



# Democratic Sports: Men's and Women's College Athletics during the Great Depression (Sport, Culture & Society)

*Brad Austin*

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American public universities suffered tremendous funding cuts during the 1930s, yet they were also responsible for educating increasing numbers of students. The mounting financial troubles, coupled with a perceived increase in the number of “radical” student activists, contributed to a general sense of crisis on American college campuses.

University leaders used their athletic programs to combat this crisis and to preserve “traditional” American values and institutions, prescribing different models for men and women. Educators emphasized the competitive nature of men’s athletics, seeking to inculcate male college athletes (and their audiences) with individualistic, masculine values in order to reinforce the existing American political and economic systems.

In stark contrast, the prevailing model of women’s college athletics taught a communal form of democracy. Strongly supported by almost all female athletic leaders, this “a girl for every game, and a game for every girl” model had replaced the more competitive model that had been popular until the 1920s. The new programs denied women individual attention and high-level competition, and they promoted the development of what was considered proper femininity.

Whatever larger purposes these programs were intended to serve, they could not have survived without vocal supporters. *Democratic Sports* tells the important story of how men’s and women’s college athletic programs survived, and even thrived, during the most challenging decade of the twentieth century.

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