

---

# Play and Childhood in the American Past

## An Interview with Howard Chudacoff

Howard Chudacoff is the George L. Littlefield Professor of American History and Professor of Urban Studies at Brown University and one of several coauthors of the popular textbook *A People and a Nation* (now in its ninth edition), which established the standard for instruction in social history in undergraduate classrooms. Chudacoff also coauthored *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (in its seventh edition), which surveys how political, economic, and social trends and issues of class, gender, culture, race, ethnicity, environment, social mobility, and suburbanization shaped life in America's cities. In other books and scores of articles and papers, Chudacoff has explored family life, childhood, adolescence, aging, and leisure. His acclaimed *Children at Play: An American History* chronicles children's exuberant play across the centuries as well as adult attempts to save children from their playful impulses. He is now at work on a book about the major turning points in the history of intercollegiate athletics during the second half of the twentieth century. In this interview, Chudacoff reflects on the challenges of writing about the history of play, the relationship between play and other topics and themes he has explored, and, particularly, about the relationship between play and sports in the United States. **Key words:** history of children's play; childhood; college sports; family life; sports in the United States

**American Journal of Play:** Why did you write about the history of children at play?

**Howard Chudacoff:** I have been interested in the interaction between the lives of ordinary people and history for much of my career. I began by examining how and when people changed residence, and in the early 1970s, I wrote *Mobile Americans* about Omaha, Nebraska, around the turn of the twentieth century. After that, I focused on changing patterns of family and individual careers. I produced a number of articles on different stages of family life and wrote *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture*. Then I moved to studying a specific stage of individual life—male bachelorhood—and wrote *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American*

*Subculture* in the late 1990s. Subsequently, I considered several topics for a new research project and found childhood both logical and appealing. Though historians had written about childhood, most studies focused on infancy and early childhood, and just some of them considered adolescence. I wanted to undertake a project with two different perspectives: one that considered the age group of kids six to twelve who had seldom received much attention but who, to me, represented *real* childhood; and one that analyzed play in a way largely sensitive to children's own culture—how children structured their own play regardless of what adults wanted them to do and thought they were doing. In this regard, I was inspired by a best-selling book from 1957 by Robert Paul Smith with the wonderful title, *Where Did You Go? Out. What Did You Do? Nothing*. The book's semihumorous accounts of the author's childhood amusements made me realize that of course children "went out" somewhere and of course they "did" something. But where they went and what they did often were things that they did not want their parents to know about. The kids were not necessarily being mischievous or even disobedient; they simply were seeking and asserting autonomy. I wanted to see how this phenomenon manifested itself through play and how it changed over time.

**AJP:** What was your own childhood play like?

**Chudacoff:** My childhood occurred during the immediate post–World War II era, when unsupervised, neighborhood play in backyards and vacant lots predominated out-of-school hours. It was an era when the common modes of transportation were the bicycle and your own feet, not parent-chauffered auto rides to and from organized play.

**AJP:** In *Children at Play*, you note that as a kid you broke the child-labor laws. Could you say how? And could you comment on the historical relationship between work and play for children?

**Chudacoff:** It was really my uncle, my employer, who broke the child-labor laws. I started working for him more than twenty hours a week at the age of twelve, when state law prohibited such employment before age fourteen. So until I was fourteen, I was paid my hourly wage—I think it was thirty-five or fifty cents an hour—in cash, off the books.

During my research for the book, I found a wonderful line early in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, in which Tom explains the difference between work and play. "Work," he said, "is what a body is obliged to do. Play is what a body is not obliged to do." That simple statement struck me as more pre-

cise than the various social-scientific definitions that I read in jargon-filled books and articles because it notes the nonobligatory quality of play that is so essential. That quality guided me toward children's improvised, self-constructed play and the ways that they used play as a means of asserting autonomy. Thus, I could consider a phenomenon that stood at the center of children's culture, a phenomenon that, though it was weakened over time by intrusion from nonfamilial factors such as schools, parks, and child saving, has retained some of its essence. By fashioning their own ways of play through appropriation and transformation of playthings and play sites, youngsters have been, and still are, able to just be kids.

**AJP:** You once worked in a toy warehouse. Can you tell us about that and whether you ever got to play with any of those toys?

