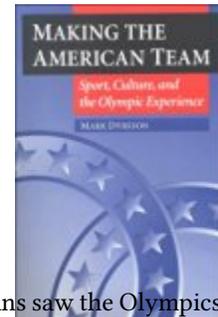


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Dyreson. *Making the American Team: Sport, Culture, and the Olympic Experience*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1998. 269 pp. \$24.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-06654-2.

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The relationship between sport and politics has always been an ambiguous and somewhat contentious one. But in his book, *Making the American Team: Sport, Culture, and the Olympic Experience*, Mark Dyreson shows very clearly how inextricably linked the two are. Dyreson has compiled an informative history of the role sport played in the rise of American republicanism. His central thesis, that late nineteenth-century American philosophers, educators, businessmen and politicians used sport to “solve important political and social problems” (pp. 18), is well researched and elucidated throughout his text. He takes particular focus on the Olympic Games, and with this work traces the forces behind the revival of the Games in 1896 through to its pre-war zenith in 1912, and the contribution this made to American nationalism. Through a variety of sources, Dyreson shows us how turn of the century American power brokers such as Theodore Roosevelt, Price Collier, James Sullivan and A. G. Spalding believed success at the Olympics would make Americans the world’s strongest and boldest people. Moreover, sport would “restore civic virtue . . . inculcate a sense of fair play . . . shape American economic and social relations... and serve as a crucial institution for creating a twentieth-century American republic” (pp. 29).

Following the presentation of his thesis in chapter one, Dyreson outlines in five successive chapters the behind the scenes politicking and manoeuvring of the 1896, 1900, 1904, 1908 and 1912 Olympic Games. This makes for an interesting read as Dyreson exposes the motives, intentions, worries and pressures Baron de Coubertin and the other Olympic progenitors faced in revitalising the Games. Given that today the Olympics is the world’s largest festival, it’s curious to read about the troubles Coubertin faced securing funds and support for “his” Games. However, this was not the case in the United

States, where from the start politicians saw the Olympics as an ideal opportunity to display not only the young republic’s physical health, vigour and strength, but its mental and economic vitality as well. Thus it was at this time, says Dyreson, that athleticism joined other “isms” that would soon define modern America—mechanism, industrialism, individualism, capitalism, nationalism, scientism.

However, as Dyreson explains in his final two chapters, the grand concept of a sporting republic came to a crashing halt with the arrival of the Great War. The war destroyed any chance that Berlin would host the Olympics in 1916. And according to Dyreson, it also changed American’s understanding of sport. No longer did Americans believe that international sport could maintain peace in the world. Quite the contrary, sport was instead regarded as the ideal training ground for war as America’s fighters soon distinguished themselves on the battlefields of Europe just as they had in the stadiums of Athens, Paris, St. Louis, London and Stockholm.

Dyreson thus suggests that it was World War I that led American intellectuals to abandon their campaign to use sport as an agent for social change. With this shift in thinking, he believes, came the image of sport we have today: a mindless expression of mass culture. But if this is the case, and sport is indeed trivial, Dyreson poses in his introduction, Why do Americans care more about it than religion, politics, science or their own constitution? Unfortunately, Dyreson does not go on to address this question, instead he uses it as a rationale for his book: because sport is so central to American culture there probably exists no better site to compile historical understandings of the United States.

Therefore, while *Making the American Team: Sport,*

*Culture, and the Olympic Experience*, does offer an intriguing and stimulating historical portrait of the rise of sport in America, Dyreson does not speculate on the apparent appeal sport had for so many turn of the century Americans. Why did sport capture the American imagination so easily? What was missing from most American's lives that sport fulfilled? Including this type of information, I believe, would allow the reader to see the connection between the personal and the political and how sport does not not operate in a vacuum.

Dyreson also depicts the rise of sport in America as if just a few powerful individuals mapped out a logical plan and then followed it methodically. In this way it is not as contextually linked with other societal forces operating at the time as it could be. It's also difficult to conceive of such a significant cultural change without a few stumbling blocks along the way. However, Dyreson does not present one critical voice of America's sudden involvement and investment in international sport. For example, lobby groups who felt the large sums of money involved could have been better spent elsewhere. It is the omission of these points of view that leads me to interpret Dyreson's thesis as extremely deterministic. For he

makes it seem that sport created American republicanism as opposed to serving it. However, despite this limited ontological view, Dyreson's book remains a highly informative and stimulating piece of scholarly research.

It's particularly interesting, for example, to read Dyreson's accounts of how many of today's sports cliches evolved. For as he suggests, it was the necessary rationalisation of sport in those early days that has led to such truisms as, "Today's sporting champions will be tomorrows captains of industry," or "Sports builds character." Finally, it's impossible to read Dyreson's accounts of the numerous scandals, e.g., race fixing, professionalism, that surrounded the early Olympics without making comparisons to the host of problems and issues confronting the Olympics today. In this way, Dyreson makes it apparent throughout his book that as long as Americans contest sport, politics and controversy will be involved.

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