

Chandler, Joan M., *Television and National Sport: The United States and Britain*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988. Pp. 240, index. \$24.95.

In this book, Joan Chandler argues effectively that television can not be held responsible for “corrupting” sport since sport had already been corrupted before television was invented or before certain specific sports were televised. Chandler’s strongest evidence comes in chapter-length histories of baseball and football, focusing on changes in rules which altered both games and the culture surrounding them in significant ways. So, too, chapters on cricket and soccer are useful, suggesting that the host culture for a sport governs not only what happens to the sport but how television may be used to exploit it as commercial entertainment. The mesh of British and American subjects is not always smooth, but the comparative treatment of both sport and television is welcome.

But what “corruption” means raises questions. Chandler seems to accept such concepts as “sacred space” and to believe that fans, at least, as distinct from more casual spectators, want the concept observed, too. As a matter of logic, though, there is no reason to assume that the fans’ version of what a sport ought to be like is necessarily the “true” or “correct” and “pure” one. As the umpire said, “it ain’t nothin’ until I call it.” Who makes the call? The owners?

The players? The fans? The nonsport businessman? The academic? Perhaps the broader issue here is how sport has become part of the growing “consumerism” in American culture, which has been discussed so usefully by Jackson Lears and others. This is also why Benjamin Rader’s *In Its Own Image* remains useful, albeit in ways quite different from Chandler’s book.

So, too, the discussion of “national differences” is, at best, highly debatable. For example, Chandler claims that Americans are characterized by a focus on result or specific event and outcome, unlike the British whom she considers inclined toward “process” (p. 77). Chandler shows no awareness that this view runs contrary to some of the most influential interpretations of the American experience. Indeed, to name one, John Kouwenhoven long ago traced the American emphasis on “process” through such diverse fields as music, visual arts, decorative arts, language, and aesthetics. This, in turn, is hinged upon the underlying logic of Alexis de Tocqueville and of the entire school of “consensus” historians such as Louis Hartz. The treatment of “national differences” is all the less satisfying—and seems all the more defective—since Chandler assumes her assertions about this issue rather than proving them.

This latter problem may stem from the book’s interdisciplinary character, which is at once a strength and a limitation. The diverse perspectives from different disciplines make for a lively book, which is also an “easy read.” But it also risks making the argument seem occasionally off-handed and arbitrary, contingent upon Chandler’s personal reactions while attending sporting events or watching them on television.

Even more, though, the notion of national cultural uniformity itself has problems. The fan going to Wrigley Field may exemplify that old chestnut about rural reverie—smelling the grass and all that. But such notions collapse into silliness for the fan going to Royals Stadium in Kansas City, where a very large number of fans are farmers, live in small towns, and have more than enough rural experience every day. For such fans, the baseball park is more an emblem of advancement and even high technology than of the agrarian myth. Similarly, it is not clear that the cultural predispositions of America’s many ethnic subcultures, notably Hispanic, match Chandler’s characterization.

Like much else in the book, Chandler’s discussion of a sporting event as a “text” being “translated” to a different medium is thoughtful and useful. What may need more consideration, though, is the place of televised sport in the experience not of the fan, or even of the spectator, but of the television watcher, for whom appreciation of what is watched is secondary to the watching.

Some of Chandler’s claims are questionable. In the early decades of this century, did spectators at college football games really “understand that they were subsidizing other sports” (p. 54)? Is “quality” in the televised broadcast of a sporting event a matter of style or content (p. 99)? Chandler’s assertion that American spectators “require that one team win” and consider a draw “entirely unacceptable” (p. 150) is arbitrary and most regrettable. Also, the book has a bit of the “insider’s” bias. For example, Chandler introduces Al Davis into her

discussion of football without identifying him, taking for granted the reader's interest and knowledge.

*Television and National Sport* adds usefully to the discussion of sport's place in mass culture. Its imperfections and special biases may invite worthwhile debate, while its accomplishments will inform and even entertain.

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