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Jon Griffith
Chapman University

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Sports in Shackles: The Athletic and Recreational Habits of Slaves on Southern Plantations

Jon Griffith

When conducting a survey about the general views people have on slavery, quantitative analysis showed that the majority of individuals identify slavery as a racist institution, defining slaves simplistically as masses of people involved within it.[1] This perception is not far off from the views of those who initially forced Africans from their homelands hundreds of years ago. Historically it is easy to lose count of the over thirteen million slaves taken from Africa. Legends have developed from countless stories about American slavery and these tales laid the foundations for famous characters in history books and literary works. However, each slave, whether born in America or Africa, famous or not, was a person. Every slave had a face, a name, a family, and a life. Despite the institution of slavery and the harsh conditions presented by plantation life; tradition, culture and individuality were preserved within the numerous slaves whose voices are not heard in history books. These were men, women, and children who aimed to step beyond the social boundaries branded upon them by slavery. The life of the American slave is a topic that maintains distinct variables of cultural and social interaction. The institution of slavery oppressed Africans and African-Americans as a people; however, their will to experience a normal setting through cultural entities such as music, religion, and sports is the essential narrative on the accurate story of millions of people who have been lost in one of history’s darkest sagas.

To fill the void of workers in a young country, a long tradition of overseas trade allowed for generations of black Africans to be brought across the Atlantic to serve as laborers. As the new cornerstone to the frivolous American economy, the introduction of African slavery would create an institution that would last for almost three hundred years.[2] Along with this massively controversial history came numerous conflicts of opinions and viewpoints. The perception of American slavery, in modern reference, consists of an accepted point of view contrived from numerous literary works, historical publications, and theories. This generalized position from historians and, on a wider scale, the American public, has placed African-American slaves in a class defined by the labor that they did and by the treatment that they received. African-Americans held a unique legal status, which was inherent due to the social confines of the institution itself.[3] Slaves labored over monotonous tasks, endured social persecution, torturous punishment, rape, and separation from loved ones because of their newfound social establishment. Though not all slave owners treated their slaves harshly, they nevertheless coerced their labor. The story that has not been told throughout history is that of the modes of individualism and culture that the slaves aimed to create in certain social forums. On many plantations, a desire to elude the treatment they encountered served as a catalyst for slaves to develop recreational foundations as a method of coping with their daily struggle.

The nature of individual culture within the terms of enslavement stemmed from a desire to forge a basis for self-identity beyond the control and persecution from the white slave masters. Undoubtedly, the generic sentiments of slavery throughout American history found in textbooks and classrooms throughout the country, provides a glimpse into the mindset of Americans on the issue. However, the representations of slaves contrived from these stereotypical images hinder the reality and complexity of their existence as individuals. Slavery was an evolving institution, which experienced vast changes over its numerous generations. African slavery transformed into American slavery and with this shift came new cultural foundations. Accordingly, traditions developed in exchange with the interactions and the progressions of a new cultural and social institution.[4] It was through vital cultural developments of leisure that slaves were able to establish and experience a reprieve through activities such as sports and recreation, despite being bound by the institution’s harsh practices.[5]
The history of slavery is an extensive chronology that displays hundreds of years of African culture infused with the growing American social structure through the Civil War. These cultural aspects became part of American slavery, and while different from their white counterparts, witnessed a parallel evolution with American sports and recreation in the 19th century. The attempts of African, ultimately African American, slaves to develop socially produced a unique slave culture constructed over numerous generations. This would affect not only the lives of slaves on the plantations, but American society as well. With the identification of these various features among slave life in the South, it is clear that the stereotypical view of American slavery, which consisted of backbreaking labor and the mistreatment of African Americans, minimized the reality of slaves as a people who insisted on experiencing a life of normalcy through recreational activities. It is important to understand that many of the issues clearly shown throughout these generalizations revolving around the topic of slavery are valid. However, sports were a way of declaring an independent slave identity, contrary to popular perceptions that seemingly defined slaves in a common manner.

In 1852, the cornerstone of literary and historically accepted views on slavery came in the form of a publication by author Harriet Beecher Stowe, Uncle Tom's Cabin. In the mid 19th-century Uncle Tom's Cabin became the bestselling book in the nation, changing the way Americans viewed slaves. It was not until after the novel was published, that people finally realized that blacks, too, were people; Harriet Beecher Stowe humanized the slaves, which most people had failed to do. Even today, this novel is considered one of the greatest literary accounts of slavery, and is still one of the cornerstones of the American public's perception on the institution. Her novel depicted many accurate scenarios of bondage in the South; however, Stowe's approach also created a false representation regarding aspects of the individualism and the identity of the American slave. As an abolitionist, Stowe created an intensely real portrait of life for the American Slave. She promoted themes of familial separation, physical torture, and death. This novel was detrimental to the movement against slavery at the height of the Civil War. However, historically this text, which holds so many truths on the subject of slavery, lacks complex notions. Stowe's antislavery background presents a heavy focal point regarding the treatment of slaves and the emotional content of her book speaks volumes on the maltreatment of African Americans. Her novel does not speak to the individuality of slave culture.

With works like Stowe's and numerous others, the basic formula of American slavery focuses on the concept that it was an extremely dark period during American history. Those who lived through it faced unimaginable atrocities and horrors and the institution of slavery is defined as American, specifically Southern, negligence toward an entire race. The average American and the academic scholar both routinely identify many symbolic figures with the institution of American slavery. These characters of symbolism construct lists of names and images that generate stereotypical archetypes and issues about the institution. Individuals such as Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Dred Scott, and Abraham Lincoln are all names that have become directly correlated with the struggles of American slavery. However, these individuals and their stories miscalculate the deeper obstacles and problems that the thousands of slaves, whose names and faces are not found on posters or in books, dealt with on much more personal level.

When modern scholars dissect the life of the American slave, the overwhelming cruelty and harshness of their existence becomes glaringly obvious. Slaves worked long, hard hours in the fields year round and were rewarded with little gratitude or respect for their efforts. Former slave, Frank Adamson, who was interviewed for the Federal Writers Project in the early 20th century, recalled his daily work routine in the cotton fields of South Carolina, "what I do? Hoed cotton, picked cotton, 'tend to calves and slop de pigs, under de 'vision of de overseer." Mr. Adamson's daily chores were similar to those of the typical plantation slave. Another former slave interviewed in the 1920's and 1930's for the Federal Writers Project was Jacob Branch, who recalled plantation shifts and quotas that each worker was expected to meet: "my sister there, she had to bring in nine-hundred pounds a day [of cotton]. Well, cotton was hard cus it was heavier there."

