

PREFACE

Shady Avenue

The satellite trucks and crowds that coalesce around American tragedies are gone. A newly installed gate, a chain-link fence adorned with paper stars, some with the message “Keep Strong,” remains. After the mass shooting at Pittsburgh’s Tree of Life Synagogue, a local designer developed a logo consisting of three colored hypocycloids—red, blue, and yellow pointed stars—like those long adorning the helmet of our city’s beloved professional football team, the Pittsburgh Steelers. Only now one was a golden Star of David. The phrase “Stronger Than Hate” accompanied the image, and this message was quickly embraced by the grieving city. The symbol was an ideal blending of Pittsburgh’s identity: toughness forged in a defining industrial past. We are blue collar and immigrant, an identity manifest in our play, the teams we worship. As the designer noted on his Facebook page, “It was a perfect basis for an image of hope.” The logo soon spread across the Internet and onto thousands of T-shirts sold to aid victims’ families or to make a quick buck. I ordered four.

As an embodied cultural practice, sport is replete with both personal meaning and social significance, and few places more dramatically exemplify the meaning of sport to a community than Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The iconic Pittsburgh Steelers often stand as proxy for the city’s identity despite the steel industry’s near complete disappearance from its

riverbanks—the exodus of its workers. That its fan base calls itself a nation, the Steeler Nation, underscores the role of modern spectator sport in providing the invented histories, practices, and symbols that unite disparate peoples into a collective, a nation of remembrance. Pittsburghers of my generation are, after all, a diaspora. Sport operates as a substitute for home: the landscape with its rivers and bridges and hollers, the secular and once sacred that bound us, the cultural glue flowing from communal institutions and their inherited narratives. The games we play and watch now feed collective desires to remember Pittsburgh and define ourselves, our community, and what we hope to be. Sport offers an escape from a world of unremitting change, shifting borders, but one that often involves forgetting who and what we really have been.

This book narrates the social and economic evolution of the greater Pittsburgh area through the lens of sport. Drawing from a range of sources—institutional records, newspaper accounts, legislation, court cases, oral histories, literature, and photographs—I describe how the region's dominant institutions utilized sport to define and enforce visions of identity and community that promoted white supremacy, unchecked capitalism, and racial segregation. These influential institutions touted genteel white outdoorsmen, compliant immigrant industrial workers, and heroic male athletes, while they excluded and demonized those unlike them, justifying their denial.

I analyze how, with varying agendas, sometimes clashing visions, state and local government agencies, media, corporations, fans, religious organizations, and players shaped the meaning of our play, who we are. Institutions sought to mold productive workers, true sportsmen, and proper girls, and to maintain their leaders' interests. Others resisted, and our soccer pitches, hunting grounds, rivers, basketball courts, pools, and playgrounds have been sites of contestation: over the meaning of our play and, most of all, over who can play.

The general failure in media and sports writing to clarify how historical forces such as systemic racism, global capitalism, and politics influenced who got in the game normalizes the limited representation of Asians and others. Many Americans view sport as defined by meritocracy and assume a group's absence is due to their lack of something—cultural, biological. We disappear, outside the reach of history's narrative voice. Unless one explores such axes in the historical record, bias can seem but natural evolution and the hagiographies of sports idols accurate chronicles of America's past.

This history of western Pennsylvania begins then with the earliest

Asian migrants to the region, the Chinese. I recount their experiences in chapter 1, "From Nations You Know Not: Race, Labor, and Play in Western Pennsylvania." Asian experiences frame the book's exploration of the intersections of sport, identity, and memory because of the unique positioning of Asians in American society. Asians' presence drove American society to define the legal, physical, and social boundaries to opportunity—migration, labor, citizenship, civil rights, and recreation. Our presence has insisted on the questions: What is race? Whiteness? What is possible? The answer for Asians was: not much in the Pittsburgh region. But it was not for lack of game.

Chinese arrived in the area in the late 1800s, first as replacement workers for a local factory, and this role as antagonists to white workers defines local history, with Asians, African Americans too—demarcating the boundaries of the racial and industrial order. The region's powerful labor unions and lawmakers lobbied for and enacted legislation and boycotts targeting the Chinese and their businesses, mainly laundries and restaurants. Media portrayed Chinese men as predators and the Pittsburgh City Council sought to bar white women and girls from the alleged vipers' dens: Chinese restaurants. Chinatown was a neglected, impoverished neighborhood cut off from the expanding recreational opportunities available in Pittsburgh. Racial segregation of public space was the rule. Yet a set of privileged Asian and Pacific Islander athletes excelled in local venues and enjoyed both unique social mobility and media acclaim. This group included a crack baseball team of mainly ethnic Chinese from Hawaii who barnstormed the area from 1912 to 1916 and whupped a lot of local college, amateur, and semiprofessional teams. Several members settled in Pennsylvania and were talented enough to receive major league offers, but not white enough to leap the color line. Their opportunity remained constrained, like Asians in Pittsburgh, even if they were clearly capable and willing to succeed, just as formerly incarcerated Japanese Americans were.

