



Jun-2011

# Where have you gone, Jack Lorimer? New England's Moment in Juvenile Sports Fiction

Andrew C. Holman

*Bridgewater State University*, [a2holman@bridgew.edu](mailto:a2holman@bridgew.edu)

---

### Recommended Citation

Holman, Andrew C. (2011). Where have you gone, Jack Lorimer? New England's Moment in Juvenile Sports Fiction. *Bridgewater Review*, 30(1), 7-10.

Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol30/iss1/6](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol30/iss1/6)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

# Where have you gone, Jack Lorimer?

## New England's Moment in Juvenile Sports Fiction

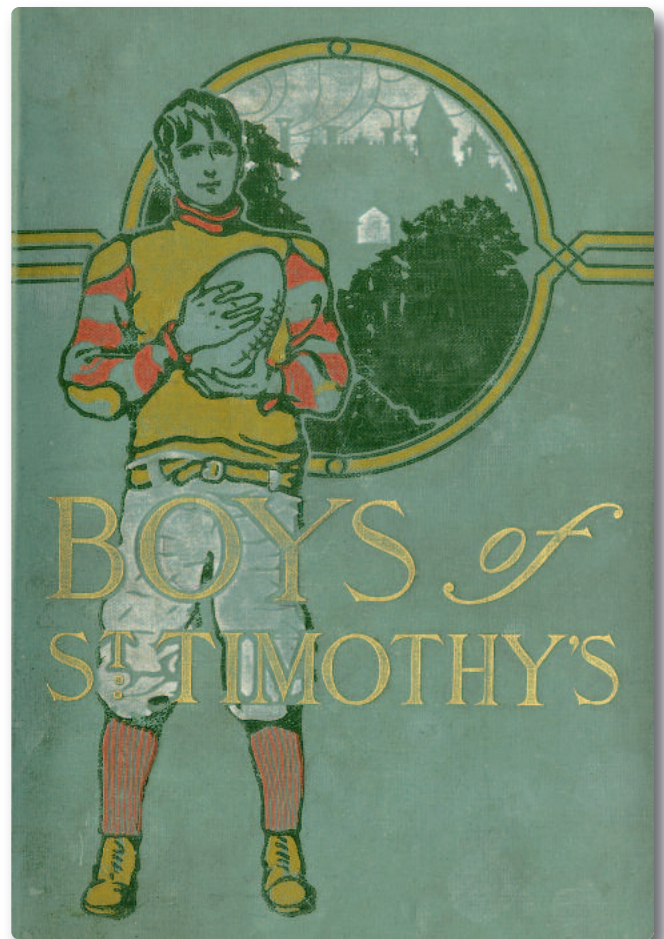
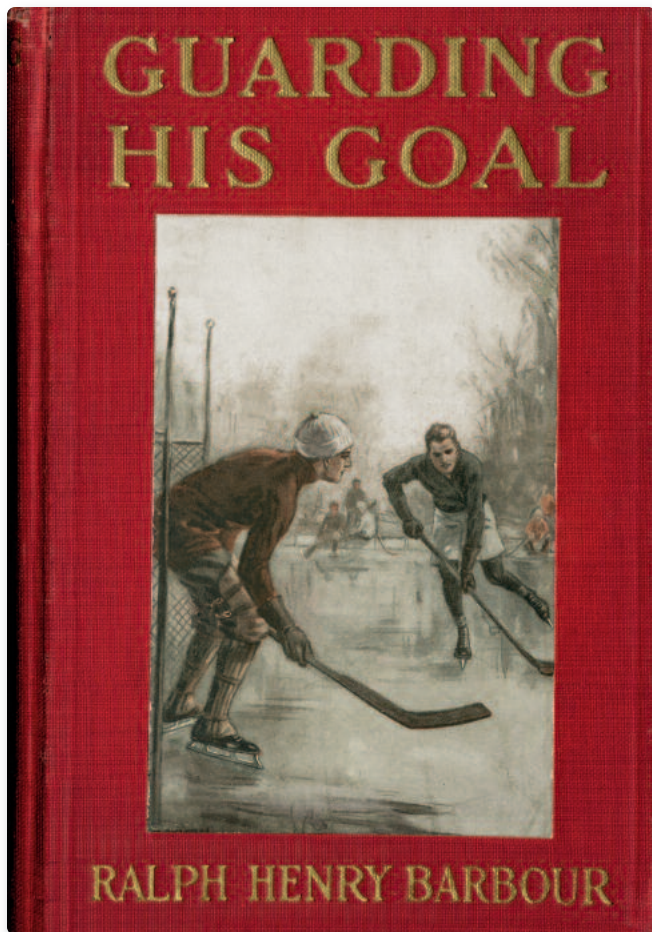
Andrew Holman

