

## BOOK REVIEWS

Betts, John Rickards. *America's Sporting Heritage: 1850-1950*  
(Reading: Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1974)

This is, indeed, a fitting epitaph to the late John Betts. It is a synthesis of his many contributions to the field of sport history which will stand to attest to his broadness of vision and dedication to a segment of history that, throughout his lifetime, was divorced from the mainstream of historical scholarship. The fact that Betts was a professional historian and thus only incidentally interested in sport history, may account for the one or two minor criticisms which may be levelled at the book. Most important of these is an apparent lack of knowledge of research completed after 1954; this thus eliminates many valuable sources, such as Voigt and Seymour's first volumes on the history of baseball, Lewis's writings on intercollegiate sport, and Van Dalen and Bennett's section on American physical education. This, plus some rather poorly constructed paragraphs, due no doubt to the fact that at the time of his death, Betts had not completed the final draft, are the only grounds upon which the scholarship and writing can be criticized. His use of source material, footnoting and basic scholarship are impeccable, while his writing paints a vivid and lively picture of America's sporting heritage-sound scholarship and lively, stimulating reading.

Betts makes it quite clear as to what he was trying to achieve.

"It is the purpose of this study to describe the ways in which sports in America have been influenced by historical development and how sports in turn have penetrated our language, literature, arts, educational philosophy, city planning, and other facets of American civilization." (Preface: vi)

He attempts to achieve this in two ways; first, by dividing the time period into two major eras-

Part I Rise of Class Sports, 1850-1920, p. 5-246

Part II Rise of Mass Sport, 1920-1950, p. 250-368 and secondly, by

focusing in some chapters primarily on the history of sports per se (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 9, 10) and in others on the relationship between sport and various societal institutions (Chapters 3, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13). The result of this is a distinct unevenness in both writing and depth of insights. It would appear to this reviewer that Betts was far more comfortable writing about the relationship between sport and societal variables than on sport per se. This is particularly evident in Chapters 9 and 10 on "Fabulous and tragic years, 1920-1935" and "Recovery, war and peace," where the presentation is superficial and the analysis tacking the depth of insight and thought that is evident throughout other parts of the book.

It is in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11 and 12 that Betts provides some of the finest examples of American sport history yet written. These

chapters are not homogeneous; they reflect different aspects of and approaches to the writing of history. Chapter 3 "Sporting Journalism and the Technological Revolution" is perhaps the best example of straight historical writing in the book; it traces most clearly the development of sporting journalism and its impact upon the sport world. In terms of history of sport per se the most clearly developed and presented history is contained in Chapters 4 and 5 in which Betts traces most clearly the growth of sport in the period 1860-1920. However, to a reviewer with this writer's bias it is in Chapters 7, 8, 11 and 12 that the most valuable and distinct portions of the book are to be found. In Chapter 8, "Social and Cultural Implications, 1860-1920," Chapter 11, "Business, Industry and the Economic Scene," and Chapter 12, "Social democracy and the playing fields," Betts touches, lightly but with penetrating insight, a number of societal variables which either affect or were effected by sport, these include private enterprise, law, education, women, business and others. None of these topics is covered in any depth, but the insights provide a provocative starting point for discussion and further study. Chapter 13 on "Education, Religion and the Arts" falls into the same vein but is perceptually and analytically inferior to the others. For example, a topic such as "The Churches Sponsor Sport" is covered in a cursory fashion in less than one page and thus there is little time or space to achieve anything worthwhile.

I have deliberately left until the end a consideration of the chapter which contains the heart of Betts work, and provides the thread that gives an overall unity to the whole book. Central to all the changes analyzed so clearly, is the process of urbanization. While the frontier, climatic and physical conditions and ethnic origin provide the basis of differences to be found in American life and society; urbanization has been the process that has brought unity and commonality to American sport and society. The growth of organized sport, so clearly portrayed in this book, was essentially an urban creation and in Chapter 7 "Urbanization and Democratization" Betts achieves a clear and vivid analysis of this most complex process. He achieves the nearly impossible task of making a bewildering complexity understandable without losing the sense of perplexity and turmoil which were so much a part of the adaptation to urban life. The important and sometimes vital role that sport played in the painful adjustment to city life and the solution of urban problems, is clearly illustrated and documented.

This is an outstanding contribution to sport history and amply achieves editor John Loy's claim that it reflects "a unique blend of breadth of perspective and depth of insight afforded by no other historical account of American sport" (Editor's Foreword, iv). It is indeed a magnificent and lasting tribute to the scholarship and professional dedication of John Rickards Betts.

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