

athletes. Coming up with such regulations is going to be dicey, because there is not a worldwide definition of "professional." It may be impossible to find a common ground. Financially-assisted foreign athletes may still be thought of as amateurs in their own countries, especially when compared to American-style pro basketball players. Even if the IOC makes a ruling on what constitutes a professional, ways to circumvent its limits will be surely found, just as there are now ways around adhering to the strict concept of amateurism.

International Olympic Committee President Juan Antonio Samaranch has been at the forefront of the attempt to get each nation to send its best athletes, regardless of how they make their income—in other words, to get rid of this already-eroding concept of "amateur" athletes.

Representation of each country by its best is a noble idea. But as far as the United States is concerned, that is only the first step. Professionalism in the Olympics is as much a fiscal question as an ideological one, and the United States is at the crossroads. It can follow the path much of the rest of the world has chosen, paying athletes outright, covering training expenses or offering performance incentives. Or it can hold fast to the idea of sending only "amateur" athletes. In that case we can't complain about the medal count, because our "nonleague" athletes will not be able to compete with the privileged rest of the world.

If this country wants to do something about fostering athletics, there are going to have to be some changes made.

Winning an Olympic medal is the highest athletic aspiration for most of the sporting world. That is one of the essential reasons foreign athletes receive financial assistance. Emphasis in the US is on basketball, baseball, football, hockey, and tennis, because those are the sports where money can be made. That is where the competition and training and opportunities are, and those sports do not need any help. But if the US is to compete on equal footing in the less glamorous (i.e., most Olympic) sports, there has to be "opportunity." There has to be professionalism.

James Michener has said that "the

costs of becoming a top athlete in most fields have become so great that amateurs cannot pay for them out of their own pockets." But unlike the Soviet Union or Eastern bloc nations, the United States government would have a hard time justifying tax money going to talented, healthy athletes while there are bigger problems at home. Similarly, the general public is not going to fund—through attendance at events, purchase of associated merchandise, etc.—a sport that does not play well on television, has no recognizable personalities to promote, is not popular with a sizable number of Americans, or cannot be wagered upon.

What's left is corporate sponsorship. Some already exists. The Miller Brewing Company sponsors the US Olympic training center in Colorado Springs. Miller has obviously made a significant financial commitment to present and future Olympic athletes. Rather than providing this broad assistance, perhaps companies such as Miller should become sponsors of individual American teams, in association with each sport's governing body or federation.

Yugo now "sponsors" the US men's volleyball team to an unknown degree. Perhaps an agreement should be made with the federations by which athletes are selected by the governing body, given jobs by the team's sponsor, and have training, living, and miscellaneous expenses paid for by the companies. The federation would have "sport" control while the companies would have financial control. The athletes could also become spokesmen for the companies, appear at various events, wear their companies' logos on their uniforms, etc.

Corporate sponsorship is now a given with major sporting events. In case you haven't checked, some of New Year's Day's biggest bowl games are the Sunkist Fiesta Bowl, the USF&G Sugar Bowl, the Mazda Gator Bowl, and the John Hancock Sun Bowl. That's the same sort of setup from which most of American sport could benefit. It would not take as much money to support the US handball team as it does for, say, Gulf & Western to run the New York Knicks. Wouldn't a company such as McDonald's stand a lot to gain by being the sole and complete financial

backer of the US Olympic gymnastics team? And wouldn't US gymnastics as a whole benefit from an infusion of support?

Of course, if Americans are worried about their sports and teams being overrun by corporations, or being tainted by the color of money and becoming too much like the Europeans, that's fine, too. Just don't complain about the lack of American medals.

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LETTERS

On Poetry by Richard Eberhart

People want to save their souls by writing poetry, or so they say. Should we take that seriously? Did Smart save his soul in the madhouse writing all those lucid lines? Perhaps it's enough to say that from primitive times there has been a need for expression.

Poetry is older than prose. Poetry was the morning cry when coming out of the cave to see that the sun had arisen again, a high song of joy in the treble clef. It was also the low sounds of grief at the death of a child who had wandered away from the cave and been killed by an animal. Our early ancestors probably knew the whole range of emotions from joy to sorrow, from lyric cry to threnody.

Nowadays prose must outnumber poetry quantitatively nine to one. Millions of Americans get along from birth to death without poetry—well, maybe they read a poem in a newspaper, but they then forget it. Yet however mechanical our age becomes we have to deal with prose all the time. We have to read, if only traffic signs; we have to be instructed; we have to give instructions. The prose of the day may be some kind of computer language, part mathematics, part English, as a Harvard Phi Beta Kappa orator warned at a commencement not long ago; and it may be a dangerous sign of possibly losing the

collective mind, as she put it. But at least prose is for everybody. Poetry is not.