Many other slaves claimed similar work routines during their terms of bondage. Numerous slaves recalled, that due to the intense heat in many of the southern states, the cotton they had to pick day in and day out became heavier and heavier. Cotton, when dry, is a very light and soft material which weighs close to nothing, however for the slaves picking it daily in the strong heat, the redundancy of the task made the cotton feel as heavy as stones. To have daily quotas of anywhere from four-hundred to nearly one-thousand pounds, meant that slaves were forced to work from sun up
to sun down or longer to ensure that they completed their tasks. Failure to do so often resulted in punishment, depending on the personality and severity of the slave master or overseer. [14] Clearly, these aspects of plantation life for slaves were in accord with the American stereotype of merciless work and countless struggles. The enslaved African-Americans were incessantly subjugated by slave drivers who watched, maintained, and both physically and mentally abused their slaves. [15]

The traditional view of American slavery presents a vivid image of devastation and torment; words that give minimal acknowledgment to the true accounts of the African-American slaves themselves. Many of the past arguments for slavery as an economic institution in America claimed that slaves were simply property, like that of a horse or cow on a farm. [16] Though the vast majority of people in today's society do not think the same way, it is important to identify that studying slavery through the stereotypical lens of American history and creating a sentiment that only includes harsh work and harsh treatment eliminates the individualism of American slaves. In this context, these general views similarly create an unfinished representation of the American slave as an individual when, in reality, to create a life for themselves, slaves on Southern Plantations continually developed ways to escape from the materialization of their worst fears by participating in sports and recreational activities.

Relentless work routines and hard forced labor were not the only forms of horrid treatment for African-American slaves in the South. There were numerous forms of torture, pain, and physical harm administered at the hands of the white slave owners on their human workers. This reality provides evidence for the stereotypical view of bondage. [17] The physical torture experienced by slaves on the plantation took place for numerous reasons. Included as forms of punishment and manipulation of fear, the physical abuse that occurred during slavery was a prime reason for African-Americans suffering these fates to search for a means beyond the pain. Since the beginnings of the institution of slavery, physical harm had been a part of the process. Slave traders would travel to the African coasts where they would hunt African tribes and would capture, chain, ship, then sell them as slaves, illegally. The introduction of the Middle Passage into historical record would induce a dark period in history where the trafficking of African slaves would reach numbers beyond the hundreds of thousands.

Slaves on Southern plantations were not always treated horribly. Research in the slave narratives at the Library of Congress show that a vast number of slaves found comfort and sometimes friendship with their owners. However, there were many slaves who were dealt the unjust hand of physical abuse that slavery, especially in America, has become known for. The most commonly told story of physical mistreatment is symbolized by the cracking of a whip. [18] The final scene of Harriet Beecher Stowe's book signifies the harsh punishment of the whip as Uncle Tom's white master beats Tom, the main character and a slave, to death. Like Uncle Tom, many African American slaves suffered this very fate.

One story in particular highlights the true accounts represented by the martyrdom and death of Stowe's character, Uncle Tom. [19] A slave named George found comfort with his past culture and from time to time enjoyed preaching and telling stories of his history from Africa. However, he was caught doing so, and his master aimed to stop these actions immediately. Ignoring his master's threats, George continued preaching and received over five hundred lashings from the whip of his master. Despite the abuse, George recovered from the lashings and continued to preach. Forced to run away, George was eventually captured in Greenville, South Carolina where the next step in brutality would occur. A resident of Greenville county named Moses Roper witnessed the wrongdoings against this African American slave and, in a letter to a friend, recalled the proceeding events: "George was burnt alive, in the presence of an immense assemblage of slaves, which had been gathering together to witness the horrid spectacle". [20]

Stories similar to George's can be found throughout the narratives, letters, and primary source material relevant to American slavery. Women slaves were raped, adults and children alike were whipped and often were killed at the hand of their masters. [21] Any form of wrongdoing was punishable by numerous lashings, extra work, no food, or other forms of torture. Former slave Henry Bibb was a husband and father to fellow slaves. His wife and daughter suffered numerous forms of harsh treatments from their slave masters as he recalled in a letter written in 1844:

To stand by and see you whip and slash my wife without mercy, when I could afford her no protection was more than the duty of a slave husband to endure. My infant child was also frequently flogged for...
crying until its skin was bruised literally purple. This treatment was what drove me to seek any kind of life for them, for this was not living.[22]

Numerous other slave stories have this similar theme: many slaves had to learn to deal with these very same issues and upon doing so turned to cultural components, individuality, and camaraderie among other slaves to find meaning and support in the midst of their struggles.

Though sports were an outlet for slave individuality, these communal and individual events did not restrict the plantation owners' firm grasp on the individual freedoms of slaves in an attempt to limit their knowledge of the outside world.[23] Overseers and owners held slaves under rules regarding all aspects of life, including recreation and sports. Countless slaves lacked the proper equipment and venues to participate in certain sports. According to the Georgia slave narratives, one slave on a plantation on the Dixon property recalled, "recreation was not considered important so no provision was made in the regular routine." The slaves were rarely given the opportunity to participate in individual events without the consent or supervision of the slave owners or the overseers on the plantation.[24] Slave owners strongly maintained strict conditions to limit individuality and the development of African American slave culture. In an attempt to keep African American slaves ignorant of religion, freedom, and education, the reality of freedom or a world away from the plantations within the institution for many slaves became blurred in the midst of the harshness of their daily lives. Slaves on a farm in Alabama developed a perspective similar to the numerous other slave communities, "life was kiner happier durin' slavery cus' we never knewed nothin' 'bout any yuther sort of life or freedom."[25] For numerous slaves the only social experience they ever encountered was the work they were forced to do every day.

Sports were a way to not only release built up emotions and frustrations, but were also a physical escape from the realities of slave life. The athletic and physical thrill of sports, competition, and hunting were pivotal aspects of life for many African American slaves, yet recreational activities stretched far beyond the limits of brute activity and physical athleticism. To battle the oppression felt throughout the trials of their enslavement, American slaves produced an entire realm of self-identification through their recreational inclinations. Including numerous activities and cultural entities, these important elements did not necessarily signify survival or even physical ventures for the slaves, but rather were components of the cultural foundations of the slave community. Vast amounts of research on slave culture reveals such themes as music, dancing, weddings, and sports as important aspects of the individual tradition within slave communities.

Historically, the influence of music on the slave community had an impact far beyond being a simple social diversion from cruel reality. While leading hundreds of slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman used song and music to encode secret messages and meeting places for runaway slaves.[26] Culturally, music had a great impact on slave life in all forms. However, recreationally the slave's ability to sing and dance provided them with one of the most rewarding experiences while escaping from the day-to-day reality of plantation life. Men and women would feel the love and closeness that any two free individuals would feel in any white or black community as they performed dances and enjoyed musical entertainment. At cornshuckings[27] and festivals, people would play the fiddle and create music which allowed slaves of all ages and sexes to dance and enjoy themselves with one another. It was an essential reprieve from their daily struggles.[28]

Community events among the slave quarters were a vital form of leisure, which allowed African-American slaves the opportunity to co-exist within a social environment. Cornshucking events were the most common social gatherings on the southern plantation for the American slave. Resulting in competitions among blacks and whites, the music, dancing, and alcohol became a social avenue for normalcy for slaves. Cornshuckings were primarily held on Saturday evenings and remained one of the best memories for former slaves post-bondage. Numerous slave narratives show evidence that similar parties took place all over the south. It was during these particular events where many of the historically known cultural events took place for American slaves. The use of instruments, folk tales, and secret slave songs all were a major part of Cornshuckings. Often times slaves would take this time to 'jump the broom,' a term which, for slaves, meant matrimony.

