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Ezra Taft Benson, then a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, tosses out the first pitch at the all-church softball tournament in 1962. Visual Resource Library, © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.
“Spiritualized Recreation”
LDS All-Church Athletic Tournaments, 1950–1971

Jessie L. Embry

An Arizona dentist cancels all appointments for a week. A Canadian businessman works nights so he can leave the office. Five carloads of men leave Florida. A California electronics worker and his family change their vacation trip plans. They share two things in common: each man is a championship softball player, and all have the same destination—the annual All-Church Priesthood Softball Tournament in Salt Lake City, one of the world’s largest and most unusual sports events.”

During the 1950s and 1960s, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints sponsored all-church basketball, softball, and volleyball tournaments that brought together teenage boys and men up to the age of thirty. As the above quote from 1961 indicates, men from throughout the United States and Canada participated. While on one level the men were playing a game, on another level the athletic tournaments provide an important lens through which one can view the LDS Church during the mid-twentieth century. The basketball tournament started in the 1920s; the three tournaments thrived during the 1950s and 1960s. In 1971, Church leaders abruptly declared the end of all-church tournaments. Understanding why the Church sponsored the tournaments and then ended them helps scholars understand the Church’s transformation from an Intermountain West/American church to an international religion. This article looks at that change by examining the all-church athletic tournaments.

Thomas O’Dea and the Sociology of Mormon Athletics

Interestingly enough, it was a Catholic sociologist scholar, Thomas F. O’Dea, who described the cultural impact of sports in the 1950s and then
also predicted a possible change. His brief comments were so accurate that I have chosen them as the framework for this article. O’Dea first did an in-depth study of Mormons in the Harvard Values Study Project. His research became the basis for *The Mormons* (1957), which became a sociological standard for understanding the LDS Church. Brigham Young University sociologists Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffman, and Tim B. Heaton, the editors of a collected volume of essays, agree that O’Dea’s work is invaluable and had a major impact on Mormon social sciences.³

O’Dea divided *The Mormons* into nine themes and then mentioned thirty-two specific topics. His topical discussions were brief, often only a few paragraphs or a few pages. Yet his curt comments spoke volumes about the subjects. This is especially true of O’Dea’s discussion of Mormon recreation:

Recreation—viewed as closely related to work and health—meets with strong Mormon approval and is seen as important in supporting and refreshing man for a more effective life, as well as for its own sake. It has become (especially since the accommodation that followed the manifesto of Wilford Woodruff ending plural marriage in 1890) an area in which the church has concentrated much of its organizational talent and a large share of its co-operative energy. It is today one of the important spheres of activity in which group action under church auspices engages the individual member in the active life of the church.

While this concern with organized recreation is an outstanding feature of postaccommodation Mormonism, there was very early an emphasis upon play and upon joy. The Mormon repudiation of religious pessimism found expression in the *Book of Mormon* notion that “men are that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25). Dancing and the theater were emphasized in early Utah and are given considerable attention today, and dancing was a typical Mormon form of recreation even when they were crossing the plains. Beginning as spontaneous, unplanned, but approved activity, Mormon recreation has come to take place more and more within the context of church organization and sponsorship, especially through the auxiliary organizations that activate women and younger people.

In this process the Mormon church has drawn from many sources to develop a composite and many-sided recreational theory. Concern with developing group solidarity, health, leadership, culture, and self-expression has been important to Mormon recreational efforts, while Mormon theory has recognized social, rhythmic, dramatic, constructive, physical, and other urges as seeking satisfaction through recreation. The church program is characterized by a large degree of central planning and direction, and participation in church-sponsored recreation is considered a kind of religious activity.

It has been said: “The Mormons have spiritualized recreation. They have recognized the group factor in play: that the group not only enhances play, but is often the main motivating factor.”⁴ Recreation
has become an important expression of Mormon activism and group solidarity, which it simultaneously reinforces. It is the natural context for the development of the Mormon child, and, together with the other activities of the church and its auxiliary organizations, it provides a most effective context for the learning of Mormon attitudes toward church and world. It is perhaps one of the areas in which genuine creativity has been shown by the Mormon group since the definitive ending of Mormon exclusiveness in 1890. On the whole, it is looked upon as an aid to eternal progression, as a lighter form of education, with which it is considered to be intimately related.5

As this article will confirm, sports were “one of the most important spheres of activity in which group action under church auspices engage[d] the individual member in the active life of the church” in the 1950s. Throughout the LDS Church in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, Church leaders encouraged young men to participate in basketball, softball, and volleyball.

In 1957, O’Dea felt that the LDS Church was using recreation to support its spiritual goals. He did not elaborate on how play met those religious goals, but his brief comments supported what Church leaders and members said about the role of recreation: the all-church athletic tournaments brought young LDS men together, helped them strengthen their testimonies, reactivated those who were not attending church, and introduced nonmembers to Mormonism. The tournaments also promoted fair play and built character. These were all ways to “engage the individual member.”6

O’Dea went beyond describing Mormonism in the 1950s and tried to predict future problems. While he saw Mormon recreation in the 1950s as positive, he was not sure that it should continue. He praised Mormon recreation as the only field where “Mormonism [has] been able to meet the challenge” of dealing with “this-worldly spheres” for which other groups—government, voluntary, and secular—could have more “attractive” appeals. But he questioned whether “organized religion [should] offer competition in spheres of life in which non-religious organizations do better.” Instead religions should deal with “deeper human problems.” He also foresaw a time when the Church would not be as closely connected to Salt Lake City and Utah. “The Mormon movement may be on the eve of its Diaspora . . . [where] belongingness would no longer be exclusively identified with a specific place.”7

These statements sum up the reasons for the Mormon all-church athletic tournaments and why they were discontinued in 1971. Sports activities played—and in some cases continue to play—an important role in Mormon daily life on the ward, stake, and Church level, but the
tournaments ended when a worldwide church moved the focus from Salt Lake City and Church leaders focused less on recreation.

**Beginnings of Mormon Athletics**

“Beginning as spontaneous, unplanned, but approved activity, Mormon recreation has come to take place more and more within the context of church organization and sponsorship,” wrote O’Dea. He was correct that LDS sports (just one form of recreation that the Latter-day Saints used) started as a “spontaneous, unplanned, but approved activity.” The growth of basketball provides a good example of an activity that started at a grass-roots level and became institutionalized. In fact, basketball itself began in this manner. In 1891, James Naismith, who started college as a theology major but left the ministry to study recreation, invented basketball as a Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) activity. The YMCA started in England as a way to keep young men in an urban setting off the street. It was not directly connected to any religion but promoted Christian values. About the same time, churches were concerned about young men falling from Christian standards and also not attending church meetings. Religious leaders promoted basketball games as a way to attract young men to the church building and then hopefully to attend worship services. Naismith was pleased that “churches . . . accepted athletics as an aid” to attract young men to religion.

