Greater New York: The Sports Capital of Depression Era America

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Recommended Citation
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Millions of Americans live and die with sports. They turn to the sports pages in the newspaper before looking at the front page or at the editorials. Indeed, many New Yorkers learned to read back to front, because the back pages of the Daily News, the Post, and the Mirror offered the sports headlines. For that reason alone, because so many care so deeply about sport, historians have an obligation to take the subject seriously.

Any history of the American experience covering the prosperity of the 1920s and the depression of the 1930s quite simply, is incomplete if it neglects sports. In the Roaring Twenties, sport penetrated American life through the media to an unprecedented extent. Radio and newsreels, as well as newspapers in many languages focused popular attention on baseball, horse racing, football, boxing, and the growing sport of basketball. Upper class pursuits like golf, tennis, and polo gained also an unlikely mass following. Even the Daily Worker, the organ of the Communist Party, had a sports page in the 1930s (Goldstein, 2009). Those years also generated a new breed of media hero: Bill Tilden in tennis, Bobby Jones in golf, and of course, many, many boxers and ballplayers. Babe Ruth even had a cameo role playing himself in Harold Lloyd’s 1925 silent comedy “Speedy.”

The Great Depression did indeed cut attendance at ballparks and other venues, but in no way did the economic crisis dampen the public’s fascination with sports and sports personalities. During the 1930s, attendance at Yankee games at the Stadium and Giants games at the Polo Grounds fell 9 percent compared to the 1920s, though that was far less than the average decline in attendance in the major leagues (Baseball Almanac) In September 1935, a crowd of 18,000 attended the United States Open Polo Championship at International Field in Westbury. An impressive turnout, to be sure, but in 1928 a record 40,000 thronged to the championship match there between the United States and Argentina (which the United States won). Still, in 1935 a capacity crowd of 13,000 filled the Forest Hills tennis stadium for the men’s and women’s national championships (predecessor of the U.S. Open), and the annual clash between Notre Dame and Army brought over 80,000 to Yankee Stadium. Even during the worst years of the Depression, championship boxing matches filled ballparks and Madison Square Garden (Drebinger December 29, 1935).

New York City was the unchallenged capital of professional and amateur sport in America for much of the twentieth century, and it would not be much of an exaggeration to claim it was the world capital of sport. What other city could even challenge that claim? Where else would be found such storied venues as Madison Square Garden, the Polo Grounds, Yankee Stadium, Forest Hills, and Belmont Race Track? New York had them all, as well as other now forgotten and long-gone arenas like Madison Square Garden Bowl in Queens (also known as the “Jinx Bowl” because no champion ever successfully defended his title there), Jamaica Race Track, and dozens of minor league venues like the St. Nicholas Arena, Sunnyside Garden, Dexter Park, and Dyckman Oval.

Looking at 1935 alone, we find great events and milestones—the New York Yankees giving Babe Ruth his unconditional release and naming Lou Gehrig team captain, Omaha winning the Belmont Stakes to take the Triple Crown—but the year was mostly typical of the sporting scene in that era, with the notable exception that neither the Yankees nor the Giants won the pennant. The Yankees
won in 1932, and then ran off an unprecedented string of four straight World Series triumphs from 1936 to 1939. The Giants had won in 1933 and would win the pennant again in 1936 and 1937. The Dodgers, of course, were never expected to win, though they did have the ever-colorful Casey Stengel as manager. In 1934 Stengel’s team denied the rival Giants the pennant by beating them in the last two games of the season. The Giants had led the league since June and had a seven-game lead on September 7th but lost their last five games to finish two back. It was a sweet victory for Stengel and his players. Asked about the Dodgers before the season, Giants manager Bill Terry answered, “I was just wondering whether they were still in the league.” The remark has usually been rendered as “Is Brooklyn still in the league?” (Popik 2005).

