

## Sport and Fiction

Richard Keller\*

“Thank God for center field! Doctor, you can’t imagine how truly glorious it is out there, so alone in all that space—Do you know baseball at all? Because center field is like some observation post, a kind of control tower, where you are able to see everything and everyone, to understand what’s happening the instant it happens, not only by the sound of the struck bat, but by the spark of movement that goes through the infielders in the first second that the ball comes flying at them; and once it gets by them, ‘It’s mine,’ you call, ‘it’s mine,’ and then after it you go. For in center field, if you can get to it, it *is* yours. Oh, how unlike my home it is to be in center field, where no one will appropriate unto himself anything that I say is *mine!*”

(Alexander Portnoy to Doctor Spielvogel in *Portnoy’s Complaint*)

“What beats me—is why did it always have to happen to me? What did I do to deserve it?”

(Roy Hobbs in *The Natural*)

Although sport has served as subject matter for American fiction almost from its beginnings, it is twentieth century American writing that has used sport most extensively and seriously. Even so, it has taken sports literature a number of years to receive serious attention perhaps because a lot of bad writing has been published, but a close look reveals a long list of competent writers and works.\*\* Sport has the capacity to provide both Alexander Portnoy’s peace and Roy Hobbs’s perplexity and that should come as no surprise. A key function of literature is to explore human problems and experiences and sport has been fertile material for writers.

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The first American writer to sense the possibilities of sport as subject matter was Ring W. Lardner. Lardner, who began his career as a sports writer for several midwestern newspapers, became possibly the most widely read author of his day. His short fiction and essays were published in many popular magazines, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Redbook*, and *Esquire* among them. Lardner's most famous character, Jack Keefe, was the source of a series of stories first published in the *Saturday Evening Post* and later collected to form the epistolary novel *You Know Me AZ* (1916). Keefe, a rookie pitcher for the Chicago White Sox, is a braggart-buffoon who writes letters to his hometown buddy, Al Blanchard, back home in Bedford, Indiana. Jack Keefe's perception of himself indicates that he is handsome, rugged, witty, a lover, a star, truthful, a good husband and father, a force to be reckoned with on and off the diamond, and humble. His letters indicate otherwise. The humor generated through Keefe the naive narrator explain in large part the immense popularity of the Jack Keefe stories. That same technique also obscured some very real and non-humorous concerns Lardner had. Ring Lardner tried to show a hero-worshipping American public that athletes were people, not gods. Fans, too, were a Lardner target for he believed most of them to be ignorant of the games they watched. Surprising because it was so early in this century, Ring Lardner talked of greed, impersonality, and corruption in organized sports. Having Jack Keefe discover his own trade to the lowly Washington Senators by reading a newspaper column makes it quite clear that ballplayers were objects to be bought and sold. Lardner's characters can be stupid, petty, and prideful, like Keefe and Alibi Ike, but they seldom harm anyone but themselves. So successful was Ring Lardner that he was admired and imitated by Ernest Hemingway and praised by Virginia Woolf.

Although Lardner had planted the seeds, very few sports 'novels grew during the next several decades. Sport was a part of novels by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, Hemingway, William Faulkner, Sinclair Lewis, and many others, but sport seldom seemed the primary focus. A goodly number of excellent short stories, however, were written, such as Irwin Shaw's "The Eighty-Yard Run," Carson McCullers' "The Jockey," and Budd Schulberg's "Crowd Pleaser." Not until the 1950's did writers, particularly Bernard Malamud and Mark Harris, continue what Ring Lardner had started earlier in the century. Harris produced three baseball novels in this decade—*The Southpaw* (1953), *Bang the Drum Slowly* (1956), and *A Ticket for a Seamstitch* (1956)—and just as Lardner did, Harris uses a ballplayer as the ostensible author. Henry Wiggin, the fictional pitcher, begins his writing career to set the record straight, to educate the "100,000,000 boobs and flatheads that swallowed down whole the lies of Krazy Kress in his column of last September 30, 1952." *Bang the Drum Slowly* is the most interesting of the trilogy crowd-pleasing for it focuses on the relationship of Wiggin, an all-star pitcher, and Bruce Pearson, an illiterate third string catcher from the rural South who dis-

covers he is dying from Hodgkin's Disease. The novel is touching without wallowing in sentimentality and was made into one of a very few worthwhile sports movies. Harris's debt to Lardner is obvious in the use of narrative technique, the dialect and misspellings, and the ironic humor. Mark Harris does add a more sophisticated, expansive worldview than Ring Lardner's, for the latter was a bit of a prude. Never does a Lardner ballplayer use profanity, for example.

Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) is an exceptional novel that shares a thematic kinship with *You Know Me Al*, but is a more serious and complex book. Both deal with the difficulty of being or becoming a hero. While Malamud's novel is packed with surreal comedy, its protagonist Roy Hobbs is not a mere buffoon. Unlike Jack Keefe, Hobbs is obsessed with baseball and is driven to be the best in the game's history. The novel, which integrates comedy, mythic struggles, and tragedy, is brimming with thinly veiled allusions to Babe Ruth, Shoeless Joe Jackson, the Black Sox scandal, the Eddie Waitkus shooting and many more. Roy Hobbs, with his homemade bat Wonderboy, returns to baseball after a fifteen year absence as a kind of knight errant whose quest is the rescue of the floundering New York Knights managed by Pop Fisher whose luck has run so badly that he is afflicted with athlete's foot on his hands. Just as in the Fisher King myth, the powerless Pop's kingdom has turned barren and sterile. His team is in last place and even though it is still May, Pop laments, "It's been a blasted dry season. No rain at all. The grass is worn scabby in the outfield and the infield is cracking. My heart feels dry as dirt for the little I have to show for all my years in the game." (p.34)

On his first appearance at the plate, Roy follows Pop's orders to the letter and in a delightfully comic scene, Roy quite literally knocks the cover off the ball:

Wonderboy flashed in the sun. It caught the sphere where it was biggest. A noise like a twenty-one gun salute cracked the sky. There was a straining, ripping sound and a few drops of rain spattered to the ground. The ball screamed toward the pitcher and seemed suddenly to dive down at his feet. He grabbed it to throw to first and realized to his horror that he held only the cover. The rest of it, unraveling cotton thread as it rode, was headed for the outfield. (p.65)

The rains come and Roy has returned fertility and life to the barren kingdom.

All does not end well, however, Malamud has two major concerns. One is the necessity of myth, of heroic figures, of standards for which to strive. As the novel's title indicates, Roy Hobbs has great capabilities. With the Knights, he shatters records, terrifies pitchers, and establishes a new level of excellence at the plate and in the field. Roy Hobbs, though sensitive and fairly intelligent, shows no aptitude for emotional growth. He makes bad choices, the worst of which is his obsession with Memo Paris, the aloof temptress, thoroughly rotten bitch-goddess, and niece of Pop Fisher.

Malamud admires heroic actions. He admires the human capacity for dignity, strength, and endurance. Many of his characters, like Yakov Bok in *The Fixer*, shows this. Bernard Malamud's second point is that characters—if they are to survive—must understand that they are human and that while they can accomplish many things, at some point they will fail. Because he cannot do this Roy Hobbs loses it all. Like the mighty Casey, he strikes out ending the Knights pennant hopes. In a rage he throws fix money he had accepted back in the face of Judge Goodwill Banner, the demonic force in the novel. He loses the bad Memo and the good Iris Lemon. He is banned from baseball and his records are ripped from the books. So rapid is Hobbs's plummet from the pinnacle that he leaves the ballpark unrecognized save for one who asks him to "Say it ain't true, Roy."

