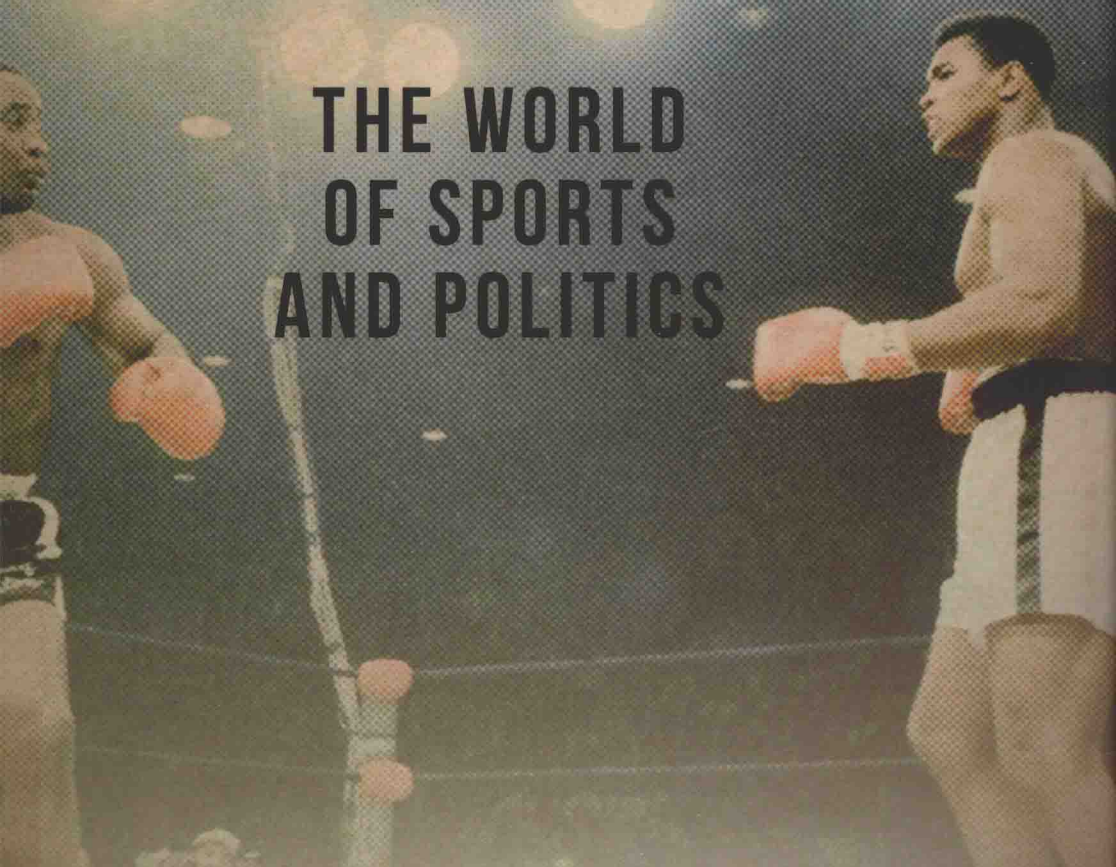


ROGER I. ABRAMS

PLAYING TOUGH

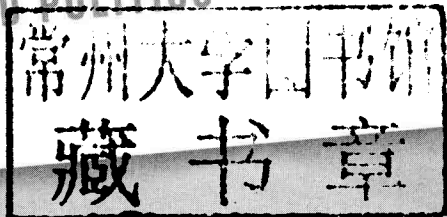
THE WORLD
OF SPORTS
AND POLITICS



[ROGER I. ABRAMS]

PLAYING TOUGH

THE WORLD OF SPORTS
AND POLITICS



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PLAYING TOUGH

Staying within the spirit of the game and playing tough and aggressive are welcome, and those ideas should be taught and encouraged. . . . Sports can be a great model for life off the field . . . Of course, there's talent and potential, and then there's the so-called politics of the environment.

Brandi Chastain

Sometimes, playing tough
with push back tactics analogous
to boxing is unavoidable.

Rick Brandon and Marty Seldman,
Survival of the Savvy: High Integrity Politic Tactics
for Career and Company Success

"PLAYING TOUGH" IN POLITICS AND SPORT

It was a tough world, and being a man meant *playing tough*. Nixon was the most political man imaginable."

