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GAME FACES

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THOMAS H. PAULY

GAME FACES

Five Early American Champions and the Sports They Changed

University of Nebraska Press Lincoln & London

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Frontispiece, from the top: Tom Stevens,
Fanny Bullock Workman, Bill Reid,
May Sutton, and Barney Oldfield.
These photographs are reproduced
in their entirety in the interior.

Set in Sabon by Bob Reitz.

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For my wife, Suzanne, whose cheerfulness,
lively conversation, and wonderful
meals have kept me going.

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Contents

Introduction ix

1. TOM STEVENS:
Bicycling and the Obstacle of Amateurism 1

2. FANNY BULLOCK WORKMAN:
Mountaineering as Science and News 29

3. BILL REID:
The Play That Changed Football 69

4. MAY SUTTON:
California's Intrusion on Women's Tennis 109

5. BARNEY OLDFIELD:
People's Champion and Threat to Early Automobile Racing 145

Epilogue 185
Acknowledgments 189
Notes 193
Bibliography 223
Index 235

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Introduction

People today think of the early days of American sport in terms of the 1920s. This is not to say that they believe sports originated during this period, but rather they remember its champions: Babe Ruth, Red Grange, Helen Wills, and Bobby Jones. Each competed in a sport popular then and even more so now. The enduring fame of these athletes is, of course, rooted in their remarkable accomplishments, but it is equally indebted to a culture that aggrandized those accomplishments.

Jay Gatsby's "old sport" greeting of an acquaintance, dated though it sounds, attests to the widespread interest in sport at the time. Powerful commercial forces were stoking this interest and focusing national attention on athletes who excelled. Newspapers were the single most influential factor. By 1925 one-quarter of all newspapers sold were purchased for their sports pages.[1] In 1919 400 journalists and 20,000 spectators attended the fight between Jess Willard and Jack Dempsey.[2] Seven years later, at Dempsey's first match against Gene Tunney, these numbers soared to 1,800 correspondents and 130,000 spectators.[3] When Bobby Jones successfully achieved the fourth victory of the first Grand Slam, sportswriters cranked out an estimated two million words of coverage.[4]

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Sales of radios, which only began with the opening of the first transmitting station in 1920, soared to the point that 40 percent of all households had one by the decade's end. As the popularity of live reports of sporting events outstripped transmission capability, resourceful announcers learned to improvise eye-witness narratives from wired information. These "reporters" in distant station booths, like those actually at the event, skillfully cued the tenor of their voices to the emotion of the moment and accentuated the successes or disappointments of favorites. The blare of tabloids, another newcomer from 1919, intensified pressure on established newspapers to hire a new breed of sportswriter adept at personalizing athletes and enlivening their performances. Grantland Rice wrote himself into history with the famous opening of his *New York Herald Tribune* account of Notre Dame's 1924 victory over Army: "Outlined against a blue-gray sky the Four Horsemen rode again. In dramatic lore they are known as famine, pestilence, destruction and death. These are only aliases. Their real names are: Stuhldreher, Miller, Crowley and Layden." Along with Ring Lardner, Damon Runyon, Westbrook Pegler, and Heywood Broun, he transformed accomplished athletes into legendary ones. Their presentation conceded immediacy to newscasters and crafted absorbing accounts that sold newspapers to readers already aware of the final score. They inspired a proliferation of sobriquets—"the Sultan of Swat," "the Galloping Ghost," "Little Miss Poker Face," and "the Manassa Mauler," which aided in fashioning heroes who were simultaneously awesome *and* familiar.

Sports reporters encouraged ordinary citizens to believe that they knew and understood their champions. Older

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defenders of journalistic accuracy and respectability objected to this contrivance and perceived younger reporters as seeking the same fame and fortune that athletes enjoyed.[5] "Present-day opinion of newspaper editors, psychologists, trades publication editors, advertising men, and journalism instructors is that sports on their present scale would be impossible without the sports section of the daily papers," reported *Editor and Publisher* in 1927. "Without the assistance of the newspapers, sports would never have attained their present popularity."[6] In short, we remember the champions of the 1920s because newspapers, radios, and newsreels so effectively branded them on the consciousness of our culture.

The figures in this book date from an earlier era when sports were still developing and beginning to attract this kind of notice. Except for automobile racing, the sports represented here—bicycling, football, tennis, and mountaineering—originated during the aftermath of the Civil War and were powerfully influenced by the surge in industrialization and commercialization that war unleashed. To hard-working middle-class Americans, these two developments increased the appeal of recreation and sport as meaningful alternatives. Prior to the Civil War, as the country converted from Calvinism to capitalism, responsible citizens believed that they had to work hard and save. Industry, productivity, and perseverance determined the success of the individual and the nation. Leisure and idleness, on the other hand, were vices fraught with moral, financial, and political hazard. However, the new and enlarged middle class that emerged following the Civil War had the capital and the incentive to question and then amend the puritanical values they inherited. Still

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believing work to be necessary and gainful, these ambitious, upwardly mobile citizens began to sense that working conditions had grown claustrophobic, regimented, and debilitating. Was it not better, they reasoned, to spend time away from the factory or office and use recreation and vacation to counteract these damaging effects? Paradoxically, the various new games they embraced as escape rapidly came to be seen as effective therapy that would rehabilitate players into more productive workers. Moreover, the informality and relaxation that made sport such a valued alternative developed its own set of expectations, organizations, and regulations and functioned as a meaningful complement to the workplace.

