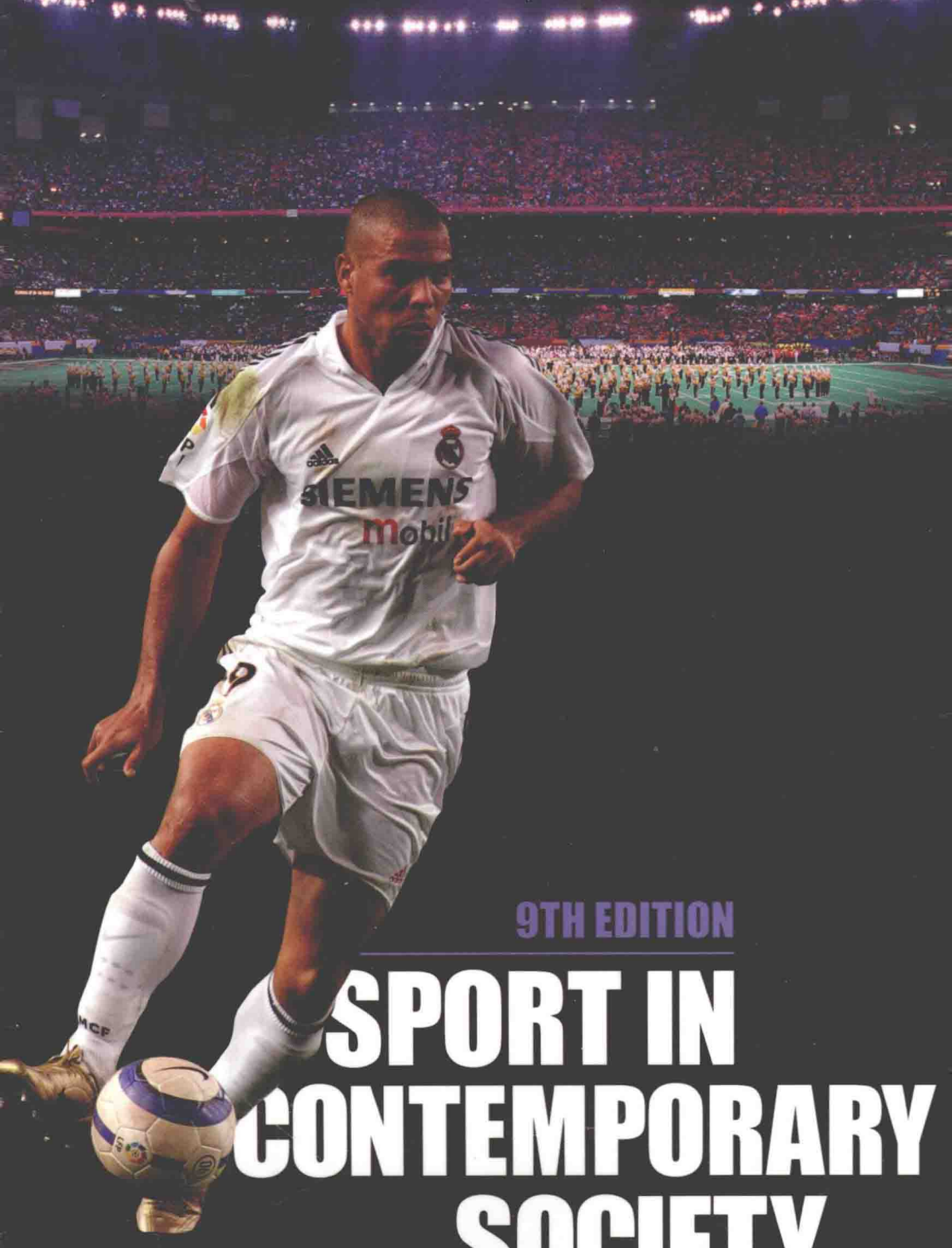

9TH EDITION

SPORT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

An Anthology

Edited by D. STANLEY EITZEN

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Ninth Edition

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Preface

Most North Americans are at least somewhat interested in sport, and many are downright fanatical about it. They attend games, read the sports pages and sport magazines, participate in fantasy leagues, and talk endlessly about the subject. But even those fans who astound us with their knowledge of the most obscure facts about sport do not necessarily *understand* sport.

Do sport buffs know how sport is linked to other institutions of society? Do they understand the role of sport in socializing youngsters in both positive and negative ways? Do they know that the assumption that sport builds character is open to serious debate? Do they know that racism continues in sport? What about the ways in which sport perpetuates gender-role stereotypes in society? How do owners, coaches, and other sport authorities exercise power to maintain control over athletes? These are some of the issues this book examines.

