

Muscular Christianity and Football

In the late nineteenth century, a fear about the softness of American society raised doubts about the capacity of the United States to carry out its imperial destiny. This problem was associated with the final settlement of the frontier. As important as the development of open space was to the expansion of the territory of the United States, the completion of the continental expansion brought an attendant fear that traditional masculinity was on the wane and would bring about a withering of the individual and the national body. This fear spread to the church as well, where the result was thought to be a moral softening (Miller 2011, p. 38). To make matters worse, waves of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe were flooding American cities with foreign cultures. This concern became so pressing that talk of "race suicide" became common.

The United States was not alone in the fear. In England:

Interest in physical culture generally developed in the mid-nineteenth century as a response to what was perceived as a weakened urban population with no access to the healthy activities of rural life ... It found adherents among the 165 English public schools, who used it to promote leadership and team-building qualities; among the Church, who saw the value of muscular Christianity. [Wray et al. 2007, pp. 165-66]

This muscular Christianity was a "belief, which first appeared in British private schools, that competition in games helps instill desirable traits of character and thus qualifies as a legitimate educational activity" (Mandelbaum 2004, p. 148).

Thomas Hughes' two popular British novels of the time, Tom Brown's School Days and Tom Brown at Oxford were successful in promoting muscular Christianity. The narrator of the second book distilled the essence of muscular Christianity: "[It] is "a good thing to have strong and well-exercised bodies The least of the muscular Christians has hold of the old chivalrous and Christian belief, that a man's body is given him to be trained and brought into subjection, and then used for the protection of the weak, the advancement of all righteous causes, and the subduing of the earth which God has given to the children of men" (Hughes 1895, p. 113). Theodore Roosevelt recommended Tom Brown's at Rugbys was one of two books that every American should read (Roosevelt 1900), although he was confused about the title since none of the Tom Brown books appeared under that name.

Eugenics and Muscular Christianity

Promoting muscular Christianity would not be enough to create the kind of culture that would keep the country strong so long as waves of supposedly "less-fit" immigrants threatened to inundate the Anglo Saxon culture; nor could Darwinian selection be counted on to eliminate the supposedly unfit because new immigrants would swamp that process.

In the United States, where modernization and science seem to go hand-in-hand, an imagined need for scientific management of racial matters took hold. Luther Burbank and other plant breeders had been making remarkable progress in creating new fruits. Such success suggested that something similar be done for the human population.

Scientific breeding, known by the scientific-sounding name of eugenics, put down strong roots in the United States as well as other countries, eventually taking its most repugnant form in Nazi Germany. At first, the idea was to select the healthiest stock. Within a short period of time, strong genes became identified with the white race.

Rather than existing as a cult limited to a small group of wingnuts, many of the leading progressive figures in the scientific and intellectual worlds of the time supported this movement. Anything that helped to rationalize the legacy of slavery was welcome in many quarters. Disdain for immigrants added to the appeal of eugenics. Eugenics offered a scientific method to preserve the culture and social order. The cause of eugenics was not hurt by the satisfaction offered by scientific evidence of one's natural superiority. Finally, the desire to make the United States into a powerful imperial power made the case for eugenics almost irresistible.

Together with muscular Christianity, eugenics suggested a renewal of American vigor. W. W. Hastings, Dean of the Normal School of Physical Education, Battle Creek Michigan, made the importance of this connection clear in an academic presentation on "Racial Hygiene and Vigor," which brought together the subjects of sports, eugenics, and vigor, the latter being a code for the capacity to wield power around the world. Hastings began with eugenics:

Modern eugenics claims virtually that through the unnatural conditions with which modern civilization has surrounded us there is no such thing to-day as real natural selection; physical degeneracy is on the increase; false social standards are responsible for false mating and lack of individual and national vigor, and that the only possible cure for this condition is rational scientific human breeding for the welfare of the race. [Hastings 1910, p. 516]

Hastings added a class dimension to his subject:

Until the present century the masses have made little showing on the annals of any people. It was the quarrels, the blood feuds and spoils of the great leader of the time or times which the historian tells us molded the whole trend of the times. It was the profligacy of a Caesar which fed the mouths of the common people of Rome, robbed them of their self-respect, and made of them a race of professional paupers and idlers; which by perennial human life, their physical basis of virtue and religion. The utter ruin of his race was nothing to a Nero if by it he could reign a Caesar. [Hastings 1910, p. 516-17]

Sports offered the supposedly genetically-blessed elite young men an opportunity to display their potential as natural leaders. In effect, muscular Christianity was intended to produce the kind of leadership that aristocrats had historically exercised, especially in times of war. In contrast to aristocracy, where family ties had governed selection, muscular Christianity, which merged with the eugenics movement, was determined to scientifically produce a new breed of natural leaders on the basis of genetic inheritance as well as the young men's own hard work and self-discipline. The expectation was that this new generation of leaders would carry out its duties and obligations so successfully that the rest of the population would naturally embrace their new brand of meritocratic leadership.

The muscular Christianity/eugenics movement did not ignore the role of women. Their responsibility was for breeding new leaders with roots in the dominant, educated classes of northern European stock. For example, in March 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt attacked women who used birth control as "criminal against the race" for not producing more children from the "fit" (Gordon 1974, pp. 156-57).

By the later part of the nineteenth century, football appeared to offer a partial response to the threat of declining masculinity. Organized Boston-style football emerged in elite secondary schools in the urban Northeast, such as Boston Latin and Dixwell's. Some of these boys would eventually matriculate to Harvard, bringing their game with them, which would soon displace the regional versions of football that Yale, Princeton, and Penn had been playing (Miller 2011, p. 60). Because the sport appeared to offer an ideal means for addressing the threat of declining masculinity by toughening elite young men, it became a primary vehicle for developing muscular Christianity.

The scientific climate of the time seemed to support this choice. "New ideas about medicine, nutrition, and

sanitation supported the growing belief that the quality of human health was not a consequence of ... preordained fate but rather the result of behavior" (Miller 2011, p. 38).

The sport also resonated with the grander cultural aspirations of the leaders of American universities, who accepted the ideals of muscular Christianity as a means of developing character. They also must have appreciated that football games earned them good revenues (Collins 2013, pp. 213-14).

Football and the Imperial Destiny

The mind-set of muscular Christianity was almost perfectly suited to the justification of imperialism, especially when buttressed by eugenics. The imperial mission was to civilize heathens around the world. According to one British pundit: "If asked what our muscular Christianity has done, we point to the British Empire" (Minchin 1901, p. 113).

William Mathews, a Chicago professor wrote about Americans' agreement with this kind of assessment:

As might be expected, Theodore Roosevelt enthused about this imperial fray: "As an avid sportsman in an era when Social Darwinism thrived, [he] saw football as helping revitalize an effete population physically and mentally unprepared to defend themselves or take their place on the world stage" (Watterson 2000, pp. 64-65).

In 1895, Roosevelt went into more detail about the importance of toughening elite students in a letter to Walter Camp, coach of Yale University's successful football program and known as the "father of (American) football." After a fawning introduction, followed by a callous appreciation of the injuries that young football players suffered, Roosevelt continued:

I am very glad to have a chance of expressing to you the obligation which I feel all Americans are under to you for your championship of athletics. The man on the farm and in the workshop here, as in other countries, is apt to get enough physical work; but we were tending steadily in America to produce in our leisure and sedentary classes a type of man not much above the Bengalee baboo, and from this the athletic spirit has saved us. Of all games I personally like football best, and I would rather see my boys play it than see them play any other. I have no patience with the people who declaim against it because it necessitates rough play and occasional injuries. The rough play, if confined within manly and honorable limits, is an advantage [Roosevelt 1895, p. 99]

A few strains came together in this paragraph, beginning with Roosevelt's oft-expressed concern with the feminizing effect of the closing of the frontier. His contemptuous reference the Bengalee baboo reflects the idea that people in the colonized world are not really manly. Finally, the immediate goal was to find a way to displace the British, who controlled Bengal:

Americans looking to revive the spirit of manifest destiny gazed enviously at the imperial successes of their British cousins: 'The splendid empires which England has founded in every quarter of the globe have had their origin largely in the football contests at Eton, the boat-races on the Thames, and the cricket-matches on her downs and heaths' [Collins 2013, pp. 213-4, citing Matthews 1876, p. 61]

Football seemed to provide even better training for American imperialism:

The demands placed upon the football player are not unlike jingoistic demands that soldiers experience. "Football is very much like a small war," wrote J. Hamblen Sears, "and the training of a team is not so different from the training of an army A brave man who cannot or does not obey orders in regiment is well known to be not only useless himself, but a serious cause for the loss of discipline and efficiency on the part of all the other men in the regiment. It is precisely the same with football. In their 1896 book, Football, Camp and Deland observed "a remarkable and interesting likeness" between "battles and the miniature contests on the gridiron". [Miller 2011, p. 171]

Walter Camp the, co-author for the book, Football and recipient of Roosevelt's letter regarding the game, is perhaps best known today for the annual Walter Camp Award given to the collegiate football player whom the major coaches select as the outstanding player of the year, earned his status as the father of football, first as a player, then a coach, as well as the designer of many of the rules, which separated football from Rugby. By virtue of his experience in the physical conditioning of football players, he became a military advisor during World War I.

Because football seemed to reflect the aspirations of modern business, which was the greatest beneficiary of imperial expansion, it supported the imperial destiny. In so far as the fostering of the expanding professional and administrative middle-class was concerned, American football provided strict rules for the Ivy League players compared with the ill-defined organization of traditional rugby. In this way, the organization of football came to resemble the

newly emerging vision of scientific management of business.

In this respect, Allen Guttmann argues that football's attractiveness also comes from a combination of primitive and modern elements (Guttmann 1978, pp. 85, 125). "The basic explanatory factor that makes modern sports unique "is the scientific world-view:"

In other words, the mathematical discoveries of the seventeenth century were popularized in the eighteenth century, at which time we can observe the beginnings of our modern obsession with quantification in sport. During the Age of the Enlightenment, we can see the transition from the Renaissance concept of "measure" in the sense of moderation and balance, to the modern concept of measurement The emergence of modern sports represents neither the triumph of capitalism nor the rise of Protestantism but rather the slow development of an empirical, experimental, mathematical Weltanschauung. [Guttmann 1978, p. 129]

The more telling association of football with the capacity of empire building provided an obvious attraction for the sport, especially because of the parallels between the game and business. Scoring points as a team resembled the way corporations kept the books on profits, which flowed from the collective efforts of their workers.

Time management is a crucial consideration in running a business as well as a football game. Walter Camp was also chairman of the board of directors of the New Haven Clock Company, a family business. This latter connection is often mentioned regarding the introduction of the game clock in football (Collins 2013, pp. 225-26). Finally, the authoritarian nature of coaching is quite similar to business management.

British rugby was also developing along the same lines. William Suddell, a manager of a cotton factory, could almost be described as a British counterpart of Camp. In an 1887 interview, Camp was proud to say that the game is "played more scientifically than it ever was, and that is solely due to the fact that in a professional team the men are under the control of the management and are constantly playing together" (Collins 2013, p. 226).

No matter how capable elite leadership is, either in matters of the economy or war, success ultimately depends upon the contributions of the great masses of people who are supposedly suited to their less elevated circumstances. For example, in the case of imperialism, ordinary foot soldiers also needed to be instilled with the proper military ethic.

Toward this end, leaders in the Young Men's Christian Association attempted to provide a proletarian version of muscular Christianity for the working classes by inventing basketball. While Ivy League schools were preparing elite students to lead the emerging American imperial state on the gridiron, winning adulation from the upper classes, working class boys began to play basketball in shabby working class gyms.

The sports of rugby and football were also related to Mill's notion of war as a form of outdoor relief in a double sense. These games offered a kind of outdoor relief for the players. As a violent team sport played in elite universities, football was a perfect venue for creating a culture of tough-minded men who would exercise leadership in the greater game of imperialism.

Probably nobody expressed the relationship between sport and war more starkly than George Orwell: "Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence: in other words it is war minus the shooting" (Orwell 1945, p. 42).