Rethinking Sport, Empire, and American Exceptionalism

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Historian Anders Stephanson has recently declared that the “United States is today the world’s largest transoceanic empire. Innumerable islands under the American flag dot the Pacific and the Caribbean, the biggest and most notable being Puerto Rico. This is a colonial empire in the most conventional sense: far-flung territories and populations are held under the control of the center in a state of formal inferiority.”1 Most Americans seem to be unaware of this empire, much less the history of how it was achieved. “Old-style imperial possessions are rarely discussed or even acknowledged,” Stephanson writes, and “the overwhelming reality of imperial power in the insular possessions, then, is mirrored inversely in the insularity of the imperial power itself.”2

In recent years, though, empire and imperialism have been dragged into discourse as explanatory tropes for interpreting the recent American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as for the way in which the current Bush administration responded to the 9/11 attack by embracing a new imperial program called the Project for a New American Century.3 In a 2004 review essay of recent books within this tradition, Ronald Steel suggested that Americans are now “in the early stages of imperial self-recognition. Americans are only just beginning to understand the role their nation plays in the world, and the price incurred by that role. That acknowledgment is late in coming because we have been brought up on an image of ourselves as rebellious colonists winning liberation from the clutches of imperial Europe.”4 This growing awareness of the nation’s imperial past and present comes at a time when the future of American global hegemony is now widely debated.5 As Jonathan Schell writes, what “we may in fact be witnessing is not just a contest between an American empire and its particular colonial targets but a final showdown between the imperial idea and what I like to call an unconquerable world, meaning a world that has the will and the means to reject any imperial yoke.”6 Such issues have evoked a lively debate among imperial historians, political economists, and cultural commentators.

Whereas empire has been a central topic for British sport historians during the past couple of decades, the topic has been virtually out of bounds for their American counterparts.7 With a couple of noteworthy exceptions, American sport

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historians have hardly analyzed their subject within a global context—much less have they demonstrated, unlike their colleagues in sport sociology, that sport has had a role in the development of the modern empire and imperial mentalities. Although Steven Riess noted in 1997 that sport and foreign relations have not been adequately integrated into the American literature, prior to the publication of a couple of recent works (most notably by Gerald Gems), only Allen Guttmann had explored the implications of cultural imperialism as manifested in the diffusion of American sport in his 1994 book, *Games and Empires*.

This neglect derives from at least three cultural and scholarly factors. First, there has been a general, American reticence to acknowledge the existence of an empire or a well-established imperial mind-set in their nation’s past (and present). Outside of left-wing polemics and revisionist histories, the notion of an American empire as one comparable to previous empires has rarely been acknowledged in either popular or academic discourses. Americans have imagined themselves to be fundamentally unique, special, or “exceptional.” This historical amnesia of the nation’s past stems from the hold of popular historical narratives of American “westward expansion” and “manifest destiny,” which have portrayed a benign, often romantic story of “aggrieved innocence.” As late as the 1970s, leading historians of American diplomacy, like Ernest May, suggested that America’s rise to a global power was merely fortuitous—“greatness was thrust upon it” by larger, historical forces. Second, following on this cultural explanation is the fact that historians (including sport historians) have been seduced by the interpretive talisman that is American exceptionalism—a term, as Trevor B. McCrisken, explains, is used to describe “the belief that the United States is an extraordinary nation with a special role to play in human history; a nation that is not only unique but also superior.” First used in the early nineteenth century by Alexis de Tocqueville (although the idea can be traced back to colonial times), it became a central component of American national identity and a powerful ideological influence on U.S. foreign policy. This exceptionalist ideology persisted throughout the twentieth century—articulated by such luminaries as Frederick Jackson Turner and promulgated prominently in the “consensus” historiography in the 1950s. This strain outlived the new social history, with its emphasis on the themes of race, class, gender, and ethnicity that appear to cut across the central tenets of the faith in the United States as an exception. And, third, American sport historians have curiously remained on the sidelines of the conceptual and theoretical debates that have been advanced within the parent discipline.

American sports history flourishes and yet, simultaneously, the field is increasingly estranged from the mainstreams within social, cultural, and political history. After its rise to become a promising subfield of social history during the 1970s and 1980s, American sport history came to be recognized, albeit grudgingly in some staid circles, as a serious area of inquiry during the 1990s. But after achieving its status as a recognized area of research, it has become seemingly less visible and relevant within mainstream history. Seldom are the revered sport history monographs cited in the footnotes and bibliographies of key works in American history, and even more seldom do sport historians publish their research in the leading American history and American Studies journals. Even though there is a new generation of scholars who are transforming the field of sport history in the United States, many sport historians have been less reflexive about the wider implications