**Chudacoff:** As new toys came in—hula hoops, Frisbees (which back then we called Wham-O Flying Saucers), Barbie dolls, early electronic games, and more—coworkers and I of course examined them and sometimes tried them out. I recall that occasionally I set up a plastic bowling set in an upstairs room and played at lunch time. I also purchased (wholesale) an elaborate paint-by-numbers set and filled in the different numbered parts of a landscape scene during the lunch hour.

**AJP:** How else did you play as a child?

**Chudacoff:** My time was not completely unorganized. I played in a basketball league, spent a couple of years in Little League baseball, and participated in Boy Scouts and religious education. But there was also a lot of free time for playing informal baseball and football games in the neighborhood, making model airplanes, reading on my own, and engaging in what in the eighteenth century was called “roaming” but today would be called “hanging out.”

**AJP:** Did all these experiences influence your future scholarly interests?

**Chudacoff:** The most influential experience was my interaction and friendship with the working-class men on the job. That really piqued my interest in social history and prepared me for research in it. I worked in my uncle's warehouse between ages twelve and twenty-two, and he employed young men who had come to the city from small, rural towns, sometimes by way of service in the armed forces. They and the various truck drivers who picked up and delivered goods to the company introduced me to ways of life much different from my own and taught me respect for social difference.

**AJP:** In general, does rural life create more opportunity to play than city life?

**Chudacoff:** No, I don't think so. Play styles can be different because of the contrasting types of environment and materials that can be appropriated and transformed for play purposes. Certainly fields and forests offer appealing opportunities for play, but so do streets, buildings, backyards, and vacant lots.

**AJP:** Were the busy streets of American cities at the turn of the twentieth century hostile to play?

**Chudacoff:** Not necessarily. My research for *Children at Play* suggested that children used the streets much of the time, at least until they were thrown off, and even then, they returned until someone removed them again. Think of all the opportunities the streets provided, not just space but also implements that could be appropriated for play: utility poles, fire hydrants, mailboxes, alleyways, sidewalks, and stoops. Of course, the busier the streets became—especially with fast-moving cars and trucks—the less children used them, not necessarily because they saw them as unsafe but more because traffic created too many obstacles.

**AJP:** Is indoor play mostly a middle-class and suburban phenomenon?

**Chudacoff:** Evidence suggested to me that all kinds of kids engaged in indoor play. The higher the family income, the more likely children were to have their own, private spaces in which to play. And, of course, these children have had more, and more elaborate, commercial games and toys. But lower-income children also played indoors, appropriating unused spaces and household items—clothespins, pieces of wood, furniture, clothing, kitchen implements—and incorporating them into their play. If working-class children were involved in the family economy—as newsboys, mill operatives, scavengers, store clerks, and the like—they would have had less time and energy for any kind of play. More recently, as electronic play has expanded time devoted to indoor play, wealthier suburban kids may be devoting more time to indoor play, but studies suggest that lower-income children also spend a lot of time indoors playing video games.

**AJP:** How did the phenomenon of the sheltered child arise? Could you describe that within the context of demographic history?

**Chudacoff:** From the mid-nineteenth century onward, this demographic transition—aided by advances in medical science—created a situation of lower birth rates, enabling parents to invest more material and emotional resources into fewer children. That, when combined with threats to safety accompanying urbanization and industrialization, resulted in more intense

concern about protecting children from the dangers of a fast-paced, uncertain world. In addition, separation of place of work from place of residence, along with reductions in child labor and apprenticeship, confined mothers and their children to the home more than in previous eras and placed greater responsibility on women to nurture and protect. The result was the sheltered child.

**AJP:** How did age segregation in schools during the later part of the nineteenth century affect children's play in America?

**Chudacoff:** Graded schools created and reinforced peer groups, bringing children of the same age together for more hours per day than time spent within the family, exclusive of sleep. The before-school, during-school (mostly recess and lunchtime), and after-school interactions within these peer groups inevitably revolved around play: sports, games, informal and improvised play—all mostly unsupervised. Consequently, play partners became age peers, as much as or more than siblings, and so peers influenced children's tastes in games and toys more than parents and other adults did.

**AJP:** How does researching play in the nineteenth century differ from researching play in the twentieth?

**Chudacoff:** Children's diaries from the late twentieth century are much scarcer than those for earlier periods; thus, it is more difficult to locate children's own views of their play. Obviously, however, the twentieth century produced multifold sources of adults observing and prescribing play.