Michael A. Genovese

When I asked him about staying focused and *playing tough*, he told me that if you're going to play tough, you have to keep control.

Saul L. Miller, interview with hockey goalie Billy Smith

The predominant fear was that *playing tough* with Germany would lead to another slaughter. Far better to let Hitler have what he wanted and enjoy some peace.

Guy Walters

It is very difficult for parties to credibly commit
to *playing tough*, however, given the consequences
for both parties for doing so.

Francisco Cabrillo, Seán Fitzpatrick

Staying within the spirit of the game and
playing tough and aggressive are welcome,
and those ideas should be taught and encouraged.
But you also have to learn that what happens
on the field stays on the field.

Brandi Chastain

I'm hanging in here.
I'm getting back up.
I'm *playing tough* today.

Stephen R. Covey

Well, in our society, we have things that you might use your intelligence on, like politics, but people really can't get involved in them in a very serious way—so what they do is they put their minds into other things, such as sports. [I]t occupies the population, and keeps them from trying to get involved with things that really matter. —*Noam Chomsky*

Sports serve society by providing vivid examples of excellence. —*George F. Will*

Sports do not build character. They reveal it. —*Heywood Broun*

[PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS]

To some, sports are a frivolous diversion. To others, they are the most important component of their lives. To most people, sports are an important part of a full life, along with family, friends, and a job. Sports inspire us and outrage us; they entertain, and, if we are fortunate, they can cause us to be very happy, if not content. Their potential for joy should be a matter of celebration and not censure.

The same is true of politics, an essential part of our lives even if we chose not to participate in the franchise and ignore the news as much as humanly possible. In modern society, it is useless to try to avoid running into government, whether driving on the city streets or seeking official approval for your marriage. Politics, and the governments it produces, determines how individuals interact with each other. It can make your life more miserable than a losing baseball team.

This book is about the historical relationship between sports and politics, about how each activity has affected the other since the beginning of recorded time. Politics has used sports (and vice versa), sometimes in obvious ways: your favorite sports team likely plays in a stadium or arena built with public funds, and your favorite politician proves he or she is just a “regular guy” by appearing at sporting events and wearing the appropriate team paraphernalia. Occasionally, major sporting events, like the Olympics, offer overt political messages. Just think about the Nazi Olympics of 1936 or the U.S.-led boycott of the Moscow Olympic Games in 1980.

Writing about the symbiotic relationship between sports and politics has allowed me to return to my roots in political science and revisit some of the

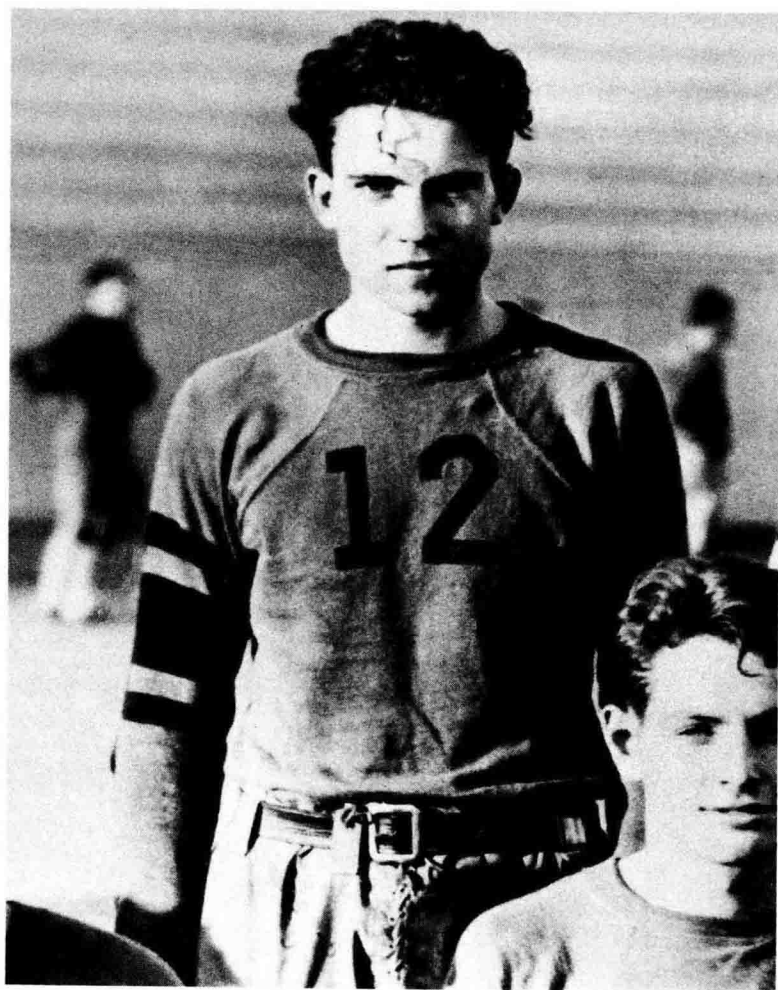
sacred texts in the field. It has also offered me the opportunity to learn (and share) more stories about sports. I have avoided retelling at length stories I have related in earlier books, such as the remarkable achievements of Title IX in women's sports, an obvious example of the nexus between politics and sports. Instead, I have ventured into boxing, soccer, rugby, and Olympic sports, while telling an interesting tale I uncovered from the nineteenth-century days of purely "amateur" baseball and its connection to corrupt urban politics.

