

Sports and Games of the American Revolution

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Fighting the American Revolution consumed a relatively small percentage of the eight years stretching from the Battle of Lexington to the end of the war. There were long intervals between battles when life was exceedingly humdrum. Many men could have shared Quartermaster Sergeant Simon Griffin's dispirited comment written in 1778, "Nothing to do But Play Ball in Ouer Regiment."¹ Although camp routines and housekeeping chores took part of each day, there was ample time left² which the soldiers filled with a variety of recreation.

The letters and diaries of Revolutionary soldiers serve as the best sources about sports and games. Officers wrote the majority of diaries and the largest group of officer-diaries came from New England. The picture is clearer concerning the officers' activities than the men of the ranks who wrote less. Occasionally there are glimpses of the common soldiers' sports caught in the officers' disapproving attitude toward what their men were doing. Orderly books contain dictums against all sorts of rowdy and wasteful behavior, including some of the sporting activities which the officers felt did not enhance the discipline or the public image of the army.³

The soldiers had to use their ingenuity to amuse themselves, because there was no organized program of recreation. The one small attempt at organized competitive activity was designed solely for military purposes, to instill courage under fire. Amusement was only a by-product of offering a reward for the capture of each cannon ball fired from the enemy's Boston batteries at the American lines in 1775. Chasing and securing the cannon balls became an exhilarating sport as the men raced and scrambled for them. A correspondent in Cambridge, Massachusetts whose letter was published in the *Virginia Gazette* related that "it is diverting to see our people contend for the balls, as they roll along."⁴ However, even this encouragement of individual competitiveness had to be stopped, because in their eagerness, some of the soldiers were sticking out their feet to stop cannon balls rolling slowly along the ground, and the weight of a ball crushed their feet.⁵

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Sports were almost never utilized to promote the unity of a company or a regiment. There seemed to be no attempt to build company pride through sports challenges, nor to pit one state or region against another. The only evidence of anything like competitive rivalry occurred early in the war when two of the major American encampments around Boston were on Prospect Hill and Winter Hill. On October 24, 1775, the men of Winter Hill came to Prospect Hill to challenge their best wrestler to a match on October 26. Although all wrestling in camp was strictly forbidden by orders given the previous June, the “grand wrestle” took place on Prospect Hill, where the challengers from Winter Hill were beaten.⁶ Just why such challenges appeared so briefly and did not become a common occurrence is not clear. Possibly the officers discouraged geographic rivalries, because men from different colonies already cherished animosity for each other. The officers may have tried to direct all hostility toward the British, but the evidence allows no more than speculation.

Most men probably had never before had the luxury of leisure. Making a living required a great deal of time, but many occupations also provided enough exercise to promote health. In the army, the men not only needed to fill in spare hours, but they also needed to keep their bodies fit. George Washington appreciated the value of physical fitness. He encouraged his officers to see that their men were involved in games of exercise. From headquarters in Morristown in May, 1777, he issued the general orders:

Improve all the leisure time your Brigade may have from other duties in manouevring and teaching the men the use of their legs, which is of infinitely more importance than learning the manual exercise. Cause the Officers to attend regularly and perform their part of these duties with the men. . . . Games of Exercise for amusement may not only be permitted but encouraged.⁷

The men did engage in active sports, but not always when they were supposed to. Washington made a tour of the camp during the maneuver hours and found a number of men who should have been drilling occupied in other activities, and “the want of shoes or other articles of clothing cannot be urged in excuse for their not being under arms because they were employed at games of exercise much more violent.”⁸

Washington set an example for his men by taking part in sports when he could find time in his busy schedule. A young Frenchman, Francois Barbé-Marbois, the secretary to the French minister, visited Washington’s headquarters in 1779 and noted that Washington “sometimes throws and catches a ball for whole hours with his aides-de-camp.”⁹ A notation in the diary of George Ewing on May 4, 1778 while he was stationed at Valley Forge recorded that Washington “did us the honor to play Wicket with us.”¹⁰

Wicket was a form of cricket. Wicket required a long, shovel-shaped bat which was straight on one side and spoon-shaped on the other. The ball was

bowled at the wicket which was defended by the player with the bat. If he struck the ball, he had to run to the base of the one who bowled the ball and return to the wicket.¹¹ Dr. Ebenezer Elmer of the New Jersey Line recorded that after dinner at his colonel's quarters, "we took a hearty game at Bandy Wicket."¹²

Cricket, was also played at Valley Forge. Morale was apparently very high one bright April day, which not only inspired the men to get out and play games, but also a camp poet to write these lines:

Camps, hills, and dales with mirth resound;
All with clean clothes and powdered hair
For sport and duty now appear,
Here squads in martial exercise
There whole brigades in order rise.

