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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
Dr. Andrew Roth

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





Was Greta Garbo really Max Baer's lover? For that matter, who was Max Baer? All of them the sons of immigrants, who were the early 20th century's great Jewish boxers?

What was eugenics? What did it have to do with "Oregon's Perfect Baby Girl Contest"?

On a much lighter note, did Germany Schaeffer really steal first base?

The Global Summit is over. It's time to pick up ***The American Tapestry Project's*** "Sports and the Immigrant's Quest for Inclusion." In two pre-Global Summit ***Book Notes*** we examined the first two great waves of American immigration – the Irish and Germans in the mid-19th century and the great wave of southern and eastern European immigrants as the 19th century turned into the 20th. Picking up that story's thread in the early 20 century, we'll answer those questions.

The great 19th century Irish ballplayers exploded the anti-immigrant bias of their time as did the great German ballplayers of the next era including Hall of Famers Honus Wagner, Addie Joss, and Babe Ruth. Among those first German ballplayers, however, were many more merely mortal individuals whose experiences highlighted sports as a door into American society.



One of the most celebrated was Germany Schaefer. As Schaefer's biography notes, he was "always willing to entertain the crowd." A better than average player, "he gained his greatest notoriety for 'stealing first base'" The son of German immigrants, Schaefer was born in 1876 on Chicago's South Side in a neighborhood infamous for vice, prostitution, and gang violence. [1] It was a neighborhood James T. Farrell made famous in his great novel about

Irish immigrants – ***Studs Lonigan***.

A key member of the great Detroit Tigers' teams of the 1900s, Schaefer might not have been a great player, but he was a very good player. He was better known for some of his stunts. In a 1906 game against the Chicago White Sox, Schaefer strode to home plate boldly proclaiming he was the greatest pinch hitter of all time. He shouted to the crowd that he'd hit the first pitch he saw into the left field bleachers. [2] He promptly did.

Schaefer is legendary for at least once stealing first base. In an August 1911 game, Schaefer stole second base hoping to draw a throw from the catcher so that his teammate on third base could steal home. Sensing the ruse, the catcher didn't throw to second. So, Schaefer led off second base on the first base side. He then stole back to first base to try to set up the play again. An argument ensued. Schaefer was called out and the inning ended. [3]



Before all of this foolishness, there was Chris von der Ahe. A German immigrant, he owned the St. Louis Browns in the 1880s. Von der Ahe was one of the few owners of that era to make a profit from his ballclub. He did it by charging lower ticket prices so workingmen could attend. He also played games on Sunday, an American “no-no” at the time, and he introduced selling beer at the ballpark. So, a German entrepreneurial immigrant created two American traditions – sports on Sunday and beer sales at the ballpark. [4]



Beginning with Lip Pike in the 1860s, there have been numerous great Jewish ballplayers. [5] Current major leaguers Ryan Braun, Alex Bregman, Ian Kinsler, Joc Pederson, and others continue the tradition. Among many others, they were preceded by Moe Berg, the catcher who was also a spy, Lou Boudreau and Al Rosen of the Cleveland then-Indians, Sandy Koufax, arguably one of the greatest pitchers of all-time, and Ron Blomberg, baseball's first ever designated hitter (DH). On April 6, 1973, Blomberg went to bat for the New York Yankees against the Boston Red Sox's Luis Tiant in the top of the first inning. The bases were loaded. He drew a walk to score a run. In the process, he set two firsts: the first appearance of a designated hitter (DH) and the first DH run batted in. [6]



The greatest Jewish ballplayer was Hank Greenberg, who played for the Detroit Tigers from 1933 to 1947. A great player, in 1938 he hit 58 home runs challenging Babe Ruth's then-single-season record of 60. Greenberg's military career, however, sets him apart. Drafted in May 1940, he entered the Army, but when Congress said men over 28 were exempt, he was honorably discharged. Later, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Greenberg was the first major leaguer to enlist in the Army.

When the war ended, he returned to the Tigers in 1945, hit a home run in his first game, and led the Tigers to a World Series victory. After he retired as a ballplayer, he became Major League Baseball's first Jewish owner/general manager with Cleveland. After baseball, he had a successful career on Wall Street. In 1954, he was the first Jewish player to be voted into the Hall of Fame. [7]

Show business and the music industry in the early 20th century attracted Jewish artists because it was one of the few arenas in American life where Jews did not encounter discrimination. Early American popular music – Tin Pan Alley – was dominated by young Jewish artists. One of them, Irving Berlin, practically wrote the entire “American Songbook.” I’ve mentioned that before in previous **Book Notes** about Christmas Carols and patriotic music. I’ll be doing a two-part series on Berlin for my WQLN/NPR **The American Tapestry Project**. It will air in January and February, 2024. Later, it will be posted to WQLN’s and other podcast websites.

