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# Catholics and Sports in the United States: An Alternative Tradition

*Patrick Kelly, S.J.*

*An accurate understanding of Catholic views of the body and theological traditions in the medieval and early modern periods allows us to see the ways Catholic theological sensibilities positively shaped sport practices during these periods and continued to exercise an influence later in the United States. Thomas Aquinas played an important role in this regard. In his view, since virtue had to do with moderation, a virtuous person should not work all the time, but needed time for play and recreation. Thomas' thought on this topic influenced late medieval preaching, the humanist and Jesuit schools of the Renaissance, the approach of Jesuit missionaries to Native American games, and the development of sports at Catholic schools in the nineteenth-century United States. Catholic acceptance of sport in the United States, then, was based on theological and ethical considerations and predates its embrace by secularists and "muscular" Protestant Christians in the late nineteenth century.*

*Keywords:* Catholic anthropology; muscular Christianity; sports; St. Thomas Aquinas; Jesuits; Native Americans; intercollegiate athletics

## Two Vignettes

In 1878 a student author for the *Georgetown College Journal* provided an account of the "Athletic Sports" that took place at the school's annual Field Day in the nation's capital. The first event described was the hurdles, in which he reported,

Chew made a graceful finish in the unprecedented time of one second, but unfortunately he made it at the very first hurdle, which proved to be his *pons asinorum*, and over which he executed a double somersault which would have kindled enthusiasm in the heart of the average showman.<sup>1</sup>

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1. *Georgetown College Journal* 7, no. 2 (1878), 15, Georgetown University Archives, Washington, D.C. The term, *pons asinorum*, literally, "asses' bridge," refers to a stumbling block.

As it was clear in the account who was to come in first and second, all the excitement centered in “who should bear off the honors of the rear.” It looked like a student named Walsh might do so, but then he made a sudden spurt and shot by other runners. His flight was a short one, however:

On one of the last hurdles, he was observed to fall like a shooting star, and strike a graceful and becoming attitude upon his head. Whether he assumed this position in the wild exhilaration of the moment, or whether he was forced to it by the attraction of gravity, we cannot say.<sup>2</sup>

In another event, the tug of war, one of the Lawler brothers on one end would from time to time turn completely around and put the rope over his shoulder and move forward

damaging to a great extent the efforts of Conde Palle[n] just next to him who being considerably smaller in stature, was sometimes observed dangling in mid-air, while at other times, the sudden depression of the rope would reveal him in a sitting posture, whence the elevation would again relieve him, making his whole performance look something like that of a puppet worked by means of a string. McManus [meanwhile] pulled with steady earnestness, his face exhibiting that expression of intense agony mingled with hope often to be seen in representations of the early Christian martyrs.<sup>3</sup>

In the student journalist’s description of the greased pig race, during which students tried to catch a pig that had been let loose in the field, the author informed his readers how the pig ended up stuck among cartwheels and stumps and other objects: “Then, in our efforts to disentangle him, he would suddenly rush at us with a perfect crescendo of squeals, attempting an occasional nib at our calves in a way not altogether conducive to social feeling.”

The pig disappeared in the crowd, but soon emerged dragging little Henry Touceda after it at a wondrous rate of speed, so that a grave doubt arose in our minds whether Henry had the pig, or the pig had Henry. But as the prize was awarded to the boy, and as the pig was not even mentioned as second, we can confidently assert that Henry won the race.<sup>4</sup>

Twelve years earlier in an article entitled “Amusements: Their Uses and Abuses,” leading Congregationalist pastor Washington Gladden had painted a very different picture. As he reflected on his childhood, he lamented the fact that his own Christian upbringing had led him to think that playing

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2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

sports was sinful; or, that if he did play them, he should do so with the utmost seriousness. As he described,

In my boyhood I used to think that if I became a Christian it would be wrong for me to play ball; or if I engaged in the sport I must do so in a serious and thoughtful way, with none of the hilarity and abandon which made the ball-ground so attractive to me. If I had become a Christian then I am sure I should have felt bound to repress all my boyish exuberance of spirits, and my conscience would have reproached me for engaging in any pastime which gave it vent. Yet doubtless the boyishness that was in me would have proved stronger than those mistaken convictions of duty, and I should have presented the common, though somewhat paradoxical spectacle of a human being committing sin in doing that which is perfectly right.<sup>5</sup>

Gladden was concerned at the time he was writing that Christians still had a tendency to consider play and sport as immoral. He invited the reader to consider a young man who was taught in his Christian home that the game of billiards was sinful, “not only wrong in bad places and among evil companions, but . . . *essentially* wrong,” and that Christians who played it in their homes were committing a great sin. This young man passed the night in a Christian home where the game was played and initially he looked on with an uneasy conscience, but, according to the description, he underwent a transformation:

The game is explained to him, and he sees that it is a beautiful exercise; that it is interesting but not exciting nor fatiguing; and he is utterly unable to find in it any trace of wrong, or any mischievous tendency. Before retiring he kneels with the rest around the family altar, and he cannot see that the religious life of this household is injuriously affected by this amusement.<sup>6</sup>

Gladden reflected that such a young man would be puzzled and confounded by this experience and when he reflected on it would conclude that his parents deceived him in this matter, “that they have denounced a thing as sinful which is not only innocent but excellent, and he thinks they have done it with a view of abridging his enjoyment.” He would lose all confidence in their teachings in this area and their influence over him would be gone. The concern Gladden had is that the young person would seek amusement whenever and wherever he could get it, including places of ill repute and with less than savory companions. “Hundreds and thousands of the

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5. Washington Gladden, *Amusements: Their Uses and Abuses* (North Adams, MA: James T. Robinson, 1866), 6.

