

Harris, Janet, *Athletes and the American Hero Dilemma*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994. Pp. xi, 151. Appendices, index. \$26 pb.

Athletes and the American Hero Dilemma, by Janet Harris, is the fourth in a series of Sport Science Monographs published by Human Kinetics. This volume addresses an issue of current relevance and concern—i.e. whether “heroes even continue to exist in contemporary American society” (p. 2). In her book, Harris suggests that the possible influence of heroes may be that: “(t)hey are thought to help define individual and collective identity, compensate for qualities perceived to be missing in individuals or society, display ideal behaviors that people strive to emulate, and provide avenues for temporary escape from the rigors of daily life” (p. 1). Although the purpose in resolving this issue seems to hinge on the potential influence of heroes, Harris concludes that “questions of influence are beyond the scope of the present volume” (p. 95).

In considering the issue of whether heroes continue to exist, Harris articulates the positions of pessimists and optimists within the framework of a debate which “has remained mostly tacit or unacknowledged” (p. 2). This debate is linked to a deeper dilemma within society, which “is tied to larger intellectual concerns about anomie, the loss of shared values” (p. 1). By examining “athletic heroes in the context of the broader American hero dilemma” (p. 24), Harris hopes to arrive at a resolution of this debate, although she admits that “ongoing social change may prevent the debate from ever being completely settled” (p. 103). In order to arrive at a resolution, Harris defines the debate, defines athletes among youths’ hero choices, and gives youths’ characterizations of some of these heroic athletes.

The examination of athletes in the context of the hero dilemma “focuses on the period since the 1960s” (p. 2) when “the American hero dilemma was particularly salient” (p. 24). In articulating each perspective, Harris says that “the pessimists often believe that deterioration of heroes is an indication of broader

defects in American life” (p. 3) while optimists reason that “differences in the concept of what makes a hero are not necessarily considered manifestations of deterioration” (p. 3). Harris also notes that neither the pessimists nor the optimists have much to say about power inequities among members of dominant and subordinate groups in American society” (p. 5).

One of the strengths of this monograph is its provision of qualitative information obtained from a 1982 study of Greensboro youth who characterized their heroes. This investigation included 128 respondents, divided evenly among four grade levels (3rd, 6th, 9th and 12th grades), and also divided evenly between girls and boys, and between black and white students. In her chapter entitled “Youths’ Characterizations of Heroic Athletes,” Harris gave a sampling of responses from these youth with regard to the “two most frequently mentioned athletes (Tony Dorsett and Reggie Jackson), entertainers (Burt Reynolds and Diana Ross), and political or military leaders (Ronald Reagan and Martin Luther King, Jr.)” (p. 84). While many of the comments were insightful. I wanted to know more about the demographics of each respondent—e.g. what was the grade level, gender and/or race of that person? In addition, I wanted to know more of the youths’ statements about athletes who were less frequently named.

An additional strength of this volume is the extensive use of references to the scholarly literature which “spans many disciplines including history, folklore and literary studies, communication studies, the social and behavioral sciences” (p. 66). The breadth of literature on this topic testifies to the importance of examining the meaning of heroes within our society. However, while I agree with the importance of this issue, I had some difficulty with the underlying premise of the debate (or dilemma) between pessimists and optimists. Since Harris defines as her main organizing theme the dilemma of whether heroes even exist. I made several observations. First, while the scholarly literature is organized into polarized camps of pessimists and optimists, the Greensboro study was conducted on the basis of the premise that heroes do exist. This was evidenced by the fact that students were asked to define their heroes, assuming their existence. A second underlying suggestion seems to be that the resolution of this debate can result in obtaining truth. This implication is particularly interesting in light of Harris’ earlier assertion that she did not “locate this study in an existing theoretical model” (p. x). However, the suggestion that this debate can be resolved, that there is a knowable truth or reality, seems to be a modernist assumption, while the optimists’ position appears to articulate a functionalist perspective. A final difficulty with the underlying premise of this debate is what it would mean to resolve this issue—i.e. to determine if heroes do or do not continue to exist. It seems that a more interesting question to ask is what the existence (or non-existence) of heroes tells us about our culture.

In an article devoted to the meaning of heroes (*Utne Reader*, 1993, May/June), Matthew Coodman astutely observes that there is somewhat of a paradox in that “the very qualities a society tends to seek in its heroes—selflessness, social consciousness, and the like—are precisely the *opposite* of those needed

to transform a talented but otherwise unremarkable neighborhood kid into a Michael Jordan or a Joe Montana. Becoming a star athlete requires a profound and long-term kind of self-absorption, a single-minded attention to the development of a few rather odd physical skills, and an overarching competitive outlook” (p. 103). Perhaps this is the real dilemma—not whether athletic heroes still exist, but whether the qualities needed to attain athletic excellence actually prevent the development of true heroic qualities. This issue was raised during the much-publicized O.J. Simpson trial, when many people were quick to point out that O.J. was a “football hero.” and emphasized that he was not an “American hero.” The implication seems to be that the two notions have often been automatically conflated.

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