ever a football player yet not gloried in the hacks and bruises which are so certain to result from a well-fought game… Pluck and endurance, presence of mind, thorough unselfishness, and a cool disregard of danger, are indeed fully as important qualities in a good football-player, as strength and suppleness of limb, quickness of eye, and speed and nimbleness of foot; and he who loves the game is sure to develop the former qualities (if he have them not already), and to retain them all through his after career.” (Cassell’s. Pg. 29)

**Elite British Public Schools Incorporate Sports Into Their Curricula**

While sports were becoming steadily more popular, it wasn’t until the elite British public schools adapted athletics into their curricula that sports became one of the notable features of the Victorian Era. The public schools led the way in creating a new ethic of athleticism in the schools that then became a notable characteristic of British society that was then exported to elite US schools. Understanding this development is key to understanding how sports came to be incorporated into elite US prep schools and universities.

We should pause here to explain the public schools in Britain. In contrast to the US, where public schools mean schools funded by the state and local governments, British public schools are in fact private, and equivalent to US independent secondary schools such as Andover, St. Paul's and Groton. Public schools emerged in Scotland and England as charity schools, some founded as early as the 1550s, whose purpose was to educate local scholars, and charged no tuition. At the time, children of the elite were usually home-schooled by tutors. Public meant that access wasn't determined by religion, social class or where students lived. In contrast to the private schools at the time, who were run for profit by their owners, public schools were subject to public management or control. As the 19th century progressed, upper class families began to see the public boarding schools as the best place to send their boys to acquire the kind of character that would ensure that they became good leaders. After the Clarendon Commission report presented in 1864, Parliament passed the Public Schools Act of 1868 that declared seven prominent public schools (Eton, Charterhouse, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Westminster, and Winchester) to be independent and run by independent boards of governors. Over time, other schools received the same designation. The influence of the public schools on British life can hardly be overstated, as graduates dominated administration of the Empire, and continue to be well represented in the upper reaches of British politics to this day. The name public stuck.

The adoption of an athletic culture in British public schools was one of the notable developments of the Victorian era. In the words of historian Richard Holt, "The innovative and organizing genius of the Victorian for games turn out to be more durable than the philosophy of self-help or the evangelical revival... The vigor and scope of Victorian sport was quite remarkable, ranging from the subtle infiltration of the Field and the reorganizing of established activities like racing, boxing, and cricket to the wholesale transformation of play, devised for the most part in the third quarter of the century, have become so commonplace that we tend to take them for granted as somehow logical and necessary results of industrialization...Yet these changes in social conditions cannot explain the style and spirit in which the new sports were played nor the cultural centrality they came to have. For this we must look to the growth of the public schools and the distinctive range of ideas brought to bear on secondary higher education in the mid-nineteenth century. Understanding the rise of the 'gentleman-amateur' is the key to understanding the cult of athleticism." (Holt, pg. 74)

As the Victorian Era progressed, the institutional resistance to athletics in elite British schools ended, and, in a process that came to be known at the Athleticism Movement, athletics became integral to the educational mission. After headmasters brought a new focus on organized games for their upper-class charges, games quickly became one of the notable features of a public school education. The boys, their parents and alumni became enthusiastic proponents of games, making them much more popular. (Timothy J.L. Chandler (1988) Emergent Athleticism: games in two english public schools, 1800–60, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 5:3, 312-330, DOI: [10.1080/09523368808713665](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523368808713665))

The male students in British public schools began competing in cricket and other sports as early as 1788. (Sports and Freedom, pg. 6) (This is primarily a male story. There were important changes in how women and their bodies were perceived, and they were allowed to do some activities. However, these activities were less extensive than the boys, and took care not to violate what was seen as a very important distinction between the physical capacity and essential character of young women as compared to young men. (Holt, pg. 118)) Unsurprisingly, once these students went on to colleges and universities, they wanted to compete against other schools. The first intercollegiate athletic contest was a cricket game between Oxford and Cambridge in 1827. (Pg. 6) For almost two hundred years, an Oxford don or student would cox crews comprised of professional watermen in races. In the early 1800s the students began to row as well and competed in bumping races where boats would start off in intervals and if your boat caught and bumped the boat in front of you, you won. Rowing gained popularity with students at Oxford and Cambridge. It’s unsurprising that the same Oxford student who organized the first cricket match also initiated the first Oxford/Cambridge crew race on the Thames River at Henley in 1829. 20,000 people watched the first 2 1/2 mile race, where the crews bet £500 (10,433 pounds in 2017 values, or $14,099) on the outcome. This became an annual event and Oxford and Cambridge moved the race to London in the 1840s, and still race the 4.2 mile course to this day. At this time, Harvard and Yale both had rowing clubs, and would start their own tradition of racing against each other in 1852.

Contemporary observers saw sports in Britain as a key aspect of the culture that was uniquely British. The Frenchman Baron de Coubertin, who went on to found what we think of as the modern Olympic Games, felt that sports were key to understanding English imperialism. Sports, which had spread from the upper classes to the lower classes, helped create political stability, forming a stable platform for the British to project power overseas. In 1896 when he watched a game of rugby, Coubertin observed, “in the twilight, one in the great Gothic chapel of Rugby, my eyes fixed on the funeral slab on which, without epitaph, the great name of Thomas Arnold was inscribed, I dreamed that I saw before me the corner-stone of the British Empire… The role played by sport is what appears most worthy of notice in English education.” (Holt, pg. 1)

Over the course of the Victorian era, more disorganized sports were supplanted by more organized sports as the larger society adapted to the economic changes taking place. Sports represent a “cultural and political as well as a social and economic enterprise; it involves maintaining a creative tension between the straightforward changes in the circumstances of most people— shorter hours, higher wages, new kinds of work— as well as the values that ordinary people brought to their play and ‘their betters’ sought to impose upon it.” (Holt, pg. 3) In order to understand how US colleges and their stakeholders in the US— students, alumni, administrators, presidents—adapted sports to fit into the very different American cultural landscape, we must look to the way that British public schools incorporated athletics into their institutions.

The rise of the more organized sports was driven by social and economic changes in Britain in the first half of the 19th century. Industrialization, the development of a more robust national transportation system, increasing urbanization, and improving living standards which led to increased disposable income, more leisure time, and a desire to exercise as society became more industrialized and less labor-base, all helped created an environment more conducive to the growth of national popular sports. “Teams and spectators could travel easily and relatively cheaply to games, newspapers with match reports and results could be quickly and widely distributed.” (Holt, pg. 5) As an added benefit, sports helped to unite the upper-class elite with the sons of the rising middle class. Adding to these changes was a moral reformation of the role of the public schools beginning around 1850.

Once the institutional decision was made to build up athletics, public schools created a series of educational arguments to sell the new strategy to students, parents, alumni, and other stake holders. These elements provided the raw material for the revitalization of the public schools, making them an even more important facet of British culture. An important turning point was the three-year Clarendon Commission, a Royal Commission formed in 1861 to investigate all aspects of the top public schools-- financial, administration, curriculum, and teaching. (Chandos, John. Boys Together: English Public Schools 1800-1864. Oxford University Press. 1985. Page 320) The Commission examined the most notable change in the public schools, the wholesale adoption of a highly organized athletic culture. Starting in the 1850s, "games were purposely and deliberately assimilated into the formal curriculum of the public schools: suitable facilities were constructed, headmasters insisted on pupil involvement, staff participation was increasingly expected and the creation of a legitimating rhetoric began.” (Mangan, Athleticism. Pg. 16) While the report had some concerns about the poor academic standards at the public schools, it gave a stamp of approval to the athleticism regime.

For our story, we have to look in detail at how the public schools came to embrace organized team sports. The issues of character built by participation in team sports and control over students were paramount.

**How Sports Helped Schools Control Unruly Students**

Until the mid-1800s, public school headmasters showed little interest in athletics. (See Mangan, pg. 18 and Holt, pg. 75). The curriculum was based in Latin and Greek texts, via rote learning, and wasn't too rigorous. In the afternoon after school, the boys were left to their own devices, and brutality of various forms proliferated. Local wildlife suffered as some boys roamed the countryside chasing and killing small birds, hunting wildfowl and other prey, whaling away at each other with sticks and throwing stones at each other and passers-by. During one summer day in 1843, Marlborough boys engaged in a brutal frog hunt and "beat the creatures to death and 'piled the bodies high'. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 18) A comprehensive study of public schools found that up until at least 1845, almost every school gave the boys unfettered freedom to do whatever they wanted during their leisure time, with no organized compulsory athletics. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 21)

Fist fights were common. At most schools, there wasn’t an organized athletic regime, though there were some regular contests such as football games that were characterized by extreme violence, essentially brawls, that sometimes resulted in boys being carted off to the hospital with broken bones. (Holt, Pg. 77) Violence was a fact of life for boys in British public schools in the 1800s. “Violence and pain were taken for granted not only between the boys, but as a means of discipline. Masters flogged boys and older boys flogged younger ones.” (Holt, Pg. 78) Sometimes the punishments were severe enough to notice. In the early 1900s one boy at Winchester wrote in his diary, “I got an uncommon flogging this morning, the blood ran through my shirt and into my breeches.” (Chanos, Boys Together, P. 77 or 141-2)

Violence was a companion to the relative freedom that the boys enjoyed when they weren't required to be in class or chapel. It was a more violent time, and masters by and large accepted a high level of violence as a societal norm. While their afternoon leisure time was their own, and not a concern for the headmaster and masters, keeping order was a constant source of worry for school administrators. Managing boys was particularly difficult given staffing levels. For example, Eton had nine adult faculty members overseeing 500 students! To keep order, headmasters relied on the whip and, perhaps more importantly, a system of student supervision where select older students serving as prefects were put in charge of policing behavior. The prefects also used violence to punish both real and imagined infractions and asserted their dominance in a system that came to be called 'fagging'. A fag was a younger boy who would be forced into becoming essentially a servant to an older student, doing whatever he was told. In return, the older boy was supposed to look after and protect his fag.

To modern sensibilities, a ratio of one responsible adult to 55 boarding students horrifies. To this, add the Lord of the Flies system of relying on students to effectively police themselves-- until the mid 1800s some public-school students would be locked in for the night in large open rooms with as many as fifty cots and thin flock mattresses, with the older boys in charge, until the masters unlocked the door in the morning. (Chandos. Pg. 329) Each boy had a stand up desk and only a few senior boys were allowed chairs. Prefects were gods, with almost no restraints. Juniors at Winchester were called slaves. "Boys between the age of nine and nineteen "would be locked up at night and left without supervision till morning, a 'free', self-contained, self-governing community, with its own class system, moral standards, public opinion and legal code." (Chandos. Boys Together. Pg. 87) Some felt that this harsh regime was necessary to toughen up British boys. "Corporal punishment must be inflicted in such modes, and with such instruments, as may produce present pain, without lasting mischief; and it must be continued till temptation is counteracted, till negligence is corrected, and obstinacy subdued." (Barrow, William. An Essay on Education. Vol. II. F. And C. Rivington. London. 1802.Pg. 156) For some, the public-school disciplinary system was crucial to the survival of the British nation and Empire. In addition, some masters felt that the prefects were perfectly placed to catch bad behaviors that they simply couldn't see. (Chandos. Pg. 242)

Both masters and the prefects relied on caning or flogging to keep order. There was widespread acceptance of corporal punishment, among masters, students, and parents. Masters flogged rule breakers publicly as a way of demonstrating their authority and (hopefully!) discouraging further rule breaking. Student prefects were also expected to use violence, or the threat of violence, to instill order and discipline. At it's core, the fagging system was based on violence and physical intimidation, all in the name of creating discipline.

Winchester Headmaster Tom Arnold considered the fagging system necessary to maintaining order. (Chandos. Boys Together. Pg. 104) The Reverend William Barrow, who warned about the threat subjects such as art and music would pose to a proper manly education, voices a common sentiment in support of the public school disciplinary system.