**AJP:** Which is richer evidence for you—diaries or prescriptive literature from the same time period?

**Chudacoff:** Diaries offer intimate insights into children's lives, especially because youngsters are not trying to "construct" a life, are not conscious of the kind of record they are leaving behind, as adult diary writers usually are. Prescriptive literature is an important counter-source because it often reveals not only what adults—sometimes selfishly—wanted children to be doing but also a kind of subtle frustration that children were doing something unacceptable.

**AJP:** What about research based on old toys? What have you discovered from them?

**Chudacoff:** I think improvised toys were—and are—more important than commercial ones. As I tried to express in my book, a toy can be anything; and what is used as a toy at one point in time may have a different function at another point in time. So, although children in previous generations did

have what today we would call toys—sleds, skates, balls, and dolls—often they got the most amusement from toys that resulted from their own creativity. Store-bought toys hold a youngster’s attention for a few hours, then they often get relegated to the back of the closet, and informal toys take over. I have often been asked, “What do you think have been the best toys?” I always think of three: a stick, a ball, and a box.

**AJP:** If you could revive a children’s game or two from the nineteenth century, which ones would you pick?

**Chudacoff:** I would choose a game I call “scrub,” but it went by other names. It was a form of baseball that could be played by any number of participants, male and female, from three upward. Its rules were complicated but easy-to-learn. A batter could continue to be “at bat,” or have a turn at bat, as long as he or she did not make an out via a fly ball or being thrown out or tagged out. A batter who made an out through a ground ball or by being tagged out on the base paths had to join the fielders; and as a batter made an out, the players in the field moved up position-by-position; and the pitcher replaced the batter who made the out. Thus, an alternate name of the game was “workup.” If a fielder caught a ball on the fly, however, that fielder immediately became a batter. The game had no score, no innings, no time limit. Players could get experience at every position as well as at bat.

**AJP:** You have written that the post–World War I era is a golden age for play? Why is that?

**Chudacoff:** Children had a double source of playthings and play sites. On one hand, urban and rural environments still could be used for play, and children still had incentive to create playthings out of everyday materials. At the same time, the expansion of child-centered play sites (including their own bedrooms) and the explosion of commercial toys—not to mention the increase of leisure time prompted by reductions in child labor—vastly expanded opportunities for different types of play.

**AJP:** Have we lost anything valuable by taking slingshots, pocketknives, and dodge ball away from children?

**Chudacoff:** I think so. I certainly do not want to sanction anything that will harm large numbers of youngsters, but I feel that somehow we do not trust children to learn and understand how to control their use of such toys and games. However, I suspect that kids have fewer opportunities to challenge themselves and perceive for themselves what is safe and what is not. I cannot point to any research that I have undertaken to substantiate

my suspicion, but it appears to me that we (adults, teachers, government) prescribe too much. In lectures I give to public audiences in countless places, I constantly get feedback, especially from teachers, complaining that children too often crave a prescribed way of achieving something, including in a game, rather than being left alone to find out for themselves, sometimes by failing. I am not a psychologist, but I wonder if we too facilely equate self-esteem to easy success.

**AJP:** Why is the child-saving impulse so often opposed to play?

**Chudacoff:** As I said in the book, adults have always wanted to save children from something, whether it was the devil or Indians in early eras of our history, street traffic and undesirable immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or presumed predators and illegal substances today. Any kind of play that involved risk, even if the risk was miniscule, sparked adult fears. I tried to adopt a differentiation made by play analysts between risk and hazard.

**AJP:** Why is it important to distinguish risk from hazard?

**Chudacoff:** In a perhaps overly simplified sense, risk is something that kids decide for themselves, and they must decide whether the potential reward is worth the risk. Hazard is something dangerous beyond a kid's control, such as thin ice, fast-moving traffic, or a hot stove. Assessing risk seems to me an important part of growing up, and it seems that our current risk-averse society too often does not trust a child's ability to understand and avoid risk.

**AJP:** How do current complaints about the corrupting moral influences of video games compare with earlier criticisms of new forms of play?

