

Rader, Benjamin G. *In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports*. New York: The Free Press, 1984. Pp. ix, 228. Index, bibliography. \$15.95

Ben Rader believes that “the changes induced by television have altered the role that sports play in American life” (p.3). Television’s influence on sport, he avers, has been disastrous, for “Television has essentially trivialized the experience of spectator sports” (p.5). Television has demythologized sports heroes, and undermined the wholesome values which sports used to represent. “No longer are sports as effective in enacting the rituals embodying traditional American values, and no longer do they evoke the same intensity, the same loyalty, or the same commitment” (p.210).

Rader begins his book by describing “sports as they once were,” using the 1951 National League playoff game as a backdrop. Here is the ideal world of sport, where professional games help to overcome the divisions of “race, religion, ethnicity, and class” (p.8), and in which the drama is flesh and blood, not staged. The fan, the aspirant, forget their daily worries as they are caught up in the joy and beauty of performance. Sport thus played strengthened traditional values such as hard work, integrity, self-control and cooperation, and created community bonds. In an age of bureaucracy, sports heroes represented the power of the individual.

Sketching the impact of newspapers on sports, Rader states that radio announcers broke with journalistic tradition by promoting instead of reporting sports. Television followed radio’s route, but went much further along it. The technical limitations of the 1950s favored individual rather than team sports, and “those sports which graphically displayed individual acts of violence or faked violence” (p. 37). Boxing gave up its “traditional aesthetic” as television promoters demanded more punching; newcomers were hustled in and out of the TV ring as cannon fodder, destroying small fight clubs in the process. Beset by scandal caused by greed, boxing never recovered from its bout with TV.

Rader regards the 1960s as a turning point. Arledge's wizardry at ABC coincided with technological developments which gave us the color, multiple camera angles, slow motion, and instant replays to which we are now all accustomed. So successful did ABC become through sports that by the 1970s CBS and NBC "came to believe that the sports division might well be the key to a network's overall prosperity" (p. 120). All three networks poured money into sports programming, money which turned players into militants, made college and professional clubs willing to alter rules and schedules to meet TV demands, and led to the creation of "trashsports." By the 1980s, and the advent of cable, viewers were drowning in sports; "with contests always present it was difficult for the viewer to get excited about who won or lost" (p. 137). Television had turned sports into just another commodity, to be repackaged and delivered in whatever way consumer whim might demand.

Rader's thesis is not new; William Johnson, Roger Angell, Michael Arlen and David Parente are only a few of the writers who, at greater or lesser length, have keened over what the "boob tube" in sport has wrought. Yet Rader's array of figures, names, and anecdotes, and his very clearcut presentation of his ideas, set this work apart. It overlaps very little another recent book on televised sport, Ron Powers' *Supertube: The Rise of Television Sports* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1984).

Nevertheless, historians will have problems with this book. Assertion is not evidence. The publishers demanded that the book be undocumented; the parsimonious bibliography is no substitute for the lack of footnotes. More puzzling, given Rader's previous books, particularly *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators*, is his determination to treat TV as a totally independent entity. In passing, Rader refers to the changes in American society between 1950 and 1984, particularly the revolution in leisure time, and admits that minor league baseball, for instance, was not destroyed solely by TV. But he insists on blaming TV for the present ills of sport in America, as if there had been no human rights movements, no drug problem, no changes in lifestyle throughout society, no fitness craze, no jet travel; as if, in fact, without TV, sport in the 1980s would have been like sport in the 1950s as he perceives it.

The perverseness of this view is perhaps best illustrated by Rader's discussion of college football. He states, "Money and high visibility furnished by television transformed college football into virtually a professional sport. . ." (p. 157). Yet in 1905 *McClure's* and other magazines were publishing articles with titles such as "The College Athlete: How Commercialism is Making Him a Professional," and by 1929 the most searching report ever published on college athletics dubbed college football "a profitable professional enterprise." TV has altered nothing; it has simply increased the stakes.

And while it is perfectly true that the vast sums of money TV has poured into the sports industry have made the most witless of us aware that sports is a business, we have little evidence that sport was ever as pure as Rader suggests. Money and prestige have always attracted talented players; specialization, "la

technique” as Ellul calls it, is a feature of the twentieth century. The values Rader believes sport represented in the 1950s are simply those of the 1950 WASP; if “traditional values” have melted away in sports, so they have in America in the 1980, now consciously pluralistic. Rader is unwilling to allow TV any points; he even thinks that the huge number of Americans who could never hope to see professional or even amateur sport at its highest level in 1950 were somehow better off than their descendants who can watch a telecast from anywhere in the world.

This work is a personal statement. Rader hates what he believes has happened to sport during his lifetime; he wants his old world back. He has written an interesting and readable book about it, a pioneering study in an important field which historians have hitherto neglected.

University of Texas at Dallas

Joan Chandler