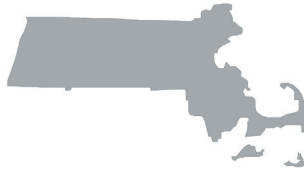


Front cover of Spalding's *Official Base Ball Guide* (1889)

EDITOR'S CHOICE

“Take Me Out to the Brawl Game”: Sports and Workers in Gilded Age Massachusetts

ROBERT WEIR



Editor's Choice: *This essay originally appeared in Sports in Massachusetts: Historical Essays, a 1991 publication of HJM's Institute for Massachusetts Studies which was edited by Ronald Story. The next few issues will include a selected article from one of HJM's many edited collections. These essays retain their fresh interpretation and broad appeal. Story, who introduces the article, is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Author Robert E. Weir is a freelance writer who currently teaches at UMass (Amherst) and Smith College.*

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INTRODUCTION

What sort of game was baseball, and what was its connection to the industrial order? Was it, as some have suggested, a largely genteel affair, beloved chiefly by clerks and entrepreneurs, promoted predominantly with an eye to middle-class morality? Was it a device not only for helping rustics adjust to the city, but also for inculcating the bourgeois virtues of teamwork, punctuality, and thrift? Did it, as Albert Spalding asserted, uplift?

No, says Dr. Robert Weir. That may have been an initial tendency. Victorian morality, after all, was a powerful force in the mid-nineteenth

century, and it held promoters as well as participants in its grip. But so, he argues, was the culture of American workers, especially in a heavily industrialized state such as Massachusetts, and especially during the 1880s, the heyday of the Knights of Labor.

Nowhere was the working-class presence felt more powerfully than in sports, and most particularly in baseball. As this dramatic study makes clear, baseball . . . became the game it did because American workers willingly and willfully appropriated it for their own uses and filled it with their own values. Warren Goldstein pioneered this argument in *Playing for Keeps* (1989). Weir goes a step further . . . [The fact] that baseball became the American game may have been due, by his reading, less to the promotionalism of Albert Spalding than to the vulgar masses – workers, trade unions, and the Knights of Labor.¹

* * * * *

In 1874, *Scribner's Magazine* published an editorial entitled “Good Games” to instruct its readers in proper pastimes for respectable Americans. It recommended wholesome parlor games like “Yes and No,” “Authors,” “Who Am I?,” and “Poets.” The following year, *Scribner's* advised against “rough games,” especially for girls, and advised that social activities, reading clubs, and popular lectures were more appropriate diversions.²

But what of team sports like baseball, a game soon to be deemed the “National Pastime”? In 1871, the *New York Times* reported that baseball was “patronized by the worst classes of the community, of both sexes; and moreover, many of the gatherings have been characterized by the presence of a regular gambling horde, while oaths and obscenity have prevailed.” Ten years later the same paper again denounced baseball: “Our experience with the national game of base-ball has been sufficiently thorough to convince us that it was in the beginning a sport unworthy of men, and that it is now, in its fully developed state, unworthy of gentlemen.” A subsequent *Times* editorial predicted baseball's demise.³ Not until 1874 was the *Boston Globe's* coverage of baseball more extensive than that given to more

¹ Introduction by Ronald Story. Reference to Warren Goldstein, *Playing for Keeps: A History of Early Baseball* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

² *Scribner's Magazine*, February 1874 and February 1875.

³ *New York Times* quotes from Irving Leitner, *Baseball: Diamond in the Rough* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1972), pp. 10, 108-109, 128.

genteel activities like cricket, swimming, and horse racing. Even Walter Camp, an ardent supporter, admitted that early baseball languished due to the “evils dragged into it by those whose sympathies were only with the gambling and pool-selling classes . . . [and has] a bad odor among respectable communities.”⁴

“Polo” – a rudimentary form of ice hockey played with a ball, not a puck, and lacking the formal rules later adopted by Canadians in 1879 – was equally vilified.⁵ In 1885, the *Haverhill Laborer*, a working-class newspaper, recounted the opening of the ice polo season, a rough-and-tumble match played on the city’s skating rink on the Little River. League play commenced with a 9:00 p.m. battle between Haverhill’s two hometown teams: the Stars and the Globes. The *Laborer* reported:

Every seat was occupied and standing room was not plentiful. The fair sex were out in great numbers, ready to give their applause and allegiance . . . The feud between the Montagues and the Capulets, of the Houses of York and Lancaster . . . all pale into insignificance in comparison with the rivalry between the respective friends of Haverhill’s two league polo clubs. . . . The audience was about evenly divided, so far as applause was concerned, and each skillful play brought forth a roar of applause which caused the Chinese lanterns around the rink to vibrate.⁶

What compelled a throng of Haverhill residents to stand or sit by a frozen river on a cold Wednesday night in February? The next morning’s work bell would ring early, and the average Haverhill worker faced ten to twelve hours of toil. Why weren’t tired workers at home resting? City rivalries aside, polo was an exciting and violent game. The *Laborer* remarked that the game was “too rough, in fact, for those who prefer polo to the ring, and several exhibitions of temper were shown by individual players.” The Haverhill match was less than four minutes old before Wardman of the

⁴ *Scribner’s Magazine*, September 1889.