With professional baseball's impermeable color line firmly entrenched, Abe Manley and his wife Effa formed the Brooklyn Eagles in the Negro National League, also in 1935. Mayor La Guardia threw out the first ball for their inaugural home game at Ebbets Field, which the Eagles lost to the Homestead Grays 21-7. Lacking fan support, the team moved to Newark the next year, merging with the Newark Dodgers. In this same year, Nat Strong died. He had operated semi-pro baseball teams and controlled bookings for barnstorming teams in the metropolitan area for three decades. For many years he reserved Dexter Park in Woodhaven on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day for Negro League doubleheaders, surely a sign that New Yorkers would flock to see good baseball regardless of the color of the players.

Not surprisingly, New York was also the chess capital of America, and for a time, one could claim, the world. In 1935, 24-year old Samuel Reshevsky of the Marshall Chess Club won the international masters tournament in England. He had emigrated from Poland to New York in 1920. In Warsaw, the American chess team, led by Grandmaster Frank Marshall, with Isaac Kashdan, Reuben Fine, Abraham Kupchik, Al Horowitz, and Arthur Dake (all New York players, though Dake came from Oregon), again won the International Chess Federation tournament to three-peat as world champions. They had won in Prague in 1931 and in London in 1933.

Madison Square Garden hosted college basketball games for the first time on December 29, 1934, attracting a capacity crowd of 16,000. Fittingly, St. John’s played in the first game, though they lost to tiny Westminster College of Pennsylvania, 37-33; in the second game of the doubleheader, New York University topped Notre Dame, 25-18. One might say that this event heralded the dawning of the golden age of college basketball in the city, with City College, Long Island University, Columbia, St. John’s, and N.Y.U. all rising to national prominence, and Madison Square Garden emerging as the sport’s epicenter. But this event also presaged a darker side, the behind the scenes role of gamblers and fixers. The scandal erupted in 1951, but rumors of fixes and point-shaving abounded for years before.

In boxing, no city could challenge New York's preeminence. Challenger James J. Braddock took a 15-round decision from heavyweight champion Max Baer in front of 30,000 at Madison Square Garden Bowl on June 13, 1935. Two years before, Braddock had been washed up and on relief in New Jersey. Sportswriter Damon Runyon dubbed him “Cinderella Man.” After winning the title, Braddock told reporters, “I’m glad I won, because it will please the wife and kids. I’ve got the prettiest kids in the world, and tonight I can go home to them and say, ‘Your daddy is champ.’” (Schaap 2005, 259). Twelve days later, 20-year old Joe Louis fought in New York for the first time, scoring a sixth round technical knockout over former heavyweight champion Primo Carnera before 60,000 at Yankee Stadium. The Free Milk Fund for Babies, one of several such charities spawned by need in the Depression, received part of the gate. Carnera had won the title in 1933 by knocking out champion Jack Sharkey at Madison Square Garden Bowl. He was the first Italian to wear the heavyweight crown, but his career in America had been guided by mobsters and questions persisted as to the legitimacy of his bouts. In September, before 88,150, the biggest crowd ever for a boxing match at the Stadium, Louis knocked out former champion Max Baer in the fourth round (Baer had taken the title from Carnera in 1934).
In 1935, retired heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey opened his restaurant near Madison Square Garden, and it quickly became the watering hole of choice for sports figures, reporters, and fans (as Toots Shor’s would become in the 1940s and 1950s). He closed the establishment in 1974 when Times Square, and New York City, was a far different place. In a column written after Dempsey’s death in 1983, Times sportswriter Dave Anderson described how a year or so before he shuttered his place for good, Dempsey recorded the last knockout of his career. He was in a cab in midtown when two young thugs, seeing an old man in the back seat, pushed in beside him in an attempted mugging. Big mistake (Anderson 1983).

The year 1935 saw the Downtown Athletic Club award the first Heisman Trophy for the nation’s best college football player to Jay Berwanger of the University of Chicago. (The University of Chicago was a founding member of the Big Ten, but raised standards and dropped football in 1939.) The sculptor was Frank Eliscu; the model was NYU footballer Ed Smith. The trophy was named for John W. Heisman, the club’s athletic director. (Located in the shadow of the World Trade Center, the Downtown Athletic Club closed after the September 2011 terrorist attacks). In the still-young National Football League, which was actually marginal compared to the wildly popular college game, the Giants lost the championship game to the Lions 26-7 as a crowd of only 15,000 endured the December rain and sleet in Detroit (Drebinger, December 16, 1935).

