

## Essay Reviews

Riess, Steven A., *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989. Pp. 332, illustrated. \$29.95.

*City Games* explores the connections between the development of American sport and the growth of urban America. More a synthesis of existing scholarship than new research into unexplored territory, Steven Riess's book, certainly achieves its major objectives. Dividing American urban development into three stages; the walking city (1820-1870), the industrial radial city (1870-1960) and the suburbanized metropolis (1945-1980) he displays an impressive command of the work of urban, social, and sport historians in demonstrating how a variety of factors including class, ethnicity, race, social values, politics and geography mixed in different ways over time to affect urban growth, American sport and the dynamic interaction between them. But Riess's command of the literature and his uncritical acceptance of it, also serves other purposes-less intended but no less significant. In the end, *City Games*, both as an example of scholarship and in terms of the scholarship on which it relies, illustrates both the solid work already accomplished by sports historians as well as some of the real limits of that effort. In doing so, it helps direct us towards a promising future.

Although always concerned about the dynamic interplay of a variety of factors in demonstrating that the city, "more than any single factor, influenced the development of sport and recreational pastimes in America," two recurring themes, Riess insists, have been "central to the evolution of sport in the city."(pp.1,6) Indeed the relationship between people and what he calls urban spatial arrangements and the efforts of social reformers "to ameliorate the quality of urban life through sport," provide the framework for discussions of the impact of class, ethnicity, and urban politics on that process.(p.7) His brief, opening chapters on the walking cities of mid-19th century America, for example, take into account the different sportive interests of working-class ethnics and the wealthy in showing how sport helped define class boundaries and established, for such groups, a sense of community. Yet, the most critical development in this period, Riess argues, was "the creation of a positive sports ideology" as "partial solution to the urban pathology" that accompanied the growth of cities.(p.26) Here and in later chapters, relying on the work of Don Mrozek, Ben Rader, Steven Hardy, Melvin Adelman and other scholars, he makes a strong case for the reification of this ideology, in one form or another, as a critical ingredient for legitimizing sport as acceptable outlet for urban Americans. Depending upon time, circumstance, and the people involved, it

appears in one form or another-be it as an instrument of self-reform or a vehicle of social control.

The significance of this sports creed certainly figures in Riess's analysis of sport and the radial industrialized city. But in this period-the focus of almost three-quarters of the book, he argues that even more important were spatial considerations involving land and its use, dictated in part by class, ethnic, and racial tensions. Fuelled by immigration and industrial development, an ever-expanding urban population found different leisure opportunities that spurred the development of American sport in distinctive ways. During the so-called Gilded Age, wealthy WASP urbanites accessed land on the fringes of the city and choice plots within to build exclusive country clubs and city athletic clubs that defined their status and social standing while providing escape from "the worst pathological features of the industrial city."(p.91) Taking advantage of increased leisure time and a sports ideology that encouraged their participation, the middle class eagerly used new parks built in their neighborhoods to engage in a variety of recreational sports. They also spent their discretionary income to purchase bicycles and to attend baseball games at new ballparks accessed by public transportation that they could afford. Clever sports capitalists able to see the possibilities for real profit in this new business of sport did their part to encourage participation.

Only the working-class, increasingly made up of eastern and southern European immigrants, suffered during this period of rapid urbanization. Living in crowded, ethnic neighborhoods with little access to public transportation, parks, ballfields, or racetracks, they also experienced the disappearance of informal playing sites in the face of urban economic expansion. Not that this stopped them, Riess argues, from using the streets as playgrounds and from participating in a range of neighborhood leisure activities that required limited space. Spurred by the activities of settlement house workers and social reformers who worked to access public land for park development in such areas and who urged participation in sport as a way of assimilating second-generation working-class immigrants, European immigrants with different cultural heritages made sport a vital part of their lives.

No less significant than these various ways in which groups of citizens responded to urbanization and its effect on space and leisure opportunity, were the responses of politicians, criminals and capitalists to the commercial possibilities inherent in sport. Focusing on baseball, boxing, and horseracing, Riess traces the interplay of forces that resulted in their expansion with particular focus on the building of semipublic sports facilities that encouraged professionalization and profits.

Similar concerns about professional sport and its expansion dominate the book's one short chapter on sport in the suburban era. With little or no attention to other concerns, it focuses on the connection between the rise of new metropolitan regions in a post-World War II America and the expansion of professional team sports. Summarizing an interesting literature on the location of professional sports franchises and urban development, Riess finds little to

substantiate the claims of local boosters, businessmen, and sports fans that the public cost of subsidizing such enterprises produces the kind of economic and social benefits promised.

Despite the rather mixed heritage of the connection between urban growth and the development of modern American sport, Riess's overall assessment of the process is certainly positive. As he puts it in the book's concluding sentence, "American sports institutions have been not simply a product of urbanization but have themselves deeply influenced urban change, usually for the better, in distinctive and visible ways." (p.259) Given this perspective, it is no wonder that the subtitle of *City Games* is "the evolution of American urban society and the rise of sports."

In the face of a good deal of contrary evidence offered throughout; from the bankruptcy of the so-called sports creed, the false hope sports has offered blacks, and the discrepancy between the promise of commercial benefit and the true economic and social impact of sports franchises on today's urban centers; readers may well be surprised by such a sweeping conclusion. In fact, however, it is symptomatic of a major limitation of this otherwise useful book.