About a hundred years ago, in the summer of 1911, there were probably five bona fide local sports heroes whom most Bostonians would proudly have claimed as their own: Red Sox fielder Tris Speaker and hurler Smoky Joe Wood, prizefighter “Boston Terror” Sam Langford, the prickly marathon runner Clarence DeMar, and Captain Jack Lorimer, an “all-rounder” who starred at a variety of sports at Millvale High and Exmouth College. The first four of these men were distinguished by singular athletic careers: by 1911, they had amassed impressive hitting, fielding and pitching records, knockout streaks, and the first of seven Boston marathon victories. The fifth in this list was distinguished by what he was not: real. Captain Jack was entirely fictional, the product of the keen imagination of “Winn Standish,” the pen name for *Boston Herald* reporter Walter Leon Sawyer (1862–1915). That he could be included in such a list reveals a very curious remnant of the region’s sporting



past. Sport fiction captivated young American sport followers in the early twentieth century, nowhere more devotedly than in New England. For many of them, the line between the real and the imagined was never thickly drawn. In the days before radio and

television broadcasts and the expansion of spectator sports, most fans got their sporting news in print, and they consumed the daily sports page and sporting fiction with equal voracity. Moreover, these two main sources shared a similar form and tone; the



dramatic flair with which real games were depicted in the daily press matched the stylistic verve of sports-themed dime novels and school stories. What was real mattered less, perhaps, than what rang “true.”

Today, juvenile sports fiction might be forgotten, but it is not gone. These days, one cannot peruse the shelves of used book stores without stumbling across the remains of this literary phenomenon, and for good reason. The sheer volume of juvenile sports fiction produced in the United States make them ubiquitous. From the 1890s until World War II, thousands of these novels and serialized stories were mass-produced and sold to a booming national market. Taking advantage of the transatlantic success of Thomas Hughes’ British school story *Tom Brown’s School Days* (1857), book publishers produced entertaining and edifying materials for at least two generations of American

youth. Among the myriad invented characters in those years, by far the most celebrated one was the boy-hero Frank Merriwell, another “all-rounder,” whose escapades at Fardale Academy and Yale University first appeared in serial form in *Tip Top Weekly* in 1896 and continued to thrill American boys until 1916. When Frank seemed to have done just about all any hero could credibly do, his heroics were carried on in print by his fictive brother “Dick Merriwell” and by “Frank Merriwell, Jr.” Frank’s popularity was parlayed into a radio serial when that medium found its feet in the 1920s. Created by Gilbert Patten ([1866–1945] writing under the pseudonym “Burt L. Standish”), Frank Merriwell opened a literary door for dozens of other writers who pieced together thrilling narratives about pluck and courage and success in sporting endeavors and life.

Juvenile sports fiction of this era possessed a number of interesting character-

istics, not the least of which was its message. Juvenile sports stories were classic morality tales freighted with incorrigible villains, legal authorities (that were only *sometimes* effective at carrying out their jobs) and ethical conundrums facing their main characters around every bend, on playing fields and off. Fictional heroes were created to define what real sportsmen should aspire to be (but could never wholly become): courageous, honest, manly, amateur, fair and selfless. Almost all of the stories followed closely the formula that Walter Evans observed in his 1972 article “The All-American Boys.” The classic sports story focuses on one boy’s integration into school life or into acceptance as part of a local team. “The typical school story is some variation on a fairly standard but flexible pattern of introduction / bully attack / proof / bully regeneration / apotheosis.” In all of these stories, conformity to a “sportsman’s code” is expected. The stories

