

Eisen, George, and Wiggins, David K., eds. *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. 1994. Pp. xvii, 241. Index. notes. \$55.

It is heartening to see that an anthology focusing on ethnicity and sport in North America ranging from 1840 to 1990 has been added to the recent spate of books chronicling the experiences of marginalized groups in sport. George Eisen and David Wiggins correctly recognized “that one of the most glaring gaps in the literature was the lack of research dealing with the involvement of ethnic groups in North American sport” (p. vix). Thus they set out to “raise important questions, provide pertinent information, and encourage other scholars to pursue research on sport and the ethnic experience” (p. vix). In this goal they were largely successful; author after author in this text demonstrates that sport is not just patriarchal, but also ethnically limiting (and only occasionally freeing). The importance of further study in this area thus becomes self-evident if academics hope to understand fundamental aspects of sport in North America.

What, then, are the “important questions raised” through this text? The editors set out to “provide an overview of ethnic contribution to sport and, conversely, examine the impact of sport on ethnic culture” (p. xv). Chapters accordingly chronicle the experiences of Native Americans (ch. 1), German immigrants (ch. 2, 3), Irish immigrants (ch. 4) Italian immigrants (ch. 6), interned Japanese Americans (ch. 7) African Americans (ch. 8, 9), and ethnic women in Chicago (ch. 10), as well as the Jewish American link to baseball (ch. 5), immigrants and the Workers Sports Federation in Canada (ch. 11), and social mobility and African American and Hispanic athletes (ch. 12).

Research on marginalized groups most often attends to only one specific type of power relation. In this case, the authors privilege *ethnic* power relations. They only tangentially connect ethnicity to other types of power relations such as gender (a central focus in only one chapter), class (e.g., the context of poverty), sexual orientation (never mentioned) or age (e.g., intergenerational differences). Such an approach does generate a partial story about the impact of “ethnicity” on individuals’ lives within their particular historical and social context. However, this method fails to draw out the interconnected, constructed identities of the individuals under discussion. Without a final chapter synthesizing the various ideas on ethnicity and sport, the book also fails to leave the reader with a coherent picture of ethnicity and sport as seen through these case studies.

Reading this book, one cannot help but be struck by the ways these stories differ from mainstream accounts of sport history. Readers are actively (and sometimes uncomfortably) reminded of the forgotten voices in history, as authors describe largely ignored aspects of American history such as the Japanese internment camps, the immigration patterns and subsequent struggles of Italians, Irish and Germans, and the discriminatory treatment of African Americans even after they were granted constitutional rights. These accounts defy the uncritical adoption of a “melting pot” description of American cultural life, as readers work through carefully constructed accounts of sport as a contested arena for “legitimate” cultural practices.

This contested arena begins with the definition of “sport.” Authors demonstrate the need for a broadened view of “sport” when they include in their discussion many activity patterns more commonly labelled as “leisure.” These “sports” include physical activities arising from non-North American cultures, such as bocce, and activities which are social more so than competitive in nature, such as picnics, dances and festivals. Unfortunately, the editors missed an opportunity to make this point overtly, labelling their book *Ethnicity and Sport* and leaving undiscussed the relationship between ethnicity and battles over “legitimate” sport.

The content in this text effectively dispels a monolithic view of ethnic groups. For example, readers are able to glimpse within-group differences, such as the differing patterns of sport for Italian immigrants from Northern and Southern Italy. Authors include subtleties such as the way African Americans

stratified themselves on the basis of the lightness of their skin (p. 159). or the differences in intergenerational leisure patterns demonstrated by the Issei (first generation, immigrant Japanese) versus the Nisei (children of the Issei, born in America) in the internment camps during World War Two.

A comparison between chapters reveals that ethnic groups also vary in terms of their desire to “fit in.” For example, Eric Solomon points out that Jewish immigrants would “come to America *to stay*” (his emphasis) (p. 78). and thus they looked to baseball to more quickly Americanize, since “to know and love baseball was to know and love America” (p. 78). Carmelo Bazzano recounts quite a different tale about Italians, especially the Southern Italians. who came to the United States and “tried to keep alive in the new land their old habits... ma[king] every effort to recreate many of the sights, sounds. and smells of the Old World” (p. 106). Not surprisingly, these two groups took a very different approach to life, and to sport, in the United States when they immigrated.

