



9-1-2006

*Sports in Zion: Mormon Recreation, 1890-1940.* by Richard Ian Kimball

Brian J. Hill

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>



Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Hill, Brian J. (2006) "*Sports in Zion: Mormon Recreation, 1890-1940.* by Richard Ian Kimball," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 45 : Iss. 3 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol45/iss3/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

Richard Ian Kimball. *Sports in Zion:  
Mormon Recreation, 1890–1940.*  
Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003

Reviewed by Brian J. Hill

Richard Ian Kimball's treatise, *Sports in Zion: Mormon Recreation, 1890–1940*, provides an illuminating view of the history of Church recreation. With careful documentation, Kimball links a lesser-known period and aspect of Church history to the social history of the United States and its Progressive Era. Just as America turned some of its attention during this time to the social ills of industrialization and urbanization, Church leaders likewise expressed concern for youth and their movement away from religious foundations. During the early twentieth century, social reformers across the United States turned in part to recreation facilities and programs to address society's ills. The Church also embraced recreation to combat a spiritual drift attributed to the evils of a move to the city. The commitment to recreation and sport within the Church then was deeper and different than what we see today.

Stories of recreation from early Church history are well known and sometimes mentioned from the meetinghouse pulpit. Joseph Smith's stick pulling, Brigham Young's homilies about the need for eight hours of recreation, as well as dancing on the plains and in the social halls of Utah are a part of popular history, even taking on the patina of folklore. Likewise, current generations have likely heard of all-church sports tournaments, early Church involvement with the Boy Scouts of America, and the development of girls' camp properties. However, they are not likely to know of the institutional commitment to recreation during the middle years of Church history. Even professors who currently teach and prepare recreation leaders are not likely to be conversant with a Church era of intense dedication to recreation principles as a measure of social reform.

Kimball describes the physical facilities and properties developed during this era such as ward amusement halls, Deseret Gym, and various girls' camp summer homes. He also chronicles the athletic, scouting, and youth programs within the Church. But more importantly, he documents

the Mormon recreation ideology that grew in the Church during this time and provided a foundation for the Church's building and program efforts. That ideology featured a recognition of social problems associated with urbanization including adolescent delinquency, idleness, sexual indulgence, drunkenness, and general rowdiness. Church leaders of the day feared that city life was destroying the spirituality of the rising generation, who were three generations removed from the pioneer converts. As an answer to these urban troubles, theories and philosophies of recreation were considered and adopted.

Kimball's careful research of original documents highlights key publications that delineate this Church-focused recreation ideology, such as *Parent's Bulletin No. 1: Recreation and Play*, published by the Deseret Sunday School Union in 1914. This pamphlet included excerpts from the writings of reputable sociologists, play theorists, and social reformers. The problem of "urban commercialized recreation and the lack of parental involvement at home" (39) suggested the need for the Church to address not only spiritual development but physical development as well. Dr. E. G. Gowans, the editor of the bulletin, emphasized, "The time is on us when we must take this phase of life into our own hands and provide wholesome pastimes for our children just as systematically, just as religiously, as we provide for their educational instruction and their religious training" (39-40). Further, Gowan also urged parents to play with their children, claiming that "the father who plays with his boy, or mother who plays with her girl, are far more likely to save their souls than those who merely clothe and feed and school" (40). Recreation was also seen as a way to integrate individuals more deeply into a larger group, in this case, the Church (41).

Another crucial feature of recreation ideology during this time was leadership development and training. The general Mutual Improvement Association conferences held each June included instruction in proper recreation and amusement as early as 1906 (35-36). Further, the MIA organizations offered four-week training courses in sports and recreation leadership beginning in 1912 (37). Wards and stakes organized amusement committees to take some control over leisure time, especially among the youth, that culminated a few years later in the establishment of a general Social Advisory Committee (41). Besides conferences, training curriculum, and institutes, publications were prepared that provided instruction and detailed the developing recreation ideology. Articles in Church periodicals and special bulletins issued by various Church auxiliaries document the growing concern for recreation and its place in the Church from 1900 to 1940.

Kimball's sources draw heavily upon primary Church documents. His narrative and bibliography suggest he has carefully considered every issue of the *Improvement Era* published during the fifty-year period of his study. His research in the LDS Church Historical Department's archives uncovers illuminating manuscripts from the Deseret Gym records and a variety of recreation committee minutes. His background in Progressive Era history and the general milieu of Church history are also apparent from his comprehensive bibliography. In short, his historical analysis appears sound, thorough, and well-documented.

Perhaps Kimball's most meaningful contribution in this piece, besides the history in both broad and detailed perspectives, is in raising a consciousness about the potential of recreation and sport to address societal challenges. During the Progressive Era, the evils of urbanization, juvenile delinquency, idleness, increasing sexuality, and overly-commercialized amusements crept into the lives of Church members and were resisted through systematic wholesome recreation. Any thoughtful reader of this work may wonder whether the social problems of our day that slip into the lives of Church members could be prevented through wholesome recreation. Should violence, pornography, childhood obesity, materialism, unsportsmanlike competitiveness, and time poverty be combated by purposeful Church and family recreational programs? By carefully analyzing a time when recreation and sport were systematically utilized to do good, Richard Kimball furtively asks us if the same might be utilized again.

---

Brian J. Hill (brian\_hill@byu.edu) is Professor of Recreation Management and Youth Leadership at Brigham Young University. He received his BS in 1986 from Brigham Young University in Recreation Management and Youth Leadership and his PhD in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management from Clemson University in 1994.