New poems are sometimes new half a century later, as is the case with my own "The Groundhog," or "The Fury of Aerial Bombardment." Both are old but have lasted. Take a look at Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's *Oxford Book of English Verse*. Flip back to the last half-inch of pages, where you'll find a vast collection of poems by somebody called Anonymous. Mr. Anonymous, about two thousand years old, or at least a thousand, wrote some of the newest poems in that book.

On Saturday, March 26, 1988, at Thomas Center, Gainesville, a plaque was unveiled commemorating Robert Frost, who had lived here part time, in the winter, for 15 years or more starting in the early 30's. He had given readings at the university, and his wife died here. In his citation President Reitz said in part, "He has shown us that it is possible to be both subtle and plain, both original and traditional, both direct and richly textured, both engaging and serious."

In my *Collected Poems: 1930-1986* there is one entitled "Worldly Failure," which reads as follows:

I looked into the eyes of
Robert Frost
Once, and they were
unnaturally deep.
Set far back in the skull, as far
back in the earth.
An oblique glance made them
look even deeper.

He stood inside the door on
Brewster Street,
Looking out. I proffered him
an invitation.
We went on talking for an hour
and a half.
To accept or not to accept
was his question.

Whether he wanted to meet
another poet;
He erred in sensing some
intangibile slight.
Hard for him to make a
democratic leap.
To be a natural poet you have
to be unnaturally deep.

While he was talking he was
looking out,
But stayed in, sagacity
better indoors.
He became a metaphor for
inner devastation,
Too scared to accept
my invitation.

There is a story behind the poem. At the time Frost was living on Brewster Street near Lake View Avenue in Cambridge, where my mother-in-law lives. My wife, Betty, and I were living at 10 Hilliard Place. On Betty's suggestion I went over to see Frost and invited him to dinner on Saturday night to meet a British poet friend of ours. He said he would be glad to come. We talked outside his door for a long time. Betty had told me to show him a review, I think now it was a British one, of a current book of mine, which was positive but not all praise, to see what he thought of it. Upon perusing this Frost said he never read reviews of his own work, and paid no attention to them.

On Thursday Frost phoned to say he could not come on Saturday as he had been called out of town, or some such excuse.

Later we found out that the lady who took care of Frost, Kay Morrison, had informed him that the poet in question coming for dinner Saturday night was Kathleen Raine, one of the best English poets, a contemporary of mine from 1927 to 1929 at Cambridge. Frost remembered at once that Raine had written a review of his poetry in the *London Times Literary Supplement* that was not 100 percent praise. It was positive, but maybe only 90 percent. So Frost refused to dine with her at our house. He could not stand any critic saying anything against his poetry, even if only slightly dispraising.

Here is a stanza from "Vignettes" in my book *The Long Reach* (1984):

The day after the inauguration
of President Kennedy
We went to a cocktail party at
the Coxes,
Neighbors in Georgetown near
34th Street.
The Hindemiths were there,
I had not known composers,
The talk was all of the
new America.
Robert Frost was there. I went

up to him eagerly, saying,
"I hear you talked with the
President this morning,
What did he say?" Instant reply,
"I did all the talking."

This is a direct, true statement, no subterfuges, no ambiguity. Is this better than the complexities, artifice, and aesthetic distance in the other poem? Is the reality of poetry aided or lessened by comparison with actual facts behind a poem? If you love the poetry should you care about the biography?

Richard Eberhart is the author most recently of Collected Poems, reviewed in the January Chronicles. He lives in Maine.

STAGE

Break a Leg by Katherine Dalton

In 1963, when Tyrone Guthrie produced his first season at the new Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, the States did not have much in the way of regional theater. In a country whose two most famous actors are, respectively, a President and a presidential assassin, Ronald Reagan and John Wilkes Booth—two actors who, in other words, became famous for something other than their art—it seems inevitable that a British director would found what is one of our premier theaters. (At least we are not alone. Guthrie founded Canada's *de facto* national theater, the Stratford Festival Theater in London, Ontario, as well.)

It was 25 years ago last May that the new Guthrie opened with *Hamlet*, and its 25th season these past nine months included a production of *Hamlet* as well, directed by Artistic Director Garland Wright. *Hamlet* is such a difficult play not only because of the language, and the length, but because its main character, the man who must carry the show, is not always attractive. Wright purposefully chose to play *Hamlet* very young, choosing the American actor Zjelko Ivanek for the lead. Ivanek is in his early 30's but is slight enough to pass for a teenager. It is a sound