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Americans & Their Games:
Sports and the Immigrant's Tale I

Who was John L. Sullivan?

What is the ladder of American immigration?

This is the first of a four-part examination of the fusion of one of ***The American Tapestry Project's*** major threads – "The Immigrant's Tale" and one of America's great engines of immigrant cultural assimilation – sports!

John Thorn, Major League Baseball's official historian, has written often about how baseball gave him entrée into American society. Thorn was born in a refugee camp in Stuttgart, Germany in 1947. His father, Richard, a Holocaust survivor, worked there as a translator. In 1949, Thorn's family came to America. They settled in New York City's Queens borough. Baseball cards were his entrée into American society. [1]

Collecting baseball cards was a kid's thing in the early 1950s. Kids flipped them, traded them, put them in their bicycle wheels to make a clicking sound imitating, at least in a young boy's imagination, a motorcycle. Thorn said he learned how to read by deciphering the information on the back of the cards. Thorn was first attracted by the colorful photos, but it was trading cards with the neighborhood kids that made him one of the gang. [2]

Thorn's story typifies that of generations of Americans – from the Irish who dominated 19th century professional baseball to Italian Americans in the mid-20th century to the 21st century Japanese, Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Venezuelans.

Port of entry? Engine of assimilation? How has sports functioned in The Immigrant's Tale?

To answer that we need to delve into the history of American immigration. Our 21st century controversies over immigration are as old the American experiment. As documented in numerous books, most notably John F. Kennedy's ***A Nation of Immigrants***, Tom Gjelten's ***A Nation of Nations*** and Ronald Takaki's ***A Different Mirror***, America is a nation of immigrants. Unless you're descended from an indigenous person –from a Native American – you're descended from an immigrant. Everyone is descended from someone who came from somewhere else.

Some sooner – some later. Some willing – some unwilling. But everyone is descended from someone who came from somewhere else.

It began at the beginning.

John Winthrop, he of “a city upon a hill” fame and first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, emigrated from Suffolk England in search of religious liberty. Paul Revere, he of “one if by land, two if by sea” and “the midnight ride of Paul Revere” to warn that the British are coming, the British are coming, was the son of Apollos Rivoire, a French Huguenot refugee fleeing religious persecution. William Penn founded the colony of Pennsylvania as a refuge for Quakers and other European religious minorities seeking religious freedom.

One of those minorities was the Pennsylvania Dutch – a mispronunciation of Deutsch, which is German for German. The “Deutsch” settled in Philadelphia, encountered anti-immigrant persecution, most notably from Benjamin Franklin who resented their refusal to give up the German language. In the face of this bigotry, they retreated to a new village north of Philadelphia – Germantown.

And, in 1619, the first slave ship unloaded captives in colonial Virginia beginning America’s 400-year-old tale of racial turmoil.

It is the American Story. A nation of immigrants – a nation of people seeking refuge, of people fleeing persecution, of people seeking opportunity.

Surveying the history of American immigration through the lens of sports requires that we first look into four topics: Citizenship, the Ladder of American Immigration, the Phases or Eras of Immigration, and America’s three major legislative acts controlling immigration.

Citizenship

These immigrants fleeing persecution and seeking opportunities came to America wanting to be American citizens. What does it mean to be a U.S. citizen? Citizenship means a "right to have rights," since it serves as the foundation of our fundamental rights derived from and protected by the U.S. Constitution.

How does one become a U.S. citizen? There are two paths to citizenship: birthright and naturalization. These are specified in the ***Citizenship Clause*** of the Constitution’s 14th Amendment. It reads:

> All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. [3]

Naturalization is the legal process by which a non-citizen acquires citizenship. It has taken many different forms. The current process involves two steps:

establishing your eligibility for American citizenship and passing a citizenship test. The current eligibility test includes 15 requirements. They range from being 18 years old, being a permanent resident of the United States for five years, being of good moral character, being willing to serve in the military if needed, and, finally, swearing an oath of allegiance to the U.S. Constitution and to the United States. [4]

Vivek Ramaswamy, a current candidate for the Republican Party's presidential nomination, would limit voting rights to those who can pass the U.S. citizenship naturalization test that all immigrants must pass to become U.S. citizens. [5]

Could you pass it?

