

Roberts, Michael. *Fans! How We Go Crazy Over Sports*. Washington, D. C.: The New Republic Book Company, Inc., 1976. Pp. xii, 209. Index. Paper. \$3.95.

In the introduction to his book, *Fans! How We Go Crazy Over Sports*, Michael Roberts emphasizes the attempted suicide of a football fan who could no longer live with the slipshod play of his favorite team. Roberts' reaction to this incident, the first words he writes in his first book, is, "Poor marksmanship was all that averted a human sacrifice to the football gods; maybe they were appeased by the gesture itself." Someone should tell Mr. Roberts that giving the ending away before finishing the second paragraph is no way to start a book, especially the first time out. Once it is made so obvious what the tone of the book will be, the only real excuse for continuing is to hopefully discern some originality in this traipse through much trampled territory. Alas, it is not to be.

The only thing even remotely original here is the relative freshness of some of his anecdotes. Only some, however, for he even drags in Vince Lombardi who, in spite of being dead several years, still can't live down his infamous attitude concerning the true purpose and nature of sport.

Since Roberts does not stray from the path beaten by his predecessors in attempting to prove there is something innately corrupting and subhuman in sport, he is no less steadfast in committing their errors, the most fundamental of which is one of interpretation. Even this wouldn't be so bad, if it weren't so obvious that Roberts intentionally overlooks simple interpretations in favor of one-sided views simply to support his opinion.

It is not necessary to go any further than the introduction to find a perfect example of this. His opener about the guy who tried to blow his brains out over a klutzy football team tells it all. Rather than realizing that somebody whacko enough to kill himself over a ball game is just as likely to do it because his pet geraniums were eaten by a neighbor's goat, he sees it merely as another example of the insidiously addicting, mind-warping, soul-destroying pollution of sports.

It is not possible to give a full listing of Roberts' one-sided, self-serving analyses, but some highlights are:

ITEM: "Washingtonians had long ago collectively decided that nothing was more important (than a Redskins' game); the Redskins' activities controlled the rhythm of their comings and going, the threads of their conversations, the moods of their Monday mornings in fall and winter."

It's too bad Mr. Roberts sees nothing wrong in using his ability to get his opinions into print to speak for a few million people who don't have the same privilege. They must have been relieved, however, to read their unanimous decision in print. (You couldn't get that many people to whistle Dixie together, much less state a football game was the most important thing in their lives.)

ITEM: Roberts insinuates crime and arrest rates drop during game time because police are goofing off watching the game. A disinterested observer, instead of assuming the police are dogging it, would almost certainly conclude the simplest explanation is that for about three hours potential victims are off the street, unavailable as prey. Arrests would also drop if drunks stay in one bar instead of endangering public streets as they might otherwise be doing. (An interesting statistic to check here would be the rate of alcohol-related traffic accidents reported during the same period.) Could it be Mr. Roberts avoided this line of thought simply because it might put football games in a favorable light rather than the nefarious one he prefers?

ITEM: Comment of a college student in the stands during a televised game: "We just live for football . . . Nothing else is important, classes or anything. We just live for Friday when we start to party and get ready for the game."

Roberts goes from this juicy tidbit into a long dissertation on the disruptive effect of sports on campus, passing over the true key phrase in that student's entire comment—"we start to party—". Anyone who knows anything about college students would realize that, for a significant portion of the student body, athletics are nothing more than an excuse to booze it up and blow off steam after a boring week in class. The inference that dedicated, diligent, hard working students, attending college to better themselves, are being subverted

by that devil narcotic sports, is clear. (In point of fact, it is probably far more likely that this student and all others with his attitude, are attending college for precisely the opposite reason.)

The two most care-worn avenues the author traverses are those old standbys, comparing sport to gladiatorial games, with spectators howling for blood and guts, and sport as a religious spectacle. These two flights of fancy are favorite weapons of those who would abolish sport, or more specifically, competition. Though analogy is the poorest, trickiest, most inaccurate and deceptive tool of logic, it is undeniably a potent oratorical weapon, especially when wielded by someone trained in using words for emotional impact rather than factual content. (A retired newspaper columnist, for instance.) Let's examine these calumnies.

The gladiatorial concept is the easier of the two to swallow, since the surface comparisons fit together so well. Our sporting contests, at least the spectator ones, take place in buildings named for their Greek and Roman ancestors, arenas, stadiums, and coliseums. Tens of thousands of people are witness to these contests. They scream, cheer, boo, stomp their feet, and frequently work themselves into a frenzy, all for the sake of a contest whose participants are injury prone and subject to almost constant pain. It would be easy to assume all those rabid, slaving fans are excited by all that physical pain and suffering. Too easy.

Anyone who watches athletics regularly knows the truth. The biggest cheers, the wildest excitement, are reserved for the football halfback who runs the length of the field without being touched! In basketball, the twenty-foot jump shot that passes cleanly through the net, or the crisply executed team offense that allows a player to avoid the defense and score a wide open layup are the biggest thrills. A hockey player using finely-honed skills to single-handedly score a goal provides the greatest excitement.

Yeah, but what about all that pain, all those raving maniacs screaming kill!, kill!?

Watch what happens when a player is injured, even in front of the opposition fans. There is almost instantaneous quiet. The more serious the injury, the deeper the silence. When a player goes down and then gets up, this is met without exception by cheers and applause.

Now for the religious angle. Roberts makes many references to the "football gods", the fans who "worship" star athletes, and the deference these stars are shown by people from all strata of society.

What the author mistakes for "religious" awe and "worship", are in truth

perfectly natural feelings of respect and admiration for feats and abilities far above those possible for the average person. These reactions are no different from those shown for a moon-walking astronaut, a brilliant scientist, an accomplished musician, or a father who saves his children from a burning building. The objects of those feelings may be vastly different, but the feelings are no less sincere.

Ten or fifteen years ago, Roberts' book would have been interesting, controversial, and thought provoking. It's too bad he's late by those same ten or fifteen years. He's done nothing but rehash old ideas, spout old cliches, kick the same dead dogs. It is to be hoped he can branch out to other topics. This market is as old and tired as his arguments. He could end up retiring from a second career.

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