6. *Ibid.*, 22.

youth of both sexes go down to ruin from Christian families by this road every year,” he wrote.<sup>7</sup>

Gladden questioned the suspicion of enjoyment of play and sports that the Puritans had handed onto the Protestant churches, noting this was not the doctrine of the New Testament. He pointed to Jesus’ himself who signaled his entrance to ministerial work by “mingling in the festivities of a wedding.” Gladden’s view was rather that

it ought to be a part of the religious instruction of the young that sport, glee, fun, not the dismal, repressed, shame-faced variety, but the real hilarious, exuberant sort, is their lawful inheritance; and that there is by divine appointment, ‘a time to laugh,’ as truly as a time to pray. Then their consciences will not be constantly tormented with the thought that it is wicked to do that which they are all the while longing to do.<sup>8</sup>

Washington Gladden’s anxiety surrounding play and sport, and the broader Protestant religious heritage that was associated with such concern, is well known among scholars of the history of sport and recreation in the United States.<sup>9</sup> But the kinds of experiences discussed above of the students at Georgetown, a Jesuit Catholic college—which were commonplace at Catholic schools in the nineteenth-century United States—and the Catholic religious sensibilities that provided the context within which they could have occurred have been neglected in studies of sports history.

This neglect is in part due to a larger problem within the writing of the history of sport. A common narrative in the field tells the story of Catholicism as a religious tradition that loathes the flesh. This is most often expressed when scholars write about play and sports in medieval and early modern Europe, an era in which it is hard to ignore the influence of the Catholic faith on people’s attitudes and cultural traditions. For some scholars, the loathing of the flesh meant that the Catholic Church only had a negative influence on the development of sport and recreation during these earlier periods, either through lack of encouragement or explicit condemnation and prohibition. Other scholars who acknowledge the extent of play and sport during the medieval and early modern periods attempt to understand these realities apart from any explicit Catholic influence.<sup>10</sup>

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7. *Ibid.*, 23.

8. *Ibid.*, 7.

9. See, for instance, Foster Rhea Dulles, *A History of Recreation: America Learns to Play* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1965); Elliot J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).

10. Clifford Wallace Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); D. Stanley Eitzen and

According to the common narrative in the field, the Puritans in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries loathed the flesh more than the Catholics and added a suspicion of play which intensified negative attitudes toward sport. This changed in the nineteenth century when “muscular Christians” in England and the United States began to embrace the body and sport.<sup>11</sup> For some scholars, it was not changed religious attitudes, but rather the rise of secularism that most influenced the development of sport in the modern world.<sup>12</sup> Within this narrative, Catholic acceptance of sport in the United States had to do with athletics’ increasing popularity, and little if anything to do with Catholic theological and spiritual traditions.

### Revisiting Catholic Cultural and Theological Traditions

Because the neglect of studies of Catholicism and sport in the U.S. is rooted in part in misunderstandings of earlier Catholic cultural and theological traditions, it is important to set the historical record straight. Social history has shed light on lay Catholics’ involvement in play and sport during the medieval and early modern periods, during which people enjoyed games and sports especially on feast days, holy days, and Sundays. Since feast days accounted for as much as one-third of the calendar year (the number varying according to region and time period) and the celebration of some feasts lasted for several days, there was ample opportunity for sports and athletic contests, as well as other forms of recreation that included dancing, music-making, and the recitation of poetry. The importance of games and sports is evident from their depiction in prayer books, stained glass windows, and woodcuts of this period.<sup>13</sup>

Even among medieval women there is sufficient evidence, according to Allen Guttman, “to disprove the dismal null hypothesis about play’s total absence from the lives of medieval women.” Medieval peasant women’s place was not only in the home since they participated in the labor of the agrarian economy that “made them a hardy lot.”<sup>14</sup> According to Teresa McLean, “a sport had to be very rough indeed before it was too rough for medieval

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George H. Sage, “Sport and Religion,” in *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of Sacred and Profane*, ed. by Charles Prebish (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993); Allen Guttman, *Sports: The First Five Millennia* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 52–67.

11. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 50–57.

12. See Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978).

13. See for example, Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: the Ritual Year 1400-1700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1975).

14. For a detailed description of the sports medieval women played in Europe, see Allen Guttman, *Women’s Sports: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 48–52.



A fourteenth century (ca. 1350) roundel in the Great East window, known as the Crecy window, in Gloucester Cathedral, England. Often called “the golfer,” it shows a man engaged in some form of sport, though golf was yet to be invented (Courtesy of Richard Cann).

women, who played and disported, as they hunted and worked, alongside the men.”<sup>15</sup>

When the humanists started the first schools primarily for lay people in the fifteenth century, they incorporated space and time for play and sport. The Jesuits, who opened their first schools in the sixteenth century, followed the humanist lead and did the same in all of their schools, an important development as the Jesuits ran nearly 800 schools in Europe and elsewhere by the mid-1700s.

There were a number of factors that led to the emergence of a religious tradition which so easily incorporated play and sport on religious feast days and Sundays, depicted them in religious works of art, and gave them an important place in educational institutions.