What does the test ask?

It consists of two parts: 1) You must demonstrate an understanding of the English language, including the ability to read, write, and speak basic English; and, 2) you must pass an oral civics test. Any given test asks 10 questions from a list of 100 questions. To pass, you must answer six correctly.

Sample questions include: What is the supreme law of the land? The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the U.S. Constitution – what are they? What do we call the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution? What is one right or freedom in the First Amendment? And, finally, there are four amendments to the Constitution about who can vote – name one of them. [6]

As you'll have already noted, the questions are basic. Every American should be able to answer them. Can you?

What is *birthright citizenship*? It means what it says – if you're born in the United States, then you're a citizen of the United States regardless of your parents' status. There is one exception. Children born to foreign diplomats temporarily assigned to the United States cannot claim American citizenship.

Birthright citizenship originated in the 14th Amendment after the Civil War to ensure that the newly freed slaves were included in American society. It almost goes without saying, it has been contested ever since. [7]

As an American citizen, what are your rights, duties, and benefits?

The essential rights are: first, the freedoms granted by the Bill of Rights and subsequent legislation and court decisions. Regarding the Bill of Rights, they include freedom of speech, assembly, and religion; freedom from unwarranted searches and seizures; freedom from self-incrimination; freedom from excessive bail and fines and cruel and unusual punishment. Other basic rights include freedom to reside and work in the United States, freedom to enter and leave the

United States, the right to vote at 18 years of age or older, freedom to run for public office, and the right to apply for federal employment.

What are the benefits of citizenship? If you travel abroad, you get consular protection outside the United States; you have increased ability to sponsor relatives living abroad for emigration to America, which becomes a major culture shifting issue after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965; you can transmit your citizenship to children born abroad; and, lastly, you are protected from deportation.

What are ***your responsibilities and duties*** as a U.S. citizen?

Actually, they are simple; there are only four: 1) you are required to serve on juries, 2) you are required to pay your taxes, 3) once every 10 years you are required to complete a census form, and, 4) you are required to serve in the military if needed to protect the country that extends you these rights and benefits. [8]

Pretty simple, actually.

The Ladder of Immigration

Whether we talk about its earliest experience in the 17th & 18th centuries or the experience of 21st century New Americans, American immigration has followed the same basic pattern throughout its history. At different times, discussing American immigration, I've used the metaphor of a cycle or a wheel that repeats itself over and over again. Recently, I've decided *the ladder* is a more accurate metaphor. The pattern's four steps or stages most closely resembles a ladder as one generation after another enters, assimilates, and climbs the ladder of American society.

The ladder of American immigration follows this pattern:

In Stage 1, the great-grandparents emigrate to America; they grab a foothold on one of the ladder's lower rungs. They get jobs – often menial, dirty, and dangerous jobs others don't want;
often jobs far below their talents. They work hard, they build a home, and, most importantly, scrimping and saving, they get their children educated.

In Stage 2, the grandparents – the children of the original immigrants – work hard.

They solidify their position in American society. They move up several rungs on the ladder. Some of them begin to no longer think of themselves as Polish or Scottish or whatever nationality.

They now think of themselves as Polish- or Scottish-Americans: hyphenated Americans, but *Americans!* They still join ethnic clubs. They still extend a helping hand to other, newer American immigrants from their family or nation of origin. Some assume leadership positions in their community. And they, too, ensure that their children are educated.

In Stage 3, the grandchildren of the original immigrants are established, anchored, in American society. They have established their place – some even climb several rungs higher. Some, not all, obviously, own businesses, are members of the professional classes and have assumed leadership positions in American society. They no longer think of themselves as hyphenated Americans. They are now Americans with little or no emotional attachment to the "old country." Two generations removed from their immigrant ancestors, they have no direct personal memory of the immigrant experience.

