

# **Sport in Contemporary Society**

An Anthology

Second Edition

D. Stanley Eitzen

**SECOND EDITION**

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**SPORT  
IN  
CONTEMPORARY  
SOCIETY**  
**An Anthology**

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## *Preface*

Most Americans are at least somewhat interested in sport, and many are downright fanatical about it. They attend games, read the sport pages and sport magazines, and talk endlessly about the subject. But even those fans who astound us with their knowledge of the most obscure facts about sport—who the opposing pitcher was when Don Larsen pitched his perfect no-hit World Series game or how many winning seasons the football team of Slippery Rock has had—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 American values? Do they know how much racial discrimination continues to exist in American sport, and why? Do they know how often or how seldom it is really the case that sport enables its participants to rise in the American social structure? Do they know that the assumption that sport builds character is open to serious question? What about the relationship of violence in sport to the structure of society? What about the ways in which sport has perpetuated sex-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 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 usually been little more than describers and

cheerleaders. Until recent years journalists have rarely looked critically at sport. Instead, they have perpetuated myths: "Look what baseball did for Jackie Robinson" or "Football helped a whole generation of sons of coal miners escape the mines."

The second reason for our sports illiteracy is that sport has been virtually ignored by American academics. Only in the past fifteen years or so have American social scientists and physical educators begun to employ scientific research methods to investigate the social aspects of sport. Previously, as with sports journalism, academic research in the field of sport 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 such phenomena as cheating, violence, and failure were, for the most part, simply ignored.

Today, however, not only academics but also a new breed of sports journalists—though the latter are still a minority—are making insightful analyses of sport's role in society. They are examining the positive *and* the negative consequences of sport. They are substituting facts for myths. Most significantly, they are documenting the reciprocal impact of sport and the various institutions of society: religion, education, politics, and economics. There is no danger that sport will suffer from such examination. On the contrary, sport is revealed as a subject far more complex and far more interesting than most of us have imagined.

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 articles 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 to the nature of American society. Thus, this book has several groups of potential readers. First, it is intended to be the primary or supplementary textbook 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 American institutions. A third audience for this book is general readers who wish to deepen their understanding and appreciation of sport.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This edition of *Sport in Contemporary Society*, while retaining much of the structure of the original, has undergone extensive changes. Two sections have been deleted and replaced by a section on the media and another on violence. I have retained only 5 of the selections from the first edition, replacing the others with 33 new ones. My choices in these changes have been guided by the suggestions of several anonymous reviewers and my editor Walter Kossmann. My thanks to them.

My greatest debt is to the authors of the works found in this volume. My thanks to them for their scholarship and, most significant, for their insights that help us to unravel the mysteries of this intriguing and important part of social life.

D. Stanley Eitzen

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## *Toward an Understanding of Sport*

The character of American sport has changed dramatically in the twentieth century. Sport was once primarily engaged in by persons who sought the enjoyment of physical activity and competition. Although there are occasions for this level of sport now, sport for the most part has become corrupted. The athlete's pleasure has been superseded by what brings pleasure to fans, parents, sports team owners, alumni, television, and the corporations that buy television advertising. Sport has become spectacle, big business, and an extension of power politics. This shift to what might be dubbed "corporate sport" is seen not only in the professional leagues but also in the Olympic Games, colleges, high schools, and even in children's sports. What once was regarded as play has become work. Spontaneity has been replaced by bureaucracy. The goal of pleasure in the physical activity has been displaced by extrinsic rewards, especially money.

The articles selected for this book examine the current organization of sport critically from a number of perspectives. The four selections in this section serve to raise the reader's consciousness about sport in two ways. They point to the ubiquity of sport in society, the contemporary problems and issues of sport, and to how social scientists study and analyze sport. Thus, they set the stage for the analyses of specific areas of sport found in the subsequent sections of this anthology.

The initial selection is taken from the preface of Robert Lipsyte's perceptive book, *SportsWorld: An American Dreamland*. Lipsyte was a sports journalist for *The New York Times* and exemplifies the new breed of sports analyst. The selection reprinted here attunes the reader

to the pervasiveness of sports myths and their political, economic, and social consequences for individuals and society. The questions raised about the role of sport in producing and rationalizing failure, in building character, in supporting racism and sexism, and in reinforcing the social class system are insightful and set the stage for later selections in which these themes are discussed in greater detail.

