

Cole, Lewis. *A Loose Game: The Sport and Business of Basketball*. New York: Bobbs-Merill Company, Inc., 1978. Pp. ix, 198. \$8.95.

The title for Lewis Cole's first book comes from his belief that basketball is "a notoriously loose game—you can't play it well if your body and mind don't enjoy agility that comes with relaxation." Unfortunately, Cole, identified on the jacket as a one-time teenage playwright, SDS organizer, and college English teacher, has organized his book so loosely that his obvious love of the game and his general intelligence are diluted by a melange of random observations and annoying literary allusions. One of the plagues of intellectuals writing about sports can be a maddening pretentiousness. Cole's comparison of Naismith's invention of basketball to Poe's creation of "The Raven" has to rank high on any list of strained metaphors. If this is what the jacket calls the "literary sociology" of basketball, I put in a strong vote for good old-fashioned reportage.

What could have been the most important chapter of Cole's book delves into "The Pyramid of Success: Basketball as a Business." The phrase comes from the most successful college basketball coach in history, John Wooden of U. C. L. A., but Cole does not discuss Wooden at all nor his success at recruiting and sheltering stars (like Bill Walton) over the years. Cole does discuss the 1951 college basketball scandals and offers a fascinating but wholly unsubstantiated theory (except by hearsay) that the breaking of the news was deliberately timed to aid the emergence of slumbering pro basketball in New York. Cole also explores the rise of the American Basketball Association in the 1960s and how the Players Association of the N. B. A worked to postpone the merger with the aid of sympathetic Congressmen. But this important story is

treated too generally to have the revealing impact it requires. That it was the Senate *Judiciary* Committee of 1972 which delayed the merger in the interests of the free trade of players in both professional leagues is not even mentioned. Cole is rightfully critical of the self-serving testimony of NBA Commissioner Walter Kennedy who tried to get Congress to believe that basketball “was an entirely different activity” from normal business. But instead of exploring the psyches of the different basketball owners and the pro players, utilizing the techniques of let us say a Dreiser in exploring their business motivations, Cole is content to describe ABA meetings as “cesspools” and the desires for a larger slice of the economic pie by the players as “a bourgeois revolution.” A real study of the ABA and the delayed merger with the NBA is still needed.

Cole’s chapter on “African Handball”—the nickname white working class youths have given to basketball—has moments of insight. He realizes that a radical friend’s awe of Earl Monroe’s “moves” is only a subtler manifestation of the stereotyped view of the natural rhythm of the Negro. Cole himself observes of many professional players today, “They are feted, paid exorbitant salaries—and simultaneously made to feel worthless.” This is a shrewd insight but such a nugget is largely lost in the haphazard presentation of his book, which ends with random and unexceptional portraits of basketball from the church gym to the pros. After one church game, Cole quotes a referee saying of his beloved game, “We are all junkies.” With Cole’s background and talents, it is disappointing that the level of observation rarely exceeds this level of banality.

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