This effort to include sports in religion was often referred to as muscular Christianity. According to historian Clifford Putney, muscular Christianity is defined as “a Christian commitment to health and manliness.” Reviewers of the English novelists Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes coined the phrase in the 1850s and used it to describe a new type of “adventure novels replete with high principles and manly Christian heroes.” Putney argues, “Between 1880 and 1920, American Protestants in many denominations witnessed the flourishing [of muscular Christianity] in their pulpits and seminaries.” Many church leaders believed that men viewed religion as too “feminized” and in fact churches in industrial cities were attracting only women. Muscular Christianity flourished during that time as churches dropped their opposition to sports and the YMCA created new games and introduced athletic programs. Churches believed that sports taught moral lessons such as “reverence, adventure, courage, cooperation, loyalty, self-restraint, fairness, honor, [and] unenvious approbation of another’s success.” Putney says, “After 1920, pacifism, cynicism, church decline, and the devaluation of male friendships combined to undercut muscular Christianity.”
According to Richard Ian Kimball, Clifford Putney’s *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America* “situates LDS recreational activities on the extreme edge of Protestant recreation.” Putney writes that before other churches accepted sports and recreation, “the Mormon Church was the first to support Boy Scout troops, the first to erect a recreation hall wherein athletic competitions were held.” Putney guesses, “Why exactly they pioneered these forms of organized uplift is difficult to explain. Possibly it devolved somehow from their belief in familial, as opposed to individual, salvation: the notion that more important even than inner goodness was outward conformity to the laws of God and society.”

**Sports in Early Mormonism**

Putney fails to understand that recreation was not new to Mormons in the twentieth century. Joseph Smith Jr., founder of the LDS Church, taught that religion involved all aspects of life. He enjoyed arm wrestling and pulling sticks (a game similar to arm wrestling, except participants put the soles of their feet together, held a stick in their hands, and tried to pull over the opponent). He also promoted ball games, music, and drama. Mormon scholar Rex Skidmore overstated his case when he argued, “Joseph Smith must be considered as one of the outstanding leaders in the modern recreation movement.” In contrast, Ruth Andrus wrote in her dissertation that Joseph Smith’s support of recreation was practical. He was involved in play, but he “did not preach on that subject.”

Smith’s successor, Brigham Young, expanded the Church’s view of recreation. He promoted and practiced physical activities. To make that possible, he put a gymnasium in his Utah home and encouraged his children to exercise. He believed play should be where members could “enjoy the Spirit of the Lord.” In other words, he felt Mormon recreational activities should be held with other Latter-day Saints in Mormon homes and meeting places. Church members should not frequent taverns and bars, where LDS standards are not followed. By not playing in those settings, Young believed, young people would have “mastery over [themselves] and command the influences around [them].” He explained that it was not their “lawful privilege to yield to anything in the shape of amusement, until [they had] performed every duty, and obtained the power of God to enable [them] to withstand and resist all foul spirits” and “obtained . . . the blessings of the Holy Spirit.” He encouraged “eight hours work, eight hours sleep, and eight hours recreation.”

Brigham Young had organized the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA) in 1875 to help young men grow spiritually, socially,
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and physically in a Mormon environment. That organization’s focus shifted in 1908 when Joseph F. Smith asked the priesthood quorums and not the YMMIA to teach theology. The move was part of Smith’s Church-wide correlation movement, which put more emphasis on priesthood quorums and less focus on the Church auxiliaries such as the YMMIA. In response, the YMMIA General Board passed a resolution: “Owing to the fact that the Priesthood quorums have formally taken up the study of theology, the YMMIA [will] take up educational, literary, and recreative studies, permeated by religious thought.” These activities included music, art, “social culture and refinement,” and “athletic work.” The YMMIA leaders stressed that “recreation and amusement are indispensable to our social and moral development, but should be under the same vigilance and control as our religious training.”

As Kimball explains, recreational activities became more important over time. At the turn of the twentieth century, some Mormons left their agricultural roots and moved to cities to work in business and industry. Salt Lake City was growing. In addition, the first generation of converts had died and with them some of the religious zeal. Their children did not always share their parents’ enthusiasm for religion. LDS youth began turning to non-Mormon programs for entertainment and education. Programs like the Boy Scouts of America, the YMCA, or local clubs and debating societies kept young men off the streets but not necessarily in church.

Like other Christians, Latter-day Saints played basketball, but it did not start out as a churchwide activity. Instead, individual wards started their own programs and determined their own criteria for selecting winners. For example, young men were playing basketball in the Twentieth Ward in Salt Lake City in 1906. After seeing that the game attracted young men to church, the YMMIA leaders formed two teams that played for a pennant based on attendance at meetings and recruitment of new members. The Twentieth Ward program was so successful that the Ensign Stake adopted the ward’s program two years later in 1908 and formed a stake basketball league. The Twentieth Ward triumphed over the Eighteenth Ward with a score of 28 to 23 for the first championship.

E. J. Milne, a physical education professor at the University of Utah, worked with the Ensign Stake athletic committee and saw the value of basketball in a Mormon setting. The same year the Ensign Stake held its first tournament, Milne received quasi-Church approval to promote basketball when the Church magazine the Improvement Era published his article about converting “ward and gymnasium halls” for “basket ball, hand ball and gymnastic work” because of “numerous inquiries . . . [about] adopting a course in physical education or athletics.” In other words, other local
units had independently thought of expanding the use of sports and wondered how to do it. Milne saw many uses for the halls but he focused on basketball because it was “the greatest of all indoor games in the country, and especially in the state of Utah.”

The early programs were for teenage boys who also participated in Boy Scouts. But general Church leaders soon recognized that they needed to provide a program for young men after Boy Scouts to keep them involved. As with basketball, the general Church leaders looked at locally planned programs. They were impressed with a 1919 Salt Lake City Eighteenth Ward program that provided activities for teenagers and men in their twenties. Just a year later, the YMMIA General Board adopted the Eighteenth Ward program, which included basketball.

At first, wards competed only within their stakes. But the young men wanted more competition, and their leaders agreed. So in September 1921 the superintendent of the Ensign Stake YMMIA met with his counterparts in other Salt Lake stakes—Granite, Liberty, Salt Lake, and Pioneer—and they decided to sponsor a tournament. The young men enjoyed playing with a larger set of teams, and the leaders declared the first tournament a success. It was so well received, the Salt Lake stakes made it an annual event. The stake leaders from the entire Salt Lake Valley area drew up a constitution with rules. In 1923, eight Salt Lake Valley wards took part in what became the all-church tournament.

