

Sports debate

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Sports are a shared pleasure and a field of competition among observers and provide one of the few available outlets for male communication. They have become an unparalleled device for a society that wants to avoid issues, to keep things impersonal, to "enjoy" people without laying oneself open or committing oneself to them, and to have "fun" in the process.

In many respects sport has become the contemporary opiate of the masses. Sport appears to be an "answer" to the discontentment that man feels. Life is not all it should be; there is a great void that the daily activities of life simply do not fill. In the past people have turned to religion to take care of this need. Today many turn to sport to provide that something extra in life.

Interest in sport today is a direct reaction against the mechanization, the division of labor and the standardization of life in a capitalist civilization that robs people of their power to make decisions and their creativity. Every weekend, tens of millions of men sit before their TV sets and stadiums and arenas, rising with their victories, falling with their defeats, and emerging temporarily purged of their anger, their frustrations, their feelings of impotence.

Meaning in a dull life.

Athletic contests bring some temporary excitement and meaning into the often meaningless lonely lives of American males. A dull insignificant job is more easily endured if one is able to spend evenings and weekends watching exciting sports events. When he is cheering for his team, he is really cheering for himself as well. When he screams insults and abuse upon the opposition sports unit, he is verbally assaulting those forces he has confronted and that so often have combined to frustrate his own personal achievement and his own social and psychological health and security.

Furthermore, team loyalties formed in adolescence and maintained throughout adulthood serve in a nostalgic way to bring a certain reassurance of continuity into the personal lives of many Americans.

Many commentators have suggested that the militarization of American society accompanied by the Vietnam war led to the replacement of baseball by the more militarized and violent game of pro football as the nation's most popular sport. One finds frequent reference to the "Nixon game plans" regarding that president's political and economic strategies. At the same time, people involved in sport speak of "throwing the bomb" and "blitzing."

In truth, football fans seem to have become largely callous to the violence of the game. The action on the field attracts and holds the spectator as it allows imagined direction of the whole intricate show. Elaborate offensive and defensive maneuvers, discussions of field generalships, and so on, reinforce both the image of strong men running things and the desire to control and manipulate a complex technical environment by skillful measures.

An unhealthy component.

What are we to make of the sport phenomenon? It is not the intent of this writer to maintain that athletic activity and even sports spectatorship cannot be a healthy and pleasurable part of life. Rather it is to suggest that the values associated with, and the emphasis given to sport (especially in its spectator status) are presently an unhealthy and passifying component of American life.

The direct political effect was summed up a few years ago by Stanley Aronowitz: "As long as the workers can participate in the games through betting and drain their passions in heated arguments about whether Mays or Mantle was the greatest all-round outfielder of all time, the system has a few years left."

The centrality of sport in American culture presents socialists with a political challenge: to offer a version of human life that might give people the meaning and identity they search for in sport. Play ball!

—Simon Rosenblum

Creativity and freedom

Simon Rosenblum's article makes some interesting observations about the role of sports in American society, but I find it hard to accept his view that you can explain the American passion for sports wholly in terms of efforts to reaffirm masculine identity and to compensate for feelings of impotence in the home and at the workplace.

Although Rosenblum doesn't say so directly, he implies that there is nothing intrinsic in the experience of playing or watching sports that is worthy of the time and attention that American men devote to it, and therefore, that radicals need to find ways of directing all that energy into more politically constructive channels.

Although I agree that the routinization of labor, the erosion of community life, and changes in male/female relationships are important forces shaping the development of sports in the U.S., I do not think that sports serve the politically repressive function Rosenblum attributes to them.

First of all, I have never seen any evidence that shows that athletes or sports fans are less politically active or aware than the rest of the citizenry.

The widespread participation of college and professional athletes in the protest movements of the '60s certainly suggests that sports are not the opiate some intellectuals make it out to be and that the "dumb jocks" are not always so dumb after all.