The ability to create music and interact with fellow slaves socially gave the African-Americans a sense of rarely experienced individualism and intimacy. Many slaves played instruments, and together with music and dancing,
had small parties with dancing, drinking, and enjoyment. Looking back on his days on a South Carolina Plantation, Andy Brice remembered getting his first fiddle, "I learn and been playin' de fiddle ever since. I pat one foot while playin'. I kept on playing and pattin' date foot for thirty years."[29] Many slaves learned how to play instruments similar to Mr. Brice in order to relax after the monotony of work on the plantation. Music, dancing, and singing were cultural keystones to the identity of the American slave. Even when working in the fields, if they were allowed to sing, the long hard days full of labor and pain would be accompanied by the southern air filled with the voices of slaves singing while pushing to meet their daily quotas. Music provided the slaves with a sense of enjoyment and independence by creating a tune of beauty, comfort, and confidence.

Though opportunities to enjoy their traditional music were rare, slaves did enjoy times throughout the year in which they experienced breaks from their excessive work. Certain plantation owners allotted slaves Saturday nights or Sundays off of work, and it was during these stints of relaxation that the habitual foundations of life away from the field were formed.[30] During these days slaves truly experienced the product of the culture and the communities they had created for themselves. Slaves utilized these small breaks from work to fulfill their desire for social gratification through music, dancing, or even the consumption of alcohol. James Boyd, a slave interviewed during the Federal Writers Project, lived his life in Texas where he worked on a plantation. He recalled that "sometimes us have de corn huskin' and dere a dollar for de one what shuck de mos' corn. Us have de big dance 'bout twice a year."[31]

Slaves were rarely allotted time to spend with one another or to enjoy the brief moments of the free life they longed to live while under the rule of their slave masters. Though they maintained numerous elements of escapism through their forms of recreation, one of the most symbolic forms of peace came on a day at the end of every year. As one of the most widely recognized days of rest among Southern plantations, Christmas was a highly anticipated day for the American Slave. Many slaves received a day or two off of work on the plantation, and some even had the opportunity to visit family or loved ones on neighboring farms. This was possible only if their slave master allowed them a pass. A narrative from the Library of Congress described former slave Wes Brady's fondest memories of recreation, "we had parties Saturday nights and massa come out and showed us new steps. He allus had a extra job for us on Sunday, but he gave us Christmas Day [off] and all the meat we wanted."[32]

Slaves also turned to formal customs and forms of celebration to create a cultural foundation. They enjoyed events such as wedding ceremonies, dances, and parties during these brief holidays. On many plantations, slaves could only marry with the permission of the plantation owners. In order to maintain intimate relations and fulfill the basic human need for compassion and love, some slaves would wed in secret to hide their union from their masters. This would typically be done by the man and woman holding hands and jumping over a broom, a tradition equal to modern customs of crossing the threshold into the family's new home. The companionship, symbolized by the matrimony of a man and a woman, fulfilled a void of the necessary human need for affection and care that so many slaves never experienced. As slaves enjoyed these significant moments of happiness and bonding, marriage was not the only symbolic forging of intimacy and love.[33] Slaves held dances where men and women would take the hand of one another and experienced the grace and closeness two people feel when holding each other close on the dance floor.[34] These additional forms of recreation proved to be substantial forms of cultural enjoyment and individuality for many American slaves.

Historian Sterling Stuckey wrote a book, Slave Culture, in 1988. In five-hundred pages, Stuckey argues that as a whole, slave culture developed continuously throughout the institution of slavery, from its introduction into the new world through the emancipation of the slaves in the late 19th century. Africans who forced into a life of bondage in a foreign country interacted with one another in many ways to maintain social traditions from their homeland. Despite the evolution of the institution within the country over hundreds of years, Stuckey believes that even during the moment in which slaves were granted their freedom from slavery, vital elements of African life were still present in their daily existence. He believes this lasting culture, which developed from customary African traditions as well as new experiences in America, has developed the cornerstone to the culture of African Americans even today.[35] Slavery attempted to deny these people culture and individualism, but in many cases, the harsh practices unintentionally brought together a joint effort to create a life amidst the horrid scenes.
Aside from these important aspects of recreational culture, all of these traditional affairs were constructed from African and American roots. For slave sports, this fact is no different. Sports have been around since ancient civilizations roamed the globe and with the development of different societies, came the development of different sports. African tradition, European tradition, and ultimately American tradition would construct a hodgepodge of different styles, rituals, and customs within the evolution of sports.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, sports among all cultures had similar foundations. African sports, even before slavery, involved many of the fundamental activities that African Americans participated in after their forced trek to America. The roots of traditional African sports included things like wrestling, jumping, running, ball games, and stick or spear throwing, all of which continued their cultural role as slaves from Africa adapted to a life of bondage in the United States. Wrestling in African culture during the early 18th century and for eras preceding the 1700s, was not only a popular cultural sport but was an important celebration of life and a rite of passage. Elders forced young men to wrestle other young boys in the tribe to prove their strength and courage before crossing from boyhood to manhood. Entire ceremonies were based around the sport of wrestling, and only the strongest members of African tribes were able to partake in these competitions and festivals. This was done in order to prove the strength of a tribe and the individuals who lived within its confines. Wrestling was a prominent sport among Africans because their lives promoted themes of physicality and nature. To them, this sport represented a way of life. Many inland tribes who depended on animal husbandry and growing crops staged wrestling matches as a form of ritual to appease the gods to ensure agricultural success.

Running was, and is still today, a prominent physical aspect of life in Africa. Young men in tribes would tend to livestock in pastures far from their homes and would often run to the location of their daily chores. The boys would partake in races against one another, highlighting their speed and agility in individual athletic competitions. Because enclosed pastures were not readily utilized at this time, roaming animals and distant fields were central to raising much of the livestock for the African tribes. This required running to be a vital element of not only play, but work as well in order to maintain the safety and cultivation of animals.

Similar to wrestling, jumping was another sport that was crucial to African culture in regards to the young boys' transition into manhood. Initiation rituals among African tribes include many different forms, depending on the different cultures presented, and in the case of high jumping, the ability to leap great lengths proved a man's strength and physical capabilities. Physical prominence was an attribute respected by many tribal African communities. Accordingly, jumping symbolized the ability to overcome the natural surroundings, creating an importance for this particular activity within the communities. In certain tribes, a young boy's final test before his declaration of manhood required him to jump higher than his height standing straight up. If the young boy failed to reach his peak during the jump, he would be forced to train longer than the others and was looked down upon. This cultural aspect was extremely important in many African traditions as it was composed of traditional symbolism that represented a vital stage of growth amongst the tribe's people.

Unlike African tradition, in American slave culture sports were not symbolic of the transitional phase into the adult life, nor were they utilized as veneration of the gods. The sport or recreational activity most similar in African tradition to American slave culture was the use of sticks, spears, or ultimately, hunting. Stick games, spear throwing, and hunting served as both a source of recreation and food production within the different cultures. This was, and arguably still is today in parts of the continent, a prominent communal theme in African culture. While many African tribes relied on agriculture to survive, other tribes' primary source of survival focused on hunting for sustenance. Hunting was also used for religious purposes, sacrificial practices, and community festivals and recreation. Parties largely focused around the successes of tribal hunting expeditions. The men would venture out to kill wild animals on day-long hunting trips. Upon their return, large fires were built to cook and eat the animals, and to honor the gods.