First of all, contrary to the way historians of sport tend to depict Christian attitudes, Christian theologians insisted, over against Gnostic and Manichean views, that the material was good as created by God and that the

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15. Teresa McLean, *The English at Play in the Middle Ages* (Shooter’s Lodge, Windsor Forest, UK: Kensal Press, 1983), 7.



human person is a unity of body, soul, and spirit. Christians during these periods also experienced their belief system “bodily.” In addition to using images in worship and participating in the sacraments, medieval Christians went on pilgrimages, participated in processions, put on mystery and morality plays, sculpted—and then venerated—statues of saints, fingered their rosary beads, blessed themselves with holy water, lit candles, and engaged in corporal works of mercy.<sup>16</sup>

With respect to the issue of how Christians should engage with non-Christian cultural traditions, St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, played a very important role. In his letters to communities in Greece, St. Paul made use of experiences in athletic contests to explain the dynamics of the Christian life. Christian writers in subsequent centuries followed St. Paul’s example and continued to use athletic metaphors to explain the Christian faith, most frequently when providing accounts of martyrdom or descriptions of the monastic life.<sup>17</sup> When other cultures later began converting to Christianity, the tendency on the part of church leaders was to incorporate the ball games and other sports of the people and “baptize” them by having them played on feast days and holy days.

The thirteenth century Dominican Thomas Aquinas, in particular, influenced Christian attitudes toward play and sport. According to Thomas, virtue is associated with moderation, and consequently there could be a “virtue about games,” because a moderate person should not spend the whole of his life working or worrying about work. He or she also needed time for play and recreation. Play was only sinful if it was excessive or carried out in ways indecent or harmful to persons. Because he associated virtue with moderation, Thomas insisted that it was also possible to sin by having a lack of play in one’s life. In his view, whatever is against reason is a sin. “Now it is against reason,” he wrote, “for a person to be burdensome to others, by offering no pleasure to others, and by hindering their enjoyment.”<sup>18</sup>

According to Thomas, play does not derive its value or significance in relation to work. It is not only the “pause that refreshes” so one can return to work and be more productive. Nor is its value to be found in extrinsic goods that come from it. Rather, “what we do in play is done for its own sake.”<sup>19</sup> But the

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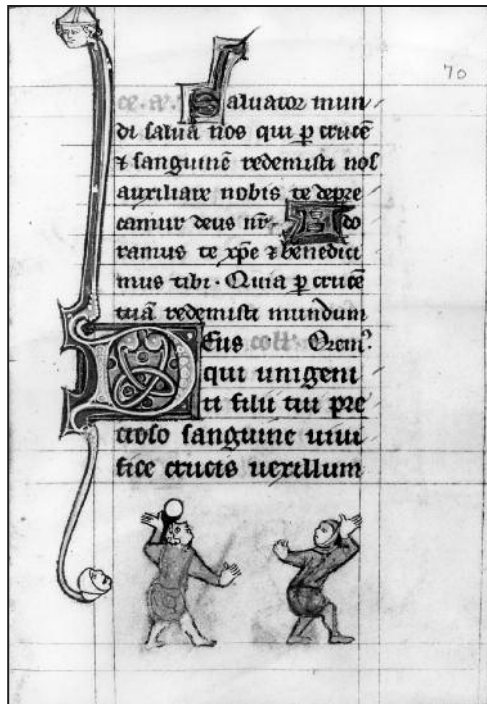
16. See Patrick Kelly, S.J., *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), Chapter 3: “The Spirit is Bound with the Flesh,” 63-93.

17. See Kelly, *Catholic Perspectives on Sports*, Chapter 4, “I Have Run the Race, I Have Fought the Fight,” 94-117.

18. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Vol. 2, Pt. II-II, q. 168, art. 4.

19. *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings*, trans. and ed. Simon Tugwell (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), 527-528.





French Book of Hours, ca. 1300, showing two figures at play (Courtesy of Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland).

enjoyment experienced in play *is* directed to an end for Thomas: the recreation and restoration of the person. Thomas even viewed play and contemplation as analogous because both activities are enjoyable and done for their own sake.<sup>20</sup>

Thomas's view of the relationship between virtue, moderation and play had a significant influence on pastors, preachers, and educators in the late medieval period and beyond.<sup>21</sup> The humanist and early Jesuit educators, for instance, were careful not to have students study for too long without some recreation. As Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II, wrote in the mid-fifteenth century in a treatise about education for the still very young King Ladislaus of Hungary:

20. Ibid.

21. See Alessandra Rizzi, "Regulated Play at the End of the Middle Ages: The Work of Mendicant Preachers in Communal Italy," in *Sport and Culture in Early Modern Europe*, John McClelland and Brian Merrilees, eds. (Toronto, Canada: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2009).

I approve of and praise your playing ball with boys your own age. . . . One should not always be intent on schooling and serious affairs, nor should huge tasks be imposed upon boys, for they may be crushed with exhaustion by such labors, and in any case if they feel overcome by irksome burdens they may be less receptive to learning.<sup>22</sup>

Thomas' emphasis on virtue having to do with moderation also influenced the early Jesuits.<sup>23</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Order, had to learn the hard way about the importance of moderation after engaging in excessive fasting in the early days after he was injured by a cannonball, which left him with stomach ailments the rest of his life. But after his studies at the University of Paris, during which he was introduced to the writings of Thomas, he championed the importance of moderation in studies, work, and spiritual exercises. He also insisted, against the objection of some Jesuits at the time, on the importance of having a villa outside of Rome to which men could go to take a break from work and have time for recreation, including the playing of games.

The "Rules" of the first Jesuit-run colleges contained a section about conserving the body's health and strength: "It is necessary to moderate the spiritual exercises, such as devotions and studies." Accordingly, the academic schedule should provide "some hours for honest bodily recreation, as after lunch or dinner for a while."<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on moderation and the importance of recreation was also present in the *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), the formal education program for the Society of Jesus' schools. "A nice balance should be maintained," the authors of the *Ratio* wrote, "between study time and recreation periods."<sup>25</sup>

Because the *Ratio Studiorum* was the plan of studies for all Jesuit schools, it was common to set aside space and time for recreation and sports in the network of Jesuit schools throughout Europe and beyond. The first

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22. Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, "The Education of Boys," in *Humanist Educational Treatises*, Craig W. Kallendorf, ed. and trans. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 143.