⁵ Today’s ice hockey was virtually unknown in the U.S. until after 1895. Ice polo, or “polo” as it was simply called at the time, was a bit like field hockey on skates: short stick and a hard rubber ball that was known to pulverize shins. Its loose rule structure lost out to Canadian-style hockey by 1900. Until then the word “polo” was used to refer to the ice variety in most newspapers for the simple reason that horse polo was an upper-class sport that was seldom covered.

⁶ *Haverhill Laborer*, February 28, 1885.

Globes tossed Bolan of the Stars to the rink, and a fight ensued. Shortly after that, the Globes scored their first goal, and their fans responded with cheers and the blowing of horns.⁷

Why did Haverhill's residents find ice polo more appealing than Victorian parlor games? The account in the *Haverhill Laborer* gives clues. It is peppered with allusions to exciting rushes toward goal, to men falling on the rink, to vicious fouls committed by the players, of flashy goal-tending, free-flowing wagers, and wild cheering. Raw violence threatened the audience: a street clerk from Merrimac complained that his horn was taken from him, and errant balls struck a woman and her daughter. The article made it clear that the overflow crowds surging the river banks were drawn by the allure of rough passions, the likes of which *Scribner's Magazine* had cautioned against.

These slices of Gilded Age life call into question assumptions about American life and culture in the late nineteenth century. Since David Montgomery's ground-breaking study of workers' struggles for control, historians have been cautious about assuming that the triumph of industrial capitalism led to the subjugation of the working class.⁸ Still, most studies of workers' control have centered on the workplace and on politics. Historians are divided on the significance of sports and leisure. Several have taken a decidedly pessimistic view. Elliot Gorn's study of bare-knuckle boxing laments the transformation from an activity associated with rough culture, saloons, ethnic pride, and gambling into a commodity. He writes:

As the old Victorian ethos withered, prize fighting grew to be less the shared expression of an oppositional way of life than exciting entertainment sold in national leisure markets, similar to circuses, amusement parks, dime novels, and movies. The ring began losing its capacity to uphold alternative cultural standards... Sports in general and prize fighting in particular became absorbed into the hegemonic culture, and successful athletes were pointed to as proof that the social order still functioned smoothly, that ability and hard work were indeed rewarded. In a word, the ring's original antibourgeois message

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). See also Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, & Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Random House, 1976).

had been diluted, and pugilism lost some of its old expressive force.⁹

Historian John Kasson saw late Victorian sport as sanitized, homogenized, controlled, anti-intellectual, imbued with the values of “corporate conscience . . . [and lacking the] farce, owning, and nonsense” that made it a vital component of nineteenth-century working-class life.¹⁰ Rosenzweig concluded, in his study of Worcester, that though workers “won some important victories in [their] struggles to shape their own play,” inter-class and intra-ethnic clashes hindered working-class struggles. By the end of World War I, recreation entrepreneurs controlled Worcester’s leisure activities. Popular recreation ceased to be an arena in which classes clashed as they once had.¹¹

But we should not confuse the mature stages of organized leisure with its origins and early development, nor should we discount the concessions won by the working class. The Globes-Stars match illustrates the failure of elites to impose standards of morality on the masses, and further investigation of working-class sport in Gilded Age Massachusetts reveals numerous other examples of such partially successful struggles for control.

It is true that by the end of the Gilded Age, economic elites owned polo rinks, regulated parks, licensed boxing matches, and controlled professional baseball. But just decades earlier it would have been quite unthinkable for “respectable” Americans to attend such activities. It was the refusal of the working class to give up sports that led entrepreneurs to appreciate their economic potential. Once they entered the field, commercial entrepreneurs were forced to compromise their personal values if they wished to turn profits. As historian Donald Mrozek put it: “Although the rise of sport as a key element in American mass culture is surely among the key consequences of the actions taken by the middle and upper classes, it certainly was not what they had in mind.”¹²

⁹ Elliot Gorn, *The Manly Art: Bare-Knuckle Prize Fighting in America* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 251.

¹⁰ John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 104-106 and the final chapter.

¹¹ Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours for What We Will: Workers & Leisure in an Industrial City, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) conclusion, and especially pp. 225-227.

¹² Donald J. Mrozek, *Sport and American Mentality, 1880-1910* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983), p. 229.