One Choix of Fives are earnest here,
Another furious at Cricket there.¹³

Lieutenant William Feltman must have played furiously at cricket with his army friends in South Carolina in 1782, for he wrote in his dairy, "This day I was very much fatigued playing cricket."¹⁴

Other ball games were played during the Revolution including an ancestor of baseball. George Ewing at Valley Forge wrote that he "exercised in the afternoon in the intervals played at base."¹⁵ Robert Henderson, an historian of baseball, accepts Ewing's statement as a reference to a predecessor of modern baseball.¹⁶

Another game played with a ball was shinny, which is related to field hockey. The ball was struck on the ground with a bent stick. The object was to drive the ball over the opposing team's goal line.¹⁷ General John Sullivan led an expedition against the Indians of New York and Pennsylvania in 1779. Although the trek was arduous, the men recorded numerous games. General Sullivan watched some of his officers play shinny and was pleased with their performance. All ranks of officers took part in these ball games including General William Maxwell and the chaplain, Parson Samuel Kirkland.¹⁸

Dr. Ebenezer Elmer also played an unidentified game which he referred to as "whirl." Whirl may have been a game Elmer and his colleagues invented for this is the only known reference to the game. If this is so, it is evidence of the creative ingenuity people used to deal with the unfamiliar phenomenon of leisure time. Elmer, Colonel Elias Dayton, Parson Kirkland, "who exercises among us with greatest familiarity," some Indians, and some athletically inclined officers spent long afternoons playing whirl while at Fort Schuyler in 1776. Playing whirl involved risks of physical injury. Dr. Lewis Ford Dun-

ham gave Dr. Elmer such a severe blow on his mouth, he cut his lip and nearly dislocated his jaw.¹⁹

A ball game which received very little mention in the diaries of the Revolution was football, but at least one Revolutionary hero played this game. Nathan Hale recorded in his diary that he played football on November 8, 1775. Apparently he was a skilled player. A fellow officer, Lieutenant Elisha Bostwick, reminiscing about his friendship with Nathan Hale, recalled that “his body agility was remarkable. I have seen him follow a football and kick it over the tops of the trees in the Bowery at New York, (an exercise which he was fond of.)”²⁰ Elihu Clark mentioned playing football in camp at Roxbury in September 1775.²¹ Eighteenth century football was a running and kicking game with rules and style that varied from place to place.

Another game that was popular with the soldiers was called “fives,” which was related to handball. The name “fives” referred to a variety of ball games played with the hand. Originally fives players wore a glove or a binding of skin and cord on their right hands and the racket evolved from this hand covering. The balls were made of white leather stuffed with feathers, wool or dogs’ hair.²² Lieutenant William Feltman played fives on his tour of duty in the Southern campaign in 1782.²³ Captain Bloomfield was the loser in a game of fives and it cost him a mug of beer.²⁴ The men who were taken prisoner in Quebec after Benedict Arnold’s disastrous attack on the city in 1775, also played fives following the advice of the prison doctor who said the prisoners should exercise to remain healthy. It was painful for the scurvy-ridden men to be active, but it was preferable to the morbid symptoms of those who “adhered to their blankets.”²⁵

Nine-pins was another pastime familiar to American soldiers. Claude Blanchard described a garden party near Providence which he attended with General James Barnum where the guests played nine-pins. Lieutenant Samuel Shute made notations that the men on the western campaign against the Indians spent a considerable part of June 1779, “bowling bullets.” Lacking proper bowling balls, they substituted cannon balls.²⁶

