

Smith, Leverett, T. Jr. *The American Dream and the National Game*. Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975. Pp. 285. Index, notes. \$11.80.

Professor Smith's book is touted as a revision of his 1970 Ph.D. dissertation in American studies, but don't believe it! A perusal of his bibliography shows only a single reference to a post 1970 work, an indication of no revision. This is sad, for revision is sorely needed. Stylistically the book reads like a verbose dissertation with tortuous prose and chains of long quotes. It is a case of opportunity missed because moving from dissertation format to book offers a golden chance for a fledgling author to shed his pedantry. But this is pedantry. Mayhap it is the kind that prompted the late Arthur Lovejoy, that great historian of ideas, to admit to preferring pulp works to academic tomes, protesting that there were times when he simply had to have surcease.

Mr. Smith's book is an example of what my old professor of American social and cultural history would call "a think piece." The author's avowed task is to chart the changing relationship of sport to other institutions in American Society, a task which he approaches by diligent content analysis of selected literary works having sports allusions and by a good sampling of popular works on American baseball and football. Following a long discourse on the meaning of work, play, sport and the like, which adds little to the problem of clarifying such catchwords, the author turns to the significant role played by baseball and football in American sport and on the national character.

Smith seeks to plumb the meaning behind America's serial love affair with these two sports; meanings which he thinks will elucidate that tricky structure called "the American Dream" and catch its changing parameters over the past century. Smith's thesis is that by switching alle-

giance from big league baseball to pro football, a divorce and remarriage culminating about 1960, Americans also changed dreams. However, the basis for such a transformation of allegiance, and the nature and content of the “American dream” is never clarified. It is as if Smith assumes that everyone knows about the American dream, just like everyone knows that pro football now reigns as the nation’s top sport. This is the *res ipsa loquitur* fallacy with a vengeance.

In developing his argument, Smith explains how prior to 1919 baseball reigned as the national game, having taken on a quality of “instinct for workmanship” that squared with prevailing American work ethics. In those years the game’s “scientific style of play,” with its clever tactics, disciplined teamwork, balance of hitting and pitching squared neatly with prevailing social norms and values and functioned as a safety valve for working Americans in need of displacement and recreation from the rigors of industrial work. However, 1919 produced the Chicago Black Sox scandal which undermined public faith in the game, demythologized its personnel, and exposed its seamy, mercenary and mendacious aspects. Under the autocratic rule of Judge Landis, faith in baseball was restored, but at the price of making the game a paternalistic, hieratic system which subjected players to the will of owners and managers. As such big league baseball got out of touch with the American dream. Even while Babe Ruth brought the “big bang” style of high scoring games, the players were little more than infantilized lackeys. Worse, as Smith draws from Eliot Asinof’s 1955 novel *Man on Spikes*, the game’s leaders were positively irrational at times; capable of imprisoning good *men* in the minors for the better part of their careers. In the face of such behavior the game’s fall from public grace was inevitable since athletes would go, like good American dreamers, to those sports where talent counted more.

Hence by 1960 pro football rose to claim the forfeited title of America’s national game. It did so despite its advocacy of antidemocratic and anti-individualistic values. Indeed, Smith opines that such hallowed values are out of touch with today’s neo-technical industrial world. Using Asinof’s laudatory work on the New York Giants of the NFL (*Seven Days to Sunday*), Smith finds football more attuned to the scientific world view, better capable of using disciplined specialists rationally, and better led by rational coaches who plot the game plans and orchestrate the tactics after the fashion of a corporate manager. As a reflection of the changing American dream, pro football hews to the notion that talent, dedication and coaching lead to success, money, power and prestige. Thus football reflects the nation’s new faith in military discipline, family loyalty, and successful schooling as sure routes to the good life. By mastering these a pro team like the late Vince Lombardi’s Green Bay Pack-

ers was able to transcend problems like racism and individualism and to produce a harmonious machine wherein united *professionals* battled to cash and glory.

This is the message sounded by Smith and its flaws are many. For openers, his assumption of a unitary American dream which changes shape over the years lacks even operational definition. Not surprisingly its mythical quality is unexplored. Had Smith drawn upon the sociological studies of dominant American values, he could have learned how polytypical these are. Since values are the stuff that societal dreams are made of, and since American values are so contradictory, Smith's assumption of a unitary American dream is scarcely tenable. Moreover, a pluralistic society like America with its ever expanding cornucopia of leisure outlets, casts a clear doubt on the existence of a National American sport or pastime for now or for any time past in America.

And even if the myth of the National game were true, Smith's failure to update his study makes one doubt his simplistic belief that football has won out. Recent Harris polls show otherwise, and while polls are suspect, the rise of tennis, golf, jogging and even roller skating add fuel to the notion that a pluralistic society has no national game. One could go further and point out that the rise of the Major League Baseball Players Association has ended the infantilization of players and has turned millionaire re-entry draftees into today's culture heroes and thus representatives of the American "dream." But this is the kind of updating that a "revised" book should have done.

Baseball historians will profit from Smith's lengthy analysis of major league baseball's 1920 transformation. The Black Sox scandal, the redemption under Landis, and the stylistic revolution wrought by Ruth are adequately covered. A final chapter on "Vince Lombardi's World" is a useful sketch of pro football's fortunes in the 1960's. Beyond these Smith's discussion of work and play, his interpretation of Huizinga's theory of play, are helpful, but by no means the gospel. Smith is not clear on the distinctions between play, leisure, sport and work. In sum, he offers nuggets for thought amidst a welter of dross, but the book's tort style and murky arguments are likely to make the reader emulate Lovejoy and search for a bouncy paperback.

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