

E. Digby Baltzell. *Sporting Gentlemen: Men's Tennis from the Age of Honor to the Cult of the Superstar*. New York: Free Press, 1995. Pp. 420. \$30.

Historian and sociologist E. Digby Baltzell has accomplished the near impossible, not once but twice. He has written a fair-minded history of men's tennis, even as each page exudes his love for tennis as it was played before 1968. And he has maintained his love affair with tennis, even as he hates all that feeds and surrounds the "cult of the superstar" that has come to dominate the game since, say, 1968. The fault line separating Baltzell's "gentleman" from the tennis "superstar" is not simply a division between pre-1968 amateur tennis and post-1968 open (read "professional") tennis. The "sporting gentlemen" whom Baltzell so admires are not just the amateur tennis champions of now long ago, but a few professional players of more recent vintage. Arthur Ashe and Ivan Lendl spring immediately—and, in Ashe's case, often—to Baltzell's mind.

For that matter, Baltzell finds much fault with the state of amateur tennis in the age of the "superstar." "Sporting gentlemen" do not grace the upper reaches of the current college game or even the outer reaches of a Nick Bollettieri tennis camp. But the term could refer to anyone with a passion for the game—and to the players as they once conducted themselves. Here E. Digby Baltzell leaps instantly to mind.

Baltzell has not written an angry book, though anger he no doubt feels. He has not written a book of nostalgia, though these pages are dotted with personal memories of his days as a ball boy, player, and fan. Nor has he written an objective history of the game over the course of approximately 100 years. No one filled with his passion could possibly be objective about his game. But such an author could be fair-minded. And Baltzell invariably is. What else could possibly be expected from a "sporting gentleman"?

And what else has come to be expected from this historian who brings the insights of the sociologist to his work? Or should that be the other way around? To borrow from his sport, E. Digby Baltzell is a scholar who hits his winners with a two-handed backhand, that is when he is not playing his academician's game equally well with either hand.

The result is a first-rate piece of history, even as it is an exercise in idiosyncratic history. It is also rueful history—and yet vaguely hopeful history, even if Baltzell finds precious little basis for believing that his game (and his country?) will once again right themselves. Sport has a way of playing such tricks with us. The rise or, more often, the demise of our treasured sport (whatever it is) can become the occasion for a commentary on the rise or, more likely, the demise of our country (wherever it is). On the other hand, the births and rebirths of our sporting heroes (if not our “sporting gentlemen”) have a way of inducing a sense of optimism about the future of both where no grounds for optimism would otherwise exist.

In Baltzell's case, his hero among all of his tennis heroes is a “sporting gentleman,” whose playing career straddled Baltzell's 1968 dividing line. This hero's “moral life.. . has constantly renewed [Baltzell's] faith in the staying power of the gentlemanly ideal.” His name is Arthur Ashe. It's almost as though Baltzell wants to say that, because a mannerly black youth from Richmond, Virginia, could rise to the top of his game and remain a gentleman once he got there, the country will not necessarily breed another generation of “rude” and “vulgar” Jimmy Connorses and John McEnroes.

Money and the possibilities of more money seem to argue otherwise. But do they? An almost envious Baltzell casts an occasionally wistful glance in the direction of the other gentleman's game in order to bolster his vague hope that money doesn't have to be the root of this American evil. Golfers play for big money, too. But, laments Baltzell, golfers, even American professional golfers, have retained a sense of fair play, good manners, and a commitment to personal honor over personal advantage unfairly gained.

Perhaps the explanation for the differences between the two sports resides less in their respective sociological landscapes than in the nature of the way each game is played. If professional golf were a head-to-head match play affair, one wonders how long these superstars would remain gentlemen. Witness the hints of huffiness that accompanied the 1995 Ryder Cup matches. Furthermore, golfers can spend entire tournaments, sometimes entire seasons, without so much as a visit with a member of an always remote rules committee. Contrast that with the multiple tennis judges and instant decisions required of them. Change those two conditions and lurking behind the freshest face among the Paul Azinger look-alikes is a grimacing monster wearing spikes and wielding clubs.

But golf is not Baltzell's game. For better or for worse, tennis was, is, and will be his game, every new generation of tennis “brats” notwithstanding. Does the presence of a gentlemanly Pete Sampras or a quiet Jim Courier give Baltzell pause to reconsider his lament for the state of his game? Not really. Superstars

Sampras and Courier are an improvement over McEnroe and Connors, but they are not gentlemen according to the Baltzell definition of the term. Rather they are automatons who have been bred to play tennis, while being robbed of the rest of their lives. Baltzell's "sporting gentlemen," it must be pointed out, did not just play a gentleman's game in a gentlemanly way, but they also had lives and interests that extended beyond the boundaries of their game. Generally college-educated and always literate, they were, say, budding E. Digby Baltzells with no doubt stronger backhands and better court sense. Take away their tennis talent and they would have been well on their way to careers as possibly college professors or more probably stockbrokers. Take away Jimmy Connors's mother and what do you have but a budding juvenile delinquent?