When there was a billiard table handy, the soldiers took advantage of the situation to spend “agreeable afternoons” playing the game. When his regiment was encamped near Richmond, Virginia in 1780, Captain Joseph McClellan and his friend, Captain John Davis went to town to spend the afternoon playing billiards and drinking wine. As the army moved on, Captain McClellan and Lieutenant Joseph Collier took a walk to New Castle and found a billiard table in town where they spent the afternoon.²⁷ While waiting for the final surrender ceremonies at Yorktown, Lieutenant Feltman and his friends explored Williamsburg and located a billiard table, but it was a poor one.²⁸ Dr. Ebenezer Elmer, whose athletic skills were varied, played billiards with his

colonel, major, and a commissioner sent to deal with the Indians of upstate New York. This group probably had an excellent billiard table for it was in Johnson Hall, the manorial home of the wealthy Tory Indian Superintendent for the Northern Department, Sir William Johnson, who had ruled much of upper New York like a feudal lord until his death in 1774.²⁹

Shuffleboard was known to the soldiers as evidenced by the fact that Lieutenant Abraham Wood of the Invalid Regiment was court-martialed and convicted of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman, which consisted of keeping an unlicensed tippling house and sponsoring shuffleboard. The court discharged him from the army and cancelled his commission.³⁰ Fencing was not common, although it had a few adherents such as Daniel McCurtin who enrolled at a fencing school near the camp around Boston in 1775.³¹ Jabez Fitch witnessed some “sword playing” in a barn while he was a prisoner on Long Island³² and there were occasional duels.³³

Boxing was not a familiar sport in America. Private Joseph Plumb Martin said he had heard of lowbred Europeans, especially Irishmen, who indulged in boxing, but he did not believe it until he had seen it. One December day when he was visiting the sutler’s hut, a couple of not-entirely-sober Irishmen were reminiscing together. Suddenly one asked the other if he would “take a box.” The other cheerfully agreed. They went outside and the other patrons followed to watch the novel sport. It was a cold day and ground was frozen. Nevertheless the men stripped and prepared to fight. The combatants rushed for each other, missed completely and fell on the hard ground which bloodied them considerably. They prepared for another charge, rushed at each other again, missed and fell once more. After this, they decided they were too drunk to box and went back to the sutler’s hut “both as bloody as butchers.”³⁴ In November 1777, Jabez Fitch noticed a large collection of people on Long Island and discovered that the “diversion of the day” was a “severe Combat in the Boxing way between the famous Polhames and some Refugees.” Since the American prisoners were allowed to roam fairly freely in their neighborhood, the prisoners could join the local citizens in watching sporting events.³⁵

There were two spectator sports popular chiefly in Virginia. One was cock-fighting and the other horse racing. The French observer, Baron von Closen, said a cockfight was something one might see once out of curiosity, but it was too cruel to enjoy as a sport. He had seen the poor creatures knocked about, blinded, and killed by the sharp steel spurs with which the cocks were armed. He planned to take a pair of the spurs back to Europe to satisfy the curiosity of his friends. He had seen some cocks which were so very skilled in using the spurs, they had won a reputation for miles around.³⁶

While the Marquis de Chastellux was touring Virginia, his party stopped to feed the horses. While waiting for the horses to eat, he had an opportunity to

watch a cockfight. People were busy placing bets and the stakes were high. The spectators excitedly urged the cocks to fight and a boy near the Marquis “kept leaping for joy and crying, ‘Oh! it is a *charming diversion.*’ ” Chastellux confessed he was astonished at the “stupid” interest the sport engendered among the spectators.³⁷

Congress discouraged horse racing during the Revolution as being too frivolous for wartime, when the army needed horses for practical purposes. Congress passed a resolution in 1774 and another in 1778³⁸ recommending the suppression of horse racing with the result that the sport dwindled, but it did not completely disappear.

Philip Vickers Fithian was horrified when he rode to a militia muster in Virginia to find the men engaged in drinking and horse racing rather than military exercises.³⁹ The *Virginia Gazette* advertised a “purse race” at Manchester in September, 1779, for any horse, mare, or gelding running two mile heats.⁴⁰ Hopes for renewed interest in horse racing endured during the war as witnessed by numerous ads for breeding race horses. For example, the *Pennsylvania Packet* carried an advertisement in 1780 for a horse named “Why Not.” The ad further stated that “Why Not” had won \$1000 at a three mile race at Christina Bridge in 1778.⁴¹ While marching through Virginia in August, 1781, Lieutenant John Bell Tilden won a half Johannie, a Portuguese coin properly called a johannes, and a bottle of wine at a horse race.⁴² Baron von Clofen attended several horse races in Virginia and found them more entertaining than the cockfights. He learned that one of the great occupations of Virginia was preparing horses for racing and he noted, “The French have been amused more than once by these races.”⁴³ The Tories on Long Island observed no restrictions on horse racing, so the soldier-prisoners assigned to that area were able to share a number of races with the local inhabitants.⁴⁴

