

WAR AND SPORTS:  
FROM THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR TO 1917

For the United States, as for the rest of the Western world, a sporting culture developed in the late nineteenth century benefiting from improvements in transportation, the growth of mass media, particularly cheap newspapers, urbanization, and industrialization. By 1898, athletic contests were a regular part of the national calendar. Baseball in America had developed sufficiently to support popular interest in a World's Series that would begin within five years to be played between teams from the two major professional leagues. Intercollegiate rivalries in football and other sports had been established that promised to endure for future generations believing in the importance of athletic competitions. But sports had not yet become a part of military life, and only with the entry of the United States into war with the Spanish over Cuba would a critical mass of men be gathered together in the armed services to justify the creation of a formal sports program.

After the defeat of the Spanish, military commanders intentionally created opportunities for soldiers and sailors in Cuba and in the Philippines to play baseball, to run track, and to experience other types of athletic competitions. National leaders such as President Theodore Roosevelt and Gen. Leonard Wood provided personal examples of the advantages derived from physical fitness. And General Wood began the process of ensuring that Regular Army units as well as National Guard outfits engaged in physical training commensurate with the demands to be placed on the country's soldiers in the future.

For those European-American men anxious for the United States to acquire its own Empire, events in the last years of the nineteenth century posed a unique opportunity to do so. With Frederick Jackson Turner having declared the frontier closed, and with the huge growth in American population due to immigration from Europe, empire-builders argued for the urgent need to expand America's role. The overthrow of the Hawaiian government provided an excuse

to annex those islands as a site for expansion further into the Pacific. Then the struggle by Cuban rebels to establish their island's independence, with the consequent threat to American business interests on that island, and with the reports of the hideous conditions in which many in the Cuban population were living due to Spanish policies, led to a demand for the United States' involvement in the struggle against Spain. Despite substantial opposition among some in Congress, the press, and the general populace, in 1898 those who wanted the United States to acquire an empire finally got their wish as America embarked on a war with the Spanish, ostensibly to help those Cuban rebels gain their country's freedom, but ultimately to take control over Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

For the American military establishment, the growth of an overseas empire demanded a reconsideration of its role, its size, and its proper function. The army to a great extent and the navy to a more limited extent were forced to move beyond the era of Indian fighting and prepare for a larger role overseas. The disorganization in troop transport from Tampa to Cuba, and the failure of private business to supply the army with palatable rations, revealed that the army especially was not yet ready to take on international responsibilities, absent substantial rethinking of its system for caring for the troops.<sup>2</sup> The acquisition of empire, therefore, provided a justification for those within the military services who had concluded near the end of the nineteenth century that a vastly expanded navy *and* army was a necessity for an America entering, in Peter Karsten's words, the "dog-eat-dog world of international commerce, imperial rivalries, conscription armies and Dreadnought navies."<sup>3</sup> But the inadequacy of planning to anticipate the needs of an expanding military revealed during the Spanish-American War also left the army and navy with a substantial amount of thinking to do about what a modern military required to arm, clothe, feed, and keep soldiers and sailors in action.

The events of 1898 marked the beginning of a long, slow growth in the authorized strength of America's military. In April 1898, a total of 28,747 men were serving in the Regular Army. To fill the manpower needs of the military as it prepared to move into Cuba, units of the National Guard were accepted into federal service so long as they volunteered as a body, while other new state units and volunteers for federal service were also incorporated into the armed forces. Congress also authorized an increase in Regular Army strength to 64,719. Thus, by the end of May, 1898, along with the growing Regular Army, the military was able to claim at least 124,804 volunteers in uniform for the national emergency. Although the rapid success of the soldiers in Cuba, along with the collapse of the Spanish forces in the Philippines, reduced the need

