Bloom, Don. *Confessions of a Sportswriter.* New York: Vantage Press, 1988. $16.95; Kindred, Dave, *Heroes, Fools and Other Dreamers.* Marietta, GA: Longstreet Press, 1988. $14.95; Murray, Jim. *The Jim Murray Collection.* Dallas: Taylor Publishing Co. 1988. $14.95.

Here are three books by sportswriters. Of what use are they to the sports historian? Mainly, they are made up of newspaper columns removed from the context that originally gave them meaning. Newspapers themselves have proven essential to the study of modern urban life and the development of sport. In his *Small Town Chicago* (1980), a study of Finley Peter Dunne, George Ade, and Ring Lardner, James DeMuth speaks of the newspaper as "making the city

comprehensible to its citizens" (19). The three writers he studied, he felt, tried "to domesticate the unfamiliar features of Chicago society which disturbed their readers" (20). Melvin Adelman in *A Sporting Time* (1986) argues that the press developed a "new sports ideology" involving personal health, morality, and character development that gave sport a new modern social importance (270, 285). Eliot Gorn's *The Manly Art* (1986) suggests a third version of the role of the press. "Mass media sanitize, then play back depictions of outlaw folk cultures" (253). One can see all three versions of the role of the media in 20th century American life at work in each of the three books under review, although each has a quite different focus from the other two.

The Jim Murray Collection is one of a series called "The Sportswriter's Eye" which, according to the dust jacket, "celebrates great contemporary American sportswriters and their craft." The book consists of an introduction by Vin Scully and 87 newspaper columns divided into three sections: "Personally Speaking" (41 columns), "Portraits" (39 columns), "Fond Farewells" (7 columns). The columns have apparently not been edited and it is not clear who chose and organized them, though Carlton Stowers is listed as "Series editor."

Murray's columns have a punchy, witty, straight-from-the shoulder, man-to-man style (women may enjoy reading Murray, but only six of these columns have women as their subject), most readable in a newspaper format. A thousand words of Murray is enough for one day. His opinions are for the most part conservative, though not always logically so. In his various columns about baseball, for instance, he shows himself quite opposed to change, arguing against changes in uniforms, and characterizing the game as "the great escape, our uncommon denomination" (102). One of his columns is "a salute to baseball, a hymn to yesterday" (95). The game is played and watched by the young at heart. Casey Stengel is the "world's oldest nine-year-old" (257). Murray's fond farewell to Dizzy Dean is titled "He Never Grew Up" (254).

As a consequence Murray's columns consistently oppose the big money games off the field since free agency. He deplores lawyers and unions and keeps silent about owners. We learn he doesn't much like owners either only in another context, Writing about Bill Veeck, he characterizes them as "a bunch of bankers, chewing gum heirs, mortgagers, generals, judges and beer barons whose principal interest is in making 10 percent on their money." Veeck is celebrated because he is fun-loving and therefore childlike, not because he instituted significant changes.

On occasion Murray's opinions are more than witty and conservative. A column on the Hall of Fame ("Fame but No Hall") turns into an essay on Maury Wills as an innovative offensive player. In a column on Satchel Paige, he asserts that ballplayers in the Negro leagues were better than those in the white major leagues.

David Kindred's *Heroes, Fools and Other Dreamers* is in some respects quite different from *The Jim Murray Collection.* The essays make better reading in one respect; they result from various kinds of writing assignments, and thus there is more variety in length and emphasis. In addition, Kindred seems to be

addressing a different audience, one that likes to think of itself as sophisticated, If Murray thinks sports ought to be fun, Kindred thinks they ought to be meaningful. His introduction searches out the lessons of sport. "We see [Greg] Norman and we draw from his example a feeling of his strength and excellence; and we put that feeling to our own uses, perhaps in work as difficult as a mother's rearing a child, perhaps even in the writing of a sentence. We would be as good in every way as our games have shown it is possible to be" (13).

This is well put, but on other occasions Kindred's language is strained. Consider these sentences describing Bert Yancey's golf game: "Yancey was a classicist with a club in his hand. His swing was a symphony, each movement majestic in its purity and simplicity" (116). Sometimes Kindred's thinking is obscured. Here is an important declaration from his essay "College Athletics":

> I love the college games, not only for the passion invested in them by young men and women in pursuit of their athletic dreams but for the societal good the whole enterprise can accomplish by giving thousands of young people a happy reason to crack a textbook more than once (184).

This doesn't make much sense, and it comes in an essay of a sort which isn't covered by the title of the book. Most of the 45 essays are about sportsmen (three are sportswomen); "College Athletics," longer than most of the pieces in the book, is an attack on the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

In his introduction Kindred acknowledges the presence of economic considerations in sports as he asserts that these considerations are ordinarily transcended. He quotes Tom Callahan of *Time* magazine:

> If you write about sports long enough, you're constantly coming back to the point that something buoys people, something makes you feel better for having been there. Something of value is at work there, and it's a value beyond the cheat, tawdry value ABC and Calvin Griffith and all the money-changers put on it. Something is hallowed here. I think that something is excellence (17).

