

Book Reviews

John Feinstein, *A Civil War: A Year inside Football's Purest Rivalry*. Boston: Little Brown & Company, 1996. ix + 412pp. US\$24.95, C\$33.95.

In his renowned book, *The Hero: A Study of Tradition, Myth, and Drama*, Lord Raglan distinguished between two kinds of truth, dramatic truth and historical, the difference essentially between Shakespeare's Richard III and the one who actually occupied the English throne. Raglan goes on to say that most people are primarily interested in the former kind of truth, leaving details to professional historians. *A Civil War: A Year Inside College Football's Purest Rivalry* by John Feinstein is a pure example of dramatic truth. This does not mean that Feinstein disdains facts and statistics; what it does mean is that he uses them to serve the story of an American spectacle, the Army-Navy Game that in 1999 reached its 100th birthday.

Feinstein's focus is on the game for 1995, and the season for both teams that led up to it. The jacket describes all that was at stake for both sides:

For Navy it was a must win year. The cadets had beaten the Midshipmen three straight years, each time in a heartbreaking fashion, and for the entire senior class the Army game would be a last chance at redemption. Army had its own troubles: a beloved coach was in danger of losing his job, and the team leaders were determined to finish their careers with a winning season and a bowl-game invitation.

There are twenty chapters, all imaginatively titled, an introduction and an epilogue, which deal in depth with every game of a season crucial for both teams in their efforts to regain respectability on the gridiron. One might say that this is a drama of eleven acts (the games) with twenty scenes, the players and coaches the *dramatis personae*.

Engaging in a type of instant replay in print – first used on television incidentally in the Army-Navy game of 1963 – Feinstein achieves a Sophoclean sense of irony in his verbal recasting of that season, that is, we know what is going to happen in each game, especially those who follow Army and Navy, but the players on both sides in Feinstein's book do not know what is in store for them, at least this is the illusion Feinstein skillfully manages to create. In Aristotelian terms we know about the *anagnorisis* (discovery of the plot) even before picking up the book. What holds the interest is the element of *dianoia*, that is meaning. One thing is always clear in this struggle. The contestants in what for decades before the Super Bowl was known as

'America's Biggest Show' are not seeking pleasure but meaning which in the heroic tradition can only come through the pursuit of honor, glory and victory.

Thus what emerges is a remarkable story of young men heroically contending with their fates, both on the field and off, and trials off the field are many, everything from a rigorous academic subjects that players in many other schools cannot imagine: for instance, twenty-three hours in engineering curriculum, to a military regimen run by lords of discipline. When the cheating scandal broke at the military academy in 1951, one sports writer said with sympathy for the 95 players involved that the military academy required of its football players a schedule that could not be handled in a twenty-four hour day by a combination of Paul Bunyan and Sir Galahad, one of the knightly models also enshrined at Annapolis, along with John Paul Jones. Though in recent years demands by the executive departments at both schools may have been relaxed to some extent and curriculum widened to allow for a diversity of majors, the daily rigors are pretty much the same as always, judging from Feinstein's accounts.

One of the strongest features of *A Civil War* is Feinstein's treatment of the players, for instance Jim Cantelupe, spirited and talented defensive captain of the Army team, and Ryan Bucchianeri, the Navy field goal kicker who missed two field goals in two separate losses to Army and who heroically endured the consequences that followed at the Naval Academy. These are major players in the drama as are other teammates and the coaches, Bob Sutton of Army and Charlie Weatherbie of Navy, one of the most devout coaches one is apt to read about in the annals of muscular Christianity.

One aspect of academy life that Feinstein brings to light is what has long been known among academy football players, that in spite of Corps and Brigade enthusiasm visible over television at the Army-Navy game, there is not the universal and unflinching support of the football teams that one might suspect on the Post at West Point or in the Yard at Annapolis. Instead football players are sometimes looked upon with suspicion or even resentment by other members of the Brigade and Corps over what is viewed as perks for the football teams, e.g. special scheduling and special tutoring, though extra instruction is available to all. The players in turn feel that any attention they receive from the administration of the academies is minor compensation for all else with which they have to contend.

Still football is king of sports at both academies. For instance, at Annapolis in addition to the varsity, there is Lightweight Football (up to 159 pounds), junior varsity, and plebe football. Further, each of the battalions, at least six in number, has a suited squad team and every company a team in touch football. Of all sports at the academies, football is the closest parallel to war. Hence the historical and ongoing use of the football-war metaphor at both Annapolis and West Point and the reason in part for Feinstein's title *A Civil War*. Army and Navy play each other in every sport, but no other carries the

significance of the annual football game. Their influence on the sport has been significant nationwide, especially that of the Military Academy considering its role in the crisis of 1905 over the debate to ban football and in the development of coaches who have worked at West Point, Vince Lombardi, among others.

The football-war metaphor provides a clue to the dilemma faced by leaders at both schools, who, one can be sure, subscribe to MacArthur's dictum that there is 'no substitute for victory' in either sports or war, yet how does winning in football against college teams often loaded with talent good enough or soon good enough for the professional leagues? You do not, as Feinstein illustrates with his insightful commentary on of the longest 'rivalry' in college football between Navy and Notre Dame, though in 1995 Army almost pulled a major upset against Notre Dame. With Notre Dame and Navy the word 'rivalry' no longer applies as the 38 consecutive losses by Navy well illustrates. If this game is removed from the schedule of the teams, however, we immediately acknowledge the commercial aspect of collegiate athletics that the Army-Navy Tradition strives to deny yet participates in to remain part of the mainstream of American college football.