Through primary evidence, it is also clear that African tribes played different games and sports with balls and make-shift bats. These tribal sports were similar to modern games, which include field hockey and dodge ball. Among these traditional athletic games, African tribes used balls made of hippopotamus hide, or even wood, as the essential pieces for recreational participation in such events. Sports and competition allowed for the
athleticism and physicality of African tribes to be displayed among their native lands as they partook in numerous recreational activities. Similar to many other sports played in African cultures, there were a number of reasons, far beyond a limited understanding for physical enjoyment, why these athletic ventures were pursued. Often times in African society, sports and competitions were held to show the masculine prowess of individual tribe members. Many military combatants and warriors would utilize games and recreational activities to show off their power as strong warriors in battle. Whether it was to appease the gods, to demonstrate military or personal strength, or simply to enjoy the freedom of recreation in good will, as an institution of tradition among African people, sports played a prominent role in their daily lives.\[43\]

As the African Diaspora spread throughout the globe, African sports did retain aspects of traditional recreation. However, Western recreation in the 16th and 17th centuries influenced sports in Africa due to the infusion of different cultures at the peak of the slave trade.\[44\] Despite being transported to a foreign world and shackled to an institution, which attempted to strip them of their cultural experiences and humanity, sports remained a prominent recreational activity among African slaves. Even as early as the institution’s introduction to the New World, sports and recreation became a traditional component aimed to stop the destruction of African culture. In the later part of the 18th and 19th century, a variety of sports began to gradually develop popularity in America. The infusion of Western and African cultures ultimately resulted in commonalities in the realm of sports among African, inevitably African American slave culture, and the culture of the American public. A local hybrid of recreation did emerge during this transitional period; however, slaves brought over attempted to retain native forms of sports so they could preserve their homeland traditions.

Though the cultural foundations for sports among slaves may have originally developed from an African pedigree, the advance of cultural institutions of sport and recreation for slaves in the American South followed a distinct pattern of American sports. African influence on sports and recreation within American slavery was possible since the slave trade was not banned until 1807. As slavery reached its peak and was ultimately destroyed as an institution in America in the 18th and 19th centuries, the sports and recreational habits slaves practiced on plantations were similar to the growing popularity of comparable sports in the rest of American society. Slave culture became a concoction of African and American tradition.\[45\]

Baseball, boxing, running, wrestling, and horseracing were competitive sports that became popular in America during the 18th and 19th centuries. Horseracing is an ancient sport that dates back to long before the establishment of the American colonies in the 17th century. However, as British settlers bred horses in the New World, it was inevitable that racing and riding would become recreational activities.\[46\] Wrestling also dated from ancient antiquity. As British settlement, Native American, and European wrestling styles meshed in the 18th century, wrestling became one of the most popular sports in a much more modern country.\[47\] As numerous sports bridge the gap between African and American culture when it comes to American slavery all of these types of recreational involvement show a distinct relationship with the recreational culture of the American slave. For example, baseball transformed throughout America, and with the introduction of Town Ball in the Massachusetts area, the sport took shape in American society in the 18th century. This early form of baseball included formation running and the use of a stick to strike a ball. Though its origins were in the North Eastern area of the country, forms of the sport spread widely throughout the nation, including the South. With the introduction of the sport of Town Ball, the predominant precursor to American baseball was born and, not only did free Americans enjoy the sport but slaves did as well.\[48\]

The cultural evolution of the American slave allowed the recreational habits formed during their time on the plantations to expand to numerous forms of athletic involvement. Not all of these activities were necessary for survival, such as hunting or even some of the wrestling or boxing matches among slaves. The variety of sports experienced on the plantation fulfilled other fundamentals of human endurance in regards to the struggles of slavery including personal connections with both their past and newfound cultures. As sports and recreation in Africa represented a transition to adulthood and thus independence, a similar hope was attached to these activities for American slaves. Sports permitted Africans and ultimately African Americans the opportunity to develop a separate identity amidst slavery.\[49\] The stereotypical view of American slavery lacks a perspective on the complexity of the slaves themselves as individuals. Sports, though popular throughout the entire country
among the general free public, were an essential part of life for those deemed as 'property' as well as an attempt to live life as human beings.[50]

As a cultural aspect of slavery, sports were an extremely important element of life for the American slave. The competition and athleticism provided through sports granted slaves healthy outlets for aggression and enjoyment with and away from their masters. Although slaves primarily participated in sports on their own time and own terms, occasionally the masters of the plantations would pit their strongest and most valiant slave against a slave from a neighboring plantation in boxing or wrestling matches.[51] These events were prominent among southern plantations and served as forms of entertainment for slave masters and their families as well as the slaves living in the area. Owners predominantly purchased male slaves for their strength and physical prowess. Their white counterparts throughout the country were often times astounded by the brute force and strength presented by the slaves both shipped from Africa and those bred domestically.[52] These slaves were not only efficient field hands but they also made for entertaining competitors within the confines of the ring. The excitement among the plantations would brew as the boxing matches were intense, bare-knuckled brawls filled with violence and blood.[53] Ultimately, the plantation owner whose slave was crowned victor of the match would take the losing slave home. The loser, in other words, was the bet in these competitions.

Though the majority of the wrestling or boxing bouts would pit two slaves against one another, it was in this arena that African Americans got the opportunity to be physical with their oppressors as well. A former slave interviewed in 1938 recalled this rare event, "en slav'ry time grown white boys woud come tuh play en wrassle wid de "Niggers" Sho' woud."[54] Traditionally, however, the slaves would not get a chance to interact physically with their white masters as this was deemed socially inappropriate at the time. Similarly, boxing matches between white and black athletes at the turn of the century were frowned upon as they could upset notions of white supremacy within society. Will Adams, a plantation slave who witnessed these sporting events, discussed the competitive sports played among slaves, "then massa have two niggers wrestle, and our sports and dances was big sport for the white folks."[55] During these athletic matches, slaves reached a plateau of extreme performance and physicality unavailable to them on a daily basis in the cotton fields of the American South. These events were opportunities for slaves to be competitive which held meaningful significance for the individual participants as the nature of athletic recreation created a sense of pride, social status, and reward for the slaves competing. They were lifted to higher, more independent levels for those brief moments. Plantation slaves found comfort and solitude in competing and watching these athletic events as they openly became involved in certain communal proceedings, which legitimized a sense of culture and normalcy for themselves, even at the expense of entertaining the masters.

However, these matches highlight the importance of physical competition for the slaves outside of the ring as well. Although the traditions of African customs unraveled in the face of slavery, the creed of the African homeland and its culture was still passed to the generations of slaves in America. These sports were not only a personal escape on the plantations, but were also a connection with a distant and fading past as it allowed the strongest slave men to compete among one another. Sports continuously became an attempt to salvage the lost traditions covered by the new life Africans were forced into and to assimilate into a society dominated by their oppressors.[56] As the evolution of the American slave expanded over time, the true roots may have arguably faded, yet the new local custom of sports and recreation, including that of wrestling, continued in a new light. The institution itself showed little respect for individual freedoms of African American slaves, and these human beings rarely had time to connect with both the cultures from their past and those in the present.