There are two fundamental reasons for the ignorance of most North Americans about the role of sport in society. First, they have had to rely mainly on sportswriters and sportscasters for their information, and these journalists have typically been little more than describers and cheerleaders. Until recent years journalists have rarely examined sport critically. Instead they have perpetuated myths: "Football helped a whole generation of sons of coal miners escape the mines" or "Sport is an island free of prejudice and racism."

The second reason for our sports illiteracy is that sport has been ignored, for the most part, by North American academics. Only in the past generation or so have North American social scientists and physical educators begun to investigate seriously the social aspects of sport. Previously, as with sports journalism, academic research on sport has tended to be biased in support of existing myths. In particular, the early research by physical educators was aimed at proving that sports participation builds character. In this limited perspective, phenomena common to sport such as cheating, excessive violence, coaching tyranny, and the consequences of failure were, for the most part, simply ignored.

Today, however, not only academics but also a new breed of sports journalists are making insightful analyses of the role of sport in society. They examine the positive *and* negative consequences of sport for people, communities, schools, and nations. They demystify and demythologize sport. Most significantly, they document the reciprocal impact of sport on the various institutions of society: religion, education, politics, and economics. There is no danger that sport will suffer from such examination. Critical reflection leads, sometimes, to positive changes. Moreover, the scholarly scrutiny of sport reveals a subject far more complex and far more interesting than what we see on the fields and arenas and what we read in the sports pages.

This book is a collection of the writings representing this new era of critical appraisal. It includes contributions from both journalists and academics. The overriding criterion for inclusion of a particular article was whether it critically examined the role of sport in society. The praise of sport is not omitted, but such praise, as with condemnation, must be backed by fact, not mythology or dogma. (Occasionally a dogmatic piece has been included to challenge the critical faculties of the reader.) The selection of each article was also guided by such questions as: Is it interesting? Is it informative? Is it thought provoking? Does it communicate without the use of unnecessary jargon and sophisticated methodologies?

In short, the selections presented here not only afford the reader an understanding of sport that transcends the still prevalent stereotypes and myths; they also yield fascinating and important insights into the nature of society. Thus, this book has several groups of potential readers. First, it is intended to be the primary or supplementary text for courses in the sociology of sport, sport and society, and foundations of physical education. Second, the book can be used as a supplemental text for sociology courses such as the introduction to sociology, American society, and social institutions. A third audience for this book is general readers who wish to deepen their understanding and appreciation of sport.

The ninth edition of *Sport in Contemporary Society* has undergone extensive revision, with half of the forty selections new to this edition. In keeping with my plan from previous editions, gender- and race-related articles are found throughout the collection, not just "ghettoized" into their appropriate sections. The result is an anthology of lively and timely chapters that will sharpen the reader's analysis and understanding both of sport *and* society.

I am indebted to the authors of the chapters in this volume. My thanks to them for their scholarship and, most significant, for their insights that help us unravel the mysteries of this intriguing and important part of social life.

D. Stanley Eitzen

SPORT IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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PART ONE

Sport as a Microcosm of Society

The early part of the twenty-first century was a disheartening time in sports. Greed seemed to go unchecked. New stadiums were built at taxpayer expense *and the price of tickets went up.* Elite athletes were given astronomical salaries. Professional team owners threatened to move to different cities if they did not receive more subsidies. Parents were spending up to $100,000 annually to have their children groomed for the world of big-time sport. Scandals were commonplace in big-time college sport. Player and fan violence seemed rampant inside and outside the arenas. "Against this tawdry backdrop we've again been forced to face up to the sad truth that sport isn't a sanctuary. It reflects, often all too clearly, society. And, yes, today greed and violence are a big part of society."[1]

My thesis is that sport is a microcosm of society. If we know how sport is organized, the type of games played, the way winners and losers are treated, the type and amount of compensation given the participants, and the way rules are enforced, then we surely also know a great deal about the larger society in which it exists. Conversely, if we know the values of a society, the type of economy, the way minority groups are treated, and the political structure, then we would also have important clues about how sport in that society is likely organized.

The United States, for example, is a capitalistic society. It is not surprising, then, that in the corporate sport that dominates, American athletes are treated as property. In the professional ranks they are bought and sold. At the college level players once enrolled are unable to switch teams without waiting for a year. Even in youth sports, players are drafted and become the "property" of a given team.