Basketball started on a local ward and stake scale, but it did not remain merely a Salt Lake City tournament. To use O'Dea’s wording, the tournament was eventually brought “within the context of church organization and sponsorship.” While adding basketball to the general church focus was new, programs for the young men were not. With this new focus, the organization’s leaders recognized basketball’s value and took over the Salt Lake stakes’ tournament in 1929.

**All-Church Tournament Organization**

“The church program is characterized by a large degree of central planning and direction,” wrote O’Dea. Once the YMMIA took over the basketball tournament, “a large degree of central planning and direction” was indeed required. To facilitate the process, the YMMIA General Board appointed an athletic committee that met throughout the year to plan the weeklong tournament.

The committee had to decide the rules of the game and the rules of participation. With this in mind, the YMMIA published a yearly athletic manual. While the core of the manual remained the same from year to year,
year, small details changed to meet concerns that arose over time. Using these rule books, wards and stakes sponsored basketball teams that played each other during a season and then held a tournament. The YMMIA offered suggestions for scheduling these seasons, but it set the dates for all-church tournament participants. Although only a limited number of teams and players came to the tournament, Church leaders were very proud of the overall participation. According to Church estimates, the number of boys and men playing basketball grew to ten thousand by the mid-1930s. That number continued to grow so much in the 1950s and 1960s that the YMMIA could keep track of only the number of teams and not individual
players. In 1952, there were 970 teams. When the Church added a junior division in 1955, there were 1,211 senior teams and 1,161 junior teams. When the tournament ended in 1971, there were 2,358 senior teams, 2,814 junior teams, and a small college division. Teams had to win on a division level in the 1930s to get to all-church. While the number of teams grew, the number of teams permitted at the tournament did not change. By the 1960s, teams had to win at a regional and then a zone tournament to qualify for all-church.28

Once the teams made it to the all-church tournament, the athletic committee had to find gyms to play in. The Church owned the large Deseret Gym in Salt Lake City, but there were so many games going on, the Church had to use ward and stake gymnasiums. The committee then had to seed the teams and develop a schedule. The Church provided meals and housing for all the players. But the goal of the tournament was not only the game. The Church wanted to provide spiritual training and a chance for young men to meet Church leaders. The committee opened the tournament with a devotional in which Church leaders discussed sports as a model for the young men’s lives. The committee also planned a banquet for participants and coaches and asked Church leaders to attend.29

This basketball program was so successful that after World War II the YMMIA added two more large scale all-church tournaments: softball and volleyball. The two new and always smaller tournaments were also centrally organized and required a great deal of time and effort. Softball started as fast pitch and then evolved to slow pitch as more teams played slow pitch and fast pitch lost its supporters. At first, the Church leased baseball fields in the Salt Lake City area but in 1955 built a four-plex diamond named after George Q. Morris of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, who was instrumental in the athletic program.30

The first official softball tournament was held in 1949. In 1954, control of the softball tournament was moved from the YMMIA to the Melchizedek Priesthood, which meant that instead of the YMMIA planning and operating ward softball teams, local softball officials reported directly to a stake president. The stake president could select a stake softball director from the high council or from the MIA stake board. Church leaders argued that softball was more than just a sport; it was a way to keep men active in the Church.31

Softball grew in popularity because Church leaders encouraged members to play. Joseph Fielding Smith, then President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, asked all stake presidents in 1961 and 1962 to have their stakes participate since the softball tournament was an “important priesthood activity.”32 There are no records that suggest why Smith singled out
softball among all the sports as a priesthood responsibility. Basketball was always a more popular sport in terms of number of teams and participants. Smith may have wanted softball to grow in popularity because with ten men on a softball team (instead of the five on a basketball team) more boys and men could participate. Also, few high schools and colleges had softball teams, which meant that fewer people were restricted from playing on Church teams because of their participation in school athletics. Outside of Joseph Fielding Smith’s encouragement, however, the basketball and softball programs ran very much the same. Regardless of the reason, making softball a priesthood responsibility made it even more centrally controlled.

**Spiritual Purposes of Church Athletics**

“Recreation has become an important expression of Mormon activism and group solidarity. . . . It provides a most effective context for the learning of Mormon attitudes toward church and world. . . . On the whole, it is looked upon as an aid to eternal progression,” wrote O’Dea. The all-church tournaments included devotionals and banquets because the purpose of Mormon athletics was primarily spiritual and not social. In the
1950s, Walter Stevenson, an MIA general officer, gave an address at BYU: “Why an All-Church Basketball Tournament?” He explained, “We have an activity program in the M.I.A. for one purpose, and that is to develop Latter-day Saints among the participants.”

General Authorities and local Church leaders frequently repeated that idea. For example, Paul Hansen, the basketball coach of the Edgehill Ward in Salt Lake City, taught his players at the start of each season: “This is a basketball. Behind me is a basketball floor. Across the basketball floor is a chapel. The reason for this game is to put into practice the things you learn in that chapel.”

As late as 1966, Ezra Taft Benson of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles said at a softball tournament that while the games would be a “challenge” and “explosive,” playing softball itself was not the main goal. Softball was “a part of the great program to build men.” There were “problems, sure,” but the games served a bigger purpose. “As we go into this great church softball tournament of champions may we not forget that much greater ball game of life. May we all be champions in that all important tournament.” In conclusion, Benson offered a blessing. “May [the tournament] bring joy to our hearts, may it teach you valuable lessons, may it make you appreciate more fully the rich program of the church, the purpose of which is to build men and women of character and strengthen and deepen spirituality.”

Church leaders used anecdotal examples to support Benson’s conclusion. For example, W. Floyd Millet, an athletic committee member, wrote, “[Softball will] strengthen testimonies” and “point the way to missions and temple marriages.” He then cited a letter from James E. Hill, the bishop of the Jacksonville, Florida, Fifth Ward. Hill listed each position on the Jacksonville ward team and then where the young man was on a mission. He said at the first of the season, three had not been attending church and only two were considering missions. All the Mormon players ended up serving missions, and the one nonmember was still attending meetings.

Church leaders listed several spiritual and social goals that they hoped the tournaments fulfilled. They included testimony building, reactivating members, and converting nonmembers. Social goals included fellowshipping, building character, practicing sportsmanship, and developing talents.

Gaining a testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ was the most important goal. Joseph Fielding Smith, President of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles, explained in August 1956: “Keep in mind above everything else . . . that these activities are for the purpose of making you better Latter-day Saints, and help lay a foundation in truth and righteousness.”