In Stage 4, but sometimes it happens as early as Stage 3 or even 2, the great-grandchildren of the original immigrants are totally assimilated into American culture and society. They did not know the original immigrants. They have no memory of the immigrant experience. They are Americans and, having climbed the ladder of American society, many of them pull it up denying others access to the same path they and their ancestors climbed.

So, the arc of the ladder's path goes from passing through the open door of American immigration through struggle and trial to total assimilation into American culture to the immigrants' descendants turning their back on their immigrant heritage and closing the door to future immigrants.

Some version of that cycle, of that sequence of ladders, has happened after every wave or phase of American immigration. But, as we'll discover, once through the door, one of the paths to assimilation, one of the routes up the ladder into American society, has been sports.

'Waves' of Immigration Trigger Legislation

In colonial America, if you could get here and were willing to work you were welcome (it wasn't that clean or that welcoming, but it was still essentially an open door). After the American Revolution, there were three great waves of American immigration that shaped America.

The first wave occurred between roughly 1845 and 1870 when the first non-Protestant, non-British immigrants challenged the Protestant domination. They were, of course, the Roman Catholic Germans and Irish. The second great wave consisted of southern and eastern Europeans between the mid-1880s and the onset of World War I. This wave brought to America's shores millions of Italian, Greek, Slavic, Russian, and Russian Jewish immigrants. Anti-immigrant

legislation, the Great Depression, and World War II reduced mass immigration into America to a trickle between 1924 and 1965. Then, the Immigration Act of 1965 perhaps unwittingly once again flung open the door triggering the Third Great Wave. Between 1970 and today, 47 million immigrants entered the United States. The percentage of foreign-born people residing in the United States today is just slightly less than its peak of 14% in 1870.

Those three great waves triggered three immensely consequential legislative acts seeking to regulate immigration into the United States. We'll look at each in detail as we progress, but for now they are the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Immigration Act of 1924, and the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.

So far, I've mentioned citizenship, briefly skimmed the cyclical pattern of American immigration, hinted at the major waves of American immigration and, admittedly, not said much at all about sports.

What's going on?

Well, to have some understanding of sports as a portal into American society, we needed to have some understanding of the basics of American immigration. Let's expand upon that by looking at those waves of immigration, by looking at how New Americans in each era used sports as their pathway into American society and culture. The first great wave occurred between, just using rough dates, approximately 1840 and 1875.

Even in the 18th century a trickle of immigrants entered the United States between, oh, say, 1790 and 1830. Between approximately 1790 and 1830, on average, 60,000 immigrants entered the country each decade. Then, in the 1830s, that number more than doubled to 143,000 and in the 1840s increased tenfold to almost 600,000.

What happened? Between 1845 and, to pick a date, 1875, immigration to America exploded from two sources. First, between 1845-1849, the number of Irish fleeing the potato famine – the Great Irish Famine – the Great Hunger – jumped from about 50,000 in the 1820s to 780,000 in the 1840s and another 914,000 in the 1850s.

An incredible increase.

In 1840, the total U.S. population was 17.1 million, including 2.48 million slaves.

Between 1831 and 1870, almost 2.3 million Irish immigrated to the United States. But they weren't alone. Those Irish were joined by an equal number of German immigrants fleeing the failed German revolutions of 1848. Between 1841 and 1870, 2.2 million Germans immigrated to America. That combined 4.5 million Irish and Germans changed the face of America.

The twin impact of the arrival of all these New Americans was profound. First, both the Irish and the German immigrants were largely Roman Catholic. They were the first significant non-Protestant immigrants in American history. It would take another century and a half, but their arrival signaled the beginning of the end of the Protestant domination of American culture.

How?

Why?

Well, without getting into the cultural weeds, it was a simple matter of numbers. In 1850, the combined non-immigrant population of the United States was approximately 23 million. The Irish and German Catholics alone totaled almost 4.5 million or 19.6% of the population. When all the numbers were combined, the New Americans represented about 16% of the population. Half did not speak English; almost all were Roman Catholics, the very church whose persecution most of America's earliest immigrant settlers had originally fled.

