
James Oliver Robertson
Richard Harris  
Department of Geography  
McMaster University


City Games is a very badly written book about a very interesting topic: the relationships between the development of American cities and the development of organized sports. The book is valuable to anyone trying to understand or teach American sports history because it is a compendium of most of the important developments in American spectator sports. It has the added value that the sports are discussed particularly as they have related to urban ethnic groups.

Steven A. Reiss, who is professor of history at Northeastern Illinois University and editor of the Journal of Sport History, has organized the book around important questions in sports history. The focus of his discussion is on the development of cities and urban culture between 1870 and 1960. In that period, Reiss reviews in detail the relationship of sports to urban social structure, to racial and ethnic groups, and to urban spaces. Organized youth sports, the development and commercialization of professional spectator sports, and the relationship of sports to urban politics, organized crime, and American business are all discussed at length. A final chapter examines sports in what Reiss calls “the Suburban Era” from 1945 to 1980.

There is, however, little clear analysis of any of the questions the book covers. Reiss takes little care to portray human beings, individually or in the aggregate, who are subject to human passions, desires, habits, abilities or limitations and who actually lived in the past Reiss covers. The writing is imprecise, repetitious, and full of vague, ill-defined phrases and neologisms — for examples, “zone of emergence” is used a multitude of times, “sports” and “sport” are used interchangeably, and the following sentence opens a concluding paragraph: “Urbanization’s impact upon sport in the radial city was particularly crucial because of changing spatial relations.”

Reiss expects his often misused words to carry substantive historical content or precise analytical meaning, but he rarely provides the content or the meaning. In his conclusion, for example, he writes: “The importance of athletics to city folk was stressed by the widely accepted positive sporting creed which by the turn of the century had become the conventional wisdom. Athletics and, in particular, team sports were regarded as symbols of democracy and as integrative mechanisms which taught traditional small-town values to urban youth. Many agencies tried to implement the ideology to Americanize and assimilate urban boys, especially impoverished second-generation inner-city lads . . .” There is no further definition of “sporting creed” or “ideology,” no explication of “integrative mechanisms” or “assimilation,” and no description of any “agencies” or of the real people who “stressed” or “regarded.” It is a shame a book so full of potential interest, which brings up so much of importance about its subject, was so inadequately edited.

James Oliver Robertson  
Department of History  
The University of Connecticut


Books on the topic of Canadian cities, particularly those that set out to address the physical, phenomenal environment, are not common. The publication of such a text is therefore welcome, sight unseen.