Winter brought special diversions for the soldiers of the Revolution. When there was enough snow, they went sleighing. Dr. Ebenezer Elmer, stationed at Fort Ticonderoga during the winter of 1776, observed on several occasions that conditions were very good for sleighing. The ice on Lake Champlain was hard enough for good sledding, because the sun caused little thawing even on the pleasantest days. A number of officers took advantage of the weather to go sleighing to Crown Point for a pleasure jaunt.⁴⁵ Alexander Graydon recalled numerous sleighing parties in Reading, Pennsylvania during the winter of 1777-1778.⁴⁶

An almost universal winter sport which took no equipment and little skill was snowballing. It must have been a problem at Fort Schuyler in 1781 for the commandant issued strict orders against all snowballing in the garrison.⁴⁷ Skating was not common, because skates were not among the equipment that soldiers carried with them. Somehow, Alexander Graydon managed to obtain

a pair even though he was an American prisoner of war on Long Island. He and some fellow prisoners were allowed to roam the streets within certain limits. When winter came, the Tea-water Pond froze and Graydon and his friends found it covered with British officers “who thought themselves skaters.” Several of the American prisoners joined the British in their skating “from the malicious pleasure more than anything else, of showing them what arrant bunglers they were.”⁴⁸

Summer brought water sports. Hot days tempted the men to go swimming, although they were vulnerable targets for enemy sharpshooters. Many people including George Washington considering swimming in hot weather to be very unhealthy. In addition, the men often created a ruckus among the citizens of the countryside by not wearing sufficient clothing while bathing. Furthermore, they were running naked up to the houses “with a design to insult and wound the Modesty of Female Decency.” General Greene found such conduct beastly and declared that he would punish with severity any individuals involved in future outrages, asking, “Have the Troops come abroad for no other purposes but to render themselves obnoxious and Ridiculous?” Then he added that the British could not have done a better job of showing the Americans to be rude, barbarous and unprincipled.⁴⁹

In July, 1776, Washington ordered that the troops swim only in the mornings and evenings, because putrid fever was prevalent in camp and he felt that swimming in the heat of the day was at least one cause of the disease.⁵⁰ Orders of 1777 again warned the troops about swimming in hot weather and drinking too freely of cold water when they were hot and “their blood inflamed.”⁵¹ Inasmuch as the personnel of the army changed continually, and some seasoned troops were stubbornly disobedient, each summer Washington had to repeat his admonitions against swimming and indecency. An example of his repeated orders is:

There is to be no bathing between the hours of 8 and 5, and the custom of remaining long in the water is to be discontinued, as it is too relaxing and injurious to the health. It is also expected that the soldiers in this kind of recreation will observe more decency than they usually practice.⁵¹

About two weeks after issuing these orders, Washington discovered that his orders were disregarded, forcing him to post sentinels at swimming places.⁵³

There was danger from the enemy while the men were in swimming. On occasion men were fired upon while bathing. Near Boston in July, 1775, Paul Lunt recorded that “the Cat Ship fired at some of our people in swimming.”⁵⁴ Some Indians ambushed swimmers in the vicinity of Albany in 1777. Guards set out in pursuit of the Indians and chased them into the woods, preventing them from taking any scalps, but not before they had killed two swimmers.⁵⁵ Water also provided a few with the joys of sailing. Colonel Jeduthan Baldwin

went sailing in a barge with a group of friends, but squally weather spoiled this outing.⁵⁶

Revolutionary Americans recognized divisions in their society. They classified themselves as the “better sort,” the “middling sort,” and the “poorer sort.”⁵⁷ There is much evidence that the sporting activities of the military personnel followed the social levels of society in general. Officers usually engaged in sports with other “gentlemen.” The social significance of titles like “mister” and “esquire” had deteriorated considerably before the Revolution, and the term “gentlemen” no longer denoted extraordinarily high standing in society, but it still carried the implication that there was a category of men who were not gentlemen, men who were not usually qualified to be officers.