LDS author L. E. Rytting writes, “Through the fellowship and spirit of teamwork which come from the activity, participation and interest in the church’s other programs often result in a spiritual reawakening.”
While no statistics could provide evidence of increased spirituality, there are many personal accounts of men who saw the benefits in their lives. For example, basketball player Randy Wardwell from Cincinnati, Ohio, felt that playing the game and watching other teams practice gospel principles “was a spiritual experience for me personally. It was a testimony building experience.” Richard Perkins from Blanding, Utah, played for the Grayson Ward, which won the all-church tournament in 1954. Perkins was the most valuable player that year. He explained, “I’ve become more religious and in the Church more through basketball.” LaRay Alexander, the coach of the Grayson Ward from Blanding, bragged about his players’ basketball skill and teamwork. But he was equally proud of their records in the Church since their basketball participation, pointing out that one had since been a stake president and four had served as bishops. After listing their callings, he bragged, “You can tell what caliber of guys we had.”

Church sports and recreation were, according to a Church magazine article, “an excellent rehabilitating force which will bless and benefit the lives of all male members of the ward.” Church-sponsored athletics and recreation provided opportunities to create or renew friendships among players—something that helped inactive members feel welcome. Richard Perkins recalled that when the Blanding town team became a church team, some players were not eligible. But they started going to church so they could play. Gary Fish, who played in Cincinnati, explained that sports kept members active since everyone had to attend meetings. As a result, half of the young men who played ended up going on missions. Randy Wardwell’s family did not regularly attend church. But playing basketball introduced him to Church doctrines and motivated him to attend church.

Missionary work is an essential part of the LDS Church. Just as sports and recreation provided a place for active members to include those who...

The schedule for the first all-church junior basketball tournament in 1955. Even on the program cover, organizers sought to express the spiritual aspects of the tournament. Courtesy L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.
did not attend church regularly, these activities could also be used to introduce others to the Church. The 1953–54 MIA Athletic Handbook stated, “The athletic program is sponsored with the understanding that it will be used as a missionary tool to make converts.”

A stake president told of two missionaries who “formed the nucleus” of a basketball team in 1958 with seven nonmembers. All seven joined the Church, and five served missions. In 1956, Elder Mark E. Petersen suggested that conversion for the youth of the Church and others was the purpose of MIA. “Every chapel must be a mission field. Every class must be a mission field, and every child who comes to MIA must be considered an investigator of the gospel.”

Church President David O. McKay viewed the same belief on a larger basis when he introduced the slogan “Every member a missionary” in 1959. McKay hoped that Church members would invite their friends to church meetings and to their homes. Then they could invite them to listen to the missionaries.

Basketball was a way for LDS youth to invite their friends to church. One example was R. Conrad Schultz, who later became a General Authority. Schultz was born in 1938 and lived in Eugene, Oregon, during his teenage years. He played high school basketball but quit when a coach criticized him. Some Mormon friends invited Schultz, who was not a Latter-day Saint, to play church ball. The first year the team went to the all-church tournament and lost after two games. But Schultz attended a banquet where Elder Joseph Fielding Smith, then an Apostle, spoke. Schultz was impressed. He also enjoyed attending church meetings and felt accepted by the young men and other members of the ward. As a newcomer to the town, Schultz met people and made friends through his contacts at church. However, Schultz stopped attending church meetings after the basketball season because the rules no longer required him to attend. The next year he decided to play church ball again. That year the coach invited him to listen to the missionaries and consider joining the LDS Church. Schultz had lots of questions, but through prayer and fasting he decided to be baptized.

Looking back on the experience, Schultz saw God’s hand in his decision to quit the school team because he found the Church. But he also saw problems, explaining that church ball “has to be friendly and it has to be Christian.” Schultz generally saw basketball as a good way to do missionary work.
and reactivate members, especially youth. He remembered that about half of the non-LDS players during the time he played joined the Church, and about half of those remained active beyond their teenage years. For Schultz, playing church ball was a life-changing event.48

Schultz represents a positive example, but was his experience typical or unusual? How effective were church sports in reactivating and converting young men? Church leaders did attempt to keep track of numbers, but they always felt that the totals were incomplete. Joseph Fielding Smith’s letters to stake presidents about priesthood softball asked the leaders to report baptisms and reactivation among those associated with softball. Based on the replies he received, Smith reported 250 converts and at least 350 wives and children who joined in 1963. In addition, 1,600 men and boys returned to church attendance. He added that those figures did not include the “untold number who remained active” because of softball.49 In 1966, Elder Delbert L. Stapley, who took over responsibility from Elder Joseph Fielding Smith for encouraging softball, explained that 164 stakes had reported 109 conversions, 90 conversions of families, and 1,179 reactivations; he speculated that if all the stakes had reported, the numbers would have been 400 converts, 350 families, and 4,432 reactivations. Even in 1971, just before the all-church tournament ended, Stapley was still asking stake leaders to keep track of the number of converts and people returning to church activity: “We are anxious to determine the actual accomplishment from the church softball program.”50

Social Benefits of Church Sports

Sports and recreation also met social needs. The men enjoyed playing together and created friendships that lasted their entire lives. The 1944 all-church basketball champions from Grantsville, Utah, developed a sense of community and friendships that continued for a lifetime. Fifty years after their win, all but one player met for a reunion; the one missing man had died.51 The 1947 Glenwood, Alberta, team developed the same closeness without winning a single game at the all-church tournament. Years later Glenwood team members met and put together a book about their memories of the team. They also recreated their all-church tournament photo.52

In many cases, the fellowshipping extended beyond the team and to the members of the ward. Blanding, Utah, residents, for example, were proud of their team. Team member and coach Neldon Cochran explained that ward members had few options for entertainment in Blanding: “They didn’t have anything else to do but go see the ball game.” Local games were a highlight, but not everyone could leave the Four Corners area to attend
The 1947 basketball team of Glenwood (Alberta) M Men won the right to participate in the all-church tournament in Salt Lake City. This was the first Glenwood team after World War II ended and some of these men had returned from the war. They did not win any games in the tournament, but the camaraderie of participating in this small-town team, making the trip to Salt Lake, and meeting Church President George Albert Smith lasted a lifetime. Left to right: Dan Lybbert, Keith Law, Dean Quinton, Dennis Prince, Loril Bohne, Winston Bohne, Byron Smith, and Wilbur (Bill) Hansen. Courtesy L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.

