

SPORTS

New left veteran defends his past as baseball fan

BASEBALL AND THE COLD WAR

By Howard Senzel

Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, N.Y., 1977, \$10.00

Remember Frank Verdi? The third baseman for the Rochester Red Wings who was struck with a stray bullet during a game between Rochester and the Havana Sugar Kings in Havana on July 26, 1959, the first year of the Cuban Revolution? One year later, the International League (triple A) shifted its Havana franchise to Jersey City and professional baseball was gone from Cuba, another victim of the "crusade against Communism." This obscure incident is the starting point for Howard Senzel's remarkable new book.

Baseball and the Cold War, aptly subtitled "a soliloquy," revolves around Senzel's efforts to investigate this bizarre series of events, and, in the process, to piece together the disconnected strands of his own life.

When the "new left" fell apart in the early '70s, it left Senzel disoriented, "floating through American time and space with neither culture nor identity." To help get his bearings, Senzel decided to immerse himself in a project that linked the great passion of his childhood, baseball, with that of his adolescence and youth, radical politics. The Frank Verdi/Havana Sugar Kings affair seemed ideal for that purpose and so Senzel returned to Rochester, the city he grew up in, to examine the history of professional baseball in Cuba, before and after the Revolution.

What Senzel discovered, however, was hardly of earth-shattering significance. After going through the Rochester papers, interviewing sportscasters and officials of the club, he found there was no "behind the scenes" story or CIA plot—just a predictable tale of venality and sensitivity to political pressure on the part of the small-town businessmen who ran minor league baseball in those days.

The real story for Senzel was the feelings evoked in him as his research progressed—his inability to feel at home in the city of his birth, his emotional distance from old friends and relatives, the inability of his new left "reflexes" to provide

him with direction in a time when visions of limitless prosperity and utopian dreams of revolt had both lost their credibility. The two cultural settings that had been most meaningful to him—the working class neighborhood of his early childhood and the radical community he felt part of in the '60s had both seemingly disintegrated, leaving in their wake a standardized corporate culture devoid of "human characteristics."

Surveying Rochester in the mid-'70s, a city filled with McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken, where Bob Dylan concerts were marketed like a new model car, Senzel writes: "One morning, long before it was true, we awoke to find that our culture had been replaced. Gone were all the restaurants shaped like chicken and ships... That special quality that the human mind and hand give to the things they care about is gone from the marketplace and survives only in gift shops and hobbies."

In the cultural vacuum Senzel found himself within, the most authentic feeling available was his love of baseball. In the course of his research Senzel gradually recaptures the emotions he experienced as a devoted Red Wing fan, and finds they are virtually the only part of his childhood that is readily translatable into his adult life.

The reason for this, Senzel concludes, is that baseball is one of the few aspects of American culture that has not been distorted beyond recognition by the corporate world, that can stir the imagination of observers in much the same way it did 15 or 50 years before.

"When I think of all the minute details of my everyday life," Senzel writes, "that have been organized against my satisfaction and in favor of corporate profits, I think that baseball has survived miraculously well... Baseball is big business... [but] the same baseball is a child's pleasure on a sunny afternoon, an internal world of knowledge and speculation, theoretical studies and practical theories, and a body of pure thought that is as likely to enchant a serious adult as it does a merry child."

This conclusion, needless to say, is sharply at variance with the common "rad-



Photo: J. Weinick/Montage-Free

ical" view which Senzel once accepted that spectator sports are an "opiate" that divert people's attention from the problems they face and prevent them from rebelling against their oppressors. Sports are indeed a refuge, Senzel shows, but a refuge from a wide array of anxieties for which there are no simple solutions.

To deprive people of this outlet, he suggests, is to deny them one of their most genuine and spontaneous sources of pleasure and fulfillment.

In addition, Senzel takes on the myth of the "passive spectator" by showing us the remarkable variety of ways fans use sports as a springboard for fantasy and speculation, a reference for aesthetic and moral judgment, and a focal point of sociability and community spirit.

Being a rabid baseball fan as a child, Senzel feels, did not inhibit his political development; rather, it provided him with

an heroic image of human possibilities that was entirely consistent with his evolution as a radical activist. "Nearly every summer," he writes, "I saw human capability stretched to its limits by conflicting desire... It inspired me... to be a little more grand, a little more stylish, and as noble as I could possibly be."

Despite its good natured tone, the book ends on a pessimistic note. Senzel does not really see any way to stop the corporate world from absorbing and destroying everything he holds dear, and he makes no programmatic suggestions.