23. While the humanists and Jesuits only educated boys in their first schools, this did not mean that girls and women were not active in games and sports during the early modern period. Girls and women continued to play football, stoolball, and foot races in many parts of Europe. In Italy, where humanist education began, women competed in races. In Venice, where nautical sports had a place of special importance, women officially started participating in the regatta in 1493; see Guttmann, *Women's Sports*, 62–66.

24. Ladislaus Lukacs, ed., *Monumenta Paedagogica Societatis Jesu/ penitus retractata multisque textibus aucta* 92, nos. 107–108 (Rome: Institutum Historicum Societatis Jesu, 1965), 68–70.

25. *The Jesuit Ratio Studiorum of 1599*, trans. by Allan P. Farrell, S.J. (Washington, DC: Conference of Major Superiors of Jesuits, 1970), 12.

school buildings the Jesuits built in France had a spacious courtyard surrounded by classrooms where students could play. The Jesuits introduced one free day in the middle of the week, during which students could take a walk into the countryside and play games and sports. During the summer months, the students would occasionally spend the day at a villa owned by the Jesuits, playing ball games, cards, or chess.<sup>26</sup>

Although some say eighteenth-century France saw a “softening of body and soul,” there was still much sporting activity in the Jesuit colleges during this period. A young Jesuit who taught at the College Louis Le Grand in Paris observed,

If children are in the courtyard they are in “liberty land.” They are there on the free days during the entire day, from 9:00 to 6:00, only stopping at meal time. It would be against the good order of the college to get somebody out of this except for health reasons. And free days are countless, coming nearly every Tuesday and Thursday in the year.<sup>27</sup>

The principle of moderation influenced how Jesuits thought about the relationship between work and recreation in society more generally. Jesuit Francois Pierron wrote that life in the seventeenth century could be somber and boring without games and recreation. “Recreations are called such,” he wrote, “because they give new being to spirits which are overwhelmed by too much work.”<sup>28</sup> For Pierron, work should not and could not continue without ceasing, for if a person works diligently, “it is very reasonable that one would enjoy some rest from time to time, and that one would take some recreation.”<sup>29</sup>

The Jesuit approach to play and sport was very different from the approach of the Puritans in the British colonies during the same time period. As Samuel Eliot Morrison wrote of Harvard College in the seventeenth century:

In the matter of lawful recreations for Harvard students before 1674, the historian must confess to drawing the records almost blank. The puritans, with their emphasis on the virtue of hard work and the sin of idleness, overlooked the physical need of a young scholar for rest and

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26. Francois de Dainville, *L'Education des Jesuites: XVI-XVIII siecles* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1978). See especially the chapters “L'exercice physique dans les colleges de l'ancien regime” (518–525) and “Les vacances dans l'ancienne france” (526–533).

27. *Ibid.*, 524.

28. Francois Pierron, S.J., *Le Bon Precepteur ou La belle maniere de bien elever la jeunesse pour Dieu, & pour le beau monde* (Lyon: Chez Horace Boissat & G. Remers, 1661), 218.

29. *Ibid.*, 216.

recreation. Their only grievance against their mother universities (aside from the ‘prelatical’ atmosphere) was the ‘waste of precious time’ by students who were not kept almost constantly at their books and stated exercises.<sup>30</sup>

According to Morrison, the same approach was present into the eighteenth century, as there was “the same early-to-bed and early-to-rise schedule; the same want of lawful recreation, except swimming in summer and skating in winter.”<sup>31</sup>

### French Jesuits and Native Americans Games

The French Jesuits brought to North America their Order’s cultural and theological traditions with respect to play and sport. While the Jesuits’ missionary and educational activities took place in parts of what would later become Canada, they also extended to the Great Lakes region and the Mississippi Valley south to Louisiana. The Jesuits lived, traveled, and worked alongside the native people and shared aspects of their customs and way of life. Their attitude about the games of Native Americans was typically one of acceptance. Josef Lafitau, S.J., wrote of the Native Americans’ games: “Besides the necessary occupations the Indians have others which are either pure diversion, as are their games of chance, or diversion mixed with exercise, which are in the province of gymnastics, serving to exercise and form the body.” He pointed out that “these games are among the first institutions of men,” and “the first with which the ancient authors have acquainted us.”<sup>32</sup>

The journals of Jesuit missionaries contain many descriptions of games they encountered in daily life. Father Paul du Ru observed a kind of ball game among the Muskogean in Mississippi, for example:

We walked to the village where there were games and a great dance. The men play in pairs; one of them has a ball in his hand and throws it ahead. Both of them run as fast as they can, throwing a big stick after this ball and, as well as I could make out, the one whose stick is closest to the

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30. Samuel Eliot Morrison, *Harvard in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), I: 112.

31. Morrison, *Harvard in the Seventeenth Century*, II: 452. According to Ronald A. Smith, the leadership at other pre-revolutionary colleges viewed play and sport in a way that was similar to the leadership at Harvard. He attributes this to the fact that seven of nine of these colleges were “products of either the Protestant Reformation or the evangelical religious fervor of the eighteenth-century Great Awakening”; see Ronald A. Smith, *Sports and Freedom: The Rise of Big Time College Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 9.