for further growth, and led to the suspension of further recruiting in August, the army never again fell to pre-1898 manpower levels. Indeed, the continued fighting between units of the American army and Filipinos favoring independence for their islands led Congress in March 1899 to require the maintenance of the Regular Army at 65,000 men and to ask for the enlistment of 35,000 additional volunteers to deal with the Filipino insurgency.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the growth of the military at the end of the century, commanders initially paid little attention to how best to entertain the troops. Indeed, officers were not specifically trained to meet soldier welfare needs through sport, even though the two military academies had developed football programs during the 1880s, playing extensive intercollegiate schedules. Although the annual Army-Navy game was suspended from 1893 to 1899 by civilian political pressure stemming from allegations of a near-fatal duel at the Army-Navy Club after the 1893 game, the resumption of interservice play led to a long tradition of intercollegiate athletic success for both schools. Significantly, however, despite the incorporation of organized sports into West Point's program, the basic physical education program at the Point remained relatively unchanged. As late as 1905, Cadets were required only to participate in fencing, dancing, and horsemanship aside from their regular drills. Although boxing and wrestling were added to the educational agenda in 1905, formal instruction in intramural football, hockey, lacrosse, baseball, and similar team sports for the cadets remained in the future.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that most service academy graduates had had little experience in playing sports themselves or in organizing athletic competitions, was reflected when it came to training and entertaining America's soldiers in 1898. Although Henry Cabot Lodge argued that the "time given to athletic contests and the injuries incurred on the playing field are part of the price which the English-speaking race has paid for being world-conquerors," and Theodore Roosevelt recruited his Rough Riders from among the men of his acquaintance who had played sports in the past, neither man was ready to insist that the nation's military include sports as part of the regular training regimen.<sup>6</sup> Even those who were in fact quite committed to encouraging athletics among the troops of the expanding army encountered monumental difficulties in trying to implement an organized sports program. First the health problems generated by the yellow fever, malaria, and dysentery experienced by the soldiers in Cuba rapidly reduced the ability of most to participate in any sort of strenuous physical activity. And since most of the volunteers for service in 1898 never left stateside training camps, the military's failure to plan for long-term stays in those encampments led to low troop morale, and to the growth of disease due to the filthy

conditions in those camps as well. Thus, although a Red Cross official visiting the camp near Tampa, Florida, where soldiers were waiting to embark for Cuba described troops lounging and smoking, but also playing handball, Theodore Roosevelt lamented that the fellows stationed in Cuba were left with nothing to do.<sup>7</sup>

Since the Army in 1898 was unprepared for the rapid deployment of its forces, lacking plans for moving, feeding, and training those troops, the Army was also unprepared to entertain those soldiers. Even Roosevelt, who believed in the value of sports, and the rigorous life, and who recruited among athletes for his Rough Riders, didn't anticipate that a system of organized athletics would contribute to the well-being of the troops under his command before being faced with the results of a lack of a formal program for troop entertainment in Cuba. However, in subsequent years, as representatives of the United States' Army served as occupation troops on the island, sports, particularly baseball, became an important part of their lives. As the historian Louis A. Perez, Jr., has suggested, baseball had been identified by Cuban patriots by 1898 as a game in which they could express their distinctiveness from and opposition to that Spanish culture typified by the bullfight. During the years of United States' occupation, American soldiers and Cuban civilians played many baseball games against each other, with American soldier leagues also being established on the island. In this, future military-civilian contacts through sports were prefigured.<sup>8</sup>

Because the 1898 army raised to fight the Spanish included a substantial number of African-American troops on the assumption that they would be more likely to be immune to the tropical diseases endemic in Cuba, the question of whether they would make good soldiers under those combat conditions inevitably arose. Since the Regular Army already included the African-American Twenty-fourth and Twenty-fifth Infantries as well as the Ninth and Tenth cavalries, who had distinguished themselves during the Indian Wars in the American West, the men of those commands were subjected to substantial scrutiny during the Spanish-American War. While serving in Cuba and later during the Philippine Insurgency, these soldiers demonstrated their ability and commitment to the American cause, fighting on San Juan Hill with Roosevelt and caring for the victims of the epidemics that decimated the Fifth Army Corps in Cuba.<sup>9</sup>

Because black and white soldiers were serving side by side, albeit in segregated units, they often participated in athletic competitions against each other, especially during the Philippine Insurrection, when the army's provisions for its troops had become relatively better organized.<sup>10</sup> This competition on the playing field between African-American and European-American soldiers

inevitably revealed much about assumptions concerning race at the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup> Despite the preservation of the color line between black and white troops, the turn of the century Army provided competitive opportunities that might not otherwise have been available to African-American sportsmen. As the historian of black athletes, Arthur R. Ashe, Jr., has argued, "with the vested interest in the physical well-being and high morale of its soldiers, the Army provided facilities, competition, coaching and encouragement for its black enlisted men."<sup>12</sup> Since African-American men were being excluded from professional baseball by the 1890s, the chances for interested athletes to play the game while in the military must have been welcomed by the soldiers. Thus, the Twenty-fifth Infantry stationed in the Philippines in 1901 challenged any team, including those drawn from European-American units, to play baseball against them. Similarly, African-American men stationed in the Philippines actively participated in the track and field meets being staged for the American army's occupation troops, with the Ninth Cavalry winning a meet in 1908 by defeating teams from the European-American Third Cavalry, the Fifth Field Artillery, and the Twenty-sixth, Twenty-ninth and Thirtieth Infantries, as well as an African-American team from the Tenth Cavalry.<sup>13</sup>