Differentiated at first by the physical activity each involved, sports appealed to citizens as play for adults, and participation was judged to be more important than competition and victory. The high-wheel bicycle, which appeared following the 1876 Centennial Exposition, was promoted as healthy exercise and a stimulus for cordiality, but manufacturers strongly discouraged racing. Nevertheless, competition proved impossible to marginalize or suppress in the ensuing expansion of sport. Meanwhile, people naturally gravitated to individuals and teams that excelled, and many discovered that they preferred to be spectators rather than participants. Initially, small numbers of supporters and enthusiasts gathered along the boundaries of play, but they soon swelled into restless crowds hoping for better accommodation and improved performance. Resourceful entrepreneurs sprang up to address these expectations. In return for admission fees, they arranged schedules and seating and raised financing for the costs of equipment and travel. These responsibilities fostered exchange and led to the formation of

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cooperative organizations and standardized rules for events.

During the 1880s, as newspapers noticed reader interest in the proliferating contests, they started offering final scores and abbreviated summaries of the action. Two telling measures of the growth of this interest were the expanding length of these accounts and their transition from bits of news randomly inserted into features and their eventual consolidation into a designated section for sports. By the 1890s every major newspaper had at least one reporter concentrating on sport, and magazines began to concentrate on a single sport.[7] *American Lawn Tennis* (1898) and *Golf* (1900) offered expensive oversized formats and slick paper for their upscale readership. Fifteen years before, *Outing* was so far ahead of this trend that the magazine incurred a substantial loss when it was resold two years after its purchase. The new editor's decision to enlarge its focus and cover more competitions developed it into the leading journal of sport, but it did not become profitable until 1895, when its circulation reached ninety thousand.[8]

The sporting goods business furnishes an equally vivid measure of this growth. During the 1870s manufacturers of wood, leather, and textile products noticed sport as an area of promise, and by 1880 eighty were offering some kind of gear. The first retail outlets for this merchandise targeted baseball enthusiasts, then the largest market, and the most successful of these was the A. G. Spalding Company, which opened in Chicago in 1876, a year after Spalding arrived to be captain and manager of the Chicago White Stockings. As support for this venture, he brought out a booklet titled *Spalding's Official Baseball Guide*, secured a contract from the National League for official baseballs and bats, and quickly became

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the largest purveyor of baseball equipment. When his annual baseball guide achieved a circulation of fifty thousand in 1885, he acquired the American Publishing Company and commenced a line of *Official Guides* for other sports, each addition affirming that the sport being covered had enough participants and enthusiasts to be a viable market. He bolstered this diversification with acquisition of manufacturers of bicycles and tennis equipment and establishment of thirteen more retail outlets in other cities. By 1900 Spalding was the dominant merchant, but business was so strong that there were now 144 manufacturers of sporting goods, including the recently founded Rawlings (1888) and Abercrombie and Fitch (1900), both of which attained instant success.[9]

The five champions profiled in this book date from this earlier period, predating the 1920s and World War I, when sporting events were first commercialized and achieved popularity. Although few today recognize the names of Tom Stevens, Fanny Bullock Workman, Bill Reid, May Sutton, or Barney Oldfield, each was a stellar performer and famous at the time. Stevens was the first man to ride a bicycle, "a high wheeler," around the world (1884–87). Workman, accompanied by her husband, completed seven expeditions into the Himalayas between 1898 and 1912 and was among the first three climbers to reach an elevation of 23,000 feet, a feat that was not surpassed by another woman until thirty years later. Bill Reid was one of Harvard's greatest athletes and following his graduation, coached its football team through three glorious seasons, but his greatest accomplishment was his role in saving the game from a national movement for its abolition in 1905. Sutton, a tennis player from California, was the youngest winner of singles at the 1904

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National Championships (now the U.S. Open) until Tracy Austin (1979) and the first American woman to triumph at Wimbledon (1905). Oldfield was the first champion of motorcar racing and so resourceful at capitalizing on his success that he almost destroyed the sport.

Although these male and female champions are usually mentioned in histories of their sports, remarkably little has been written about them and their careers. Currently the only book devoted to any of them is a fifty-year-old biography of Barney Oldfield by an author who was more an enthusiast than a scholar. When I started this project, I was hoping to turn up a prominent athlete from the past who warranted fresh research and legitimately deserved to be better known. In my previous publications, I had already gravitated toward similarly neglected achievers from literature and the theater. My initial research yielded enough possibilities that choosing one became difficult, and I concluded that a selection of profiles might be a refreshing alternative to the conventional biography. An equally important factor in my eventual choices was the colorful stories that lurked within the material I was finding. I did not want tales that smacked of contrivance, like those of the titans and folk heroes promoted by sportswriters since the 1920s. Certainly the period I was researching contained many forgotten champions who dominated races, clobbered opponents, and amassed victories. I wanted both something else and something more. I preferred the warts—the eccentricities, the self-righteousness, and the prejudices—that made my choices both successful and offensive. I was even more interested in the intense drive of all five to excel and triumph and their shared belief that sport should be more than play.

