

Guttman, Allen. *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978. Pp. viii, 198. Index, notes. \$12.95.

According to the dust jacket of *From Ritual to Record*, Allen Guttman is the author of three previous books and numerous articles on American history and literature. He comes to his consideration of the nature of modern sports, then, from a broad concern with the culture of modern America.

The central purpose of Guttman's book is to show what is modern about modern sports, to explain how modern sports got the way they are. "The basic explanatory factor," what makes modern sports unique, Guttman argues, "is the scientific world-view."

In other words, the mathematical discoveries of the seventeenth century were popularized in the eighteenth century, at which time we can observe the beginnings of our modern obsession with quantification in sport. During the Age of the Enlightenment, we can see the transition from the Renaissance concept of "measure" in the sense of moderation and balance, to the modern concept of measurement . . . The emergence of modern sports represents neither the triumph of capitalism nor the rise of Protestantism but rather the slow development of an empirical, experimental, mathematical *Weltanschauung*. (p.85).

This passage occurs in the middle of the book, toward the end of the third of its six chapters. The first defines sports as kinds of physical contests which are related to games and play. The second seeks to distinguish modern sports from primitive, ancient, and medieval sports. In it, modern sports are assigned seven characteristics: secularism, equality of opportunity to compete and in the conditions of competition, specialization of roles, rationalization, bureaucratic organization, quantification, and the quest for records. (p. 16). These, we discover, are "to a remarkable degree the characteristics of modern society as described by Max Weber and Talcott Parsons." (p.69). Guttman thus views sports in the context of the emergence of the modern world and through the sociology of Weber and Parsons.

In these chapters—and, in fact, through the whole book—Guttman, in addition to advancing his own argument, is disputing other versions of the nature and development of modern sports—particularly those of Marxist historians and sociologists, although he also discusses the limitations of Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* and previous efforts to explain the Americanness of baseball. In general, he is suspicious of interpretations he feels are "the product of ideology rather than the result of careful empirical analysis." (p.71).

In the second half of the book, Guttman turns his attention to the

analysis of sports in modern America. He spends a chapter on baseball, another on football, and a third on Americans' preference for team sports over individual sports. Both individually and as a group, these are arresting essays. My rehearsal here of their arguments can give little sense of their richly detailed texture or of the many insights they contain.

Guttman finds baseball's "special attraction among team games" to lie in "its primitive-pastoral elements, and, simultaneously, in its extraordinary modernity, in its closeness to the seasonal rhythms of nature, and, at the same time, in the rarified realm of numbers." (p. 113). Though he does not stress the similarity of the two sports, he argues that football's attractiveness also comes from a combination of primitive and modern elements: the primitive being different from baseball's, what Guttman calls "the prehistoric *Existenzkampf*." The two sports share a high level of quantification. (pp. 125, 129).

Guttman's final chapter makes a fine conclusion to the book, for it simultaneously establishes a difference of degree between American sports and those of other modern nations and reasserts his sense of the nature of modern sports. Americans, he finds, are more given to team sports than inhabitants of other modern nations. This he presents as paradoxical, for Americans are known for their individualism, and it would appear that Europeans are more individualistic in their preference of sports. He declares that Americans' preference for team sports represents a combination of individualism and cooperation which produce a new sort of freedom, that sort available to individuals in the modern liberal state.

The other side of the liberal tradition, the side which developed into democratic socialism, has stressed the individualism which thrives under positive freedom, when a man is free to choose among alternatives and to act upon his choice. It is the opposite of the Spartan-like reduction of want exemplified by life at Walden Pond. For this conception of freedom, the transition from traditional to modern forms of social organization represents a net gain. an increased opportunity for each person to maximize his or her human potential. Under the conditions of modern democracy, society liberates because man in society is free to do what no man ever did alone. (p. 159).

It may be that Guttman is finally overcome by his battle with the Marxists and Neo-Marxists at this point. His description of the relation of sports and society tends to become a defense of the modern liberal democratic state against its radical critics. It may be that ideology, rather than careful empirical analysis, is in operation here as well as in the Marxist interpretations.

Despite this, *From Ritual to Record* seems to me an essential book for those of us interested in the history of modern sports. I say this for two

reasons in addition to the obvious one that its arguments are stimulating. It is a brief and clearly written book, despite the complexity of the topic and the bewildering variety of materials marshalled in support of its arguments. Secondly, this variety of materials is itself important. Guttman shows us how we may synthesize materials available to us, whether they be attitudes revealed through works of art or statistical information, not just to learn the history of sports, but to learn their cultural meanings.

North Carolina Wesleyan College

Leverett T. Smith, Jr.