

Fit for America: Major John L. Griffith and the Quest for Athletics and Fitness

By Matthew Lindaman. Published 2018 by Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY. \$60.00. 280 pp. ISBN: 9780815654353

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Athletics properly conducted may serve as a great moral agent that will work for the betterment of society. —John L. Griffith

Fit for America: Major John L. Griffith and the Quest for Athletics and Fitness is an intellectual biography that traces the influential career of the Big Ten's first commissioner, John L. Griffith, and provides a long-overdue account of Griffith's instrumental role in the promotion and organization of American intercollegiate athletics. *Fit for America* breathes life into the 40-year career of Griffith, which until now has been largely lost to history. Lindaman's work, pulling from primary sources, presents a rare look into the life of one of America's preeminent athletic administrators during the first half of the twentieth century. The biography explores the evolution and organization of intercollegiate athletic administration and how Griffith's philosophy of athletics shaped military preparedness between World Wars I and II.

Lindaman constructs a framework that gleans the significant details of Griffith's career from the incredible amount of written works he left behind, primarily published in *Athletic Journal* editorials and university-archived correspondence he both sent and received. There is a logical sequence to the eight chapters of Lindaman's text, beginning with an insightful introduction to Griffith's legacy in athletic administration. Lindaman's introduction identifies four ways *Fit for America's* transdisciplinary perspective contributes to the historiographical literature, highlighting Griffith's role in the elevation of intercollegiate athletic administration, Griffith's philosophical beliefs concerning the role of intercollegiate athletics in American life and American institutions of higher education, an analysis of the connection between athletics and military preparedness both during and between World Wars I and II, and the regional component of intercollegiate athletics.

It is worth mentioning that sport historians will have to look elsewhere to find the effects, if any, Griffith had on the advancement of both women and minorities in intercollegiate athletic competition. While not referenced, it is worth contemplating that Griffith's impact throughout his career in Iowa is likely to have influenced the purpose and advancement of female participation in athletics in the state. Iowa girls began playing organized basketball in 1898, and in just over 2 decades the sport's popularity had grown to nearly every small town. In 1920, Iowa hosted the first girls' state basketball tournament in Des Moines. During this

time, while many states were banning girls from engaging in physical activities, Iowa educators and administrators championed athletics for all. Irrespective, Lindaman should be applauded for his biographic introduction of Griffith.

The first chapter, “Off and Running,” provides a strong introduction to Griffith’s formative years at Beloit College, a small liberal arts institution in southern Wisconsin. Lindaman meticulously details Griffith’s experience as a student-athlete, student manager for the football and track teams, and sports editor for the *Beloit Round Table*—a role he used to publish and promote his athletics-for-all philosophy and early approach to athletic administration. The chapter continues into the early years of Griffith’s career, providing insight into his experience as coach and athletic director at three colleges in South Dakota and Iowa, founder of the Drake Relays, and cofounder of the first-ever NCAA track and field meet. These early career experiences establish Griffith as both an assiduous advocate of intercollegiate athletics and one of track and field’s foremost ambassadors. Chapter 1’s thoughtful account of Griffith’s early career experiences lays the foundational groundwork for the ensuing seven chapters that are presented in chronological order.

Chapter 2, “War and Fitness,” analyzes the overall impact of wartime on Griffith’s career—during which time he served as a major in the U.S. Army and supervisor of physical education and athletics. After his resignation from Drake University in 1917, Griffith was named the athletic director at Camp Dodge and was responsible for organizing athletics and recreation for 30,000 men. Despite this undertaking, he still found time to write, and the basis of “War and Fitness” is best captured in Griffith’s own words, written in the *Camp Dodge* newspaper, “The war department has found out after much experience that athletics is the one thing to keep the minds and bodies of its soldiers in good condition” (p. 44). By 1919, Griffith had garnered national prominence for his leadership at Camp Dodge and was commissioned to lead the army’s physical education training. It was during this time that Griffith would lobby for the expansion of physical education and college athletics. In 1921, he founded the *Athletic Journal* as part of his efforts to connect athletics and the advancement physical education. He used the publication as “a medium for the exchange of ideas. Such exchanges would also contribute to the construction of a common language of ideals among coaches and athletic directors across the land” (p. 52).

“The Ballyhoo Yeas, 1919–1925” is a fitting title for Lindaman’s third chapter and highlights the persistence of national preparedness and the emerging role of sport as a cornerstone of modern American life. Lindaman traces the growth and nationalization of college athletics in what Griffith referred to as “an era of stadium building in America” (p. 61), which resulted in stronger regional land-grant institutions, conferences, and the NCAA. Historians agree that no single decade produced a list of legends like the 1920s—and after reading this chapter it becomes clear that John L. Griffith is one of them.

Chapter 4, “Becoming Commissioner,” explores Griffith’s new role as the commissioner of the Western Athletic Conference (Big Ten Conference). Lindaman skillfully illustrates the creation of the conference commissioner’s position during the postwar era and the implications it had on athletic governance. The chapter sheds light on Griffith’s directive to transform the organization into one the nation’s most ethical athletic conferences. Griffith investigated many of the