

Atyeo, Don. *Blood and Guts: Violence in Sports*. London: Paddington Press, 1979. Pp. 384. References, index, illus.

Almost a generation ago, when boxing was wallowing through one of the periodic attacks launched against it, A. J. Liebling remarked that if a prize-fighter ever went as nutty as Nijensky “all the wowsers in the world would be screaming ‘Punch-drunk.’ Well, who hit Nijensky? And why isn’t there a campaign against ballet? It gives girls thick legs.” Both Ernest Hemingway and Albert Camus, Liebling continued, enjoyed—but were not particularly successful in boxing, yet few well-intentioned social critics saw fit to credit the sport with stimulating man’s intellect. (*The Sweet Science: A Ringside View of Boxing*). Liebling, a writer noted as much for his humanity as his wit, was not insensitive to the violence in boxing; he was not the sort of fan to salivate at the comers of his mouth as he implored Rocky Marciano to throw another overhand right. Nevertheless, he did see that the jeremiads of the critics of violence in sports were being carried to preposterous lengths.

In *Blood and Guts: Violence in Sports* journalist Don Atyeo paints a stark and disturbing picture of the evolution of violent sports. His book overwhelms the reader with the diversity of the carnage: hunting ranches that guarantee an easy kill (easy, that is, for the hunter) of an exotic animal; a snarling dwarf matched against a sibilant dog in a pit; boxers whispering to themselves after their ring careers have ended; football players limping through shortened lives after their days in the sun passed; hockey players hired more for their penchant to perform surgery with a stick than their ability to score or skate; soccer fans whose sole *raison d’etre* is rioting; and more, so very much more. His case is convincing. It would be ludicrous to deny that violence in sports has reached frightening levels and that when Evil Knievel performs the echoes pulsing from the colosseum become markedly louder. Indeed, civilization does “often (seem) a very thin veneer.” (p. 121)

With such a convincing case and surplus of evidence it’s a shame—if I might be permitted to change metaphors—that Atyeo occasionally feels the need to stack the deck. Certainly there is a surfeit of violence in professional hockey, football, and boxing, but instead of making this point by examining a typical contest, Atyeo concentrates on the exceptional, the outrageous acts of violence. In boxing, for example, his longest quote is from Fritzie Zivic, who is commonly agreed to have been the dirtiest fighter ever to lace on a glove and

then use those laces to rip open an opponent's face. In football he examines Joe Namath's knees and dwells on the likes of Conrad Dobler and Ernie Holmes, both of whom hardly represent the typical professional football player. In hockey Dave Schultz receives the most space. At other times specific examples are exaggerated. Atyeo, writing about the longest boxing match on record—the 110 round marathon in 1893 between Andy Bowen and Jack Burke—says on the fight's conclusion “eyewitnesses reported that the faces of both fighters looked ‘like hamburgers’.” (p. 169) However, the April 8, 1893, New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reported that Bowen suffered only a small cut above the left eye and Burke lost no blood. This is not to discount Atyeo's source; perhaps he read the *Picayune* account and, for one reason or another, believed it was wrong. But, because *Blood and Guts* contains no footnotes, it is difficult to check such contradictions. Similarly, it is hard to accept Atyeo's assertion that “For every Jack Dempsey there were thousands of Jack Powells who could recall finishing one bout and then being called back into the ring to fight another bout later that same night. Boxers fought four or five times in a week, starting out at age 12 or 13 as dollar-a-head sluggers in blindfolded Battle Royals. At the end of their career, many could boast upwards of five hundred fights.” (p. 170) Once more the reader is being told that the grossly exceptional is really the norm. Precious few fighters began their careers fighting in Battle Royals (and most of those deplorable spectacles never used blindfolds), fought twice a night or four times a week, or had anywhere near five hundred bouts. Boxing is a violent enough business, and ring tragedies unfortunately occur far too often. There is no need to magnify the situation by misleading the reader. It is almost as if Atyeo is writing for a society so jaded by violence that he feels the need to give us even more blood and guts to make his point. At times his book comes close to doing for sports what Sam Peckinpah did for movies.

Beyond this criticism, Atyeo's book is quite impressive. It provides a wealth of information on the evolution of violent sports, although the absence of footnotes or a larger bibliography is regrettable. And his contention that violence in sports both mirrors a violent society and creates even more tension is convincing. Although he adds little to the discussion of the Catharsis Theory, his summary of the controversy is judicial. If at times the reader might wish for less chronicling and more interpreting, there is no doubt that the book is an important and provocative contribution. It's a book to read, think about, and discuss.