

Harris, Janet C. and Park, Roberta J., Editors. *Play, Games and Sports in Cultural Contexts*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc., 1983. Pp. xi. 521. Notes, references, index. \$24.95 (cloth)

The editors of *Play, Games and Sports in Cultural Contexts* collected 24 previously published articles and chapters from books and grouped these works into 5 broad, thematical parts in the book. The result is a significant text that provides considerable insight into the major question which prompted the publication; viz., “What do play, games, and sports *mean* to the people who engage in such activities?” Readers, it is hoped, will come “. . . to know something more about the meanings and functions” of play, games and sports. Targeted at the “intelligent undergraduate,” the intended effect will likely be as diverse as the original sources of the articles since meaning resides in people and people’s perceptions obtained while reading the book.

Park, a historian and Harris, a social psychologist are in effect holding up samples from the broad field of the anthropological/sociological study of play, games and sports in an effort to encourage historians, social psychologists, sociologists and other social scientists who study the same phenomena to use interdisciplinary resources in order to answer their research questions on the cultural significance and meanings of play, games and sport. Without question, the reader is provoked into crescendos of fascination for the unusual—the Balinese cockfight, the Tikopian dart match, Zulu football and Pueblo Indian baseball—and it is difficult not to begin to frame series of questions on the meaning and significance of similar culturally-bound activities historically and in contemporary society. For the North American student of sport who seeks some form of introspective, objective insight on the cultural meaning(s) of play, games and/or sport in the region, there are excellent selections such as an 1890 article on Cherokee ball play (lacrosse), a study of the “cult” of “Big Red” football in Nebraska, and a provocative analysis of ceremony and ritual present in the American high school sport system that attempts to loosen the “intellectual blindfold” limiting North American perceptions of sport.

In between these peak reading experiences, there are sections in which this reviewer wallowed. Part Three, “Play and Interpretation,” and Part Four, “Socialization and Enculturation Through Play, Games and Sports” are

pointlessly complex and, along with a few other articles in the book, jargonistic. Part Three in particular brings the reader to a grinding halt after the diverse anthropological stimulation of the first 13 chapters (three fifths of the book). It would require more than the skills of an "intelligent undergraduate" to integrate the material in these sections with other parts of the book; however, scholars who deal regularly with play theory and philosophy of play/games/sport will be better able to use the articles noted. The editors do provide a thorough introductory section to the "sociological study" of play, games and sport as well as brief discussions that purport to provide a conceptual framework for each of the five sections. In addition, reference notes and full bibliographies follow each article. Yet, similar to any reader or anthology of articles, the continuity is contrived by groupings around, in this case, concepts such as cultural interpretation, sports and rituals, play interpretations, socialization, enculturation and acculturation. Since the articles are culled from 19 different sources in an attempt to persuade students and scholars to consider cultural meaning, the text needs further editorializing in order to make it fully useful. For example, short essays at the end of each major section could serve to synthesize the articles, draw the concepts together and place the individual readings in context with the overall theme and major research questions posed by the editors. The epilogue falls short of real analysis, synthesis or interpretation of the articles. The strengths of the book are rooted in the diversity of the articles—the sum of the parts is greater than the whole, in this particular case. Readers cannot help being reminded, or more firmly convinced, of the tremendous significance of play, games and sport in various cultures. Moreover, more questions are raised than answered by reading the book—a significant benchmark of scholarship. Not only is the work a fine compendium of otherwise scattered research, it is also a firm and convincing plea to social scientists researching behavior, cultures, changes, forms, personalities through play, games and sports to consider and analyze the meanings and functions of these phenomena to the people who engage(d) in them.

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