



Sports and Recreation in Ohio

Discover the dynamic history of sports in Ohio, including the accomplishments of our state's athletes, the emergence of organized professional sports and the significance of amateur sports as a leisure activity.

Background

Sports and athletic activities have been an important part in the lives of Ohioans since the state's settlement in the 1780s. As the industrial economy grew and large cities became more dominant, organized athletic activities began to develop. After the Civil War, and especially at the end of the 19th century, professional baseball and football teams were established, and amateur sports clubs formed in the growing numbers of city gymnasiums.

German immigrants brought to Ohio athletic traditions of their homeland that had a significant impact on American culture. Educator Friedrich Ludwig Jahn developed a series of gymnastic exercises, to which he applied the German verb *turnen*. Clubs devoted to improving mind and body through physical training were called *Turnvereins*, and participants were known as *Turners*. Cincinnati was home to the first Turnverein in the United States, established in 1848. Classes were offered for all ages and both men and women participated. The clubs also played an important social function, serving as a meeting place for German-speaking immigrants. Swedish gymnast Pehr Henrik Ling developed another popular style of gymnastics that differed from Jahn's in its use of moveable equipment such as hoops, clubs, and small balls rather than stationary equipment. The two methods of exercise were combined and introduced into the public schools in the late 19th century.

Baseball

Baseball features prominently in early Ohio athletic history. Cincinnati was a leading city in the development of this sport. In 1866, the Cincinnati Live Oaks played the Brooklyn Eagles in Cincinnati's first inter-city match. In 1869, Cincinnati developed the nation's first professional team, the Cincinnati Red Stockings (now known as the Cincinnati Reds). The players were paid \$9,300 a year, an exorbitant salary for the time. The players won 130 straight games in their first few seasons. They were so popular that President Benjamin Harrison, an Ohio native, attended a Reds game in Washington, D.C. in 1892, cheering the Reds to a 7 to 4 victory. Some of the Red Stockings' star players even became nationally known, most notably pitcher Asa Brainard, who was so well regarded that top pitchers on all baseball teams of the 1870s were known as "asa" (which passed into common slang as "ace"). The team was a charter member of the National League, which formed in 1876. In 1919, the Reds won their first World Series; they also won in 1940, 1976 and 1990.

Another important Reds player was William Ellsworth "Dummy" Hoy, a deaf mute. Because he could not hear the umpires' calls, the umpires began to use hand signals that are still used today to indicate balls and strikes.

Cleveland soon followed Cincinnati's lead by professionalizing its team, Forest City, and joining the National League in the 1890s. Denton "Cy" Young (for whom the Cy Young Award



is named), played for the Cleveland Spiders from 1890 to 1898 and played for the Boston Red Sox in the forerunner of the World Series in 1903. Cleveland dropped out of the National League, but became one of the charter members of the American League when it formed in 1901. Originally called the Blues, the Broncos, and the Naps (after star player Napoleon Lajoie), the team settled on the nickname Indians in 1915. The Indians won the World Series in 1915, 1920 and 1948.

Notable Buckeye State baseball players include Moses Walker, who became the first African American to play in the major league when he played with the Toledo Blue Stockings in 1884, and Simpson Younger, who became the first African American college baseball player when he played at Oberlin College in 1867. Stockdale, Ohio, native Branch Rickey (1881-1965) played for Ohio Wesleyan University then became a professional scout, manager and executive. He is famous for hiring Jackie Robinson, an African American, to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, breaking the color barrier in major league baseball. Pete Rose, who was born in 1941 in Cincinnati, broke numerous major-league records, including Ty Cobb's record of career hits. Ohio-born President William Howard Taft was a great fan of baseball, and became the first president to throw a ceremonial first pitch in 1910 at a game between the Washington Senators and Philadelphia Athletics.

Football

Football is another important sport in Ohio's history. Cleveland native John Heisman (for whom the Heisman trophy is named) was a pioneer in the sport and coached at Oberlin College in 1892 and coined the term "hike," which is still used today to signal the start of a play. Additionally, he lobbied for dividing football games into quarters and a rule allowing a forward pass. Football began as a student game. Critics felt that it was "a foolish form of mass brutality," but it caught on. By 1890, high schools and colleges throughout the state had teams. Rivalries between cities, such as Massillon and Canton, and states, such as Ohio and Michigan, began to take shape.

Professional teams were as prevalent as high school and college teams. Many cities had pro teams in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, including such well-known names as the Columbus Panhandles, the Toledo Maroons, the Massillon Tigers and the Canton Bulldogs. In Canton in 1920, the American Professional Football Conference was formed. It was the predecessor of the National Football League. The city is also home to the national Pro Football Hall of Fame, which opened in 1963.

Ohio boasts two football legends, Paul Brown (1908-1991) and Woody Hayes (1913-1987). Brown won national titles coaching college and professional teams, was the namesake for Cleveland's NFL franchise, and started the Cincinnati Bengals. Hayes coached at the Ohio State University for 28 years and was one of the most successful college coaches in history.

Other Ohio sports legends are sprinter Jesse Owens, golfer Jack Nicklaus and racecar driver Bobby Rahal. Owens (1913-1980) was a high-school sensation in Cleveland, then a star athlete for Ohio State. He is best known for winning four gold medals at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. Nicklaus (b. 1940), "the Golden Bear" of Upper Arlington (a Columbus suburb), won a record 20 major championships, and is considered one of the best golfers of all time. Rahal



(b. 1953) was born in Medina, Ohio. His impressive record of wins was highlighted by his victory in the Indianapolis 500 in 1986. After retiring from driving, he became a team owner.

Women in Sports

For women, participation in athletic activities was less common, partly due to fears that sports were damaging to the female body. Around the turn of the 20th century, women began to ride bicycles and do gymnastic exercises, and play golf, tennis, field hockey, baseball, and basketball, often with modified rules. Competition was often discouraged as unfeminine. Throughout the 20th century, opportunities for women to play competitive sports increased, particularly following the passage in 1972 of Title IX, which prohibits gender-based discrimination in federally-funded schools.

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