By the late 1800s, Asians were excluded from the financial and social rewards of Pittsburgh's industrial boom and expanding recreational opportunities. White residents too were not a monolith and the area's economic growth established and reinforced disparities in wealth and power between the ruling mainly WASPish elite and the largely southern and eastern European immigrant laboring class. No other industry better exemplified the vast inequities of industrial capitalism than coal mining, the subject of chapter 2, "Corner Kicks and Coal: Soccer, Community, and Recalling a Coal Mining Past." Coal towns were racially segregated fiefdoms in the stranglehold of coal companies that employed their own private police

force, the despised Coal and Iron Police. Accidents and violent strikes defined the industry, and topflight, physical soccer. The coal industry's labor and social conditions in southwest Pennsylvania spurred the development of a robust soccer community during the first half of the twentieth century. Local amateurs became national champions and Olympians, and media widely promoted the local game and exploits of the popular teams and star players. Many teams were founded by coal companies, and the class and community-specific nature of soccer here and its ties to a bloody industrial past challenges common narratives of the game's allegedly suburban or mainly ethnic roots in the United States. Soccer in the area was much more American than we acknowledge—its growth tied to industry, mass media, and social inequality.

The region's famed industrial expansion fueled by coal radically reshaped the social and natural worlds: enriching and empowering a select few, warping American democratic ideals, and destroying the rich native flora and fauna. It also spurred the expansion of fishing and hunting in Pennsylvania, the focus chapter 3, "Poached Trout: Fishing and Hunting in Penn's Woods." The Commonwealth played a key role in the history of outdoor sports, home to the country's earliest fishing and hunting clubs and lodges, getaways for eastern elites including Pittsburgh's industrial and banking magnates. I detail how in the early 1900s these powerful interests and allies used their economic, social, and political capital to develop the state's game agencies and ground them in core beliefs: science-based game management practices, public access, and gentlemanly recreation for WASP sportsmen. Media and state agencies presented the region's southern and eastern Europeans as dangerous threats to the natural environment, and Pennsylvania passed laws barring them from hunting or fishing. They viewed Black people as menaces as well, and I focus specifically on the rarely acknowledged history of Pittsburgh's African American hunters and anglers. The practices and experiences of these men and women expand the history of conservation beyond nostalgic narratives centered in whiteness, maleness, and industrial philanthropy and can inform current efforts to increase participation in these waning sports that are crucial to the preservation of natural resources.

Recreation in the Three Rivers region was often segregated by class, gender, race, and faith, but it also provided opportunities for residents to connect across such boundaries, including conservation efforts and interracial coalitions to combat racism. Pittsburgh's dramatic landscape of bridges and steep hillsides, coupled with urban planning, housing segregation, and suburbanization, however, led to entrenched racial segregation,

including in recreation. In the first half of the twentieth century, philanthropists, social service agencies, industry and city planners argued for and expanded the recreational infrastructure of the city and the opportunities for its residents—founding parks, playgrounds, stadia, swimming pools, and professional and amateur sports teams, competitions, and leagues. When residents were denied access, they created separate institutions such as the Bucktails Fishing and Hunting Club and the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House (IKS), the focus of chapter 4, “Basketballs, Bunk Beds and Bridges: The Irene Kaufmann Settlement House and Its Neighbors.” I analyze the settlement’s evolution amid the pressures of Americanization and racial integration as its surrounding community transformed. The IKS was originally a women’s organization in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, serving Jewish girls’ spiritual needs, which expanded into a community organization serving an ethnically and spiritually diverse neighborhood. The settlement’s recreation programs, especially competitive athletics, grew increasingly robust and settlement staff invested in sport to mold the physical and moral character of members. Some in the Jewish community, however, argued that this emphasis on sport instead promoted the secularization of Jewish youth and questioned its growth.

The IKS offered athletic opportunities for girls and women, but they were secondary and declined as the organization struggled to integrate its increasingly Black clientele during the post–World War II era. The institution eventually relocated in the late 1960s, following the upwardly mobile Jewish community to the wealthy suburbs of East Pittsburgh. Like others, the community was streaming to Pittsburgh’s expanding suburbs and seeking recreation even farther afield, in summer camps that were popping up across Pennsylvania. Outdoor recreation was increasingly touted as an antidote to industrial urban life, and local institutions increasingly provided resources and opportunities. Summer camps became widely popular in the Pittsburgh area but were limited almost entirely to white youth. The IKS’s Camp Emma focused on the promotion and maintenance of Jewish identity, further separating Jewish kids from their nonwhite peers.