32. Joseph Francois Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians Compared with the Customs of Primitive Times*, Vol. II, William N. Fenton, ed., and Elizabeth L. Moore, trans. (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1974), 189. This volume was first published in 1724.

ball wins the play. Then the one who wins throws the ball the next time. This is a rather strenuous game: nevertheless, it is played by both old and young.<sup>33</sup>

The women also played ball games. As Father du Ru commented, the women

separate into two parties between two large posts in the square. Somebody throws a little ball in the center, and the one who seizes it first tries her best to run around the post on her side three times, but she is prevented by the women of the opposite party who seize her if they can. When she can no longer resist them, she throws the ball to her people who make a similar effort to run around their post. . . . The games are very long and ordinarily when they are over the women plunge into the water to refresh themselves. Sometimes the men play this game also.<sup>34</sup>

In this context, the games provided the Jesuits with a reminder that the native peoples and Europeans shared a common humanity. Paul Le Jeune wrote that there seemed to be certain games “that children find out for themselves without being taught,” such as hide-and-seek. The Natives played a number of other children’s games that Le Jeune had noticed in Europe as well. He described one such game in which the “little Parisians” used to throw a musket ball into the air and catch it with a little bat that was scooped out for this purpose. He wrote,

The little montagnard [mountain] Savages do the same, using a little bunch of Pine sticks, which they receive or throw into the air on the end of a pointed stick. The little Hiroquois have the same pastime, throwing a bone with a hole in it, which they interlace in the air with another little bone. I was told this by a young man of that nation as we were watching the little montagnard children play.<sup>35</sup>

The Jesuit Lafitau was intrigued by the similarities between the Native game of lacrosse and a game played by the ancient Greeks and Romans called *epicyrus* or *harpastum* (in Latin). In fact, according to Lafitau the rules of the

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33. *Journal of Paul du Ru, (February 1 to May 8, 1700), Missionary Priest to Louisiana*, Ruth Lapham Butler, trans. (Chicago: The Caxton Club, 1934), 21, entry for February 27, 1700.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Paul Le Jeune, S.J., “Le Jeune’s Relation, 1634” in Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents. Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791* (New York: Pageant Book Company, 1959), VII: 95. The English word *savage* is the translation of the French word *sauvage*, which is derived from the Latin *silva*, meaning “forest.” Originally, it meant a person or group of people who lived in the forest or the country and did not use complex technologies. This was the sense in which the Jesuits used the term during this period. While this did not mean “less than human,” the term was not free of negative connotations.



“Ball-play,” an illustration of a Native American sport similar to lacrosse, by George Catlin, 1844 (Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.).

two games were exactly the same. This allowed him to describe lacrosse by using the ancient Greek writer Pollux’s account of *epicyrus*:

The players are divided according to their number and distributed into two teams as equal in number as possible. Then a line is drawn in the centre of the field which they call *okuros* on which they put the ball. In the same way, two other lines are drawn, far apart to serve as limits, behind each of these two teams. Those to whom the lot has fallen, first throw the ball towards the opposing side which makes, on its side, every effort to throw it back to where it comes from. The game goes on in this way, until one or the other has driven his adversary to the limit or the line which he is to defend.<sup>36</sup>

According to Lafitau, one difference between the games was that to throw the ball in lacrosse the players used bent sticks at the end of which was a racket and there was “no trace of any implement used in the ball games” of the ancient Greeks and Romans.<sup>37</sup>

The criticisms of the Jesuits with respect to Native games were limited to specific abuses or excesses that usually involved what they regarded as supersti-

36. Lafitau, *Customs of the American Indians*, II: 198–199.

37. *Ibid.*, II: 199.



tious beliefs or the negative impact of gambling on games. But the Jesuits found something to admire even in the native approach to gambling. Paul LeJeune was amazed that the games that involved gambling did not arouse the same kind of passion they tended to among Europeans. “The most remarkable thing I notice in regard to this matter is the disposition they bring to it,” he wrote. “You might have seen this winter a great crowd returning from here to their villages, having lost their moccasins at a time when there was nearly three feet of snow—apparently as cheerful, nevertheless, as if they had won.”<sup>38</sup> The Jesuit Jerome Lalemant wrote that the native people “although passionately fond of gambling . . . hardly ever evince joy in winning or sadness in losing, playing with the most remarkable external tranquility.”<sup>39</sup> It seems that material gain was of secondary importance to the Native Americans.

Historian George Eisen contrasted the attitudes of Jesuits and other French Catholics toward Native American games with the attitudes of English Puritans. He pointed out (as mentioned earlier) that since the Jesuit missionaries lived, traveled, and worked with the native peoples, they and the French travelers and traders also borrowed freely from Native American customs. “Lacrosse is the most familiar sport activity embraced by Canadians,” he wrote, “but the use of canoes, toboggans, sledges, snowshoes, and other pastimes can be mentioned.”<sup>40</sup> According to Eisen, the French also participated in native traditions of gambling, wrestling, running, and bathing in sweat huts.

Eisen noted that the Puritans, on the other hand, did not live or work with the native peoples. Because the Puritans regarded native culture as “inferior in every respect to that of the chosen people, themselves,” they tended to reject tribal culture entirely and did not take up native American customs or practices.<sup>41</sup> The thoroughly negative appraisal of native cultural traditions was related to the Puritan view of the sinfulness of the human condition apart from salvation in Christ, formally taught as the doctrine of depravity. This emphasis on sin and depravity was also part of what made them suspicious of the pleasures associated with play. Additionally, the salvation for which the Puritans and their Protestant heirs strove was associated with a new level of discipline and self-control which allowed them to faithfully live out their calling. In large part because they associated “godliness” with the disciplined living out of one’s calling or work, they viewed play and games as a potential distraction and hence as associated with sin.