Kindred's purpose is to drive the money-changers from the temple of sport, and his specific target in the essay "College Athletics" becomes the NCAA itself, "the stuffed-shirts who run college athletics" (184). But Kindred is angry at more than this one element in college athletics. The fact that universities and coaches make millions and players go virtually unpaid is "an outrage." What always outrages Kindred throughout the book, and in this he closely resembles Murray, is the "intrusion" of money in the world of sports. Neither wants to deal with a business.

Don Bloom's *Confessions of a Sportswriter* is a rather different book from both Kindred's and Murray's and may ultimately be more useful to sport historians than either. Though both Kindred and Murray contain autobiographical elements, Bloom's book is much more of an autobiography. We get more of a sense here of what a sportswriter's life is like. Bloom knits columns from some 37 years of sportswriting together into a not-always-coherent but usually fascinating account of the life of a newspaperman covering sports. Bloom isn't as good a writer as Murray or Kindred, but his book tells us more about the profession than either of theirs: "Being a columnist then [1969]

was not being a specialist as it is today. We did our columns after doing the routine chores" (98).

Confessions of a Sportswriter is by far the longest of the three books, and its main focus is the sportswriter's life even though the book itself is built around columns Bloom wrote for the Sacramento *Bee,* Sacramento *Union,* and Woodland *Democrat.* Bloom talks about changing jobs (73, 314) and spends some time complaining about one of his bosses (319). Many of his columns focus on the West Coast, but just as many treat the national and international sports scene. Bloom calls his profession "the often zany sportswriting business" (247) and writes about anything and everything connected with sports: from high school sports (which he notes "sell a lot of newspapers") to professional wrestling to such sports celebrities as Ty Cobb and Jack Dempsey to the Olympic games.

Bloom is full of opinions. He calls the Amateur Athletic Union "ridiculous and inept." For him, Roger Maris's MVP means "most vile person." Like Kindred, he's appalled at the situation in college athletics. Here he is concerning one possible solution to the problem:

> They talk about throwing out the rule book and paying non-students to perform on athletic teams-possibly for five years. Horse-shit. Scholastics come first and extracurricular activities are second (246).

Legendary Bear Bryant receives a verbal drubbing for not recruiting black players sooner. "With his stature, Bryant could have been the Abraham Lincoln Branch Rickey of his time. He didn't do it. Blacks could not play for Alabama" (105). But Blooms' style, like Kindred's, staggers in the face of the problems of college athletics: he speaks longingly of "the days before scholarships cluttered the collegiate atmosphere" (27).

Bloom thinks out loud about the imperatives of his profession. On at least two occasions he talks about the wisdom of not sitting on a story, something he himself says he won't do. Encountering a colleague afraid of losing a source if he publishes a story, he asks, "What's the sense of having sources if you don't use them?" (37). Of his story recalling California quarterback Joe Roth's cancer, he says, "it was one of the most difficult stories I ever wrote, but someone had to break the very sad news" (287).

Bloom also has a sportswriter's natural animosity towards television journalists. "The majority of people who work for TV and radio stations are not reporters. They are hired because they look good on camera or have excellent voices over the airways. Some don't even know how to spell correctly. . . . Nor do the majority of them irritate athletes with probing questions" (126). Bloom's chief animosity is reserved for one who does ask probing questions, Howard Cosell. Cosell publicly blamed Sacramento State coach Stan Wright for Eddie Hart and Reynauld Robinson's missing the 100-meter semifinals in the 1972 Olympics. Bloom's defense of Wright and attack of Cosell takes up several columns (203-216). Bloom's book in general suggests that David Voigt's brief

study of the development of sportswriting, "From Chadwick to the Chipmunks," is substantially correct.[1]

Finally, Bloom has the reporter's basic skill, the ability to listen. Here is Jack Dempsey:

> I lived with bums and challenged guys to bare-fisted fights in saloons for two bits or half a buck. That's when 1 was in my teens. I learned real quick how to prepare my body for the abuse it had to take in a fight. I used gum, beef brine and my fists to get to the top. I chewed gum by the hours to develop the muscles in my face. I rubbed brine into my face to toughen the skin. You could cut my face with a razor blade and it wouldn't bleed.

Sheer poetry! As a consequence of all this, though Don Bloom is the least known of these three writers, his book may be the most useful of the three to sport historians.

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1. Voigt, David Q, "From Chadwick to the Chipmunks," *Journal of American Culture* 7:3 (Fall, 1984): 31-37.