The article by George H. Sage, a physical educator, portrays sport as a serious activity that permeates contemporary society. Sport is related significantly to other major institutions including the economy, politics, and religion. Sport, Sage emphasizes, has major consequences for the personal development of individuals and for the maintenance of societies. Thus, it must be the object of serious scrutiny by scholars in the social sciences.

The final selection, by sociologist Jay J. Coakley, considers the relationship of sport and society. He asks: What does sport do for our society and for the communities in which we live? Is sport beneficial to the well-being of society and its inhabitants? Or, is it a tool by which the powerful manipulate the masses? In answering these questions Coakley describes two theoretical approaches—functionalist and conflict—that guide the work of sport sociologists. The understanding of both these perspectives is vitally important to the analyst of society. It is crucial to note that each approach offers significant insights about society. However, the theoretical approach guiding the structure of this book and the selection of articles is the conflict perspective. As I said in the preface to Eitzen and Sage's *Sociology of American Sport*:

[The] goal is to make the reader aware of the positive and negative consequences of the way sport is organized in American society. We are concerned about some of the trends in sport, especially the move away from athlete-oriented activities toward the impersonality of what we term "corporate sport." We are committed to moving sport and society in a more humane direction, and this requires, as a first step, a thorough understanding of the principles that underlie the social structures and processes that create, sustain, and transform the social organizations within the institution of sport.<sup>1</sup>

## NOTE

1. D. Stanley Eitzen and George H. Sage, *Sociology of American Sport*, second edition (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1982), p. xi.

# *Sportsworld*

ROBERT LIPSYTE

For the past one hundred years most Americans have believed that playing and watching competitive games are not only healthful activities, but represent a positive force on our national psyche. In sports, they believe, children will learn courage and self-control, old people will find blissful nostalgia, and families will discover new ways to communicate among themselves. Immigrants will find shortcuts to recognition as Americans. Rich and poor, black and white, educated and unskilled, we will all find a unifying language. The melting pot may be a myth, but we will all come together in the ballpark.

The faith in sports has been vigorously promoted by industry, the military, government, the media. The values of the arena and the locker room have been imposed upon our national life. Coaches and sportswriters are speaking for generals and businessmen, too, when they tell us that a man must be physically and psychologically “tough” to succeed, that he must be clean and punctual and honest, that he must bear pain, bad luck, and defeat without whimpering or making excuses. A man must prove his faith in sports and the American Way by whipping himself into shape, playing by the rules, being part of the team, and putting out all the way. If his faith is strong enough, he will triumph. It’s his own fault if he loses, fails, remains poor.

Even for ballgames, these values, with their implicit definitions of manhood, courage, and success, are not necessarily in the individual’s best interests. But for daily life they tend to create a dangerous and grotesque web of ethics and attitudes, an amorphous infrastructure that acts to contain our energies, divert our passions, and socialize us for work or war or depression.

I call this infrastructure SportsWorld. For most of my adult life, as a professional observer, I’ve explored SportsWorld and marveled at its incredible power and pervasiveness. SportsWorld touches everyone and everything. We elect our politicians, judge our children, fight our wars, plan our vacations, oppress our minorities by SportsWorld standards that somehow justify our foulest and freakiest deeds, or at least camouflage them with jargon. We get stoned on such SportsWorld

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SOURCE: Robert Lipsyte, *SportsWorld: An American Dreamland* (New York: Quadrangle/The New York Times Book Co., 1975), pp. ix–xv.

spectaculars as the Super Bowl, the space shots, the Kentucky Derby, the presidential conventions, the Indianapolis 500, all of whose absurd excesses reassure us that we're okay.

SportsWorld is a sweaty Oz you'll never find in a geography book, but since the end of the Civil War it has been promoted and sold to us like Rancho real estate, an ultimate sanctuary, a university for the body, a community for the spirit, a place to hide that glows with that time of innocence when we believed that rules and boundaries were honored, that good triumphed over evil, and that the loose ends of experience could be caught and bound and delivered in an explanation as final and as comforting as a goodnight kiss.