Elite attempts to transform the working class had surprising consequences. One of them was the brief popularity of ice polo. In Brockton, Protestant ministers and the popular press waged a crusade to wean workers away from the world of ice and roller-skating rinks, where they imagined that all manner of vice flourished. As a *Haverhill Laborer* reporter snidely remarked, the new crowds packing the Brockton rink furnished “theme for a moralist.” After the skaters were gone, large audiences crowded every corner of the arena to watch “that old-time diversion of slugging, tripping, and wrestling called polo.”¹³

By the mid-1880s however, even the staid *Boston Globe* reported on ice polo matches and chronicled the fortunes of Central League teams in Boston, Cambridge, New Bedford, Salem, Somerville, Waltham, and Woburn. The *Globe’s* foray into sports coverage is an object lesson in the significance of working-class cultural preferences. Like many urban newspapers after the Civil War, the *Globe* generally promoted the values of the city’s social, financial, and Republican Party elite (eight members of which had capitalized the newspaper in 1872). To differentiate itself from the *Boston Herald*, editor Maturin Ballou promised a “semi-literary” publication. For its first two years the *Globe* featured on its pages drama, music, fine arts, sermons, and literature.¹⁴ Sports news was limited and consigned to the rear of the eight-page newspaper. Aside from an occasional baseball line score, the most detailed coverage was reserved for the genteel sport of horse racing.

In late 1873, Ballou left the *Globe* and Charles H. Taylor was persuaded to abandon his political career, and his leadership of *American Homes Magazine*, to pilot the *Globe*. For several years, the paper teetered on the brink of bankruptcy while Taylor sought a formula to win readers and attract advertisers. Taylor tried numerous ideas. He replaced arts and literature with news on the front page, added wood-cut illustrations, printed special editions for events like Bunker Hill Day, and over the objections of local clergymen, he published a Sunday edition. Success came, however, from something quite different. Taylor reduced the paper’s price to two cents, printed lurid crime stories, converted the paper to a Democratic Party organ (to attract Irish readers), and greatly expanded the sports coverage.¹⁵

¹³ *Haverhill Laborer*, February 13, 1886.

¹⁴ *Boston Globe*, March 4, 1872; *Boston Globe*, 1872-1873.

¹⁵ Louis M. Lyons, *Newspaper Story: One Hundred Years of the Boston Globe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

Soon, coverage of sports, especially baseball, was extensive. By 1886, accounts of sporting events frequently got front page coverage. Arts and society events almost never did. What caused such dramatic change? Why did the *Globe* begin offering extensive coverage to the coarse, violent world of ice polo? Clearly Taylor recognized that sports were enormously more popular than refined culture. An overflow crowd of more than 2,000 viewed a violent Boston-Woburn match, all (the *Globe* reported) “tickled to death” by the spectacle.¹⁶ Likewise, the city’s National League baseball team averaged nearly 5,000 spectators a game in 1889.¹⁷ The *Globe*, in short, put its editorial policy where the money was. Ice polo was relatively short-lived. Few leagues survived into the 1890s. By 1900 the game was replaced by Canadian-style ice hockey. But the *Boston Globe* was not merely responding to a fad. It was responding to a full-fledged sports culture that engulfed Gilded Age society because of a bottom-up push from the working class.

By the 1870s, few things aroused working-class passion like baseball, a sport that evolved from the children’s game of rounders and became the nation’s pastime because of the dogged determination of its most humble admirers. Throughout the Gilded Age, the city of Boston fielded professional teams that attracted state-wide attention. From 1871 to 1876, the “Red Stockings” competed in the National Association of Professional Baseball Players.¹⁸ But professional and semi-professional clubs were not limited to the “Hub” (Boston). Holyoke, Lowell, New Bedford, Springfield, and Worcester held International League franchises in the 1870s; and Brockton, Haverhill, Lawrence, and Newburyport competed in the New England League in the 1880s.

Professional teams were, of course, controlled by entrepreneurs. This fact has led some historians to misinterpret the cultural significance of baseball. By 1890, baseball was indeed the “National Pastime,” and unscrupulous promoters like Albert Spalding were successful in attracting middle-class patrons to the ballpark by sanitizing the sport and convincing them that the game reinforced their own values. New England clergymen and intellectuals sold baseball to the public under the rubric of “Muscular

¹⁶ *Boston Globe*, February 9, 1886.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, September 1, 1890.

¹⁸ When the league reorganized in 1876 as the National League, Boston was a charter member. Boston also fielded teams in the New England League in the 1880s, the Union League in 1884, the Player’s League in 1890, and the American Association in the 1880s and 1890s.

Christianity.”¹⁹ Historians have sometimes fallen prey to the promoters’ own rhetoric, arguing that the game’s organization, competition, efficiency, record-keeping, and rules echoed an emergent capitalism, and that its stress on teamwork, self-control, expertise, and loyalty replicated factory discipline. In such a reading, baseball unwittingly reinforced middle- and upper-class cultural mores. So tame a game was safe for the middle classes by the 1870s. By 1884, when Ladies’ Day was instituted in National League ballparks, it was even safe for women.²⁰

But we should read Victorian praise skeptically. Baseball, as Francis Couvares observed, “gained respectability as a result of popular success and not vice versa.”²¹ Middle-class endorsements were *ex post facto* at-



Baseball team, late 1800s

¹⁹ For more on “Muscular Christianity,” see Harvey Green, *Fit for America: Health, Fitness, Sport and American Society* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986); Stephen Hardy, *How Boston Played: Sport, Recreation, and Community* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1982); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981); and Mrozek, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Peter Levine, *A. G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball: The Promise of American Sport* (New York: 1985); Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: 1980); Steven Gelber, “Working at Playing: The Culture of the Workplace and the Rise of Baseball,” *Journal of Social History* (Summer 1983), pp. 3-22; Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: 1978); Steven A. Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Westport, Conn.: 1980).

