

Sloan, Tod. *Tod Sloan By Himself* ed. A. Dick Luckman. San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1988. Pp. 203. \$8.00 (paper).

Born James Forman Sloan, "Tod" (from "Toad") Sloan lived a life which often reversed the traditional (if mythic) understanding of the American dream.

An Indiana farm boy, Sloan found temporary fame and fortune by leaving the farm for the city. A revolutionary in the business of racing horses, he continued to ride east, not west (after a California detour), in his search for greater victories and friendlier pastures. Spurning America for England in the mid-1890s, Sloan was met with both instant acceptance and ultimate rejection, all in the short space of five years. And therein lies a tale, a tale which Tod Sloan felt compelled to tell all "by himself."

Written in 1915 when Sloan was barely forty, this curious autobiography has long been out of print. Like Sloan himself, his memoir deserved a better fate. Thanks to San Diego State University Press, Sloan once again will get his long sought-and long posthumous-hearing.

In many respects, Sloan was the Pete Rose of the jockey trade at the turn of the century. But in one significant respect, he was not. Banned from riding in England after the 1900 racing season for betting, a shocked Sloan immediately conceded that, yes, he had placed wagers, but only on himself. Sound familiar? It surely did to Sloan. After all, he had often done just that on the western shore of the Atlantic. But what had been standard practice in the United States was taboo in England. And the brash Sloan paid dearly for violating that taboo.

This wayward son of the middle border had initially found a home among English aristocrats. In fact, upper class Englishmen proved to be more democratic than allegedly democratic New Yorkers in their dealings with this proud young man, who had had to make his own way in the world from age thirteen on. Of course, the obvious fact that Sloan was a genius at his craft helped matters considerably.

Sloan's success stemmed from his pioneering a new style of riding. Pejoratively referred to as the "monkey seat," Sloan's position on the horse was high up on the neck of the animal. From that perch (and in a semi-crouch), Sloan was able to look directly over the horse's head-and to control the tempo of the race from the outset. Prior to Sloan, endurance had been more important than speed. After his arrival, more so in London than in New York, speed became primary. Speed attracted customers, and in America at least horse racing was a commercial enterprise-before and after Tod Sloan had set foot in his abbreviated stirrups.

However, in that breezily written memoir, Sloan does make clear that speed and pace are not the same thing. There were times, he advises, when waiting to make a move proved wiser than forcing the action. Nor are speed and savagery to be linked. There were never times, he insists, when he resorted to the stirrup to drive his mount on.

Can a great athlete be both canny and naïve? Of course. And Tod Sloan is Exhibit A all by himself. Here again the Pete Rose parallel appears semi-apt. While racing, Sloan was a master strategist. Away from the track, he consorted easily with gamblers and aristocrats. Moving assuredly within both circles, his canniness was not confined to his brief moments in the winner's circle. Nor was he monomaniacal about his sport. Here was a jockey who had had to work hard to overcome his fear of horses. Here was a man whose career offers ample proof

that knack alone is no guarantee of success. He worked for-and earned-his greatness. And yet he had a knack for more than riding horses. Shooting and auto racing were among his other consuming passions.

So where is the naïveté in all this? Pervading his memoir is a freshness, an earnestness, an openness, an Americanness that belies the story that he tells. His is, in part, a story of American wickedness (gambling interests) invading a more innocent England. And yet this forever innocent American never really understood what happened to him-or why-in England.

Beginning in 1901 all English racing courses (and almost all American tracks as well) were closed to Sloan. And yet he was never formally suspended or disqualified. Furthermore (and unlike Rose), he did have ongoing connections with his craft. He could attend races. He could own and train horses. And, presumably, he could still place bets.

Like Rose, Tod Sloan was an innocent American in ways that transcended courts of law, sport, or public opinion. One day, he forever believed, everything would be made right once again. That day, of course, never came-despite Sloan's exercise in apologia. Fifteen years after his unwritten banishment, he took up the pen, still assuming that he would soon be able to re-live his days of youthful greatness. Instead, he would spend the final eighteen years of his life—trying and failing-to come to terms with what had happened to him in the prime of his professional life. At least Mr. Rose's tragic collapse came after his own days of youthful-and middle-aged-greatness were over.

As a jockey, Sloan was a winner, though not always a gracious one. As an apologist, he was a loser, though seldom a bitter one. His book did not achieve what he sought to achieve. But Sloan was far from destroyed by this failure. He had had too much fun along the way.

It would be saying too much to conclude that Sloan was a better man for his failure. But the history of horse racing on both sides of the Atlantic is better for having this document of one more American original who fell victim to-and was almost victimized by-the mischief within and around him.

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