Much of the interest of Feinstein's book grows out of his detailed narration of games of the academies with teams representing various levels of competition, Bucknell, Delaware, Lehigh (Level 3), Tulane, Duke and Rice (Level Two), and Notre Dame, Washington, and Tennessee (Level 1), which Army had actually beaten a few years before. Ironically, Level I competition would also include the Air Force Academy that regularly defeats the older academies and maintains what appears to be permanent possession of the CIC (Commander in Chief) Trophy. Feinstein offers a number of opinions on the dominance of the Air Force Academy over the older schools but no satisfactory explanation, if there is one.

For the most part Feinstein's tone is one of admiration of the academies, but he does not hesitate to point to the several flaws of the human institutions, scandals of one kind or another and the attitude sometimes expressed by some at the Naval Academy by the initials 'IHTPP' ('I Hate this Fucking Place'). There is no controversy or scandal without ideals and no places proclaim knightly ideals so visibly as the academies, the ideals of all-roundness (sound mind in a sound body) and the ideal of an officer and a gentleman. Feinstein thinks that the hyperbole of Brent Musberger in the 1993 broadcast of the Army-Navy Game was on target when Musberger said: 'There is no bowl game at stake here. There is no coalition poll, no number one ranking. No Heisman trophy is at stake either. This is bigger than all that'.

Of all institutions in America probably none has connections so strong with the old world traditions as West Point and Annapolis. In both places the idea of the Guardian Class articulated in Plato's *Republic* is permanently esteemed. The rationale for both institutions is justified by one line from Plato quoted by McArthur in his famous last speech to the Corps, 'Only the dead

have seen the end of war'. Hence the perpetual need, by this line of thinking, of a permanent warrior class with a belief, in McArthur's view, that there is 'no substitute for victory'. Unfortunately, in a commercial society where winning ball games is 'the only thing', the credo of MacArthur comes under severe strain so that losing ball games has become part of the habit of the service academies owing to the superior talent that flocks to other schools without military commitments, without military regimen (at least off the field) and without the same kind of academic standards. At the service academies, as Feinstein remarks, players must be able to read and write, take physical education, and do a lot of marching and early rising, every day.

Since their primary mission, at least traditionally, is to produce professional warriors, probably no schools revere more the idea of winning than the service academies. 'Beat Army' and 'Beat Navy' reverberate throughout the Post at West Point and the Yard at Annapolis not just before the big game but throughout the year. The last places in the country where sports would ever be regarded as the 'Toy Department' are the academies. Instead an unwritten maxim is 'every man an athlete' which includes female Cadets and Midshipmen too of course. So what, one argument runs, if the Academies are all too often going up against heavy odds in most Division I games. That is the way combat is, at least from the point of view of the individual soldier and sailor. Many would say that that is the way life is too for every individual.

Academy officials, according to Feinstein, say that 'winning (in football) is important but not of paramount importance'. Having been an observer of sports at the academies for many years, having played some for Navy before a permanent injury, and having been one of two goatkeepers for Navy's 'Team Named Desire', I find it difficult to agree with this completely. Like other schools in Division I or any other division as far as that goes, Army and Navy fire their coaches when they do not produce as expected. In 1995 Bob Sutton was in danger of losing his job throughout the season as Feinstein narrates so well but saved himself with a victory over Navy.

In 1999, though, the axe fell following a loss to Navy and coach Charlie Weatherbie. In making the announcement of the change, LTG Daniel W. Christman, Superintendent of the Academy, had this to say to Military Academy alumni and friends via email, a message obtained by 'Navy intelligence':

Despite Bob's commitment and passion, we felt that a change in leadership in the football program was needed if we were to take army football to the next level of competitive success. Believe me, in the highly intense world of Division I athletics, this is no easy task. . . . As you have heard me say before, sports provide a 'window' to the American people through which to view this treasure we call West Point.

Feinstein's book is a clear window on the 'window' both at Annapolis and West Point. What makes more sense as a philosophy of competition for the academies, judging from the realities that Feinstein shows so well through his book, would be something like this; 'In sports winning is important but not as important as what Grantland Rice called "the Uphill Heart"'.

It is not an easy task for any school to compete in Division I athletics but doubly hard for the military academies, which are the same as other schools but very different in mission and in several other aspects. For Army and Navy, one cannot keep from wondering how gratuitous the difficulties might be and what saner, yet still heroic paths, might be open to them, or for that matter their civilian competitors as well. Feinstein does not speculate on what changes might be desirable. As good reporters should, he narrates what he sees and most of all he makes us genuinely care for those he writes about, all 'winners', as Feinstein says, regardless of the score in the final game.

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Charles K. Ross, *Outside The Lines: African Americans and the integration of the National Football League*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1999. ix + 201pp. Index. US\$35.00 hb.

Jackie Robinson and the integration of organised baseball is undoubtedly one of the most thoroughly discussed and popular subjects in American sports history. The Robinson saga is a story of courage and heroics, both on his part and Brooklyn Dodgers co-owner Branch Rickey. Even individuals with limited knowledge of baseball history can vividly recreate details of Robinson's signing with the Dodgers.

While there have been several books written about the Robinson legend, the integration of professional football after World War II has been virtually ignored. Charles Ross attempts to fill this void. Ross, a professor of Afro-American studies and history, traces the plight of black professional football players from 1904 to 1962. Within this context of the black experience in professional football several themes emerged that included how and why blacks participated in small numbers until 1933, the drawing of the color line, the impact of rival leagues upon integration, and the economic incentives that occurred as a result of signing black players. Further, Ross argues that since the playing fields of America were integrated years before the Supreme Court reversed itself in 1954, sports, in many ways, set the tone for the nation to begin integration off the field.