The 1920s: Sports: Overview
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THE 1920s: SPORTS: OVERVIEW

Legends

The 1920s have been called the Golden Age of Sports. From the very beginning of the decade extraordinary athlete-heroes emerged in virtually every sport—baseball, football, tennis, golf, polo, and the Olympic sports. Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, Lou Gehrig, Red Grange, Knute Rockne, Helen Wills, Bill Tilden, Bobby Jones, Walter Hagen, Jack Dempsey, Benny Leonard, and Tommy Hitchcock established records and, in the process, became legends.

Prosperity and Play

After the war America was eager both to work and to play. Prosperity, or at least the expectation of prosperity, characterized the nation. Citizens in increasing numbers were leaving farms to take jobs in the burgeoning industrial cities, and Americans' personal incomes improved significantly. By 1925, 40 percent of workers in the United States earned at least $2,000 annually—which would adequately if not extravagantly support a family of four—and many enjoyed shortened workweeks, which gave them increased leisure time. The nation went on a spending spree, buying, among other items, automobiles, radios, and tickets to movies and athletic events. In 1928 Stuart Chase wrote in "Play," collected in C. A. Beard's *Whither Mankind:* "Not far from one quarter of the entire national income of America is expended for play and recreation broadly interpreted. Perhaps half that sum is expended in forms of play new since the coming of the industrial revolution, and requiring more or less complicated machinery for their enjoyment."

The New Machinery of Play

Part of the expenditure for play was invested in giant stadiums—particularly for college football and professional baseball games—that were being built across the nation. As college football began to rival professional baseball in popularity, more than twenty universities with major football programs erected new stadiums during the 1920s. The most notable of these stadiums were at the University of Washington (built in 1920, capacity of 46,000); Stanford (1921, 86,011); Ohio State (1922, 85,339); Nebraska (1923, 73,650); Illinois (1923, 70,538); Purdue (1924, 67,861); Texas A&M (1925, 72,387); Missouri (1926, 62,000); Michigan (1927, 101,701); and Alabama (1929, 70,123) The New York Yankees' Bronx baseball stadium held 62,000 fans; called "The House that Ruth Built" in recognition of the home-run king's drawing power, it opened in 1923. A new $6-million, 18,000-seat Madison Square Garden opened on 28 November 1925. In 1923 the West Side Tennis Club built the country's first permanent tennis facility at Forest Hills, New York; the concrete stadium had a seating capacity of 14,000. These huge venues for sporting events also encouraged a building boom in public and private golf courses, tennis courts, swimming facilities, and multisport athletic clubs across the nation. Americans were not just watching sports; they were also participating in them.

The Amateur Model

Athletes were exalted as models for American youth, and sports were often regarded as builders not only of physical skills but also of moral character. Notre Dame coach Knute Rockne preached, and no doubt fervently believed, that football taught the individual to triumph over adversity and attain glory. For many, the amateur, who played for honor rather than money, could be the only true athlete-hero. The "Father of American Football" wrote in his 1893 volume *Walter Camp's Book of College Sports,* "A gentleman never competes for money, directly or indirectly. Make no mistake about this. No matter how winding the road may be that eventually brings the sovereign into the pocket, it is the price of what should be dearer to you than anything else—your honor." The great amateur athletes—Helen Wills, Bobby Jones, Tommy Hitchcock, and a legion of college football players—were regarded as ultimate exemplars of this athletic ideal.

The Strain between Amateurism and Professionalism

Athlete-heroes attracted large followings, which in turn generated huge gate receipts. For many amateur athletes during the 1920s, sport-for-sport's-sake began to be less attractive than sport-for-a-substantial-financial-reward. Although Bobby Jones remained an amateur and retired from golf never having earned a cent from his sport, others responded positively to the promise of big money and turned pro. In 1925 Red Grange left the University of Illinois immediately following his final college football game and joined the Chicago Bears, with whom he could earn more than $100,000 a year. He had become a client of the sports promoter C. C. Pyle, who in the following year, 1926, financed a professional tennis tour that lured both French star Suzanne Lenglen and the rising young American player Vincent Richards out of the amateur ranks. These defections to the professional arena were generally regarded as shocking, as affronts to the purity of sport. Through most of his career Bill Tilden denounced professionalism, asserting that those who played for pay were "turning whore," yet he too became a professional in 1931. Curiously, in the minds of the American public, paying athletes was allowable in

certain sports but not in others. Professional football was, in its early years, regarded as somewhat disreputable while professional baseball was elevated to the national pastime. Baseball players usually received salaries of between $4,000 and $10,000 a year, and giants such as Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb were paid much more. Yet throughout much of the sports world in the 1920s, the conflict between amateurism and professionalism would remain a troublesome issue.

Racism in Sports

During the decade Jim Crow laws prevented most gifted black athletes from participating in the American Dream of success that was so much a part of the sports culture. Notable black athletes had appeared in the nineteenth century, particularly as jockeys, but after the turn of the century African Americans, generally speaking, were not allowed to compete with whites. There were black boxers, but only one, Tiger Flowers, held a title during the 1920s. Convinced that a mixed boxing match would have little gate appeal, many white boxers refused to face black fighters or, if they did, virtually required the African American fighters to lose. Yet, in at least one sport, blacks found a remedy. Since professional baseball excluded black athletes, African Americans founded, owned, and operated the Negro National Baseball League and the Eastern Colored League, which were established before the 1920s but achieved their highest level of stability during the decade.

Sports and Media

For Americans in general, participating in and watching sporting events became part of the good life. Radio broadcasts of college football and professional baseball began early in the 1920s and helped transform local athlete-heroes into national icons. Movie houses showed clips of sports contests and helped create stars. Newspapers and magazines gave the sports reporter a new authority as the media brought information about athletes and athletics to large, receptive audiences. Moreover, radio, movies, and the print media contributed to the "ballyhoo," or inflated dramatic interest, surrounding certain sporting events. They reported every rumor of secret "killer punches" or "evil eyes" being developed by Jack Dempsey and his various heavyweight opponents. They covered every unfolding development during the weeks preceding the 1926 Suzanne Lenglen-Helen Wills match in Cannes. The media supplied news but also manufactured it and, in the process, created and satisfied an eager audience. The 1920s roared with play. The decade was truly, for fans and athletes alike, the Golden Age of Sports.

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