Sports and Society

A generation ago, scholars interested in the history of sports were so few, and their publications so infrequent, that there was scarcely a book to recommend to readers who wanted something more than the sports pages of their daily newspaper. Today, scholars specializing in sports history are so numerous and their output so prodigious that it is difficult to limit one's recommendations to a manageable number.

Richard D. Mandell's **Sport: A Cultural History** (Columbia, 1984) has to be among the first studies that come to mind. A grand master of the significant anecdote, with an artist's eye for striking illustrations, the University of South Carolina historian moves from the funeral games of Homer's *Iliad* to the massed gymnastic displays of the Soviet Union. He investigates the role of sports in societies as different as ancient China and modern Germany. **Sports in the Western World** (Univ. of Illinois, 1988) by William J. Baker, a historian at the University of Maine, is narrated with similar flair and illustrated with an equally fascinating set of images. Here, too, one encounters every conceivable kind of athlete, from gladiators to golfers. Both authors are perceptive analysts of sports as thrilling demonstrations of extraordinary physical skill and prowess, and both also have an informed sense of the ritual contexts and aesthetic appeal of sports.

Nowhere have the ritual and aesthetic aspects of sports been more in evidence than at the ancient and the modern Olympic Games. Given the innumerable studies of antiquity's most important sports event, readers disinclined to take on thousand-page tomes in academic German are advised to turn to M. I. Finley and H. W. Pleket's **Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years** (Viking, 1976). In this brief, beautifully illustrated book, Finley and Pleket describe the mythic origins of the ancient athletic festival, and they dispel a number of modern myths, such as the notion that Olympic athletes were amateurs. (The concept of the amateur athlete is a 19th-century invention

Study for the Munich Olympic Games, *by Jacob Lawrence.*

of the British upper middle class, which was anxious to exclude the lower classes from the Henley Regatta and other old-boy events.) As for the modern games, my own book, **The Olympics** (Univ. of Illinois, 1992), is an attempt to describe briefly what happened—between Athens in 1896 and Seoul in 1988—to Pierre de Coubertin's dream of sports as the embodiment of international harmony and good will. Despite the many boycotts and the horrors of commercialization, there are still reasons to be hopeful about the Olympic spirit. Richard D. Mandell's **Nazi Olympics** (Univ. of Illinois, 2nd ed., 1987) demonstrates why the 1936 games (where Adolf Hitler did *not* snub Jesse Owens) were a triumph of pageantry and drama—and a travesty of Olympic ideals. William J. Baker's **Jesse Owens** (Free Press, 1986) is, incidentally, a model biography of the man whom even the Germans acknowledged to be a *Wunderathlet.*

Modern sports, as I attempted to show in **From Ritual to Record** (Columbia, 1978), are very different from those of earlier times. In the ancient world, for instance, neither times nor distances were measured, and contests were never decided by "points." We moderns find it hard even to imagine sports without the ubiquitous quantified results that are the basis of the uniquely modern concept of a sports record.

Since modern athletic games are essentially British inventions—Americans contributed basketball and volleyball at the end of the 19th century—it is appropriate that British sports are the subject of many fine books, among the best of which are **Sport in Britain**, edited by Tony Mason (Cambridge, 1989), and Richard Holt's **Sport and the British** (Oxford, 1989). The first is an encyclopedic illustrated account of the gamut of British sports. The second subtly examines the ramifications of social class in athletics. In **Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players** (New York Univ., 1979), Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard trace the evolution of modern soccer and rugby football from the almost murderously violent traditional game of folk-football.

Americans are, inevitably, likely to be most interested in American sports. To indulge that interest, one can hardly do better than to begin with **A Brief History of American Sports** (Hill & Wang, 1993), by Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, historians at Miami University of Ohio and the State University of New York at Old Westbury, respectively. Emphasizing the ways that sports have reassured American men about their masculinity in a world where women have increasingly challenged them in the political and economic realms, the authors also cover such conventional topics as the creation of sports leagues and the achievements of sports heroes (and heroines). My own book, **A Whole New Ball Game** (Univ. of North Carolina, 1988), which makes no claim to comprehensiveness, takes up some specific problems. Why was it, for instance, that the South, which prided itself on its hardy sportsmen, was the last part of the United States to accept modern sports such as baseball, football, and basketball? How can economists claim that black baseball players are the victims of discrimination when their average salary is higher than that of white players? (The answer: if one calculates salary on the basis of "productivity," as measured by such things as batting average, yards gained rushing, and rebounds, African-American athletes are underpaid.)

What about America's leading team games? Gorn and Goldstein have interesting things to say about football's evolution from the British sport of rugby and about the game's spread from the campus to the television screen. But there is, unfortunately, no definitive history of American football. Basketball enthusiasts have the advantage here; they can satisfy their curiosity with Robert Peterson's **Cages to Jump Shots** (Oxford, 1990). The first word of the title refers to the wire mesh that surrounded the court in the days before the out-of-bounds rule; the ball was kept in play and the players, who ran or fell or were shoved against the mesh, were kept in bandages.

Baseball has attracted an immense army of sportswriters, ghost writers, fiction writers, and historians. The most detailed account of "the national game" is Harold Seymour's magisterial three-volume **Baseball** (Oxford, 1960–90), a study comprehensive enough to satisfy all but the most insatiable fan. The best one-volume social histories are Charles C. Alexander's **Our Game** (Holt, 1991) and Benjamin G. Rader's **Baseball** (Univ. of Illinois, 1993). Readers of all three books will have to surrender their childhood belief in the myth of Abner Doubleday—he did *not* invent baseball—but they will be rewarded with exciting narratives that lend some perspective on Ken Burns's public television series. Hero-worshipers can also choose from hundreds of biographies and autobiographies. One of the best is Robert W. Creamer's **Babe** (Simon & Schuster, 1974).