The 1947 Glenwood M Men basketball team has held many reunions, including this one in 1995—forty-eight years after the tournament. Courtesy L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University.
all the tournament games. In order for fans at home to share the victories and losses, Coach LaRay Alexander called the local operator after each game and gave her the score. But seven hundred Blanding residents traveled to the final game in Provo, Utah.53

Play became a “special laboratory where the young people actually put into practice the many principles” learned in church meetings. The 1967 athletic report explains, “We see how well our young people apply that which we have tried to teach them. In the heat and excitement of the games there is no place for sham or pretense. It is here that we find out whether the individual really believes in sportsmanship, in fair play. It is here that we find out if honesty is more important than winning at all costs and if the players do unto others as they would be done by.” Sports were a “firing line” where participants learned to “hold their tongue.”54 To support that idea, young men who played basketball and volleyball took a pledge: “In order that I might render my finest service to humanity, I pledge before God and my fellows to keep myself morally clean, to defend fearlessly the truth, to learn modesty and manliness, and to obey the true rules of sportsmanship.”55

Meeting the Challenges of Church Sports

Clearly, then, Church leaders emphasized the positive reasons for church sports, and all the examples so far show how they met those goals. Yet the program had several problems as well as successes. As with the successes, there are anecdotes but no figures about the problems. A common problem was that team members did not attend the church meetings that the rules required of both Mormons and non-Mormons. R. Conrad Schultz is an example of someone who attended only when he was playing. Some wards recruited members—invited good basketball players to move to their ward boundaries so they could play on their team. Larry Schlappi recalled inviting people who lived in Sevier County, Utah, to move to Glenwood, Utah, where there was a good basketball team. He also remembered being offered a job in California if he would move to Baldwin Park and play on their ward team. During an all-church tournament, Schlappi pointed out to the authorities that a team included an ineligible college player, and that team was cut from the competition.56 Sometimes team members did not follow the Word of Wisdom. Softball player Mark Hutchings recalled that two nonmember starters on the Merced, California, team were cut from the team during the all-church tournament for smoking.57
It was also a problem to find qualified referees. The Church paid for professional referees at the all-church tournament, but stakes could seldom afford them; local officiating was often subpar because the referees did not always know the rules. Also, the Church barred those who played on high school or college teams from playing on church teams, eliminating the best players. Those who did play church sports often did not know the rules and tried to bully their way through the game to make up for their lack of athletic skills. And as is often the case in the heat of the game, players often lost their tempers. Schultz recalled one elders quorum president who just stopped playing because he could not control his temper. Local and general church athletic leaders recognized these problems and took steps to prevent them. To encourage good play, Schultz’s stake did not allow swearing; one violation and the person was ejected from the game. Church leaders offered clinics for referees.

**Other Christian Churches’ Sports Programs**

Other Christian churches that used sports to bring young men to church had the same purposes and experienced the same problems as the LDS Church. For example, Shirl J. Hoffman explains in his article “Sport, Play, and Leisure in the Christian Experience” that “the suggestion that sport has the potential for touching our minds and emotions and spirits in ways denied us in everyday life, or that it, like art, poetry, and the dance, can be an avenue of religious expression is radical only because of the distance we have allowed to occur between sport and religion.” Therefore, “can sports, like religious festivals, really nourish an attitude of expectant alertness in players and spectators? Under the right conditions I believe they can.”

Hoffman describes some of these conditions. The goal for sports as a religious activity is not winning as it is in other places. “Athletic contests are not times for giving glory to God as much as they are times for receiving insights from God. They are not worship but they can be occasions for sensing the greatness and goodness of God.” For example, mountain climber Frank Gabelein believed “mountain mysticism” was not “true religion,” but supported the belief that “climbing can uplift the spirit and give one a sense of the greatness of God.”

To help promote the type of sports that Hoffman suggested, Protestant sports ministers have published manuals. Steve Connor’s *Sports Outreach: Principles and Practice for Successful Sports Ministry* (2003) explains, “Sport has the ability to build bridges in relationships and transcend cultural barriers in a world that is more and more compartmentalized.”

https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol48/iss3/8
rest of the book then discusses how sports can be a way to bring people together by emphasizing rules, sportsmanship, and fellowship.61

The Roman Catholic Church also emphasized sports ministries throughout the twentieth century. Catholic teams participated in basketball, soccer, track, indoor baseball, gymnastics, wrestling, basketball, and boxing. In 1933, the Chicago baseball-softball tournament expanded to include teams from four states, including Utah. The New World newspaper declared that adding new teams was valuable because Catholic youth had been playing with non-Catholic leagues, and those youth needed the church’s influence in sports. A Salt Lake City priest commented when the Salt Lake City team went to the tournament, “I wish you would stress the point that the boys are going to Chicago not so much with the idea of winning ball games but because of the support given their pastors in the development of Catholic athletes in Salt Lake.”62 During the 1940s and 1950s, the future Pope John Paul II also acknowledged the value of sports. He installed a swimming pool in his residence and took skiing trips to relax. He told the Italian Olympic Committee that he and the church supported sports because of the positive impact on a person’s body and soul. Sports fostered self-discipline while promoting fellowship and community. Competition encouraged participants to excel, and sports taught important life lessons. The Pope believed sports encouraged world peace by bringing people together. While championing sports, he discouraged its violent aspects.63 At times, high-ranking Catholic Church leaders expressed concerns about sports. A 1956 pamphlet declared, “Sports have all the tingling tang of a bottle of soda pop, and the intriguing suspense of a fizzling fuse.” To avoid the fuse, the pamphlet recommended that participants focus on fun, friendship, strong bodies, and charity because “the matter of winning is entirely of secondary importance.”64

Women in LDS Sports

All of the examples cited so far deal with boys and men. Mormon recreation was not only a male activity; women participated in dance, music, speech, and drama along with the men, and girls and women played sports. But they never played in the all-church tournaments. O’Dea omitted discussing this aspect of church sports. In fact, most scholars did not consider gender issues in 1957. As anthropologist Janet Bennion explains, “O’Dea was simply painting a true depiction of what was served up to his own eyes: a system in which men were in the public forefront as political and religious actors, and women remained in the background as dutifully supportive ‘auxiliaries’ of the larger patriarchal structure. Paradoxically,
O’Dea genuinely felt women in Mormon society were equal to men, while in the same breath he underscored the basic inequities that women faced within that society.”

