

## "The Athletic Craze" (1893)

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, Americans began pursuing a variety of new leisure and recreational activities. In cities, industrial wage-earners frequented novel diversions such as playgrounds, dance halls, and amusement parks. In more rural areas, "base-ball," bicycle riding, and "foot-ball" matches became favorite pastimes. While civic, religious, and business interests often sanctioned and regulated these activities, some commentators nevertheless worried that these recreations fostered inappropriate behavior and attitudes. In the excerpt below, the editors of *The Nation* magazine expressed their concerns about the growing influence of team sports, especially football, on college campuses.

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We are glad that the Harvard Overseers have appointed a committee to investigate the game of football in its various aspects. We are also glad to learn that there is to be this winter a convention of the deities of the football world, to revise the rules, and probably abolish the "flying wedge" and other dangerous features of the present game. So far so good. But we would respectfully ask the college faculties whether they propose this winter to take any action looking to the reform of the game, and indeed all college games, on the moral side.

We refer them to some paragraphs in *Harper's Weekly* on Phillips Exeter Academy, which show the effect that the inordinate attention given to athletics in college is having on young boys in the preparatory schools. How many of them who have the size and weight qualifying to row or play football now think of the college to which they are going as a seat of learning? The practice, on the part of the athletic element in the colleges, of seeking them out, and bribing them by offers of a free education to come to one college rather than another, has become unhappily common, and has ceased to seem discreditable; that is, very young boys are invited to become professionals, and to take what is in reality a salary for acting as football players in the guise of students.

That the faculties play into the hands of these debauchers of youth by being easy with these young professionals in examinations and recitations is at least generally believed. Can nothing be done to suppress or make disgraceful this abuse of allowing professional athletes to haunt the college buildings as sham students? Is not the presence of such men at all in colleges highly demoralizing, and likely to confuse the minds of freshmen as to the ends for which colleges exist?

We are informed on good authority that Yale spent last year about \$47,000 on athletics, and the team went to Springfield the other day with three drawing-room cars and fifty men as substitutes, doctors, trainers, rubbers, and cooks. The receipts from the gate-money in New York cannot have fallen far short of \$50,000. It was earned by exhibiting feats of strength and agility by scholars and gentlemen before an enormous city crowd, in which the gambling fraternity and the prostitutes were very prominent.

We are not inveighing against athletic games. If the colleges were to-morrow to make football compulsory for every man in them, we should not say a word in objection. We are simply asking for moderation and decency. It seems to be the weakness of the American people to take nearly

everything in "crazes." There was the greenback craze, and the silver craze, and the granger craze, and the cholera craze, and now there is the athletic craze, and the leading colleges are becoming huge training-grounds for young gladiators, around whom nearly as many spectators roar as roared in the Flavian amphitheater.

One of its worst results is, however, that it frightens "the plain people" away from the colleges. The modest father who is willing to pinch himself and wife and daughters in order to give a son a college education, is appalled by what he hears and sees of the results of a football match. Debt, drink, debauchery rise up before his mind's eye as a probable concomitant of "college training," and he decides to keep his pet lamb at home. The colleges are not drawing as they ought for this class. The wealthy men are going to them in greater and greater numbers, but it is not they who keep alive the traditions of American scholarship, or show the world what a college education can do by way of preparation for life. Of the effect on the members of the various teams of the conspicuousness in which they pass some months of every year, of the interviews, the newspaper gossip, and portraits, we will not speak, as nothing definite can be known about it. But if much remains of "the modest stillness and [humility](#)"<sup>1</sup> which is, the poet says, so becoming in time of peace, after training for two or three matches, they must be almost more than human.

1. From William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, 3.1. (Return to [text](#))

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