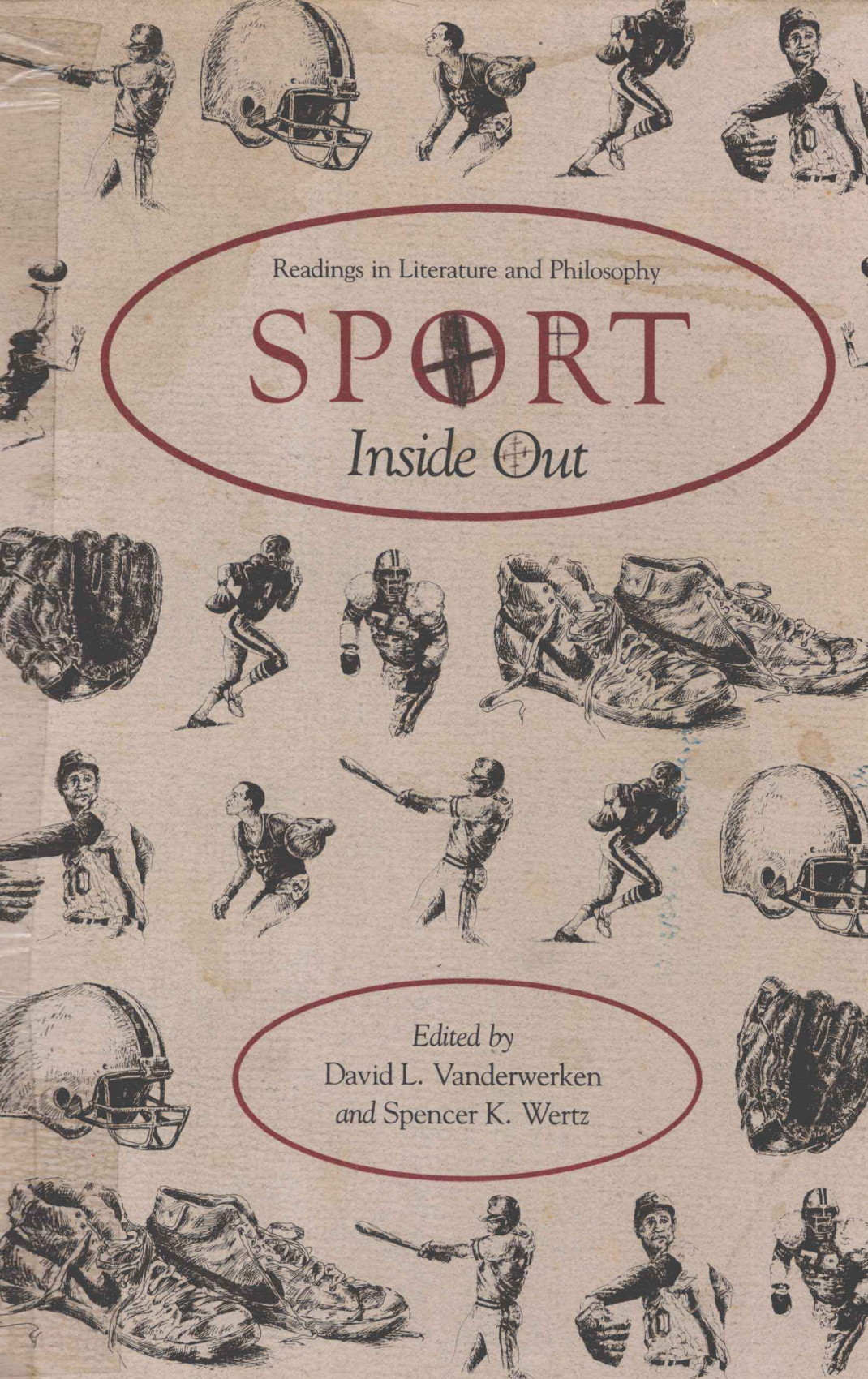

Readings in Literature and Philosophy

SPORT

Inside Out

Edited by

David L. Vanderwerken

and Spencer K. Wertz

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For Linda, Karen, Brian, Eric, Shari
and *Pippin, Daño, Cali*

Preface

In John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom's former basketball coach argues that a "boy who has had his heart enlarged by an inspiring coach can never become, in the deepest sense, a failure in the greater game of life." The coach's remark expresses several commonly held assumptions about the relationship between sport and life. One is that sport is life in miniature, life reduced to essentials, a microcosm of the "greater game." Closely related to the microcosm idea is the belief in the efficacy of sport to shape character traits and to teach values assumed necessary for proper and successful living. And finally, there is the faith that sport is a humanizing endeavor, that the athlete undergoes unique and intense experiences closed to others—experiences that make him more human somehow. The athlete savors certain possibilities of existence that make him different from, and probably better than, his fellows. He who has played *knows* something unshareable. Surely a kind of mysticism attributed to the sport experience underlies the compelling appeal of sport for the human imagination.