²¹ Francis Couvares, *The Remaking of Pittsburgh: Class and Culture in an Industrializing City, 1877-1919* (Albany: 1984), p. 124.

tempts to rationalize what could not be eradicated. Though Gilded Age elites would have denied it, the working class profoundly influenced their view of sports, forcing them to adapt to popular tastes. Despite the protests of moralists, such vices as gambling, drinking, rowdiness, and rough play prevailed in virtually all Gilded Age sporting matches, from rink to sandlot to city park to professional stadium.

The Victorian “respectable” classes were in fact late converts to baseball’s allure. Not until after the Civil War did its commercial possibilities become evident. The Olympic Club of Boston, formed in 1854, is thought to have been the first professional team in Massachusetts.²² Formal clubs were usually dominated by middle-class men, but their inspiration came from the unorganized play in sandlots across America. By most accounts, baseball’s rise in the 1870s was boosted by the game’s popularity among common soldiers during the Civil War.²³ In 1869, there were more than 1,000 professional teams, and an estimated 200,000 paying customers attending matches. By the time of the first professional league in 1872, therefore, the game was decades old.

Early baseball exhibited few of the values that middle-class apologists celebrated. In 1886 a *Boston Globe* biography of outfielder Michael J. “King” Kelly noted that he was a “dangerous” base runner who knew “all the tricks that help to win.” One infamous trick occurred in a match in which the wily Kelly scored from second without bothering with the formality of running towards third on his way to the plate!²⁴

Boston boasted two early superstars, Kelly and Albert G. Spalding. The contrast is revealing. Spalding pitched for Boston’s National Association of Professional Base Ball Players franchise from 1871 to 1875. He helped them win four championships before bolting to Chicago to the newly formed National League. Spalding became one of professional baseball’s most enthusiastic boosters and was at the forefront of battles to forbid Sunday games, ban alcohol at the ballpark, demand a strict moral code for players, and raise ticket prices from twenty-five to fifty cents, to keep laborers out.²⁵

Mike Kelly was already an established star when Spalding, by then the principal owner of the Chicago franchise, sold him to Boston for \$10,000.

²² The Olympics still played the “Massachusetts game,” whose rules resembled English rounders, rather than the “New York game” that came to dominate the sport.

²³ Leitner, chapter 4.

²⁴ *Boston Globe*, October 11, 1886.

²⁵ For more on Spalding’s attempts to moralize professional baseball, see Levine, *op. cit.*

Spalding was incensed when the White Stockings lost the 1886 championship series to St. Louis. He blamed the loss on his team's excessive drinking. Few players were as notorious for prodigious drinking as the flamboyant Kelly, and Spalding accused him of leading other players astray. In heavily Irish Boston, the affable Kelly became a crowd favorite in a way that the moralistic Spalding never did. Kelly's exploits, both on the field and off, were celebrated in songs and poems, and the *Globe* made him the centerpiece of many reports. Kelly's purchase paid immediate dividends. In 1887 he hit .394; and in 1889, as team captain, Kelly helped Boston draw 283,257 fans to the park. When Kelly and five teammates jumped to the renegade Players' League in 1890, the Boston Nationals finished fifth and drew only 147,539 fans, while the Boston Champions of the Players' League drew 197,346. When the Players' League folded, management tried to blacklist Kelly, but after he played eighty-two games for Cincinnati-Milwaukee in the American Association, Bostonians clamored for his return. When Kelly did move to Boston's American Association team, he played only four games before the Boston Nationals lured him back by evading the league salary cap. Though in the twilight of his career and able to hit only .235, Kelly was co-captain of the 1891 pennant-winning team.²⁶

In 1894, Mike Kelly died of pneumonia complicated by alcoholism. The Hub mourned its most popular star of the nineteenth century, lionizing him not only for his skill and daring, but also for his excesses – his penchant for breaking rules, his two-fisted drinking, and his grandiloquent individualism. Kelly's values were so unlike those of Spalding and the middle class that Spalding courted that one must conclude that Kelly's popularity originated with the masses and filtered up. Kelly's career likewise suggests that historians who see baseball as reinforcing middle-class hegemony overstate their case.

Of necessity, the middle class accommodated itself to the new violence of nineteenth-century sports. Polo was especially violent, far more so than modern-day ice hockey. And polo violence was not limited to the rink. On one occasion, the captain of the New Bedford team followed referee McKay into the locker room and assaulted him. The league demanded an apology, and when it was not forthcoming, fined the New Bedford team ten dollars. The 1885 Stars-Globes match in Haverhill saw violence spill into the street; the *Haverhill Laborer* reported several fights after the game.²⁷

²⁶ *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1890; September 6 and October 11, 1891.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, February 2, 1886; *Haverhill Laborer*, February 28, 1885.