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38. Paul Le Jeune, S.J., in Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, X: 187, 189.

39. Jerome Lalemant, S.J., in Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations*, XVI: 201.

40. George Eisen, “Early European Attitudes Toward Native American Sports and Pastimes,” in *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*, George Eisen and David K. Wiggins, eds. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1994), 13–14.

41. *Ibid.*, 13.



A story recounted by Governor William Bradford about a confrontation he had with newly-arrived settlers in Plymouth colony on Christmas 1621 illustrates this mindset. Bradford was particularly concerned about people being kept from their work by playing stool-ball and other such games on Christmas. Bradford had called the people out to work, but most excused themselves saying it went against their conscience to work on that day. It seems that he talked the people into working, at least for the morning, but later that day,

when they came home at noon from their work, he found them in the street at play, openly; some pitching the bar, and some at stool-ball and such like sports. So he went to them and took away their implements and told them that was against his conscience, that they should play and others work. If they made the keeping of it a matter of devotion, let them keep (it in) their houses; but there should be no gaming or reveling in the streets. Since which time nothing has been attempted that way, at least openly.<sup>42</sup>

These attitudes toward work and play influenced how Puritans and later Protestants thought about the games of the Native Americans. William Wood, for example, lamented in 1634 that the natives would “rather starve than worke, following no employements.” He hoped that the good example of the Puritans “and good instructions may bring them to a more industrious and provident course of life.”<sup>43</sup> In 1771 Dartmouth College President Eleaser Wheelock proposed work instead of recreation for indigenous students, writing that they should “turn the course of their diversions, and exercises for their health, to the practice of some manual arts, or cultivation of gardens, and other lands, at the proper hours of leisure, and intermission from study, and vacancies in the college and school.”<sup>44</sup>

## Catholic Education in the United States

The students at Georgetown College in Washington, D.C., whose raucous play opened this article were not the first students at Georgetown to play sports. From the school’s opening, John Carroll, first bishop of Baltimore and founder of Georgetown, and subsequent Jesuits promoted this dimension of student life. A 1798 public advertisement for the “College of George-Town” stated that the school was dedicated to “the improvement of youth in the three important branches of *Physical*, *Moral*, and *Literary* edu-

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42. William Bradford, *On Plymouth Plantation: 1620–1647* (New York: Random House, 1981), 107.

43. Quoted in Eisen, “Early European Attitudes,” 7.

44. Quoted in Thomas L. Altherr, ed., *Sports in North America: A Documentary History*, Vol. 1, Part I—Sports in the Colonial Era, 1618–1783 (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International, 1997), 13–14.



Georgetown College, a Jesuit-run school in Washington, D.C., boasted an ideal setting for study and recreation, ca. 1850 (Wikimedia/Patrickneil).

cation.” After noting the college’s location on one of the healthiest spots in the country, the advertisement promised a constant attention to “wholesome and regular diet, moderate exercise” and said that “a due proportion of application and relaxation are the means adopted . . . to preserve the health of youths, especially those of a tender age.”<sup>45</sup> In 1809, the school’s advertisement pointed out that “the garden and court adjoining, where the young gentlemen play, are very airy and spacious. The situation is very pleasant and healthy.”<sup>46</sup> And in 1814, the advertisement highlighted that “exercise, and whatever contributes to health” are attended to with particular care.<sup>47</sup>

According to chroniclers, sports were a part of the rhythm of the school day at Georgetown from its founding, as they had been at the earliest Jesuit schools in Europe:

Dinner (the midday meal) was followed by “recreation” or playtime for an hour and a half. Spacious playing fields were available. The popular

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45. “College of George-town, (Potomack) in the State of Maryland, United States of America, 1798,” Lauinger Library, Georgetown University Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter GUA).

46. “Georgetown College, In the District of Columbia, United States of America, under the Direction of the Incorporated Catholic Clergy of the State of Maryland,” 1809, GUA.

47. “A.M.D.G., Georgetown College, District of Columbia, under the Direction of the Incorporated Catholic Clergy of Maryland,” 1814, GUA.

sports were handball, a rudimentary kind of football that was probably more like present-day soccer, and gymnastic exercises. Fencing and boxing also had their devotees. . . .<sup>48</sup>

To educate the growing number of Catholics in the U.S. in the middle of the nineteenth century, the Jesuits founded other colleges. These colleges also had extensive playgrounds for the students and incorporated ample time for recreation. The 1857–1858 Catalogue of St. Joseph’s College in Bardstown, Kentucky, was typical: “The situation is healthy and beautiful: the buildings are spacious and commodious; the refectories and dormitories are large and well ventilated. The play-grounds are extensive and handsomely set with trees.” In the “Collegiate Regulations,” it was written that “each division has its own play-ground, Study-Hall, Dormitory and Refectory” and that “every Thursday of the Academic year is a general recreation-day.”<sup>49</sup>

As had been the case from the earliest days of the Jesuits, most of the new colleges had a “villa” or vacation house owned by the Jesuits which students could walk to for recreation. The 1861–1862 Prospectus for St. Louis University in Missouri states, for example, “The College Villa, situated near the city, is large and beautiful, with ample buildings, spacious groves, and recreation grounds. Here the students may spend their weekly holiday and the summer vacation in a manner conducive alike to health and relaxation.”<sup>50</sup>

The first sporting activities described in detail in the publications of the Jesuit colleges are the “Field Day” games, which took place on special days of the school year. As was evident in the student descriptions in the *Georgetown College Journal* in the vignette at the beginning of this article, these days were meant to be fun and entertaining—and they attained their purpose. These “Field Days” included the usual track and field events, but also sack races, three-legged races, barrel races, greased pig races, and the half-hour “go as you please.” The program for the day at California’s Santa Clara College in 1875 is entitled, aptly, “Athletic and Humorous Games.”