This is an account of just one year, and the list does not even include everything of note. Despite the economic uncertainties of the decade, we should view 1935 as part of a continuum stretching through the interwar years, as sports grew in popularity and profitability. The year also pointed toward significant changes in the sporting scene. Look at golf. The metropolitan area was home to many of the nation’s oldest and most exclusive private courses, several of which hosted the Walker Cup, the United States Open, and the PGA Tournament in the prewar decades: Winged Foot Golf Club and the Pelham Country Club in Westchester; Baltusrol in New Jersey; Garden City Golf Club, Salisbury Country Club (now the Red Course at Eisenhower Park), Engineers Country Club in Roslyn, and Inwood Country Club in Nassau; Pomonok Country Club and Fresh Meadows Country Club in Queens. Gene Sarazen, born Eugene Saracini in Manhattan, won the Open at Fresh Meadows in 1932; he had been the club pro there, but resigned before the Open because no club pro had ever won the tournament on his home course. If the metropolitan area was not the golfing capital of America, it certainly was a preferred site for major tournaments.

Two other developments transformed golf in the metropolitan area in the 1930s. First, Robert Moses directed the construction of new public courses by the Long Island State Park Commission and the New York City Department of Parks. These were not the first public courses—the 1896 course in Van Cortlandt Park in the Bronx holds that distinction—but Moses built more public courses than anyone could have imagined, bringing an exclusive upper class pursuit within reach of the middle class, if not the masses. In 1932, the first of five public courses opened at Bethpage State Park. Moses’s Long Island State Parks Commission brought in A.W. Tillinghast to redesign the private Lenox Hills Golf Club, which reopened as the Green Course. The Blue and Red Courses opened in 1935, and the next year golfers teed off on the famed Black Course (site of the U.S. Open in 2002 and 2009), the first public course to host the tournament). Within the city, there was a new course designed by John Van Kleek in Kissena Park; a pitch-and-putt course at Jacob Riis Park (1935); in the Bronx, Split Rock opened, and the private Pell Golf Course immediately adjacent became the public Pelham Golf Course (1936). No new private courses were built in the city after the 1920s, and gradually all the surviving private courses were taken over by the Parks Department. The last private course, the Richmond County Country Club, was sold to the city in 1989 and then received a 99-year lease.

Second, the 1930s saw several private clubs sold to developers. Of course, the Depression did have an impact on membership in private clubs and that contributed to a club's decision to sell. At the same time, the development pressure that transformed western Queens during the 1910s and 1920s began to be felt in eastern Queens in the 1930s. The Old Country Club in Flushing, founded in 1887,
with a golf course dating to 1902, was sold to developers in 1936, as was the Queens Valley Golf Club in Kew Gardens two years later. In 1936, St. John’s University, then crowded into downtown Brooklyn, purchased the Hillcrest Golf Club for a new campus, though construction did not commence until 1953. The trend continued after the war, with Fresh Meadows sold in 1946 and Pomonok in 1949. The former became a new residential complex effusively praised by Lewis Mumford, and the latter, the site of a public housing project completed in 1952.

The 1930s also pointed to a new media landscape for sport. Increasingly, those who could not attend in person listened to boxing, football, baseball, horseracing and all the rest on radio. But in 1933, as the Depression deepened and attendance at home games declined, the city’s three major league ball clubs agreed to a five-year ban on live broadcasts. The goal, of course, was to drive up home attendance, but in the context of the Great Depression, it is difficult to determine whether the ban had any effect at all, aside from reducing team revenues. In 1939 the Dodgers unilaterally decided to resume broadcasting and hired Red Barber away from the Cincinnati Reds; the Yankees soon followed suit and brought in Mel Allen. From that point on, broadcasting and sports were irrevocably entwined. The year 1939 also saw the first television broadcasts of sporting events—a Columbia University baseball game, a six-day bicycle race at the Garden, and a Dodgers game at Ebbets Field, with broadcasts of professional football, boxing, and hockey following soon after. With those experimental broadcasts, New York cemented its position as both media capital and sporting capital.