Boxing, to the surprise of some, did the same thing. Jewish immigrants and their sons used boxing as an avenue into American sporting culture. Hard as it might be for people today to grasp, boxing was a major sport in the early 20th century. To succeed in the ring was to succeed in America. Think John L. Sullivan and recall from the **Book Notes** on the African American experience that it was a Jewish fighter named Joe Choynski who taught Jack Johnson how to box. Exploding stereotypes, in the early 20th century there were a number of great Jewish boxers like Maxie Rosenbloom, Sam Berger, and Barney Ross.

But the greatest were Benny Leonard and Max Baer.



Benny Leonard was “one of the cleverest defensive boxers in the history of professional boxing.” He was “noted for distracting his opponents by talking to them.” [8] ESPN ranked him seventh in its rankings of the “50 Greatest Boxers of all time.” [9] When legendary trainer Ray Arcel was asked to name the greatest fighter of all-time, he replied, “Boxing is

brains over brawn. I don’t care how much ability you got, if you can’t think you’re just another bum in the park. People ask me who’s the greatest boxer I ever saw pound-for-pound. I hesitate to say, either Benny Leonard or Ray Robinson. But Leonard’s mental energy surpassed anyone else’s.” [10]

Raised amid the tenements of Manhattan’s Lower East Side, Leonard was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants. Although he lost his first professional bout, Leonard dominated the lightweight ranks during the 19-teens. He won the lightweight championship in 1917 and then beat featherweight champion

Johnny Kilbane in July 1917. [11] Leonard fought numerous bouts during the next decade, winning almost all of them. He finally retired in 1932.

After leaving boxing, with his good looks and the crowd his fame attracted, he performed in vaudeville, making several appearances as a dancer and performer. He appeared in the vaudeville musical “Battling Butler” in 1927. During his boxing career, Leonard played in “Flying Fists,” a series of short films with boxing themes and the silent film serial “The Evil Eye.” [12]

Rated at #22 in **Ring** magazine’s listing of the 100 greatest punchers of all time, Max Baer was the grandson of German Jewish immigrants. [13] Raised in ranching country in northern California, as a teenager and young man Baer worked on cattle ranches and slaughterhouses. Later in life, he said toting heavy carcasses of meat, stunning cattle with one blow of a sledgehammer, and working at a gravel pit developed his powerful shoulders. [14]



Baer started boxing professionally in 1929 but he almost gave it up a year later when he killed Frankie Campbell in a match in San Francisco. The tragedy earned Baer the nickname “Killer.” Baer was charged with manslaughter in the Campbell incident but was acquitted. Campbell’s wife forgave him, saying “It could have been you.” Baer gave Campbell’s widow the money he won from five subsequent bouts. [15] Returning to the ring after a suspension by the California boxing commission, Baer trained under the tutelage of former heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey.

Baer’s comeback was guaranteed when he defeated German heavyweight and Adolph Hitler favorite Max Schmeling in 1933. Baer became a hero among Jews and those who despised the Nazis. Film legend Greta Garbo thought Baer’s victory over Schmeling a “mini victory” against Nazism. She invited him to Hollywood to visit her. They began an affair that lasted until Baer returned to New York to train for future fights. So, yes, Max Baer and Greta Garbo were lovers. [16]

In June 1934, Baer defeated Primo Carnera for the World Heavyweight title. Baer became cocky, according to film but disputed by sportswriters, and lost his next bout to James J. Braddock in one of the great upsets in boxing history. The movie ***Cinderella Man*** is based on the fight. Baer, however, had a second act. He was an extremely good-looking guy. After he retired from boxing, he became a movie star. Not a mega-star, but successful enough that it carried him through the rest of his life. Baer starred with Jean Howard in ***The Prizefighter and the Lady*** and almost 20 other films like ***Africa Screams*** with Abbott and

Costello and *The Harder They Fall* with Humphrey Bogart. He also appeared in vaudeville and early TV variety shows and comedies. His son, Max Baer, Jr., starred in the 1960s' TV comedy classic *The Beverly Hillbillies*. [17]

While all of this was happening, numerous sons of Eastern European immigrants made the same journey. Those athletes included Joe Medwick, sometimes called Ducky. The son of Hungarian immigrants, Medwick starred with the legendary St. Louis Cardinals' "Gashouse Gang" of the 1930s. Or Al Simmons, the son of Polish immigrants, who changed his name from Syzmanski to Simmons because it was easier to pronounce. Simmons starred for the great Philadelphia Athletics teams of the 1920s.



