

1880–1899

The final two decades of the nineteenth century were an important incubation period for the practice of sport—both amateur and professional. While America was experiencing massive immigration from throughout the world and the key fundamentals of the labor movement were taking shape, exercise and sport were becoming fashionable. Colleges sponsored rowing teams, private tennis clubs were formed, the sale of bicycles rose dramatically and industrial cities became increasingly concerned about providing free space for parks and enjoying fresh air. Sport had its birth at the top and bottom of the economic scale. The affluent embraced croquet, archery and tennis, while boxing, baseball and wrestling became the province of the urban factory worker—including millions of new immigrants crowding the cities.

Baseball was the first major team sport to break into the national scene, and held a dominant position for a most 100 years. Nurtured in thousands of pickup games played in city streets and cow pastures across the nation, baseball by 1871 boasted its first professional league. For the youth of Victorian America, professional baseball offered a glorious career opportunity for both fun and social mobility. The players' decision to don gloves and wear catcher's masks improved play and attracted even more rabid fans. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported in 1883 that “a glance at the audience on any fine day in the ballpark will reveal telegraph operators, printers who work at night, traveling men, men of leisure, men of capital, bank clerks who get away at 3 p.m., real estate men, barkeepers, hotel clerks, actors and employees of the theater, policemen and firemen on their day off, butchers and bakers.”

Boxing, too, emerged as a major sport best symbolized by John L. Sullivan, perhaps the nation's first national sports hero. Heavyweight champion from 1882 to 1892, Sullivan defended his title against James J. Corbett in 1892, drenched in frenetic national newspaper coverage that emphasized that the championship was being held indoors under electric lights, that the fighters' bare knuckles were now encased in boxing gloves and that the event was sponsored by an athletic club—all innovations for the time.

At the same time, while working class America was indulging in sports that paid its players to perform, upper class America was emphasizing that grace and style in tennis, golf or croquet were more important than winning and that cheering was strictly for the "rougher" class. Out of this dichotomy came a tension between amateur and professional sport that would not be resolved until after World War II and would haunt the Olympic Games for much of the twentieth century.

The last two decades the nineteenth century also danced in the reflective glow of the Gilded Age, when the wealth of a tiny percentage of Americans knew no bounds. It was a time of vast, accumulated wealth and abundance of emerging technology—all racing to keep up with the restless spirit of the American people. The rapid expansion of railroads opened up the nation to new industries, new markets and the formation of monopolistic trusts that catapulted a handful of corporations into positions of incredible power and wealth. This expanding technology also triggered a movement of workers from farm to factory, the rapid expansion of wage labor and the explosive growth of cities. Farmers, merchants and small-town artisans found themselves increasingly dependent on regional and national market forces. The shift in the concentration of power was unprecedented in American history. At the same time, professionally trained workers were reshaping America's economy alongside entrepreneurs eager to capture their piece of the American pie. It was an economy on a roll with few rudders or regulations.

Across America the economy—along with its work force—was running away from the land. Before the Civil War, the United States was overwhelmingly an agricultural nation. By the end of the century, non-agricultural occupations employed nearly two-thirds of the workers. As important, two of every three Americans came to rely on wages instead of self-employment as farmers or artisans. At the same time, industrial growth began to center around cities, where wealth accumulated for a few who understood how to harness and use railroads, create new consumer markets and manage a ready supply of cheap, trainable workers. Jobs offering steady wages and the promise of a better life for workers' children drew people from the farms to the cities. A modern, industrial-based work-force emerged from the traditional farmlands, led by men skilled in managing others and the complicated flow of materials required to keep the factories operating. This led to increasing demand for attorneys, bankers and physicians to handle the complexity of the emerging urban economy. In 1890, newspaper editor Horace Greeley remarked, "We cannot all live in cities, yet nearly all seem determined to do so."

Despite all the signs of economic growth and prosperity, America's late nineteenth-century economy was profoundly unstable. Industrial expansion was undercut by a depression from 1882 to 1885, followed in 1893 by a five-year-long economic collapse that devastated rural and urban communities across America. As a result, job security for workers just climbing onto the industrial stage was often fleeting. Few wage earners found full-time work for the entire year. The unevenness in the economy was caused both by the level of change under way and irresponsible speculation, but more generally to the stubborn adherence of the federal government to a highly inflexible gold standard as the basis of value for currency.

Between the very wealthy and the very poor emerged a new middle stratum, whose appearance was one of the distinctive features of late nineteenth-century America. The new middle class fueled the purchase of one million light bulbs a year by 1890, even though the first electric light was only 11 years old. It was the middle class, too, that flocked to buy Royal Baking Powder (which was easier to use and faster than yeast) and supported the emergence and spread of department stores that were sprouting up across the nation.