Another aspect of the era was the intersection of sport with international affairs and difficult domestic social issues. The 1936 Olympic Games held in Berlin were a particular flash point. A propaganda triumph for Hitler, particularly as presented in Leni Riefenstahl’s 1938 documentary, “Olympiad,” Americans still could point with pride to the four gold medals won by Jesse Owens (the silver in the 200 meters went to Mack Robinson, Jackie’s older brother), notwithstanding the contradictions inherent in that achievement in Jim Crow America. Less noted is the story of Bronx-born, Brooklyn-raised Marty Glickman, a football and track star at Syracuse University. At the eleventh hour, he and Sam Stoller, the only two Jews on the track team, were replaced in the 400-meter relay by Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe. In 1996, Glickman told Times sports columnist Ira Berkow: “What I later heard is that Hitler made it known to Avery Brundage, the head of the International Olympic Committee, that he did not wish for the Jews to run. It was humiliating enough for Germany to have the black Americans winning gold medals, but giving Jews a chance to win was too much” (Berkow 1996). Historians may analyze the significance of this episode and the larger issues it highlights, but for Glickman the story always came back to its heartbreaking essence. Returning to Berlin in 1986 to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1936 Olympics, he stood on the track where he had been denied the opportunity to run, and could no longer control his rage. He shouted into the empty arena, “How could you no-good, dirty so-and-so’s do this to an 18 year old kid, to any young man who worked so hard to get there, you rotten S.O.B.s.” At least that is how he related his words in a New York Times essay (Glickman 1994). Even more obscure, though Glickman was certainly neither obscure nor forgotten (he was the radio voice of the Knicks, the football Giants and the Jets, and many other college and professional teams from the 1940s into the 1990s) is the stand taken by the Long Island University basketball team, coached by the legendary Clair Bee. Perhaps the most dominant college team in the nation, the Blackbirds won 43 straight in 1935 and 1936, finally losing to Stanford 45-31 at Madison Square Garden in December 1936. It was likely that the entire team would have been selected to represent the United States at the Olympics and would surely have taken home the gold, but they decided to boycott the Olympic trials. In his public statement announcing the decision, L.I.U. Dean Tristram Walker Metcalfe specifically stated that the reason the Blackbirds had decided not to compete was because the university would not under any circumstances be represented at the Olympic Games held in Germany. Leo Merson, one of the team’s three Jewish players, remembered, “It was emotional, it was traumatic, it was a lost opportunity, but we thought it had to be done. And I’m not sorry.” (“Long Island University Blackbirds’ Boycott,” 2008).
It was boxing, of course, that most sharply, and memorably, exposed the racial and nationalist tensions of the time. On June 25, 1935, a crowd of 62,000 flocked to Yankee Stadium to witness the heavyweight fight between Joe Louis and former champion Primo Carnera. The bout was a mismatch; Louis won with a sixth round TKO. But the atmosphere was electric. Not only was this the “Brown Bomber’s” first fight in New York, but it took place against the background of Italy’s threatened invasion of Ethiopia. While Louis and Carnera might not have fixed on the international implications of their fight, others did. The day after the bout, Professor Rayford W. Logan of Atlanta University, speaking at the New England Institute of International Relations at Wellesley College, remarked, “I am afraid that the defeat of Primo Carnera last night by Joe Louis will be interpreted as an additional insult to the Italian flag, which will permit Mussolini to assert again the necessity for Italy to annihilate Abyssinia” (“Negro Expects Mussolini to try to Avenge Carnera,” 1935). What was the good professor doing, discussing a heavyweight fight in such a forum? And one wonders, was this a topic of conversation among the attendees of that academic gathering? At a public meeting in Harlem in support of Emperor Haile Selassie, Reverend Harold H. Williamson Jr. stated bluntly, “Let’s go right up and tell why we want to knock out Mussolini like Joe Louis did Carnera” (“Harlemites Rally to Ethiopia’s Aid,” 1935).