Senzel's strength is that he provides us with a powerful image of one way that people have been able to maintain contact with their past and find space in which their imagination can roam free and their sociability flourish. For that effort, he is profoundly to be thanked.

—Mark Naison

By Marvin E. Gettleman

Fencing and some of its technology surfaced briefly in the press last summer when a Soviet Olympic competitor in Montreal apparently rigged his electrical foil to show a "touch" when none was made. In fencing salles and clubs ardent fencers regretted that the sport had got some bad press, and there was much speculation about the punishment meted out to the offending athlete. But, at the same time, the incident did focus attention on a much neglected and growing sport.

There are three basic weapons in fencing. Foil, along with the heavier epee, are now judged electrically; scoring is accomplished by a valid touch of the point of one's weapon against the designated target area on the opponent (an area that differs with the different weapons). With the third competition weapon, the saber, valid touches can be made both by the side of the blade or the point and no feasible method for electronic scoring of saber bouts has yet been devised.

The advent of electrical scoring in the mid-'50s has helped democratize a minor sport. Until then, the judges and directors of fencing bouts had absolute discretion in assigning and determining valid touches. Old-time fencers remember a pervasive bias against Jews and other non-WASPS in those days.

Until the last few years women fenced

only foil, while the other two weapons were exclusively male domains. But now women in increasing numbers fence epee and saber, and this has forced the Amateur Fencers League of America to schedule women's meets in all three weapons.

A highly energetic sport that demands considerable stamina from participants, fencing places no great premium on strength, once a certain threshold of endurance is reached. It's primarily a sport of skill and economy in which minimal motion is often the most successful. A subtle parry—just enough to deflect the opponent's blade—leaves the defender in the most advantageous position to make a riposte, or counter-thrust.

Women who master classical fencing form, with its economical defense neatly balanced by energetic attack and counter-attack, can compete with men or with each other on every level in this virtually androgynous sport.

Fencing has a number of advantages that suggest why it should be a popular

sport. It can be a lifetime activity in which subtlety, precision and timing of older fencers can overcome the greater mobility of younger opponents.

It's a highly psychological sport as well, in which feints, timing shifts and surprise maneuvers are often decisive. Fencing develops reflexes to a high degree, and thus contributes to general well-being and alertness.

The initial outlay is modest: \$15 for a foil with one or two replacement blades; \$25 for a padded jacket, with metal breast-protectors for women; a wire mesh face mask and gauntlet round out a beginner's equipment for another \$20 or so. A novice can wear sweatpants and sneakers.

Fencing partners are not hard to find, at least in the urban centers; good coaches, however, are scarce. Clubs and salles, like the modest and unpretentious Santelli establishment in Greenwich Village where I fence, are inexpensive and accessible. In other places a notice on a conspicuous bulletin board should be enough to bring near-

by fencers out of the closets.

Why then, with all these advantages, has fencing failed thus far to attain a level of popularity anywhere near that of, say, tennis?

One reason for the seemingly built-in lack of popularity for fencing is that, while capable of attracting loyal and enthusiastic practitioners, fencing is not, and possibly cannot be, a spectator sport; the action is simply too fast and intricate for non-fencers to see, let alone savor and appreciate.

Fencing thus poses questions that have considerable cultural significance. Can a sport "take off" into popularity only when the active participants are supplemented by sedentary viewers? What is the function of at least a potentially appreciative audience to an athlete? Is there an exhibitionist element in sport? Just what is the relationship between spectator and athlete? Does this vary under different cultural and political systems? Is it possible to conceive of some technical device—instant slow-motion replay of televised fencing matches, for example—which would elevate fencing from a minor sport to a truly popular and widely followed pastime?

Marvin E. Gettleman is a sub-novice fencer at Girogio Santelli's Salle D'Armes in New York City. He teaches history at the Polytechnic Institute of New York.

Fencing foils foes picks up fans fast



(off the record)

By Sidney Blumenthal
and Danny Schechter

What's in a rating

Network television is priming for its biggest ratings battle since Walter Cronkite outpointed Huntley and Brinkley. The FCC has already warned broadcasters that their licenses may be revoked or suspended if they are caught rigging audience surveys. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the FCC has already learned of "several cases where broadcasters obtained rating diaries and filled them out to show that more people were watching their stations than actually were."

The danger of fraud in the ratings ought to be mitigated by the fraud of the ratings themselves. These services are supposed to offer reliable gauges of audiences but they have questionable statistical validity. They provide scant information about what radio listeners or TV viewers desire or need in programming. Ratings are more a marketing tool used to measure profitability, than a reflection of the complex opinions of consumers.