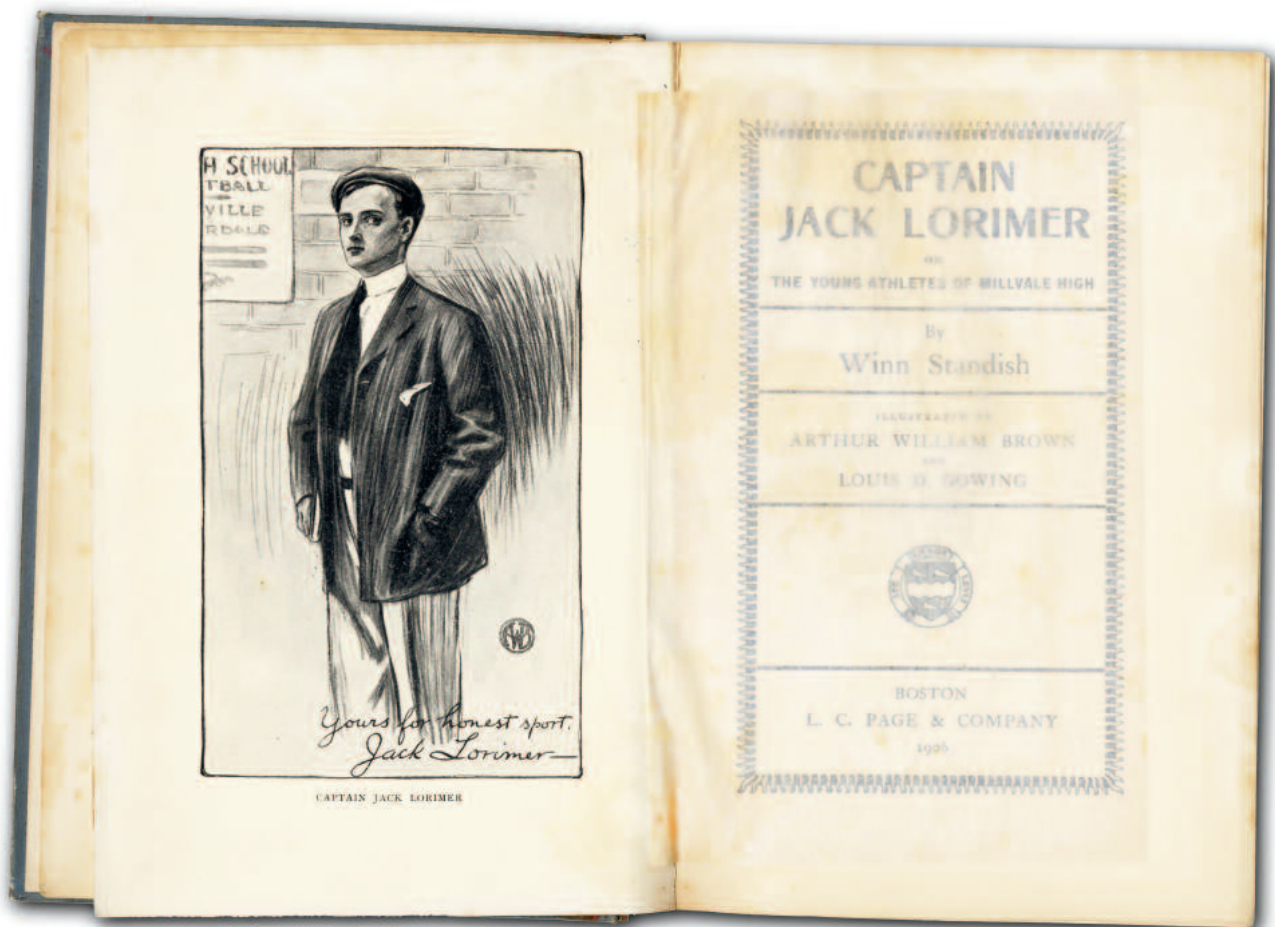
often featured characters' struggles to adopt a standard of morality – to overcome bad habits and become manly by adopting disciplined, modest, polite and self-reliant behavior. And all of this happened just in time for the central character to lead a struggling school or local sports team (in football, baseball, track, hockey or something else) to victory against a perennial rival.