Cultural traditions associated with play and games also were manifested in Catholic parishes. The Jesuit Felix Barbelin, pastor at St. Joseph’s parish in Philadelphia from 1838 to 1869 and first president of Philadelphia’s St. Joseph’s College, emphasized religious drama at the parish. He also took the

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48. Joseph T. Durkin, *Georgetown University: First in the Nation’s Capital* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 12.

49. “Catalogue of the Officers and Students of St. Joseph’s College, Bardstown, KY, 1857–1858,” Archives of the Detroit Province of the Society of Jesus, Detroit, Michigan.

50. “Prospectus of the St. Louis University, 1861–1862,” Archives of the Detroit Province of the Society of Jesus, Detroit, Michigan.

children who were involved in the various sodalities on daylong excursions during which they would play sports and sing songs.

In a letter to the editor of the *Catholic Herald*, a St. Joseph parishioner named Paul wrote about a delightful rural excursion to “Point Pleasant” that members of one sodality took under Barbelin’s care and direction:

The day was spent in all the sports and convivialities which enliven such excursions. Sweet solitude and calm repose, that day at least, took their flight, and the groves of Point Pleasant resounded with the merry shouts of joyous youth, with music and with song. Where shall I find language sweet enough to describe the unrestrained hilarity and innocent mirth of those dear youth, who compose the “Angel’s Sodality”? The sparkling eye, the rosy glow of health, the cherub smiles and merry shouts of that sweet-angel band would have driven care and sadness from any heart. How did I wish that all his friends had been there to see their good Father in the midst of his happy family!

The author could not restrain the falling tears (“unmanly tears, perhaps, but still, like rain, they fell”) as the events of the day alternated with “the chaunt, the prayer, the hymn of praise.” When the devotions were finished, “boisterous joy resumed its throne.” At the close of day, the whole company marched “in careless order” to the steamer waiting to take them home.<sup>51</sup>

Other non-Jesuit U.S. Catholic colleges in the mid-nineteenth century followed an approach similar to that of the Jesuits. The program of studies that Father Edward Sorin outlined for the students at the University of Notre Dame near South Bend, Indiana alternated between study, religious exercises, and recreation. John Theodore Wack, a doctor on his way from Detroit to Chicago, stopped at Notre Dame’s campus in the 1850s and saw what he described as a “scene that filled me with admiration.” Along with a Gothic church, clusters of buildings, and two lakelets, he mentions seeing “a large playground with gymnastic apparatus.”<sup>52</sup> A great distance in another direction he saw “a crowd of boys at play in the college-grounds; a group of them was bathing in a secluded cove of one of the lakes, watched by a man in a long black robe.”<sup>53</sup>

He was taken to the religious superior, who walked him over a causeway between the two lakelets to the islands where the Holy Cross seminarians

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51. “Excursion of St. Joseph’s Sodality,” [Philadelphia] *Catholic Herald*, September 4, 1845.

52. John Theodore Wack, “A Description of Notre Dame du Lac in the 1850s,” Appendix II, in “The University of Notre Dame du Lac: Foundation, 1842–1857” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1967), at <http://archives.nd.edu/wack/wack10.htm> [p. 1].

53. *Ibid.*, 2.

lived. “While we remained, the hour of recreation sounded on the bell,” he wrote. “Then study, devotion, and work were laid aside, and the whole community of priests, and nuns, lay-brothers and lay-sisters, students and apprentices, enjoyed their hour of innocent and sometimes boisterous mirth.” After the midday meal, there was a brief thanksgiving, “and the well-ordered boys filed out of the room; and we soon heard their glad hurrahs in the playgrounds, while the Superior and several clerical and lay professors gathered under a shady piazza, to enjoy the leisure after-dinner hour.”<sup>54</sup>

In 1864, the Notre Dame community took part in a celebration in honor of St. Edward, university president Father Sorin’s patron saint. After dinner the entire community with distinguished guests from Chicago went to a large meadow to watch and “partake in some good olden time field sports.”

The games commenced with foot races. Next followed “sack races.” Then came “Wheel-barrow races.” Ten boys, with eyes blindfolded, ran a hundred and fifty yards, each wheeling a barrow; and the first who entered the goal received the prize. Next came the grand divertissement of the day—a pig chase! A wild, lank and earless pig was turned loose in the meadow and twenty of the swiftest runners chased him, and he who caught him and held by its “narrative” was to receive the pig as his reward. The sports ended with a “grinning match.” Tired and sore, some from exercise, others from excessive laughter, but all pleased and happy, the sportsmen returned to the University.<sup>55</sup>

At Villanova, an Augustinian university near Philadelphia, the same pattern of alternation of study, religious exercises, and sport was followed. Thomas C. Middleton, an Augustinian friar wrote about the kinds of sports and games that were played at Villanova when he was a student in the 1850s. On free days, which were every Thursday, “sports of some kind or other filled the interval between breakfast and supper.” On Sundays there were no games in the morning, as church goers were left undisturbed. “But Sunday afternoons, Vesper hour excepted, were given over to the full and free to suit the spirit of joyousness in whatever exercises the students chose to pass their leisure. . . .”<sup>56</sup> One Sunday in the 1850s, while the students were engrossed in their favorite game of baseball, a trio of gentlemen who lived in the neighborhood approached the president to tell him of the impropriety of “being party to the profanation of the sanctity of the Sabbath Day.” The president

