

Trujillo, Nick. *The Meaning of Nolan Ryan*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1994. Pp. x, 122. Notes, photographs, appendix, index. \$24.50 hardcover, \$13.95 paperback.

Nick Trujillo was motoring across the New Mexico desert listening to the broadcast on the car radio of Nolan Ryan's 300th win in the major leagues. When the last out was made, Trujillo and his wife pulled off the interstate, he tells us in the preface of his book, and "celebrated with a kiss." The reader is immediately on notice, therefore, that the author, who is now an associate professor of communications studies at California State University, Sacramento, may have had more than a scholarly enthusiasm for his subject, the fireball-throwing pitcher from Texas.

While on the faculty of Southern Methodist University, the author began studying the culture of the Texas Rangers' ball park through the eyes of the people who worked there. But then when Nolan Ryan signed with the Ranger franchise as a free agent in 1989, a year before Trujillo's move to California, Trujillo refocused on the news media reporting of Ryan's 27 years in baseball.

Holder of career records for most strikeouts and most no-hitters (but also for most walks and most wild pitches), Ryan won only slightly more games than he lost while pitching for four mediocre teams. As Trujillo points out, Ryan "was rarely described as a great pitcher until very late in his career." Unfortunately, the author does not analyze in sufficient detail the contrast between Ryan's media treatment while playing in two media centers (New York and Los Angeles) and later with two Texas teams.

The strength of this book lies in the description of Ryan's highly marketable image as the virile cowboy. Unlike many of today's professional athletes who have nothing but contempt for journalists, Ryan the real-life rancher from Alvin, Texas, participated actively and continuously in the development of his image as the wholesome, humble, ever loyal, hard-working family man. "Just an ol' cowpoke," he sat for not one but three ghostwritten autobiographies, made a point of mounting his exercise bike after yet another no-hitter instead of succumbing to the pangs of celebration, and endorsed products that were consistent with his public persona.

The bulk of the book is a paean to the man's human qualities as well as his prowess on the mound. But then the author shifts abruptly into scholarly gear. He determines that the media "reconstructed" Ryan's career in heroic terms by electing not to sensationalize known negative traits.

Historians who are interested in the celebrity athlete as commodity will see in Nolan Ryan's story a good case study of how that phenomenon continues to take new directions in the modern media age.

Like so many professors of communications studies, however, the author is more knowledgeable about the object of media attention—in this case, baseball—than he is about the dynamics of journalistic behavior. Sportswriters have always used profuse metaphoric language in their prose. The pitching matchup of Ryan against another hard-throwing Texan, Roger Clemens of the Red Sox, irresistibly became a duel of gunslingers at high noon. Grantland Rice would have salivated. At the same time, daily journalists in all fields are notorious for resisting complex characterization. They are uncomfortable with nuance and subtlety, much more at ease in the presence of characters who are either unmistakably heroic or villainous.

The author's statement (on p. 66) that "reporters have the ability to dig up the smallest piece of dirt about professional athletes" requires elaboration. To suggest that the national as well as the Texas media deliberately exaggerated Ryan's heroism in order to hype audience ratings and sell newspapers is overly simplistic.

Certain aspects of the story might have been examined in more depth. Is it possible, for example, that the very fact of Ryan's unpredictable control on the mound contributed significantly to his wild western image? Trujillo's only reference to racial differences involved the coincidence of Ryan's seventh no-hitter occurring on the same day that Rickie Henderson set the record for career stolen bases. "Aw schucks," said Ryan, in effect, whereas Henderson was proclaiming himself "the greatest of all time." Trujillo decided, correctly, that Nolan Ryan was a true sports hero in part because he represented positive cultural values. It may be equally true that the cultural values of the black athlete are both positive and different.

Surely some athletes do possess some heroic qualities. The ultimate defect of this book is its failure to isolate and examine in satisfactory depth the media "reconstruction" as distinct from the self-generated image manipulation in which we all indulge.

One bibliographic error should be noted. In both the text and the bibliography, the author of Robert Lipsyte's *Sports World: An American Dreamland* is identified as Richard Lipsky.