Sometime in the last fifty years the sports experience was perverted into a SportsWorld state of mind in which the winner was good because he won; the loser, if not actually bad, was at least reduced, and had to prove himself over again, through competition. As each new immigrant crop was milled through the American system, a pick of the harvest was displayed in the SportsWorld showcase, a male preserve of national athletic entertainment traditionally enacted by the working class for the middle class, much as the performing arts are played by the middle class for the amusement of the upper class.

By the 1950s, when SportsWorld was dominated by what are now called "white ethnics," the black American was perceived as a challenging force and was encouraged to find outlets in the national sports arena. Although most specific laws against black participation had already been erased, it took cautious, humiliating experiments with such superstars as Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby to prove that spectator prejudice could be deconditioned by a winning team. Within a few years, pools of cheap, eager black and dark Latin labor were channeled into mainstream clubs.

So pervasive are the myths of SportsWorld that the recruitment of blacks has been regarded as a gift of true citizenship bestowed upon the Negro when he was ready. It has been conventional wisdom for twenty years that the black exposure in sports has speeded the integration of American society, that white Americans, having seen that blacks are beautiful and strong, became "liberalized."

This is one of the crueler hoaxes of SportsWorld. Sports success probably has been detrimental to black progress. By publicizing the material success of a few hundred athletes, thousands, perhaps millions, of bright young blacks have been swept toward sports when they should have been guided toward careers in medicine or engineering or business. For every black star celebrated in SportsWorld, a thousand of his little brothers were neutralized, kept busy shooting baskets until it was too late for them to qualify beyond marginal work.

The white male spectator who knew few ordinary black men to measure himself against may have had his awareness raised by watching such superior human beings as Frank Robinson, Jim Brown, Bill Russell, O. J. Simpson, and other highly merchandised SportsWorld heroes, but it also doubled his worst fears about blacks: added to the black junkie who would rip out his throat was the black superstud who could replace him as a man—in bed, on the job, as a model for his children.

By the middle of the 1970s it seemed as though the black experience in SportsWorld might be recapitulated by women. SportsWorld seemed on the verge of becoming the arena in which women would discover and exploit their new “equality.” It would be a complex test of adaptability for SportsWorld. The major sports were created by men for the superior muscles, size, and endurance of the male body. Those sports in which balance, flexibility, and dexterity are the crucial elements have never been mass-promoted in America. When a woman beats a man at a man’s game, she has to play like a man.

There were signs, however, that women may not embrace SportsWorld as eagerly as did the blacks, profiting from that sorry lesson as well as from their own greater leverage in American society. It is no accident that Billie Jean King, while still an active player, became an entrepreneur and an important voice in American cultural consciousness while Jackie Robinson was a Rockefeller courtier almost to the end of his life.

A great deal of the angry energy generated in America through the coming apart of the 1960s was absorbed by SportsWorld in its various roles as socializer, pacifier, safety valve; as a concentration camp for adolescents and an emotional Disneyland for their parents; as a laboratory for human engineering and a reflector of current moral postures; and as a running commercial for Our Way of Life. SportsWorld is a buffer, a DMZ, between people and the economic and political systems that direct their lives; women, so long denied this particular playland, may just avoid this trap altogether.

But SportsWorld’s greatest power has always been its flexibility. Even as we are told of SportsWorld’s proud traditions, immutable laws, ultimate security from the capriciousness of “real life,” SportsWorld is busy changing its rules, readjusting its alliances, checking the trends. SportsWorld is nothing if not responsive. Hockey interest lagging, how about a little more blood on the ice? Speed up baseball with a designated hitter. Move the football goal posts. A three-point shot in basketball. Women agitating at the college arena gates? Let ’em in. Give ’em athletic scholarships, “jock” dorms, and Minnie

Mouse courses. How about a Professional Women's Power Volleyball League?

Stars, teams, leagues, even entire sports may rise or fall or never get off the ground, but SportsWorld as a force in American life orbits on.

