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# Take Me Out to the Ball Game (And Away From Camp): How Soldiers Used Sports to Cope During War Time

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# Take Me Out to the Ball Game (And Away From Camp): How Soldiers Used Sports to Cope During War Time

## **Abstract**

Snowball fights during the Civil War were a pretty big deal.

In fact, sports and fitness in general played a role in shaping ideals of honor, courage, and idolization among the Armies of the Potomac and Northern Virginia, and they proved to have an impact on the life of the individual soldier by distracting him (or possibly her) from the monotonous routine of camp life and establishing bonds of comradeship. [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, sports

## **Disciplines**

History | Social History | United States History

## **Comments**

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# THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

## ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

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### Take Me Out to the Ball Game (And Away From Camp): How Soldiers Used Sports to Cope During War Time

*January 6, 2016*

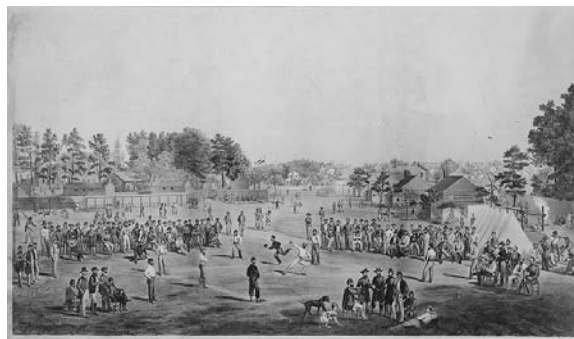
*By Annika Jensen '18*

Snowball fights during the Civil War were a pretty big deal.

In fact, sports and fitness in general played a role in shaping ideals of honor, courage, and idolization among the Armies of the Potomac and Northern Virginia, and they proved to have an impact on the life of the individual soldier by distracting him (or possibly her) from the monotonous routine of camp life and establishing bonds of comradeship.

Boredom seems a triviality compared with the tragedy and hardships of the war's famous battles, but it took its toll on the outlook and mental health of soldiers. The mundane repetition of everyday army life along with grief for lost friends and fear of impending violence caused depression, homesickness, loneliness, and anxiety and contributed to a general gloom among the armies. Soldiers felt captive in their own camps.

The remedy? Sports. A few men would organize a game of baseball and moods were instantly lifted, grievances temporarily forgotten. The physical exertion itself was beneficial to the soldiers' stiff limbs and offered a refreshing change of pace and atmosphere compared to the doldrums of boredom and inactivity. Immersing oneself in the game allowed an escape from plaguing thoughts and an outlet for expression.



*Baseball game between Union prisoners at Salisbury, North Carolina, U.S. National Archives and Records Administration via Wikimedia Commons*

On top of relief, sports forged relationships between soldiers and officers and created a standard of masculinity. Men earned respect on the playing field for their participation, even more so if they had talent. A game of baseball quickly became a microcosm of war: those who displayed audacity, courage, leadership, and critical thinking in sport were idolized and respected. Those

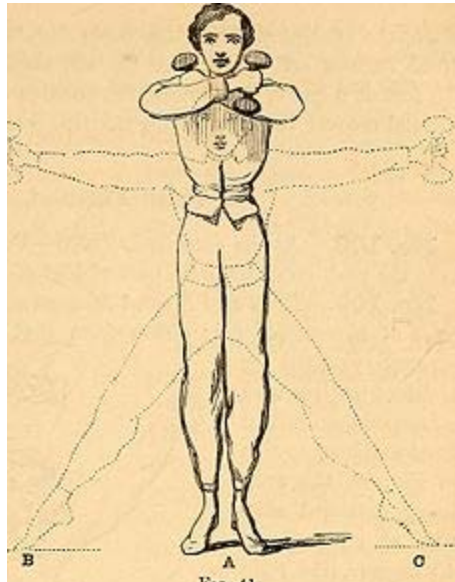


FIG. 41.

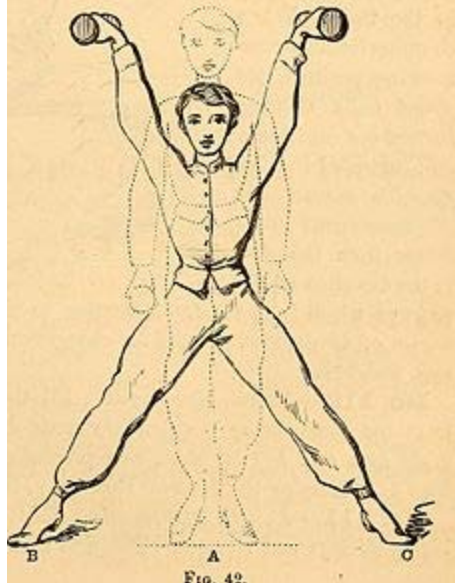


FIG. 42.

Getting swoll in 1864. From the *Hand-book of Calisthenics and Gymnastics: A Complete Drill-book for Schools, Families, and Gymnasium; With Music to Accompany the Exercises* via Wikimedia Commons

who were more athletic were thus considered more masculine and therefore more honorable.

It wasn't just baseball: racing, riding, boxing, swimming, cock fighting (though inhumane), shooting, wrestling, and chasing foxes were popular physical pastimes.

And then there were the snowball fights; not your average backyard rumble, but full-scale battles (it was war, after all) where soldiers could demonstrate tactical skill, bravery, sacrifice, and stealth. Men bonded in camaraderie while pelting their opponents, and those who were disinclined to participate were dragged helplessly into the fight; sitting out was almost sacrilege. These shenanigans also created relationships between privates and officers, as officers themselves would become popular targets and thus jump into the chaos. It has even been told that General Lee himself was hit with a snowball one winter (and was surprisingly cool about it).

Snowball fights created heroes: John Hagerty of John Bell Hood's brigade was exalted for leading 400 men against the Georgia Brigade and withstanding their counterattack, while Montgomery Corse, colonel of the 17th Virginia, took on Toombs' and Wright's brigades. Corse's cries of "no surrender" were heard until he was overwhelmed and defeated. These men, and others that demonstrated tact and courage in the snowy chaos, were deemed suitable to follow into battle.

But I haven't talked about the women yet, and it wouldn't be a proper blog post by me if I didn't write about the women.

While the 400 or so women who went undercover to fight may have taken part in the sportball extravaganza, those on the homefront did not have the same opportunities, as women's participation in sports was limited and usually went against Victorian norms. Instead, they took to a much different (and amusing for the contemporary reader) form of exercise: calisthenics.

In the early 19th century a few medical professionals decided that women—particularly young girls—were growing unhealthy because they were too sedentary, and forms of exercise like dance, gymnastics, and calisthenics became increasingly popular. They became part of school and university curriculums, and instructional publications on the subject appeared, such as Catherine Beecher’s 1860 book *Calisthenic Exercises for Schools, Families, and Health Establishments* and Dio Lewis’ 1862 article “The New Gymnastics,” which illustrated how women could exercise with weights and other props.

However, homefront fitness and soldierly sport were widely out of the realm of comparison, and I will conclude with some final thoughts on athletics as they pertained to the war and its combatants (I hope to explore more sources on women’s health and body image soon). Sports and physicality were integral aspects of army life in their ability to distract, occupy, exert, and bond, but their most consequential was the establishment of a “cult of masculinity,” the mindset that sport was the essence of manhood, and manhood was the essence of war.

Regardless of mentality, however, everyone enjoyed a good snowball fight.

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