

Athletics ^[1]

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Americans had always played games, but after the Civil War, they began taking sports seriously. The new urban population needed — and made possible — new kinds of entertainments, and the urban middle class had money to spend on leisure. The first intercollegiate athletic contest took place in 1852, and college sports became widespread in the 1870s. Baseball, too, had been played before the war, but Union soldiers popularized the game, and businessmen found that people would pay money to watch other people play. In 1869, the owner of a Cincinnati, Ohio, baseball “club” began paying his players. Two years later a professional league was formed, and the National League of Professional Baseball Club — today’s National League — was established in 1876. Bare-knuckle boxing had existed since at least the eighteenth century, but now it too grew into an organized sport, and the first championship bout was staged in 1880. (It lasted 87 rounds before challenger Paddy Ryan won in a knockout.)

In cities, people began [riding bicycles](#) ^[2] and [roller-skating](#) ^[3] for fun. But educators and reformers worried that city kids, removed from the heavy work of the farm, weren’t getting enough exercise. (This may sound familiar to you.) To solve that problem, physical education and athletics were introduced into schools.

The first “moving pictures” were invented about this time, and the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company began filming aspects of daily life that today you might find on YouTube. In the short films below, you can watch elementary students doing calisthenics and high school students doing more formal gymnastics.

In this [video](#) ^[4], students at Lathrop School in Kansas City, Missouri, perform calisthenics, April 18, 1904.

In this [video](#) ^[5], students at Central High School in Kansas City, Missouri, perform gymnastic drills, April 18, 1904.

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