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**Michał Mazurkiewicz***The Jan Kochanowski University in Kielce**Institute of Foreign Languages**ul. Świętokrzyska 21D, 25-406 Kielce, Poland**E-mail: michalmazurkiewicz@op.pl**Research interests: American, British, and Polish culture***AMERICAN SPORT AND THE SPORTS HEROES OF THE ROARING TWENTIES**

*The aim of the article is to show the role of sport in American society against the background of a very important—for many reasons—period of great social transformation in the United States, one which visibly gathered pace in the 1920s. The author presents different aspects of popular culture, which was in full bloom on account of the following factors: the joy after World War I, a sense of optimism, the development of the economy and industry, the growth of big cities, and the greater affluence of the citizens. The analysis of that unusual decade corroborates the role of sport and its great power of influence on society. In an age when technology and mass production had robbed experiences and objects of their uniqueness, sports provided some of the unpredictability and drama that people craved when looking for romance and adventure. The reasons for the popularity of sport in the USA are presented, as well as the major sports disciplines and heroes of American sport who, in a time when mass production seemed to be making individuals less significant, met with a favorable response—people clung to the heroic personalities of sports figures. The analysis of the beginnings of professionalism in sport, the beginnings of organized support, and sports broadcasting, leaves no doubt as to the significance of the period. As the article demonstrates, it was a time of rapid and profound transformation in the realm of sport. Every serious examination of phenomena in contemporary American sport—and this is also true in the case of other countries—without a knowledge of the specificity of sport in the 1920s, would be far from perfect.*

*KEY WORDS: sport, baseball, boxing, the Roaring Twenties.*

**1. The 1920s in America: General Description**

The decade of the 1920s—the Roaring Twenties—is often called the beginning of modern America and, to be precise, this description concerns different spheres of life. Many interesting social phenomena appeared and evolved at that time, and had far-reaching consequences visible even in today's American society.

It should be noted that one of the most important features of that period was af-

fluence. During the first few years after World War I, the country started to prosper (higher national income), enjoyed the first place in world production, and its citizens became much richer. Consequently, this led to the birth of consumerism and significant changes in lifestyle and culture.

Visible developments in the field of technology were taking place, and businessmen like Henry Ford became popular heroes (“the great industrial hero”—see Wecter 1972: 420). Revolutionary changes in methods of production (mass production)

made technology affordable to most people. American factories produced a huge number of goods every year, which made lives easier and more comfortable: cars were sold in bigger numbers; radio gradually entered more and more homes and became the first mass broadcasting medium. Many people throughout America would gather in their living rooms to tune in to sports, concerts, or sermons. Most importantly, the mass radio audience brought about the Americanization of immigrant communities (Johnson 1999: 723). Talking about the media, they focused on celebrities, especially the stars of the cinema and sports heroes.

The most celebrated hero of that era was probably the pilot Charles Lindbergh, the first person to fly alone across the Atlantic Ocean (from Paris to New York). The famous flight took place in 1927 and lasted more than 33 hours. “Lucky Lindy” definitely stimulated the aviation industry, but more importantly, he filled the hearts of American citizens with the hope that even things that had seemed inconceivable could be achieved. According to Dixon Wecter (1972: 424), Lindbergh’s reported words, “I did it,” echoed the relief and pride of his countrymen. “Lindbergh’s return called forth the greatest national ovation ever given an American” (Ibid.: 426).

One should, however, remember that it was a period of not only economic prosperity and unprecedented advances in technology, but also a wonderful decade for American culture—a decade teeming with excellent artists.

## 2. Heroes of Popular Culture

The cultural dynamism of the American 1920s is a truly fascinating phenomenon. According to the historian Paul Johnson,

“It is hard not to point to any aspect of culture in which the 1920s did not mark spectacular advances” (Johnson 1999: 719). And further: “During the 1920s... America began suddenly to acquire a cultural density” (Ibid.).

This was undoubtedly an excellent period in American literature. Great writers of the American Roaring Twenties include, for example, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway. *The Great Gatsby* by Fitzgerald, *Babbitt* by Lewis, *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway, and *The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner are all examples of famous literary works of the 1920s.