Some portion even of our national bravery may undoubtedly be ascribed to the hardihood of our education. *Were it not*, said a gallant admiral, *for the dormitory at Westminster, and the quarter-deck of a man of war, we should soon be a nation of macaronies*. The stare of Europe will probably always require, what it obviously requires at present, a martial spirit in the individuals of every nation, that wishes to maintain its independence. And it may be considered a maxim, that he, who has not in early youth defeated any of his school-fellows in their contests of personal prowess, will not often in his maturer years defeat the enemies of his country. (Barrow. An Essay on Education. Pg. 164)

Not surprisingly, headmasters did sometimes have trouble controlling their charges and students would sometimes rebel. Students came to feel that they had a right to administer authority as prefects and pushed back hard at any effort to rein in that right. They would literally strike if they felt their authority was threatened. Just to give one example of many in the 18th and 19th centuries, Winchester students rebelled in 1808 when Dr. Goddard, the headmaster, failed to consult them and unilaterally decided to change an All Saints day holiday into a regular school day without consulting the prefects. There were prefect revolts at Winchester in 1770, 1774, 1778, 1793, 180, 1818, and 1828. (Chandos. Pg. 31) When their authority was challenged, public school students would strike by stopping to perform their disciplinary duties. The system of self-government endured because adult graduates who had experienced the prefect system first-hand felt it had taught them valuable lessons, and wanted their sons to have the same experience. Sure, sometimes the kids got carried away! The London Times, considering the difficulty for parents evaluating the prefect system in 1858, advised parents not to dwell on the negative. The problem of resolving how "those fierce passions are tamed, how the license of unbridled speech is softened into courtesy, how lawlessness becomes discipline... And all this within two or three years and with little external assistance' and counseled that parents should 'well abstain from looking too closely at the process and content themselves with the results." (As quoted. Chandos. Pg. 31)

In his detailed study Boys Together, of Winchester, Eton, Westminster, Rugby, Harrow, historian John Chandos dismantles this nostalgic view of the prefect system. He points out that boys were ritually flogged and that some of the perpetrators would now be seen as criminal sociopaths. (Chandos. Pg. 69. Some uppe- class bullies worked their fags to exhaustion. In his memior of his Winchester days in the 1800s, William Tuckwell relays the life of a fag, who had to drop everything any time, day or night, when their student master yelled out an order. A breakfast fag might have to wash the butter, fry pork chops or sausages and then prepare the older boys morning trencher (plate), before the poor fag got his own food. (Tuckwell, William. The Ancient Ways: Winchester Fifty Years Ago. Macmillan and Company. London and New York. 1893. pg. 29-30) Later, after getting tea and anything else the juniors wanted, the fags either had to "watch out" at cricket or "kick in" at football practice. This meant trying to catch the batted balls and running to fetch them. Fags who "kicked in" had to line up on the football sidelines and keep the ball from going out of play. At this time, Winchester football featured a field 80 yards long and 25 yards wide, and the unfortunate fags were responsible for patrolling the sidelines and making sure the ball didn't go out of bounds. In 1850 canvas was strung around the field, but fags had to peer through holes to watch out for balls that flew over the canvas. Then nets replaced the canvas, making the job easier. (Corbin, John. School Boy Life in England, An American View. Harper & Brothers. New York and London. 1898. Pg. 48) If the fags were deemed to have been too slow fetching the balls, the older boys would beat them when they stuck their heads through the holes to throw back the ball. Adding insult to injury, fags weren't allowed to wear jackets. "I think the bitter and persistent cold was worse than the casual pommeling." (Pg. 34) After dinner fags had to keep the fires going, heat water for coffee, keep the beer jugs full (boys drank a lot, particularly in the early to mid 1800s), and prepare supper for the older boys, maintain the candles, and then clean up all the dishes, all the while on the lookout for the "smutty", the junior boy whose "function it was to 'cut into' belated fags with his ground ash..." (Tuckwell. Pg. 42) Fags might have to brush their masters' hair, fetch clothes, make beds, prepare a special meal, or even recite poetry, where mistakes risked a beating.

Certain rituals based on physical pain developed. We learn of a Winchester tradition called "tin gloves." Since boys were going to have to handle hot coffee pots, boilers, and frying pans, they developed a tradition where every junior would have his hands hardened by "searing with a 'hot end,' or burning brand of wood." One boy recalled trying to get away while his prefect heated up the implement, "but I was captured and my hand held fast, and I can still recall the grinding thrill of pain as the glowing wood was pressed upon it by the ministering find:-- fit prologue to the continuous barbarity which was 'to walk up and down with me..." (Tuckwell, pg. 23) Serious injuries happened. Tuckwell writes about a close call. While he was studying, his prefect got mad and "grasped the short heavy iron shovel in the fireplace and flung it at me with all his force. I ducked behind the mahogany writing-desk which stood beside me on my toys; the missile took of a corner of it a clean as if by the stroke of a hatchet. Had my head been there, I should not be now recording the adventure." (Tuckwell. Pg. 54)

Aside from burning, older boys used other physical punishments. They might carry an unfortunate boy and throw them into a muddy pond naked. Or grasp the edges of blankets to launch a boy suspended in the middle up so high that he crashed against the ceiling. There were also initiation rituals such as "pinching in" where new boys were viciously pinched in sensitive spots or made to run gauntlets while they were pelted with stones or beaten with knotted handkerchiefs. (Chanos, Boys Together. Pgs. 80-2) At Eton, prefects would have all the boys under their charge lie on top of one another and put a bed on top of the living pile. Then the older boys would jump up and down on the bed, crushing the boys. A house mother called this "an unaccountable scheme... We are quite alarmed about Liddell who was quite breathless from the pressure." (Chandos. Pg. 138)

In the horror show category, consider the Marlborough program known at "vaccinations". "The first part of the program was comparatively simple-- merely to bleed a small boy in the arm and collect sufficient blood to assuage his natural thirst for the same in some small receptacle." Then the boy was made to crawl under the desks of all the forms to the far end of the school. Along the way, the boy was bled by the older boys. Then this strange bullying turned even more surreal. "By some rude process the first victim's blood was injected in to the open wound of the second, and a fresh supply from the latter's leg was carried back by the same perilous and exciting trail. The performance was completed, of course, when the second injection had taken place, and the original patient, in the upper tired out us suppose, had been invigorated by the more aristocratic fluid of an upper fourth-form limb." (History of Marlborough. Pgs. 119-20)

Through the 1840s, fighting was common. Boys would fight until one of them gave up, and fights could last for hours. Endurance was prized. In 1825, two boys fought in front of a big crowd of their peers for two hours, until one fell into a coma. He later died after his classmates carried him back to his bed. (Chandos. Pg. 145)

Violence also transferred to the playing field, particularly in games of football. Each school developed their own versions, which didn't have many rules before the 1850s. "It was considered 'opposed to all the principles of the game' for a player to attempt 'to throttle or strangle another' in a maul. But in practice, apart from primitive prohibition to carrying disguised offensive weapons on to the field, anything short of murder was allowed." (Chanos. Pg. 148.)

The fagging system was designed to ensure conformity, and, paradoxically, cut down on bullying. To control boys’ behavior, they had to be given considerable liberty and the responsibility to discipline themselves. Independence in underclassmen was punished. Unsurprisingly, some prefects were tyrannical, and benefitted from the British tradition of keeping a stiff upper lip in the face of challenges. Some boys were sexually abused. (Chanos. Boys Together. Pg. 111) Order was also maintained by a tradition of the residential houses fighting against each other. In the same way that house sporting contests were later used to build loyalty to house and school, altercations between boys from different houses helped unite the boys of each house against a common enemy.

While not all prefects were sadists, the prefect system was based on physical punishment. The prefect system continued, but its character changed, becoming steadily less brutal from the early 1800s, a trend that intensified when the athletic regime was ushered in. The athletic regime dovetailed nicely with the prefect system, since the majority of prefects were athletes. Notably, the athleticism movement limited the power of students, transferring more authority to the adults in charge.

As economic development created a more wealthy class that became interested in having their children get the benefit of a prestigious public school education, some headmasters began to think about how they could try and change the brutal and disorganized culture of the non-academic aspects of their schools. Partly this was a reaction against the blood animal sports, driven by two main factors. First, advances in the biological sciences began to change attitudes towards animals and, second, some religious leaders began to develop new ideas about how humans should view the animal world. In a process of fits and starts, the public schools came to see organized athletics as a way of keeping the boys under control and developing the kind of muscular Christianity that helped drive the growth and maintenance of the British empire. The overall idea was to keep the boys busy all day, either studying, doing outside physical exercise, or playing compulsory sports.

It’s unclear if the headmasters driving the adoption of athletics as a crucial element in their schools knew how dominant the athletic culture would become. It is clear that the cult of athleticism came to dominate most elite public schools until the post WWII era. In short, “gradually sport ceased to be a means to a disciplinary end and became an end in itself. The culture of athleticism steadily came to dominate the whole system of elite education.(Holt, pg. 81)

**Changing Scientific and Religious Ideas Reinforce Athleticism Movement**

Another driving factor for the adoption of athletics was the changing notions of adulthood. During the Edwardian and Victorian eras, lifespans increased sharply and overall physical health increased. This increased scientific understanding, along with powerful economic growth, changed the notion of childhood and adolescence. Children had more time to develop, and childhood became longer. As the public schools grew, they had to deal with their charges going through puberty and, since they were boarding schools, shepherding their charges through this period. This responsibility of the schools standing in for parents, sometimes referred to as “in loco parentis” would also become a notable feature in elite US private high schools and universities. Headmasters were responsible for ushering their students from completely dependent children to young adulthood. It took time for a young man to get through public school, university, and attain the training to ensure that he could marry and support a family. The third rail here for the schools was the idea of sex and sexual maturity.

At the time, frank conversations about sexual desires wasn't possible, at least for educators and ministers. But looking at the language these adults used shows clearly that boys' sexual urges was on their minds. Consider an 1887 essay titled "The Prospective Character of School Training" by noted educational thinker C.C. Coterie. He worried that the schools had failed in their primary duty-- ensuring that average young man newly graduated from public schools spent his leisure time productively. How would this young man deal with the "rough and tumble" of life? Left to their own devices, who knew what kind of destructive habits he would form? Using all caps for emphasis, Cotterill asks, "HOW HAS HIS SCHOOL TRAINING FITTED HIM TO SPEND HIS VACANT TIME?" (Thirteen Essays on Education By Members of the XIII. Edited by Lyttelton, Edward. 1891. pg. 137.) How will the "average boy of business" spend his six hours of leisure time after work? "He must have some means of getting rid of his pent-up vigor and energy..." At school, the young man had had no free time, now he was left to his own devices, and at the mercy of his baser instincts. Coterill worried about this young man, just home from work "rejoicing in his strength, filled with the strange and indefinable dawning consciousness of manhood, filled with passions, with the natural yearning for the exercise of his bursting powers..." wouldn't know how to productively spend his leisure time. (Pg. 140) Schools should instill habit of reading to distract our young man during the evening. But if the schools have done their job, this young man is a firm believer in daily outdoor exercise, which provides a natural outlet for our young man. Coterill asks "does he-- to use a humble illustration-- does he read the taking of daily vigorous outdoor exercise in much the same light that he reads the taking of his daily cold tub? Has it become to him a necessary daily habit, the neglect of which would make him feel discomfort and something like shame?" (pg. 138)

Overt discussions of sexuality weren’t possible at this time, so headmasters attempted to instill a particular sense of masculinity. The term manliness crops up again and again in comments and writings of headmasters, teachers and writers of the times. As the students reached physical maturity earlier and earlier, the schools tried to instill a manliness that wasn’t defined by sexuality, but by a new moral and physical definition. “True manliness was held to reside in the harmonious growth of the physique and the character, side by side.” (Holt, Pg. 89) In a single sex environment, athletics became a key tool to teach a new ideal concept of manliness to young men.

Separating boys during puberty in a place where they spent every waking and non-waking hour together could (Gasp!) encourage homosexual behavior that was seen as the antithesis of the more noble concept of manliness that the schools were trying to disseminate. (Holt, pg. 91) Victorian headmasters wanted to keep the boys from thinking about sex at all. Jeffrey Weeks, in his study of changes in British sexual life from 1800 on, quotes J. A. Symonds, a Harrow students’ unpublished autobiography. “One could not avoid seeing acts of onanism, mutual masturbation and the sport of naked boys in bed together.” (Weeks, Jeffrey. Sex, Politics and Society: the Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800. Edition 3, revised. Pearson Education, 2012, pg. 51) One Harrow headmaster tried to implement a policy of sewing boys pockets up, but backed down in the face of public ridicule. (Holt, pg. 91) Sports were seen as an effective way to prevent illicit liaisons and urges, channeling energy towards more socially suitable activities. “If boys were permitted to play sport each day then their bodies would be occupied in wholesome and useful purposes. Sports took raw energy and gave it meaning, turning boyish nature into manly culture.” (Holt, pg. 91) In the face of critics of the athletics movement in public schools, sports boosters answered that, while not perfect, sports as a distraction were far better than the alternative. The headmaster of Clifton remarked that “you may think games occupy a disproportionate share of the boy’s mind. You may be thankful this is so. What do you think French boys talk about?” (Holt, pg. 92) A book about the history of Marlborough College from 1843-9143 sums up the discomfort and threat posed by boys’ sexuality. Games provided a release “from sins of the grosser kind” and the “inward conflict with the demon lust” and the “enormous evil of unchastity.” (As quoted, Mangan, pg. 38)

Organized games, then, could help control the base sexual urges that puberty might bring by keeping boys busy and distracted. What has been referred to as a kind of puritanical pragmatism in public schools was seen as much better than the more permissive French alternative. British parents "smugly contrasted English and French boyhood, pitying French youth, saved of its strength and France, robbed of its leaders, because of an educational system which allowed opportunity for 'idle thoughts to take the form of vicious desire'." (Mangan. Ahleticism. Pg. 132)

Athletics, then, were a key component of being 'manly'. But this manliness ideal was explicitly asexual-- physical contact on the field with other boys was celebrated, but boys were not to have access to sexual knowledge and experience off the field. Boys worn out by hard physical games were easier to control. For the public-school master, games were an acceptable substitute for girls. Repressing sexual feelings, then, was an important goal. Athletic culture exemplified courage, but also a deep sense of stoicism. Feelings and emotion were to be suppressed, at all costs. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 193.) A housemaster provides a good summary of the overall attitude towards sports. "I believe that in England we have groped our way unconsciously to a great truth in man's development; it is that 'slow growth is the best', and the splendid products of our Public Schools and Universities in the past have been due, I suggest, primarily to the fact the period of boyhood pastimes has been prolonged for as long as possible." (Foot, Stephen. A Housemaster and His Boys by One of Them London. 1929 Pg. 64)