So why were women not as involved in sports and especially tournaments as the men? Until the 1970s, many sports directors in the United States feared that physical activity would damage women’s reproductive organs. In *Women and Sports in the United States: A Documentary Reader*, Jean O’Reilly and Susan K. Cahn describe a typical intercollegiate basketball game for women in the 1960s. Teams participated in a “rare ‘playday’ . . . [where] no records [were] kept, set, or broken because statistics did not matter. What mattered was playing the game and extending that opportunity to as many players as possible.” The teams used the “old half-court rules” developed in 1892 because women’s basketball founders felt that women could not run the entire court. Even those who allowed women to participate in church sports, such as the Catholic youth programs in the 1950s, felt that women had “less muscular constitutions” and “more delicate functions in life.”

This attitude started to change in the 1950s and 1960s, partially because of the focus of United States Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy on physical fitness. As women became more involved in exercise, the rules for basketball changed. For example, in 1969, women were allowed to dribble, steal the ball, and have more than two full-court players. In 1971, women could finally play the entire court. While some women’s sports histories briefly refer to these changes, most focus on Title IX, federal legislation that required equal sports opportunity for women in schools and universities.

Mormons fell into the same pattern. While the Young Women Mutual Improvement Association (YWMIA) leaders saw a need for women to be involved in activities, they believed, like American physical fitness experts, that women were not competitive like men. Therefore Mormon men participated in athletics that were competitive, and Mormon women took part in sports and camping that were social activities. As in most early women’s sports, at first Mormon women did not even form teams. Instead they had fun days where the organizers created teams on the spot to allow the women to make friends. In 1936, an *Improvement Era* article asked women sports directors to follow the Platform of the Women’s Division National Amateur Athletic Federation guidelines, which included among its twelve “aims” a suggestion that women’s sports should stress “enjoyment of sports” and not “winning of championships” and encouraged that women not travel to games.
In 1956, the YWMIA started keeping track of young women participating in sports and allowed multistake tournaments when the participants did not have to travel very far. Claudia Shelton played softball on her stake level in the west Salt Lake City area in the 1950s. However, Eloise Godfrey Fugal remembered in the late 1960s that her ward softball team in Cornish, Utah, won the stake competition and participated in a regional tournament in Preston, Idaho. While Fugal commented that the region was large because it covered all of Cache Valley in northern Utah and southern Idaho, her Cornish team traveled approximately fifteen miles for the regional activity.

The Church’s purposes for women’s sports were the same as for men. Church News reporter Monitor C. Noyce explained in 1964, “While there are some differences in the program for young women compared with the young men’s plan, the ultimate goals are the same. Both are charged with providing wholesome recreation, building testimonies within youth so they will remain active, strong members of the Church, and influencing nonmembers to investigate the gospel further by interesting them in specific activities.” Eloise Godfrey Fugal explained that for her women’s sports were to “[build] self-esteem” and physical fitness. She continued, “I laugh a little bit. I know sometimes a big deal is made about the sports programs as a fellowshipping tool. It makes me smile now to think how anybody could be attracted to the Church when they watch us behave like we do in that setting.” Fugal’s comment points that women are competitive. Despite that, she tells that a nonmember in Cornish played softball and did join the Church, although she was not sure softball played a role in that conversion.

Although women did not play at all-church tournaments, they had specialized roles that matched expectations of women at the time. For basketball, women served as sponsors—cheerleaders, tour directors, and social chairpersons for the teams. The athletic committee assigned each team—especially those from out of town—two young women sponsors from a local stake. The women and their stake “adopted” the visiting team. The young women attended the team’s games and sat on the bench. The committee told potential volunteers, “A sponsor is love, faith, hope, and gratitude all rolled up into one pretty package and tied with a beautiful banner that she wears with pride to let the world know who her team is.”

At the all-church softball tournament, women also worked as volunteers. Effie Gunderson started attending church sports after her marriage because her husband coached basketball and softball. She explained, “I was there, so he put a score book in my hand.” At one game the umpire asked to see her books and then invited her to be “the first woman to score
The all-church championship.” Gunderson went on to serve on the all-church softball committee. She arranged for scorers and announcers, who worked twelve-hour days. She also reported scores to the newspapers.75

Another volunteer, Claudia Shelton, helped because her father, Paul “Red” Shelton, served on the all-church tournament committee and asked her to help. Claudia explained, “My girlfriend and I were the ones who went to the George Q. Morris Field. We would be the scorers and announcers. We did all the Church softball games. Our ward happened to go to the junior softball tournament and took first place. We were so excited about that.”76

End of All-Church Tournaments

The all-church tournaments were still important in 1957 when O’Dea published The Mormons, but he suggested a day when the program might
end. He was right. At June Conference 1971, YMMIA General Superintendent W. Jay Eldredge announced the “elimination of all-Church championship finals in all athletic events.” Eldredge justified the change: “We want to stress that the reasoning behind the new program, which is under the direction of the General Authorities, is we will have the opportunity to hold larger and more interesting events. . . . We anticipate that the area tournaments will increase the activity of the youth and the participation of youth and adult in leadership roles.” Eldredge encouraged local areas to plan programs that fit their needs.

Initially the Church encouraged regional tournaments. Mel Jones, the director of church sports in the Southwest Area, remembered when Church leaders decided to discontinue all-church tournaments, they told him, “Brother Jones, we want you to go back to Arizona and build a program that will make them forget Salt Lake City finals.” Jones set up regional programs, including a slow-pitch tournament in Prescott, Arizona. All the teams could play for four days, and families planned their vacations around the tournaments just as they had the all-church tournament. While Jones worked on other regional tournaments for twenty years, he explained that softball was the highlight. Jones continued that after he was released, the Church started to scale back on regional programs: “I’m sure it was because the regional Church leaders, the stake presidents and the region people determined to scale it back. Now it’s not doing so much. It’s very scaled back. In some stakes, they don’t hardly have any play. But they’re doing other things, so they’re keeping the youth entertained.”

While Jones’s program continued to offer a replacement for the all-church tournament for two decades, Church leaders started discouraging regional play as early as 1971. In order to have larger tournaments, the stake presidents and the stake YMMIA superintendents had to agree. Successful programs like Jones’s remained, but poor sportsmanship and other competing activities eliminated regional activities in other areas.

Why did Church leaders move from the all-church tournament to regional and then do away with those activities? While there were problems with teams recruiting players, poor officiating after a decision not to hire professionals, and accidents, the major concerns focused on a bigger picture. Three major reasons for the change were growth in membership, an international church, and a shift to a redefinition of the Church’s mission statement.

**Growth in Membership.** A growing church was the number one concern that led to the change. A few numbers demonstrate this growth. During the 1960s, LDS Church leaders organized two hundred new stakes and nearly two thousand new wards. Only 20 percent of the new stakes were in
Utah (a quarter of those at Brigham Young University); 62 percent were in the rest of the United States, and 18 percent were outside of the United States. This was a major change from 1950, when there were 180 stakes; in 1969 there were 496. Even the athletic program showed this change. In the 1950s, there were seventeen divisions: eight were in Utah; three were outside the Intermountain West. By the time the program ended in 1971, there were thirty-nine zones throughout the world that were broken down into divisions and regions.