By the 1880s, writers for the once “semi-literary” *Boston Globe* were concocting imaginative descriptions of sports violence. One excellent example was an illegal bare-knuckle boxing match between Patsy Friel and John O’Rourke, which took place on a Sunday evening in January of 1886. The *Globe* reported that the two middleweights had “been at loggerheads” for some time, and that they decided to raise a prize purse and settle their differences. They went to a “sporting resort” near the Lowell railway station and pummeled one another for fifty rounds:

Blood in profusion was being poured from sundry cuts about the head and noses of both. The fight was the most brutal exhibition on the part of what the higher order of animals is capable of in the way of punishing his brothers and submitting to innumerable bruises himself.²⁸

The *Globe* also reported on baseball’s seamier side. One writer called an umpire’s decision to halt a Chicago-Detroit game on account of darkness a theft worthy of “Dick Turpin, Robin Hood, Jesse James . . . [and] the early exponents of socialism.” Apparently Detroit fans agreed, because umpire Powers needed a diversion before he could sneak out of the park with a police escort. Angry Detroiters exacted their revenge on the Chicago team. As the Chicago’s horse-drawn carriage sped past a construction site, workers heaved paving stones. When a projectile struck King Kelly, a street brawl ensued. Kelly jumped from the carriage and duked it out with his assaulters!²⁹ The *Globe* account is descriptive, not judgmental, and it presents the entire episode as a natural response to poor umpiring.

The lack of Victorian propriety bothered few baseball patrons. By the mid-1880s, America was gripped by what the newspapers called the “baseball craze,” and fans turned out for games in large numbers. In the first eight weeks of the 1888 season alone, Boston sold over 65,000 tickets.³⁰ Sports began to proliferate in high schools and colleges as well. By 1890, even stodgy *Scribner’s Magazine* admitted that the moralists’ complaints against organized sports fell on deaf ears. Conceding that sports might lead to “feverish excitement, the loss of the scholastic peace so necessary to the student, the neglect of duty, and the sapping of strength,” *Scribner’s*

²⁸ *Boston Globe*, February 1, 1886. It should be noted that O’Rourke won the fight.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, October 23, 1886.

³⁰ *Haverhill Laborer*, June 16, 1888.

expressed hope that “excesses” could be avoided and that the “positive virtues” of sports might prevail.³¹

Like Mike Kelly’s accolades, the “baseball craze” came from the bottom up. By the time the middle class debated its “positive virtues,” baseball was already a working-class staple. Massachusetts working-class men and women in towns without professional teams seldom travelled to games, but they gave impetus to the “craze” nonetheless. Local teams were numerous, and working-class men aped their social betters by forming sports associations.

One of the many amateur teams predating the professional leagues was the Florence Eagles, which formed in 1866. Florence, a small section of the town of Northampton, was dominated by mills. The Eagles were a socially diverse lot. Their catcher, Andrew Robertson, was a factory hand in the Florence Manufacturing Company. Unable to afford equipment, he not only caught without a glove, but played in his bare feet. The team could not even afford medical supplies. Once, when Robertson was spiked, a bandage was removed from another player and put on his foot!³²

In 1866, teams from Chicopee, Springfield, Westfield, and several other towns competed for the Silver Ball Championship of Western Massachusetts. The Florence Eagles won the title. Community enthusiasm was apparently greater than the level of play. Over 3,000 spectators and seven reporters witnessed one Eagles-Springfield game. The fans were in for a long day; the Eagles won the game, by a score of 68 to 20. The *Daily Hampshire Gazette* noted that Springfield’s fielding was poor “and it was seldom that they caught a fly-ball.” Yet the same paper noted, with pride, that “sporting men” won \$700 in wagers on the Eagles and would “probably be willing to risk something on the next game.”³³ Only a loss to the Boston Trimountains in the New England championship game marred the Eagles’ 1866 season.

Soon the Florence Eagles were a focal point of community pride. By 1867, it was not unusual for the Eagles to travel across the Northeast for challenge matches, with the costs underwritten by local banks, lawyers, and merchants. In addition to Silver Ball opponents, the Eagles faced teams from throughout New England. In 1885, they defeated a U.S. Army

³¹ *Scribner’s Magazine*, June 1890.

³² Information on the Florence Eagles can be found in the *Daily Hampshire Gazette*, February 28 and March 1, 1883; January 19 and 23, 1916; December 7, 1923; February 12, 1926. Also the Forbes Library of Northampton has a pamphlet dated September 24, 1935, entitled “Victorious Eagles Gather Once More,” that consists of collected clippings of Eagles’ reunions.

³³ *Hampshire Gazette*, February 12, 1926. This excerpt was reprinted from the original 1866 article.

challenge squad. In 1886, they again competed for the New England amateur championship, again losing to their nemesis, the Boston Trimountains, though the Eagles complained that the game was given to Boston by the umpires.