Attitudes towards athletics were also impacted by a set of religious ideas that came to be known as muscular Christianity. The Victorian Church was anxious to appeal to the industrial age’s new economic classes, who, a 1851 survey revealed, weren’t too interested in organized religion. (Holt, pg. 93) In addition, the Church of England was worried about inroads made by the Catholic Church. Charles Kingsley, a well-known priest, university professor, social reformer and writer, and Cannon of Westminster, helped provide a moral defense of sports. “Through sport boys acquire virtues which no books can give them; not merely daring and endurance, but, better still, temper, self-restraint, fairness, honor, unenvious approbation of another’s success, and all that ‘give and take’ of life which stand a man in good stead when he goes forth into the world, and without which, indeed, his success is always maimed and partial.” (McComb, David, G. Sports in World History. Rutledge Taylor & Francis Group, New York and London. 2004. Pg. 75)

This notion of Christianity during the Victorian era fit well into the developing idea of the importance of physical health. There were rapid discoveries in the sciences, from biology to medicine to public health during this time. These changes fit neatly with changes brought by the rapid economic growth of the time and the desire to project British values abroad. Muscular Christianity was masculine, with a goal of creating men that would either ascend to a leadership position at home or project British values by working in British colonies as administrators or soldiers. In public schools, chapel was a key part of the curriculum, with the overall idea being a kind of Christian virtuousness that was deemed essential for leadership. Headmasters, almost exclusively clergy, used their sermons to try and impart important moral lessons to the boys. However, after the Public School Commission report of 1901 (Check this date), the importance of chapel receded, replaced by the character-building games regime. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 137) However, the Christian aspects didn't just disappear and had to reconciled with the growing cultural acceptance of Darwin's theory.

In the late Victorian era, they adapted a simplistic view of that Darwinism meant survival of the strongest, rather than the fittest. (Holt, pg. 94) The public school historian Mangan has written that Britain in the late-Victorian era produced a "precarious fusion of Christian gentility and social Darwinism." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 136) This social Darwinism had three strains-- social Darwinism granting the white man right to bring civilization to other countries and races; institutional racism that required public schools to graduate boys with strong physical and psychological profiles; and the notion of a gentlemen's education that would create well-rounded leaders at home and abroad. In the face of this, the idea of muscular Christianity as a justification for organized games waned. Organized games, along with strenuous physical challenges such as long marches in terrible weather, frigid showers and a student-centered system of discipline depending on corporal punishment, were important because they turned soft boys into hard men who could deal with the difficult challenges the fast-changing world presented. In a pattern that would later repeat itself in elite US colleges, stand-alone intellectualism was more of an afterthought.

**Schools Create Shared Stories, Songs, and Regalia to Justify Athleticism**

Physical education, primarily manifested in playing sports, trumped academics. Young nerd academics would be overwhelmed by the tough competition in the real world, and certainly wouldn’t project sufficient strength to keep the colonies in line. The headmaster of Fettes, a public school, expressed this view clearly when he said, “Cleverness, what an aim! Cleverness neither makes nor keeps man nor nation. (Goldblatt, David. The Ball Is Round: A Global History of Soccer. Riverbed Books. 2006. Pg. 28)

In many ways, the cult of athleticism took over the public schools. Big games with other schools and between residential houses became the most important events of the year and athletes were widely admired. In the 1800s, public school games were wildly popular. For example, attendance at the annual two-day test cricket match between Harrow and Eton was 24,626 in 1871. (As cited. Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 145) Schools had sports clubs and old boys' clubs so that alumni would continue to be interested in how their schools were doing in sports and reminisce about their own special memories on the cricket pitch. Uppingham graduates working as colonial officers in India formed an Old Boys' Club to keep in touch with their Uppingham glory days and regularly played games together and even wore the same dark blue blazers with the school crest and blue buttons, and silk scarves, ties and hat ribbons that were Uppingham uniforms. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 146) An elaborate system of uniforms developed with bright colors and patterns and specific insignia so everyone could see how decorated an athlete was.

Students loved regalia. A reminiscence of life at Harrow in the 1860s paints a vivid picture. "[N]o sight could have been more picturesque than that of the boys going down to "footer". The Middlemites wore their dark blue coats and blue stockings, the Tommyites (Steel's not Bowen's) their scarlet coats and red stockings, the "Monkeyites" their carnation striped coats, the Bradyites their purple striped coats, while we Butertew were content to play in our pink and white shirt with no coat at all... I will not attempt to describe the gorgeous plumage of the "Billyites", the "Harrisites", and the "Young Vaughanites"." (Minchin, and Cotton, James George. Our Public Schools: Their Influence On English History; Charter House, Eton, Harrow, Merchant Taylors', Rugby, ST. Paul's Westminster, Winchester. Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Limited. London. 1901. Pg. 159)

Games must have been a sight! At Uppingham, at home games the boys sported blue silk sashes fancy black velvet caps decorated with an embroidered school crest done in contrasting silver thread and silver braids and silk tassels. Adding to the look, prefects carried hunting crops to keep order. As Uppingham boys were promoted to the better teams, there prowess was publicly celebrated in a process called "winning one's star", where they were allowed to stitched distinctive stars on their chest. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pgs. 161-2) At Harrow, by the end of the 1800s all houses had adopted a "house fez", or football cap, and some houses had three versions. Butler's three fezzes were all pink-- the house match cap was plain pink; the wedding cake had pink sides, a tassel, and white top; and the third was pink and white checked with a matching tassel. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 165) The rules of who could wear what colors to signify athletic excellence was a frequent source of controversy. Schools cared deeply about the privileges and tradition of sports regalia and set up committees to oversee the system- The Lancing Games Committee, the Harrow Philathletic Club, the Marlborough Dress Committee and the Uppingham Committee of Five, to name several. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 165)

Dress rules didn't just apply to athletes, of course. As students entered the older class, they were awarded privileges that were also symbolized in how they dressed. For example, the rule book at one school explained that after one year, you could leave the bottom button of your school blazer undone, and in your fourth year you earned the right to wear your blazer unbuttoned completely. But the majority of dress rules applied to what a public school historian has called the athletocrats-- athletes who sat atop the social hierarchy. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 171) There were dress privileges for athletes that applied to no other students that highlighted status and were more comfortable. Harrow is a neat example. Athletes earned caps for making certain teams. A football cap earned you the right to wear an anklet, white scarf, and white lacer. Harrow athletes who had earned their fez (basically, a varsity letter) could leave books on, and even sit, on a special fez bench outside of the house, or walk around with hands in pockets. Members of the Philathletic Club were higher status that house games players, and could wear their blazer collars up. Highest of all were members of the cricket eleven who everyone recognized because of their speckled straw hats, who were "manifestly a person of considerable importance." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 171)

Unfortunately, the pictures of these colorful uniforms are in black and white. This same celebration of athleticism can be seen in portraits of Ivy League teams in the 19th and early 20th centuries, where cap and uniform wearing men can be seen lounging with an easy confidence. It's easy to poke fun. But the mentality at work here is no different than the message sent by the big men on campus today wearing their letter jackets. Or the signal sent by university teams dressed in team sweats donated by Under Armor or Nike who tend to roam in packs. As much as the boys dressed in pink at Butler, these athletes are sending a clear message to viewers-- we are a select group and want everyone else to know and recognize that. It would seem odd if you could recognize students majoring in geology simply by glancing at the clothes, because team identity is much more accepted. But this speaks to the special status that athletics still holds in many of our schools.

At a time where academics weren't celebrated nearly as much as athleticism, the strutting big men on campus public school boys didn't have to worry too much about studying. In the writer Arnold Lunn's memoir, he details his experiences at two public schools, Orley Farm School and Harrow. "In my house, the Homeric heroes who led our cohorts into battle on the playing fields of Harrow disported themselves at ease during the hours set aside for homework, while the local intelligentsia did their homework for them." (Lunn, Arnold. Come What May. An Autobiography. Eyre & Spottiswoode London. 1940. Pg. 29)

 Thus the social pecking order of the public schools was clear. Noted athletes were known as "bloods" and had status even if they weren't part of the prefect system. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 172) The big men on campus were jocks, and the older athletes were usually tapped as prefects to help enforce social control of the schools. In this way, athleticism helped with social conformity and discipline. "Within the schools the worship of muscle became steadily encrusted with symbols and rituals of prostration and power which exalted the athletic, excited the devout and stigmatized the heretical." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 140) Athletes were the quintessential big men on campus, celebrated at school, . As a 1913 book on the history of sports at the top public schools explained, once a Harrow boy earned his "flannels" at cricket, he reached a "position of great distinction in the School." Younger students idolized him and would look to him as a model on the pitch and in life. "He will never, probably, in after life possess such power again... He is manifestly a person of very considerable importance. It behoves him, therefore, to see to it that he applies his influence to noble and unselfish ends." (Froome, A. C. M. Fifty Years Of Sport At Oxford, Cambridge, and the Great Public Schools. (2 vols, 1913) Walter Southward & Co., Limited. London. Volume II. Pg. 127)

Another factor also enhanced and reinforced the importance of athletics in the public schools-- a number of school songs that glorified athletics Headmasters, masters, students and alums penned a number of songs with athletic themes. The songs were often sung communally, like the hymns in chapel. In this way songs supported the athleticism movement, along with sermons and the house structure. This Harrow song is typical:

**Harrow**

When you had the toil and the tussle,

The batter of ankle and shin,

'Tis hard in the moment of triumph

To pass it another to win,

But that is the luck of the battle,

And thick must be taken with thin.

They tell us the world is a scrimmage,

And life is a difficult run,

Where often a brother shall finish

A victory we have begun,

What matter, we learnt it at Harrow

And that was the way that we won.

(Froome, A. C. M. Fifty Years Of Sport At Oxford, Cambridge, and the Great Public Schools. (2 vols, 1913) Walter Southward & Co., Limited. London. Volume 2. Pg. 127)

Songs and poems were very popular at all the schools and there were a number glorifying the "bloods". Historian J. A. Mangan has written extensively about how public school athleticism was promoted by athletes, alumni, and headmasters through an elaborate system of symbolism utilizing songs, sermons, and even poetry. "For approximately seventy years between 1860 and 1930 at Harrow, Lancing, Loretto, Marlborough, Stonyhurst and Uppingham, an assortment of headmasters, masters, old boys and pupils wove around their games and playing fields a sometimes attractive, frequently naive, and occasionally ridiculous web of romance and chivalry through both published prose and verse, and articles and songs in school magazines." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 181) Famed Uppingham headmaster Edward Thring wrote a number of songs and, a number glorified exercise and athletics that were published.

For example, here's a verse from "The Uppingham Cricket Song."

Cricketers all,

If wickets fall,

As fall full well they many,

Give honor due,

Good hearts and true,

To those who win the day.

Merry England, merry England,

Fair field and win who will,

Whilst Cricket we play

Each Summer day,

'Tis merry England still.

(Thring, Edward. Uppingham School Songs and Borth Lyrics. T. Fisher Unwin: London. 1887. Pg. 23)

And here's a verse from "Fives Song". Fives was a game played with a ball batted with either hands or wooden bats against the walls of a three or four sided court.

Poets sung it long ago,

All the fight and all the woe,

Geryon and thundering Zeus,

Hundred-fisted Briareus,

Argus with his million eyes,

Oh, 'twas but a game of Fives.

Oh the lordly game of Fives.

Oh the spirit in the ball,

Dancing round about the wall!

Pg. 29)

And the second and fourth verse of "The Old Boys' Match." Celebrate how sports traditions can unite current students and alumni, creating a shared sense of mission.

Jolly sun, we do implore thee,

Stay with us the whole year round,

Young boys almost do adore three,

Old boys come to bask before thee,

Lie still on the cricket ground.

Sunshine for the old who meet us,

Old and young, a sunny game;

Sunny game, they shall not beat us,

Sunny game, though they defeat us,

Sunny life for Uppingham.

(Pg. 26-7)

Shared sports songs sought to unite their current school boys' enthusiasm for the thrill of the games with the nostalgic view of alumni. By lauding the heroic athletic efforts of past years, the songs instilled a sense of solidarity. Not subtle, maybe, but with a clear intent. Here was a Loretto song celebrating the glory days of athletics and the very idea and sanctity of athletics. (As quoted. Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 184)

Oh give me back that golden time again

When youth ran riot through the heart and mind

Even now I seem to hear the rival cheers

That tell our House match days of hopes and fears.

The gathering tramp of forwards sweeping on,

The net's exultant his which shows our goal is won.

When we see the Lorettonian, we are boys and young once more,

And our thoughts fly back to Scotland from some far Pacific shore,

Or some distant frontier highland

And we long to see again the red jersey once we wore.

Forgotten cheers are ion our ears,

Again we play our matches,

And memory sells with wizard spells

Our bygone scores and catches;

Again we rush across the slush-

A pack of breathless faces-

And charge and fall, and see the ball

Fly whining through the bases.