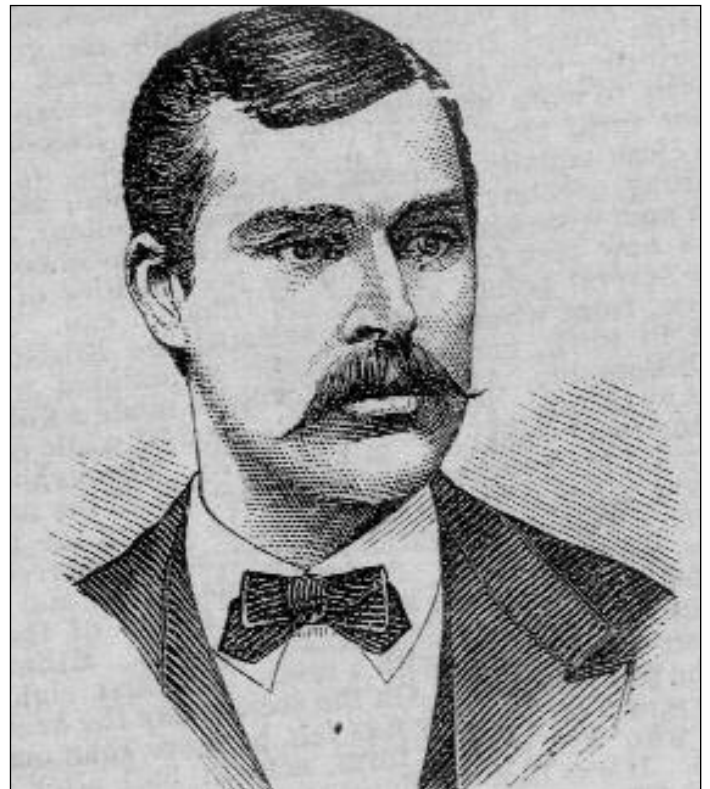


1883 PROFILE

James Raubach, who lived on a stipend from his father, continually angered and frustrated his parents, who wanted him to settle down, marry, and get serious about his life rather than waste his time playing lawn tennis.

Life at Home

- Twenty-seven-year-old James Raubach lived a life built around one overriding passion: lawn tennis.
- His mother wanted to know why he was not married.
- His father, Frank, was seething that his only son, instead of using his fancy Ivy League education on the nobleness of work, preferred the silliness of play.
- James's older sister, who devoted her time to dresses and fancy balls, always inquired why she doesn't see him at the more fashionable balls.
- Only his younger sister noticed that he was only happy when playing tennis with his friends.
- His father had made his money through hard work in the green grocery business and was lucky enough to pull out of the stock market one month prior to the Panic of 1873 that lasted six years.
- As a result, he had sufficient capital to buy up his competitors and monopolize the wholesale food market in New England.
- But no amount of successful business could distract Frank Raubach from what he saw as his son's complete lack of interest in anything but tennis.
- James had repeatedly told his father that he would settle down and find a girl to marry, but it was hard when all of the British nobility kept coming to America to marry the most eligible girls.



James Raubach preferred playing tennis to just about anything else.



James was only happy when playing tennis with friends.

- Frank told his son that he might have a better chance of finding a girl if he wasn't so busy with his tennis club all the time.
- He had also hinted that unless James settled down, married and got a job, his stipend would end sooner rather than later.
- James's father demanded that he attend the Vanderbilts' ball, known to attract a large number of eligible young ladies.
- Several years earlier, James had bought a house in Harlem on 116th St., a prosperous area where he could live easily off the stipend of \$800 his father sent him once a month.
- Thanks to the elevated railroads, installed in Harlem in 1880, an increasing number of people were moving into the area.
- The train also allowed James to get to his club without having to hire a carriage, which made his money go much further.
- He was careful with his allowance.
- He didn't even consider trying any of Mr. Edison's new light bulbs because the cost would force him to get a job.
- James rarely drank, though he did go out with his friends after matches to the bars.
- He rarely dated the women who fluttered around him.
- Before lawn tennis, James' passion was cricket.
- Now he believed tennis was far more dynamic than cricket and had a better chance of success in the United States.

Life at Work

- James Raubach was a founding member of the United States National Lawn Tennis Association, which was a merger of the New York, Boston, and Philadelphia Lawn Tennis Clubs.
- The first meeting of the National Lawn Tennis Association was held at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, New York, on May 21, 1881.
- The impetus for the founding was the inconsistent rules and equipment used around the country.
- These problems became manifest in the 1880 lawn tennis tournament held on Staten Island by the Staten Island Cricket and Baseball Club on September 1.
- The *Richmond County Sentinel* wrote about the tournament, “It will no doubt furnish quite a good deal of amusement to Staten Islanders to see able-bodied men playing this silly game.”
- The prize was a silver cup engraved with “The Champion Lawn-Tennis Player of America,” worth about \$100.
- The first problem arose over the size of the ball.
- Two members of the Beacon Park Athletic Association in Boston complained that the ball, manufactured by Ayres of England, was two-thirds the size of the ball they played with in Boston.
- The judges pointed out that the ball had “Regulation” stitched on it, and that if the two gentlemen did not wish to use the ball, they could pull out of the tournament.
- Another argument erupted about the scoring method of counting to 15, that had been taken from the game of rackets.
- The height of the net caused another argument.
- Afterwards, the National Lawn Tennis Association was created in part to codify the rules of the game.
- Thirty-six delegates, who represented 19 clubs directly, and 16 more by proxy, gathered to inaugurate the association.
- James was a member of the Country Club of Westchester County on 59th Street.
- They decided to hold a national championship in Newport, Rhode Island.
- This was far more successful, although unlike the previous tournament, was open only to club members, not to the public.
- They avoided controversy before the game, announcing that the Ayres ball would still be used.
- The singles game was won by R. D. Sears, an innovator who played the game differently than most.
- Traditionally, players stood close to the net, but Sears played back near the serving line.
- This allowed him more time to reach a ball hit to him and return it.
- James said that it was the most exhausting game of tennis he had ever played, and spent much of the rest of the singles tournament studying Sears’s game.
- Since then James had entered every tournament he could, though he never placed very high.
- He thought it was important to check his game against the best in the country.
- It was very hard to practice regularly in the winter because there were very few indoor tennis courts in the country.
- Some were set up in empty halls and armories, but there were almost no covered courts as there were in England.
- He tried to convince his father to let him and his friends practice in his house, but was never successful.
- The next tournament was played at the Newport Casino.