On this score, Baltzell's ideal "sporting gentleman" has been absent from the tennis scene for far longer than a quarter of a century. Bill Tilden may have been a "gentleman possessed by genius." but he was also a believer in the old theory that genius is at least 90 percent perspiration. As Baltzell tells it, Tilden at twenty-six spent the winter of 1919-1920 remaking his game. The result was an unmatched run of national championships. The result was a tennis gentleman who made himself into a tennis genius. That took time, money and dedication. Tilden was lucky to be able to call upon all three.

If Bill Tilden heralded the new era of total (perhaps even ungentlemanly?) commitment to tennis, he was a harbinger of what was to come in another way as well. Bill Tilden was not just a genius at playing tennis; he was a genius at the game of tennis showmanship, both on and off the court. That sense of showmanship extended to Tilden's ostentatious throwing of points, if he deemed a call had been wrongly made in his favor. Baltzell takes proper exception to this behavior, but at least Tilden was an improvement over modern amateur players who place winning over personal honor by calling points in their favor when all eyes see a different story. Baltzell, the fan, records personal observations of this brand of unsportsmanship at his own University of Pennsylvania. Here the captain of the 1936 freshman tennis team became so filled with indignation that he left a 1985 Penn tennis match in disgust over a Penn player's repeated more than questionable calls. But Captain Baltzell, the native Philadelphian *and* believer in the gentlemanly ideal, is filled only with ambiguity when his subject is tennis genius and tennis showman Big Bill Tilden of Germantown, PA. and the University of Pennsylvania.

Baltzell also cannot help himself in a more scholarly way. He cannot help but resort to sociology to inform his history. The result adds to the idiosyncratic nature of the book, as well as to its Spenglerian tone of impending doom for his game (and his country). The chosen subtitle is splendid as it is, but it might just as well have read: "tennis as a microcosm for the decline and fall of the western world."

Suddenly the villains are not the money-driven and ever-proliferating four p's, as in parents, prodigies, players, and promoters. Instead the more insidious villains are historical forces. Actually, Baltzell gives this game away in an

introduction titled “Leveling Upwards and Leveling Downwards.” Taking a page from de Tocqueville, he discusses the consequences of the American passion for equality. Inevitably, a democracy not only levels downward, but calls into being a bureaucracy to achieve that ever-elusive level playing field. Gone are not just “sporting gentlemen” on the court, but those “sporting gentlemen” who ran the sport *and* set the tone for the conduct of the sport. Gone as well, Baltzell fears, are the future Arthur Ashes whose widower father insisted that his sons abide by ancient codes of conduct and “level upward’ in the process.

Gone from the larger world is “deference democracy.” In its place is “defiant democracy.” Gone is “class authority,” and in its place are endless rules “written and rewritten by professional bores in evermore tedious detail.”

But let the potential reader stand reminded that Baltzell’s real preoccupation is the game itself, lest anyone think that the book is nothing more than a screed against the modern world. For every grand theory there are countless tennis stories. It’s just that his grand theory explains the absence of any storied players in the game as it is currently played.

And lest anyone think that anyone named E. Digby Baltzell is nothing more than a hopeless tennis snob, let it stand that the real tennis snobs are those who value money over everything else. What Baltzell objects to above all else is the “phoniness” of the modern game and the “whoring after money” that is a large part of it. Here Baltzell suspects—maybe even hopes—that he and John McEnroe are not so far apart. Near the end of the book he concedes that he has “always been painfully ambiguous about the ‘super-brat,’ hating his foul language and unforgivable behavior on the court while admiring his sane and sound comments on the state of the game.” Baltzell even goes on to suggest that McEnroe behaved as badly as he often did “because of a deep-down resentment of the *phony* values of pro tennis,” that he would have been a much happier young man had he played in the heyday of the amateur game and its “code of honor.” John McEnroe may have been stigmatized as the “super-brat,” but Baltzell discovered something more hopeful in a recent biography of McEnroe: lurking behind the ever-present sneer was a player with the “heart of a true amateur sportsman.” Ah, hope does spring eternal in the heart of every hopeless tennis addict.

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