In this book, I cover a broad swath of the political "experiences": city bosses and their machines, the establishment of secure political power, the use of sports policies to achieve international legitimacy and advantage, and the use of governmental violence against other political powers and against citizens. Sports will play an essential role in each of the stories. Muhammad Ali is a perfect example. The "Greatest of All Time" became a symbol of resistance and black pride. His courage inside and outside the ring inspired many and infuriated others. At times, sports will be the side story: establishing no-show jobs for avowedly amateur baseball players was not William "Boss" Tweed's core perfidy in running New York City in the mid-nineteenth century, but it did offer an example of how he carried out his rule. Hitler used the 1936 Olympics to establish international legitimacy for his brutal dictatorship. The boxing matches in 1936 and 1938 between Max Schmeling and Joe Louis previewed a world at war. Nelson Mandela used sports in the mid-1990s to secure his revolutionary regime in South Africa. The United States would attempt to co-opt the Olympics for overtly political purposes, to protest the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1980.

Foreign policy, the extension of politics on the world stage, frequently has involved sports. At times, a sporting conflict has evolved into violent warfare, as in the "Futbol War" in Central America in 1969. Finally, we will see sports turn the tables and seek public subsidies for private businesses, a generally successful ploy by franchise owners that continues to transfer millions of public dollars into private hands each year.

This is my sixth book on the business of sports, and for each of these works I have had the assistance of numerous research assistants. For this book, I would like to thank Michael Birch, Ted Bertrand, and Peter Fisher. My dear friend and colleague from Rutgers Law School, Associate Dean Marie Melito, has once again worked her magic on the manuscript. Most importantly, my partner for life, Frances Elise Abrams, edited chapters of the book to make sure readers will enjoy them. To her I am grateful not only for her skill in editing but for a lifetime of loving partnership.

PLAYING TOUGH



Richard M. Nixon, the thirty-seventh president of the United States, credited his football coach at Whittier College with inspiring his political career. His coach, however, remembered only that the third-string player "liked the battle and the smell of sweat." As president, Nixon supplied trick plays to his local team, the Washington Redskins, which proved disastrous on the field. *AP Images*

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Already long ago, from when we sold our vote to no man, the People have abdicated our duties; for the People who once upon a time handed out military command, high civil office, legions—everything, now restrains itself and anxiously hopes for just two things: bread and circuses.

—*Juvenal, Satire*

There is a certain tendency in the civilization of our time to underestimate or overlook the need of the virile, masterful qualities of the heart and mind. . . . There is no better way of counteracting this tendency than by encouraging bodily exercise and especially sports which develop such qualities as courage, resolution, and endurance.

—*Theodore Roosevelt, Professionalism in Sports*

[INTRODUCTION]

SPORTS AND POLITICS

Roman playwright Juvenal bemoaned his society's descent to the level of "bread and circuses," but all communities need bread to survive, and "circuses," at least in the form of sporting events, appear to be almost as essential. Sports and society have been linked since ancient times, and politics, in terms of some fundamental means of community organization, has been ever present as well. Teddy Roosevelt, the paradigmatic American politician, appreciated how fitness of body and mind energized the body politic. Over his entire political career, as was the case with many politicians, he was a "circus" of spirited oratory, masculine role-playing, and earnest cheerleading. As long as sports did not become too dangerous—he warned the presidents of the Ivy League colleges that he would intervene unless they made football safer—Roosevelt was "for it!" as he might say with a grin and a raised fist.