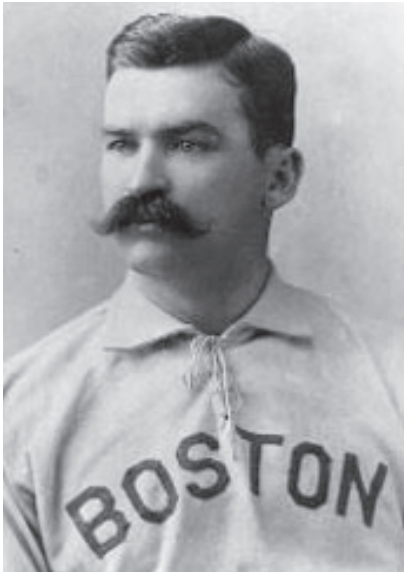
The Florence Eagles demonstrate the way baseball crossed social boundaries and lured the respectable during the Gilded Age. For a brief moment, bare-footed Andrew Robertson played on a team for which district attorney Henry H. Bond, a Columbia Law School graduate and treasurer of the Florence Savings Bank, was the pitcher. Robertson was one of the boys who practiced in the shadow of the cotton mills. As for Bond, his love of baseball may have come from watching Florence's millhands play. Or perhaps Bond watched the Florence Hibernians, a team of Irish and Irish-Americans that predated the Eagles, and whom the Eagles sometimes raided for players. Eagles other than Bond rose to prominence, including A. G. Hill, who became mayor of Northampton. But five of the starting nine had Irish surnames, only one – John O'Donnell – rose high in Northampton society to become a judge.

Baseball fueled the public imagination and broke down social barriers. Northampton, Easthampton, and Florence spawned industrial leagues in the late Gilded Age. Numerous games were played on Sundays, despite a state law prohibiting Sunday sports. Well into the twentieth century, the Eagles, later renamed the Braves, took on all comers, irrespective of social norms.

Other towns across the Commonwealth were equally proud of their amateur nines. Marlboro produced such fine teams in the 1880s that its players regularly signed with professional teams in International and New England leagues. The 1886 lineup was good enough to lure the National League champion, Chicago, to the city for an exhibition match. A Knights of Labor newspaper, the *Marlboro Laborer*, hyped the game for weeks preceding the event, taking special aim at Cap Anson and Michael Kelly (the latter had not yet been sold to Boston). The actual game was anti-climactic – Chicago won by a score of ten to one.³⁴

The Knights of Labor, the Gilded Age's most powerful labor organization, was stronger in Massachusetts than anywhere else in the U.S. In 1886, the Knights' state-wide District Assembly #30 counted more than 75,000 members. As the Knights built solidarity among Massachusetts workers, it penetrated working-class community institutions like baseball.

³⁴ *Marlboro Laborer*, October 16, 1886.



Baseball in the late 1800's was a very different game. No fences, gloves, or helmets and very loose rules, as exemplified in the story of Hall of Famer and Boston player King Kelly ("Great Mustache!"). Kelly was a tobacco chewing, cane whirling, flamboyant character. He was known for sliding into bases with great skill. A popular song was "Slide, Kelly, Slide." If a game went on too long for his liking, Kelly would have no problem opening up a bottle of brandy to begin his evening.

The Knights sponsored baseball teams across the Commonwealth, and its papers often covered local teams better than the mainstream press. An Iowa Knights of Labor editor justified the order's extensive coverage of baseball: "For every man that takes an interest in any other branch of sport, there are a score if not 100, who take a decidedly lively interest in baseball."³⁵ Baseball was often used to express working-class resistance to the existing social order. An 1886 game between the Knights and the Lasters' Protective Union was followed by a picnic and anti-capitalist speeches. Organizers of an 1887 Knights of Labor baseball game passed the hat to raise money to aid striking Worcester County mill workers, promising strikers in speeches following the game that all signs "favored the union nine" in their match against capital.³⁶

In each of these instances, working-class players used the sport to build community pride, exercise their desire for recreation, and even resist social and economic elites. When elites joined in, as with the Florence Eagles, they had to make certain concessions. Neither Sunday games, gambling,

³⁵ *The Industrial Leader*, September 3, 1887.

³⁶ *Haverhill Laborer*, July 31, 1886; *Boston Labor Leader*, May 28, 1887.

or social mixing with millhands, nor the fiery anti-capitalist speeches that often accompanied Knights of Labor games, were the ideal of Massachusetts' elite families.

