

Beisser, Arnold, *The Madness in Sports*. 2nd. ed., Bowie, Maryland, The Charles Press Publishers, 1977. Pp. 207. \$6.95.

“Something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue,” is an apt description of Arnold Beisser’s second edition of *The Madness in Sports*. It is appropriate even though the adage generally refers to women and this is definitely a book about men and their masculinity.

Although citing a need to understand the numerous changes in sport since 1967 (p. ix), the date of the first edition, nearly three-fourths of the sequel is old material from the original. Sections on The Paradox of Sports, The American Seasonal Masculinity Rites and six of seven case histories of psychologically troubled athletes are repeated. Moreover, sections dealing with Sport as Ritual, The Purpose of Sports and The Psychology of Winning are reworked versions of the earlier work.

New are a case study of a female tennis player who feared for her femininity and a chapter on fans and violence. Given the tremendous growth of women’s sports, it is significant that this change is covered with a single case report. All other mentions of women are either as wives or mothers. Yet, it is not surprising if one accepts Beisser’s notion that sport is one area the male is still supreme.

Borrowed can be another label for material from the 1967 version, but it also characterizes most of the psychological interpretation provided to explain sport. Beisser is obviously an advocate of the Freudian school of personality and references to conflicts between the id, ego, and super ego and between father, son, mother and daughter are everywhere. For example, Ken’s inability to win long tennis matches is explained in part by:

There was no place in the home for spankings or other severe punishment... Yet, at home the rivalry for Mother’s favor was intense. (p.56).

In his discussion of a winning vs a sportsmanship attitude in sport, Beisser concluded:

There is conflict between the naked desire to win and good sportsmanship . . . the essential conflict in man is selfishness and altruism, 'I' and 'We' . . . If we insist that winning is the only thing, this human concern for others will appear in less obvious ways; if we insist that winning doesn't matter, but only how you play, then the killer instinct will emerge in some hidden form. (p.153).

And later, accounting for the difficulty some athletes have in winning, Beisser offers the classic:

To the adult male, certain successes are symbolic of the achievement of unconscious wishes representing the anachronistic displacement of his father and the sexual possession of his mother—the Oedipus complex. (p.176).

Blue is for the emphasis on the abnormal, the madness, the conflict, all consistent with the Freudian death wish which sets the pessimistic tone of the book. Beisser, a Freudian psychiatrist, devoted more than one-half the book—118 pages—to case histories of athletes with psychological problems, an emphasis on the abnormal which dominates the impression of sports he presents. Although never informed whether the cases are the exceptions or the rule, the reader is told: "It is not my aim to uphold or dispel the amount of health or disorder among athletes, but to comment on the psychosocial uses made of sports." (p. 134). A closer look suggests the causes of these problems—as interpreted by Beisser himself—do not appear unique to sport, but are merely stories about athletes who also have mental problems. Nonetheless the tone has been set.

The concern for the abnormal resurrects the criticism directed toward the common research practice of using personality tests such as the MMPI which were designed to identify neurotics and psychotics to compare groups of normals, e.g., athletes vs nonathletes, teachers vs coaches or swimmers vs football players. The tests were not intended for such use.

The negative mood is continued in the second (final) section, the Psychosocial Meanings of Sport, with his frequent comparisons of the similarities between American society and conditions in Ancient Rome and his conclusion that our emphasis on winning may be the bottom line of American pragmatism, i.e., the ends do justify the means. In addition, he is critical of our system of specialization for forcing participants to become spectators who in turn have been alienated from their teams. In an effort to become involved they are invading the field, attacking both teams and the officials. Finally, there are the numerous lamentations about the blurring of sex role differences.

Whatever the weaknesses in the Victorian family, and they were many, the roles were at least fairly clear. It was easier for boys to identify with the fathers. But today,

a boy rarely relies on his father for the example of the ideal male. The image is diffused, and rather than serving as the ideal for his son, father and son together share an admiration of ideal, frequently a baseball or football player. (p. 177).

. . . to be a champion, an athlete achieves a position similar to the Victorian ideal man, strong and powerful, for otherwise he would not have won . . . He achieves success his father only dreamed of. (p. 198).

It is depressing, especially for males. It would be more wretched if he had discussed the consequences on our masculinity now that women have successfully invaded the last bastion of male supremacy.

In short, the book is mostly old, has borrowed much and is very blue.

Beisser's stated purpose is "to examine some of our accepted attitudes about sports and what they may signify for us as individuals and as a society." (p.2). It was written only because of a "unique series of events which caused me to stop and wonder what it all meant and forced me to synthesize a view of sports from my varied experiences as psychiatrist, athlete, fan and reporter." (p.2). An athlete whose career was ended suddenly by polio, he believes he shares with Freud the dramatic discovery that when action is blocked, the energy is transformed into thought. The sudden end to his athletic career did not permit his enthusiasm for sport to gradually shift to non-sport endeavors. Thus, his becoming a fan, an observer of sport, has added to his qualifications to comment on sport. In short, he believes his experiences have made him someone special, one who is capable of writing the only book thus far "which deals with the issues from the intrapsychic perspective of the athlete and fan as well as from the psychological and social observations that can be made from viewing sports." (p.x).

Despite his uniqueness, Beisser is restricted by his psychiatric orientation, both in his allegiance to Freudian thought and his exposure to those athletes who either seek or are referred to analysts. Consequently, the emphasis on the abnormal is not unusual. However, planned or unplanned the effect is the same.

Furthermore, the clinical nature of the analyses provided prompts a note of warning. The opinions offered are those of a single psychiatrist based on a theory of personality which has never been satisfactorily tested. Another psychiatrist with a varying theoretical orientation could come up with a different interpretation. For those who do not accept Freudian theory, his diagnoses are like reading a fairy tale.

This lack of empirical evidence was evident throughout the book. For example, if the reader were given some idea how common the case stud-

es presented are, it would assist in his understanding of sport. If common, they are an indictment against sport; if isolated, they merely provide interesting reading and possibly a chance for some identification.

Moreover, his social observations of sport are very general; more women are involved in sport, there is more violence among players and spectators, and participation in tennis and jogging have increased. They were made—by his admission—from reading newspapers and watching television (p.ix), sources available to us all. There was no attempt to document the extent or pervasiveness of any changes or movements.

On a more positive note, *The Madness in Sport* is interesting reading despite the weaknesses outlined above and some problems with transition both within and between chapters. The case histories are fun to read even though we may not accept the Freudian interpretations and we can sometimes identify with the “star” in the story. We may be like Ken who was not able to win the big tennis match.

The more serious students of sport may value this work for Beisser’s ideas and insights in such areas as sex roles, fans, violence and retirement. Specifically, his comment that in the majority of case studies he reported, the problems occurred when the person was faced with separation from sport, should be pursued by those investigating the adjustment difficulties of retiring professional athletes.

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