

Book Reviews

A man will turn over half a library to make one book.
Samuel Johnson

Novak, Michael. *The Joy of Sports: End Zones, Bases, Baskets, Balls, and the Consecration of the American Spirit*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1976, Harper Colophon Books, 1977. Pp. XVI, 357. Bibliography, index, illus., \$4.95.

There are a few ideas about sport which most people recognize but which have seldom been examined from a scholarly perspective. There is some kind of connection between sport and religion. For many people the enjoyment in sport is found in watching sport. Television promoters have capitalized on the popularity of sport. Ball games are at the heart of sport. In the United States there are three sports which really count—football, basketball, and baseball.

Michael Novak has used these ideas, among others, to develop a most interesting treatise about sport. Quite obviously, his major intent is to explicate the relationship between sport and religion. Although he definitely sees sport as being a form of religion, he also wishes to make it clear that sport should not be confused with the traditional forms of religion. Sport is a secular religion. As such, it shares many common denominators with the recognized forms of religion. He states: "Going to a stadium is half like going to a political rally, half like going to church." (p. 19).

The author loves sports. He wishes to account for that love. Novak is not satisfied to merely accept sport for what it is on the surface. He wishes to probe the deeper meaning of sport for the true sports fan. In that regard, he carefully distinguishes between a spectator and a fan. A spectator is one who merely watches a sporting event for whatever reason that may be, but a fan is one who really cares. The idea of rooting is inextricably related to being a fan. Novak is a fan. Therefore, he examines sport from the perspective of the fan.

As the favorite sports for many American fans, baseball, football, and basketball are analyzed in great detail. Novak postulates a special form

of attraction for each of these sports. Although he obviously identifies with all three, one is left with the impression that baseball is his favorite. "Baseball is unlike football or basketball in not being governed by a clock. . . It is part of the brilliant fairness of the game. You must, in the end, defeat yourself, use up in vain your own equal chances." (p. 68)

Although Novak is in love with sports, he is not completely blinded by that love. In his opinion there is much within sport which is in need of change. For that reason he concludes with his list of "Burkean" reforms. The word "Burkean" is carefully chosen. He begins with the thought that the institutions in sport should not be destroyed. The foundation must be preserved.

Basically, he is asking for realistic changes to improve that which is substantially sound. In this regard, Novak's work stands in sharp relief to that of the sport critics who have been attacking the very fiber of sport during the past ten years.

The Joy of Sports is far from being a complete philosophical account of sport. However, there is no reason to believe that was the intent. The focus is on what sport involvement means for the fan. There is relatively little in the book which accounts for the weekend golfer, the Tuesday night bowler, or the boy or girl who is trying out for the high school athletic team. Whatever is found in that regard tends to be fairly incidental to Novak's central thrust.

Most of all, Michael Novak's treatise on sport has to be respected for the truth which it represents. From every indication, the author is extremely honest in his approach. There may be those who would criticize Novak for being a biased observer because he is clearly an avid sport fan. He might also be criticized for being so American in his thinking. The book is almost void of any attempt to provide an international understanding of sport. Nevertheless, these limitations may also represent the greatest strength in the work. He recognizes that many Americans are extremely provincial in their thinking about sport. Consequently, he attempts to provide an account which will probe the basis for such thinking.

At one point he writes: "Most men and women don't separate the sections of their mind. They honor their country, go to church, and also enjoy sports. All parts of their lives mold together." (p. 19) Even though it seems apparent that many people don't go to church as frequently as they did at one time, Novak is probably right on target in saying that all parts of their lives mold together. What is it about sport which can cause

people to get so involved with it while giving little thought to the basis for acceptance? That question lies at the heart of Novak's inquiry.

The answer is largely found in the "seven seals" which "lock the inner life of sports." (p. 121) These are sacred space, sacred time, bond of brothers, rooting, agon, competing, and self-discovery. It must be recognized that Novak is by no means the first person to analyze the significance of any one of these seven factors in sport. Each one has been treated rather extensively in various segments of sport theory literature. Nevertheless, he pulls the seven seals together in a meaningful way. At the same time, he makes his case for the understanding of sport as a secular religion.

Much like Paul Weiss in *Sport: A Philosophy Inquiry*, Novak has presented a work which provides a basis for further thought. He will probably be criticized in many quarters as being too narrow in his approach. On the other hand, an avid American sports fan can appreciate what he has done. In any case, the promotional staff in the offices of Pete Rozelle, Bowie Kuhn, and Larry O'Brien would do well to read the book, assuming they may have an interest in perpetuating the status of the American trinity in sport.

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