

Allison, Dean, and Henderson, Bruce B. *Empire of Deceit*. London: Columbus Books, 1985. Pp. 377. £9.95.

Of all the major sports, only boxing could provide the stage for the incredible events retold in Dean Allison and Bruce B. Henderson's *Empire of Deceit*. It is the story of the Muhammad Ali Professional Sports organization, whose head Harold Smith masterminded a scheme which embezzled over \$21 million from Wells Fargo Bank. It is also a tale of boxing, a sport so accustomed to the laissez-faire pursuit of money that it proved powerless to defend itself from Smith's bold and illegal moves. In short, *Empire of Deceit* reads like a crime thriller yet provokes thoughts about the future of boxing.

The crime itself was easy, almost pure in its simplicity. Smith, a hustler, bad-check artist, and ex-con on the run whose real name is Ross Fields, started the Muhammad Ali Amateur Sports program in California. He wanted to help poor black youths whose only chance to escape poverty was sports. Or at least this is what he said, and perhaps it was partially true. Ali lent his name to the project, but not his money. Other concerned blacks provided help. The most important was Ben Lewis, a branch bank officer with Wells Fargo. Lewis provided unsecured loans to Smith, loans Smith never repaid. To cover what soon became a real problem, Lewis began to shift money around between several branch banks. He kept "loaning," money to Smith, hoping that one day the promoter would pay back the loans. Smith, who lived high-figuratively and literally—and overpaid his fighters, went deeper and deeper in debt. Presto—\$21 million and change.

Allison and Henderson detail the financial manipulations, the exposure of the crime, the hunt for the fugitives, and the eventual trial. As much as possible, the story is told from the inside. Allison, the United States attorney, who prosecuted the case, spent months studying every detail of the scandal, interviewing witnesses, and observing Smith. And Henderson is a solid investigative reporter. With the help of Lewis, who cooperated with the government, the rise and fall of Smith's "empire" is beautifully unfolded. Much like Vincent Bugliosi and Curt Gentry's *Helter Skelter*, *Empire of Deceit* is an all-night-page-turner.

The book is aimed for a general audience. While based on primary materials, it has no footnotes, bibliography, or index, and thus one can not easily check the facts. Even worse for a sports historian, the book lacks perspective. Clearly Smith's ultimate aim was to take over boxing through control of the fighters, especially the champions. He almost succeeded. As the authors write, "*Harold Smith and his cohorts had almost stolen boxing*. Smith had been using the

embezzled funds to outspend rival promoters, buy up all the top fighters in almost every weight class and corner the market in promising young amateurs, who he would move from the amateur to pro ranks.” (p. 325). By early 1981 when his crime was uncovered, he had become something of the Godfather of boxing, controlling champions, influencing ratings, and moving toward a virtual boxing monopoly. Obviously, Smith’s position in boxing was akin to that of James Norris and Frankie Carbo’s in the late 1940s and 1950s. Unfortunately, Allison and Henderson do not make the comparison or refer to Barney Nagler’s splendid study *James Norris and the Decline of Boxing* (1964).

Still, *Empire of Deceit* reinforces all theories that boxing is hopelessly corrupt. According to Allison and Henderson, Smith paid amateurs in boxing and track and field, bribed boxing officials (his ties to the World Boxing Association are particularly illuminating), and made cash payments to professionals which were never reported on anyone’s IRS returns. Certainly, *Empire of Deceit* would enliven any course in sport history and raise serious questions about the lack of centralized control over boxing.

Sam Houston State University

Randy Roberts