Two additional novels should be noted as helping sport fulfill more of its promise as subject matter. Robert Coover's *The Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* (1968) is the first sports novel to extend totally beyond the apparent limits of its subject. J. Henry Waugh, an accountant, creates an entire baseball league peopled with imaginary characters whose actions are determined by the roll of three dice and a variety of charts. The league is at first an escape from life's dullness for Waugh. Eventually Waugh begins to identify so strongly with his characters, especially Damon Rutherford a magnificent rookie pitcher, that his world of fantasy becomes his reality. Like many post-modern writers, Coover explores the failure of reality and the role of the imagination. Waugh's game is complicated, personal, and clearly governed by rules Waugh creates. The league operates with relative smoothness until Waugh, wishing to avenge Damon Rutherford's death, manipulates the game with complete disregard for the rules he has formulated. The Association and J. Henry are plunged into chaos from which the author never fully extricates the novel. Robert Coover deals with the boundaries of man's own created image. Girdled by the limits of his own self-creation, an individual is free to work, improvise and manipulate. But once the individual ignores those boundaries and violates his own individual tradition, he dooms himself to chaos, in essence exploding his mind and soul. Put succinctly by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., "We are what we pretend to be so we must be careful what we pretend to be." But this may tend to oversimplify a fascinatingly complex book that defies simplistic generalizations.

Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972), like Coover's novel, requires no intimate knowledge of sport. Most reviewers made much of the yoking of football and nuclear warfare in *End Zone*, but it is foremost a novel of and about language. Gary Harkness, protagonist and drop-out from such football factories as Notre Dame, Penn State, Syracuse University, and Michigan State, opens the novel as a student and halfback at Logos College in barren West Texas. Harkness periodically withdraws from the world and the root of this is a discovery he made early in life; words are powerful and mysterious. Naturally, Logos is

literally and symbolically the place for him, but when Logos loses the key game of the season to overpowering West Centrex Biotechnical, Harkness's entire world begins to crumble with Harkness finally incapable of dealing with an uncertain and irregular world. To do justice to DeLillo, *End Zone* is also a very funny book. Harkness's roommate, three hundred pound tackle Anatole Bloomberg tries to become a super-rational being while attempting to un-Jew himself; Myna is a girl who rejects the burdens of being beautiful by being fat and weird; the Chalk sisters, Vera and Esther are "very heavy into carrots and miracles"; Bing Jackman, a kicker, carries on conversation with the football.

By the 1950's and 1960's sports fiction finally overcame the stereotypical notion that it was frivolous, unimaginative, and childish. As subject matter sport became as useful and versatile as the English moors were to Thomas Hardy or the Jazz Age was to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Finally, here are some noteworthy novels of the last decade which should interest readers of sports fiction. Leonard Gardner's *Fat City* (1969) deals with the grim dark side of humanity through boxing and James Whitehead's first novel *Joiner* (1971) is an ambitious but inconsistent work that examines the physical, emotional, and intellectual struggles of an enormous and intelligent football player. On the other hand, Dan Jenkins' *Semi-Tough* (1972) is played strictly for laughs and for those aficionados of bawdy, raucous comedy, it succeeds quite well. *To Smithereens* (1972) is the only novel in the group written by a woman. Rosalyn Drexler concocts an improbable affair between a lady wrestler and an art antic and manages to draw readers into the novel. Like *Fat City* and *Semi-Tough*, Peter Gent's *North Dallas Forty* (1973) has been made into a movie. The novel was Gent's first and until the concluding section begins to disintegrate, the book is engrossing, and believable. Gent, an All-American at Michigan State and receiver for the Dallas Cowboys, shows promise as a writer.

1979 has been a good year for sports fiction. John Craig's *Chappie and Me* is advertised as an autobiographical novel and it traces the exploits of a white Canadian first baseman as he barnstorms with a black baseball team just prior to World War II. A piece of reflective literature, the book is not gaudy or pretentious, but it is well worth reading. Jerome Charyn's *The Seventh Babe* ambitiously combines myth and nostalgia in a book whose title character (a left-handed third baseman) is the seventh man named Babe to play for the Boston Red Sox. Phillip O'Connor's first novel *Stealing Home* certainly deserves mention and veteran Chicago journalist Jerome Holtzman has compiled an impressive array of writing in *Fielder's Choice: An Anthology of Baseball Fiction*. Now that sport has been accepted as proper and fitting subject matter

for fiction, it is likely that we may have an even greater variety of works to choose from in the future. I relish the prospect.

\*\*Literally dozens of American fictionalists have used sport, so what follows will be highly selective but I trust representative. Space limitations dictates the omission of poetry (of which there is a large body), confessional writing (Jim Brosnan, Dave Meggyesy, Jim Bouton, et al.), and juvenile fiction (William Cox's *Chicano Cruz* [1972] is an example).