How did older Americans react? Not well. They confronted the New Americans with hostility, violence, and rejection. American politics during the 1850s was dominated by two topics: the abolitionist movement (and the coming storm of Civil War over slavery) and anti-immigrant bigotry. The New Americans were confronted by signs like "Irish Need Not Apply" and "Say No to Rum and Romanism," for, unlike the older Americans who were embarking on a temperance movement to reduce or ban drinking alcohol, the Irish and the Germans liked their Irish whiskey and German lager.

One of the flash points between the Old Guard Americans and the New German Americans was drinking beer on Sunday. The ban on playing baseball on Sunday had a two-prong focus – one was keeping the sabbath; the other was trying to stop the Germans from their custom of enjoying the beer garden on a Sunday afternoon.

Flags flew warning "Native Americans (not Indians but the older Americans of largely English ancestry) to Beware of Foreign Influence." The American Party – a party of nativist bigotry – had a brief flurry before it flopped. You know it as the "Know-Nothing Party," whose main platform championed anti-immigrant fervor shouting keep "America for Americans." Their members,

betraying an embarrassment about their bigotry, when asked about the party, answered “I know nothing” – hence the name.

How did the New Americans react?

They banded together in common neighborhoods with community life focused on the local church or parish. They formed mutual aid societies, like the Erie Maennerchor and the Hibernian Society and the Sons of St. Patrick. They also gathered in less, shall we say, pristine settings. Remember these New Americans enjoyed a drink. In so doing, they expanded upon an old American custom. They built social clubs, taverns, and saloons, where the men met to socialize, relax, plot politics, and engage in games of chance and other “sporting” activities.

Taverns are an old and essential American custom. They predate the immigrant influx of the mid-19th century. They served as communal gathering places. Some wise guy once said that when Americans moved out of New England and the Middle Atlantic states and settled the land west of the Alleghenies, the first three things they did was build a church, a college, and a tavern – not necessarily in that order. The New Americans followed the same pattern. They built communities of solidarity around church, school, and tavern.

They gave rise to American tavern and sporting culture.

But these 19th century taverns were, perhaps, a bit rougher and tougher than earlier taverns. From Colliers Irish Bar in New York City to Michael Phelan’s Billiard Saloon in New York in 1859 to Nuf Ced McGreevey’s “3rd Base Saloon” in Boston in 1894, these New American taverns were the spiritual ancestors of 21st century sports bars without the banks of TV screens and with a good deal more “gaming” on the side. Some included brothels, others sported bareknuckle boxing and cock fighting. Almost all sported pool tables, and some sort of sporting activity with boxing and baseball leading the way.

So, the new immigrants seized upon two American traditions.

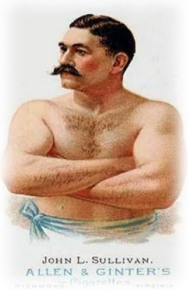
The old was tavern culture – a purely male domain. It served as a sanctuary from the nativist bigotry of the streets and tyrannical bosses.

The new was baseball: the new American game the Irish and German immigrants would dominate.

But first there was bareknuckle fighting.

Illegal in many places, bareknuckle fighting was just what it sounds like – a bareknuckle, no holds barred fight to the finish with teeth and blood spattering the combatants and sometimes the spectators. Bareknuckle fighting provided a venue in which immigrants could fight their way up the ladder of American society.

And the greatest of them all was John L. Sullivan.



Sullivan, the first modern heavyweight boxing champion of the world, was born to an impoverished Irish immigrant family. Embodying the American dream of rags to riches, in one generation, Sullivan changed his family's fortunes. He was the most successful athlete of his era,earning over a million dollars from his sport. No one else had ever done it. Measuring inflation across centuries is tricky, but that million represents about $31 million in 2023. [9]

Tabloid editors loved him. He wasn't just a sportsman; he was the first athlete to become a celebrity in the larger culture.