Secondly, I feel that Rosenblum presents a very one-sided explanation of popular enthusiasm for sport. Certainly, sports play an important role in male socialization in the U.S., and are used, upon occasion, to rouse nationalist feeling, but that's not the only, or even the primary reason why people like them.

Sports are one of the main creative outlets available to people in advanced industrial societies, an activity in which they can display artistry and ingenuity in a collective setting and win recognition for their skills. From childhood on, the ball field is a place where many people are a lot freer to express themselves than in their homes, schools and work places and this experience (for those who have it) can create powerful positive feelings that last a lifetime.

In addition, Rosenblum fails to take into account the genuine aesthetic appeal of athletic events to spectators. A twisting dismount by Nadia Comaneci, a slam dunk by Julius Erving, a leaping catch by Lynn Swann, the total strategic unity of a tennis match played by Chris Evert or Billie Jean King, provide images of dexterity, grace and mental discipline that are unexcelled in any of the cultural activities that intellectuals have defined as "high art." The millions of people who cherish these moments are no less sensitive or discerning in their judgments than followers of the ballet, modern dance, theater or poetry.

Rosenblum's picture of the sports fan as hypnotized and stupefied by the spectacle, in my view, shows considerable condescension and a trace of class prejudice.

As Rosenblum implies, the most vociferous sports fans in the country are working class men, and their banter, in the locker room and in the bar, is often filled with sexist comments and ethnic slurs. But in their analysis of the events on the field, they often display great subtlety, technical knowledge, and appreciation of beauty and excellence. On occasion, they transcend their prejudices and express admiration for a woman or an ethnic rival when their performance commands respect.

Such people should not be romanticized—indeed, they may have to be sharply confronted on their sexism in struggles to get women into Little Leagues or to win equal funding for women in school and community sports programs—but their attachment to sports should be viewed in its full complexity and not explained away with compensation theories.

Life-affirming possibilities.

The difference in the way Rosenblum and I see sports does have strategic implications. Although I would be the last one to try to minimize the role sports play in this country in perpetuating rigid and repressive definitions of male-female identity, I think it's more useful to fight to break down barriers to athletic participation for women than it is to try to get men to devote their attention to more "constructive" endeavors.

Women are working so hard to get into sports because they recognize that there is something worthwhile in it that's been denied them, not because they seek to escape their political responsibilities or ease the pain of daily life.

I think it's time for the left to recognize the life-affirming potentialities of sport as well as its negative dimensions and to show respect for the feelings of those involved in it.

If we do that, our efforts to reform American sports will be on much firmer ground and win far greater support. Many athletes and sports fans are quite open to criticism of specific aspects of sports in this country—exclusion of women, discrimination against blacks, excessive commercialism and violence—if it is rooted in a love of the game.

But if you denounce the entire experience as corrupt, you threaten one of their greatest sources of joy and satisfaction and implying that they must be stupid to devote so much time to such a degraded activity. That's an excellent way to turn people against you and discredit your proposals for reform.

The democratization of American sports still lies ahead of us. It would be a pity if we fail to achieve it because of a sectarian outlook and a lack of confidence in those whose support we need.

—Mark Naison

An art form impermanent

This morning at dawn I ran for miles over the hills of my childhood and fished and swam in the lake where I first practiced these ancient skills. This evening I will share a radio, some beers, and a ball

game with my brother-in-law. He is a carpenter at the shipyard and takes his baseball seriously. As the Red Sox go for 12 in a row we will sit in loving judgment.

In this brief interlude the world asserted by Simon Rosenblum seems unreal.

Except: last night I went to town and saw *Slap Shot*. One motif of the film shows the fans of an artless minor league hockey club quickly reduced to a degraded mob when their no-talent team goes bullyboy and starts winning. The worst left-critical clichés about sport and sports fans! Unfortunately, the audience in the Main theater shared the film's confusion. Local folks, summer people and casual tourists alike were delighted *both* by the caricature of the rabid fans *and* by the on-ice cheap shots that set them frothing.

Which part of my day was most representative of what our sports now do for us and to us: my own solitary devotions, or the ceremony of the Red Sox broadcast, or the movie patrons mirroring, even to the very yelps and curses, the debased fans in *Slap Shot*?

