

Levine, Peter. *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. Pp. xii. 328. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index, \$25.

Peter Levine opens the conclusion of *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* by citing an appearance by Dick Shawn on the *Tonight Show* during which Shawn told Johnny Carson that he had just read a book on great Jews in

American sport. It was, said Shawn, a very short book. The audience laughed as Shawn had hit the stereotype just right. If Peter Levine's book gets a widespread reading, Shawn's joke will lose its power.

However, it is not the purpose of Peter Levine to enumerate the great sports stars in Jewish-American history, but rather to examine the significance of sport for Jewish-Americans in the twentieth century, especially those who were the sons and grandsons of the immigrants who arrived near the turn of the century. This is an examination of sport as middle ground on two levels: between communities and between generations.

In the first instance, between communities, Levine analyzes sport as a tool of assimilation and acceptance into the American community. Did sport lead the Jewish immigrants and their children and grandchildren into the mainstream of American life? Did sport serve as a mediator between the ethnic ghetto and the wider hostile American world? In the course of answering both questions in the affirmative, Levine explores the bane of immigrant existence, the twin problems of assimilation and identity. In the course of his analysis he shows the limits of assimilation and the importance of a rich cultural tradition in this process. The strong pull of history, language, and religion in the Jewish community complicated assimilation, but also aided the retention of identity. Sport proved to be an extremely important avenue for both, and Levine's presentation of that story is extremely well executed. The only problem is that anti-Semitism seems to be underestimated at times, especially as Levine moves past World War II, out of the ghetto, and into the suburbs with the third and fourth generation.

In the second instance, between generations, Levine examines the role of sport as mediator and/or source of conflict between the generations of Jewish immigrants, especially those of the first and second and second and third, generations of fathers and sons. In the first generational gap, sport could serve as a source of connection between father and son who in so many other ways were growing apart. The recent immigrant father often found himself absent from the home, working long and difficult hours, while his children went to school, worked and played, and adapted to the new culture. The gulf growing between them could be great, and sport was often the only surviving connection. However, sport could also be a source of friction and strife, with fathers concluding that their sons were wasting their time, when they would be better occupied with work and faithfulness to tradition.

The role of sport as common ground is more consistently the role it plays between fathers and sons of the second and third generations. and here Levine recounts not only his own, but the experiences of many others. This is executed more in the spirit of Donald Hall than W. P. Kinsella, and does not fall into the trap of sentimental schlock. Levine provides several examples of each of these experiences while exploring their impact on both generations.

Ellis Island to Ebbets Field is laid out in an orderly fashion. It opens with an examination of the role that sport was seen to play within the Jewish

community. Most interesting here are Levine's comments on the significance of the YMHAs, the Educational Alliance, the settlement houses, labor unions, and the Jewish-American press. These advocates and sponsors of sport and physical culture created a culture of activity that reached extremely large numbers of immigrants and children, especially in the larger urban areas where the Jewish ghetto and neighborhood was a reality.

From here, Levine takes us through an examination of the various sports and Jewish domination and participation in each at several levels. Naturally the City Game, basketball, was of great significance for Jewish-Americans. At the professional, intercollegiate, and amateur levels, Jews played and, indeed for several decades, dominated basketball. The name Nat Holman alone sweeps across the spectrum of basketball history, but there were many more.

In the national pastime as well there was a significant Jewish presence in both the major leagues and the amateur leagues. The decades of the twenties, thirties, and forties, seem to be the high water mark, and the stories of Moe Berg, Andy Cohen, Hank Greenberg, and a host of others offer various insights into the experiences of Jews in baseball. The stories of Sandy Koufax, Mike Epstein, Ron Blomberg, and Steve Stone offer testimony to the continuing Jewish presence in baseball after the war, but also significant changes in the nature of that experience.

Boxing towered above either basketball or baseball in terms of significance for the Jewish community, especially between the wars. Here no figure rivals Benny Leonard in significance. Boxing played such an important role not just for its natural appeal for fans, but also because in America it could be used to counter stereotypes and strike back at the enemy. The emotive power here is no less than that of Joe Louis and Muhammed Ali for the African-American community. In addition to Leonard, Levine relates the stories of Barney Ross, Max Baer, and Joe Louis' manager Mike Jacobs. The debate over boxing and its place in the Jewish community and culture is richly surveyed for the insights it offers.

Levine then looks at intercollegiate sports and college life and their significance for the Jewish community. This, too, proves to be a rich field for cultural history, and it is topped off with a superb chapter on the experiences of Marty Glickman as the son of an immigrant Jew from Eastern Europe. Glickman's tragic experiences at the 1936 Olympics are at the center of the story, but it is a life with many other significant tales to tell.

The book closes with a chapter summarizing developments in the post-World War II world, and two short concluding chapters which attempt to draw some conclusions about the meaning of the Jewish-American experience in sport and draw some parallels and contrasts with the African-American experience.

My only criticisms of *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* are few and not earthshaking, but nonetheless worth noting. Levine's contention that in the Black Sox Scandal no reference to the Jewish backgrounds of Abe Attel and

Arnold Rothstein were to be found in the “regular press” (p. 105), while technically accurate, ignores the fact that on the issue of gambling in baseball *The Sporting News* and other newspapers did resort to anti-semitic comment, although *TSN* did refute the anti-Semitic comments of Henry Ford. The sections on Hank Greenberg and college life might have included reports that Greenberg had been denied admission to Columbia, an institution that Levine cites as discriminating against Jews. I was also surprised that there was no mention of the virulent anti-Semitic outpouring that greeted both Rod Carew’s conversion to Judaism and his marriage to a Jewish woman. But these are minor points and in no way blemish the achievement of Peter Levine in this marvelous piece of sport history, ethnic history, and American cultural history.

Others have criticized Levine for delving into the personal experiences of himself and his family. If that is all he did, this would not be history, but in fact he uses his personal experiences infrequently and judiciously to enrich the story and to drive the lessons home. The balance is appropriate and the result is stunning, giving just the right dose of additional meaning and emotion to a fascinating American story.

It is little wonder that *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* has drawn so much attention since its publication in 1992. It is also no surprise that it won the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) Book Award. It is more than deserving of all the honors that have come its way. This is history at its best and, for many, it is history which addresses the important questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? Why am I here? It does so in both the personal and group context. It uses the past to illuminate the present and to give meaning to the human experience at the individual level. It is cultural history at its best, and shows why it is important to think in terms of “the burden of history.” As Levine notes: “The pace and push of contemporary American life encourages actions and thoughts tied only to the moment, with too little regard for the consequences of such behavior for future generations. There is something to be said for appreciation, even savoring the past as a means of reminding ourselves that we are all part of a larger history” (p. 274). *Ellis Island to Ebbets Field* offers much to appreciate and to savor.

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