

Book Reviews

Adelman, Melvin A. *A Sporting Time: New York City and the Rise of Modern Athletics*. Urbana and Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1986. Pp. 388. Pictures, notes, bibliographical essay, index. \$24.95

A Sporting Time is a revised and condensed version of a dissertation that has already had a greater impact on the field of sport history in the six years since it has appeared than many books have had after a much longer period in print. Melvin Adelman's 764 page manuscript opus now comes to us in briefer and far more polished form. While it contains few surprises for specialists familiar with his doctoral thesis, the book surely will find a much larger audience among social historians and perhaps even lay sports fans who appreciate scholarly works. It is a volume which should shortly become a classic study of nineteenth century American sports. Yet it will also be criticized by those who will suggest refinements and further explorations of its many provocative points.

A Sporting Time provides both a narrative and a highly sophisticated analysis of athletics in New York City (including Brooklyn) from 1820 to 1870. Adelman has applied the modernization model developed by Richard Brown, Eric Dunning, and Allen Guttman to horse racing, cricket, baseball, and more than one dozen lesser recreational activities during this era. The book includes the best available descriptions of the premodern and modern characteristics of a host of sports and leisure activities, as well as a thoughtful analysis of their stages of transition. It is encyclopedic in its information about the New York City sporting scene, and recreation in other locations. As a reference work for anyone who is trying to prepare lecture notes for a new course in sports history, it is indispensable. More importantly, this work offers a wealth of intriguing interpretations on many major and minor aspects of New York City sports. In general, it explains and assesses the critical leadership role exercised by New York City (and Brooklyn) sportsmen, especially in promoting horse racing and baseball across the United States. And finally, the author's research is superb. He demonstrates a mastery of an extensive secondary source literature on nineteenth century American social, urban, and sport history. His primary source research in newspapers, city directories, club records, and manuscript collections yields a vast amount of data. His demographic analysis of this information presents a detailed examination of the occupation, social class, and ethnicity of players and clubs, especially in baseball. It is the most ambitious and most extensive investigation of the sociological background of the participants and teams that has appeared to date.

The structure and allocation of space in *A Sporting Time* seems for the most part to be reasonable and appropriate, with most of the work concentrated on

horse racing, cricket, and baseball. There is, however, one major organizational flaw. The final chapter on "The Press and the Ideology of Modern Sport" belongs at the beginning of the book, along with the other introductory material on the industrial revolution, technology, urbanization, and the social, political, and economic background of New York City during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The placement of the material on the ideological issues at the end of the work is particularly puzzling, because Adelman makes numerous references to religious, moral, and other questions of values in each chapter. Particular ideological references to specific sports would have been much clearer if the general discussion of ideology had preceded them. The final chapter is therefore more of an introduction than a proper summary or conclusion.

A more serious problem concerns the use of the model of modernization as the fundamental organizing principle of the book. While this is useful in describing the characteristics of sports at various stages of their development, modernization theory itself does not explain very much about the factors that shaped the rise of modern sports during the mid-1800s. While Adelman does briefly discuss the role of industrialization, technology, urbanization, and other forces in his introductory chapters and in scattered sections of his text, he does not present a thorough and convincing answer to one of the most difficult questions of sport history-why did modern sports appear during the middle decades of the nineteenth century? A related point concerns the problem of explaining the exact timing for the major stages in the modernization of those sports which developed a mass base of extensive popular participation and spectatorship, such as harness racing and baseball. For example, take the case of baseball. Why did an incredible baseball mania break out in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Newark, Jersey City, and other towns in the greater New York region between 1856 and 1860? Is there anything in the history of New York that might explain the initial baseball boom of the years just prior to the Civil War, which provided the foundation for all of the major new developments of the 1860s, such as commercialization and professionalization? In other words, we need both a more general theory of all the influences that shaped the modernization of sports (such as the changing nature of work, the role of the urban environment, transportation and communication) and also a deeper understanding of the microhistorical context that might explain why a specific new trend like mass adult ball playing took off in the New York City area in 1856 and especially 1857.

Adelman's discussions of ball playing-especially cricket and baseball-merit closer scrutiny. His chapter on early American cricket seems to be the only one in the book that lacks an adequate factual narrative for the key events in New York City during the 1850's and 1860's. During this period there were several special events that had an important influence on the fortunes of cricket in other cities. *A Sporting Time* either ignores or passes too quickly over such events as the leading English versus American all-star games, the United States versus Canada series, and the visits of All England Elevens to the New York

area in 1859 and 1868. There is also no satisfactory analysis of the New York City cricket conventions of the late 1850's, or of the feud between the New York Cricket Club and the St. George Cricket Club, which proved to be extremely damaging to the cause of cricket in the New York metropolitan area.

The strength of this chapter lies in Adelman's interpretation of why cricket failed to become a popular team sport in the United States, and why it lost the competition with baseball for the honor of being America's national game. However, certain points require modification. First, anti-English sentiment was more detrimental to the fate of cricket than Adelman suggests. While it is true that cricket did not fail simply because it was English, during the 1850's and 1860's there is some evidence of hostility to English culture and sports in the New York area, and not just among the Irish. Secondly, more emphasis should be placed on the practical difficulties that English and native American cricketers faced in securing suitable fields or "pitches." It was not just that cricket was a more complex sport and was more difficult for children and adults to learn than baseball. Proper play required a well manicured, smooth ground for bowling and fielding; baseball did not require so fine a ground. Also, the problem of time of play both for players and spectators requires more explanation. It was not simply a matter of two day matches that discouraged both groups; just as damaging were unnecessary delays-including a customary lack of punctuality, long intervals between batsmen, and long breaks for lunch. Many Americans also did not like the English custom of allowing multiple club memberships, which permitted the same players to represent several teams. Finally, *A Sporting Time* does not devote enough attention to the attempts to "Americanize" cricket suggested by native enthusiasts. Adelman should have given a few more examples of how and why American cricketers argued over ridding the sport of some of its premodern characteristics. While it is true that the sport had already passed through several stages of modernization before baseball appeared, Englishmen and some American players ultimately refused to allow the sport to complete its modernization process concerning time of play, delays, lunch breaks, etc.

Adelman's coverage of baseball is much stronger than his treatment of cricket. His greatest contribution is certainly his proof that baseball was extremely popular very early in its history among skilled artisans and low white collar petty proprietors and employees. There is some confusion in his organization of his material on the narrative of baseball's development, the press and ideological support for the game, and his demographic analysis. In general I found his arguments clear and convincing, but a few points require further examination. More emphasis should be placed on the mass participation of children, youth, factory and office workers, and various ethnic and racial groups on the amateur sandlot, street, and club levels. While Adelman does an outstanding job of presenting the narrative of the rise of organized, commercial, and then professional baseball, we should not forget that the popularity of baseball during the Civil War era depended upon the hundreds of semi-organized and more formally organized nines that played for recreation on

whatever land they could find. Furthermore, more should be said about the ideological objections raised during the late 1860's by those newspaper editors, business leaders, and clergymen who complained about young people becoming obsessed with and overly serious about baseball, and who they believed were neglecting their family or work responsibilities. Finally, we need to know much more about the spectators during this era. Who were they? Why did they come to the ball games? How did they influence the development of baseball?

Despite these reservations, it should be obvious to all that I admire this work greatly. We all owe Mel Adelman a great debt for helping to move the field of American sport history onto higher ground. His book raises nearly as many questions as it answers, but perhaps that is the mark of a first class contribution to the scholarly study of sport in America.

Manhattan College

George B. Kirsch