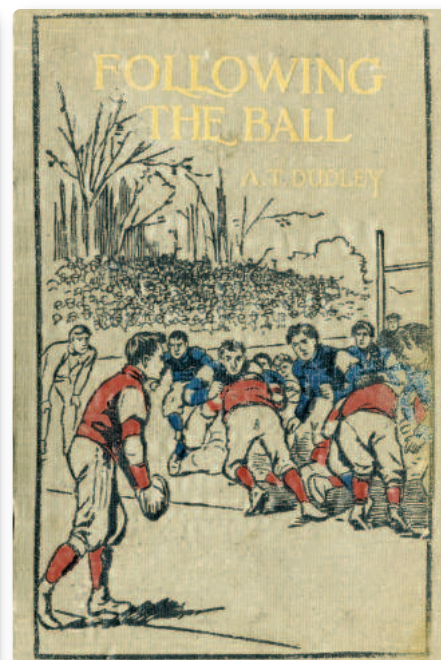
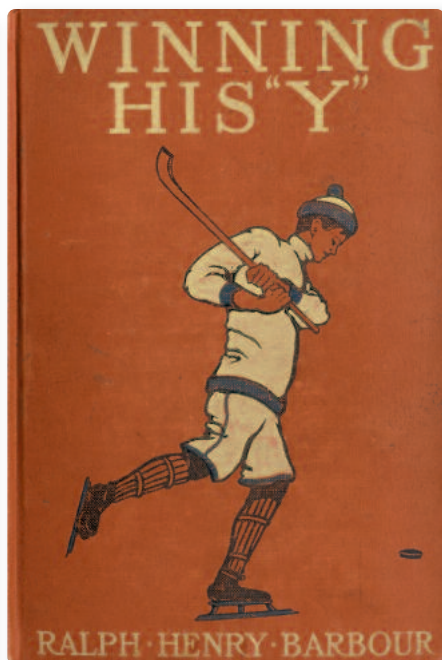
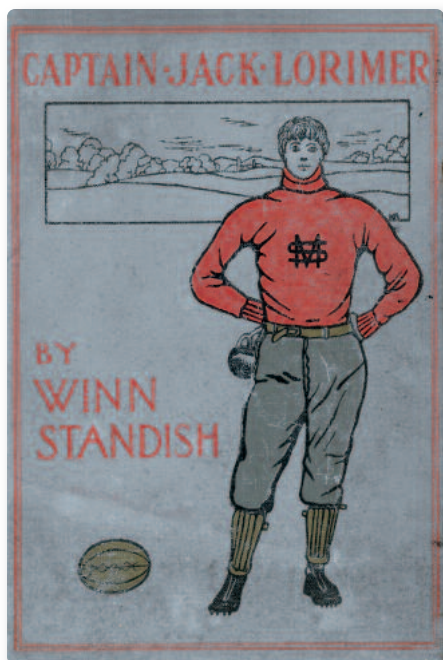
Often beautifully illustrated, sometimes with color plates, the stories were pitched almost wholly to boys and young men (though a few exceptional series targeted girls and young women). When we read them now, we find them in many places embarrassingly racist in the ways they treated and marginalized African-American, Native-American and French-Canadian characters. They were unapologetically nationalistic, sometimes trotting out the triumphant jingoism that resonated in public discourse during the first age of

American imperialism. In the preface to a 1903 volume (*Following the Ball*), the first in a series set at Phillips Exeter Academy, Albertus T. Dudley (1866–1955) declared just how far the genre had come from its British roots: "This is the story of an *American* boy and an *American* school, where it is not considered necessary that pupils should study under inaccessible windows or sleep in cubicles, or play English games under a master's clumsy though kindly tuition." American schools "boast... the higher standard of scholarship; the training in self-reliance and in bearing responsibility... the democratic life in which rich and poor meet on equal terms... While football has a prominent place in the story, the writer's object is... the development of the schoolboy's character."