Ah, baseball. Our National Pastime. An incredibly complex contrivance that seems to have been created by a chauvinistic mathematician intent upon giving America a game so idiosyncratic that it would be at least a century before any other country could beat us at it. And indeed it was. After a century in which baseball was celebrated as a unique product of the American character, Chinese boys began winning Little League championships, and young men from Latin America and the Caribbean began making a significant impact upon the major leagues. The highly organized Japanese, who had taken up the game during the postwar occupation of their country (perhaps as penance for yelling "To Hell with Babe Ruth" during banzai charges) were almost ready to attack again.

But SportsWorld had spun on. That other peculiarly American game, football, declared itself the New National Pastime. Baseball and God were announced dead at about the same time, but the decision against baseball apparently is taking longer to reverse, thanks in the main to pro football's colossal public relations machine. The National Football League played its scheduled games on Sunday, November 24, 1963, because its historic television deal was pending and Commissioner Pete Rozelle was determined to prove that nothing, *nothing*, could cancel the show. But that winter, NFL sportscasters infiltrated the banquet circuit with the engaging theory—quintessential SportsWorld—that America had been at the brink of a nervous breakdown after President Kennedy's assassination and that only The Sport of the Sixties' business-as-usual attitude had held the country together until Monday's National Day of Mourning unified us all in public grief.

Ten years later, though hopefully still grateful, America had grown bored with the cartoon brutality of pro football. America was boogieing to the magic moves and hip, sly rhythms of basketball, The Sport of the Seventies. We've had enough of pure violence, simulated or otherwise, went the SportsWorld wisdom, now we need something smoooooooooth.

There is no end to SportsWorld theories—of the past, the present, the future—especially now that a new generation of commentators, athletes, coaches, and fans feels free to reform and recast sports, to knock it off the pedestal and slide it under the microscope, giving it more importance than ever. SportsWorld newspapermen dare to de-



scribe to us action that we have seen more clearly on television than they have from the press box, and SportsWorld telecasters, isolated from the world in their glass booths, dare to explain to us what the players are *really* thinking. SportsWorld analysts were once merely "pigskin prognosticators" predicting the weekend football scores; now they may be as heavy as any RAND Corporation futurist. Is hockey an art form or is it a paradigm of anarchy, in which case are we obligated as concerned citizens to watch it? Is tennis more than just a convenient new market for clothes and building materials and nondurable goods? What will be The Sport of the Eighties? Will no sport ever again have its own decade? Will cable television and government-regulated sports gambling and the institutionalized fragmenting of society balkanize us into dozens of jealous Fandoms?

SportsWorld, once determinedly anti-intellectual, has become a hotbed of psychologists, physicians, and sociologists questioning premises as well as specific techniques. Should lacrosse players really be eating steak before games, or pancakes? Why are the lockers of offensive linemen neater than those of defensive linemen? Does athletic participation truly "build character" or does it merely reinforce otherwise unacceptable traits? Should communities rather than corporations own teams?

But very few people seem to be questioning SportsWorld itself, exploring the possibility that if sports could be separated from SportsWorld we could take a major step toward liberation from the false values, the stereotypes, the idols of the arena that have burdened us all since childhood.

SportsWorld is not a conspiracy in the classic sense, but rather an expression of a community of interest. In the Soviet Union, for example, where world-class athletes are the diplomat-soldiers of ideology, and where factory girls are forced to exercise to reduce fatigue and increase production, the entire athletic apparatus is part of government. Here in America, SportsWorld's insidious power is imposed upon athletics by the banks that decide which arenas and recreational facilities shall be built, by the television networks that decide which sports shall be sponsored and viewed, by the press that decides which individuals and teams shall be celebrated, by the municipal governments that decide which clubs shall be subsidized, and by the federal government, which has, through favorable tax rulings and exemptions from law, allowed sports entertainment to grow until it has become the most influential form of mass culture in America.

SportsWorld is a grotesque distortion of sports. It has limited the pleasures of play for most Americans while concentrating on turning our best athletes into clowns. It has made the finish more important