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Nonetheless, far and away the most important factor in my eventual choices was what their careers revealed about the ongoing transformation of sport from casual recreation into commercialized contests involving accomplished players and close supervision. The title I have chosen for this book, *Game Faces*, is meant to signal my dual intent of presenting these biographical profiles as portraits of their sports as well. In both respects, they are faces of change. The sports that initially attracted these champions were quite different from the ones we know, but the years of their participation evolved a much closer approximation. Although various issues contributed to this change, three stand out in the chapters ahead and function as themes that link and interconnect them.[10]

Of the three, money is the most important. The often-heard complaint today that sport has been corrupted by money echoes from the dawn of sport and ignores the hard fact that money has always been essential to sport. Sites, equipment, travel, and accommodations cost money, and once locals outgrew the attraction of playing one another on a nearby field, they needed funding. This problem was complicated by the fact that nineteenth-century culture, so intent on turning a profit in the workplace, believed that sport should be for amateurs and that monetary gain was a menace.

Unsurprisingly, the strongest supporters of this thinking were the wealthy, who had the leisure and means for sport. Although the concept of amateurism is usually traced to the London Athletic Club in England (1863), it was first circulated in the United States by the New York Athletic Club (1866). In 1876 the NYAC mandated that its competitions

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be restricted to "any person who has never competed . . . for public or admission money . . . or taught or assisted in the pursuit of athletic exercises as a means of livelihood." Three years later the newly established National Association of Amateur Athletes of America espoused this definition of amateurism and won agreement from colleges and other clubs, like the New York Athletic Club, that were springing up around the country. Sport was most important to these organizations and clubs as a shared interest and stimulus for affiliation. Acceptance into an elite club or college conferred preeminent status and distinguished the recipient from the rest of society. Consciously this membership emulated upper-class English interests and activities, and less consciously they advocated amateurism because it favored people like themselves, who could afford sport, and excluded those from down the social scale who could not. This thinking was personified in the so-called gentleman amateur, who vigorously opposed athletic games for money and was cavalier about rules.[11]

However, the same money that initially empowered the diverse versions of this figure in the pages ahead quickly turned against them and undermined their authority and privilege. American sport had too much appeal to be confined within upper-class preserves. The allure of financial gain unleashed the democratizing power of capitalism. In order to sell more goods, more newspapers, and more tickets, agents of commerce curried and stoked the attention of the middle class and below. Demands for greater competition and more victories from enthusiasts inspired these merchants to deploy their profits as investment. They cautiously backed competitions that accommodated an enlarged range

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of participants. Justifiably wary of the deep-seated commitment to amateurism and widespread suspicion of professionalism, they conspired to expand and exploit gray areas in these biases.

Rules and organizations would loom almost as large as money in this early transformation of sport. Initial enthusiasts quickly grasped the importance of regulations to their games. First and foremost were the issues of how the new sport should be played and then which actions should be allowed and which ones should not. The "gentleman amateur," who influenced these basics, favored casual associations and lax rules; he embraced sport as an escape from obligation and restriction. When this freedom spawned problems, as it inevitably did, he turned to his club affiliation to work out a better arrangement. This initial concession of his authority and independence was increased by those whose enthusiasm for a particular sport carried them to specialist organizations like the League of American Wheelmen, the Intercollegiate Football Association, and the American Automobile Association. These groups were more willing and better qualified to deliberate on behalf of their sports and to formulate new and better rules. Although social biases would remain a potent force within these organizations, some more so than others, their accomplishments inevitably diminished their receptivity to further changes. Some managed to rise above their biases and past, but those that did usually did so because outsiders and commercial forces pressured them.

Like water from a storm, the need for sport to broaden its range of participants, to enlarge its sources of funding, and to amend its existing rules produced a route over and around

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the obstacles in its path. In their quest for distinction and success, the champions in these chapters found themselves embroiled in upheaval and forced to reflect upon the acceptability of the existing rules of their sports—whether to abide by them or campaign for alternatives. The decisions of several were determined by whether they came from wealth. Others needed to seize upon an opening and turn it into opportunity. Some shifted from one position to the other. If each case has its own special configuration of these components, they collectively offer an illuminating portrait of how sport evolved during this period from recreational diversion into strenuous, regulated competition.

These chapters also feature pitched battles between their protagonists and archrivals. Since competition is the essence of sport—and increasingly so over this period—such contests are hardly surprising. The most enticing matches are usually ones in which a reigning champion confronts a contender with equivalent talent and a differing philosophy and style of play. Needless to say, the stakes involved can be very high, and they were especially so here. As money, rules, and mediating organizations intruded on these reckonings, the outcomes determined not only winners but also the future direction of their sports.

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