Location mattered too. New England was unquestionably the cradle for the burst of juvenile sports fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth cen-

turies. Alongside larger New York firms, Boston publishers, such as Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, L.C. Page & Company and Houghton Mifflin, produced thousands of these handsome and portable (7½-inch by 5-inch) hardcover volumes. A preponderance of the books' authors lived or had roots in the region and set their stories in New England's leafy prep schools or its gritty industrial towns. Sawyer's own home was in Brookline, Massachusetts and Frank Merriwell's creator, Patten, called Corinna, Maine his hometown. A lifelong resident of Exeter, New Hampshire, Dudley was for some time a master at Phillips Exeter Academy, the inspiration for most of his nine volumes. Among the most prolific of the writers of juvenile sports fiction was Ralph Henry Barbour (1870–1944), who was born in Cambridge and educated in Worcester and who, between 1899 and 1943, published 160 books of fiction for boys, on sports as wide-





ranging as tennis and golf, football and hockey. And there was Arthur Stanwood Pier (1874–1966), author of nine volumes about school sports life among *The Boys of St. Timothy's* (1904–29) who, though a native of Pittsburgh, lived all of his adult life in Boston and Concord, New Hampshire after he graduated from Harvard in 1895.

New England settings were most conspicuous in these stories. “Nowhere in America,” Randy Roberts writes in his recent scholarly history of Boston sports (*The Rock, The Curse and The Hub*), “have sports been taken more seriously than in Boston, where they have always been seen as serving some higher purpose.” Roberts might well have expanded his claim to the whole region. Somehow, a New England context insists that sports narratives be taken seriously. The authors of these volumes veiled the real-place inspirations for their settings only thinly. Pier’s *Boys of St. Timothy’s* subjects were quite recognizably the students of St. Paul’s School, in Concord, New Hampshire, where Pier himself was schooled and later taught for fifteen years as an English master. Edith Bancroft’s five-book series on *Jane Allen* (published 1917–22) was atypical in that it followed a female college basketball player as she made her

way from sporting neophyte to modest sports hero, but typical in that she set it at the all-female “Wellington College,” a stand-in for the real Wellesley, one of the New England private colleges where women’s-rules basketball really did take root in these years. Barbour’s narratives were set a little further afield, but not much, and the New England academy setting (such as his Yardley Hall School in fictive Wissining, Connecticut) prevailed in most of his works that used sporting narratives as moral lessons. And *Captain Jack Lorimer’s* milieu was undoubtedly greater Boston. In the five books (published 1906–12) that chronicled his doings and deeds, the hero never strayed too far from the Boston neighborhoods in which his author lived. Lorimer’s Millvale could have been any of a number of the textile towns in the immediate environs, but others, like “Roxbridge,” the hometown of one of Jack’s teammates, is hard to mistake. And the examples go on. For New England sporting fans in the early twentieth century, familiarity with these authors and identification with the characters and settings of these (admittedly saccharine) fictional narratives must have had a strangely reifying effect; that is, these unreal stories were made to feel true.

In the early twentieth-first century, these ubiquitous little volumes strewn about in the region’s surviving used bookshops and antiques stores remind us a bit about a sporting world that we have lost. In the World War I era, historian Roderick Nash wrote, American “nervousness” (about rising crime, immigration and economic recession) prompted ordinary Americans to search for inspirational models of American character – real and fictive ones – in the realm of sports. It was the fictive models, Jack Lorimer and company, that could always be counted on to deliver.

In 2011, one hundred years later (and arguably another time of “nervousness”), there are probably five bona fide local sports champions whom Bostonians proudly claim as their own: Tom Brady, Paul Pierce, Tim Thomas, Wes Welker and Dustin Pedroia. Their accomplishments (and occasional missteps) are related to us daily in a deluge of detail by countless media sources, none of which leaves much room for us to imagine our heroes, or see much of ourselves in them. They are all totally real. Too bad.

*Andrew Holman is Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review and Professor of History.*