One could argue that elites ultimately gained control of Massachusetts sports, but even here the record is less clear than one might assume. Again, the would-be controllers of public space, morality, and finances had to make concessions because of resistance from below. The public parks of Boston and Worcester were cases in point. Both park systems were influenced by Frederic Law Olmstead, whose conception of public space was a spiritual one that had little room for "exertive" sports like polo or baseball. Parks were to be vehicles to improve one's mind, morality, and spirit: quiescent strollers were to contemplate how well-ordered public parks mirrored God's creation. Moralists thus pushed recreation to the fringes. In Boston, only Franklin Park and a single field on the Common were reserved for baseball, while Worcester's playing fields were mostly in working-class precincts.³⁷

But Olmstead's ideas were out of date. In both Boston and Worcester, many resisted efforts to ban physical recreation from parks. In 1873, Boston's Lowell Baseball Club charged the Parks Commission with class discrimination, and, in the name of the 25,000-30,000 Bostonians who played, presented petitions demanding more space for baseball. By the time a compromise emerged four years later, enthusiasts had already appropriated three other parks for baseball diamonds. Baseball zealots kept up the pressure and became the guiding spirit behind the move to build city playgrounds. In Worcester, meanwhile, the attempt to remove baseball diamonds from Elm Park met with such resistance that Parks Commissioner Edward Lincoln abandoned the scheme and spent most of his tenure fielding complaints about the number of parks that excluded sports facilities.³⁸

What was true in the Commonwealth's largest cities was equally true elsewhere. In Northampton, a small triangle of land on Main Street, traditionally reserved for militia musters, was frequently the site of organized sports until the city eliminated the plot by widening the road. Baseball diamonds nonetheless sprouted wherever space could be found. By the early twentieth century, the Florence Braves (successors to the Eagles)

³⁷ Frederick Law Olmstead directed Boston's parks from 1875 to 1895. See Hardy, *op.cit.* Worcester's parks were directed by Edward Winslow Lincoln, an Olmstead disciple. For more on Lincoln and Worcester's parks, see Rosenzweig.

³⁸ See Hardy; Rosenzweig.

played inside the racing oval at the Three County Fairgrounds and at the Smith School, where crowds stood seven deep along the foul lines.³⁹ The working-class love of sport thus spilled out of vacant lots and into genuine public space.

One also sees a class struggle over ticket prices, alcohol sales, and game scheduling. By 1880, Albert Spalding's reforms, designed to cultivate a middle-class clientele, were standard for most National League teams. But a challenge was in the offing. In 1881 a new league, the American Association, made direct overtures to the workers who had been spurned by Spalding. Association teams charged twenty-five cents for tickets, sold beer at the parks, and, most importantly for workers on a six-and-a-half day work-week, scheduled games on Sundays.

The twenty-five cent ticket was dubbed the "popular price," and workers resisted efforts to do away with it. The Knights of Labor organized boycotts in Pittsburgh and Baltimore when Association teams in those cities tried to raise ticket prices. Boston's National League team had to return to a twenty-five cent ticket in the midst of the Players' League revolt of 1890.⁴⁰ Several labor papers noted that Spalding's policies hurt baseball owners financially. The *Labor Herald and Tocsin* warned that rising ticket prices would probably ruin at least four Association teams. *The Critic* noted that though Cincinnati drew well in 1890, "the stopping of Sunday games has lessened the stream flowing into the club's treasury."⁴¹ The re-institution of lower prices in Boston proved so successful that the *Globe* predicted that Chicago-led efforts to do away with "popular prices" would fail, especially in Boston, where the team drew well in 1891, and in Brooklyn and New York, where attendance fell because of fifty cent tickets.⁴²

The Players' League revolt of 1890 was, in retrospect, the high-water mark for working-class resistance to baseball's entrepreneurs. What began as a revolt against salary caps and the reserve clause ended up as a test of nerves among owners, players, and patrons. In 1887, New York shortstop John Montgomery Ward organized the National Brotherhood of Baseball Players. Ward nearly affiliated the Brotherhood with the Knights of Labor, but the alliance never quite materialized. Nonetheless, the Knights and trade unionists were solidly behind the players when they bolted from the

³⁹ Interview with Vito Bell, October 11, 1989.

⁴⁰ Couvares; *The Critic* (Baltimore), March 23, 1889; *Boston Globe*, September 6, 1891. The campaigns to keep ticket prices at twenty-five cents met with success in Baltimore and failure in Pittsburgh.

⁴¹ *Labor Herald and Tocsin* (Philadelphia), December 17, 1887; *The Critic*, August 2, 1890; *Boston Globe*, October 11, 1891. Note: Tocsin is an old name for an alarm bell.

⁴² *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1890.

National League in late 1889. As early as 1887, Knights of Labor papers warned owners not to push the players too far, as “in every League city the labor organizations are very strong, and, if the patrons who now attend the games, and who are connected with labor organizations, take sides with the players, as they certainly will do, the owners would not be long in taking a tumble.”⁴³

The threat was not an idle one. When the Brotherhood finally set up a rival league for the 1890 season, it organized teams according to the cooperative principles espoused by the Knights of Labor, charged “popular prices,” sold beer at games, and played on Sunday. Workers responded. The Players’ League outdrew the National League, 980,387 to 813,678. More significantly, National League attendance was barely two-thirds of its 1889 level, and several teams incurred huge losses. In Boston, the Players’ League Champions outdrew the National League “Beaneaters,” 197,346 to 147,539; and the latter’s attendance was barely fifty percent of its 1889 total.⁴⁴

Bad weather and insolvency did in the Players’ League after the 1890 season, but National League owners were forced to deviate from their no-compromise public position. In particular, owners realized that star quality translated into ticket sales. A few sacrificial lambs were slaughtered, but gate draws like Mike Kelly were lured back to the fold through creative violations of the salary cap. Five of the pennant-winning Boston Nationals’ starting nine for 1891 had played in the Players’ League in 1890.⁴⁵ Boston rejoiced at their return.