It was also a brilliant decade for music; jazz music, in particular, blossomed. That is why the period is often called The Jazz Age—it produced such great artists as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington. This music was not only popular in the American South, where it had originated, but also in large cities like Chicago and New York, which became its new centers. In the 20s, orchestras were becoming bigger and bigger, and more instruments were added. The creation of the first big band jazz orchestra (1923) is attributed to Fletcher Henderson (Gołębiowski 2004: 310).

The boom of American cinema, accelerated by the transition from silent films to talkies, is another important element of the 1920s. Hollywood became the film-making capital of the world, and American films filled the cinemas in numerous countries. Rudolph Valentino was one of the most adored movie personalities, whose “image exploited the era’s sexual liberalism and flirtation with wickedness” (Norton 2008: 698). Charlie Chaplin drew huge crowds to the cinemas; Marek Gołębiowski claims

that “in the history of American cinema no other personage gained such popularity as Charles Chaplin—unrepeatable performer” (Ibid.: 340). There were also other fantastic actors and actresses of the 1920s, including Douglas Fairbanks, Buster Keaton, Gloria Swanson, and many more.

### 3. Sport and Its Heroes

A real “explosion” of sport took place in the exciting Roaring Twenties. Noverr and Ziewacz (1983: 67–68) call that period “The Golden Age of American Sport.” The aforementioned affluence made possible the growth of professional sport in America. The main reason was the fact that a majority of people simply had the money to buy tickets. The public flocked to sporting events in record numbers and, consequently, the stadiums were full. The decade of the 1920s was also called the “Age of the Spectator,” during which the clubs paid more attention to public relations as the power of the fan began to be felt (Rader 1983: 196). There were many spectacular sporting events observed by the whole country, and numerous sports heroes emerged.

The sports stars of that period remain popular even today, and present-day stars are often compared to them, as many of the records of the old champions are still unbeaten. A real galaxy of excellent players from different sports disciplines includes, for example, golfer Robert “Bobby” Jones, tennis player William T. “Big Bill” Tilden, American football player Harold “Red” Grange, and swimmer Gertrude Ederle. However, in this article we will concentrate on the two sports which drew the biggest crowds: baseball and boxing.

Many of the sports heroes stood in the limelight, and thanks to the media, their fe-

ats began to be noticed in the whole country. “In an age when technology and mass production had robbed experiences and objects of their uniqueness, sports provided some of the unpredictability and drama that people craved. Newspapers and radio magnified this tension” (Norton 2008: 696).

Let us try to analyze the reasons for that incredible bloom of American sport in more detail. It was clear that the nation was tired after the war and wanted to return to normality. People started to look optimistically into the future. It was also important that in the American army many soldiers practiced sports, which increased people’s fascination with sport after the war. Sport provided opportunities to show strength and honor in the times when there was no longer a mythologized Western Frontier—as such, sport became a substitute frontier where a heroic pioneer could distinguish himself by means of his fight on the pitch, his actions, and his goals. The technological revolution gave people more free time. Additionally, sport was promoted by churches, who appreciated the development of fitness and the simultaneous cultivating of Christian values. Last but not least, the press journalists popularized sport, and the appearance of very good radio broadcasters who shaped the images of athletes played an important role as well.

Benjamin Rader notes the abundance of sports heroes at that time, repeating the phrase “The Golden Age of American Sport.” As Rader puts it, “The athletes as public heroes served a compensatory cultural function. They assisted the public in compensating for the passing of the traditional dream of success, the erosion of Victorian values [like for example hard work, which—although the USA is a separate country—had been cherished in the

same way by the middle class], and a sense of individual powerlessness” (Rader 1983: 176–177). Those heroes, by means of their natural talents, showed their strength and achievements in a visible way. One should underline the fact that there came a change in the concept of *hero*—it was no longer a politician, but rather a star of the screen or sport, as has been mentioned above.

For sportsmen, the decade of the 1920s was a period of transition, as amateurs became professionals. Professionalization raised sporting events to a higher level and made them more exciting. Baseball was in the avant-garde of American professional sport. As a result of its growing popularity, the players earned more and more. In fact, a lot more than British football players, which was a source of irritation. Talking about the game itself, baseball, apparently slow, became an offensive sport. There came a real “explosion” of the talents of a great number of players, like Babe Ruth and a whole galaxy of other excellent hitters like George Sisler, Roger Hornsby, Ty Cobb, and Harry Heilman, players who often forcefully hit the balls out of the fences of the stadiums and beat new and newer unbelievable records. Many of those players became local and nationwide heroes. They usually had colorful personalities, and were often country boys who, thanks to their perseverance, had achieved success. People were visibly attracted to that. The matches were full of drama; little wonder the attendance grew. The biggest baseball centres in the 1920s were New York and Chicago.