The autumn ratings war is billed as a blood battle—"the year of the jugular,"

according to NBC program executive Erwin Segelstein. "Every week will be a separate ratings race," he says.

Still, losers will not lose money. Les Brown, television critic of the *New York Times* explains, "So bullish is the network television economy that low rated programs do not lose money; they merely lose the network's potential for making more money in those time periods."

Profit-fever has already virtually destroyed progressive FM radio as an alternative source of music and news. As the drive for higher radio ratings intensified, management sought less idiosyncratic formats to build wider audiences and make more loot. A more homogenized sound was dictated by marketplace logic. Squads of consultants buzzed around the radio circuit spreading the orthodoxy of mediocre but lucrative programming; innovative or controversial shows were the victims.

None of this is especially surprising since capitalists can be expected to rationalize operations in the pursuit of the buck. What is surprising, however, is the degree to which unreliable information, falsely presented as scientifically accurate, is used systematically in decision-making.

The Arbitron (ARB) service, among others, is a scandal waiting to be exposed and broadcast trade publications have

been filled with statements by professionals in the field decrying the ratings system as inaccurate.

But no matter how questionable the system, advertising agencies prefer to deal with numbers. As a result, radio stations may be able to double their ratings (and revenues) with just six or seven more listeners compiling diaries in their favor.

Pulling some shades

"Well, I'm one stubborn old Social Democrat who isn't going to pull down the shades," wrote George Meany's favorite syndicated columnist, John Roche, on June 28. He's upset that the Carter administration is engaged in negotiations with the Vietnamese about normalizing relations. To Roche, this is "moral bankruptcy."

Roche is particularly incensed at liberals like Allard Lowenstein, a deputy delegate to the United Nations and leader of the "Dump Johnson" movement in 1968, who, according to Roche, "played a tragic role in turning Indochina into a totalitarian inferno." Roche neglects to mention that at the same time Roche himself was serving as Johnson's "Intellectual-in-Residence," a unique station from which he pontificated against critics of the war.

As the "brain" in the White House (it couldn't be called a "brain trust") Roche was sent to Saigon to assist Thieu and Ky in writing their constitution. The brief life of that regime must personally wound him.

Roche uses his forum to spin a political line for Meany and company. The new dogma he proposes is that the U.S. should publicize atrocities in Vietnam (which he labels "the Communist butcher") in order to distract human rights advocates from unsavory places like South Africa. "The last thing our human rights honchos should do is blackout Southeast Asia and switch to Africa or Latin America," he writes.

Any item designed to demonstrate the incompetence and repressiveness of his experimental government was amply aired in the U.S. Nobody knows just how many of these stories were planted by the CIA and the journalists it bankrolled.

The overthrow of Allende has not stopped the stream of misinformation. On June 5, for example, the editorially liberal *Boston Globe* printed a tidbit lifted from the *London Observer* (a British paper recently purchased by the Atlantic Richfield Oil Company). Under the headline "Chile's economy recovering," the story stated, "The Chilean economy, which was debauched by the left-wing theoreticians of Salvador Allende between 1970 and September 1973 and then pounded back into shape by the right-wing zealots of General Augusto Pinochet, is making an impressive recovery."

The article continued: "What is more, the fruits of it are beginning to find their way into the hands of the middle and working class Chileans." Statistics are then cited to buttress this rosy view. The source of the figures, however, is never given. The reader is left to guess that they come from DINA, the Chilean secret police, or perhaps from Milton Friedman.

A lengthy op-ed piece would be required to refute this story's telescoped lies. The *Globe* printed two letters-to-the-editor about the story, one for it and one against. Creating the impression that, if nothing else, the newspaper is fair-minded. Actually the editors of the *Globe* know better than this. They are normally enlightened about horrors like the Chilean junta. This raises the possibility that the *Observer* item slipped by, indicating sloppiness on the part of the *Globe* editors.

If this happens at the immaculately liberal *Globe*, imagine what occurs at, say, the *San Diego Union*, where the editors would be happy to exhume Allende in order to lecture him on the virtues of ITT.

Sidney Blumenthal writes for *The Real Paper*. Danny Schechter is the news director/dissector of WBCN-FM news in Boston.

Friends of Pinochet

The farther away a story is from the block a newspaper is located on the likelier it is that it will be distorted. One story that was deliberately misrepresented in many American papers was the tenure of Salvador Allende as president of Chile.

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