Capitalism is also evident as team owners "carpetbag," i.e., move teams to more lucrative markets. At the same time these owners insist that the cities subsidize the construction of new stadiums, thereby making their franchises more profitable. The players, too, appear to have more loyalty to money than to their teams or fans.

Americans are highly competitive. This is easily seen at work, at school, in dating, and in sport. Persons are evaluated not on their intrinsic worth but on the criterion of achievement. As George H. Sage has written, "Sports have consented to measure the results of sports efforts in terms of performance and product—the terms which prevail in the factory and department store."[2]

Athletes are expected to deny self and sacrifice for the needs of the sponsoring organization. This requires, foremost, an acquiescence to authority. The coach is the ultimate authority and the players must obey. This is the way bureaucracies operate, and American society is highly bureaucratic whether it be in government, school, church, or business. As Paul Hoch has stated, "In football, like business ... every pattern of movement on the field is increasingly being brought under control of a group of nonplaying managerial technocrats who sit up in the stands ... with their headphones and dictate offenses, defense, special plays, substitutions, and so forth to the players below."[3]

Thus, American sport, like American society, is authoritarian, bureaucratic, and product-oriented. Winning is everything. Athletes use drugs to enhance their performances artificially in order to succeed. Coaches teach their athletes to bend the rules (to feign a foul, to hold without getting caught) in order to win. Even at America's most prestigious universities, coaches offer illegal inducements to athletes to attend their schools. And, as long as they win, the administrators at these offending schools usually look the other way. After all, the object is to win, and this mentality permeates sport as it does politics and the business world.

These are but some of the ways in which sport mirrors society. In this section we shall examine this relationship further through three selections. The first is from the introduction to sportswriter Dave Zirin's book *What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States.* Zirin is a critical journalist with a keen eye for the inconsistencies, myths, and inequities in sport.

The second selection is by D. Stanley Eitzen. This piece examines several paradoxes of U.S. sport at the beginning of the millennium: (1) Although seemingly a trivial pursuit, sport is important; (2) sport has the capacity to build character as well as encourage bad character; (3) while the nature of sport is competition where ability tells, the reality is that race restricts; and (4) schools emphasize sports because of the personal and social benefits for participants, yet these same schools have generally resisted efforts by girls and women for participation and resources equal to those of boys and men.

The third selection was written expressly for this edition. It looks at the consequences of the Great Recession and the resulting New Economy on sport.

NOTES

1. E. M. Switch, "Giving His All," *Sports Illustrated* (December 19, 1994): 88.
2. George H. Sage, "Sports, Culture, and Society," paper presented at the Basic Science of Sport Medicine Conference, Philadelphia (July 14–16, 1974), pp. 10–11.
3. Paul Hoch, *Rip Off the Big Game* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1972), p. 9.

1

Sports—An Offer We Can't Refuse

Dave Zirin

In *The Godfather, Part II,* dying mob boss Hymen Roth wheezes the obscene truth to young Don Michael Corleone. "Michael," he whispers, "we're bigger than U.S. Steel." This scene updated for today would have Yankees kingpin George Steinbrenner booming at pubescent Dallas Mavericks owner Mark Cuban, "Screw U.S. Steel. We're bigger than the damn mafia."

Just like Hymen Roth, "Big Stein" would be telling no lies. Professional sports are now the tenth largest industry in the United States, generating $220 billion in revenue every year. And just like Mr. Roth's rackets, it's a business that can stink to high heaven.

ROTTEN ROOTS

If, in 1900, a forward thinking person had predicted that sports would some day stand as one of the great pillars of American industry, that person would have been proclaimed mad and then subjected to some combination of leeching and lobotomy. Before the 1880s, everything from the World Series to a daily sports page was just a gleam in Uncle Sam's eye. The Victorian idea that sports undermined character and promoted a slothful work ethic dominated most people's perceptions of organized

Source: Dave Zirin, *What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005): 17–22.

play. (The Victorians clearly considered child labor and building a better chastity belt more noble pursuits.) Their attitude, however, is easy to understand when you consider class. Competitive sports were a working-class pastime that reflected the brutality of early industrial life. Popular sports of the day included bare-knuckled boxing, "stick-battling," cock fighting, and animal baiting, which involved setting starved dogs against a bull or bear.