PRESIDENTIAL SPORTS

At times, it has been difficult to distinguish fact from fiction when it comes to sports and politics. There are some events we are almost certain actually

occurred. Establishing a tradition that would last for more than a century, on April 14, 1910, President William Howard Taft, Roosevelt's successor, threw out the first ball on Opening Day at National Park in the nation's capital in a game between the Washington Senators and the Philadelphia Athletics. The former Yale first baseman was accompanied to the game by his wife, his vice president, and most of his cabinet. As the *Boston Globe* reported, Taft hurled the ball "with a vigorous heave straight into the waiting hands" of Washington's starting pitcher, Walter "Big Train" Johnson, who was so inspired that he pitched a one-hitter. (It would have been a no-hitter had Senators outfielder Doc Gessler not tripped over a spectator while chasing a fly ball off the bat of John "Home Run" Baker. Fans of that day were allowed to stand in the outfield.) On the other hand, it is said that President Taft originated the seventh-inning stretch when, during the same contest, he arose in the seventh inning to stretch his abundant torso. Out of respect for the nation's chief executive, the spectators stood as well. Could this have been the origin of the custom? It seems more apocryphal than factual.

Many presidents have played golf, including almost every incumbent since Teddy Roosevelt, although few performed extremely well at the frustrating pastime. Despite his bad back, John F. Kennedy was likely the best duffer in the presidential parade; Dwight D. Eisenhower was a close second. Bill Clinton played by his own rules, often taking extra shots without adequate notation on his scorecard. Lyndon Johnson was the worst of the presidential golfers. Barack Obama, the current incumbent of the White House, tried without much success to use the golf course as a venue to seek political rapprochement with Republican nemeses. Obama also plays a mean game of basketball, according to those who have felt his sharp elbows on the court.

Presidents and other politicians have used sports to soften the public's image of their leadership. When New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani wore his New York Yankees cap, he hoped to be seen as just one of "the guys" rather than as a tenacious politico. Obama does the same with his Chicago White Sox paraphernalia. George W. Bush wore a Texas Rangers cap, but, after all, he had been a part owner of the club.

Some presidents adopted obscure outdoor sports to avoid the claustrophobic grip of the Oval Office. Herbert Hoover devised a medicine ball tossing game and enlisted aides who would participate daily in his pastime. George H. W. Bush installed horseshoe pits in the White House lawn. His son, George W. Bush, was an avid dirt bike rider. Teddy Roosevelt was up for any strenuous

activity, including boxing in the White House. Bill Clinton jogged around Washington, stopping at McDonald's for a welcomed break of french fries. Fishing was a popular activity for a number of chief executives, aided by Secret Service agents who stocked the ponds to the gills. Whatever their choice of athletics, presidents appeared to the public to pursue their sport with a passion.

Many athletes have aspired to political office, although few successful politicians ever excelled at sports after leaving politics. Gerald Ford, the nation's only unelected president, had been an All-American football star at the University of Michigan and was offered contracts to play professionally. Professional athletes Bill Bradley, Jim Bunning, Jack Kemp, Steve Largent, Jim Ryun, J. C. Watts, Dave Bing, Kevin Johnson, and many others have successfully made the move to the political ring, and some even tried out presidential runs.

Richard M. Nixon always wanted to be a regular guy and sought acclaim for what he considered his vast knowledge of sports. Instead he was a misfit president, a third-string tackle at small Whittier College, and a perpetual intermeddler whose advice to pro football coaches couldn't be ignored because it came from the White House. During his acceptance speech for the Republican presidential nomination in 1968, Nixon thanked his "remarkable" college football coach for inspiring him. (His college coach remembered that "Dick liked the battle and the smell of sweat.") In office, Nixon supplied trick plays to his local team, the Washington Redskins, which proved disastrous on the field. He telephoned Don Shula of the Miami Dolphins at 1:30 in the morning with a suggested pass play—send receiver Paul Warfield on a down-and-out—that fell incomplete. He wrote over thirty letters to baseball players during his time in office. Nixon also offered to arbitrate the 1972 labor dispute in Major League Baseball, an offer that was politely declined by the owners and the players union. (Clinton made the same offer in 1994, and the parties accepted, only to leave the White House as far apart as they had been when they entered.)