Once a Harrow or Loretto boy, always a Harrow or Loretto boy. By hearkening back to a purer, simpler time, when preparing for the big game was paramount, alumni could bathe in the warm memories of games past. This nostalgia for sports united current students with old students and bolstered the institutions. This tactic rings true for any parent of a child in most US colleges or universities, who often use athletics as a way to promote their institution.

There is power in shared songs that celebrate traditions. Most schools currently have songs that they sing together to celebrate when their football team scores. When my brother Tim and I were in the seats of the new $303 million home stadium for the University of Minnesota's Golden Gophers football team, I was struck by the different chants and songs that celebrated touchdowns. When thousands of joyful fans break into a shared song or chant, they are not only celebrating infield prowess-- they are created a strong bond amongst themselves. For the gophers, fans mark a hometown touchdown by singing the last two lines of the school song The Minnesota Rouser. (<https://cla.umn.edu/music/ensembles-creative-work/marching-band/history-traditions/school-songs>)

Minnesota, Hats off to thee!

To thy colors, true we shall ever be,

Firm and strong, united are we.

Rah! Rah! Rah! For Ski-U-Mah,

Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah! Rah! For the U of M.

[Repeat]

M-I-N-N-E-S-O-T-A

Minnesota! Minnesota! Yeaaaaaaah Gophers!

For those who think that the public school poems and songs are over the top and old fashioned, a google search for “Ivy League fight songs” will demonstrate that US colleges wrote the same kinds of lyrics.

**The House Residential System Reinforces Athleticism Regime**

A notable feature of the public schools was the residential house system. Students lived in what they called houses, and each house developed a sort of personality of its own. Organized games fit beautifully into the house system. Each year, the big events were athletic contests against other houses. This shared competition not only increased enthusiasm for the games-- it also created a strong bond between house members.

The house system that sustained the athletic programs also served another crucial purpose-- making life easier for the house masters. To modern eyes, it seems crazy to deliberately delegate most disciplinary authority to older boys, but this is exactly what public school house masters did. Although there were abuses, it made life much easier for the relatively few adult masters in charge. It was widely believed that prefects learned crucial lessons of character by keeping order in a house. An added side benefit was that in the 20th century public school, masters owned and operated the residential houses for profit, so the unpaid students keeping order kept staffing levels low and made them more money. At one point Marlborough considered freeing parents from the fees paid to house masters. However, they didn't do this because they found that "the large income of a prospective boarding-house was one of the chief financial inducements to men of first-rate abilities." (Bradley, A.G., et. Al. A History of Marlborough College: During Fifty Years From Its Foundation To The Present Time. John Murray, Albermarle Street. London. 1893. Pg. 58) (This is an interesting parallel to the present situation in US Division I colleges where the coaches and administrators make large amounts of money off the abilities of the student athletes. Administrators usually make the same argument that they have to pay huge coaching salaries to get the best candidates.) A sports regime proved an invaluable tool to help house masters control their students. House contests were so popular that they provided a unifying common purpose for students and created strong bonds between the boys. Fans, after all, love to watch/talk about/root for their teams together. The houses were small enough so that everyone participated in the event, either playing or watching. Loyalty to house bound boys together, and then loyalty to the broader school bound the houses together. Thus a kind of athletic patriotism created a shared sense of identity and purpose, enhancing the us versus them dynamic and causing boys to feel pride in their own houses and schools. In addition, the athletic culture fit nicely into the prefect discipline strategy where prefect were often notable athletes.

A similar residential house system also serves the interests of US schools that adapted the practice from British institutions. The big state schools have residential halls, but these schools tend to be so large that they don't instill the same sort of loyalty that smaller residential facilities at elite liberal arts schools do. It's much more common for large numbers of undergraduates to live off campus in big schools. For a model of the British public school house system, look to the smaller elite schools-- Yale and Princeton with its residential colleges; Harvard and its houses; Princeton with its eating clubs that allow juniors and seniors to apply for entrance and enjoy a place to dine and socialize with other club members. These residential entities (and the eating club, which serve a similar purpose of engendering student and alumni loyalty, were modeled on Oxford and Cambridge's system of autonomous colleges, and even borrowed similar architectural designs to more closely mimic the British model. In it's two residential houses, built in 2017, Yale used custom double-glazed windows that mimic the look of old windows at Oxford and Cambridge, with panes of what seem to be old wavy glass and panes repaired with lead. The big difference in the US iteration is that the US residential colleges tend to have limited self-governance. They have Heads and Deans, but aren't fully independent with their own admissions system. All are designed to give their students a shared sense of being on the larger house team. As the Princeton website states, "First-years typically take on the identity of their college with pride early in the first semester." [(https://admission.princeton.edu/campus-life/housing](https://admission.princeton.edu/campus-life/housing)) Yale promotes its residential system of 14 colleges, begun in 1933 (Harvard's residential house system began in 1928 and both were initally funded by philanthropist Edward Harkness), as a place where students can become part of a cohesive and intimate group, and use that as a base to enjoy the border cultural and academic parts of the larger university. Yale students are affiliated with their residential life "for all 4 years (and beyond)." [(https://yalecollege.yale.edu/campus-life/residential-colleges)](https://yalecollege.yale.edu/campus-life/residential-colleges)

Over the years, we've noticed that the Yale students who decided to live off campus tend to be the ones who are a little off-beat, and often more interesting. They are uncomfortable in the residential house setting, and prefer to go in their own direction. Of course, the university doesn't want students to live off campus. Admissions officers expressly look for students they feel will enthusiastically jump into the non-academic life of the school-- join clubs, enthusiastically embrace their house identity and otherwise add to the social fabric of the school. Of course, there is a big contradiction in messages sent-- on the one hand admissions officers stress that they are looking for original thinkers; on the other hand, they want students who will conform in important ways and not be too independent. In short, they want most Yale students to be enthusiastic team members and joiners, because that ensures the desired social environment. The added benefit is that this tends to produce cheerful, satisfied alumni who are much more likely to donate down the road. The house system was a "brilliantly successful piece of social engineering whereby large numbers of boys could be headed together away from home and its comforts and be adequately controlled and emotionally sustained... In short the house was a symbolic crucible in which individuality was melted down into conformity." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 150)

**Class-based Amateur Ideal At Heart of Athleticism Culture, and How Headmasters Implemented Games Culture**

Sports taught character by challenging boys physically and teaching them to be good team players. But the Victorians were uncomfortable with the idea of unfettered competition that valued winning above all else that came to dominate when the US schools integrated sports into their curriculums. Winning at all costs was not the aim. In British public schools, sports, for all intents and purposes compulsory, “enshrined the ethic of competition, or more precisely the ethic of *fair* competition.” (Holt, pg. 97). The idea was to teach boys to compete as hard as they could. Striving to do their best was the overall point. Winning was of course fun, but learning to be a gracious loser was at least as important as emerging victorious. In this thinking, life represented a series of struggles and trying hard and losing a game taught valuable resiliency.

A system of fair play developed and became what has been called the “ethic of amateurism.” (Holt, pg. 99) Middle and upper classes played the same games that the lower classes played, but they did it according to their code of following not only the rules of the game, but also the spirit of the game. “Sport had not only to be played in good spirit, it had to be played with style… Practicing too much undermined natural grace and talent. For amateurs were above all gentlemen, and gentleman were not supposed to told and sweat for their laurels.” (Holt, Pg. 100) Gentlemen also shouldn’t stoop to making money from playing. While some early advocates of athletics in US schools shared this British attitude of the gentlemen amateur, from the beginning sports in elite US universities were much more commercial than Oxford of Cambridge had ever been. In fact, as we will see, professionalism of sports in US universities was a central feature of the first sports at Harvard and Yale, in sharp contrast to the British public schools and elite universities.

Before the mid 1800s, a gentleman who played cricket was someone who was rich, and it was common that such gentlemen athletes would have teammates who didn’t have independent means. Making money from playing was common, with large amounts of money being bet on games, and socially acceptable. In the 1850s the term “professional” came into use and by the 1880s, so did the term “amateur”. A new amateur ethic took hold among the upper classes and created a new moral view of sports that frowned on being paid to play. In practice, the British notion of the gentleman amateur effectively excluded most working class athletes from participating. For example, at Oxford the earliest rowing races featured Oxford students steering while professional watermen rowed. Over time, the working class watermen were excluded, and rowing and other sports were restricted to university students competing against each other.

Constrained by this amateurism ideal, British sports became influenced by money much later than in the US. While there were professional athletes in Britain, there was a strong class division where the upper classes looked down on those who played for money. The sports associations generally frowned on allowing their athletes to make money, and kept commercialism out for sports much longer than in the US. (Holt, pg. 281) While Oxford and Cambridge students continued to enjoy playing games, the amateur ethic which didn't value winning at all costs limited the impact of athletics. Here the contrast with the elite US colleges and the Oxbridge schools is stark-- the bigger and more free-wheeling US culture provided an opening for college sports to quickly become entwined with commercialism in a way that was unique. This profoundly impacted the sports landscape in US colleges. Because commercialism was a feature of US college sports right from the start, the climate was ripe for sports, developing big media and businesses to create what has grown into the current massive US college sports entity.

The Victorian sports ideal was best represented by the wildly popular 1857 Thomas Hughes novel Tom Brown’s School Days. The book influenced an entire genre of popular British school novels and was adapted into movies in 1916, 1940, 1951, 1971 (TV miniseries), and 2005. It was also widely popular in the US, and spawned a whole genre of novels that celebrated sports-playing ivy leaguers, which will be discussed later on.

The novel follows Tom, as he goes Rugby School, where he is ruthlessly bullied by older boys. Tom isn’t a good student, but a good athlete and sensitive boy. The headmaster asks East, another boy to look after Tom, and the two strike up a bond and become fine young men— regularly praying, refusing to cheat on schoolwork and, above all, excellent cricket players. Hughes clearly approves of the Victorian idea that bullying serves an important purpose for young men. Whether it was student prefects meting out punishment for disobedience or masters using the cane to teach lessons to wayward students, boys who stoically took the punishment required by the public school code of honor became better men. (Renson, Roland. “Fair Play: Its Origins and Meanings In Sport and Society”. Journal of Kinesiology 41(2009)1:5-18. Pg. 9) In the book, Pater Brooke, head of the victorious house foot-ball team, gives a pep talk to Tom and his classmates, saying that he knows that there is bullying going on. Brooke warns that it can get out of hand, but that “You’ll be all the better foot-ball players for learning to stand it, and to take your own parts, and fight it through.” (Hughes, Thomas. Tom Brown’s School Days. Macmillan & Co. Cambridge. Third Edition. 1857 Pg. 136) East and Tom exasperate the masters, who have to flog them regularly for various transgressions. They worry that they will have to expel them if they “don’t see them gaining character and manliness.” (Days, pg. 234) Tom turns things around when he is asked to mentor a new younger boy, George Arthur. While this new responsibility gets Tom to protect Arthur from bullies, it is sports that really turns Tom into a proper British gentleman. Not because he was a good cricket and foot-ball player (he was), but because he learned to be a team player. As one of Tom's masters remarked, “The discipline and reliance on one another which it teaches is so valuable, it ought to be such an unselfish game. It merges the individual in the eleven; he doesn’t play that he may win, but that his side may.” (Days, Pg. 394)

Tom Brown's world favored a healthy body, and, most importantly, character as expressed in team sports, over intellect. Parents sent their boys to public schools for the same reason Squire Brown sent Tom-- to turn them into a brave, honest, steadfast Christian gentlemen. Hughes highlights how sports were woven tightly into the school experience. In fact, the schools used rich symbolism and ritual to reinforce the game-playing culture. Sports heroes, or 'bloods' were instantly identified by an often elaborate and colorful regalia system of special jackets, tasseled caps, and sashes. And, as in Tom's world, there were songs that were often sung glorifying the school and the sports teams.

In the nonfictional world, historians often point to Dr. Arnold, appointed headmaster of Rugby School in 1828, as the most important figure in the adoption of athletics into public school curricula. He also helped create a system of discipline that helped control the often unruly students and created a ready environment where an athletic regime could become quickly integrated into the public school. When Arnold took over, he noted that "Public Schools *are* the very seats and nurseries of vice." (Report of the Headmasters Conference: 1897. Pg. 3.) Arnold diagnosed the problem as being a "barrier existing between masters and boys, and in the distrust felt by the latter towards the former. (Pg. 4) As the Headmasters Conference in 1897 noted glowingly, Arnold "was the first headmaster to repose complete confidence in his boys." (Pg. 5) What this meant was that he increased the existing policy where older boys were given wide authority to control the behavior of younger students.