**Chudacoff:** Adults seem never to have liked vicarious playthings. Comic books in the early 1950s were seen as morally corrupting just as video games are viewed today. There probably were games and other toys—the Puritans labeled ball playing the “devil's workshop,” and centuries later, parents at first criticized the big-busted Barbie—that also were seen as corrupting. Yet video games do seem different; they are harder for the adult generation to understand because children are often far more facile with electronic amusements than adults are. One has to wonder whether when today's youngsters become adults and parents they will have the same attitudes toward video games as their parents had.

**AJP:** When adults control play, in organized sports for example, do they get what they want? Do kids?

**Chudacoff:** There is a growing literature that decries the obsessive intrusion of adults into children's organized sports and the transformation of sports into work, with year-round participation and practice, drill-sergeant coaches, demanding parents, and the like. No doubt, some youngsters do develop a passion—whether for basketball, gymnastics, skating, swimming, or whatever—and need expert guidance to reach goals they set for themselves. And I have witnessed kids in intense, organized sports having fun. But one wonders what is being missed when they are spending twenty or more hours a week at practice and competition, not to mention the additional hours commuting to and from their activities.

**AJP:** How did you develop an interest in the history of college sports?

**Chudacoff:** Though not much of an athlete myself, I have always considered myself a student of sports. Over the course of my career at Brown, I have taught many courses in the history of sports, starting way back in the early 1980s. Also at Brown, I have acted as faculty advisor to several varsity teams, and for the past twelve years I have been Brown's faculty athletic representative to the NCAA. As I observed both the benefits and pitfalls of college sports directly and through reading, I became increasingly interested in undertaking research on the history of intercollegiate athletics. After publication of the book on play, I decided to focus on fulfilling that interest.

**AJP:** Could you describe some of the benefits and pitfalls of college sports?

**Chudacoff:** Both have evolved from the fact that athletics—whether one likes them or not—have long been the face of colleges and universities. The United States is the only country in the world in which high-intensity competitive sports are supported by institutions of higher education, and we have both profited and suffered from that fact. The recent mess in college sports—not just the scandals but also the uncontrollable “arms race” in which schools continually try to find an advantage over competitors by raising and spending huge sums for facilities and coaches—has exposed more than ever before the obsessive quest for victory at all costs and the divide between athletics and academics. College sports assumed the role of public entertainment long ago, and the scale of both finances and scandal now threatens to undermine the real reason for an institution's existence. Still, we should not obscure the benefits. For thousands of college athletes who are not engaged in high-profile sports such as football and basketball, sports have offered rewarding challenges. And for the most part, these young people have succeeded academically in spite of the challenges. Graduation

rates for athletes are mostly higher than those for nonathletes. However, sports demand extraordinary amounts of time and fatigue-inducing physical effort—both practice and conditioning—that make it very difficult for those students to balance athletics and academics. In spite of NCAA limits on the formal activities, athletes are both motivated and expected to spend additional time working on their sports on their own.

**AJP:** Is it possible to be a full-time student and play a college sport?

**Chudacoff:** It has become more difficult because varsity athletics, even at low-profile schools, has become a year-round responsibility, absorbing far more than the twenty-hour-per-week limit that the NCAA places on formal athletic activities during a season and six-hour limit in the off-season. Yet those well prepared for college can manage both academics and athletics, just as, say, a cellist who practices and performs thirty to forty hours a week can manage.

**AJP:** Are team sports a form of play? Or are they something else?

**Chudacoff:** Well, it depends on the venue. Theoretically, as sports historian Allen Guttmann has pointed out, sports is a form of nonutilitarian play, only involving physical competition. Backyard, sandlot, and sidewalk pick-up games are certainly a form of play, even if they follow strict rules. Organized sports, which involve practice regimens, special training, and other quasi-utilitarian components, however, are closer to work.

**AJP:** Are college sports more democratic today than they were in the early twentieth century?

**Chudacoff:** No. College coaches carefully select their athletes and have reduced the chances for a walk-on to make the team.

**AJP:** Do you find any merit in sportswriter Frank Deford's suggestion that universities pay their athletes?

**Chudacoff:** The answer is complicated and often oversimplified. Most officials in the know realize that paying athletes outright makes them employees and therefore subject to federal and state labor laws: requirements of pensions, medical coverage, and other provisions including the right to organize and bargain collectively. Thus, paying athletes could turn out to be much more expensive and threatening than a simple salary implies. If, moreover, an athlete is an employee, he or she conceivably has the right to become a free agent to leave current employment and contract with the highest bidder. Presumably Congress could pass legislation to exempt schools and athletes from these provisions, but it is highly unlikely to do so.