Historians James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard explained that the change from all-church activities “was designed to stimulate greater local participation and minimize expenses and logistical problems involved in annual treks to Salt Lake City.” The few Charles Redd Center for Western Studies interviewees who discussed the end of the tournaments restated the Church’s position that growth was the major concern. Ron Gerber, who continues to be involved in local LDS sports, explained, “The all-church got to be so large with people coming. There were so many costs involved in it. The costs became prohibitive.” Judy Donaldson, who worked as a secretary to the YMMIA athletic committee, also saw size as a problem: The tournament “could not continue on because it was so big. It would have to have gotten like the NBA the way the Church is growing.”

In other words, the Church was rapidly becoming too large and too international to have a churchwide tournament. Besides the Church’s tournament expenses (renting gyms, hiring officials, paying for rooms and meals), leaders had to consider the costs to the individual teams to travel to Salt Lake City. They also might have been forced to create another level of tournament to avoid having even more teams come to the all-church tournament.

The International Church. Closely related to growth was the Church’s expansion into an international church. O’Dea foresaw a day in which the focus would not be on Salt Lake City or even the United States: “The Mormon movement is on the eve of its Diaspora . . . [where] belongingness would no longer be exclusively identified with a specific place.” The all-church tournaments did deal with a specific place, and there was always a predominant American element. The basketball tournament included an opening ceremony similar to the Olympic Games in which all the teams and their sponsors marched. Music included “God Bless America” and “The Star Spangled Banner.” A day of softball also began with the United States national anthem.

But as the Church grew, the intensity of the focus on Salt Lake City had to change. A move similar to the cancellation of the all-church athletic tournaments came in June 1975, when Church President Spencer W.
Kimball announced that the June MIA conference would be the last. Instead of the annual leadership meetings for youth organizations and other auxiliaries, the Church planned to “decentralize” to “meet the increased challenges of a worldwide organization” because, as President Kimball said, of “the impracticality of concentrating our activities and learning processes in the headquarters center only.” Sociologist Armand L. Mauss saw the focus on individual countries as positive in his study *The Angel and the Beehive: The Mormon Struggle for Assimilation*. He concluded that as the LDS Church grew, “church members might think of Utah as the Rome or Mecca of their faith, but they do not identify with it so strongly as in earlier stages.” Instead members looked at their own temple or their hope for one and focused on the Church in their area. As a result, “each cultural community could adapt and embroider the core in accordance with its own needs.”

Becoming an international church also meant a change in sports. Many of the worldwide membership did not even play basketball, volleyball, and softball: other countries had their own sports. The 1971–72 *MIA Athletic Handbook* stated that the LDS Church sponsored senior, M Men, and Explorer basketball; senior and Explorer softball; senior and Explorer volleyball; veterans, senior, and Explorer golf; and tennis. But YMMIA leaders stressed that those did not have to be the only options. While participation had always been emphasized, the choices of sports that the Church sponsored had been limited. Without all-church tournaments, the types of sports could be limitless. The manual explained, “Participation is a prime objective of the Church priesthood athletic program. There are many who cannot compete in basketball, volleyball, and softball. These, and many others, may be interested in less strenuous activity” that ward and stake leaders could determine. Some possibilities included “archery, badminton, bicycling, bowling, cricket, croquet, fencing, gymnastics, handball, horseback riding, lacrosse, paddle ball, running, shuffleboard, skating, skiing, squash, swimming, table tennis, track, [and] wrestling.” Leaders often encouraged co-ed sports that had “man-and-wife” or “boy-and-girl” teams.

Church leaders stressed, “We should always remember and keep uppermost in mind that our greatest concern is the welfare of each individual participant in athletic events. The entire recreational and athletic program is a means to an end, and that end, of course, is to build Latter-day Saints strong in the faith and dedicated to the Church. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep in mind that the athletic program is only a part of the great MIA institution. Athletics are an excellent drawing card and missionary tool in attracting young men to the Church and in reactivating...
many who have become inactive.” So even before the all-church tournament ended, the athletic handbooks suggested flexibility. “The type of sports selected will vary throughout the Church and will be decided by local priesthood and YMMIA officers. Such sports will consist of athletic activity which fits the needs, interests, and cultures of the membership in that particular area. For example, sports selected for Europe or the Orient may be different than those selected for the United States and Canada.”

Redefinition of the Church’s Mission Statement. “For organized religion to offer competition in spheres of life in which non-religious organizations do better—spheres themselves inadequate to the facing of deeper human problems—is to be found wanting. The basic need of Mormonism may well become a search for a more contemplative understanding of the problem of God and man,” wrote O’Dea.

Just as O’Dea suggested, the LDS Church changed several of its programs to focus more directly on saving souls. During the 1960s, General Authorities, under the direction of Elder Harold B. Lee, focused on priesthood direction rather than auxiliaries groups like the YMMIA and YWMIA. In 1948, the First Presidency had asked Lee to chair a committee to correlate Church auxiliaries under the priesthood, but Church President George Albert Smith did not think the timing was right, so the changes were delayed. By 1960, Church President David O. McKay believed that there needed to be changes, and Lee was asked to study Church curriculum. Three groups examined programs for children, teenagers, and adults and determined four major areas of priesthood authority: missionary work, genealogy, welfare, and home teaching. Based on these findings, the Church leaders reorganized the auxiliaries. As historians James B. Allen and Glen M. Leonard explained, “Auxiliary organizations were in reality only helps to the priesthood in carrying out its proper function.”

The priesthood became even more central for youth programs in 1973, when the First Presidency announced the creation of priesthood-controlled MIA directed by the Presiding Bishopric. According to Allen and Leonard, “In 1973, when Elder Lee was President of the Church, a major step toward clarifying this philosophy was taken when the Mutual Improvement Associations and the priesthood were combined.” The next year Lee eliminated the MIA as a separate organization, and the teenager groups were known as the Aaronic Priesthood and Young Women. This change meant that a bishopric would call four adult male leaders, a president and three class advisors, who would be in charge of the young men and who would answer to the bishopric. Four adult women leaders, a president and an advisor for the Beehive, Mia Maid, and Laurel classes, directed the Young Women. A service and activity committee would plan dance,
drama, and athletic programs for the ward, and a special effort would be made to include service activities. Teenagers would direct a local ward youth council. At this same time, Church leaders stressed that regional activities were discouraged and were allowed on a case-by-case basis with a special committee appointed “through the Melchizedek Priesthood MIA regional organization.”