Local sporting practices demonstrated the region’s entrenched racial segregation, but also interracial efforts to counter such ills. Progressive members of the Jewish community and other white citizens fought alongside Black residents in the 1950s and 1960s to integrate local municipal swimming pools such as Highland Park. Local law enforcement and anti-communist judges stymied their efforts, upholding the racial order, which became further embedded in the city’s geography through the cumulative impact of rapid suburbanization, white flight, segregation, and urban rede-

velopment. Pittsburgh's business and political elite of the time fostered a series of ambitious projects in the city to address urban flooding, air quality, transportation, and business development, part of Pittsburgh's Renaissance period.

Unfortunately, Pittsburgh's once powerful industrial base began to implode, and in the 1970s and 1980s thousands of industrial workers left in search of new dreams elsewhere. In chapter 5, "Terrible Towels and Sixty-Minute Men: The Pittsburgh Steelers and Remembering a Black (and Yellow) Past," I recount how locals embraced the Pittsburgh Steelers, including African American athletes like Franco Harris, as symbols of white ethnic pride and blue-collar masculinity as the once woeful team became the most dominant in the NFL. As with soccer and coal mining in earlier generations, football and steel were bound together, if in mostly unacknowledged ways. The Steelers were a team dominated by Black athletes and possessed a progressive history of minority hiring. Steeler fans, in using Black athletes as celebratory symbols, divorced themselves from the historical challenges of local Black life, including police violence, and the steel industry's long mistreatment of African American workers. White fans and media failed to apprehend the deep, persistent costs of being a Black person in Pittsburgh that extended well beyond its playing fields and pools.

I end the narrative by returning to local Asian American history, discussing the life and career of the Pittsburgh Steelers star receiver Hines Ward and the recent influx of Asians that is again reshaping the local. The work and play of new Asian migrants challenge the region's imagined narrative of white identity promoted through sport, who we mean by *yinz*, the local form of the second-person plural that confounds outsiders. How serviceable are these inherited stories of identity for the Pittsburgh of today and tomorrow? The city is now an aging postindustrial metropolis, whose white working-class residents migrated out of the region en masse a generation ago. Its economy is now anchored in education, health care, finance, and technology sectors that attract international migrants from India, Nigeria, and the United Kingdom. Hines Ward, a biracial transnational migrant who became an international star due to his Black Korean heritage, illustrates the historical complexity of local identity in the modern world long defined by fluid borders, mass media, and persistent racial anxieties. His story and that of the city's other residents—coal mining soccer players, Jewish female hoopsters, Black summer campers, and Bhutanese refugee youth—offer complicated, multivocal notions of the local and a critical history to reconnect present Pittsburgh to its past.

I include my own narrative as an angler, athlete, fan, and Japanese American to underscore this ongoing contestation over the cultural meaning of sport in Pittsburgh, its legacy. My feelings of alienation, belonging, and nostalgia underscore the complex, even contradictory meanings of sport and western Pennsylvania. Though Pittsburghers, like other Americans, have characteristically portrayed sport as exemplifying hope, the promise of opportunity and tolerance in a democratic society, the region's history illustrates the inertial pull of racism, nativism, and capitalism that has run through our games. We made our play spaces exclusively white; passed laws to keep guns from immigrants; beat Black kids trying to swim; and dumped tens of millions of public dollars into corporate sports' infrastructures in the name of public welfare, while long impoverished communities continued to suffer.

Whether just a lazy swim on a hot summer day, a perfectly placed fly cast, a full volley buried into the upper corner of the net in double overtime, or a deflected pass barely caught and returned for the winning touchdown as the clock expires, the meaning of any sporting activity is fluid, despite simplistic, comforting stories in media and public history. Franco Harris's touchdown in 1972 against the despised Oakland Raiders was a spectacular play, but only became the Immaculate Reception in hindsight and was, despite later claims, ignored by many locals and ascended to holiness only over time. The term fit the assumed Christian character of the city, and was aspirational, an act of God's grace during a time of shared economic pain. For in sport we trust.

Sport entices us with the physical challenge it presents—to command our bodies, to overcome. We witness the possibility of the body. But, in these arenas and on our rivers and streets, they remain vulnerable to definitions we ascribe to them through the stories we tell about who we are, the meaning of our play.