Many of Louis’s fights were racially charged, even beyond the usual ethnic rivalries in the ring. In September 1935 he faced former champion Max Baer at the Stadium in front of over 88,000 fans, the largest crowd ever for a boxing card there. Baer himself was no stranger to ethnic pride; when he took on German heavyweight Max Schmeling in June 1933 he wore a Star of David on his trunks. Jack Dempsey was in his corner. Returning to his corner after absorbing a terrific punch from Schmeling, Baer said to Dempsey, “I see three of him.” Dempsey answered, “Hit the one in the middle.” Baer rallied to score a tenth-round knockout. At the Stadium, Louis dispatched Baer in four rounds. Writing in *The New Masses*, Richard Wright described how thousands of blacks flooded the streets of the South Side of Chicago after the Baer fight, “how something had ripped loose, exploded.” Louis, he wrote, was a “consciously-felt symbol . . . the concentrated essence of black triumph over white” (Runstedtler 2005, 48). The two Louis-Schmeling fights are the most dramatic examples, both fought at Yankee Stadium, both laden with symbolism. In June 1936, Schmeling knocked out Louis in the twelfth round; it was the black fighter’s first defeat in the ring, and it came at the hands of a man representing for many Nazi Germany’s ideology of Aryan supremacy. Writing in his diary, Joseph Goebbels declared that Schmeling “fought for Germany and won. The White over the Black, and the White was a German.” Schmeling’s wife listened to the radio broadcast in Goebbels’s home. Hitler himself claimed, “Every German has reason to be proud.” The result hung over the Olympics later that summer. Schmeling toured the games and personally sought out Jesse Owens, but his visit only caused resentment among the black athletes. As Owens later recalled, “inwardly, many of us were trying to atone for Joe’s loss” (Erenberg 2005, 91, 94, 105). When the two met again in 1938, Louis was the heavyweight champion, having taken the crown from Braddock the year before. In their rematch, Louis scored the quickest knock out of his career, flooring Schmeling at 2:04 of the first round. Again, the fight took on the aura of a morality tale, with a triumph for America, a triumph for Black America, a deserved defeat for the Nazi.

As with every clear truth, however, there are complications. It is tempting to conclude that fans universally rooted for their race. Bill Gallo, long-time sports cartoonist with the *Daily News*, grew up in Astoria. “Whenever I hear that tired old phrase ‘White Hope,’” he wrote, “I have to smile and think of Joe Louis. When Louis was champion, all the white guys I knew rooted for him, and he fought mainly white fighters.” And then there is Schmeling himself. His manager, Joe Jacobs, was Jewish, and Schmeling repeatedly tried to leverage his influence with the Nazi elite on behalf of Jewish friends in Germany (Gallo 2000, 15; Erenberg, 74-77).

One final example of the social conflicts under the surface in sports involves New York University. Once a great football power, as were Columbia and Fordham, N.Y.U. regularly battled
prominent schools across the country. In November 1940, N.Y.U. lost to the University of Missouri 33-0, but more significant was the fact that the school withheld star running back Leonard Bates in adherence with the so-called “Gentlemen’s Agreement.” One might say this was just a fact of life at the time, that northern schools would not cause difficulties by bringing their black players to Jim Crow states, except that two weeks before the game 2,000 N.Y.U. students rallied outside the administration building to protest the university’s pragmatism, or cowardice. As for Bates, he explained that he was made aware of the “gentlemen’s agreement” when he enrolled, but said that his “major concern had been to gain a college education. Football is secondary.” (“Stevens Goes Rival One Better In Worry Over N.Y.U. Reserves,” 1940) Seven students were suspended for leading the protests. In an absurd coda, N.Y.U. honored those students in 2001, but did not actually apologize. “We can’t put ourselves in their shoes,” said a university spokesperson, “and we can’t turn back the hands of time. Fundamentally, what we want to do is embrace these members of our community and hold them up as models of people who fight for an important cause. I would call it an acknowledgment of good work and courage” (Wong 2004, 137-142). Not that N.Y.U. had anything to apologize for, of course.

These controversies could have erupted elsewhere, but the fact that they played out in New York only reinforced their significance. New York made these events, and these events made New York. In the turbulent 1930s sport may not have been the main event, but it was certainly more than a sideshow.

Works Cited