But at the end of the nineteenth century, an upstart generation of wealthy industrialists forged a new idea about these innocuous games. Industrialist J. P. Morgan and former President Teddy Roosevelt argued that organized athletics could be the means for instilling the character and values deemed necessary to make America a global power in the century to come. Sports could breed a sense of hard work, self-discipline, and the win-at-all-cost ethic of competition. Roosevelt once said, presumably while swinging a big stick,

> Virile, masterful qualities alone can maintain and defend this very civilization. There is no better way [to develop this] than by encouraging the sports which develop such qualities as courage, resolution, and endurance. No people has ever yet done great and lasting work if its physical type was infirm and weak.

Teddy and his ilk backed their words with bucks. Business scions funded organizations like the YMCA to teach sports and specifically to exclude "undesirable" ethnic groups, women, and Blacks.

As the popularity of sports rose among working people, factory owners began to see the benefit of starting plant teams as a form of labor management. This synthesis bore team factory names that remain today like the Green Bay Packers and the Milwaukee Brewers. The Chicago Bears, who used to be rooted in Decatur, Illinois, were known as the Decatur Staleys, named after the A. E. Staley Company. Their first coach, George "Papa Bear" Halas, was a Staley manager. Organized athletics became less a place to toughen up Teddy Roosevelt's gentlemen of leisure than a narrow window of opportunity for immigrants, white urban youth, and people right off the farm to claw their way out of poverty. Players who captured the country's imagination included a Baltimore orphan named "Babe" Ruth, Native American Olympic star Jim Thorpe, and the first renowned female athlete, a daughter of immigrants named Mildred "Babe" Didrikson. As another first-generation American, Joe DiMaggio, once said, "A ball player's got to be kept hungry to become a big-leaguer. That's why no boy from a rich family ever made the big leagues."

As the United States urbanized, it was evident that people would pay to see sports played at their highest level. The 1920s and 1950s, two decades with very similar economic landscapes, saw this take root. Both were periods of expansion and urbanization. Both eras saw revolutions in technology—radio in the 1920s and then TV in the 1950s—that could deliver sports into people's homes. But, most critically, both were times after brutal world wars that saw a population in the United States looking for relief, escape, and leisure.

SPORTS AND LEE GREENWOOD

In addition to becoming a profitable form of mass entertainment, pro sports were used by the political and financial elite as a way to package their values and ideas. This is why sports in this country reflect a distinctly U.S. project, rooted in aspirations for greatness as well as conquest and oppression. That's why the United States is so singular in its sports presentation. We are unique in playing the national anthem before every game (and, since 9/11, playing "God Bless America" during baseball's seventh inning stretch—even for all-American teams like the Toronto Blue Jays). We are unique in employing scantily clad women to tell us when to "cheer." We are unique in calling the winners of our domestic leagues "world champions." We are unique in the very sports we imbibe most heartily—especially football. (And don't tout NFL Europe as counter-evidence. There are more U.S. study-abroad students at those games than at your typical Amsterdam hash bar.) In many cities, the average Sunday NFL game contains more patriotic overkill than a USO show in Kuwait. First there's a military drum line to midfield. Then a standing sing-along to "I'm Proud to Be an American (Where at Least I Know I'm Free)" by Lee Greenwood. And then comes the "Star-Spangled Banner." You are certainly "free" to not stand, as long as you know that the person behind you will feel "free" to pour beer on your head. Save me, Lee Greenwood!

WHY SPORTS MATTERS

Many throughout the U.S. are repelled by pro sports today for a laundry list of reasons. People who otherwise enjoy competitive play performed at its highest levels don't want to be party to the cutthroat competition at its core. Many are also put off by the insane salaries of the games' top players, others by the backroom dealings that produce publicly funded stadiums at taxpayer expense. Then there is the abuse of steroids and other performance enhancing drugs, which some feel have taken long-hallowed baseball records and reduced them to rubbish. When you pile on the way racism and sexism can be used to sell sports, it can all seem about as appealing as a Sunday in the park with George Steinbrenner.

The way that the games have been shaped by profit and patriotism has quite understandably led many people to conclude that sports are little more than a brutal reflection of the savage inequalities that stream through our world. As esteemed left-wing critic Noam Chomsky noted in *Manufacturing Consent,*

> Sports keeps people from worrying about things that matter to their lives that they might have some idea of doing something about. And in fact it's striking to see the intelligence that's used by ordinary people in sports [as opposed to political and social issues]. I mean, you listen to radio stations where people call in—they have the most exotic information and understanding about all kinds of arcane issues. And the press undoubtedly does a lot with this.... Sports is a major factor