

Call for Papers (Conference)

## **Transatlantic Sporting Encounters: Sport and Physical Culture as German-American Meeting Ground in the Long Twentieth Century**

University of Leipzig, Institute for American Studies, Thursday, September 24<sup>th</sup> and Friday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2026

Over the course of the twentieth century, sport and physical culture had immense repercussions for German-American relations; both for how Germans perceived the United States as well as for how Germany was viewed by Americans. In both nations, sport and physical culture have held great significance and status, such that these nations' social, cultural, and political histories cannot be understood without discussing the profound influence of those important factors, serving variously as integrating as well as excluding forces. The conference therefore seeks to identify and discuss the character, role, and relationship that transatlantic contact and exchange played within these wide-ranging histories of sport and physical culture in Germany and America.

The development of sport and physical culture in the United States was shaped by 'German' influences, and vice versa. At the turn of the twentieth century, debate between whether it was Germans or Irishmen who made better baseball players could be found in the sports sections of a typical US city newspaper. The lasting presence of German *Turner* in North America is an enduring and tangible example of German influence on American physical culture, whereas other points of contact and exchange have been more subtle. Climbing sports in America and Canada can trace significant portions of their history to immigration from German-speaking regions which shared similar geographies to their regions of origin. This history of contact can also be found to be distinctly institutional rather than cultural: After World War II, student exchange programs brought many young West Germans into American high schools and colleges, where they learned to play baseball or (American) football.

For West Germany itself, the years after World War II were especially relevant. Members of the US armed forces (and their families) not only lived in German towns but played 'their' sports and introduced them to a younger generation of Germans. East Germany saw no such direct influence, but the rise and the successes of the GDR's sport system nevertheless rested on the idea of constant competition with a West dominated by 'the Americans.' Moreover, some East Germans took up skateboarding, wind-surfing, and other such *Trendsportarten*, or trend sports, which often served to highlight the boundaries and limitations of the GDR's strict policy of a centralized monopoly on sanctioned forms of sport and the culturally porous reality of the Iron Curtain. Picking up on these popular 'American' trends thus put to test what was tolerable in an authoritarian system.

For a long time and for many German commentators, American sport had seemed too different, too strange, and much too plainly business-oriented to be attractive. But as in many other social or cultural fields, 'Americanization' was far from being perceived solely as a threat—while many argued against 'American modernity,' many others were looking to American ideas and trends as inspirations for liberalizing and democratizing sport and society and culture in general. Meeting American athletes, watching American sports, or being fascinated by new American sport or fitness trends became an influential factor in this process. Aspects of American culture inextricably linked to sport and physical culture, such as music, fashion, and cinema, also

readily entered into German popular culture as economic and cultural globalization came to blur distinctions between the two.

In the media-shaped environment of sport in the long twentieth century, German and American athletes met at Olympic Games or ran together in the city marathons of New York or Berlin. Sport officials collaborated in international sport organizations on different levels. Both German and American sporting goods manufacturers considered overseas markets as invaluable targets for their businesses; journalists also travelled between Germany and the US, reporting on sports events.

The conference and a prospective follow-up publication seek to bring together original scholarship to elaborate on how sport and physical culture impacted the ways German and American people came into contact with each other, how they perceived each other, how their respective sporting traditions and cultures interacted with each other, and how sport and physical culture changed because of these contacts and encounters.

The phrase 'sport and physical culture' should be conceived to include a broad variety of sport-oriented activities. Beyond America's ties to Germany, we also invite contributions on its ties to Austria, Switzerland, or other German-speaking regions. The historical time frame is focusing on the twentieth century, but that periodization comes with relaxed bookends. The conference is to be structured not so much chronologically, but instead along thematic sections. This structure allows for both a wide variety of topics and approaches while still introducing a meaningful analytical framework.

**Athletes meeting at sport events and championships** – This addresses a huge range of options, from Olympic Games to world championships, from international meetings on the highest level, to exchanges and interactions within the realm of coaching, sports sciences, to hobby athletes joining more informal competitions.

**Lasting rivalries, friendships, or co-operations** – Taking such famous examples as Max Schmeling and Joe Lewis, Luz Long and Jesse Owens, Steffi Graf and Andre Agassi as starting points, contributions can deal with how sport shaped relations between Germans and Americans over a longer period of time. Again, this should not just include high-level activities but may also point towards cities, clubs, schools, or other organizations that formed bonds in and through sport and physical culture.

**International, transatlantic sport diplomacy, sport organization, and sport economy** – This section intends to look at how organized sport, politics, and business interests framed the ways that Germans and Americans interacted and perceived one another in the world of sports. In particular, this section seeks to emphasize how sport and physical culture struggled to remain somewhat independent from such influences, and how cross-Atlantic interactions and perceptions shaped their character and direction.

**Fans, media, and the role of sport consumption** – Contributions could point especially towards how journalists, fans, and other sports observers (such as writers, filmmakers, or artists) perceived similarities and differences, as well as continuities and changes, within German American sport relations from the perspective of the media, common fan, or consumer, especially including changes or continuities as influenced by cross American-German interactions and contact.

**Health, fitness, and trend sports** – Non- or semi-official sport activities come into play as well, e.g., exchanges about different gymnastics systems, the shared fascination in variété-style

physical performances, the embrace of health-oriented trends from pilates and yoga to aerobics and boot camp, etc. Against this backdrop of the history of physical culture and the body, broader notions of cultural influences and inter-cultural negotiations ('Americanization' vs. 'tradition' / American exceptionalism vs. multicultural transfer) could easily be discussed.

The conference takes place at the University of Leipzig, Institute for American Studies, on Thursday, September 24<sup>th</sup> and Friday, September 25<sup>th</sup>, 2026, it aims primarily to present new research. Presentations should be in English and will be a maximum of 20 minutes each, followed by a 10-minute discussion.

Proposals should be submitted to the conference organizers at Leipzig University: [olaf.stieglitz@uni-leipzig.de](mailto:olaf.stieglitz@uni-leipzig.de). The deadline for proposals is October 12<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

Abstracts should contain the following information:

- Working title
- Name of the author
- Institution
- Project outline (maximum 300 words)

The conference program will be compiled from the submissions by late October 2025. A publication of the conference proceedings is planned. Project coordinators are Olaf Stieglitz, Parker Billingshurst, and Peter Hintz, Universität Leipzig, Institute for American Studies.