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54. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

55. T.A.C., “Celebration at Notre Dame University, Indiana,” *New York Tablet*, November 5, 1864.

56. Thomas C. Middleton, O.S.A., “Some Reminiscences. The Sports and Games in Vogue in Early Days at Villanova,” in *History of Athletics: Villanova College* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jenson Press, 1923), 7.

replied, “Our boys have been to church this morning, and have thus fulfilled the law of religion for the day; by their harmless play they hurt no one. We think it far preferable to have them thus spend their leisure than by staying at home passing their hours in gossip or scandal-mongering.”<sup>57</sup>

According to Middleton, students at Villanova regularly engaged in walking, hunting, swimming, and skating. Ball games were plentiful: handball, potball, shinny (something like hockey), town ball (the ancestor of baseball), football (in a Celtic style), and “number all” (akin to baseball).

Other favorite games were Hop, Step and a Jump; Hank-a-dea, Prisoner’s Base, Duck on Davy and Tag. Foot races, too, were among the tricks of speed, besides many sorts of jumping games, such as: vault-ing with pole, high jump, as well as broad and long. One of the prefects, afterwards priest, was for many years the college champion, with twenty two feet to his credit.<sup>58</sup>

According to Middleton, “Everybody, it seemed, liked to take part in our pastimes: seniors or juniors, professors or students, were alike welcomed into any game.”<sup>59</sup>

## Conclusion

Long before the late nineteenth century, when persons with a secular mentality or muscular Christian emphasis began to embrace sport with enthusiasm, Catholics had already accepted play and sport based on theological convictions and their understanding of the human person.

The Catholic approach to sports may be considered according to what is *not* present in their theological understanding. Catholic theologians and educators did not embrace the work ethic, for which, as Max Weber has shown, Puritans and their Protestant heirs provided the ideological and ascetic underpinnings in the U.S. context. Because Protestants saw godliness to be connected to work, they tended to regard play with suspicion. Catholics were heirs of another ethical tradition, however. Since virtue was associated with moderation, excess was a problem even when it came to work or studies. A fully human life needed play and recreation.

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57. *Ibid.*, 8. While the identity of those who challenged Villanova’s president is unknown, they were likely Protestant given that playing sports on Sundays was not contested by Catholics during this period. See William Baker, *Playing with God: Religion and Modern Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

58. Middleton, “Some Reminiscences,” 10.

59. *Ibid.*, 12.



This Catholic understanding of virtue allowed a space for *play* in the various cultural contexts (or sub-cultures, in the case of educational institutions in the U.S.) where Catholics lived. If we acknowledge Thomas' understanding of play as having to do with enjoyment, the playful element of sports as practiced by Catholics in the nineteenth century is evident: in the hilarious student descriptions of the Field Days at Georgetown, which poked fun at the various participants; the days devoted to "Athletic and Humorous Games" at Santa Clara; the descriptions of "unrestrained hilarity" and "joyous boisterousness" of the youth from St. Joseph's parish; and the "boisterous mirth" and "spirit of joyousness" of the college students at Notre Dame and Villanova.

Not all Protestants endorsed the work ethic as it had been handed onto them by the Puritans and some of their Protestant heirs, however. Washington Gladden, whom we met in the opening vignette, was one influential Protestant minister who did not. Like Thomas Aquinas, Gladden was concerned about lack of moderation in work, which he thought was very common in his day. He noted that the expectation that people will be constantly at work had led hundreds to "stroke[s] of paralysis" and thousands to perish by other forms of disease, which were "directly traceable to uninterrupted work."<sup>60</sup> Gladden issued a call for moderation in work and time for play and recreation. "No man is able to keep his faculties constantly in working tension," he wrote. "They must be relaxed occasionally, not only in rest, but also in play."<sup>61</sup>

According to Gladden, even sport itself could lose its playful character. As we read in the opening vignette, Gladden's upbringing as a Christian taught him that if he was going to play baseball, he was expected to do so "in a serious and thoughtful way, with none of the hilarity and abandon" which made the ball-ground so attractive to him.<sup>62</sup> He made the case instead that it ought to be a part of the religious instruction of the young that "sport, glee, fun, not the dismal, repressed, shame-faced variety, but the real hilarious, exuberant sort, is their lawful inheritance."<sup>63</sup>

Play is not a theme that scholars have tended to emphasize in their writings about Protestant "muscular Christians." The designation "muscular" itself tends to connote qualities such as manliness, health, patriotism, and morality. With respect to morality, scholars focus on the *use* of sport for pur-

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60. Gladden, *Amusements: Their Uses and Abuses*, 7.

61. *Ibid.*, 5.

62. *Ibid.*, 6

63. *Ibid.*, 7.



poses of “character development” in the late nineteenth century.<sup>64</sup> And yet when Washington Gladden, one of the earliest “muscular” Christians, is read in the longer context of religious history the loss of the play element in U.S. society, including in sport itself, stands out as central to his concerns.

The neglect of the play element of sport by historians has consequences. Because play is associated—as Thomas Aquinas says—with enjoyment and doing something for its own sake it has to do with the meaning of sport itself before it is put to other purposes, whether the making of money or achieving fame or even the development of moral character. Indeed, it is our inability to understand play and therefore sport itself on its own terms that makes it vulnerable to instrumentalization, both by persons and institutions.

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64. Tony Ladd and James Mathisen, *Muscular Christianity: Evangelical Protestants and the Development of American Sport* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999).