Sullivan's story starts with the famine – the Great Hunger – and the flood of Irish fleeing to America. Sullivan's father Michael was one of them. Coming to America – coming to Boston, that citadel of Brahmin, Anglo-American, Protestant 19th century culture, the Irish immigrants encountered an American version of the bigotry they had fled.

As Cahir O'Doherty at ***IrishCentral*** said, "They needed a hero and boy did they get one." [10]

Sullivan became more than a mere boxer. As the greatest fighter in the world, he became the living embodiment of the spirit of the fighting Irish. Coming from an impoverished background, Sullivan scored two major points: He signaled to the Brahmin elite that their time would pass and he symbolized the American Dream that anyone could make it here if he was tough enough, determined enough, and fearless enough.

In the process, Sullivan did something no one had ever done before. After winning his championship, he symbolized the new America of railroads and telegraphs creating a nation out of the far-flung states and communities. He went on a nationwide barnstorming tour. He challenged anyone to stay in the ring with him for four rounds. If you could, he'd pay $250. Few accepted the challenge.

Sullivan used the new-fangled railroads embarking on one of the first whistle-stop tours – a whistle stop referred to entering a town's rail station by blowing a whistle signaling the train's arrival. Sullivan made 200 whistle-stops visiting

towns all across America. Irish in the poor neighborhoods of Cleveland, Chicago, and points farther west in Colorado and California, where Irish immigrants were building the railroads, flocked to see their hero. [11]

He became an American folk hero. Like Buffalo Bill Cody, Sullivan created American celebrity culture mingling transportation taking him in the flesh so his adoring fans could see him – just like vaudeville – and the media's new tabloid newspapers like Pulitzer's New York World and Hearst's New York Journal spreading the word of his legend: his drunken binges (Sullivan was a noted boozer); his boasting he could beat any man in the world; his strength – he once knocked down a horse; and his exploits with women – he was one of the great hounds of his era, an era when that was a misguided mark of celebrity.

Sullivan also marked the end of the bareknuckle era. His fight against Jake Kilrain in Richburg, Mississippi in 1889 is considered a turning point in boxing history. It was the last ever bareknuckle heavyweight title bout. It received national press coverage – one of the first sporting events to do so. [12]

Later in life, Sullivan became a teetotaler and supported Prohibition. He reformed his behavior, married his second wife and retired to a farm outside of Boston he called Donnellyross Farm honoring his father's heritage. [13]

If John L. Sullivan was the first genuine sports celebrity transcending his sport to become famous in the larger culture, then baseball and its early Irish adherents made baseball a sport for the people. Early professional baseball was dominated by Irish immigrants and their sons.

That's a lot on the history of immigration today, but next week in Part II we'll explore how Irish and German immigrants dominated 19th century baseball, the second great wave of immigration in the early 20th century, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, and ask and answer "Why do Italian Americans love the New York Yankees?"

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End Notes

1. Kuttler, Hillel, *"Q/A with John Thorn: MLB Official Historian Links Game's Past to Present"* at Jewish Baseball Museum available here accessed August 22, 2023.
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7. See *"Fourteenth Amendment…"* noted above.
8. All of the above at "What Are the Benefits and Responsibilities of Citizenship" available here.
9. *"Value of one million dollars in 1885 in 2023 dollars"* at **CPI Inflation Calculator 1635 to 2023** available here accessed September 27, 2023.
10. For information on John L. Sullivan cf. Cahir O'Dohety "A look at Irish American John L. Sullivan, the greatest boxer of his era" at IrishCentral available here, *"John L. Sullivan"* at **Top HeavyWeights** available here, and *"John L. Sullivan, America's First Superstar Athlete"* at **New England Historical Society** available here accessed September 27, 2023.
11. O'Doherty ***cited above***.
12. Cf. *"John L. Sullivan, America's First Superstar Athlete"* at **New England Historical Society** available here and *"John L. Sullivan"* in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia**, both accessed September 27, 2023.
13. O'Doherty ***cited above***.

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