Who knows? I don't. Thus I'm encouraged when a socialist newspaper initiates a serious discussion of the mass psychology of sport. I side with Mark Naison in the exchange. For all that sport as regimentation and commodity may do to reinforce the barbarities of capitalist culture, surely Simon Rosenblum's assertions are suspect.

In his vision, the representative American sports fan is a working class male who, alienated from work, family and his own sexuality, seeks surrogate satisfactions as one of the automatized herd rooting for the home team. My brother-in-law, my weightroom buddies in Detroit, and the wonderful women of Section 37/Tiger Stadium would all be surprised by this news.

Naison makes an essential point often missed by an alienated and isolated American left: millions prize sport for aesthetic joy. Our games can be an impermanent art, rich in variety and surprise, an opportunity for innovation and creation. Played by the best, our sports become the jazz of bodily expression.

Unless we see and share this we can hardly begin the tasks of analysis, critique, exemplary intervention and organization which will someday bring forth a movement for a people's sport.

—Jack Russell

Sports Quiz "The Ethnic Factor"

By Mark Naison and Fred Siegel

- Two of the greatest pro football fullbacks of all time were of Eastern European ancestry, one Polish and one Hungarian. Who were they?
- Name three Jewish-Americans who fought Joe Louis for the heavyweight championship.
- Which two Latin-American baseball players from the 1960s and '70s had fathers who were famous athletes in the 1930s and '40s?
- At various times, Jewish-Americans held professional boxing titles in the following divisions: lightweight, middleweight, light heavyweight, and heavyweight. Who were the titleholders in those divisions?
- Who was the greatest Polish-American baseball player of all time?
- Name two contemporary major league baseball players who are of American Indian ancestry.
- Name five baseball players of Italian-American ancestry who came from Brooklyn.
- Name three Latin-American tennis players who attended American universities and dominated American tennis in the late '50s and early '60s.
- A German-American woman was the first woman to ever swim the English Channel. Who was she?
- In the 1936 Olympics two Jewish-American members of the American 400-meter relay team were replaced at the last minute as a gesture to Adolph Hitler. Who were they?
- Name two pro-football quarterbacks of the 1960s and '70s who were of Mexican-American descent.
- Name two great athletes, one in baseball, one in football, who were of mixed Italian and Afro-American parentage.
- What Norwegian-American woman was considered the greatest female athlete of the 20th century?
- A black American, considered the greatest shortstop of all time, consistently outthit Ty Cobb in their encounters in the Cuban winter leagues. Who was he?

ANSWERS: 1. Bronko Nagurski, Polish; Larry Csonka, Hungarian; 2. Max Baer, Buddy Baer, and Abe Simon; 3. Willie Montañez, whose father was a boxer, and Orlando Cepeda, whose father was a baseball player; 4. Lightweight: Abe Attell and Benny Leonard; Middleweight: Barney Ross; Light Heavyweight: Maxie Rosenbloom; Heavyweight: Max Baer; 5. Stan Musial; 6. Johnny Bench and Buckey Dent; 7. Phil Rizzuto, Joe Torre, Frank Torre, Joe Pepitone, and Lee Mazzilli; 8. Alex Omede, Peru; Pancho Segura, Ecuador; Rafael Oquendo, Mexico; 9. Gentile Edente; 10. Martylickman and Sam Stoller; 11. Joe Kapp and Jim Plunkett; 12. Roy Campanella and Franco Harris; 13. Mildred "Babe" Didrikson; 14. John Henry Lloyd.

ART <>> ENTERTAINMENT

TELEVISION



The cast of *San Pedro Beach Bums*, including Christoff St. John, Lisa Reeves, Louise Hoven and others too numerous to mention.

Fall season TV falls short of expectations

If I had to choose between sex and violence, I'd choose sex every time. That's why I awaited with interest the new fall TV season, which had been touted as a retreat from the excessive violence that brought the wrath of so many citizens' groups down on the industry.

