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Mining Picks and Baseball Bats: The Unique Sports  
Culture of Butte, MT

Kevin Edgar

In industrial cities, it is inevitable that the population will be made up of the working class – that is, young single men and women; a group which is known for restless attitudes and competitive behavior. The dangers inherent in the work and the proximity of the residential areas to each other tend to create a stress within the society. To help alleviate stress and to act as a “pressure valve,” groups create formal, organized competition – games. These activities tend to unify social and racial groups and create a group association and competition in a socially healthy way. This “blowing off of steam” substitutes for unhealthy competition and helps avoid damage to the group as a whole. From an economic point of view, the industry associated with the city benefits by encouraging healthy social competition. If stress is relieved in the working group, it helps ensure that productivity, and therefore, profit, are maximized.

Butte, Montana, is an example of such a city that understands the benefit of athletic competition to a society. The history of the mining camp that became one of the most influential cities during the electrical industrial revolution is rich with stories of athletic competition. These athletic competitions and the subsequent rallying of fans behind competing teams helped to create a unique culture in the city.

Sports and games predate modern industrial American cities. Nor are they unique to “civilized people.” European explorers and colonists encountered Native Americans who played games and sports for pure amusement as well as ceremonial reasons. European colonists brought their own gaming tradition and what historians Elliot J. Gorn and Warren J. Goldstein describe as recreational ideologies to the new world. Leisure and sport were seen by the English as rewards for hard work and a job well done. Games and sports were ingrained in the British tradition at all class levels.<sup>1</sup>

Gorn and Goldstein describe seventeenth century English communities competing against each other in exuberant “hurling” matches – a competition to bring a ball to a goal, similar to modern soccer and football that would take place over miles of countryside and involve large numbers of the males of the competing communities. The competition was generally followed by a large feast sponsored by the local nobility. These competitions served a few purposes. First, it acted to provide “cultural glue” in the communities. The inhabitants of the communities could find common ground in rooting for their young men as they competed against the young men of the neighboring

community – serving, in essence, as a substitute for warfare. These competitions, which usually happened around feast and festival days, also helped to secure loyalty to the local lord, who sponsored the games and the feasts.<sup>2</sup>

According to Gorn and Goldstein, the relationship between the aristocracy and the lower classes was strengthened through these events. The rural laborers saw the feasts and celebrations as a form of reward – something they had earned through years of loyal work and service. The males of the community saw the games as a way to define their masculinity. By providing such amusement, the gentleman secured loyalty and devotion from the common man, as well as forestalling any social uprising among the working class.

Contemporary writers advocated such amusements as a form of social control. John Brand wrote in favor of popular recreation: “Popular pastimes not only helped workers accept their lot, but siphoned off discontent that otherwise might lead to political rebellion.”<sup>3</sup>

In the 1820’s only about five percent of Americans lived in cities, within fifty years that number quadrupled. Farm workers, especially those displaced by the Civil War, migrated to the city in search of employment. New York, the first American city to surpass 100,000 inhabitants, grew from 123,000 in 1820 to 942,000 in 1870.<sup>4</sup> According to Stephen Reiss, writing in *City Games*, in New York, during this time, as in other American cities:

Changing demographics, rising wealth, new spatial patterns, improved interurban transportation and communication networks, new voluntary class and ethnic organizations, the rise of modern political institutions, and traditional, transitional, and emerging modern values all interacted with each other and sport to produce a variety of distinctive urban sporting subcultures.<sup>5</sup>

To the individual living in a city in the late nineteenth century, city life was a lonely existence. Alone in a sea of strangers, the urban individual, especially a single young man, could feel disconnected. Sports teams offered a sense of community and a place to belong for the young urbanite. Teams and sport allowed men to create what Reiss calls “sporting fraternities.” These fraternities were an informal brotherhood of men who “sponsored, participated in and attended traditional sporting contests.”<sup>6</sup>

These fraternities transcended class divisions and included the economic elites as well as lower class men; a group Reiss calls “the bachelor subculture.” Made up mostly of the working class, the sporting fraternities provided a refuge against the loneliness of city life and became a substitute family for its members.<sup>7</sup>