These changes also affected the sports program. The mission of the Aaronic Priesthood and Young Women programs was to focus on bringing youth to Christ and no longer to provide recreation. So while the growth of the international church led to an end of all-church tournaments, a more important reason was a shift in focus on what the Church should be about. Sports was one of the programs that was eliminated. Armand Mauss discusses how the Church moved from its “extension education program” of the MIA youth activities to a focus on the spiritual elements. As Mauss writes, “Gone are the speech and drama and dance competitions provided by the old Mutual Improvement Association.” In their place were “priesthood correlation and youth temple trips.” As a result, “this spiritual core would link Mormon communities around the world into one universal religion.” This shift illustrates his theme of a conflict between two symbols in downtown Salt Lake City, the Angel Moroni on the temple and the beehive on the Joseph Smith Memorial Building (formerly the Hotel Utah). For Mauss, the angel represents the spiritual and the beehive the more secular cultural elements of Mormonism. For years Mormons focused on the beehive and assimilating into the American culture. With the change in focus, Mauss believes, “If the Mormon Church is to become truly a new world religion in the twenty-first century, as some scholars have projected, the angel will have to be largely disengaged from the American beehive” so that the Church can create new cultural beehives in other places.

A View into Mormon History

In just a few paragraphs, Thomas F. O’Dea summarized the history and impact of the Mormon recreational programs. The all-church tournaments fit his model. They started small but were soon swallowed up by the general Church bureaucracy. The tournaments took time and effort to organize, but the goal was never simply sports. Rather, the focus was spiritual—to build testimonies and bring young men into or back into the Church. These tournaments were eliminated because the Church was becoming an international church. A worldwide church needed to look beyond its narrow Intermountain West beginnings. O’Dea missed some points, especially women’s studies, but he represented the research of his
time. Looking at the all-church tournaments via O’Dea’s comments shows how sports history can illustrate an effective and entertaining way to understand the Church’s broader twentieth-century history.

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2. Jessie L. Embry, *Spiritualized Recreation: Mormon All-Church Athletic Tournaments and Dance Festivals* (Provo, Utah: Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, Brigham Young University, 2008), ebook at http://reddcenter.byu.edu/Spiritualized.dhtml, spells out the details of the tournaments in a chronological and descriptive format. While this article looks only at sports, athletics was just one of many recreational activities that the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association (YMMIA) and the Young Women’s Mutual Improvement Association (YWMIA) offered. These included speech, dance, music, and drama. For young men and women who were not athletically inclined, there was something for them as well. These programs followed a similar pattern to athletics, with the big event for them taking place at the annual June conference for YMMIA and YWMIA leaders. Sports serves as an example for all MIA activities. My book and this article are based on 125 interviews conducted by the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies about LDS recreation. Most of the interviews deal with athletics, but some have information on other MIA programs. The interviews are housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter cited as Perry Special Collections).

Latter-day Saints” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1954), and Gordon Norman Oborn, “An Historical Study of the All-Church Softball Tournament of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1961). These studies outline Mormon recreation and sports, but except for Kimball’s, they do not talk about a time when recreation would no longer be a focus.

3. Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffman, and Tim B. Heaton, Revisiting Thomas F. O’Dea’s The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 437–38. These essays, while seeing O’Dea’s work as invaluable, also point out what O’Dea missed, especially gender studies.


12. Putney, Muscular Christianity, 53, quoted in Kimball, Sports in Zion, 17 n. 10. In Sports in Zion, historian Richard Ian Kimball carefully spells out the beginnings of Mormon athletics. He demonstrates how the Mormon movement matched the muscular Christianity of other churches and religious-based organizations that used sports as a way to turn young men to spirituality. Kimball’s excellent introductory study could not cover all the elements of Mormon recreation; it barely mentions basketball and does not discuss softball or volleyball at all or the all-church athletic tournaments. This study ends in 1940 and therefore misses the 1950s and 1960s, a period that those who participated in the tournaments would call the height of Mormon sports.


18. Kimball, Sports in Zion, 5–9, 30.
27. For details in changes made in the policies, see Embry, Spiritualized Recreation. The changes included how often Mormons and non-Mormons had to attend church, how long they had to live in the ward boundaries, and so on.
28. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, 1942–1972, Church History Library, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah; used by permission. The numbers come from this source. The paragraph is a summary of the information in Embry, “Basketball,” in Spiritualized Recreation, 54–93.
29. For greater detail about activities associated with basketball, softball, and volleyball tournaments, see Embry, Spiritualized Recreation.
32. Joseph Fielding Smith to all stake presidents, March 10, 1961, Church softball committee circular letters, CR 68/3, Church History Library.
36. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, used by permission.
37. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, used by permission.
43. Perkins, interview, 7.
44. Gary Fish, interview by Jenny Harris, 2003, 4; Wardwell, interview, 1–2.


47. *Church History in the Fulness of Times: Student Manual. The History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2003), 555.


49. Joseph Fielding Smith to all stake presidents, February 28, 1964, March 8, 1965, Church softball committee circular letters, Church Records 68/3, Church History Library.

50. Delbert L. Stapley to All Stake Presidents, March 22, 1967, Church softball committee circular letters.

51. Other teams also held reunions, such as the Grantsville, Utah, Second Ward 1944 champion team. See the photos at http://reddcenter.byu.edu/Spiritualized.dhtml.


54. YMMIA Circular Letter, December 18, 1967, Church Record 15/1, Church History Library.


58. Schultz, interview, 5.


62. *New World* September 7, 1933, 11; September 8, 1933, 11; September 18, 1933, 11.


67. Daniel A. Lord, Your New Leisure and How to Use It (St. Louis, Mo.: Queen’s Work, 1950), 29.


73. Fugal, interview, 9.

74. YMMIA Records, Church Record 15/7, Church History Library.

75. Effie Gunderson, interview by Jenny Harris, 2003, 1–4, Charles Redd Center.

76. Shelton, interview, 1.

77. O’Dea, The Mormons, 262.


81. For more information on regional play, see Embry, “LDS Church Youth Activities Since the 1970s,” in Spiritualized Recreation, 164–200.


83. YMMIA Athletic Committee Files, used by permission.


85. Ron Gerber, interview by Jenny Harris, 2003, 18, Charles Redd Center; Judy Donaldson, interview by Jenny Harris, 2003, 15, Charles Redd Center.
86. A survey of more than one hundred interviews showed that not everyone talked about why they felt all-church tournaments were discontinued. In many cases, the question was not asked.