If the covers of *Sports Illustrated* are any clue, boxing ranks with baseball, football, and basketball among the most important American sports. The best social history of "the fight game" is Jeffrey T. Sammons's **Beyond the Ring** (Univ. of Illinois, 1988). The New York University historian tells (and interprets) the stories of John L. Sullivan, Jack Johnson, Jack Dempsey, Joe Louis, Muhammad Ali, and many others.

The lives and careers of black athletes are discussed in many comprehensive histories and detailed biographies, but it is rather a scandal that there is no really good general history of African-American athletes. The late Arthur Ashe was a great tennis player and an admirable person, but his three-volume survey, **A Hard Road to Obey** (Warner, 1988), is long on facts and lamentably short on interpretation. The scholarly deficit in this area is partially overcome by a body of books on African-American baseball players in the Negro National League and (after 50 years of exclusion were ended) in the major leagues. The story of the move from segregation to integration is told, movingly, in Jules Tygiel's **Baseball's Great Experiment** (Oxford, 1983). Jackie Robinson is, of course, the central figure of the stirring drama, but Tygiel, a historian at San Francisco State University, provides a full cast of characters, villains as well as heroes.

Jewish athletes have been luckier than their African-American counterparts. Peter Levine's **Ellis Island to Ebbets Field** (Oxford, 1992) is hagiography of the highest order. His argument that American Jews have been able to devote themselves to sports with no sacrifice of their traditional religious identity is questionable, but his narrative is masterful. Nat Holman leaps from these pages to sink another two-pointer, and Hank Greenberg emerges for another run around the bases.

Until very recently, female athletes were almost totally neglected, by historians as well as by sports spectators. At best, they were given a separate chapter in the histories that purported to tell the "saga of American sports." Now, in addition to innumerable biographies and special studies of women in cricket, soccer, baseball, golf, tennis, track and field, mountain climbing, and almost every other imaginable sport, there are many books that attempt a more comprehensive view. My own **Women's Sports** (Columbia, 1991) begins with Queen Hatshepsut of ancient Egypt and ends in the era of Florence Griffith-Joyner and Katarina Witt. En route, I discuss Spartan girls at the Heraia (games sacred to the goddess Hera), Roman matrons who mimicked gladiators, medieval huntresses, 18th-century Englishwomen who fought in bare-knuckle prizefights, Vassar College undergraduates who formed baseball teams, and female physical education instructors who appealed to the International Olympic Committee to exclude women from the Olympic Games. The book concludes with speculations on the erotic appeal of female athletes, an ideological hornet's nest in this age of feminist protest. Susan Cahn's **Coming on Strong** (Free Press, 1994), concentrating on American sports, is, as her subtitle indicates, a detailed study of "gender and

sexuality in 20th century women's sport." Cahn is a historian at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Mariah Burton Nelson's lively, controversial work is more radically feminist (and more positive about the erotic element in sports): **The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football** (Harcourt Brace, 1994).

Another way to approach sports is to examine their institutional context. Economic historians have produced a number of fairly technical studies of American sports. Most of them require a strong background in economic theory, but Andrew Zimbalist's **Baseball and Billions** (Basic, 1992) is an exception. Zimbalist is a wizard at explaining such matters as the legal technicalities of baseball's famed (and now largely defunct) "reserve clause" and the intricacies of cartelization, arbitration, and the baseball owners' exploitation of the tax shelter. Zimbalist, an economist at Smith College, is ready to practice what he preaches: he is among those planning to launch a new baseball league to rival the strike-crippled major leagues.

The debate over ethics in intercollegiate sports has been as bitter as the struggle over money in professional sports. Ronald A. Smith's inappropriately titled **Sports and Freedom** (Oxford, 1988) is an account of the beginnings of intercollegiate sports. The Pennsylvania State University sports historian proves conclusively that most of the infractions punished today by the National Collegiate Athletic Association were familiar on 19th-century campuses. College sports were full of athletes who lacked the ability or the motivation to benefit from the curriculum, under-the-table payments, coaches who earned more than the college president, and a determination among players and coaches to win by fair means or foul. Of the many analyses of the woes of intercollegiate sports today, **College Sports, Inc.** (Holt, 1990), by Indiana University English professor Murray Sperber, may be the best. He describes, among other abuses, the extraordinary fiscal and administrative autonomy enjoyed by many athletic departments at NCAA Division I universities.

Finally, for readers curious about the people in the stands and in front of the television screens, there is my **Sports Spectators** (Columbia, 1984), which moves from antiquity, when the most violent sport (gladiatorial games) had the most peaceful spectators, to the present, when British, European, and Latin American soccer games are occasions for violent rampages by young, unemployed, working-class men. But readers worried about the disorderly behavior of contemporary spectators will be comforted to learn that today's tumults are nothing compared with the Nike riots of A.D. 562, which began at Constantinople's chariot races and left 30,000 dead.

—Allen Guttmann

***Allen Guttmann** is a professor of English and American Studies at Amherst College. His most recent book is* Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism, *published by Columbia University Press.* *Copyright © 1995 by Allen Guttmann.*

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