The physical fitness ideal was not just exemplified by sports and outdoor physical activity, such as arduous marches in horrible weather. Boys could also be toughened up by purposely spartan living conditions. A report on the state of public schools reminded readers that "in dormitories, windows should always be open while the boys are in bed." (Pg. 337) In addition, the dorms and classrooms should always be well ventilated and "never be allowed to exceed 60 (Degree symbol needed) by artificial means." (Pg. 336)

Thus sports took on a moral dimension in the British public schools. In a process that would be a hallmark of early US Eastern private schools, sports, austere living quarters, and compulsory sports were seen as a way to mold the ruling class into tough, real-world leaders. This sports culture, with itssystem of house competitions within the schools, school colors, and colorful regalia that signified the wearer’s athletic achievements on the field then spread to Oxford, Cambridge, and the armed services. (Goldblatt, pg. 29)

The process whereby a new generation of headmasters integrated games into the curriculum began in 1845 at Harrow Uppingham, Lancing and Loretto. (Mangan. Pg. 18) School staff were scholars called masters, and didn’t focus on what the pupils did in their free time. This freedom was a notable feature of the public schools. Unlike the non-public schools, the relatively wealthy public school students were allowed to venture out and about unsupervised. The schools were often located in the countryside, so most students spent their free time outside fishing or hunting small animals. As the studens population grew, it became harder to keep pupils under control, and local landowner began to complain about the boys running rampant and poaching wildlife. The Marlborough student body grew from 200 in 1843 to 500 in 1848, a phenomenal rate of growth for a school. (Mangan, p. 22) At Harrow, boys kept dogs and cats and would make them fight each other and regularly had stone fights with local boys. (Mangan. Pg. 31) One Harrow grounds keeper complained that “stone-throwing was the principal leisure occupation of the boys and they performed with deadly accuracy. No dog could live on Harrow Hill. Ponies frequently lost their eyes if they had to pull their owners’ carts near the school.” (Mangan, pg. 32)[[1]](#footnote-1)

M. Wilkinson, the headmaster at Marlborough, lost control of the school and the main task for his successor, G.E.L. Cotton in his inaugural year of 1853, was to try and bring some order to the campus. In a l853 letter to parents, which he referred to as a ‘Circular to Parents’, Cotton advocated for instituting organized games as an integral part of the curriculum to keep them from venturing out unsupervised and poaching wildlife. He argued that the games would provide entertainment, as well as build community for all the students, who would have to participate in the games. In order to balance the principle of freedom for the students with the new program of organized games, Cotton chose not to make the games compulsory. He hired sporting masters wholly dedicated to creating games for the students— in effect, coaches. Cotton’s plan worked well. The enthusiastic sporting masters were able to create popular programs. “These brave masters came amongst us and reformed our cricket in a slight degree; they altogether reformed our football turning it from a private farce into a great school institution.” Shortly after Cotton’s death, his wife wrote in a letter how pleases he was with his games initiative. This effort, “a civilized out-of-door life in the form of cricket, football and wholesome sports took the place of poaching, rat hunting and poultry stealing.” (Mangan, Pg. 24)

All headmasters at the time preached and regularly published their sermons, which became popular. Cotton and others used this to make the moral case that athletic games were a part of a good Christian life. In 1853, Cotton, headmaster at the prestigious Marlborough School, worked with enthusiastic students to found the “Harrow Philathletic Club.” The club was founded “with the view of promoting among the members of the School an increased interest in games and other manly exercises.” (Mangan, Appendix I(a)ii, Page 224.) The prospectus posited that “those who play well, will generally be found to work well, also.” (Ibid) Club dues would go towards creating a gymnasium and a prize system for house contests. (Houses were dorms within the public schools.)

In his Circular, Cotton explains and justifies his new athletic policy. He complains that the system of charging subscription fees to the Cricket Club, which funded other sports as well, wasn’t working because less than half the students signed up. As a result, “the mass of the school are not trained up to cricket and foot-ball at all, which, as healthy and manly games, are certainly deserving of general encouragement.” (Mangan, Appendix I(b), Page 228.) The system of existing fines wasn’t working to control students during their leisure time, which too many spent “wandering about the country— some in bird’s nesting, or in damaging the property of the neighbors, or other undesirable accusations.” (Ibid) Cotton proposes a new emphasis on athletics, funded by a compulsory Cricket Club fee for every student. He also proposed the establishment of house libraries and the paving of the five’s courts (A version of handball played in a three or four sided court.) He writes that in the future it might be nice to create woodworking, science and carpentry club, but notes that something like a Musical Society wasn’t a priority, since it would be “limited for the most part to those who have some particular taste or talent.” (Mangan, Appendix I(b), Page 229.) The value systems is clear. Even if students had no natural affinity for sports, they should be forced to participate because athletics were absolutely essential to develop the right kind of character. Music and other extra-curricular weren’t as important and were only useful for those who had at least some natural talent for it. This favoring of athletics over other extra-curricular activities became a feature of the public schools and also became a feature of many US schools when they imported the British athletic culture. To this day, many US preparatory schools mandate playing some kind of sport, or at least some kind of physical activity, in the interest of producing candidates for good colleges seeking well-rounded students.

Headmasters had levied fines to try and keep boys from running wild in the countryside. Then some headmasters began to institute a regime of organized, compulsory, games that helped them to provide what they saw as a healthy alternative to occupying their charges in their free times. This athleticism culture was implemented in a way that controlled student behavior, created a shared sense of student loyalty towards their schools, helped keep alumni connected to their schools, and created a sometimes-brutal discipline regimen that was often led by student prefects who were usually noted athletes. The increased interest in physical fitness and sports was compatible with the religious education that was also an important feature of the public schools. Chapel was held regularly throughout the week by headmasters who were either in the Church or very religious. The ideal public school boy was a good athlete who took church seriously.

This effort dovetailed with the powerful economic forces unleashed by industrialization that had helped Britain become the most significant imperialist power. Many public school headmasters enthusiastically embraced their role in creating young men who would help in the imperial effort, and organized athletics was seen as a key tool to create future leaders. A central feature of what the historian J. A. Mangan has called the “cult of athleticism” was emphasizing the value of sports over intellectualism. While there was a belief in the importance of physical fitness as an important part of becoming a proper gentleman, just being in shape and playing an individual sport wasn’t enough. (Holt, pg. 205) More important lessons were learned in team sports. In the same way that elite US schools’ stated missions are to produce future leaders, British public schools strove to produce gentlemen who would naturally take their place at the top in the effort to manage and grow the British empire. As we have seen, the British public schools, in the decades from around 1840 well into the 1900s, implemented a sometimes-brutal jock culture that elevated athletes. The schools used the games culture to control their student bodies, giving athletes great power by making them prefects with authority to punish students and enforce the rules. A games culture kept students under control and was fun for many students who played or enjoyed watching. Making every student participate also ensured that they would be physically fit. There was a strong belief that schools could produce future leaders by challenging them physically with games and other fitness activities such as long marches in terrible weather, having to cope with hard mattresses and drafty dorm rooms, and taking cold showers.

Headmasters used these and a variety of other techniques to try and impose a system of morals on their young pupil that were primarily based on the physical, as opposed to the intellectual. They used sermons, “the playing-field exhortation, the speech-day admonition, the informal ‘jaw’, the classroom digression and the school magazine editorial— to suffuse every pore of the schools society with their version of reality.” (Mangan, J. A. The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal. Frank Cass. 1986. Pg. 2-3) Hely Hutchinson Almond, headmaster of the Loretto School in Edinburgh, implored his young charges to use their newly found physical strength to work for the Empire. In a sermon, he weighed the worth of the sportsman and the student. Which “is the more likely to be sensitive and to interpret correctly faint and momentary impressions on eye and ear; to know what is indicated by the fall of a pebble, or the distant shimmer of steel… the boy who has pored over books and papers at the town crammer’s, or the one who has constantly steered the ball through a football scrummage, or stalked wild-ducks, or ridden straight to hounds? Which of the two is the more likely to throw off the germs of disease, to recover soon from wounds, or to endure exposure and fatigue?” (Mangan, Games. Pg. 7-8)

By the late late 1800s the role of organized games was widely accepted in the public schools. The Headmasters Conference of 1897 makes this clear. "It is the spirit that loves these games and in turn is fostered by the them that has made England a dominant nation." (Special Reports on Educational Subjects. Volume 6: Preparatory Schools for Boys: Their Place in English Secondary Education. Presented to both Houses of Parliament by command of Her Majesty. London: Printed for Her Majesty's Stationery Office by Wyman and Sons Limited, Fetter Lane, London, E.C. Pg. 344) Other nations might not understand, but there "was a method in the madness, if our English games are the means of developing a side of our faculties which the classroom cannot touch..." (Pg. 345) A public school headmasters' most important task was to impart the proper character to each student and "provide him with an incomparable field for making himself acquainted with his boys' real selves, for exercising his influence in infusing a manly, unselfish, and courteous spirit, and for fitting them to deal with some social problems of later life which the games prorate in miniature." (Pg. 345)

There were downsides. Rules-based games didn't encourage individuality and tended to produce a type of boy, "a bright, wholesome, and English-like, but as uniform as the buttons of the regulation tunic." (Pg. 345) And undoubtedly some non-athletic boys suffered. Games actually weren't for the athletically gifted or the boys who hated sports-- they were for the number of disinterested boys who couldn't be reached in any other way and posed a grave threat to the overall school environment. Every school had a "proportion of boys who, owing to barren-headedness or self-indulgent laziness, are devoid of any desirable interest whatever. These aimless, hobbiless, selfish loafers constitute an element of danger which no school can afford to disregard; and the pressure which a powerful athletic enthusiasm exerts directly or indirectly upon boys of this type, either forces upon them an interest which is admittedly wholesome and manly, or at least surrounds with with a strong antiseptic atmosphere, that neutralizes their power for influencing others." (Pg. 347)

Perhaps no headmaster was more a more enthusiastic athletic supporter than the Reverend J. E. C. Welldon, headmaster of the Harrow School from 1881-1895, and later a prominent Bishop. To Weldon, the key to the strength of the British Empire was the public school sports ethic. After all, Englishmen weren’t any smarter than the French or anyone else, and didn’t necessarily work any harder. What set the British apart from their European peers was “the sport, the pluck, the resolution… [which] are effectively acquired in the cricket-fields and football fields of the great public schools, and in the games of which they are the habitual scenes. The pluck, the energy, the perseverance, the good temper, the self-control, the discipline, the co-operation, the esprit de corps, which merit success in cricket or football, are the very qualities which win the day in peace or war… In the history of the British Empire it is written that England has owed her sovereignty to her sports.” (J. E. C. Welldon, “The Imperial Purpose of Education” in Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute, Vol. XXVI, 1894-5)

From the comfortable perch of the present, the direct linking of sports games in British public schools to warfare horrifies, particularly given that many public schools graduates, motivated by the martial message of responsible adults, went off to WWI and disproportionately died in the trenches of Europe. As historian J. A. Mangan put it, "The simple and foolish image of public school boys as sportsmen soldiers is a recurring one in the literature for the schools." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 194)

Welldon thought deeply about the role of sports in the public schools. He did wish that intellectual achievements were more celebrated than athletic ones. He attributed this glorification of the athlete to general societal values, not the schools themselves. “It is not time spent upon games, but the time spent in reading, talking and thinking about them that is the danger “The boy who thinks little of himself, and much of his Eleven or his school, has not spent his Public School life in vain” (Welldon, J.E.C. Recollections and Reflections. Cassell And Company, LTD. 1915. Pg. 95) While he lamented the time some of the boys spent obsessing about sports and games, he did point out that experienced masters knew that "boys, if they are not playing games, may be doing worse things as well as better." (Welldon, J.E.C. Recollections and Reflections. Cassell And Company, LTD. 1915. Pg. 98)

Welldon approved of the harsh discipline learned in the public schools. "It is curious to notice how a boy or a girl becomes, after a short time, almost a new being, when he or she passes from the more or less casual life of home into a society where every member is expected to be punctual, docile and self-sacrificing... It is the duty of every teacher to demand unquestioning obedience of his pupils. He must, at least in a Public School, stamp upon their minds the conviction that he will be master at all costs; bet when once perfect discipline is so attained, he may give them almost any liberty..." Welldon, J.E.C. Recollections and Reflections. Cassell And Company, LTD. 1915. Pg. 141

The Reverend T. L. Papillon, Oxford educated scholar and Oxford Dean and Tutor, and philologist summed up the overall ethos of the virtue of public school athleticism.

Many a lad who leaves an English public school disgracefully ignorant of the rudiments of useful knowledge, who can speak no language but his own, and writes that imperfectly, to whom the noble literature of his country and the stirring history of his forefathers are almost a sealed book, and who has devoted a great part of his time, an nearly all his thoughts to athletic sports, yet brings away with him something beyond all price, a manly, straight-forward character, a scorn of lying and meanness, habits of obedience and command, and fearless courage. Thus equipped, he goes into the world, and bears a man's part in subduing the earth, railing its wild folk and building up the Empire; doing many things so well that it seems a thousand pities that he was not remained to do them better... This type of citizen, however, with all its defects, had done yeoman's service to the Empire; and for much that is best in him our public schools may fairly take credit." (As quoted. Darwin, Bernard. The English Public School. Longmont, Green & Company, London, ET AL. 1929. Pg. 21)

Once the decision was made to build up athletics by investing large sums in facilities, the public schools created a series of educational arguments to sell the new strategy to students, parents, alumni, and other stake holders. This exact dynamic became a hallmark of US schools as well. Public school headmasters found little student resistance to a new compulsory athletic regime, particularly among those who were good at sports. Who can blame the boys for a program that didn't emphasize academic rigor too much, and rewarded playing games?

