

Halberstam, David. *The Breaks of the Game*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981. pp. xi, 362. \$12.95 hardback, \$3.95 paperback.

Trust Al McGuire to muscle-in on center court. At the time of the ABA dispersal draft, when the best players in that collapsing league were auctioned off to the NBA, the Portland Trail Blazers were very interested in Maurice Lucas, a competitive, extremely talented player who was also considered “a potentially difficult one.” The Portland management sounded out several of Lucas’ former coaches. Hubie Brown, who had often clashed with Lucas, said the ballplayer was impossible to coach. Bob MacKinnon reported the exact opposite; Lucas was easy to work with and a total competitor. Seeking a third opinion, Al McGuire, Lucas’ college coach, was consulted. Universally regarded as a “flake,” McGuire said, “No, Lucas never played well for me, I don’t think he’ll make it in the pros.” When told that Lucas had been an all-star in the NBA, McGuire replied, “Is that right? I didn’t know that—that’s terrific. In that case I’d go for him.” (p. 35).

The story represents McGuire and Halberstam at their best. One makes you laugh, the other—the Pulitzer Prize winning reporter for his work in Viet Nam—captures a personality in a quote. Halberstam’s approach to professional basketball is through anecdote, and occasionally the stories overwhelm the narrative, which is the tale of the season (1979-1980) he spent with the Portland Trail Blazers. *The Breaks of the Game* concerns basketball and society and business, and how the first was corrupted by the second two.

Professional basketball, Halberstam makes painfully clear, is a product which has reached the point of diminishing returns. Once it was alive and organic; it grew out of a genuine love for the sport in cities in the Northeast. And the rivalries were real. When Boston and Philadelphia played there was always something at stake. Since there was not much money in the game, pride and love of the game were more than just words used to sell a beer. Soon this electric state was recognized by television, and the short run toward ruin was begun. Television invested and influenced. New teams sprang up like mutant mushrooms, often in Sun Belt cities with no tradition or appreciation of the sport. Salaries skyrocketed, seasons were prolonged, and competition and determination were stored away only to be taken out and dusted off during the long playoff season. For Halberstam, professional basketball is the American economy in microcosm. It is the old story of a good product suffering from mass production and over-commercialization.

Halberstam's handling of the economic issues generally make sense. He tends to over-romanticize the "good old days" and he seldom provides any figures to support his generalizations, but there is no question that professional basketball is in trouble. Especially interesting is the cultural clash inherent in the growth of the sport. "It was not by chance that the league was schizophrenic; its players to a large degree came from the blighted ghettos of an older, more tired America, industrial cities undergoing urban decay in the beginning of a postindustrial age; but its new markets . . . were in the West and Southwest" (p. 80). It is a case of black blue collar heroes in a white white collar world.

Nowhere is Halberstam better than when discussing the implications of race in basketball and America. Through basketball, blacks in the eyes of many whites have torn down one set of myths only to replace them with a different set. In the 1940's, during the era of segregation, whites believed that black athletes were inferior. Integration of professional sports ended this myth. The next myth to fall was the belief that blacks "lacked guts and were never tough in the clutch." The latest myth is that blacks are superior athletes but lack the ability to think and lead. Men like Lenny Wilkens have demonstrated the absurdity of such myths but still they linger. Halberstam does believe, however, that racial stereotyping is not totally unwarranted. Professional coaches, he maintains, complain that blacks raised in the South lacked assertiveness. The race theme in all its variations surfaces throughout *The Breaks of the Game*.

Written for the general public, Halberstam's fine book is more of a meditation on basketball and American culture than a detailed examination of the sport. Anecdotes and speculations replace numbers and footnotes. His research involved more watching and listening than reading and digging. It is, nonetheless, one of the finest books we have about basketball. Like David Wolf's *Foull*, it represents journalism at its best and is ideally suited for classroom use.