In 1969, Nixon decided to attend the college football game between the University of Texas and the University of Arkansas. He announced that the winner of that contest would be the national champion, ignoring the fact that the Penn State squad was also undefeated. In the Oval Office after winning his second term while deeply mired in the Watergate scandals, Nixon told his aides that his primary legislative objective would be lifting the NFL television blackout policy that kept fans from seeing local playoff games. On his infamous Oval Office recordings, Nixon said: "If you can get playoff games, believe me, it would be the greatest achievement we've ever done."

Faced with increasing protests about the Vietnam War, Nixon retreated into the world of sports, announcing to the press that he was watching football games and not the protests. Nixon said shortly before he left office: "A man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits." On August 9, 1974, Nixon quit the presidency.

SPORTS AS A POLITICAL PLATFORM

While sports offered politicians the veneer of the common man, they also offered premier athletes a platform from which to express their political views. Although most athletes have remained apolitical, there are numerous examples of those who were able to raise fundamental issues of fairness and politics because of their athletic success. Muhammad Ali, whose singular boxing career we will examine in detail in Chapter 5, refused induction into the armed forces in 1967 because of his religious principles and, as a result, became a political and secular symbol of courage to some and infamy to others. Track stars Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their clenched right fists in political protest on the Olympic podium in Mexico City in 1968. In 1996, after converting to Islam, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, a guard with the Denver Nuggets, refused to stand during the national anthem. After a one-game suspension, the league worked out a compromise under which Abdul-Rauf would stand but could close his eyes and look downward, praying during the anthem. Beginning in 2004, Toronto first baseman Carlos Delgado decided he would no longer stand for "God Bless America" during the seventh-inning stretch of Major League Baseball games as a protest against America's wars in the Mideast. At the urging of their club owner Robert Sarver, the Phoenix Suns voted unanimously to wear "Los Suns" uniforms in 2010 to protest Arizona's new draconian anti-immigrant laws.

Similarly, sports may cause voters to express their political dissent. Four days after Britain was eliminated from the 1970 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup by West Germany, Britain's Labor Party unexpectedly lost the national election, tossing Harold Wilson out of office as prime minister. That may have been only fair, because Wilson had won the office in 1966 after England unexpectedly won the World Cup.

Some athletes are considered so unique to national pride and self-respect that politics must intercede to keep them from being lured away by world

rivals with much greater financial resources. After the 1962 World Cup, European soccer clubs such as Real Madrid, Juventus, and Manchester United tried to sign Brazilian superstar soccer player Pele, but the Brazilian Congress declared Pele an “official national treasure.” His sale or trade to a foreign club was forbidden by law.

We remain uncertain, however, about some events that purported to unite sports and politics. Did Fidel Castro have a baseball tryout with either the New York Yankees or the Washington Senators before he took to the Cuban hills to lead a revolution? It is difficult to find adequate proof for the story. Although Castro spent decades berating “the Yankees,” the object of his ire was the American government and not the American League club from the Bronx. Castro certainly had the right stuff to play the American national game; he had pitched for the University of Havana in the 1940s and was said to have had a terrifying curve ball. (As might be imagined for a Communist leader, Fidel was a left-hander.) The Pittsburgh Pirates scouted Castro, but they were not impressed.

Did another Communist revolutionary, Mao Zedong, actually swim nine miles down the Yangtze River on July 16, 1966, as reported by the China News Agency? It would have been a prodigious effort for any seventy-five-year-old man, a world record for sure. The world press had spread rumors that Mao had experienced a heart attack, thus explaining the political importance of demonstrating his fitness. Curiously, the official picture of the historic event only showed Mao’s head bobbing above the water, a primitive version of “photo-shopping,” which was not unusual in Communist dictatorships, where fallen leaders were quickly erased from earlier photographs.

The story of the third Communist sports and political leader is the least believable of the trio. Kim Jong-il, the recently deceased dictator of North Korea, was said to have quickly mastered the golf course, a matter of great interest in golf-crazy East Asia. On his first visit to the fairways and greens, the Dear Leader is said to have shot thirty-eight strokes under par, including at least five (and perhaps eleven) holes-in-one. He also bowled a perfect 300 game.

At times, fact and fiction have blended into mythology. The story of the professional Ukrainian soccer players who were ordered to play a match against the conquering Nazi army in 1942 is a frightening example. The great Kiev Dynamo team played a team of the invaders, but, contrary to the orders of the ss, it triumphed. Despite incarceration without rations, Dynamo won