Of course, not all of the boys were wild about compulsory sports and tried to get out of them. Some wanted to continue to tradition of unsupervised outside activity, some just didn't like sports. Over time, playing games nearly every day simply became the normal routine, and those who didn't want to became a sort of odd-nerd minority, called "degenerate boys imbued with the spirit of loafing" at Lancing. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 83-4)

**Public Schools Put Their Money Where Their Mouth Was**

As we will see later in our study of athletics in elite US schools, you have to follow the money. Some headmasters lamented that the boys didn't take their academics seriously. However, when we look at how much money they invested in the athleticism regime, the conclusion is inescapable-- they cared more about athletics than anything else. In this way, the public schools provided the model for many elite US schools in the 20th century.

Public school campuses were transformed by athletic investment. A study of six public schools highlights the growth in the amount of school land dedicated to playing fields, gyms, pools and other athletic facilities. The study of the acreage devoted the athletics at six public schools (Harrow, Marlborough, Uppingham, Lancing, Stonyhurst, and Loretto) demonstrates that they grew from 14 acres in 1845 to 329.5 in 1900. (Mangan, Athleticism. Pg. 71) Headmasters felt that good facilities mattered. Edward Thring, headmaster of the Uppingham school spoke approvingly of the marketing value of good athletic facilities. "Machinery, machinery, machinery should be the motto of any good school... As little as possible ought to be left to personal merit in the teachers, as much as possible ought to rest on the siesta and the appliances." (Mangan, Athleticism. P. 70) In a pattern that would be repeated in US schools, the funds for facilities came from parents, wealthy alumni, staff (a good number of headmasters were very wealthy men, and top administrators made very high salaries). In addition, regular income from compulsory athletic subscriptions fees paid by every student provided a regular stream of funds to help finance the athletic programs. (Mangan, Athleticism, pg. 71)

So all boys had to play, and they all had to pay. US schools today, searching for money to support their sports programs, often charge a sports fee to all students, whether they are interested in sports of not. Most top state school charge an athletics fee to all students, whether they care about sports or not.

Like the giant football stadiums in the US, shrines to the importance of athletics to many US high schools and colleges, the new athletic facilities build in British public schools in the 19th century broadcast a clear message. Our staff, our students, their parents, and our alumni are wealthy enough to build facilities which will allow those lucky enough to attend to learn the kind of character that only a good sports regimen can give. When visitors walked to the Harrow fields and witnessed the 34 cricket fields, they knew how much the school valued sports. This was a time of great wealth accumulation in Britain and the athletic venues trumpeted the value system of this new upper class. "Riches disproportionately held in the hands of the the upper classes raised public school chapels, built the houses, purchased the playing fields, and provided the security which permitted the occupation of these fields for several hours each day." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 99) Investment in the classrooms generally didn't keep pace with the athletic venues, and this disparity reinforced how much the schools valued athletics over academics. Even critics who felt that the schools emphasized athletics too much acknowledged that athletics was too important for schools not support. In 1898, Lionel Ford, an Assistant Master at Eton, wrote critically about sports in the public schools. "Athletics ceased to be a pastime, and became a sacred institution, on which scholastic hands must not be profanely laid... Any school that would recommend itself to the British public must concern itself to see that its athletic appliances do not fall behind its neighbors'." (Ford, Lionel in Cookson, Christopher. Editor. Essays on Secondary Education. Chapter Public School Athletics. Oxford at the Clarendon Press. 1898. Pg. 290-3

Athletics dwarfed other extra-curricular activities. The athletic ethic--male, sometimes violent, with explicit military overtones, respectful of rules and conformity-- was the opposite of the image of the effeminate scholar who spent time by himself, nose buried in a book. Better to project a manly image that demonstrated superior self-control, then be book smart. The idea of English masculinity as it should be reflected in its public school boys is summed up by Harold Nicolson writing about his uncle, the noted diplomat Sir Arthur Nicolson's, Rugby school days. "It was taught on all sides that manliness and self-control were the highest aim of English boyhood: he was taught that all but the most material forms of intelligence were slightly effeminate: he learnt, as they all learnt, to rely on action rather than ideas." (Nicolson, Harold. Sir Arthur Nicolson, bart.: a study in the old diplomacy. London: Constable & Co ltd. 1930. Pg. 7)

Once games became an integral part of the curriculum, public schools began looking for faculty and heads who could highlight the importance of sports. No longer did headmasters need to be top scholars. There were three types of masters-- well rounded, scholars and athletes or athletic boosters; rich gentlemen who could help finance athletic facilities; and 'games masters' who were famous athletes who often continued to play with the boys. (Mangan, Athleticism. Pg. 114-5.) Enthusiasm for athletics became so important by the late 19th century that many students played because they wanted the chance to land what were lucrative teaching positions in the public schools. A Headmasters' Conference in 1897 criticized headmasters for relying too much on athletic qualifications, claiming that a 130 of the 150 applicants listed athletics as their biggest interest and the process showed contempt for applicants who were merely scholars. (Mangan. Athleticsm. Pg. 116.)

As in the US once sports were integrated into elite colleges, there were critics of the athletic culture. The Public Schools Commission report of 1864 criticized the lax academic standards, but at the same suggested that small curriculum changes could address this shortcoming. The Commission, reflecting the cultural ethos at the time that was distrustful of intellectualism, approved of the emphasis on athletics in public schools. As historian J. A. Mangan observed, "the disparagement of brains elected nothing short of a general and virulent anti-intellectualism on the part of most boys and some masters." (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 107)

While headmasters sometimes lamented that their students were too sports-focused, they unsurprisingly went along with the primacy of athletics, bowing to the prevalent social suspicion of intellectualism at the time and the seeming inevitability of athletics. Reading through the sermons of F. W. Farrar, headmaster of Marlborough from 1800-1804, it's clear that he wishes more of his students put as much effort into their studies they put into playing and thinking about games. "Do not think that I disparage the physical vigor at which I daily look with interest, but it is impossible to repress a sigh when one thinks that the same vigor infused also into intellectual studies which are far higher and nobler, would carry all success and prosperity in life irresistibly before you." (Farrah, F. W. (Frederic William). In the Days of Thy Youth: Sermons on Practical Subjects Preached at Marlborough College from 1871-1876. Second Edition. Macmillan and Co. London. 1876. Pg. 112-3.) But his misgivings didn't cause him to try and lessen the primacy of athletics at Marlborough, and he clearly felt that games taught valuable life lessons. In another sermon to the boys, he defended games, saying that games "undoubtedly do educate, or may be made to educate, much that in manly in the best and truest sense... By manly I mean all that is eager, hearty, fearless, modest, pure." Sports were the antidote to idleness, which could lead to low-life activities such as "betting, lounging, drinking, and worldliness in its worst sense." (Pg. 368-9) Farrah and other headmasters did encourage their students not to put too much emphasis on games. He warned that "A boy for instance, is often in danger of wholly overestimating the value of his own athletic success... " (Farrar. Pg. 370.) This advice emphasizes that games were valued because of character traits that they taught, but must be kept in perspective. It was "wrong to be vain of any gift" and athletes must play by the rules, put in their best effort and never forget that "games, however useful and delightful, are not of first-rate, not even of third, fourth, or fifth-- scarcely even of tenth-rate importance in comparison with higher things." (Farrah, pg. 371) This goes right to the heart of the amateur ideal of sports promulgated by British Public Schools.

Assistant Master at Fettes College in Edinburgh C. C. Cotterill, in his 1893 book on public school reform, sums up the dominant attitude of the time favoring athletics. Cotterill didn't believe in competitive exams and thought that compulsory outdoor exercise was the best way to positively influence the mental, moral and religious health of the boys. Boys thrived when they were given very little help and left to figure out things for themselves. Public schools provided an ideal environment for boys, who could thrive according to what he called the laws of health. (Coterill. Pg. 15) The "greater part of society live in towns, and live unwholesome and enervating lives, almost wholly heedless of the laws of robust health." Coterill, Pg. 11-2As he thought about what kind of men public schools should produce, Cotterill favored "kind, pure thoughtful, robust, and above all, self-sacrificing... But cleverness-- what an aim? Good God, what an aim? Cleverness neither makes nor keeps man or nation. Let it not be thought that it ever can. For a while it might succeed, but only for a while... Big brains, big biceps-- yes, both are well enough. But courage and kindness, gentle manliness, and self-sacrifice-- this is what we want..." (Coterill, C.C. Suggested Reforms in Public Schools. William Blackwood and Sons. Edinburgh and London. 1893Pg. 177)

School magazines regaled readers with the heroic exploits of the athletes and reinforced the headmasters' notion that sports should be celebrated because they taught crucial lessons of character. Student editors found out that sports sells. Newspapers also reinforced the message. A typical pro-games sentiment was in the London evening newspaper *The Pall Mall Gazette,* which reported on the popular annual cricket match between Harrow and Eton on July 16, 1866. The reporter approved the way that the Harrow team exemplified character by how they played. "Cricket is a game which reflects the character-- a game of correct habits, of patient and well-considered practice-- the very last game in the world in which any youth without the power of concentrativeness-- nine tenths of education but voted a bore at Eton-- is ever likely to excel. To any lover of education the play of Harrow was a treat, and that of Eton a disappointment. In Harrow we saw care and discipline, and patient labour; in Eton a wildly erratic performance, no sign of training or mental effort." (As quoted. Mangan, Athleticism. Pg. 69-70)

A summary of the athletic regime in the British public schools in the last half of the 19th century could closely apply to the sports landscape at many US private high schools and college. "A huge games-playing machine was ultimately constructed, efficiently serviced and periodically improved; oiled by the wealth of governors, staff, boys, parent and old boys; driven by an elitist group of masters and pupils who protected and promoted their principles and their pleasures with elaborate rituals and symbols of status and power; put to general use by constant reiteration of an educational ideal and, ultimately, by the crude technique of coercion." (Mangan, Athleticism. Pg. 74)

**SPORTS CULTURE MIGRATES UP FROM PUBLIC SCHOOLS TO UNIVERSITIES**

In the early 1900s, the athleticism movement of the late Victorian and Edwardian in the British public schools spread to the secondary schools (equivalent to US public schools) that educated the majority of British schoolchildren. However, athleticism wasn't adopted as fully by the secondary schools as by the richer public schools. Secondary schools didn't have as much money for sports venues and facilities, headmasters didn't enjoy the same kind of control as their public school peers, and, crucially, the students went home in the afternoons. The explicit upper-class basis for the amateur athletic ideal in the public school, along with the financial handicap for publicly funded schools, also limited the growth of athletics outside of the elite public schools.

The athleticism culture did impact the elite British universities. Public school students brought their enthusiasm for games with them when they went to university. The development of athletics at Oxford and Cambridge followed the same trajectory as that of the public school. University students first enjoyed animal sports and physical contests such as boxing, then transitioned away from all except fox hunting and, over time, adopted organized games. University graduates had enjoyed participating in a number of athletic pastimes, most of which were centered around animal outdoor sports and individual physical contests. One contemporary observer noted that “In a manner never before or since duplicated, late-Victorian and Edwardian university life, was an extension of the English public school. It was a sporting life, centred not so much around horses and hounds as around the river, the cricket pitch, and the football field.” (J.A. Mangan (1984) ‘Oars and the man’: pleasure and purpose in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 1:3, 245-271, DOI: 10.1080/02649378408713551. Pg. 246) In the same pattern as we've seen with the public schools, Oxford and Cambridge didn't have high academic standards.

There was a strong link between Oxford and Cambridge and the public schools. Up until WWII, almost all public school masters came from Oxford or Cambridge. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 122) Once athleticism became rooted in the public schools a positive athletics feedback loop was established-- public schools sent games enthusiasts to Oxford and Cambridge, and when they graduated, some of them went back to work at the public schools as well-paid masters-- that sustained the athleticism culture. The public school loyalty to House led naturally to loyalty to the particular college, and both heightened interest in games against other houses or colleges, also intensifying interest in athletics. As the historian Mangan summed up, athletics benefitted from a process of circular causality. "The successful games player at school flourished in the same capacity at the university and then returned to school as lauded assistant master to set another generation of devotees along the same route. Thus the cycle of 'schoolboy sportsman, university sportsman and schoolmaster sportsman was created'." (Pg. 126)

Oxford and Cambridge were founded in 1167 and 1209, respectively. These two universities, even more than the elite US schools such as Harvard and Yale, became the quintessential symbol of an elite British university. They were sometimes referred to collectively at ‘Oxbridge’. During the 16th, 17th and 18th century, young Oxford and Cambridge gentlemen enjoyed diverse physical activities such as boating, boxing, tennis, fishing, a handball game called “fives”, swimming, fishing and a form of stick fighting called “cudgels”. They also enjoyed hunting in various forms, bull and cock fighting and horse racing. Sports historian Ronald Smith shows that sports at this early time was generally poorly organized, and often unsupported by universities. (Sports and Freedom, pg. 5.)

Hunting was a particular pleasure for the young English gentlemen. If it had been possible to turn fox hunting into an intercollegiate sport, it very well might have been the first. There were some limits, though. In the 1500s there were so many animals on campus that an Oxford college had to ban hunting dogs, ferrets, hawks, and hares from their grounds. (Sports and Freedom, pg. 5.) Students often seemed more enthusiastic about hunting then their studies.

