

BOOK REVIEWS

Michener, James A., *Sports In America*, (Random House, New York, 1976).

"The King is dead! Long live the King!" Indeed, the King is dead, at least until his next opus. Can this be the same author that captivated us with *Tales of the South Pacific*, *The Voice of Asia*, but more particularly with such as *Hawaii*, *The Source* and *Centennial*. perhaps his finest works? Sometimes you have it, sometimes you don't, and one of the greatest living authors, in baseball parlance, "struck out"; in cricket terminology "he was caught in the covers making an ineffectual stroke".

But the death bell tolled before the book ever got underway. As Michener put it:

"THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO THREE MEN WHO
HELPED ME UNDERSTAND AMERICAN SPORTS . . .
ED PISZEK, owner of the Philadelphia
Firebirds hockey team
JOE ROBBIE, managing director of the
Miami Dolphins football team
ROBIN ROBERTS, of baseball's Hall of Fame".

Alas and alack! Ed Piszek, Joe Robbie, Robin Roberts? Ugh! Not John Betts, Guy Lewis, Ron Smith, John Lucas? Piszek, Robbie and Roberts! And the Philadelphia Firebirds? Who in heaven's name has ever heard of the Philadelphia Firebirds? The die was unfortunately cast early. The careful, meticulous research involved in *Centennial* and *Hawaii* was not in evidence, though in fairness the author does cite a number of articles and books utilized.

But what are basically presented are the confessions of a "super-jock". As Michener said, "This book was written by a man who loves sports", and he reflects that twice in his lifetime sports have made the difference between life and death to him. When he was very young and "from poor surroundings" he was rescued from the possibility of a reformatory by a local roofer and coach, and his exposure to sports kept him from getting into trouble. His mind goes back to those days, like our own minds too often slip back into our few athletic successes-the day we beat Podunk High by a devastating shot, the tackle that saved the game. And so James Michener went to Swarthmore on an athletic scholarship, and a new world opened up for him. The second event that linked his life with sport was a "massive coronary infarction" in 1965, and his recovery, using a combination of diet, running but particularly

tennis, had a marked effect on this thinking.

It is somewhat embarrassing reading these personal confessions, but at least the book is an honest book, the true confessions, beliefs and opinions of an honest super-jock. Much of what he says makes common sense, but it is simply that it has all been said before, by so many others. Perhaps the book is a fine contribution for Mr. Average America, but for the well-read physical educator and student there is little new and that is its failure. Perhaps as professionals we hear it so much we accept it—Michener repeats the truisms we accept and read and talk about daily. His three basic criteria, for example, are: (I) Sports should be fun for the participant. (II) Sports should enhance the health of both the individual participant and the general society. (III) Sports have an obligation to provide public entertainment.

The work is divided up into thirteen parts: basic principles, ways of participating, sports and health, children and sports, women in sports, sports and upward escalation, colleges and universities, the athlete, the inescapable problem, the media, financing, government control, competition and violence.

The confessional in the first chapter and the case studies utilized in the second chapter are the weakest part of the book, and a disastrous start from which the book never completely recovers. We hear of Herman Fly, "super spectator"; the Pole, "super bettor"; Artemius Crandall, "super football player"; Morgan Forsythe, "super golfer"; and so on. It is tough to win back the true student of sport in American life after that, but the book incredibly does improve somewhat. The chapter on sports and upward escalation provides keen insight into the problems facing many black athletes in particular; the chapter on government control is also a fine contribution.

But unfortunately Michener misses the mark. It is no threat to our literature, and as sport historians we can breathe a sigh of relief. For with the money and time at his disposal, and his obvious interest in sport, Michener had a unique opportunity to produce a work that would have had us shaking in our shoes. If he had followed his more normal method of writing, taking specific time periods and doing in depth work on those cross-sectional selections, he could have produced a definitive work on the role and relevance of sport in America. This is how he captivated *us* in *Hawaii* and *Centennial* and *The Source*. He could have achieved in depth historical analyses that would have been astonishing, and frighteningly accurate, as only he can do. He has a rare ability utilizing that cross-sectional approach.

We can all rest easy. Michener "missed the boat", when he had it in his grasp. He "fumbled the ball". John Betts can rest easy, as can Guy Lewis, Ron Smith, John Lucas and other ad-

venturous scholars who wish to attempt the definitive work on sport in America. The ball game, as they say, is not over. The North American Society for Sport History has due cause to continue its efforts.

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