Too often, Riess offers jargon-packed generalizations that neither fit the evidence he presents nor the larger historical context he is describing. For example, explaining the creation of what he calls "a positive sports ideology" during the age of the walking city between 1820 and 1870, he describes it "as a substitute for the lost world of small town America and its values" and a response to an "urban pathology" that promoted vice and anomie for new urban residents. (p.3) Yet, as Eric Foner and others have pointed out, America on the verge of Civil War was still a society of small towns and small producers. Even though the war played a key role in propelling the country into its modern urbanized, industrial age, it is unreasonable to generalize about "lost worlds" and anomie as accurate characterizations of city life in these years.

Similar problems also arise when Riess discusses the role of this same sports ideology in legitimizing participation in sport for urban middle classes in the Gilded "Victorian bourgeoisie," he notes, "enjoyed sports that were useful and either enabled them to personally escape the woes of business and urban pathology or else enhanced city life by improving individual character, public health, or social morality."(p.60) Descriptions of such participation and of prescriptive rhetoric urging the "strenuous life" as antidote to "overcivilization" and the loss of individuality engendered by urbanization, industrialization and the rise of the corporate state follow. But what exactly is urban pathology? Does it have the same meaning in 1840, 1890 and 1960? Do assertions about attitude and behavior based on prescriptive rhetoric tell us enough about how everyday people experienced it or why they participated in sport?

Riess is hardly alone in relying on such evidence in trying to understand the complex relationship between sport and urbanization. Much of the scholarship he summarizes tells us a good deal about what people have insisted sports' purpose is-be they Jacksonian health reformers, baseball entrepreneurs, settlement house workers, politicians, or athletes. Nor is there any dispute that

such people, acting on their beliefs, have been key players in making sport such an important part of the urban landscape.

It is time, however, to go beyond interpretation based on proscription and prescription if we are to obtain a full understanding of the connection between sport and cities. Recent efforts by Elliot Gorn, David Nasaw, Roy Rosenzweig, and Rob Ruck that, in their own ways, attempt to understand the meaning and actual experience of sport and leisure of everyday working-class people in different urban settings, offer a variety of possibilities here. In simplest terms, more attention to history "from the bottom up" is the next step needed to complement the story that Riess tells.

Riess is too good a scholar not to be aware of such work. Indeed, at times, he even incorporates what it has to say in limited ways into his analysis. But ultimately, he is reluctant to embrace fully their arguments or their speculations, many of which call into question interpretations that celebrate the "rise of American sport," "the evolution of American urban society," and American capitalism. One example will suffice. Summarizing the experience of urban blacks in the period between 1870 and 1960, he describes how their sporting options, like those of other well-defined, ethnic urban population groups have been influenced over time by class, culture, and space. Blacks, however, have also had to deal with the factor of racial distinction. Riess adequately recounts the impact of segregation on the development of black urban sport, black interest in boxing and baseball, the importance of black athletic teams and individual athletes as symbols of black pride, and the faint and elusive hope of social mobility offered to blacks through sport. He concludes by noting that "as white ethnics moved out of the inner city, they were replaced by blacks, who also succeeded in boxing and basketball, the two major sports most congruent with the physical and cultural character of inner-city life. But unlike the white groups, blacks have not been able to escape urban poverty and the ghetto, and one result has been the unfortunate over-reliance on athletics as a means of getting ahead."(p.123) A few pages earlier, explaining why blacks still rely too much on sport as a path to social mobility, he suggests that "unlike earlier cohorts of inner-city basketball players, the latest generation devoted *all* their attention to the game and little to their brain, with the result that even if they excelled in basketball and achieved a degree of fame, there was a strong chance they would end up right back in the ghetto where they had started."(p.117)

While much of his description is accurate, Riess's explanation for what he describes is sorely limited. Part of the problem is that cities populated by urban blacks in the 1960s and 1970s were far different places than those that housed Italian and Jewish immigrants and their children in the 1920s and 1930s. Deteriorating urban infrastructures, gentrification, problems of crime and drugs far beyond anything imagined by an Arnold Rothstein or an Al Capone, the collapse of public housing, health care, and a whole range of other factors complicate attempts to compare the situation of groups of people living in dramatically different urban situations. A different organizational approach that more subtly considered changing urban conditions over the last century

might have helped. More attention to the possibility that what happened in New York, Chicago, and Boston did not necessarily reflect situations in smaller cities with different ethnic and racial mixes certainly would have been useful. Ultimately, however, Riess's overriding positive perspective on sport, urban American, and, implicitly, American capitalism, explain his views.

Why haven't "blacks been able to escape urban poverty?" Have they indeed devoted "all their attention to the game and little to their brain," and if so, what might explain it? Riess is noticeably silent on these questions. Nor is he willing to consider the work of Harry Edwards, Mark Naison, and other social critics of sport and American society who provide answers that include sharp criticisms of a capitalist political economy and American capitalist social values. In the process, they also underline the potentially pernicious role of sport in contemporary urban America in masking the real problems faced by blacks and other members of this nation's increasingly growing under-class, a large portion of which lives in cities that are unable to meet the basic needs of all of their citizens. While there is no reason to agree with such criticism, recognition of it would have greatly enriched a book as important for what it provides as for what it excludes. Limited in its political perspective yet accurately reflecting the efforts of many scholars engaged in the growing and vital field of American sport history, *City Games* not only provides a useful summary of where we are presently but also, inadvertently, some clues about where we should be headed.

Michigan State University

Peter Levine