The Sporting Magazine regularly featured remembrances from students.

An Oxford student from Christ Church College looked back on his university time from 1820-21. The rote-based latin and greek curriculum was sometimes tedious. Still, his servant kept his room, brought him tea when needed, and cleaned his clothes. (Pg. 77) School did sometimes get in the way of his preferred lifestyle. He regretted what he called “the persecution of hunting men.” (The Sporting Magazine XX. N.S— No. 123. December 1827. Some Farther Passages In The Life of An ‘Oxford Scholar,’ During His Second Year’s Residence at Alma Mater.” Pg. 69) They had to cut class and still pay the tutors. “It is utterly impossible, in such a place as Oxford, that all the Under-graduates can be studious: those who do not read must do something else; and how can a young man of rank and fortune spend the day better, when not reading, then following a pack of fox-hounds?” (pg. 70) How, indeed! He complains that the tutors frowned and punished gambling, but “hunting is the best preservative I know against the vice of gaming: it requires early hours and regular living. The excitement and fatigue attending a good day’s sport with a pack of fox-hounds, obliges a man to retire to his bed betimes.” (Pg. 70) From his account, he pushed hard against the rules and his rooms became a hub for large number of his classmates who gathered to read the Sporting Magazine, consider the odds of upcoming horse races, discuss novels and enjoy “a decanter of Port, ditto Sherry and Madeira, with a bottle of cool Claret ready to be tapped.” (Pg. 78) This students’ interest in horse races and gambling was widely shared— in the 1880s the Sportsman, the Sporting Life, and the Sporting chronicle were all selling over 300,000 copies per day. (Holt, pg. 181) By his own account, he exasperated the faculty and they asked him to leave after two years.

One Cambridge student also reminisced about his hunting days, and poked some fun at Oxford as well. “In nothing do we so far surpass our Oxford friends as in the excellence of our hacks. Jordan’s and Baxter’s stalls were full of horses, scarcely any one of which was to be had under ‘three figures:’” (“Memoranda Cantabrigiensia.— No. II” The Sporting Magazine XXI, N.S— No. 127. April, 1828 ), Pg. 425). He wrote that “most of the shooting round Cambridge was nothing less than decided and unequivocal poaching. The Trumpington and Ditton manors were most infested by our unlicensed depredations.” (“Memoranda Cantabrigiensia, , 426.) Many students kept horses and dogs. A Cambridge student enthused that students enjoyed hunting so much that “no weather, distance, or their convenience, is a stop to its indulgence.” (“Memoranda Cantabrigiensia,” The Sporting Magazine XXII, n.s. (May 1828), 30.) University students, then, were continuing the same tradition of public school students-- roaming the countryside in groups, and no doubt irritating their neighbors.

It was clear that many students relished non-animal sports as well. “When bad weather hindered our out-of-door amusements, my friend Harry Angelo’s room was a great attraction: he had some excellent fencers in his school in 1823-4… then for sparring, you might amuse yourself for half an hour with Bill Eales, who would give you a rehearsal which might be put in practice on any evening you chose, if you took a stroll over the Market Hill after dark.” (Pg. 427) Over the hill you would hopefully find some townsmen looking for a scrap or row...

He recalls going home one evening and seeing that “parties of five or six, both ‘gown’ and ‘town’ were parading abreast, with the peculiar and not-to-be mistaken air which provokes a fight, each in hopes of the opposite party commencing aggression.” They were heading for “the trysting place” and he “hooked on to a line of my friends who were bound thither, and on our arrival all was ripe for riot.” The chaotic scene at the town center featured townsmen, “‘Cavaliers and Roundheads’ (who) eyed each other as if measuring the strength of a future opponent— Proctors and Bull-dogs, Deans, Tutors, and Big-wigs, all in motion— and ‘name and College’ instantly demanded of any one who shewed any symptom of disorderly conduct.” A sort of riot called a “rush” took place and the highlight seemed to be when a sea of people created a living boxing ring for a friend, “a sore-length-wiry ten stone man, a hard rider, a quick sparrer, and the best oar on the river”, who was successful in “manoeuvring his man under a lamp, and, whenever favored by the reflection of the light, banging ‘one two’ into his face (a pretty broad one), and with the most dismal effect.” Later, the boxing match was broken up and “another general melee occurred.” When he saw a friend in danger, our correspondent screamed “‘gown, gown’ most lustily” and charged “the man nearest him as best I might.” Looking back, he writes “Thank God, he (his opponent) got an infernal back eye during the night’s amusements!” (429)

The term “rush” has been adopted to describe the annual initiation for fraternities, sororities, and other organizations such as Yale's secret societies or Harvard's finals clubs. This idea of a “rush”, at that time an organized physical confrontation, was brought to US schools and became a tradition at Yale and Harvard, where the annual fall “rush” featured organized fights between classes came to be known at “Bloody Monday”. This tradition heavily influenced the process of how the games of soccer and rugby were modified to become American football. This violent streak ran from Oxford and Cambridge, to Harvard and Yale, and then was incorporated into our game of football, which became much more dangerous than rugby.

For many Oxbridge students, athletic pursuits were much more important than their studies. Dinner hour was moved from 3:00pm to later to accommodate rowing practice and cricket matches, which could take many hours, began at noon, so students couldn’t go to afternoon lectures on match days. (P.247) (Interestingly, Princeton, as part of its policy to maintain a strong athletic program, "reserves the 4:30-7:30pm time slot for student participation in athletics and other extracurricular events." (<https://odoc.princeton.edu/faculty-staff/course-policies-practices>)) Some felt that this trend went too far. Politician Charles Tennyson remarked that “the mechanism of work at the University is as nothing compared with the vast machinery of play… Cambridge life still shows traces of that fundamental principle of British education, the belief that while limitless exercise is essential to the production of a sound body, a sound mind can only be produced by a studious and deliberate inactivity. One is not, therefore, surprised to find sport of all kinds carefully and elaborately organized.” (J.A. Mangan (1984) ‘Oars and the man’: pleasure and purpose in Victorian and Edwardian Cambridge, The International Journal of the History of Sport, 1:3, 245-271, DOI: 10.1080/02649378408713551. Pg. 248) Tennyson was exaggerating here. The historian J.A. Mangan has noted that “There were, in reality, three Cambridges; predominantly of the mind, predominantly of the body and of both mind and body. In short, there were reading men, rowing men and men who attempted both.” (Oars and the Man P.248) While some were able to bridge the athletic/academic divide, most couldn’t. In his autobiography Come What May, Arnold Lunn, who attended Oxford in 1907, used the term “the public school athletocracies” to complain about his jock classmates who weren’t interested in studying.

Oxford and Cambridge shared the same problem that the public schools had in the mid to late 19th century-- students bored by a rigid curriculum with too much time on their hands. (Oars. Pg. 262.) The universities also looked to games to occupy their charges, and came to emphasize rowing over all other sports.

Certainly athletics was on the mind of a majority of Oxbridge scholars at this time, particularly at some of the more athletics-mad colleges. (Oxford and Cambridge are comprised of a number of residential colleges that each have their own buildings and admissions systems.) The Chanticlere, the student magazine of Jesus College at Cambridge, reveals how athletics dominated student attention in 1886. Well over half the issue, 18 of the 28 pages, was devoted to stories about students playing cricket, rugby, lawn tennis, and boating. (Oars and the Man Pg. 251) The magazine also listed the athletic credentials of incoming students, and didn’t mention any academic qualities. (Oars and the Man P. 253) Jesus alumni wrote in to urge further investment in athletics. Letters "requested improved facilities of the right sort: 'racquets and five courts, a cinder path, a gymnasium... And everything else which would help to render happy the life of the athletic scholar." (Oars, pg. 252)

Jesus college of Cambridge was able to reverse a decline in admissions in the 1860s by boosting up its athletic program. While university admissions grew universally after the1871 Act of Parliament abolishing religious tests for all but Divinity degrees, the fact that Jesus had the best rowing team at Cambridge, caused admissions to shoot up from sixth to third among all of the colleges. (Oars and the Man Pg. 254) As one tutor explained, “the position of the College boat on the river was an index of the prosperity of the college.” (Oars and the Man P. 255) This new success was a direct result of a dynamic crew coach. Another spike in applications occurred in 1904 when Jesus brought back Steve Fairbairn, a renowned coach. A Tutor told Fairbairn that "the position of the college boat on the river was an index of the prosperity of the college." (Oars, pg. 255) Interestingly, in both cases the emphasis on rowing, caused a spike in the number of applications initially, but the spike wasn't sustained. So athletic emphasis in the universities had two sides-- positive and negative. One Jesus historian commented about the tenure of the athletic booster Master George Corrie and Dean Morgan. "There can be little doubt that the decline in numbers was due to over-emphasis on rowing at Jesus during Corrie's later years, coupled with the rowdiness and idleness of many of the rowing men." Historian J. A. Mangan, in summing up the tenure of Corrie and Morgan, talked of "their schoolmasterly efforts to nurture the bodies and to a lesser extent the minds of their charges." (Oars, pg. 261)

(We should pause here to note that Oxford and Cambridge both really care about the outcome of the annual Oxford/Cambridge boat race. Both schools have historically recruited a number of foreign oarsmen, often national team oarsmen, who are admitted into a one year master's program so that they can row in the race. I knew several elite rowers in the 1980s and 1990s who spent a happy year rowing for either Oxford or Cambridge, having fun rowing in the oldest rowing race in the world, and pocketing a master's degree as well.)

What's interesting here is the contrast with the US elite colleges. Clearly there was a limit to how much Oxford and Cambridge would come to embrace athleticism. While there have always been critics of athleticism at US colleges from the mid-1800s to present day, most US schools have continued to emphasize athletics. Following the timeline of the British public schools, Oxford and Cambridge adopted a test-based system that turned each applicant into a number based on grades and performance on the A-level tests.

Again following the public school model, once the regime of organized games became more firmly established at elite British universities, the traditional activities of animal sports, gambling, drinking and betting on horse racing diminished. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 122) Like the public schools, Oxford and Cambridge created a series of moral, educational, and cultural arguments justifying organized games. Public schools have received more attention from historians, but the justifications for organized games were the same. Historian J. A. Mangan traces the parallels between the athletic regime in public schools and Oxford and Cambridge and concludes that Oxford and Cambridge were as committed to organized games as the public schools. Mangan writes that the "essence of Victorian and Edwardian upper-class educational purpose: character training through athletic endeavour. It was no less valid at the university that it was in the public school... This muscular morality above all else which the British product of public school and ancient university took to every corner of the empire." (Oars. Pg. 263)

In spite of this enthusiasm for rowing and other sports, there was a limit to how athletics were integrated into British universities that simply didn’t exist in US schools. Schools like Oxford and Cambridge, and their graduates, helped to create a culture of Victorian sport and sportsmanship that marked a shift away from gambling on and watching contests toward a more participatory model characterized by active playing, teamwork and fair play. Playing sports was fun, but games had to be rule-based and amateur. Well-rounded gentlemen played sports, but did so in a certain manner that spoke well of their character. Being good at team sports was a better testament to your character than excelling at an individual sport. A game well played was more important than winning, and if you did win, it was bad form to boast about it. The Victorian notion that a healthy body was just as important, if not more so, than a healthy mind, was exemplified in both the British public schools and universities. The rigor of sports helped have healthy bodies and the proper character essential to leadership.

Competition was good training, but had to be constrained by notions of fair play. Competition at all costs was damaging. “The idea of a the healthy mind and body merged into a garbled Darwinism that was itself often intermingled with notions of Christian and imperial duty. All this was contained with a framework where the fierce individualism that was required for economic success had to be balanced against the need for social cohesion and political stability.” (Holt, page 87)

Upper class ideals of amateurism were paramount. As discussed before, competing fiercely was admirable, but a respectable Oxford or Cambridge man shouldn't be seen as making money via sports. As interest in sports in the 1860s grew, so did a system of running races throughout Britain that featured cash prizes. Some Oxford runners began "pot hunting". This crass money-seeking was "greatly resented by their fellow-undergraduates, and it required some firmness on the part of other Oxford athletes to set their faces against this practice. This they did, and a better view of the Sports began to be entertained." (Froome, A. C. M. Fifty Years Of Sport At Oxford, Cambridge, and the Great Public Schools. (2 vols, 1913) Walter Southward & Co., Limited. London. Volume I. Pg. 3)

Clearly athletics was seen as an integral part of a complete education, and became a defining part of the power projected during the colonial era. Character development mattered, more than academic rigor. “The statement once made, that Waterloo was won in the playing fields at Eton, was no absurdly exaggerated one, for the grand old English games, and Football particularly, are admirably calculated to engender those sterling qualities which have won for British soldiers so many hardly-contested fight— the pluck to face any odds and any danger; the determination to win, if exactly at the right minutes; the hardy self-confidence that never even knows defeat.” (Cassell’s. Pg. 28) Sports, then, were not simply games to be enjoyed— they became tied up in ideas of patriotism and were part of the national British identity that was projected around the world during the colonial period. “Wherever the British went, the gospel of sport went with them. ‘The Englishman carries his cricket bat with him as naturally as his gun-case and his india-rubber bath,’ remarked Blackwood’s Magazine in 1892” (Holt, pg. 6)

Athletics values absorbed at the British public schools and universities was considered the perfect training for running the British Empire. These athletic experiences had cultural consequences, creating a group of manly Christian men who helped project British values abroad. (See: Tennyson, Sir Charles. “They Taught the World to Play”. Victorian Studies. 1959.) The spartan, physically challenging public school environment produced the perfect imperial soldier or administrator. Team games and the prefect system produced stoic, physically robust, energetic men who were comfortable with working together and at the same time also willing to defer to authority. “It was, therefore, a useful instrument of colonial purpose. At one and the same time it helped create the confidence to lead and the compulsion to follow.” (Mangan, J. A. The Games Ethic and Imperialism: Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal. Frank Cass. 1986. xvii–xviii.)

