

Book Reviews

*A man may be a fool and not know it—
but not if he writes a book.*
Anonymous

Cady, Edwin H. *The Big Game: College Sports and American Life*. Knoxville, Tennessee: University of Tennessee Press, 1978. Pp. 254. Bibliography, index. \$14.50.

Edwin H. Cady is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Duke University. He is chairman-elect of the Board of Editors of *American Literature*, and author of numerous books and articles on American literature. Edwin Cady has served as a Faculty Representative to the NCAA from both the Big Ten and the A.C.C. He seems to be well-connected in the College Sports Establishment as his lists of “thanks” and “appreciations” in the Preface include John Pont, Ben Schwartzwalder, Bobby Knight, Walter Byers, Wayne Duke, and a host of others. Edwin Cady is clearly an insider, and this book both benefits and suffers from that fact.

The Big Game is divided into two books: Book One, “The American Big Game” and Book Two, “What to Tell the New President about . . .” Book One is an attempt to analyze the two college sports of football and basketball in terms of myth and symbol, and draws heavily on literary analogy as a departure point for analysis. Book Two is a guidebook which warns of the pitfalls and perils of Intercollegiate Athletics, while ignoring the basic assumptions behind them which lead to these same pitfalls and perils. This review will focus on Book One.

“The American Big Game,” contains five chapters, 140 pages, of at times brilliant analysis and insight. This is coupled with high levels of frustration born of awkward, obtuse and muddled prose, the hallmark of modern literary criticism. One brief example: “If in humanity as the psychiatrist knows it, ‘intrapersonally,’ play is *egosyntonic*, strengthening personality, in humanity as the ethnologist knows it, ‘interpersonally,’ play is *enculturative*” (p. 43). If you are willing to fight your way through this sort of thing, the rewards are great. Unfortunately many may not want to pay the price.

Cady outlines a set of principles for the understanding of American Intercolle-

giate Athletics, sets out their unique qualities, and their place in both the community of scholars and American culture. To Cady the major issues that matter in college sports are the same as those that matter in American life: “authenticity, community, democracy, honor and redemption or renewal” (p. 6). He points out, via Stephen Crane and George Santayana, that the Big Game is actually several games. While the prime game is the one in the center of the arena played by the athletes, there are several others being played in the stands by students, alumni and general public, and in the media by reporters and by the consumers of the media.

The historical origins of the Big Game are explored, as well as the agonistic and fraternal nature of American culture. He finds the agonistic and fraternal in American literature and sees them at the heart of college sport. Santayana’s “Athletic Ode” is presented and analyzed. In it Santayana justifies college football as being “gentlemanly” rather than “genteel,” as being free, spontaneous, and disinterested, and representing the best things in national manners. Unfortunately to use Santayana to praise college football in the contemporary context, would be like using Jefferson to praise corporate Agri-Business. Cady also draws on Santayana’s view that college student athletics embody the Italian term *virtu*, which was the “essential quality of the Renaissance gentleman. It meant that he was not merely acquainted but ‘accomplished’ in the arts . . . could not merely perform but adapt them to triumph esthetically over the troubles and boredoms of life” (p. 31). Whether college football or basketball is among the arts may be debated, while as to the fact that both offer escape from the troubles and boredoms of life, there is no doubt. But there is serious doubt that the term “college *student* athletics” has any application to Intercollegiate Athletics.

One of the most interesting parts of the book deals with “*homo aleator*, the gambler, the devotee of the raptures of risk” (p. 52). Cady finds American culture to be a gambling culture, and the gamble at the heart of the Big Game. It is that quality of the “rapture of risk,” which can be found in abundance in frontier humor, barracks humor, and the humor of the bull pen and the locker room. Anthropological materials are drawn on to illustrate the *homo agonistes*, *homo ludens*, *homo aleator* triad among the Kwakiutl Indians of North America and the Kurelu of New Guinea, and these suggest a similarity to the “struggle-play-gamble pattern characteristic of our Big Game culture. . . .” (p.61).

Cady goes to great lengths to deny that Big Game Sport is a religion or a ritual. It is only “sort of ritual” and “one of the best, most potent popular art forms” (p. 75). These ideas are explored via Clifford Geertz, Daniel Boorstin, Aidan Kavanaugh, Arnold Beisser, Gertrude Jaeger and Philip Selznick.

The result is an interesting and eclectic view, a broken-field thought pattern worthy of Gale Sayers.

Book One closes with a portrait of the ideal football coach, which should be required reading for all those charged with the responsibility of selecting such a personage. Cady suggests a number of measures, including tenure for coaches, which he hopes would make the coach more fully a member of the academic community, rather than “Attis-Osiris- Adonis-Dionysus, the corn god, the scapegoat” (p. 127). This is a call for sanity and the end of human sacrifice on the campus, which at the same time a plea for demythologizing the coach. This leads nicely into Book Two, where Cady draws on his years of experience to offer a full range of commentary on all facets of Big Time Intercollegiate Sports. It is here that Cady’s attachments to the sport’s establishment are most apparent. That bias aside there is much in Book Two to provoke argument and thought, and in addition it does not suffer from the vocabulary of obscurity that haunts Book One.

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