"Good for the media," I thought. After all, violence is about death while sex is—or should be—about life. Also sex is—or should be—about human relationships, both personal and political. It's a subject that lends itself to explorations of the changing roles of men and women and the wider range of choice we all have about how to live, with whom and on what terms.

That's what I thought.

But a review of the new season's openers punctured my optimism. This is the worst and most boring fall season I can remember.

Anyone who thinks the prime time shows are about sex may be tempted to become celibate. The Sexual Liberation League can relax. Most of the new shows—even those whose primary subject matter is "coupling"—aren't about sex at all. Sex is simply a vehicle for the expression of some common and quite reactionary social attitudes.

In both form and content most of the new shows represent a retreat from the realities of American life, follow very old formats and present very old models of social and personal relationships. *Love Boat* and *San Pedro Beach Bums*, to pick two examples, seem to be written by people who have been in a coma since 1958 and are resuming their lives as if nothing had happened since.

The setting of *Love Boat* is a luxury cruise ship. The plots re-

volve around the romantic goings-on of the passengers, most of whom are frantically trying to get together or back together. *Beach Bums* is downright offensive. It stars five young men whose sole activity is "getting girls." The first episode involved these red-blooded males' effort to keep the local beauty pageant going despite the threat of a pull-out by its financial backer. In *San Pedro* beauty pageants are not dated or deplorably sexist; they are the cultural event of the year.

And then there is *Soap*, the most controversial of the new shows, which is supposed to be a prime-time version of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman*. That

doesn't make it interesting or relevant. For unlike *Mary Hartman*, which placed its sexual material in the context of a working class community, *Soap* is a series of sexual one-liners, delivered by a crew of characters each of whom seems more shallow and less appealing than the last.

Sometimes the one-liners are funny. But Archie and Edith Bunker are funny too. And if you tune in *All in the Family* after watching *Soap*, you might get the impression that it's a profound work of art. After all, it does have complex characters dealing with serious issues.

Superficiality of character and theme is a problem not only in the new "sex" shows, but on virtually every new show from drama to adventure. I never thought I'd get nostalgic for *Police Story* or *Medical Center*, but watching *Chips* and *Rafferty* brought it on. At least the old shows tried to develop human personalities and experiences, even if they did it in a corny, melodramatic style.

The new ones determinedly avoid any serious dramatic material or themes. They keep jumping from incident to incident at such a pace that it's impossible to remember, much less relate to any single story line.

Chips involves two thoroughly adolescent motorcycle cops, who rush from crime to crime with an excess of noise, disaster and flamboyant chatter that leaves you with a headache.

Rafferty moves from one medical crisis to another in an equivalent flurry of noise, excitement and sensationalism. The main character is an inhuman boor, but he never stands still long enough to call attention to that. He's a moving target that no emotion—even contempt or anger—can zero in on.

It seems as if the networks have decided to get around the problem of violence on TV by replacing "realistic" (i.e. graphically) violent crime shows like *Kojak* with a bunch of action-oriented, simple-minded, escapist fantasies, in which sex (as represented by the *Playboy* center-fold subjects) replaces blood and gore as the "draw."

It also seems that the programming for this new season represents a backlash against progressive trends that have characterized prime-time commercial TV in the last few years. Shows like *All in the Family*, *One Day at a Time*, *Good Times* and *Maude*—(the list is surprisingly long!) did a lot to popularize progressive attitudes toward race, sexual minorities, working people and women.

If all that is being scrapped in favor of outdated or escapist fare, it can only mean that the networks are running scared and trying to shove a lot of garbage down our throats.

Fortunately the audience is not holding still for it. Already several of the new crop of shows have been cancelled due to poor ratings and universally bad reviews.

If the network heavies don't watch out, they're going to find themselves without an audience.

—Elayne Rapping

Elayne Rapping is a teacher in Pittsburgh and reviews TV for *IN THESE TIMES*.



Gavin MacLeod and Lauren Tewes in *The Love Boat*.

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