

America's Sporting Hub An Introduction

When the Puritans sailed to Boston's shores to create a society founded on their religious ideals, one of the secular vices they were hoping to escape was organized sports. Surely, Boston's forbearers would be shocked to discover the descendants of their "city upon a hill" worshipping a pantheon of athletic gods in sporting shrines throughout the region.

Sports are intricately woven into the fabric of Boston and are an essential part of the daily lives and psyches of its citizens. For Bostonians, sports are a constant source of intense ecstasy and—on more occasions than most fans would care to remember—heartbreak. The vibe of the city is often dictated by whether the home team won or lost the night before. On mornings after Boston teams play on the West Coast, you can count on seeing bleary-eyed commuters on the T. Sports stories routinely make the front pages of the city's newspapers, a sports station dominates drive-time radio, and television ratings for Red Sox games trounce network programs. How sports crazy is Boston? Well, when it came time to christen the new tunnel under Boston Harbor, the city chose to honor not a politician, military hero, or Founding Father, but Ted Williams, a baseball legend who hadn't donned a Red Sox uniform in thirty-five years.

And while Boston has a reputation as being a professional sports town, tickets to minor league baseball games and college hockey games regularly sell out, fans pack high school football fields on Thanksgiving mornings, and tens of thousands line the banks of the Charles River to cheer amateur rowers. Basically, if you put up a scoreboard, Bostonians will come.

Boston has always been America's sporting capital, but with the recent championships of the Red Sox, Patriots, and Celtics, the title has never been more deserved. That success has of course brought with it the fair weather fans, but the majority of Boston sports fans are die-hards who stick with their teams through thick and thin, through Duck Boat parades and mind-numbing futility.

The relationships between die-hard Boston sports fans and their teams are lifelong love affairs—and as with all affairs of the heart, there are giddy highs and rocky lows. Fans invest their precious time and treasure into these relationships—purchasing tickets, merchandise, and plane fares to hit the road to cheer on their teams. Stomachs churn during big games, making the victories that much sweeter, but if championship dreams are suddenly snuffed out, a true fan feels as if he or she has been punched in the gut and will start to exhibit the five stages of grief.

Boston sports fans idolize superstars who deliver championships and stay loyal to the home teams. But this intensity cuts both ways, and Boston fans are known to react like jilted lovers when one of their heroes skips town to take up with the enemy. (You haven't been the only one, Johnny Damon.)

It shouldn't be a surprise that a city known as the Athens of America shares with the ancient Greeks a love of sports and an appreciation of the role they play, along with intellectualism and spirituality, in the formation of a well-rounded person. And perhaps sports are treated with zeal in Boston because they are the city's guilty little pleasure, a chance for normally staid Bostonians to shed their austere past and let loose. Or perhaps it's because sports are quintessential meritocracies, where success and failure is based on individual talent and tenacity rather than social and economic background, a democratic concept that still resounds in the city that launched the American Revolution.

The reason for Boston's sports obsession could also be a little more evident. Quite simply, the city has been blessed with some of sports' most storied franchises, brightest stars, and memorable moments. Iconic settings such as the Green Monster, parquet floor, Citgo sign, and Heartbreak Hill are familiar to sports fans around the world. Some of sports' greatest legends—Ruth, Russell, Orr, Bird, Flutie, Yaz, Brady, Williams—have thrilled the hometown fans. Just mention the jersey numbers 4, 9, 12, and 33, and sports fans instantly nod in recognition.

There have been some incredible chapters of sports history written by Boston's teams too. Etched into the memories of fans across the country are moments such as Carlton Fisk furiously waving his extra-inning blast fair during the 1975 World Series, Bobby Orr flying through the air after clinching the 1970 Stanley Cup, John Havlicek stealing the ball, Adam Vinatieri booting a pair of Super Bowl winners, and the Red Sox cowboying up after their backs were against a pinstriped wall in the 2004 American League Championship Series.

Despite all that history, Boston was certainly never predestined to be a great sports town. While the Puritans weren't necessarily the monolithic spoilsports that they are often portrayed to be, they didn't embrace athletic pursuits either. The Puritans tolerated hunting and fishing, but they drew the line at ball games and popular Elizabethan blood sports, such as bear baiting and cockfighting.