As the army in the Philippines settled down to an occupation of the islands, it was faced with the dilemma of how best to maintain the interest and enthusiasm of the soldiers. Among other things, a formal sports program was developed for the first time by the military. Thus, even as civilian society devoted more attention to organized, modern athletic competitions, similar competitions were being conducted by the army.<sup>14</sup> And in so doing, the problems of race and class that had so affected the civilian population became critically important within the military. Since athletic excellence had by the turn of the century become a marker of the superiority of both a man's body *and* his character, the athletic successes of black soldiers competing against whites from other units provided a challenge to assumptions about the relative inferiority of African-Americans.<sup>15</sup> As would be the case when athletes from other nations competed successfully against athletes from the United States in subsequent wars, sports provided a means for reinforcing cultural hierarchy.

Although there continued to be opposition to the presence of United States' forces overseas, the Spanish-American War seemed in most minds to have concluded favorably to American interests, and the heroes of that conflict, including Theodore Roosevelt, Adm. Thomas Dewey, and Gen. Leonard Wood, were held in esteem in subsequent years as exemplars of American manhood. Yet males in American society remained the subject of continuing cultural

discourse about how they should develop themselves to represent the United States and its people. Therefore, American men continued to seek out arenas in which they could develop their strength, character, and power. The sports world remained a site for demonstrating masculine superiority after 1900 as it had begun to be before the war with Spain. And within the army, sport would finally be recognized as a viable means of maintaining soldier health and morale.

In the years between the Spanish-American War and the United States' entry into the First World War, Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood became one of the first commanders to actively promote the value of athletic training as an adjunct to drill and as means of instilling the values of teamwork and cooperation in the troops. He had come from the Medical Corps and was directly interested in the physical health of the American soldier, but he also loved to participate in athletics, as demonstrated when he was stationed at the Presidio in 1892. There, he joined the San Francisco Olympic Club's football team and played left guard against a team from the University of California.<sup>16</sup> As an old crony of Theodore Roosevelt, General Wood was famous for his physical fitness and for the aggression with which he played games such as single stick—a game that he and the President played so roughly that Roosevelt occasionally lost the use of a hand or suffered black eyes from injuries incurred while playing.<sup>17</sup>

As chief of staff of the army, Wood concerned himself with the training offered to new recruits. In some respects, his vision of the training necessary to make a good soldier reflects the conventions of pre-Civil War warfare, since as late as 1914, Wood argued that troops needed to have at least twelve months' training at 150 hours per month to ensure their readiness for combat.<sup>18</sup> During World War I, Gen. John J. Pershing would find to his surprise that less general training was needed, although the exigencies of that conflict demanded that the doughboys receive substantial special education in trench warfare. Later, during World War II training time was drastically reduced, especially as replacements were needed for those soldiers lost in battle in the Pacific and in the fight against the Nazis in Europe.<sup>19</sup>

But more important to General Wood's vision than the number of hours dedicated to training was his attempt to impose common fitness standards on all of the men potentially liable to service should the United States again go to war. Among other things, this meant that the men in the various state National Guards, as well as the soldiers in the Regular Army, would be expected to meet similar physical standards. To facilitate that process, the war Department distributed a manual for the physical training of troops in 1914.

In the Introduction to the *Manual of Physical Training for Use in the United States Army*, General Wood said that he wished that the physical training

of all enlisted men be conducted according to the precepts set down in the *Manual*, since there was “nothing in the education of the soldier of more vital importance than this.”<sup>20</sup> According to the War Department, physical training was necessary not only to promote general health and bodily vigor, or muscular strength and endurance, but also to help the enlisted man become more self-reliant and to conduct himself with “smartness, activity, and precision.”<sup>21</sup> To accomplish those goals, the soldier was to be required to participate in setting-up exercises (coming to attention, for example), to march at quick or double time, to use the dumbbell, club, or rifle to increase upper-body strength, to climb a rope, to jump, and to work with apparatus such as the pommel horse. More significantly, aside from the assigned physical fitness activities, the soldier was also expected to participate in athletics and swimming competitions. And, although the *Manual* didn’t require every soldier to box and wrestle, the War Department suggested that they be encouraged to do so. Thus, for the first time, general military training included time for sports and athletic contests.

