

Roberts, Randy, and Olson, James S. *Winning Is The Only Thing: Sports in America since 1945*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989. Pp. xii, 257. Index, bibliographic essay, photos. \$18.95.

Randy Roberts is well known to the community of sport historians for his informative and exceptionally well-written biographies of pugilists Jack Dempsey and Jack Johnson. This time he shifts gears as he collaborates with his former colleague James Olson to construct a synthesis of the development and meaning of sport in America since 1945. The two authors assert that the post World War II era was a watershed mark in the history of American sport. Prior to this period sport knew its place in American culture as it offered people a diversion from the troubles and tragedies of daily life. However, in the subsequent generation it came to assume extraordinary significance and the games people played and watched took on important political, economic and personal consequences. Sport emerged as a national obsession and as a new cultural currency which helped stitch together a diverse society. These events not only reflected the profound social changes occurring within the United States, but sport came increasingly to be a lens through which millions of Americans "interpreted the significance of their country, their communities, their families and themselves." (p. xi)

Roberts and Olson examine a variety of themes to explicate the changing face of sport and its linkage to the broader cultural and social milieu. They devote two chapters each to the Olympic Games, the growing nexus between television and sport, the shifting structure and economics of professional sport and the

black experience in American athletics. They also investigate corruption in sport giving most of their attention to the 1951 basketball scandal and conclude with an analysis of the fitness movement of the previous two decades. As a result of this approach, the focus of the book is much more selective than its subtitle suggests as it concentrates almost entirely on high level competitive sport, explores almost exclusively the sporting practices of men and delves more into the seamy side of sport.

Roberts and Olson have produced a well-crafted and eminently readable work. They drew upon a vast amount of scholarly and popular literature on sport to construct their synthesis and they wove the material in a variety of places into fresh insights and new interpretations. Nowhere is this more evident than in their innovative treatment of the sport-television relationship. Similar to virtually every writer on this subject, Roberts and Olson recognize the dramatic and transformative character of the new technological media. However, they claim that television has too easily emerged as the scapegoat for the vast changes that occurred in the sports world and that critics of its influence have tended to overlook the multiple and complex reasons for such alterations. While Roberts and Olson concede that television often overexposed and altered sport, they blame the owners rather than network executives for this trend since the latter were rightly concerned with the advancement of their companies, the creation of entertaining programs and it "was not their duty or responsibility to safeguard the special character, structure, and rituals of the sports world." (p. 111)

Roberts and Olson are without question at their best when they insightfully dissect the profound influence Roone Arledge had in creating the sports television revolution. They deftly show how he dramatically changed the manner in which athletic events were watched and understood, explore the imaginative technological innovations that he introduced to sports telecasting and discuss his genius in comprehending how the media should present sporting events. Roberts and Olson make perfectly clear that the marriage between sport and television that Arledge both solidified and expanded was not one of equal partners as the television executive was always first and foremost concerned with the entertainment (and by implication, ratings) nature of his sport programming.

Throughout the work, Roberts and Olson offer a variety of suggestive interpretations of various sporting trends and patterns during this era. For example, they assert that similar to the world of business and popular culture, the cultural currency of American sports, with its emphasis on money, power, status and identity, has colonized the Olympic Games and that this international sporting event has "degenerated into commercial extravaganzas financed by television and dominated by a show-business ethos." (pp. 209-10). While Roberts' and Olson's perspectives are often thought-provoking, their analysis of some themes remains open to debate. For example, they maintain that the immigrant Catholic culture of NFL owners set them apart from their counterparts in other professional sports, significantly contributed to the internal

solidarity and success of professional football, and was responsible in the years prior to 1960 for the limited franchise movement in this sport at a time when baseball and basketball were stricken by such flight. There is no doubt that the similar social backgrounds of NFL magnates influenced both their outlook and interrelationships. However, the claim that it led them to create a corporate vision-which promoted a preference for stability over mobility and an authoritarian rather than democratic model of leadership-stretches the point, fails to comprehend the nature and stage development of football as compared to other sports, and contains questionable assumptions. The contention that the NFL maintained a greater sense of place is not born out by the evidence as the percentage of professional football and baseball clubs in 1945 which had moved to new cities by 1960 was virtually the same for the two sports, 30 and 31.25 percent respectively.

The book contains some factual errors. The Los Angeles Rams did not sign Woody Strode to boost attendance, but rather the club was forced to sign black players as part of its agreement to lease the Los Angeles Coliseum. The Dodgers won the World Series in 1955, not 1956 (p. 134) as every Brooklyn boy knows. In addition, Roberts' and Olson's contention that sport in America in the pre-World War II era was mere diversion runs counter to both the current scholarship and historical reality.

The most serious limitation of Roberts' and Olson's work is their almost total exclusion of the significant changes in women's involvement in sport and their failure to relate sport to the important shifts that occurred in gender relations. They devote only slightly more than two pages to women, of which half examine the pre-1945 period. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Billy Jean King receives scant attention even though she probably ranked only behind Jackie Robinson and Muhammed Ali (both of whom were treated in detail) as a major symbolic figure of the sporting change of this generation. Roberts and Olson did note the dramatic gains women made athletically and that the issue is no longer whether they should compete but the battle is now "over what percentage of the pie they should receive." (p. 220) However, they provide no analysis of the trials and tribulations that went into the selection of this course, the significant contradictions and tensions that it produced, the ongoing discriminatory practices that persist and the meaning of women's sporting involvement in a patriarchal society. Roberts and Olson's inadequate treatment of women is exacerbated by their failure to explore sporting change within the context of the important shifts within gender relations. Precisely how such critical alterations, some real others more stylistic, impacted on sport is unfortunately not discussed. Nor do they investigate how Americans used sport as a lens to reinterpret their visions of both masculinity and femininity, and their relational character.

While I have some reservations about Roberts' and Olson's work, there are a couple of reasons to applaud their bold effort. Their book will no doubt provoke dialogue and debate about the nature and meaning of sport in post World War II America and hopefully it will stimulate further research into this comparatively

less explored terrain in the history of sport. Equally if not more significant, *Winning Is The Only Thing* is the initial attempt to construct a synthesis of sport in America for a given time-frame. While the study reveals some of the difficulties of constructing such a type of historical scholarship, it also indicates the need for and the benefits that can accrue from such an endeavor. Roberts and Olson's book should encourage other sport historians to create similar kinds of studies for other time-periods.

Ohio State University

Melvin L. Adelman