It seems the Puritans packed their contempt of ball games and blood sports with them on the *Arbella* and brought them to Boston from the motherland. The city's forefathers believed that spectator sports were incubators of morally corrupt behaviors such as gambling and frivolous activity that profaned the Sabbath. (The latter objection remained firmly entrenched in Boston for centuries with the blue laws prohibiting some Sunday sporting events well into the 1900s.) They also shunned sports such as tennis for their popish origins; other sports, such as horse racing and football, were equally rebuffed for their perceived risks to public safety.

While spectator sports gained popularity in other American colonies in the early 1700s, strong opposition remained in New England. Bowling and swimming were among the few sporting activities to be found in colonial Boston, and horse racing was about the only organized spectator sport tolerated in the city during the eighteenth century because it promoted military training. And even then, horse racing was forbidden within four miles of any town center.

The city's sporting fervor didn't come of age until the middle of the nineteenth century. During the latter half of the 1800s, the Industrial Revolution gave rise to a wealthy merchant class and, in turn, a greater amount of leisure time. Flush in time and fortune, Boston Brahmins baptized tennis, golf, and yachting. Their sons who played on the fields of Boston Common became the pioneers of baseball and football.

On the other end of the social strata, immigrants who poured into Boston in the 1800s brought along their own pastimes, such as cricket, soccer, and hurling. But they also joined with the social elite in patronizing sports already entrenched in the American consciousness, and they saw the opportunity that sports provided for social mobility. Heavyweight champion John L. Sullivan, the son of immigrants from the Emerald Isle, became an idol among the Boston Irish. Francis Ouimet, another product of immigrant parents, captured the city's attention along with the 1913 U.S. Open golf tournament at The Country Club. Even today Rocky Marciano is beloved by Italian-Americans in his hometown of Brockton, nearly forty years after his passing.

Just like today, Boston in the early 1900s offered a smorgasbord of choices for the die-hard sports fan. For instance, Bostonians who picked up *The Boston Globe* on Bunker Hill Day in 1902 could scan the day's sporting program and find a wealth of choices on land and water. Baseball fans could head to the Huntington Avenue Grounds to watch the city's American League team take on Cleveland in the morning and then cross the tracks to watch the National League nine square off against New York in the afternoon. Racing fans could attend steeplechases at The Country Club in Brookline, follow motorcycles circling the track at Cambridge's Charles River Park, or watch the Dorchester Gentlemen's Driving Club race their trotters in a matinee at Readville Trotting Park. Golf clubs staged match play competitions, and the Longwood Cricket Club hosted the Massachusetts state championship tennis tournament. Cricket matches and amateur boxing were on the docket. Meanwhile, mariners could watch any number of yacht races in Boston Harbor, and crews from around the metropolitan area took to the Charles River for a rowing regatta. Even devotees of the new horseless carriages could join in the fun and watch the Massachusetts Automobile Club on a run from Boston to Cohasset.

It's clear that today's die-hard Boston fans are just the latest custodians of a rich sporting heritage that spans generations. And the Hub is a city that deeply honors its traditions. Sports are no exception. The Boston Marathon, Harvard-Yale football, and the Beanpot are quintessential Boston events that are not just athletic competitions, but celebrations of the city's past.

Boston sports fans may have a reputation for provincialism, but they are anything but an insular community. Travel to any part of the country wearing a Patriots hat or Celtics jacket and you'll quickly discover kindred spirits. You can even travel to the far side of the world and find fans in a Red Sox bar. You may not share a language or a culture with the locals, but you have a more important bond—a love of the Sox.

Sports are the great equalizer—crossing not only linguistic and cultural boundaries, but those of ethnicity, power, and economics. The fates of the local sports teams are fodder for

conversation from the halls of power in the State House to the lines at city soup kitchens, from the Italian cafes of the North End to the Irish pubs of Brighton and the taquerias of East Boston. In stadiums, bars, and living rooms, Bostonians come together to cheer on the home teams with a singular voice.

In this most historic American city, sports connect Bostonians not only to people around the city and around the world but to distant ancestors and family. After all, Boston is a city where season tickets are birthrights passed down from generation to generation. Fans can go to a baseball game at Fenway Park and sit in the same exact seats as their great-great-great grandparents.

When the Red Sox broke their 86-year championship drought in 2004, thousands of fans made intensely personal pilgrimages to the gravesites of family and friends to share the good news. That's because at its most basic form, being a die-hard sports fan in Boston is about joy, it's about heartbreak, it's about honoring the traditions of the past, and it's about unbreakable bonds with our families and our community. In a sense, it's an experience of the faithful. And for that, hopefully the Puritans can see some virtue and forgive us our trespasses.