Butte, Montana was one of thousands of mining camps that sprung up throughout the west in the late nineteenth century. First

gold, then silver, brought miners to the camp located high on the Continental Divide. But it was copper that made what could have been just another busted mining town into one of the most prosperous cities of the industrial age. By the turn of the twentieth century, Butte boasted a population of over 100,000 and was the most significant city between Minneapolis and Spokane. The copper mined in Butte became the wires that electrified the world.<sup>8</sup>

The citizens of Butte were immigrants from around the world. Miners from Cornwall and Ireland were followed by immigrants from Finland, Italy, China, and the Baltic Peninsula. It has been claimed that there were more than forty languages spoken in Butte around the turn of the century.<sup>9</sup> The immigrants brought with them their home cultures which combined and created a unique Butte culture. The great grandchildren of the original immigrants still live in Dublin Gulch, Finntown, German Gulch and The Cabbage Patch. Butte was a typical mining town. Inhabited primarily by young, single men, it has been said that in its heyday, Butte was a “wide open town.” It was a mecca for drinking, gambling, and prostitution.

And sports. Just as in other communities, workers in Butte found camaraderie and fellowship in sports. Each mine had a sports team and neighborhoods engaged in competitions, pitting not only local, but cultural and international ties against one another. The difficulty of the work and the diversity of the backgrounds of the inhabitants created a unique culture in Butte. The history of sports in the city reflects this uniqueness.

The quintessential American sport is baseball. It swept the nation in the 1880’s, according to Ronald Story,<sup>10</sup> with the intensity of what can only be called a cultural movement. Story compares the movement of baseball to other mass cultural movements such as temperance or revivalism. Baseball seemed made for Butte. According to Story, baseball was a “man’s sport.” Baseball offered the opportunity for men to play a boy’s game. The rules stay the same whether you are playing Little League or Major League Baseball. Baseball ties into the bachelor subculture in ways that other sports don’t. Baseball, unlike fishing or hunting, says Story, is aggressively physical. It is simple to learn and featured bursts of exciting play. Baseball is intensely competitive. This competitive nature lent itself easily to the rough and tumble life in Butte, MT. Butte was one of the first western cities to organize baseball. The Butte Mines League was created in 1899 and became part of the Pacific Coast league in 1901.<sup>11</sup> The history of the city’s teams and leagues is long and colorful. The 1920’s were the heyday of Butte baseball. The mining companies sponsored teams with such names as The Young Muckers, The Berkeley Mines team, The Clark team and the Anaconda Company Team. Today’s American Legion teams in Butte harken back to the mining past. The teams are nicknamed the Miners and the Muckers.

Football too, was a perfect fit for Butte. As Don James says in *Butte’s Memory Book*, “Contact sports and Butte fans seem to be a

natural combination.” The rough life in the mining city was reflected in the brutal play on the field. Playing on fields of granite, the players were an early example of “Butte tough.”<sup>12</sup> Football began in Butte just before the turn of the century. James’ book features pictures of professional teams from the 1890’s. One professional Butte team proclaimed themselves the “World Champions” of 1895. Football was a device in early Butte that was used as social control to keep the rising gang problem under control. According to James, in 1926, a fierce inter-gang rivalry had arisen among the youths in Butte. The competition for turf and access to athletic equipment had led to property damage and rock fights among the gangs. Several youths were arrested and sent to the state industrial school that year. In response, the Butte government created a youth sports program which soon gained national attention. Thousands of youths were said to have participated. The program offered a variety of sports and activities for both boys and girls.<sup>13</sup>

Butte’s young athletes have made their mark in high school sports as well. Butte has become known as the City of Champions due to the number of state championships its high school teams have racked up over the years. The Montana High School Association began its formal high school state championships in 1900. Butte High School won eleven of the first twenty football state championships and has won the title 26 times since. The Butte High team won their most recent state football championship trophy on November 16th, 2012 in what many have called the greatest football game in the history of Butte.<sup>14</sup> When championships in basketball, track, and softball are added to the count, it becomes very obvious that Butte high school athletes have continued the culture of sports and have continued the long tradition of winning.