This analogy between sport and life, so easily and often drawn, is part of America's conventional wisdom. But we believe that it demands examination. Hence, this anthology of sports-centered fiction and poetry, speculative and informal essays, and philosophical meditations. The purpose of this disparate compilation is to raise, but hardly to resolve, focal and ongoing questions about the relationship between sport and life. Where does the analogy hold, where does it mislead, where does it deceive? If correspondences do indeed exist between elements of sport and that which is not sport, precisely where do they reside? Or is sport an autonomous world tangential at best, unrelated at worst, to anything outside itself? The readings we have selected reflect such concerns.

We have divided the book into four parts, moving from subjective to objective, from the experience of sport to ideas about sport. Part I, Sport and the Individual, explores the impact of sport upon the player, the individual

fan, and the collective—the hometown crowd. Part II, Sport and Society, focuses attention on the social mythology surrounding sport. The readings in Part III, The Meanings of Sport, examine what sport has to do with religion, myth, and philosophy—problematic matters all. Finally, Part IV touches upon other Dimensions of Sport, including Language, Fantasy, Humor, Space and Time, and Death. This list of topics could be extended indefinitely.

Each part leads off with some brief keynoting remarks. Selections of fiction and poetry precede expository material that speaks to issues raised by the creative works. We feel that the dual perspectives, the imaginative and the analytical, illuminate more than either form of discourse alone. In one instance, the section on Sport and Social Myths, we have reversed ourselves by opening with former President Ford's essay and letting the fiction comment on it.

Inevitably, our groupings and categories are arbitrary. Many selections could be interchanged, and the instructor will likely wish to add and delete or skip around. The guides for further study at the end of each section include some of our suggestions on this matter. We have tried to include enough variety to encourage modifications appropriate to specific needs. These readings should be workable in English and philosophy classes, as well as for more eclectic humanities classes and interdisciplinary sequences. The great majority of pieces are quite recent, reflecting the burgeoning interest in sports in the last ten years or so. Thus, our bias is toward contemporary writing simply because of its availability, bulk, and quality. We have largely restricted the creative works to those concerned with major American team sports—baseball, football, basketball—because of their broad cultural impact and because of the abundance of excellent material. A good anthology is flexible, and above all, useful, and we hope to have approached these ideals.

Most of the material included in this anthology has been used in our classes in Sport in Modern American Literature and Thinking about Sport. Although the collection is aimed at a collegiate audience, it is our hope that the sports-minded public who seek an understanding of their own involvement in sport or a society's preoccupation with sport will find this book a faithful guide and companion.

The American academic world has discovered that it had best take sport seriously. The Seventies witnessed the appearance of courses on sport in several disciplines, philosophical inquiries into the nature and aesthetics of sport, anthologies of sports-centered creative literature, and collections of sociological and psychological studies of sport. (For openers, see the selected bibliography.) The *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport, Journal of Sport History*, and *Arete: The Journal of Sport Literature* now exist. Even James A. Michener,

after chronicling Hawaii, Spain, and North America from the year zero onward, has turned his attention upon *Sports in America*. In short, studying sport has become not only legitimate but even respectable.

Of course, many outside the academy regard these developments with a sense of alarm, hostility, and woe. The intrusive academic, notecards in hand, with his penchant for interrogation, speculation, and analysis is now investigating nearly virgin territory. The sentiment seems to run "Can't they leave sports alone? Must the damn professors make a field out of *the field*?" We offer this collection in rebuttal to such an anti-intellectual stance. We believe that understanding enhances, rather than spoils, enjoyment, whether of Wallace Stevens's poetry, Kant's thought, Alfred Hitchcock's films, or the National Football League.

In the movie *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, a dying William Bendix claims that he fought the Axis powers not only for mom and apple pie but for the Brooklyn Dodgers. It behooves us to understand the genesis of such a statement. "Know thyself" goes for nations as well as for individuals.

. . .

The editors of this anthology owe much to many. Without the contributors and their representatives, of course, there would be no book. Special thanks go to Dr. Lyle Olsen, San Diego State University and Dr. Robert J. Trevas, Ohio University who read and commented shrewdly on the manuscript.

Finally, while we can never repay the generosity of Karen and Linda, who put up with us daily, we sure do enjoy trying.

