

Ruck, Rob. *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987. Pp. xi, 238. Introduction, notes, index, map, photographs.

Rob Ruck, a history professor at Chatham College in Pittsburgh, has written a seminal socio-historical story of the origins, evolution and changing roles of amateur and professional sports in Pittsburgh's black community from the turn of the century through the late 1950s. Ruck divides this era into "three overlapping periods of development": (1) the sandlot period of 1900 through the early 1920s which witnessed the arrival of black southern immigrants with their rich baseball tradition; (2) the golden age of black sport in Pittsburgh from 1920 through the 1940s which ushered in the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords; and, (3) the period of decline of black sport in Pittsburgh from the late 1940s through the 1950s which was marked by the integration of organized baseball, television and several other social factors which drew the attention of Pittsburgh's black citizens away from their community.

Ruck does a masterful job of noting all of the various sports activities that took place within the black Pittsburgh community during these three historical periods. The book chronicles the sports calendar of Pittsburgh's black community. Baseball, football, track, boxing, softball, tennis are all covered in this interesting study. Ruck presents each of these sports in all of their various levels of participation and interest for black citizens of Pittsburgh. For example, Ruck traces the evolution of the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords from the sandlots through semi-professional status to polished professional clubs with national followings. In the area of football, he traces evolution of black Pittsburgh's participation in this sport from local high schools and area black colleges to such semi-professional clubs as the Garfield Eagles.

*Seasons* also brings to light the local athletic heroes of these teams. Some, like Ralph Mellix, enjoyed a fame that was limited to their local community. While others, such as Josh Gibson, attained legendary status within the national Afro-American community because of their exceptional athletic talents. And Gus Greenlee, the numbers racketeer and ward boss, who became owner of the Crawfords, president of the Negro National League and the first black manager of a black world champion, John Henry Lewis, the world's light heavyweight champion.

Ruck's examination of Pittsburgh's black community through the single lens of sport is reminiscent of Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph William Nicholas's pioneer work, *The Negro Church*, which viewed black culture through the prism of religion. Ruck's contemporary study replaces Mays and Nicholas's colored sacred lens of black religion with the untinted secular lens of black

athletics. His findings are spectacular, especially in the area of class interaction. Ruck is able to make clear the distinctions between the sports interests of the OP's, Pittsburgh's staid black middle class, and those of the more recent lower class immigrants from the South. His chapter which is devoted to Cumberland "Cum" Posey, the son of one of the outstanding OP's families, who went on to excel in baseball, football and basketball as a player, manager and owner, best summarizes the dynamics of class that Ruck discovered during his research.

After looking through this clear lens of sports at the black community of Pittsburgh, Ruck concludes that sports fulfills three primary functions for the various classes of blacks that make up Pittsburgh's black community during the first half of this century. In his Introduction Ruck notes that, culturally, 'Sport helped bring forth black Pittsburgh's potential for self-organization, creativity, and expression.' (p. 3) Socially, sport "provided black Pittsburgh with a pleasant cultural counterpoint to the often grim experiences encountered at work and in the neighborhood." (p. 3) And, politically, "sport was a forum for symbolic political assertion and an arena for real political struggle." (p. 3)

These and other conclusions are based on sound, rigorous research. Extensive use is made of *The Pittsburgh Courier*, the black community's weekly newspaper, which proved to be a treasure trove of photographs, articles and interviews. Interviews for the study came either from the Archives of an Industrial Society, Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh or from the author's own collection.

It is to be hoped that Ruck's study will inspire other studies of sport in black Pittsburgh. His well-written and thoroughly documented book strongly suggests that this is not the final inning of research on this interesting topic.

Indiana University

William H. Wiggins, Jr.