Wrestling and boxing would not only find popularity among the slave quarters of African and African-American slaves, but also in the sports realm of America, where the advancement of these sports would become a social craze as well.[57] Though the white race dominated sports in American society during the era of slavery, the impact of slave athletics would be lasting in the realm of American sports post-antebellum as well. The fists of a man named Jack Johnson won the first African American heavy weight boxing championship in American history. Born to two former slaves only five years post-emancipation, Johnson received little formal education and was raised in Galveston, Texas. It was here where he began boxing at a young age. Johnson grew up in an African-American home plagued by the racism his ancestors felt amongst the fields of the American South. Leading to his
famous match at the turn of the 20th century, controversy arose as he aimed to battle a white contestant. Interracial sports, like segregation of most societal elements, were not widely condoned. Despite his family's roots as African American slaves, Johnson went on to defeat a white contestant in December of 1908. His victory caused race riots all over the country, but the social and racial impact of his title in the sports world and in boxing truly stemmed from his family's past. Continuing with the traditions his family experienced within the institution of slavery, Jack Johnson will forever be remembered in American athletics, constructing evidence of the lasting influence and development of slave culture and sports in American society. [58]

Another devastating form of brutality on the plantations received by slaves was malnutrition and starvation. An interview with a field hand in the American South highlighted a shocking account of this type of treatment as, "she was left for a number of days without any-thing to eat or drink. She says she tried to tear her eyes out to eat them, she was so hungry." [59] Though, once again, not all accounts of slavery went to this level, it was a factor that resulted in the deaths of African Americans in the South.

Many slaves hunted as a solution to this inhuman treatment. Primary targets for slaves on hunting expeditions included small game such as rabbits, raccoons, possums, chicken, and even squirrels. [60] According to former slave Louisa Adam's interview with the Federal Writers Project, "My old daddy partly raised his chillums on game. He caught rabbits, coons, an' possums. He would work all day and hunt at night." [61] Searching for alternative provisions outside the small and, in many cases, insufficient rations of food dispersed among the plantations, hunting as a recreational activity did provide food among the slave quarters. By overpowering the small animals, slaves experienced moments of valor, accomplishment and reward. Many slave owners allowed this to become a daily activity for slaves. It reduced costs for slave upkeep but allowed for the formation of an independent, self-reliant spirit among the quarters. During the long, dark nights behind the slave quarters and in the work fields, slaves and even small children enjoyed setting traps and hunting. [62]

Though used as a means of survival and empowerment at times, hunting was also a recreational activity that brought joy and adventure to the lives of many African Americans. Slaves would form hunting parties made up small groups of men, women, and children, comparable to African tradition. It transformed into a communal activity, as well as an individual one. They captured numerous animals and would take them back to the slave quarters to be cleaned, dressed, and cooked. There the slaves would sing, dance, and eat the game they had killed on their hunting expeditions in an impromptu celebration. Hunting as a recreational sport supplemented rations for many slaves, but more often than not the adventure, and ultimately the outcome of recreational hunting parties, resolved into feasts and festivities among the slave quarters on occasional days off the plantation. According to a slave from Missouri named John Anderson, "Our amusements consisted only of fishing in the summer time and hunting during the winter months." [63] These brief periods of rest were rare and slaves utilized every free moment allotted possible to experience the aspects of life they missed on a daily basis. [64]

As a form of indulgence on the atypical customary holidays such as Christmas and on weekends, slaves prominently played sports when given small allotments of time off. [65] It was during their rare moments of rest that many slaves partook in other sporting events apart from the aforementioned competitions. Slave athletics included sports of endurance and skill such as running and swimming, proving that their athletic endeavors did not solely focus on physical brutality like wrestling and boxing. Swimming was not an extremely prominent theme in sports on the plantation; however, distance running and sprinting was something that slaves routinely enjoyed. [66]

Running dates back to the pre-slavery era and was always a sport of convenience and enjoyment in African culture. Accordingly, American culture found running to be popular amongst both the areas earliest inhabitants and whites during the colonial and modern eras. Native African tribes utilized the open plain landscapes and areas of their homelands to participate in this particular sport. The tradition of running as a recreational amusement continuously passed on and became a practical sport for American slaves in the Southern regions of the United States. Though open field areas were readily available, freedom to move for the America slave was more limited than for an African tribesman. However, during cornshucking festivals, holiday events, and even at night in the cornfields or backlands, many slaves enjoyed the thrill of running against one another. [67] Running as an example...
was a cultural tradition that developed long ago in African tribal societies. The plantation owners viewed these moments of entertainment as occasional amusement for the slaves and entertainment for the white audience, as the plantation families, both white and black, watched the races. However, the African American slaves saw these experiences as a traditional culture embedded in their new life in America. Slaves did not care that owners used them for entertainment; they simply visualized their participation in such activities as culture for them.

Running was not the easiest sport for slave participants in retrospect, as many African-Americans rarely had shoes or covering for their feet, making this a painful venture. However, the freedom and enjoyment so many slaves expressed feeling while running openly was worth any amount of physical pain afterwards. A slave from the Federal Writer's Project observed, "nothing, no pain or sadness, could ever be worse than what they did to him on his plantation during the days of slavery." The sport of distance and sprint running would become famous in the late 19th century around the world, and would ultimately expand to a global amusement with the introduction of the Olympics and marathon running.

African tradition incorporated running as a recreational activity long before American slavery formed, and though slaves occasionally embarked on recreational races for personal satisfaction, the entertainment of the white owners continued to be an overriding theme among slave sports. A former slave from Texas recreated a scene from his days in slavery during the Christmas celebrations on his owner's plantation:

> on Christmas we had all we could eat and drink and after that a big party, and you ought to see them gals swingin' they partners round. Then massa would have a few good niggers wrestle. Our sports was big fun for the massa and his family. They'd sit on the gallery and watch the niggers put it on brown.

Slaves were utilized for any job, at any time. The white owners held a strong disregard for the emotions and needs of slaves, lacking respect, both socially and culturally for their 'property.' It is clear that owners used slaves for both manual labor and entertainment purposes. Even during the periods of rest granted to the slaves, the owners of the plantations continued to use their 'property' for their own means. Despite their subjugation, slaves attempted to keep a piece of their individuality by continuously partaking in social activities. While simultaneously following every strict order of their white masters, slaves incorporated personal enjoyment and motive into their participation in communal recreation.

For many of the sports that American slaves played on plantations, the rewards made available at the culmination of these events brought an increased element of competition and athleticism into recreation. This rang true whether slaves participated for their own enjoyment or that of their master. The time off on the plantation and a vast majority of the prizes eligible for receipt for slaves would come from the slave masters. There is no doubt that thousands of slaves had been treated poorly and, seen as nothing more than property to their slave owner, rarely had access to certain daily commodities. This included, but was not limited to, substantial food, proper seasonal clothing, shoes or covering, or even bedding. The slave owner's intense determination to disallow the personal development of the American slave was evident in this treatment of African Americans. This included such cruelties as lack of education for slaves, minimal individual freedom for love, companionship, or culture, and physical brutality. To maintain individualistic amenities despite this treatment, slave sports and competitions would often times conclude with prizes. These prizes were a small attempt to fill the void left by the inhuman treatment of slave masters. These tokens included trophies such as jugs of whiskey, money, small game, food, and at times a woman for a bride. These all became symbols of many of the amenities that slaves were unable to enjoy within their enslavement.

