

Cohen, Stanley. *The Game They Played*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977. Pp. 246 and Rosen, Charles. *The Scandals of 1951: How the Gamblers Almost Killed College Basketball*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978. Pp. 262.

There is a contemporary sound to the story. Transcripts are forged and doctored to enable “student-athletes” to enter college. Jobs are given to the athletes although no work is required for them. University officials, entranced by the elixir of winning, look the other way. It takes the moral courage of one player to turn down a bribe and to inform the authorities, and the scandal breaks.

The time was 1951 and Manhattan College center Junius Kellogg was the honest player. Virtually all the major basketball powers in New York City and nationally ranked schools like the University of Kentucky and Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois had star players “shaving” points so that gamblers would beat the listed point spreads for victory.

Within a few months in 1977 and 1978, two New York City writers, Stanley Cohen and Charles Rosen, had books published dealing with the story of the scandal which rocked college basketball in the early 1950’s. There is understandable overlap in the books since each author lived through the experience as a young fan and an earnest lover of the “city game.” Neither is an historian and there is lamentable lack of source notation in each book. But both have provided tantalizing tidbits of background to point shaving. Rosen places it as far back as the 1920’s when early pro basketball teams like the Original Celtics used to play games in small towns. They would play the local evenly one night to encourage bets against them the next night when they would clean up.

Both authors note that Long Island University, which had players serving as key conduits to the gamblers in the 1951 scandal, had been suspected of shaving points since the 1930’s. Bookmakers often refused to accept bets on L.I.U. games. Cohen has unearthed the story of a bribe offer in 1949 to a George Washington University player which resulted in the arrest of four gamblers, three of them from New York, but the authorities did not choose to investigate further. Both authors cite many cases where detectives did not follow through on leads for fear of harming their alma maters. Both argue that the reason that St. John’s University became the only New York City school not hit by the scandal was that many New York police officials and members of the Catholic Church hierarchy helped cover up suspicious acts by St. John’s players.

When the scandal broke, it was the predominantly black and Jewish players at L.I.U. and C.C.N.Y. (City College of New York) who received the severest

penalties. In the strongest part of Stanley Cohen's book, he cites at length from the one-hour sentencing speech of Judge Saul Streit, a C.C.N.Y. alumnus. Streit condemned the bending of entrance requirements by L.I.U., whose famed coach Clair Bee had risen by 1950 to faculty status and a vice-presidency in the administration. Streit went on to sentence four of the players to prison terms, which "may serve as a warning to other college athletes who may be tempted," he intoned, "that they cannot break the ideals of American sport and then escape with a mere reprimand," (pp. 205-6). The judge suspended sentences of two of the players when informed they were joining the armed services.

It was a time of hot war in Korea and cold war McCarthyite paranoia at home, and both authors fill their pages with incidents from the politics of the 1950's. Unfortunately, the link between these events and the scandal is rarely shown. Cohen especially overdoes this technique. He also believes his undistinguished career as a basketball player warrants pages of reminiscence. These too florid passages detract from occasionally keen observations. For instance, he speculates that the point-shaving player may have come to find a challenge in winning the game but keeping the score down; he "would be required to transcend his athlete's gifts and distill them into those of the virtuoso." (p. 163).

It is to Charles Rosen's credit that he has done the legwork and made the phone calls to bring back to life survivors of the scandal. He tracked down Sherman White, working at a neighborhood development office in Northern New Jersey. The 6'8" White was one of the great stars of his day, an "Elgin Baylor-and-a-half," Rosen says, who was named *Sporting News* player of the year for 1951 a few days after Judge Streit had sentenced him to prison. "I'm all finished with being ashamed," White told Rosen. Like most of the players, White felt that fixing point spreads was wrong but the temptations of the money, the sense of "belonging" to the crowd, and the physical fear of not going along all proved too great to overcome. Although White is not drawn with the fictional power Jay Neugeboren uses in his novel *Big Man* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1966), Rosen draws from White a telling insight: "Society has a secret mean streak that not many people get to see. When a man is down, society likes to keep you down." (p. 31)

The travails of the convicted players after 1952 were indeed poignant. Pro basketball teams had been planned around the City College stars and Sherman White. Kentucky greats Alex Groza and Ralph Beard had actually played for nearly two years with the Indianapolis Olympians' fledgling National Basketball Association franchise when their part in fixes of the 1940's came to light. Beard and Groza were instantaneously expelled from the N.B.A.

Rosen tracked down Ralph Beard who after suffering the loss of his chosen

livelihood and a divorce built a family and a new life as a pharmaceutical salesman. Beard had been a state hero in Kentucky and the first years of exile were hard. He no longer wants retribution but feels that the hand of justice had not been administered fairly; many fixers had escaped detection. He had taken the money because he had come from a poor background, but he adds, "If doing something to influence the score of a basketball game makes you guilty, then in my mother's eyes, I'm innocent." (p. 221)

Rosen is especially good at limning the New York Players and coaches. He etches a sharp portrait of the famed City College coach and Original Celtic star Nat Holman. The son of a hardworking Russian immigrant grocer on the Lower East Side of New York, Holman preached the gospel of hard work to the players, but he was extremely aloof. Main contact with the players came from his assistant Bobby Sand, who did the dirty work of recruiting (arranging for the necessary transcript changes) and who communicated more caringly with the players. Sand waited in vain for the day to come when Holman would pass the coaching mantle on. When the scandal broke instead, Sand's violations brought about his demotion and a public expression of shock from Holman. "Small fries were supposed to fry," Rosen writes knowingly. (p. 217)

One of Bobby Sand's successful missions had been to lure the gifted 6'8" Brooklyn center, Ed Roman, from the campus of University of Cincinnati where he had enrolled. Promised admission for his brother and a job for his father (never delivered), Roman succumbed to the call to loyalty to his city's most renowned public college. Not yet 20 when drawn into the fixes, Roman could not break out of its vortex.

Now a school psychologist in an inner city public school and studying for his Ph.D., Roman offered Rosen some trenchant comments on Americans' "romanticized view of athletics." "They want to identify with the entire fantasy that the world of sports has come to represent. Whenever you break a moral code that people think they are supposed to believe in, you are confronted with a stronger wrath than any burglar or common thief ever faces." (p. 243)

Could the scandal happen again? "History never exactly repeats itself," the great historian Charles Beard once said. Both authors believe that the presence today of lucrative pro basketball contracts after college should curtail the threat of collegiate fixes. Yet, the academic abuses in college sports have become major news again as the 1980's begin. The commercialism and the stress on winning at all costs could conceivably lead collegians to question the legitimate road. *The Game They Played* and especially *The Scandals of 1951* are instructive reading, pointing out how little certain values have changed. It

would be indeed tragic, however, if other fathers in the future would have to lament with Sherman White's father, quoted by Rosen, "Sherman had to go to college to learn something he was never taught at home." (p. 127).

Lee Lowenfish