Some became legends, such as Bronko Nagurski and George Halas. Nagurski played for the Chicago Bears from 1930 to 1937 when they were known as "the Monsters of the Midway." He was a member of the first group voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame. Halas, son of Austro-Hungarian immigrants, was the owner and head coach of those same Chicago Bears. He was better known as "Papa Bear." Halas was one of the founders of the National Football League. To this day, the Chicago Bears wear a GSH patch on their uniforms honoring Halas.

Great athletes all, they gave the lie to the anti-immigrant fervor roiling American society in those eras, but it didn't stop immigration's foes. The Immigration Act of 1917 started the legal assault on immigration, but the first law to substantially reduce immigration was the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act of 1924. Albert Johnson was a congressman from Washington state whose anti-immigrant and white supremacist bonafides are well documented. As Adam Hochschild notes, "On the floor of Congress, he talked openly of 'wops', 'bohunks', 'coolies', and 'Oriental off-scourings.'" [18] U.S. Senator David Reed (R-Pa.) "claimed recent immigrants for southern and Eastern European countries had failed to satisfactorily assimilate ... he championed recently passed legislation to severely restrict immigration to the United States." [19]

What inspired this new law? Johnson and Reed's sentiments were not unique. Despite their sons' and grandsons' success as athletes, there was lingering anti-Catholic and anti-Irish hostility from pre-Civil War America, but the main anti-immigrant inspiration was an intense, sometimes vicious, nativist reaction to immigrants from southern and eastern Europe during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

From 1890 until 1920 but particularly between 1900 and 1910, there was a massive surge in immigration from southern and eastern Europe. Italians, Poles, Greeks, and others from Russia and the Balkans came to America in search of a better life. Americans' reactions were split. Business and industry greatly approved. Why? 19th century America's burgeoning industrial expansion needed workers. Solution? Bring in desperate people, fleeing oppression and poverty, willing to work in deep mines, to tend blast furnaces and do the other dirty jobs an industrial economy demanded.

American nativists, however, feared the loss of their cultural identity. Defining white people as only those of Nordic stock, nativists were terrified that America would cease to be white and English because of people vilified by U.S. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge (R-Mass.). He particularly scorned Italians, Greeks, Russians, Jews, and all Slavic people. [20] On the West Coast, increased Asian, primarily Japanese, immigration stoked similar fears.

How did the anti-immigrationists fight this foreign threat? Their chief evangelists were Lodge and Prescott Hall. In the late 19th century, Lodge began fulminating against "the mongrel scum" invading America as he vigorously sought to require a literacy test to enter the country. Hall was the driving force behind the Immigration Restriction League. He advocated eugenics, a since discredited form of scientific racism. He successfully lobbied for the Immigration Act of 1917. It included a literacy test and taxed every immigrant an inflation-adjusted \$162 to enter the country. It also barred almost all Asians. [21]

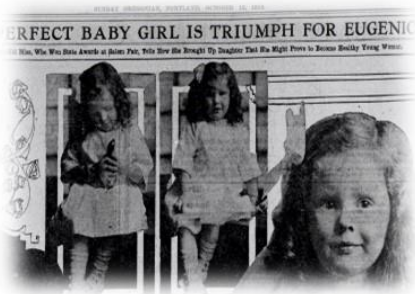
Hall and Lodge earned their ignominious place in American history for their support of eugenics – a pseudo-science that gave respectability to racism. These defenders of Nordic superiority defined "race" differently than we do today. They defined it as nationality; in their scheme, English was a race, French was a race, etc. Thus, the guardians at the gate were members of the English race, but since that excluded highly desirable northern Europeans, they expanded the concept to include all those they called Nordic – essentially, the British and Scandinavians.

Germans and Italians posed opposite problems. Since as central Europeans it could be argued Germans weren't Nordics, the apostles of eugenics classified them as Alpines – a spurious category. The rules of inclusion were malleable but excluded all southern and eastern Europeans. That created a problem. Since they were descendants of the Romans, what to do about the loathed Italians? Simple. Just deny their connection to the Romans. The modern Italians, the eugenicists argued, were not descended from the Romans. They were a bastard race, a degenerate Roman residue.