Though slave narratives provide statements claiming women were the subject of reward in sports, women did not favor this subjugation. The oppression of women within slave culture ironically mirrored the oppression felt from the white community amongst blacks.

The lack of intimacy and love was something that greatly destroyed the spirit and individualism of the American slave during the years of bondage. The prize of a bride or mate as a symbol of affection and closeness to another human was the pinnacle trophy for many male athletic participants. As families were constantly ripped away from one another, slaves rarely had a lasting matrimony. The closeness of family and the emotion of love lacked stability among slave life on plantations. Many times women were viewed as the greatest prize of all for male competitors. Willingly or not, many women were subjects of forced relations with both fellow slaves and the slave owners.
masters themselves. Though relationships and children blossomed from these associations, in certain cases, love has become a disputed topic in the realm of slavery. Women were overpowered beyond their control, and were utilized as resources of victory for both white and black men. Women slaves hated this treatment.

The true symbols portrayed through the awards won by slaves who participated in sports are a glimpse into the reality that slavery stripped these humans of the fundamental elements needed for a healthy life. They had no means of providing for themselves. They received no payment and were kept under close watch by the overseer or slave driver. To get off the plantation a pass was required, and any slaves caught without one were simply taken. It is through these elements that the desire for involvement in recreational activities shows testament to the importance of sports for the existence of the American slave. As slaves could win items including food, clothes, or even love, the promise of victory and these materials they yearned for created legitimacy for sports to become extremely important for slaves on plantations.

Women were faintly visible in the realm of sports in regards to American slavery. Notably, slave women suffered many of the ill fates that their male counterparts faced, yet were not remotely as involved in sporting events. Apart from dancing, cooking, and weddings, preliminary research provides no example of women participants in traditional slave sports; yet, these arguably feminine and traditionally different forms of recreation, veering from the male dominated sports, allowed women a similar escape from the bearings of slave life.

As the accounts recorded in the interviews of former slaves show no signs of women participants in the physical aspects of recreational activities, women battled numerous forms of oppression. They too sought social and communal justice through communal activities. Based on cultural and social standards in America during slavery, women were likely limited or simply denied participation in such events. Social struggles for slaves, let alone slave women would be a detrimental issue throughout the country long after emancipation would be declared. After the Civil War many black women continued to tend to the homes and families of white Americans in a not so subtle acceptance of American limitations on female activity. However, African American women would attempt, despite their social struggles within and outside of slavery to create a sense of legitimate culture in their lives as well.

Slave narratives follow a distinct pattern of male dominance in the field of recreational habits; however, it is clear that male slaves were not the only individuals looking for an escape from the daily struggles of American slavery. Plantation labor was a job for all slaves, regardless of age or sex. Though the work of the male slave focused on physical labor, women too were forced to work in the fields, maintain the master’s homes, cook, clean, and tend to the slave children. Though women primarily attended to these particular chores, the workload was dispersed to every level of slave community. Even at the youngest ages on plantations, slave children got a small satchel and commonly worked as field hands in the cotton fields across the American South. Subjects of the harsh working conditions and questionable treatment that paralleled that of male slaves, women and children alike turned to recreational solitude to sustain a sense of individuality and culture amidst the barriers of bondage.

Many of the sports that slaves enjoyed had elements of immense danger involved; whether it was physical harm from events such as boxing and wrestling, or an elevated risk of being caught in the midst of covert events and severely punished by their master. However, like the women confined to a harsh life within the terms of bondage, children had to work laboriously day after day. As children, they especially desired an element of enjoyment in their lives. Similar to women, slave children usually worked as servants in the homes of the master or attended to chores around the plantation fitting to their physical capabilities. Along with these common themes of child labor however, also came a desire for the children to seek recreational ventures like their elders as well.

Unable to physically partake in some of the more strenuous recreational events that took place on the plantation, children enjoyed dancing, music, cornshucking, and most of all, marbles. The modern rules of this game require a circle approximately ten feet in diameter drawn on the ground. The primary objective was to knock the opponent’s marble out of the ring. The modern version is virtually identical to the game slave children played on the plantation. Slave children would draw a circle in the dirt, either in the cabins of the slave quarters, which were predominantly built on dirt lots utilizing the earth as the floor, or outside in nearby areas, and would use homemade marbles to play. Made out of rocks and stones, these marbles were the essential pieces used by slave children to play this game. Being a game of no danger and of little consequence to the slave masters, children used...
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the game of marbles as the primary form of recreational escape.\textsuperscript{[87]} White children also played this particular game. Especially in the realm of recreational pursuits, slave and white children were allowed to both play and compete with one another during their early years.

Though countless slave children played marbles, these young slaves adopted similar aspects of adult recreation into their adolescent games. Analogous to other aspects of recreation, gambling and prizes were important elements of slave sports at all ages. Though games played by slave children on the plantation resulted in primarily innocent interactions, the game of marbles developed into a sport of gambling and prizes for children. Sella Martin, a slave who was a house servant, recalled his childhood in a typical account of slave children: "Marbles was the general game of boys in the South, and the spirit of gambling being the prevailing passion with the young as well as with their elders in slaveholding society."\textsuperscript{[88]} Victory would often time result in prizes similar to those of other recreational activities including money, alcohol, and food.

As the social makeup of slavery in America consisted of men, women, and children, comparable social needs and communal functions became prevalent among slaves of all ages.\textsuperscript{[89]} The similarities of both adolescent and adult sports in slavery did not end with gambling. Though the majority of documented slave sports were too dangerous for child participants and slave children were primarily involved in playing marbles and community events, one of the most important institutions of recreation for slaves was the exception to this rule. The children at a young age were objectified like their parents and fellow slaves, and they accordingly searched for a life beyond the social destruction of their personal identity due to slavery.\textsuperscript{[90]}

In an effort to participate in cultural sports throughout slavery, children and adults alike played a game known as 'Town Ball.' The origins of the official sport of 'Town Ball' essentially came from a game started in England in the 18\textsuperscript{th} century known as 'Rounders.'\textsuperscript{[91]} This sport was much like modern baseball. Two teams attempt to round bases by hitting a ball with a wooden plank or bat.\textsuperscript{[92]} With the introduction of European, and specifically British culture into the Americas in the late 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} century, the original precursor to American baseball found its unofficial form in the New World. Long before 'Rounders,' primitive forms of baseball existed, even in Africa. According to researchers on sports across the globe in the 17\textsuperscript{th} through the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, stick and ball games were a part of African culture, especially for young children.\textsuperscript{[93]} The tribes themselves constructed the equipment necessary for African sports. Balls were made of rough hides from the hippopotamus or the elephant.\textsuperscript{[94]} Utilizing the abundance of wood from around the area, they made makeshift bats and sticks from the logs of trees.\textsuperscript{[95]} No formal set of rules gives today's baseball fan any concrete signs of African influence on the modern game, but it is clear that culturally, Africans played games similar to 'Rounders' and 'Town Ball.' However, one can claim that the cultural influence on African society with these stick and ball games has similar cultural context as a past time in Africa like in the United States.