Other Players’ League rebels found employment with Boston’s American Association club, including center fielder Tom Brown, whom fans awarded with a gold watch in 1891, as the most popular player in New England.⁴⁶ Boston also won the Association crown in 1891. But while the Association retained its appeal to the working class, Boston and Baltimore were the only two American Association teams to do well financially in 1891. *The People* ventured the opinion that Sunday baseball was the sole reason the American Association remained solvent.⁴⁷ The situation was

⁴³ *Herald and Tocsin*, December 17, 1887.

⁴⁴ *Boston Globe*, October 7, 1890.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, September 6, 1891. The following members of the 1891 Boston Nationals played in the Players’ League in 1890: catcher Michael Kelly, left fielder Harry Stover, third baseman William Nash, second baseman Joseph Quinn, and pitcher Harry Staley. All except Staley played with the Boston Champions; Staley played in Pittsburgh.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, September 6, 1891.

⁴⁷ *The People* (New York), June 21, 1891.

similar in the National League. Boston did well at the gate, but only because it retained “popular prices.” Of those who raised prices, only Chicago made a big profit.

With the Players’ League out of the way, the National League turned its guns on the American Association. The *Boston Globe* warned National League owners not to be fooled by Chicago-led efforts to wipe out competition and return to the exclusive policies envisioned by Spalding. Apparently the *Globe* saw what residual moralists did not: that baseball’s popularity had changed public perceptions. The paper argued that efforts to ban Sunday baseball in Boston would fail because the local city league, “a powerful organization,” played games on the Sabbath. It also urged the city’s National League team to retain “popular” prices.⁴⁸

The *Globe*’s predictions came to naught in the short run. The National League absorbed the American Association in 1892; and from 1892 to 1900 National League owners more or less had things their own way. But the handwriting was on the wall. Owners would have done well to listen to the *Boston Globe*. Attendance at professional games stagnated in the last decade of the nineteenth century and only revived when the American League began playing in 1901. The American League struck a compromise over ticket prices by instituting scaled tariffs. But even before that, baseball thrived on the sandlots, school grounds, and city parks, beyond moralist and entrepreneurial control. Religious journals railed against baseballers who violated the Sabbath; a few cities passed “Blue Laws” and occasionally raided Sunday games. But time was on the side of the sportsmen. Massachusetts did not lift its prohibition against Sunday baseball until 1928, but a law is only as good as the ability to enforce it. Thousands ignored the ban.

Today, scaled ticket prices, beer sales, and Sunday baseball are part of the American social landscape. The Boston Red Sox drew 3,048,250 fans to Fenway Park in the 2007-2008 season selling out all 18 home games nearly 120 years after the formation of the first professional baseball league. Likewise, the Boston Bruins – heirs to Gilded Age ice polo craze – fill the recently-renovated Boston Garden for nearly every National Hockey League match.

How easy it is to assume that these sports have always been part of American life, to forget that there was once a time when Massachusetts

⁴⁸ *Boston Globe*, October 11, 1891. Stephen Hardy argues that baseball did not integrate the masses because high ticket prices kept Commonwealth workers out of the ball park. However, since Boston was forced to reinstitute “popular prices,” Hardy’s point is a questionable one. See Hardy, p. 16.

parents did not urge their children to go to playgrounds or to immerse themselves in sports. Over time the games became more formal, public space more regulated, professional sports more respectable. Yet the triumph was not complete. Drinking, gambling, rowdyism, and rough play did not and do not reflect the values of America's elites, although such behavior remains part of American sports.

Hard-drinking Mike Kelly begat John L. Sullivan, who begat Babe Ruth, who begat the beer-soaked revelers who linger on park softball fields after the game or bask in the Sunday sun at Fenway Park. Untold amounts of money change hands in illegal Massachusetts football pools and rotisserie leagues. As for rowdyism and rough play, one needs only to sit in the bleachers of Fenway Park or listen to a Boston Garden crowd's delight when a Bruin throws an on-ice punch to realize that the Gilded Age is but a primal scream away.



Note: This essay originally appeared in *Sports in Massachusetts: Historical Essays*, a publication of HJM's Institute for Massachusetts Studies. It is available for \$7.50 (includes postage and handling). Our other edited collections include *Massachusetts Politics: Selected Historical Essays*; *Labor in Massachusetts History: Selected Essays*; and *Education in Massachusetts: Selected Essays*. Each is \$7.50 or order any three books for \$20. See the HJM webpage for complete tables of contents. These book sales help support our annual fundraising drive.