*AJP:* Are big-time college sports destined to keep growing bigger, or is the trend reversible?

**Chudacoff:** I do not foresee any reverse. Ultimately, what may happen is that those two dozen or so schools with the biggest of big-time teams and the most lucrative TV contracts will form their own super conference, organize their own championships (such as a football playoff), and even formulate their own rules for eligibility and the like. Such a move would vastly undercut the NCAA's power and income, but it might—might—enable schools unable to compete with the big boys a chance to operate college athletics on a more reasonable and affordable scale. There is always the possibility, however, that this is an unrealistic dream.

*AJP:* Has there been any more profound turning point in college athletics than Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972?

**Chudacoff:** Title IX did not begin to become fully effective until Congress overrode President Ronald Reagan's veto and passed the Civil Rights Restitution Act of 1987. This measure put real teeth into Title IX enforcement by applying Title IX to an entire institution rather than to just the department that accepted federal aid. I do believe there were other profound turning points—that is what my next book is about—but I would rather keep those to myself for now because my thinking is still in process.

*AJP:* What do you make of the ancillary activities that gather around the most spectacular college sports—tailgating, cheering, socializing, and other forms of fandom? Do these democratize sports by making room for the nonplayer? Are they in themselves forms of play?

**Chudacoff:** Sporting events do offer spectators the opportunity to participate vicariously in what takes place in the playing arena, so in that respect, these activities may be seen as democratizing. And, if we include hanging out as a form of play—which I would agree to—then yes, fandom is a form of play.

*AJP:* Does fiction or film provide good historical evidence of sports history?

**Chudacoff:** Yes, fiction and film, if good rather than simply comic, can get inside the heads of athletes and portray sports beyond just the physical accomplishment. Both HBO and ESPN have produced outstanding documentaries on a variety of sports topics that can be very good history.

*AJP:* Do you have a favorite sports novel or film? Is so, what makes it memorable and important?

**Chudacoff:** When I was in about fourth grade, my teacher announced one day that there was this new phenomenon called mass-market paperback

books and that she had found a service where, for a dime a book, anyone in the class could purchase one or more of these publications. I bought and became enraptured with a novel called *The Kid Who Batted 1,000*. It was the story of a baseball player who had the unusual talent of being able to hit a foul ball from every pitch served up to him until the pitcher finally gave up and walked him. In the book's climax, the last inning of a World Series game, the kid came to bat, but a walk would not have won the game; a home run was needed. The kid fouled off a number of pitches until. . . . You can imagine what happened. I recall that book because to understand it, a young reader had to learn and comprehend the intricacies of baseball, and I think that the book really launched me as a lifelong baseball fan.

**AJP:** Your intriguing book *Children at Play* enjoyed a great deal of favorable attention from the press. Have audiences for your speaking engagements also been appreciative of the subject of play? Have you learned from their questions?

**Chudacoff:** My audiences—and they have varied from academics to museum types to teachers to the general public—have been most rewarding and responsive. Regardless of venue or audience composition, I have consistently heard similar comments around the notion that kids and play today are not the same as in the past. In part, these responses reflect what Steven Mintz often refers to as a “declension model of history”—that everything is going to pot. I think that older generations misinterpret children of today because they are looking for patterns of behavior and of culture that do not exist in the same ways they did when observers were young. I am concerned, however, with one quite consistent response audiences have given me. Whether teacher, parent, or other observer, audience members have told me that today's children seem reluctant to try things on their own: children, respondents tell me, crave and demand explicit instructions, prescriptions even because they (the kids) are so programmed to achieve success that they are anxious about failing, even if failure might give them an object lesson.

**AJP:** A last question: when you finish your book on college sports, what topic is next for you?

**Chudacoff:** As a historian, I have two goals in regard to whatever topic I am exploring: one, to tell the story of what happened; and two, to point out how and why history followed a particular path. At the moment, I am

still focused on college sports. Anyone writing analytically about it is usually obligated to make recommendations for change, and I will probably do so in the end. Right now, with college sports in such upheaval, I am still determining what direction my recommendations will take.