The sport of 'Town Ball' itself became a cultural phenomenon in North America during the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} centuries. The game adopted several different names including, 'base, round ball, base ball, or just ball.' Throughout various slave narratives and letters, African Americans referred to the sport described similarly to baseball incessantly as 'Town Ball.'\textsuperscript{[96]} As a cultural icon in America, this sport would become the forerunner to the athletic revelation that would be known as America's past time. People all over the country enjoyed the game of 'Town Ball' and witnessed its rise all over North America as a game played by people of all ages and races.\textsuperscript{[97]}

Both white Americans and black slaves participated in the game of 'Town Ball' providing a common experience despite the social differences of the two groups.\textsuperscript{[98]} They played the game both together and separately. Though it is unclear whether or not enslaved African Americans found inspiration from their native games, no evidence points to substantial influence from the American interpretation of both 'Rounders' and 'Town Ball' either. This sport for both free white Americans and African Americans in bondage became an essential piece of recreational enjoyment.\textsuperscript{[99]} This sport was one of the few that gave both adults and children, of either race, a chance to enjoy physical activity and competition. Like many of the other sports within American slavery, games went on after work was finished, especially on holidays and time off.\textsuperscript{[100]} Many of the same tokens, including food, alcohol, and clothing, were available as wagers and tokens of victory during these athletic competitions.\textsuperscript{[101]}

\textsuperscript{70} Voces Novae, Vol 2, No 1 (2010)
On the plantation, 'Town Ball' quickly became one of the most popular sports among slaves. This was due to minimal physical danger and the ability for a large group of slaves to participate in the activity. Slave narratives found in the Library of Congress present a clear depiction that on the plantation 'Town Ball' was a game that slaves not only played amongst themselves, but was a sport shared with white children and adults as well. Community rules on the plantations chiefly paralleled social American standards, but in some cases, the boundaries could be crossed for personal affairs. According to former slave Ed Allen, "White boys and colored boys, whole crowds used to go in the river down here all together. We used to play baseball together, all had a good time."[102] At age eighty-three years old, a former slave from Alabama, Henry Baker, still remembered his days of playing the sport on his master's plantation, "we allus made de ball outa cotton an' rags."[103] By using available materials easily found among the plantation, 'Town Ball' became an efficient sport of play for slaves. Mr. Baker continued, "de way we played 'Town Ball' wuz, we had bases en we run from one base tuh de udder 'coase ef de runner wuz hit wid de ball he wuz out. We played wid de niggers... 'coase de white boys played wid us too."[104] It was a highly popular sport among the slaves in the South and was a pivotal aspect of slave culture in terms of recreation.[105]

Despite the struggles of slave life on the plantation, the desire to salvage an independent culture for African-Americans in bondage became recurring within numerous recreational endeavors. Ultimately, these activities would be an essential escape from many of the common issues of slavery. By creating social customs, sports, and recreational games, the entire social structure of American slaves within plantation life became involved in the development of an independent slave culture. Notwithstanding the efforts of numerous white slave traders and owners to rid both Africans and African Americans of their own culture, slave communities found simple salvation amid recreation and sport, which allowed slaves of all ages to participate.[106] The institution of slavery impacted slaves of all ages and sexes in different ways, but athletic competition and recreation, especially the sport of 'Town Ball,' became a valued component of African American culture on the plantation. The sport of baseball in American culture would continue to develop in to the most well known form of athletic recreation in American society. The first African American baseball player to integrate white teams, Jackie Robinson, retained pride in his family's past, breaking the color barrier of American sports despite the fact that his own grandfather had been a slave in the American South.[107]

Though the traditional culture of African sport held numerous similarities to American sports during this era, new forms of recreation for African Americans became accessible within the confines of plantation life during American slavery. The introduction of such sport included horseracing. The sport of horseracing is one of ancient indelible tradition, dating back long before the American colonies were even discovered by European explorers. Though this particular sport was once only known as an activity of the nobility, its evolution through the centuries has made it part of routine within various cultures. Horse racing, though never a practiced sport in African pastime, became a sport of adventure and excitement within slave holdings throughout America. The daily routines of the slaves, which involved physical labor on the plantation in the hot fields of the South, often times provided a close relationship for slaves with horses used for this labor. As slaves developed a sense of comfort with the animal and were innately in control of the beast throughout the daily routines of the farm, slaves found this relationship rewarding. Slaves often times found themselves no better than horses while under the control of the plantation owner or the slave overseer. Many slaves also saw horses as something to abuse because they equated them with work. The development of this relationship between animal and man allowed the slaves to venture into a new field of sport. Horse races and horse riding became a prominent form of recreational relief for the American slave away from the grotesque hardships of slave life.[109]

Among slave culture, the development of horseracing would have a similar history to that of the sport in American society. Slaves were introduced to the horse on the plantation but were not able to participate in formal horseracing. Thus, it is important to note that horseracing was the most difficult sport for slaves to experience. This rings true for numerous reasons. Slaves were not entrusted to venture away from the plantation. The only times that African Americans were allowed to travel freely in the American South were with a pass from their slave master. Even free African Americans were subject to illegal capture and enslavement in the South if found without a pass. Thus, giving them access to the most advanced form of transportation of that era raised enormous security issues.[110]
Recreational horseracing and horse riding was also difficult for slaves due to their inability to move freely throughout the area with the fear of being caught by their master, the patrollers in the area, or other slave owners. The horses used for slave labor on the plantations were the strongest and fastest horses available in the country. Slave owners kept the horses in closed locations because if slaves were able to steal the horses they could quickly escape from the plantations. Due to these reasons, horseracing was limited. Horsemanship was also the mark of a gentleman. The social competition between races created a boundary between whites and blacks. The slaves who did participate in this recreational form were slaves who did not seek to escape with the animal but simply to enjoy the sport.

Despite these obstacles, racing was one of the most elaborate and exhilarating events of sport for the American slave. Horses were readily accessible on the plantation considering they were used daily on Southern farms; though they were often kept away from the slaves, it was not impossible to sneak the animals away. Racing was a far more dangerous event primarily enjoyed by African American male adults, but simply riding horses was something that slaves of all ages and genders enjoyed on the plantation. Horse riding was one of the few physical sports that women actually were able to participate in within American bondage. Children also had the ability to ride horses, as it was a safe yet enjoyable form of recreational sport for slaves. According to a former slave in Texas, "De white and cullud chillen played together, all over de place. Dey went fishin' and rode de plough horses' and run de calves and colts and sech devilment." [112]

Horse races were rarely communal events, as most participants were the men who had primary access to the animals. They partook in small events against one another. Even in less formal arenas such as the plantation itself during the day, the slave men working with the horses plowing the fields would hold small races: "my mother tole we all about dem time my father and the other workers rode de horses up to de smoke house and got da' meat. Dem wul'd race and run dem horses fast." [113] Because slaves had a difficult time getting horses away from the main plantation foundation, recreational horseracing and riding was an event that slaves mixed with the daily grind of the plantation work.