What is eugenics?

By denying people and groups judged to be inferior from procreating and encouraging those deemed superior, eugenics' advocates sought to improve the quality of a given human population. Dog and cattle breeding for humans. The concept is ancient. In 400 B.C., Plato advocated selectively breeding humans. In the 19th century, it was understood as a way of improving groups of people. First promoted by Francis Galton, Charles Darwin's cousin, it attempted to use the principles of evolution to breed for desirable social characteristics. Darwin opposed this as scientifically invalid because it mistook a secondary or tertiary characteristic for a genetic effect that might be true for the individual but not the group. [22]

In America, the chief proponent was Harvard professor Charles Davenport. In the early 20th century, responding to the influx of immigrants, Davenport's shaky science was seized upon by people from across the political spectrum espousing eugenic ideas to improve the quality of America's genetic stock. They used both *positive* methods, such as encouraging "fit" individuals to reproduce, and *negative* methods, such as forced sterilization of people considered "unfit" to reproduce.



One of their so-called positive attempts was to breed better, more English, more Nordic babies. They sponsored contests promoting better babies, such as Oregon's Perfect Baby Girl Contest. It banned African American and immigrant children from entering. On the negative side, they endorsed banning immigrants from inferior races, such as Italians, Poles, Greeks, Hungarians, and Russians. Remember, they equated race with

nationality. [23]

The eugenicists' influence peaked just after World War I in the work of Madison Grant, whose "The Passing of the Great Race" lamented the decline of northern Europeans, and Lothrop Stoddard, whose "The Rising Tide of Color" bewailed the besieging of Nordic culture by undesirables. You might recall that F. Scott Fitzgerald mocked Stoddard's book in "The Great Gatsby." The eugenics movement became associated with the Holocaust when many defendants at the Nuremberg trials justified their actions by claiming there was little difference between the Nazis and American eugenics programs. Today, the disgraced discipline suggests scientific racism and white supremacy.

Its most consequential impact was in completely changing the trajectory of American immigration through the Immigration Act of 1924. The Act prevented immigration from Asia, set quotas on the number of immigrants from the

Eastern Hemisphere, and provided both funding and enforcement mechanisms to enforce banning immigrants. Its key provisions were: 1) it limited immigration from countries outside the Western Hemisphere and barred immigrants from Asia; 2) of major consequence, it created nationality quotas and set them at 2% of foreign-born members of that nationality residing in the United States in 1890. Why 1890 and not 1900 or 1910 or 1920? Because nationalities with small numbers in 1890 were prevented from immigrating in large numbers. The quotas particularly harmed Italians and other southern Europeans, eastern European Jews, as well as other eastern Europeans and other Slavic people. Third, the Act gave 85% of the quota to western and northern Europeans and those who had an education or trade. Fourth, it established the consular system of the Immigration & Naturalization Service. Fifth, it created the visa requirement. Lastly, it established the Border Patrol primarily to guard the Mexico-United States border. [24]

What were its results?

Henry Cabot Lodge, Sr. and Prescott Hall must have been thrilled.

In 1925, its first year, it cut immigration almost in half. Immigration from Italy fell 90%. The provisions of the act were so restrictive that in 1924/25 more Italians, Czechs, Yugoslavs, Greeks, Lithuanians, Hungarians, Poles, Portuguese, Romanians, Spaniards, Chinese, and Japanese *left* the United States than arrived as immigrants. [24]

Because eastern European immigration did not become substantial until the late 19th century, the law's use of the population of the United States in 1890 as the basis for calculating quotas strangled migration from eastern Europe, where the vast majority of the Jewish diaspora lived at the time. Unintentionally, it made escaping the Holocaust virtually impossible.

As a result of the 1924 Immigration Act, immigration into the United States fell to a comparative trickle between 1925 and the early 1970s. It became a minor issue in American politics. Still, as we'll see next week, the sons and daughters of those "undesirable" immigrants used sports to assimilate into American culture becoming some of America's shining stars. We'll also see how the Immigration Act of 1965, one of the two most important legislative acts of the past 70 years, unwittingly re-opened the door to American immigration. Having done so (remember, "build a wall"?), it launched the ongoing transformation of American culture at the heart of many of our current culture wars.



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.
Scholar-in-Residence
The Jefferson Educational Society
roth@jeserie.org

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