Let us recall briefly one of the legends of American baseball. Babe Ruth (1895–1948) was probably the most famous player in the history of baseball. Ruth was a classic example of American success. He grew up in a tough neighbourhood and was a “bad

kid,” but in spite of unfavourable circumstances managed to make it. His popular name was “Bambino.” Ruth played for the New York Yankees and their stadium is called “the house that Ruth built” (Crowther 2004: 470). This player—famous for an extremely powerful hit—electrified baseball with his home runs, and was the first baseball player to hit sixty home runs in one season. Interestingly, his total record of home runs was not broken until 1974. Each day, thousands of Americans turned to the sports pages to see if Ruth had hit another homer. He played baseball instinctively, and did not need a lot of time for training. Like many sports stars, he had serious personal problems with drinking and women; he was “known for his overindulgence in food, drink, and sex” (Norton 2008: 698). Ruth was one of the sportsmen who earned more than the president, which caused quite a stir. Babe Ruth is still one of the main athletic heroes of America, almost a demigod of sports.

Coming back to the question of money, the first sports associations forbade the players to receive money for their performances. It was believed that if the earnings of the players depended on how well they played, the game would become more aggressive and lose its charm. The situation was different in boxing: the organizers of boxing fights thought that payment would only increase the motivation of boxers. As early as at the end of the nineteenth century, boxers were quite well paid. A good example is John Sullivan (1858–1918), named the “Boston Strong Boy,” who won a huge number of fights. At the age of 33, he had not even lost once. He was the first American sportsman to earn one million dollars.

Talking about American boxing in the 1920s, it is impossible not to mention Jack

Dempsey (1895–1983), one of the most famous boxers of that period. His popular name was the “Manassa Mauler,” as Manassa in Colorado was his birthplace and he was famous for his aggressive style as a fighter—he “mauled” his opponents. His ascension to the heavyweight championship helped make the 1920s the Golden Age of American boxing. Over 100,000 fans watched some of Dempsey’s fights, and gate receipts started to exceed one million dollars.

Dempsey started from a very low level. Born into a poor family, he first fought in small western towns for a hundred dollars. He obtained one of his nicknames, “Jack the Giant-Killer,” after he surprisingly defeated the champion Jess Willard, who was much taller and heavier than him.

At that time, boxing began to acquire a new level of respectability. Before the First World War, fights were often organized in secret in isolated rural areas and generally had a bad reputation. During the war, the army used boxing as a part of the training and after the war legal barriers to prize fighting were officially dropped. Boxing entered enormous stadiums and enjoyed unprecedented popularity. American celebrities, high society, and even “proper women” went to see the fierce fights (Rader 1983: 187).

One of the most spectacular fights of the 1920s was Dempsey–Carpentier, in 1921. The fight was often billed as one between a “foreign enemy” versus an American. But perhaps surprisingly, the Frenchman Carpentier divided the American society. There was a contrast in images. Namely, Carpentier had fought in World War I and was a decorated veteran, while Dempsey had avoided service and was called a “slacker.” Consequently, the American nation

took sides. During the fight, a huge part of the audience supported the Frenchman. However, Dempsey knocked Carpentier out in the fourth round, and his popularity soared higher. This popularity reflected the type of hero sought by the American audience—a “mauler,” not attached to tactics, who “relied upon quick, physical solutions” (Ibid.: 192).

It is worth noting that the interest in sports in the 1920s was not only limited to passive participation. Active participation became a generally accepted model of behavior as well, especially among the American middle-class. More and more sports clubs were established in the United States, and the number of people playing different sports kept growing (Michalek 1999: 300). The creation of the American sports public, idolization of athletes, organized support, and the sports media are all significant examples of the contribution of the 1920s to modern sport. Looking at the facts presented above, this contribution seems unquestionable.