Washington and his generals encouraged distinctions between officers and men. They never presumed that an army should be equalitarian. An army required discipline, and discipline required officers who commanded respect. Orderly books expressed official disapproval of fraternization, for when “too Greate a Fimilarity Is exercised between Non Commis^d officers and Privates, (it) Distroys all Subordination, and Gives rise to Impertinence.”⁵⁸

The officers’ banning of certain activities indicates that there was a distinction between the officers and the men. There is a note of parental superiority in the admonitions against swimming, wrestling, horse racing, and snowballing. There was usually a practical reason for the officers’ disapproval, accompanied with the intimation that if the persons involved had a hint of common sense, they would not have to be told to quit doing dangerous and unhealthy activities. Tones of exasperation accompanied repeated reminders that certain behavior was not acceptable. The men should realize that they should not play games when it was time to drill. They should know better than to swim in the unhealthy heat of the day. They should not be so foolish as to risk their lives swimming in the vicinity of the enemy. Officers thought their men reckless and wasteful to the point of hurting their cause. Also their men’s behavior was often rowdy and low class as in wrestling and boxing, sports often associated with immigrants like the Irish. Their indecency in swimming nude or their childish snowball throwing made the army look undisciplined to outsiders. Officers were concerned about the public image of the army.

Most of the American games derived from English games. Horse racing and fox hunting were aristocratic English pursuits which retained their aristocratic place in colonial Virginia and other southern colonies.⁵⁹ Cock fighting was also an English import which explains why the French found it so alien, and indeed, distasteful. Bowling, nine-pins, fives, billiards, cricket, and football all came to America with the English colonists. Although Americans rejected political ties with the mother country, there was no parallel action to expunge their English cultural heritage. In fact, evidence from studies of material cul-

ture indicates that while Americans were growing politically independent, culturally they were becoming more English. Their imitation of English architecture, furniture, pottery and gravestones became more pronounced throughout the eighteenth century.⁶⁰ Militarily, Washington modeled his army on the English professional army. Not surprisingly, Americans based their recreation on English patterns, also.

Sports were informal for both officers and men. Games arose spontaneously. There was no mention of individuals or groups who organized people to play. There were no hours set aside specifically for sporting activities. There was no indication that there were special areas for playing. The diaries did not mention teams, which leaves the impression of individuals who happened to be playing together, because they shared the same location and the same leisure time. There was notable lack of specialization among the players. There were no references to positions played or to any hierarchy among the players. The diarists made no observations on rules or the breaking of rules, which is characteristic of very informal sports. Rules were flexible, varying in the same game depending on time and place.

Most striking of all, there was scarcely any attention paid to who won or lost. There was no recorded gloating over victory or despondency over defeat. Since they apparently cared very little about the outcome of the games, the soldiers must have played for their own personal satisfaction. Intrinsic, non-utilitarian goals are indicative of play rather than formal sports. Because Revolutionary games relied on intrinsic rewards, soldiers usually were participants rather than spectators. Other than horse racing and cock fighting, there were few spectator events. In short, Revolutionary sports were characterized by what they lacked in comparison with modern formalized sports. They did not have rigid rules, external organization, specialized hierarchy, specific times or places, crowds of spectators, and concern over the outcome. The positive attributes of these games were informality, individualism, spontaneity, and flexibility.

Sociologists view sporting activities as a continuum ranging from spontaneous play to formally organized professional sports. They apply this continuum to societies. Since "sport represents a microcosm of society and its values,"⁶¹ observations of Revolutionary sports reveal a less organized, less specialized, and more spontaneous society than modern America.

The society from which the army derived was not used to thinking in terms of competitive teams. People struggled against nature to survive or they competed as individuals to prosper in the market place but their communities were still isolated enough that they did not interact very much. They felt no need to prove greater community spirit or greater team skill than neighboring communities. Consequently the soldiers probably would not have responded

to efforts at developing company or regimental loyalty through a program of organized recreation, because it was not a familiar cultural pattern.

In summary, the sports and games of the American Revolution reflect a society that was essentially English in orientation, a society in which social levels were recognized and informally adhered to, and a society which was relatively flexible and spontaneous.

Notes

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