 Ronald Smith, an historian of US college athletics, calls Britain the “first modern sporting nation.” (Smith, Sports and Freedom. Pg. 4) British sports became fused with imperialism and patriotism. This notion was transplanted successfully to the North American colonies, where in the face of cultural, physical and political differences, it hybridized in our colleges in a way that was strikingly different than British educational institutions. In many ways, sports in the US has also become an important part of our national identity— an integral part of the story that we tell ourselves about what it means to be an American. (We will come back to this theme in a later chapter discussing how money has helped create a strong bond between sports and patriotism in the US.) Ironically, when the public schools and elite British universities warmly embraced the idea of character built by sports, they were planting the seeds of the eventual rethinking of, and reduction, of the primacy of athleticism.

**BRITISH ATHLETES AND THE WORLD**

As the British Empire expanded in the late 19th century, the cultural importance of athletics, along with the need for recruits, made athletes from team sports ideal recruits. Graduates of Oxford, Cambridge, and other elite schools provided many of the recruits for the Empire. With the exception of the Indian Civil Service, athletes were favored over more academically qualified candidates. (Holt, pg. 206) The Sudan Political Service was the best example of athletic favoritism. The ideal recruit was a sportsman with a good second, and it was better to be a poor student, but a good athlete, rather than an excellent student and a non-athlete. (There are three classes of honors academic degrees in British Universities-- first, second and third. Unlike many US colleges, grade inflation doesn't exist, and only a small percentage of students are awarded firsts.) As one person who served on the Sudan Political Service put it, the board "attached considerable importance to the athletic records of candidates. Such activity was regarded as an indication not only of physical fitness (important in a climate which was often unhealthy) but of personality, initiative and capacity for judgement and control of subordinates." (Holt, pg. 206)

The public school and elite university athletic emphasis was a perfect feeder for the British Empire. A reformer writing in the late 19th century warned that "we think too much about training *boys*, and not enough about training *men*. We think too much about the *school*, and too little about the *nation*." (Cotterill. Pg. 22) They emphasized training the mind, to be sure. But even more important was training the body. Physical education, which fit in with the renewed scientific understanding of the human body, also helped the boys meet the fitness threshold for admittance to the army or Imperial service. It also answered parents’ concerns that their relatively elite children needed to be toughened up in order to succeed in an all-or-nothing competitive world. Games also fit neatly into the Muscular Christianity that was dominant in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In rallying the boys around sports, public school headmasters trained them to believe in the Empire and be ideal recruits. In fact, in embracing the importance of character as it could be learned on the playing fields, the schools fervently believed that they were training politicians, business leader, and soldiers. The boys should serve both God and Country. This grandiose message really is no different than the mission statements of elite US colleges, which will be discussed later.

Team games, then, were the key. As historian J. A. Mangan summed up, "games 'were the wheel around which moral values turned'. They were the pre-eminent instrument for the training of a boy's character. It was for this reason that the so-called 'games ethic' held pride of place join the pedagogical priorities of the period public school." (Mangan, J.A. The Games Ethic and Imperialism, Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal. Frank Cass. London \* Portland, OR. 1998. Pg. Xvi) For a direct link between the public schools and the administering of the Empire, look no further than the fact that in the 1920s five of the eight members of the School Empire Tours were public school headmasters. (Mangan. Games Ethic. Pg. 2)

Looking back, there was an ugly side to the enthusiastic public school embrace of the Empire. Loretto headmaster Hely Almond's feelings were clear. "To be a nation of healthy animals is the first condition of national prosperity." And, "At every school in the country the elements of practical physiology should be intelligibly taught, and applied to daily life." (As quoted, Mangan. Games Ethic. Pg. 8) He preached to his students at Loretto that blood could very well be the price of glory. "And as the field of 'tumbles dead' passes before your eyes, will you say of those who have presented their bodies as living sacrifices in the sacred cause of driving back the foes, that a single hour of the strong joyous discipline which gave firmness to the nerve, and vigor to the limbs which now lie stiff and cold in death, has been spent in vain?" (As quoted. Mangan. Games Ethic. Pg. 6) Keep in mind that Almond was talking to boys ranging in age from 11-18.

The fact that enthusiasm for games survived the utter devastation of WWI, where public school students loss their lives were over-represented among the 700,000 who lost their lives, highlights its durability.

The sports of the Empire were primarily cricket, and rugby, not football. While football was widely popular in the Britain, the public schools moved away from it in favor of rugby. In the 1800s football was very different than the game today (American soccer), and much more violent. Because the public schools moved away from football, it didn't become an institution of the Empire like cricket. (Holt, pg. 237) This would influence the development of sports in US schools, who rarely played cricket and would develop the most important US sport, football, by combining elements of rugby, and football as it was played in Canada.

**Fall of the Empire Marks End of Athleticism in British Public Schools, But Finds More Fertile Ground in US Schools.**

Ironically, the overt effort to tie athletics directly to service in the Empire helped deal a death blow to the cult of athleticism in British public schools. Looking back, the traumatic experience of WWI, often referred to as the Great War, marked a turning point in the emphasis of athletics in public schools. The change unfolded over a number of years. While there had been critics of the athleticism movement as early at the 1860s, over time the criticism of the educational value of athletics strengthened. Some headmasters, such as Marlborough's Cyril Norwood, headmaster from 1916-26, began to modernize the curriculum, required boys to pass tests to gain entry into the upper school, and worked to minimize the centrality of athletics to school life.

Powerful political and social forces at work in the Victorian era wound down helped create a broad consensus for educational reform. The Boer war, 1899-1902, between the British and two Boer (Afrikaner) provided a precursor to WWI. While the 500,000 British forces eventually defeated the 88,000 Boer forces, 20,000 British died, some from a hit and run guerrilla campaign. The British strategy of destroying huge numbers of farms and setting up a system of brutal concentration camps where several thousand prisoners died, parked international and domestic outrage and condemnation. (<https://www.britannica.com/event/South-African-War>) In the face of this firestorm of public outrage, both major British parties, the Liberals and Conservatives, realized that they needed the votes of the non-public school majority. In addition, a growing uneasiness of German industrial strength and increased global commercial threat to the British economy spurred an interest in increasing educational standards.

Responding to these forces, Parliament passed the Balfour Education Act in 1902, a sign of how much had changed since the Headmasters Conference of 1897. The 1897 Conference criticized lax academic standards, worrying that emphasis on athletics might be one factor explaining the poor academic performance of many students. Yet in spite of this concern, on balance the 1897 Conference came down strongly in favor of athletics as having an critical role in the educational mission of the public schools. Only a few years later, the Balfour Act standardized and strengthened the educational secondary (what we refer to as public schools) educational system of England and Wales, leading to a sharp increase in the number of public secondary schools. The Fisher Educational Act of 1918 built on the secondary public education system by establishing schools for all pupils who wanted to take advantage of them.

Graduates from the state-supported schools began to gain entry to Oxford, Cambridge, providing an institutional challenge to the public schools. In short, no longer could public school graduates count on gliding on to a prestigious university. (This pattern would repeat itself in the US in the 20th century, where graduation from an elite eastern prep school like St. Paul's essentially guaranteed admittance to an elite university. As admission standards and the educational landscape in the US changed, the admissions hook provided by graduating from a prep school became worth less with each passing year, a trend that continues today.) University admissions in Britain became more competitive and based on performance on three or four tests called the A-levels. Currently, applicants have to meet certain minimums to be considered for admissions to British universities. If you don't achieve a certain threshold, you can't go to university.

Public school headmasters were quick to see the threat provided by the new system that promised more equal educational opportunity for children from all social classes. In 1903, the public schools instituted a Common Entrance Examination, creating a standard applying to all public school students, and moving away from the previous system of each school having their own entrance exams. They also formed a formal system of inspections to ensure that the schools were meeting their academic expectations. In addition, during the period between World Wars, teachers, some headmasters, and medical experts began to develop a new concept of physical exercise in the public schools that moved away from the conformist athleticism towards a more individualistic model. In 1935, the British Medical Association warned that physical education in the public schools was lacking, and over-emphasized games. (Mangan. Athleticism. Pg. 214) Games were still played, but the public schools moved towards allowing more individual activities that included golf, hiking, mountaineering, fishing, and even afternoons off. (Managan. Athleticism. P. 215) In this way, the public schools were winding the clock back to at time when boys valued their ability to decide for themselves what they did in their free time. The athletic culture, implemented as a way to control students by making them all conform to a strict games regimen, was gone.

The quintessential image of the stoic public school graduate who had learned to suffer quietly, put the needs of the team first, repress his emotions, and not worry too much about how much he knew, ended. The martial drumbeat lauding the importance of athletics in the projection of national strength, crashed and crumbled against a wall of absolute horrors in the two world wars, closer government control of the educational system, and a new national preference for what was perceived to be a fairer test-based admission system to universities. The strong ideal of amateurism also weakened the hold of athleticism in the British public schools. Winning wasn't the ultimate goal-- competing hard and fairly was. While sports had been paramount for many public school boys, British schools never professionalized sports the way that schools in the US did.

Before the mid 1800s, public school administrators used a student prefect system to control students. While the prefect system endured, the new athleticism movement used the enthusiasm for games to better control and shape their students into the kind of young men who could lead Britain. The athleticism movement moved from the public schools up to elite universities like Oxford and Cambridge. In contrast, as we will see, when the athletic regime was transplanted to the US, it reached its fullest extent at universities like Harvard, Yale and Princeton. In the British public schools, they went from a largely student-controlled era of free-ranging afternoons outside to a scripted, organized games system run by adult games masters. In the US, athletics were begun by university students trying to exert their own control by rebelling against what they considered a boring classical curriculum and domineering authority regime where the schools felt that they had to act as moral stand-ins for parents. Over time, administrators as US schools wrested authority for administering athletics away from students and created an athleticism movement that turned out to be more extensive and durable than the British model.

 Control, then, is a key concept when we jump across the Atlantic and explore how athletics came to dominate admissions in many elite US colleges. US students began playing sports as a way of pushing back against the existing power structure, which they found repressive and boring. In spite of many critics, a strong cult of athleticism came to dominate many elite US schools. Athletic success became too important to leave to students. Paradoxically, in the face of social, economic, and cultural changes over the 20th century, a strong case can be made that control of athletics have in effect been taken away from many US schools. Some US schools have invested so much money that sports have in essence become too big to fail, with a momentum of their own that administrators would be terrified to attempt to stop.

In the next chapter, we will explore the link between the athleticism movement in British public schools and universities and US schools, and how this was instrumental in the development of "holistic" admissions policies favoring well-rounded students. In both instances, the most desirable character traits became athletic prowess, which was more important than academic achievement. Both shared a goal of creating leaders, molding students of high character that could take up the leadership mantel in all aspects of society. The British ethos of athleticism-- male, violent, martial, conformist, and repressive-- was the shared model. An elevation of athletics over mere intellectual achievement, a belief that sports were a necessary step to develop the character of future leaders, and an institutional preference for athletes that molded the overall atmosphere of these institutions became foundations of elite educational institutions in both countries.

However, there were crucial differences between Britain and the US that created an environment that was much more conducive to athleticism in the US-- the sheer size of America and different concepts of amateurism. There were far fewer schools in England, and they were not as independent from state influence and control as private US private high schools and universities were. In contrast, in the US there were no uniform standards, national, religious, or otherwise, that dictated how schools were run. This was particularly true in the years after the American Revolution, when the number of new schools exploded. As the number of colleges grew in the 19th century, many schools came to see athletics as a way to showcase themselves and market their programs to both the public and prospective students. In sum, “winning in athletics gave that visibility in a physical form.” (Sports and Freedom, pg. Viii) Added to the larger scale of the US educational landscape is a sharply different concept of amateurism in sports. Money simply plays a much bigger role in US college athletics.

The durability of the cult of athleticism in many US colleges and private high schools has been remarkable. Despite a number of challenges over the years, the regime of organized sports at US schools has continued to thrive. The history of sports in US colleges is a history of regular scandal. What's remarkable is that you can take the written words of critics responding to excesses in college athletics from over a hundred years ago, dust them off, and re-use them today to respond to some of the latest scandals. Rinse, and repeat.

Now, on to how US schools adopted athletics into their institutions...

1. Mangan, J. A. Athleticism in the Victorian and Edwardian Public School: The Emergence and Consolidation of an Educational Ideology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)