Bruce Saylor, long time sports editor at the *Montana Standard*, points to the ethnic diversity and rough living conditions as factors that create Butte athletes:

Ethnic competitiveness probably bred the Butte athlete and needing one another to survive dire circumstances made the rivalries mostly friendly, forming teams that were forces with which those from other locales were forced to contend.<sup>15</sup>

Saylor says that, “Butte kids play with their hearts and souls as well as their brains, bodies, talent, arms and legs.” Recalling his early days as a sportswriter in Butte, Saylor says:

The first football game and basketball game I covered in Butte, I noticed the difference. Emotions were dialed up a notch above what I thought I had experienced was the top. I could almost feel the vibration of the importance of the moment oozing up through the ground

and floor between my toes. I still experience the feeling and it still is a tingle.<sup>16</sup>

According to James, "It meant something to be a kid in Butte."<sup>17</sup> Saylor echoes that sentiment:

It means he or she will be teased and envied by those from other places. It means he or she will have hallowed ground in a good sports city. It means he or she has earned respect of the community, it means he or she holds membership in a club of legends, greats and solid citizens. It means he or she has been offered a foundation that can be used toward building a productive life and some help in rearing families of their own thanks to life lessons learned.<sup>18</sup>

The rivalries between teams within the city of Butte have resulted in many examples of fierce athletic competition as well as moments that bind the schools together. The two high schools, Butte High School and Butte Central Catholic High School have sustained a long, intense "sibling rivalry." However, sharing their Butte background, the two schools come together when needed. At Butte High games against other schools, a good portion of the crowd will be made up of Butte Central students and vice versa.

Writing in the *Montana Standard* in 2008, Sportswriter Bill Foley described a girls' basketball game in which the two schools came together in a way that transcends sport. One of the Butte High player's fathers had recently died of cancer, and a freshman player was killed earlier that year by a drunk driver. In addition, the daughter of the Butte Central head coach was undergoing treatment for cancer. The two teams turned what should have been the yearly grudge match into a celebration of the human spirit. The two teams wore matching warm-ups and paid tribute throughout the game to their fellow Butte citizens and athletes. "I couldn't help but think that BC-Butte High rivalry is just like a sibling rivalry. Brothers or sisters will fight like hell. But when times are tough, they stick together, "That's Butte to a T: I can beat him up, but you better keep your damn hands off of him," said Foley.<sup>19</sup>

Sports are much more than kicking or throwing a ball. To individuals it can mean personal glory or fortune. For a city, it can be a reflection of, and creation of a unique cultural identity. Throughout history, athletics have help create communities and bind those communities together.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Elliot J. Gorn and Warren J. Goldstein, *A brief history of American Sports* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Garroux, 2004), 6

<sup>2</sup> Gorn and Goldstein, 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> NYC Department of City Planning

<sup>5</sup> Stephen A. Reiss, *City Games: The evolution of American Urban Society and the rise of sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1989), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Reiss, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ellen Crain and Lee Whitney. *Butte* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Janet L. Finn, *Tracing the Veins: Of Copper, Culture and Community from Butte to Chuquicamata* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 76.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald Story, "The Country of the Young, the meaning of Baseball in Early American Culture." In *Sport in America: From wicked amusement to national obsession*, by Kenneth T. Wiggins, 121-128. Champlain, IL: Human Kinetics, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Bruce Sayler, interview by Kevin Edgar. *Thoughts on unique Butte sports culture* (July 17, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Don James, *Butte's Memory Book* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Publishers, 1975), 275.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>14</sup> Montana High School Association. *Montana High School Association*. 2006. MHSAA.org (accessed July 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Sayler, interview by Kevin Edgar. *Thoughts on unique Butte sports culture* (July 17, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> James, 276.

<sup>18</sup> Sayler.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Foley, "Tap 'er light." *Montana Standard*, January 14, 2008. [http://mtstandard.com/sports/high-school/tap-er-light-how-the-times-have-changed/article\\_4cf1c08f-6f81-52be-8c60-249a58bd3486.htm](http://mtstandard.com/sports/high-school/tap-er-light-how-the-times-have-changed/article_4cf1c08f-6f81-52be-8c60-249a58bd3486.htm).

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