The Wall Street Crash ended the crazy period of hedonism, called in France the *années folles*. The next decade, the 1930s, brought an end to the popularity of sport and athletic heroes. It should be noted that the stream of super-champions also began to run dry. Perhaps super-champions simply could not arise in the Great Depression of the 30s—a sad decade suffering from economic want (Rader 1983: 193). However, in the years to follow, sport would suffer heavily not only from the Great Depression, but also from World War II.

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## AMERYKAŃSKI SPORT I BOHATEROWIE SPORTU BURZLIWYCH LAT DWUDZIE- STYCH

### Streszczenie

Celem niniejszego artykułu było ukazanie roli sportu w społeczeństwie amerykańskim na tle niezwykle ważnego – z wielu powodów – okresu wielkiej transformacji społecznej w Stanach Zjednoczonych, która nabrała szczególnego tempa w latach dwudziestych XX wieku. Przedstawiono różne aspekty kultury popularnej, która znalazła się w pełnym rozkwicie za sprawą takich czynników, jak: radość po zakończeniu pierwszej wojny światowej, poczucie optymizmu, rozwój gospodarki, przemysłu, wielkich miast i większa zamożność obywateli. Analiza owej niezwyklej dekady potwierdza rolę sportu i jego wielką siłę społecznego oddziaływania. W czasach, gdy technika i masowa produkcja pozbawiły przeżycia i przedmioty ich unikalności, sport dostarczał poczucia nieprzewidywalności i dramaturgii, którego ludzie pragnęli, poszukując romantyzmu i przygody. W artykule przedstawiono powody popularności sportu w USA, zaprezentowano główne dyscypliny sportowe oraz bohaterów amerykańskiego sportu, którzy w czasach masowej produkcji, gdzie jednostki były mniej ważne,

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## AMERIKOS SPORTAS IR TRIUKŠMINGŲ DVIDEŠIMTŲJŲ SPORTO DIDVYRIAİ

### Santrauka

Straipsnio tikslas – atskleisti sporto vaidmenį Amerikos visuomenėje. Sportas yra labai svarbus JAV dėl daugelio priežasčių socialinės transformacijos laikotarpiu. Šis procesas buvo itin spartus 1920-aisiais. Straipsnyje aptariami įvairūs populiarosios kultūros aspektai, susiję su tam tikromis aplinkybėmis: džiaugsmu po Pirmojo pasaulinio karo, optimizmo jausmu, ekonomikos, pramonės, didžiųjų miestų ir piliečių gerovės plėtra. Šio neįprasto dešimtmečio analizė patvirtina svarbų sporto vaidmenį ir didelę jo įtaką visuomenei. Tokiu laiku, kai technologijos ir masinė gamyba glemžėsi objektų unikalumo, sportas pasiūlė tam tikro nenusipėjamo ir dramatiškumo potyrių, kurių žmonės troško ieškodami romantikos ir nuotykių. Straipsnyje minimos sporto populiarumo priežastys JAV, taip pat aptariamos pagrindinės Amerikos sporto šakos ir sporto didvyriai, palankiai įvertinti visuomenės, adoravusios kultines sporto asmenybes, kadangi masinės gamybos laikais žmonės buvo vertinami menčiau. Straipsnyje analizuojamos profesionaliojo sporto ištakos, organizuotos paramos pradžia, sporto transliacijos. Šie faktai patvirtina



trafli na podatny grunt – ludzie silnie utożsamiali się z tymi bohaterami. Analiza początków profesjonalizmu w sporcie, początków kibicowania i transmisji sportowych nie pozostawia wątpliwości w kwestii znaczenia owego okresu. Jak ukazano w artykule, był to czas szybkiej i głębokiej transformacji w dziedzinie sportu. Każda poważna próba rozpatrywania zjawisk we współczesnym sporcie amerykańskim – można to odnieść także do innych krajów – bez znajomości specyfiki sportu w latach dwudziestych byłaby ułomna.

*SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:* sport, baseball, boks, burzliwe lata dwudzieste.

to laikotarpio svarbą, pabrėžia, kad tai buvo greitos ir gilios sporto transformacijos laikas. Jokia rimta šiuolaikinio Amerikos sporto reiškinų analizė nebūtų tinkama be specifinių žinių apie 1920-ųjų metų sportą – tai tinka kalbant ir apie kitas šalis.

*REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI:* sportas, beisbolas, boksas, triukšmingieji dvidešimtieji.

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