James Robinson, from Muncunian Butler to American College Trader

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The professional sport of pedestalism declined towards the end of the 19th century with the decline of the 1860s, including the barriers to innovative Amateur Athletic associations (AAA), established in the 1890s, continually competing with cricket in the early 1870s, and then with the establishment of the Northern League, their professional teams found new entreaties and the baseball players who were reliant on the professional activities for their economic gain struggled to recover. However, due to the perceived transfers of 1870s athletic training, some professionals obtained employment in soccer whilst others migrated to sport in the 1880s, the20th century continually evolving in the development of modern sport. Through the deconstruction of history, several 'layers of truth' can be uncovered, which provide a well-rounded impression of the subject, working theoretically, not always chronologically.

Robinson the Athleticist

James Robinson was born in 1846 in Fallsworth, Manchester, to Martha Worsic and William Robinson, a working-class butcher from Glossop. Robinson and his brother Alfred were involved in a small family business by apprenticing as butchers whilst in education. During his employment, Robinson competed in local amateur competitions for Fallsworth, Worsop, Salford and Manchester Athletic Clubs, specialising in the one and two mile walking events. Making headlines in August 1871, Robinson dominated an event at the Manchester Athletic Club annual meeting, Stakes-on-Trent, taking home a gold medal and a large silver cup for his performance in the club’s principle events, the one and two-mile walking, before continuing to compete successfully at the 1875 world championships in New York City offering a salary three times as large as that of Princeton, the job was one he could not refuse, making him the highest paid president. Robinson was also invited to train champion athletes including Luther Carey, Walter C. Dohn, and Alfred B. Johnson, a brother of President Johnson, and was commissioned by Walter G. George, ‘march’ champion of America and later manager to the British Olympic team. His position at the MAC ended in 1878. Robinson’s involvement in athletics was curtailed by illness, which saw him return to Saratoga Springs to run Woodlawn Park’s 500-acre property grounds, taking the position of superintendent to Woodtown Park Kennels and Stock Farm, and head of the Saratoga Athletic Club.

Robinson became responsible for the numerous and extensive events at the newly constructed Woodlawn Oval, a superior athletic complex, which included a cinder running and throwing track, baseball diamond, tennis courts, croquet grounds, bowling lane, and grandstand.

Although a fine walker and successful in major competitions Robinson was always overlooked by the amateur organisations. The sport, and its athletes, were struggling to move away from their professional counterparts as sports and revenues were lost to the amateur competitions, and the public perception of these events even mirrored the exhibition matches which were popular in the 1860s that were fuelled by gambling, a major problem for amateur committees.

Robinson the Entrepreneur

Robinson’s name was used in nationwide campaigns to endorse Alfred’s Powis Plasters for ‘cuts, bruises, strains, rheumatism and colds’, and his column in the World provided an additional platform to display his messages and discuss his views on athletics, contributing to his increasing status as a pioneering trainer. Robinson was invited to the Royal Bounded in 1888. Robinson perceived that the British athletic system was lacking in organization and required an efficient and well managed system that would generally improve the safety of the game. Robinson’s rules were considered and the fifteen versions of the game were introduced to the American colleges, allowing Robinson to improve the rules and status of the team. Although Robinson had to participate as a professional athlete himself, he could no longer be the team’s physical trainer and the need for a professional trainer in the 1890s was not permanent. Robinson’s rules were adopted by the University of Texas, the University of California, and the University of Illinois, which allowed Robinson to change the rules and professionalisation.

Robinson’s death to heart disease in March 1906, a condition from which he suffered from 1903, changed the attention towards the all-round trainer in Princeton History. Although his responsibilities had considerably lessened in the years leading to his death, his presence at sporting events and his general ambition around campus filled student spirits, as the Princeton Athletic Council was ‘fearful of losing him to an offer from another university or to a possible move abroad. Robinson’s death was attributed in the following manner: “He was fond of work, and his death was anticipated as a great loss to the University.” Robinson’s death, for all intents and purposes, infused the university community as a result, and his passing, along with the presence of the Athletic Club and his sons, which provided a new dimension to Robinson’s persona as one of influential authority in the development of collegiate sport.

Robinson the Trainer

The death of his father in February 1878 made Robinson re-evaluate his career path, accepting a job with Henry Hilton, the millionaire New York judge, at his estate in Cloughford, New York’s east. Robinson resided in Saratoga Springs whilst fulfilling his new position at the Saratoga Race Course but his passion for athletics never faltered and he quickly took the position of trainer to help him in his role of professionalism and improved sporting, for example to football, horse racing, and cricket, or moved abroad.

Robinson’s success at the Harmer AC contributed to his appointment at Harvard University in 1881, although Robinson was awarded athletic titles regarding the use of professional trainers and imposed by Harvard’s faculty, saw his position insecure. Repeating his daunt in the treatment of Robinson and the faculty’s ‘poor decision’ at the university, the Harvard student body rallied against the exclusion of professional trainers, which the administration quickly debated. With the new rules debated by many large League institutions, Robinson founded another club which returned to England, engaging in the cattle shipping business whilst in London.

Although some concerns arose regarding his eligibility under the new athletic rules, in October 1885 Robinson retained his Princeton position, being paid $570 (approximately $18,000 today’s calculations) split equally between the Princeton undergraduates and alumni. Continuing in his role as athletic trainer to the football, baseball and athletic teams, “professor Robinson” provided the help to Princeton finish both the 1885 and 1889 football season as champions and securing his employment for the foreseeable future. In 1888, with an increased salary, Robinson had the additional responsibility of preparing the Princeton preparatory school athletes, identifying suitable talent for the university teams for the following academic year. The physical educators were unhappy with this arrangement, suggesting that the trainer’s presence at schools and colleges provided and environment where knowledge was not properly trained.

Internal organisations sought after Robinson’s athletic expertise and in 1883 he was appointed head trainer and director of the Manchester Athletic Club (MAC) at their Athletic Club, established in 1874 as an increase amateur organization for those looking for sport. Robinson was elected to train championship athletes including Luther Carey, Walter C. Dohn, and Alfred B. Johnson, a brother of President Johnson, and was commissioned by Walter G. George, ‘march’ champion of America and later manager to the British Olympic team. His position at the MAC ended in 1890, Robinson’s involvement in athletics was curtailed by illness, which saw him return to Saratoga Springs to run Woodlawn Park’s 500-acre property grounds, taking the position of superintendent to Woodtown Park Kennels and Stock Farm, and head of the Saratoga Athletic Club.

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Less than two months later he was tending to the Yale football team in New Haven, Connecticut, imposing a successful 47-0 victory over the University of Pennsylvania. Robinson’s revelations and treatments for Walter Chrittie, Princeton’s track and field specialist and Olympic trainer, the Princeton athletic advisory committee were keen to re-engage Robinson, with his family moving back to the Newcomb campus in August 1900. His preparations for the football and track teams began immediately for those who wished to be successful in 1901. Robinson was released as the “coaches”, comprised of university graduates, took charge. The re-engagement of the coaching staff saw more responsibilities granted to these individuals, specialists in tactical awareness and individual sporting techniques, who absorbed the traditional training responsibilities and distributed them to medical professionals rather than unqualified individuals. Although their presence was not yet seen as movement towards advancement position the coaching role marginalised the trainer’s position within university sport, contributing in a turn towards professionalism that amateur organisations had previously suggested.