This sport, like many of the others, found slaves competing against one another for bragging rights and for material items not easily obtained due to the constraints of American slavery. In the example of the men racing to the meat house, the two slaves raced to small morsels of meat taken out of the meat house, which was the prize. To the overseer and the slave masters the African Americans were going about their daily business and work tending to such chores as raising hides in the meat houses; however, as a form of recreation, slaves utilized this time to enjoy the sport of horseracing, a form extremely atypical according to the growing tradition of American horseracing.

Horse racing in its more traditional form most often happened away from the work areas on the plantation. Slaves took horses into the open backfields near their residences and held clandestine events that pitted slave against slave in a fast-paced race atop a powerful horse. [115] The events would usually take place at night, making the dangers of being caught less likely. Though the night gave the slaves an opportunity to escape and partake in these events, racing in the backwoods in the night became a dangerous task for the safety of the horse and the rider alike. [116]

Some slaves became strong horsemen as a product of their work with the animals in the field, resulting in races and gambling among the men. [117] Slaves would often gamble small tokens on the winners of the races, similar to the modern day racing events enjoyed throughout America today. Among the thrill of the horse races, slaves were in control of their beasts and felt a sense of authority and liberty as they raced across the lands they maintained daily despite the dangers of their master reprimanding them.

Sports played in slavery meant much more to slaves than just a form of recreation or an active involvement in communal regards. A vast number of slaves have been interviewed and of the thousands of narratives, letters, and memoirs available to read and research, it is evident that memories of sports and recreation throughout both the years of childhood and adulthood remained some of the fondest memories for slaves. Numerous African Americans, even years after gaining their freedom, never forgot the memories and fun they had within the
institution of slavery, as these remained many of the only bearable recollections. Slaves played numerous games and coexisted with fellow African Americans who had also been stripped of the same basic human rights at the hands of the white southerner in America.

Sports were symbolic. They did not hold the same meaning or symbolism as sports in African cultures but in African American cultures, especially within slavery, sports and recreation meant something more than just entertainment. Slaves were willing to risk their lives and freedom to enjoy late night horse races and other events as well. Within the sport of horse riding and horse racing in slavery, slaves felt power and freedom as they controlled the animal. Though to many slave owners and plantation overseers, slaves were as low as or even lower than the farm animals residing within the plantation fences, it was during these particular recreational events that American slaves were able to feel a sense of pride and self-worth. In the slave narratives of the Library of Congress, a repetitive theme found throughout the words of many slaves themselves create a sense of sadness as they compare themselves to the livestock being sold at the markets. It was through events such as horse racing that American slaves risked and were able to feel a sense of worth beyond their normal comparison to the animals maintained throughout the South.

There is no doubt that the institution of slavery in America will forever be known as one of the darkest moments in the nation's history. Slavery became a prevalent component within the American economy as the nation primarily constructed its foundations off the cultivation of tobacco and other agricultural resources. Ironically, for the young colonies to grow into a nation that would ultimately stand for equality of all and against the unjust tyranny of the time, the virtual enslavement of an entire race fueled a fight for freedom. For over one hundred years Africans who were migrated to this 'New World' lost all sense of individuality, lost all sense of life and hope.

Americans today view slavery for what it was, a terrible social tragedy which questioned the country's entire foundation, yet the people, the ones who were enslaved, the ones who lost their families, friends, homes and lives were the ones who endured the wrath of these historical truths. Though many great works have dedicated themselves to educating the masses on the horrors of American slavery, it is unfair to the legacies of these men, women, and children to neglect the entire history and their attempts at creating a life with a semblance of normalcy despite the immoral, inhumane, and hypocritical treatment they received. Slaves fought for their rights from the moment they were taken from their native lands. They rebelled, as in the famous case of 'La Amistad,' they learned to read, they understood the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, they asked questions, they fled, they escaped. However, the greatest accomplishment of any slave in the fight for their freedoms, not only as Americans but as people in general, was that they lived.

The expansion of slavery as a prominent institution in the Southern United States made the growing negative treatment of the American slave inevitable. As this treatment aimed to halt the growth of slaves as people and focused on cultivating an efficient and strong labor force for the Southern economy, the decline of the individual culture of the African American slave was imminent. Though the stereotypical views of slavery found in numerous history books, and even literary masterpieces such as Uncle Tom's Cabin, have identified the realities of slave life in the South, those who wore the shackles experienced much more complex emotions, desires, and tribulations than those presented in the aforementioned areas. Far more detailed than the statistics of any history book, as slaves dealt with the unimaginable horrors of American slavery in the South, they utilized recreational habits and sports to create a social and cultural world that allowed them to be what they truly were: humans. With these social and cultural advancements among the slave community, similar to the institution of cultural sports among the American public of the era, slaves aimed to stop the destruction of the African American identity. Many of the very same principles American slaves fought for were congruent to the fundamental elements of the country, which ironically condemned them to their life in shackles. The cultural developments and sports habits that were present on Southern Plantations are evidence that slaves aimed to create a balanced life for themselves; one filled with tradition, enjoyment, freedom, and culture. The American slave's desire for the development of culture and identity through sports ultimately was the attempt of the enslaved community to experience the basic American principles of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.
This survey was conducted around Orange County, having over 120 people surveyed on what they personally identify with the issue of slavery. The chosen group for this project involved all genders, ages, and races ensuring a broad demographic. This was vital to understanding truly what people in society today understand about the issue of slavery. Though it may not speak for society as a whole, the findings from this survey indicate a common pattern with much of the information and generalities provided in books and taught throughout history courses in schools all over. This survey was conducted from August 2009 to March 2010.


Ibid., 127-143.


The Federal Writers Project was a part of a larger group of projects implemented by President Franklin D. Roosevelt of the United States. In an attempt to aid the numerous individuals who were unemployed due to the Great Depression in the 1920’s and 30’s, F.D.R. assigned all of the writers and artists to the task of interviewing the slaves who were still alive. Thousands of slaves in their later years were sought throughout the country. They gave long interviews talking about their daily lives, the struggles of slavery, and all of their memories.


Ibid.

The Athletic and Recreational Habits of Slaves on Southern Plantations


21 Numerous letters and writings have been published in a number of different books talking about numerous different aspects of slave culture and slave life. As a main source in this paper, the book entitled, *Slave Testimony: Two Centuries of Letters, Speeches, Interviews, and Autobiographies* edited by John W. Blassingame has inspired many of the slave stories and adventures of numerous slaves as well as opened up a variety of other primary source material as well. The letters and stories between slaves and their loved ones inspire readers to understand the deeper connection of slaves as individual humans in their own personal element. The book brings together testimonies and stories unlike anything history books tell, and in the words of Blassingame himself, "If we want to know the hearts and secret thoughts of slaves, we must study the testimony of black."


25 Ibid., *Slave Testimony*, Sella Martin.


27 Cornshuckings were community events that took place from time to time on the plantations. The owner and their family would gather with the slaves at times and there would be competitions to see who could shuck the corn the fastest. These events also included dancing, food, and stories.


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[36] Ibid., 1-11.

[37] Ibid., 1-5.

[38] Ibid., 1-5.


[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.


[43] Ibid.


[45] Ibid., 5-11.


[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid.


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[62] Ibid., 1-7.


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[86] Ibid., 709.


[94] Ibid.


[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid.

[99] Ibid.


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[105] Ibid., 40-45.


[112] Ibid.


[120] Ibid.