Although the writers of the *Manual* emphasized that the contests and competitions were not to resemble competitive athletics and therefore were not to be about breaking records or establishing individual prowess, they also recognized that such contests and competitions would “never fail to induce the usual rivalry for superiority attending personal contests.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the *Manual* suggests a disjunction between the idea that sports and athletics within the military could serve to unite soldiers together in physical fitness and the notion that sports and athletics would necessarily encourage the kind of interpersonal competitiveness also thought to be useful in combat. The War Department’s *Manual*, therefore, created conflicting missions for those who would have to implement the sports program. On the one hand, such a program might surely lead to each soldier’s greater physical fitness and a willingness to commit his body when asked to do so, and the soldier might also learn to respect and admire those within his unit who exhibited greater athletic ability. On the other hand, competition and rivalry among soldier-athletes also posed the danger that it might get out of hand, resulting in the destruction of the loyalty and group cohesion needed within the military. So long as the rivalries could be kept in check, presumably through the acquiescence of the young men involved in a hierarchy based in part on athletic ability, the sports program would help train and maintain the morale of the soldiers, but if the rivalries engendered by athletic contests became too great, the ultimate goal of creating a unified fighting force would not be met.

In discussing the recommended athletics program, the *Manual*’s writers recognized the disjunction between the goal of identifying the best while

ensuring the fullest possible participation by the many. According to the *Manual*, the “value of athletic training in the service is dependent upon the effect it has upon the mass, and not upon the effect it has upon the individual few.”<sup>23</sup> But the writers also pointed out that a sports program geared exclusively to the majority of soldiers would not allow the athletically gifted to fully develop their talents. Accordingly, they recommended that an annual field day be organized at which individual skills could be displayed and the most skillful be determined.

Although the *Manual* provides specific descriptions of the bulk of the proposed physical fitness program, illustrating the descriptions with photographs of men engaged in the various exercises, it does not include any information about how to box and wrestle. Although the War Department therefore encouraged soldiers to engage in those sports, their physical fitness instructors were not given the means to adequately coach them. As the army would shortly discover, the troops needed not only to be encouraged to play sports, they needed to have training in how to play particular sports, training that civilian instructors would have to provide during the emergency of the First World War.

Despite its failure to provide for trained physical fitness instructors, with the publication of the *Manual of Physical Training* the army began moving toward the recognition that organized sports within the military could help meet its need to quickly develop in new recruits those qualities deemed to be necessary to the good soldier. Young men within the military would attain more than the stamina developed through marching and drill. They would learn through sports to cooperate with each other, to identify with the members of their team, and to recognize their common bonds. By participating in or watching sports, they would learn how to face and overcome adversity, not only on the playing field, but later on the battlefield. And with the *Manual's* publication, sports and athletic competitions took their place as an integral part of military life.

The journey to the inclusion of sports as a part of military training in 1914 had been a long one. The crisis of masculinity that gripped elite white men throughout the Western world at the end of the nineteenth century was not easily overcome. But as a style of masculinity emphasizing aggressiveness and physicality was reclaimed, and as the idea that a young man's character could only be fully developed through athletic contact with other men was embraced, the search for a place where men could act out their physical aggressions was intensified. Because the business of sports had organized and modernized along with so many other enterprises at the end of the century, the playing fields were available to which men could point as the place where they could



be most fully in touch with themselves. And as they grew stronger by playing sports, or learned how to honor that strength in others, many American men in particular concluded that their masculinity could also be saved by leading their country into the modern imperial world.

Yet that first attempt in 1898 to create an Army for overseas service revealed many deficiencies in the system devised for asserting the interests of the United States on the world stage. Not the least of this was the failure by the army to provide adequately for the health and entertainment of the soldiers going off to war. After the immediate crisis of 1898 was concluded, Gen. Leonard Wood and others in command rediscovered what those civilians enamored of sports had believed all along—that athletic competition builds the man. Acting on their belief that participation in sports would help prepare any man for competition not only on the ballfield or in the boardroom, but on the battlefield as well, military commanders began looking to athletics as a crucial part of preparation for war.