DAVID L. VANDERWERKEN
SPENCER K. WERTZ
Fort Worth
January, 1985

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Part I:

Sport and the Individual

Introduction

The sport experience is both private and shared, intensely personal for the player and the spectator yet unifying and communicable within the larger group, the team and the crowd. Beyond the spectacle in the stadium lies the community, whether town, state, or nation, and its involvement forms the third side of the triangle out of which the full complexity of the sport experience emerges. These three viewpoints—the participant, the spectator, the community—are explored in the readings in Part I: Sport and the Individual.

All five literature pieces in Section I: The Participant concern athletes a bit past their prime who are caught between their memories and achievements and the harsh realities of time and circumstance. Whether amateur or professional, each athlete fears hanging them up and strives to extend the transition period.

A common tension in these writings is the contrast between the extraordinary experiences available to the athlete and the boring ordinariness of the nonsports world. Sport offers the athlete occasional entry into an extra dimension of human experience. The magic moment—mystical, incommunicable—is best articulated by Irwin Shaw's description of Christian Darling's eighty-yard run with a screen pass, by Glendon Swarthout's aging catcher, Al, when he stages a private home run derby for his wife in the empty Arizona ball park, and by David Hilton's joyous jump shot even as his left leg disintegrates. Yet the fleeting transcendent moment, our writers maintain, is of sport alone and cannot be approximated in everyday life. The message is clear: sport is better than life. Perhaps this is so because the spirit of play is triumphant in such scenes.

Despite these isolated and rare moments of joyous transcendence, the prevailing mood of these works consists of anxiety, disillusionment, and alienation. The main characters sense that their sport has become work, that their games play them. Consider the fear and desperation of Swarthout's Al, trying to make the roster with a good spring performance, or Hemingway's ex-

hausted welterweight champion, Jack Brennan, preparing for a fight he can't win, or the terrifying futuristic gladiator, Jonathan E, in William Harrison's "Roller Ball Murder," who feels that he has a "deep rupture" in his soul. In identifying the participant's experience of sport, these negatives must be accounted for as well as the epiphanies.

Justifiers of sport have long insisted that the sport experience builds character, teaches values, prepares one for the "game of life," and so on. However, several of the readings question such assumptions, asking whether in the lives of these maturing athletes sport has in fact promoted or retarded personal growth and an increase in wisdom. The issue is often dramatized in the players' relationships with women. The most complete analysis may be found in Shaw's "The Eighty-Yard Run." Over fifteen years, we see Christian Darling's wife, Louise, become increasingly mature while Christian stands pat, refusing to grow beyond his college football experiences, retreating to mental instant replays of his magical run. At the end of the story, when he attempts to re-enact his run at age 35, he becomes a sympathetic yet pathetic victim of his sport experience, which hardly prepared him for life. As he admits to himself: "He hadn't practiced for 1929 and New York City and a girl who would turn into a woman." In Swarthout's story, Al and Babe try to hold their marriage together. She like her husband is hanging on, bitter, frustrated, playing putt-putt with other baseball wives, and drinking too much to avoid thinking of what the future holds beyond baseball. Harrison's Jonathan E stages a reunion with his ex-wife, Ella, and discovers that she is a part of the corporate nightmare—dehumanized, impersonal, brutal—that roller ball itself so accurately mirrors: "She plays like a biker, I decide; she rides up there high above the turmoil, decides when to swoop down, and makes a clean kill." Finally, Hemingway's Jack Brennan claims to miss "the wife" in his spartan training camp although the reader can only surmise about the quality of their union. These stories demand that the easy analogy between the sport experience and life be rigorously scrutinized. Yet the question remains concerning precisely what the participant gains, learns, or knows through the sport experience.

The three philosophical essays by Adam Smith, Margaret Steel, and R. Scott Kretchmar suggest some other ways of looking at the problem of knowing in the sport experience. In other realms of human endeavor, knowing is equated with thinking. But in sport, thinking about the movements to be performed inhibits, even paralyzes action rather than releasing it. One might ask, How is the action released? By feeling. In sport, knowing is feeling. Smith foresees no verbal counterpart to feeling, whereas Steel and Kretchmar attempt to analyze this affective region.

Smith describes the athletic yogi, pursuing a carefully planned course of

physical and mental exercises in order to concentrate the mind. As an ancient Hindu proverb reports: breath is the lord of the mind. To play in a trance, as Nicklaus does on the golf course, is to suit up in Smith's "mental scuba gear." Smith pushes this thesis to the point where we begin asking if playing is really "playing without your head." There are times when participants are supposed to think. A participant must think about the whole game, about the dynamics of the game, the strategies employed by himself and his opponent. There are times to be mindful. But executing an action is obviously different from thinking about an action.

