

Sissons, Ric. *The Players: A Social History of the Professional Cricketer*. (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1988) Pp. xiv, 336. A\$19.95.

The rise of the professional athlete in nineteenth century England occasioned a series of strong responses from the men who took it upon themselves to protect the oft-stated virtues involved in sports. Since that time many journalists have done little to hide their abhorrence for events that turned “gentlemen” into

mercenaries. One London writer pointed out that “we’ll weary of the fat cats one day-and it can’t be too soon.” The same writer concluded that the “beauty of sport used to be that it was separate from everyday life. It was not a career, far less a route to great wealth.” A colleague of his reminded readers that “the amateurism we have lost was not only good stuff in itself, but a valuable part of the life of the community.” The same week, a newspaper editorial opined that “What is really needed in sports today is . . . the code of the gentleman, which boils down to respect for the feelings of others.” Another prominent sports journalist wrote that some professionals “feel the game is so badly run that they have stated that unless things change they will pick up their balls and play elsewhere.”

The above are dramatic indications of how the argument about professionalism demonstrated the important relationship between sports and the value structure of English society. They also show why this stylishly written book by Ric Sissons deserves a wide readership. The quotes I listed were published in London between the winter of 1977 and the spring of 1988 and refer to a range of sports including cricket, football and tennis. They show the continued existence of the idea that professionalism has besmirched sports and, by implication, that there had been a golden age of sports to which we should return to regain the purity of the activity.

Throughout this book, Sissons demonstrates a vast knowledge of the literature about cricket, as well as the social and playing subtleties of the sport itself. He has a sure touch in finding the right quote to drive home a point and provides a substantial background in English social history against which to view cricket. It is those strengths which make it all the more regrettable that the publisher chose not to include footnotes in the book and that the bibliography is restricted to books and articles specifically about cricket.

Sissons shows how the professional cricketer had to fight against a variety of prejudices in order to gain acceptance as something more than a laborer. In some ways, he was the equivalent of a side show freak—a marvelously talented curiosity that did not fit into the normal ideas of productive paid labor. Since he was participating in mere game, why did he deserve a respectable salary. At the same time, he was the master of a sport that was considered an important attribute of English culture, morality and the ideals that made England special, at least in the eyes of proper English society. Payment would debase both the cricketer and cricket. But another fact was inescapable; it was the professionals, starting with the All England Eleven, who set the standards for the game, took the lead in spreading it and received the greatest acclaim for their efforts.

Sissons presents marvelous sketches of cricketers, but some of the most vibrant personalities were men who were involved in the debate over the administration of the game. An important opponent of the professional was James Pycroft, who complained about men “making their livelihood in a silly way” and argued all “true lovers of cricket” to have nothing to do with All England matches. Somehow it seems appropriate that Pycroft, who was protecting the higher social and moral instincts threatened by working class

professionals, was a graduate of Oxford and a barrister trained at Lincoln's Inn who had abandoned his earlier careers when he took holy orders. His change summed up the essential dilemma facing the spectators and officials. Were they more interested in high quality cricket or the high qualities of the cricketer?

In the 1880s, Lord Harris took it upon himself to lead a movement to stop the professional from being "prevented from reaching the highest ranks by unnecessary restrictions" (p. 87). He called himself a "cricket Socialist," but a few years later he led efforts to stop the free movement of cricketers. It would be easy to look at him as a hypocrite or a buffoon or consign Lord Harris to the category of those swayed by their irrational loyalty to *the game*. Instead, Sissons shows us how Harris' conversion paralleled his role in the Primrose League, a Tory organization dedicated to "uniting all social classes in a common crusade against the forces of Atheism and Revolution" (p. 90). Cricket was to be one of the chosen instruments to reinforce the social values of a ruling Christian, English (cricket showed that God was an Englishman) elite; in Harris' phrase cricket was a "great Conservative institution."

Sissons' chapters on the "Golden Age" and the "Close of Play" show how individual professionals achieved some status and relative wealth in the period between 1850 and 1880 and how fleeting were both their fame and security. His survey of leading players demonstrates how they tried to use their success at cricket to avoid going back to the discipline and anonymity of factory life and manual trades. They tried to retain their connection to the sport and to trade on their only salable commodities, their name and sporting reputation. The tenuous nature of fame is clearer when Sissons presents ten cases of the once mighty ending up in poverty.

One of the strongest chapters, "The Disguised Professional" looks at the "contracts, expenses, jobs, gifts" and other rewards that were made available to amateur cricketers by authorities who thought it was essential to preserve the façade of amateurism. Hypocrisy was preferable to admitting that the moral virtues of the game would not be compromised by the professionals. The issue is put into sharp perspective by Sissons' conclusion that "Although always regarded as an amateur, Walter Read was the best paid pre-War Surrey cricketer" (p. 157) It would be interesting to know who "regarded Read as an amateur" and how important it was for the cricketing press to help perpetuate what must have been an openly known fraud.

The final chapters do an excellent job summarizing the way in which professionalism became legitimized after the Second World War and how the game accommodated to it. Sissons' discussion of the future of cricket takes into account the current financial problems of the sport and the incursions of corporate sponsorship. We are reminded that individual patronage was always important to cricket, the use of corporate patronage in 1988 says more about the society than it does about the sport. As any good social history of a sport, *The Players* has a feel for the dramatic. Sissons' eye for this is at its surest when he discusses, "1953—A Momentous Season." For the first time in the twentieth century, a professional, Len Hutton, was asked to captain England in a Test

series against Australia and Jack Hobbs became the first professional cricketer to receive a knighthood. The real triumph of professionalism is shown best when Sissons remarks that unlike Hammond, “Hobbs, Hendren, and Sutcliffe were proud to be professional cricketers” (p. 273). There could be no clearer declaration of the new status of the professional than when the leading practitioners felt that they could come out of the shadows of a second class status and take their proper place as the leaders of the sport. *The Players* is an excellent analysis of how cricket has changed. Most important, Sissons shows how the sport has been part of English society, warts and all.

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