Smith's mysticism is replaced by analysis in Steel's and Kretchmar's studies. Steel claims that learning a sport, such as tennis, is like learning a science: "In learning science we *do* science by working through the exemplars, the problems and classical experiments. Once the science is learned we can go on to new discoveries." Steel continues by showing that this is also how we learn games. Kretchmar goes even further, showing how the bodily *gestalt* of "distancing" works in sport—that thinking does take place in the form of detaching oneself from one's own immediacy. "Don't dwell on the mechanics—concentrate on the whole game, the game before you," yells the coach. Steel and Kretchmar help explain how such remarks are meaningful.

The bodily *gestalt* also serves as an explanation of the problems of the aging athlete: as the body wanes, so do one's skills. That knowing is feeling in sport could be the reason why such a gulf lies between participant and spectator. This gulf is further explored by the next section: The Spectator.

One of the shrewdest insights into the spectator's side of the sport experience appears in Don DeLillo's definition of the "exemplary spectator," from his novel *End Zone*, as the "person who understands that sport is a benign illusion, the illusion that order is possible." At the same time, as we know, some spectators aren't so exemplary, whose vicarious identification with sports figures shades into obsession, neurosis, and violence. The readings in Section II: The Spectator cover the range of possible spectator responses, from the aesthetic appreciation of a Roger Angell through the disordered Frank Gifford fetish of a Frederick Exley to those who make death threats against Reggie Jackson.

Of the pieces below, those by Dickey, Humphries, Epstein, and Angell illustrate DeLillo's notion of exemplary spectatorship. Dickey's "For the Death of Vince Lombardi" stresses the galvanizing cultural power of Lombardi and his Green Bay Packers over "those who played for you / And those who entered the bodies / Of Bart Starr, Donny Anderson, Ray Nitschke, Jerry Kramer / Through the snowing tube on Sunday afternoons." Yet Dickey asks hard questions about the Lombardi ethic ("Does your death set us free?"),

finally deciding that "We've got to believe there's such a thing / As winning." On the other hand, Rolfe Humphries's "Night Game" comments less ambiguously on fan identification. The tone is joyous as the crowd crosses the outfield after the game, "So wonderful underfoot, so right, so perfect / That each of us was a player for a moment." More analytically, Joseph Epstein, the editor of *The American Scholar*, in his essay "Obsessed with Sport" discovers the features that he finds most satisfying as a spectator—craftsmanship of a high order, an absence of fraudulence, clarity in both situation and character, and levels of physical intelligence. Perhaps the most exemplary spectator of all is Roger Angell in "The Interior Stadium." For Angell, baseball is art—rich, inexhaustible, timeless, memorable. After describing the geometry of a routine grounder to short, Angell writes: "Scientists speak of the profoundly moving aesthetic beauty of mathematics, and perhaps the baseball field is one of the few places where the rest of us can glimpse this mystery." Angell bears out DeLillo's claim that the exemplary spectator finds in sport "not just order but civilization." Baseball's philosophical lessons are made explicit by James Memmott's sensitive critical study and Harold VanderZwaag's reply. They guide the reader through Angell's images and suggest questions for us to contemplate.

Would that all fans were as civilized as these, but, of course, they're not. The darker side of the spectator psyche emerges in the pieces by Exley, Vecsey, and Gilbert and Twyman. Harmless vicarious identification with George Brett is one thing, but Frederick Exley's twisted involvement with Frank Gifford is quite another. As a whole, *A Fan's Notes* is a penetrating study of all the cultural icons involved in America's success mythology and how failure to measure up to that mythology can lead to psychosis. More particularly, Frank Gifford becomes the incarnation of our success mythology for Exley, the measure for everything Exley isn't, an ideal alter ego who can never be realized. In the excerpt below, Exley tells of his one chance encounter with Gifford at USC at a campus hangout in which Exley discovers that Gifford is a fellow mortal. At least Exley never projects his love-hate fixation into overt violence on Gifford. George Vecsey in "Fans" and Bil Gilbert and Lisa Twyman in "Violence: Out of Hand in the Stands" explore the problem of spectator hooliganism. The conventional notion that sport provides a release of spectator aggression, a catharsis, that keeps society docile is discredited by these two essays. Some plausible causes offered for spectator rowdyism are the availability of liquor, the frustrations of contemporary living, the absence of internal restraint, and media-induced exhibitionism. Gilbert and Twyman suggest that the sportsworld itself must "reeducate fans" to see that "these are games, not genuine confrontations of world-shaking significance."