Occasional references address interethnic discrimination as well. For example, jobs in Philadelphia were more likely to go “to Irish and German immigrants and their offspring” (p. 158) than to African Americans. Italian boxers, to be marketable, sometimes had to adopt Irish names in the early 1900s in order to fight (p. 112). This “ethnic” hierarchy of acceptance within society, which pitted ethnic groups against each other, was coined “ethnic succession” in the Introduction (p. xiii). A real strength of this text, therefore. is that readers are able, in many ways, to move beyond a monolithic understanding of ethnicity, recognizing various types of power relations between and within ethnic groups.

Weaknesses of this anthology arise mainly through issues which were left unexplored. The editors note in the Introduction that they purposely used the term “ethnic”

...in the widest sense of the word. It connotes both national/ethnic as well as racial groups with identifiable cultural differences. *We must come to grips with the realization that in America, in one way or another, we are all ethnics* (my emphasis) (p. xv).

After this promising comment, the chapters are sadly devoid of comparable insights. Ethnic groups are the expected “others”: Native Americans. and immigrants from Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Africa, Europe, and Central America. But what of the people in power who shaped sport: what was their ethnicity, and how did they use it to facilitate their situation? The inclusion of this material, as well as an exploration of the role of “race” in ethnic relations, would have brought the analysis to a more sophisticated level. As well, the editors noted that both the United States and Canada were deliberately included to highlight cross-cultural similarities and differences (p. xv). The inclusion, however, of only one (of 12) chapters on a Canadian case study made this comparison tenuous at best.

This anthology, therefore, is limited because it presents ethnic individuals

as the “other”: different from the mainstream (and thus, it is implied, usually from the reader), who are of interest primarily because of their differentness. This approach reifies mainstream sport and mainstream culture as the norm, with “others” (those existing outside the mainstream) consistently labelled as “ethnics.” This encourages readers to bring a voyeuristic eye to the account, and reinforces the exclusionary “otherness” of the group(s) under examination.

Left unaddressed is at least one central question: if these ethnic groups are the “other” then who are they “other” in relation to? When authors do not treat everyone as an ethnic (a point made in the introduction but left undeveloped in the text), readers (and researchers) cannot fully comprehend the power relations behind ethnicity. In point of fact, one group of “others” who define the rules and have access to resources, impose and reinforce their vision of sport upon a different group (or groups) of “others.” The use of this frame of analysis, in a book on ethnicity, would go a long way towards illuminating the process whereby select sportspeople socially construct sport to benefit some groups and to exclude others, thus reproducing a hegemonic order.

Another approach to ethnic relations, built around the concept of the “universal singular” achieves something quite different again. It connects readers to the groups under examination, thus exposing “otherness” for what it is: a category based on power, which assumes that those in power are the norm. The concept of the universal singular suggests that while we, as individuals, are fundamentally unique, we also share, through strands of our autobiography, links to others. These widespread links form broader societal patterns which help us to know about ourselves and our culture. We each, then, have an “otherness” to our lives, as well as linkages which connect us across power relations to others who are seemingly different from us.

If this tack were taken in a book on ethnicity, readers would be brought through quite a different process. Each person would be encouraged to insert her/himself into the discussion about differences (and similarities) between groups from various ethnic backgrounds. Universal experiences across ethnic boundaries would more easily emerge, breaking down the voyeuristic barrier and instead building commonalities. Researchers would be encouraged not to impose discrete artificial categories on people’s lives, even though these categories are currently privileged within academic analysis. Instead, attention to intersections between race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation and age would become a central focus. Concomitantly, the fluidity between our various social identities would come under study (in different roles, different ways, and to different degrees), illuminating how we struggle to know ourselves and survive in a social world.

Power relations based on ethnicity are a fact of life. Nevertheless, researchers are just beginning to address this absence of knowledge about the “ethnic” experience in sport. Existing sport histories are largely bereft of accounts which uncover both individual and systemic ethnic discrimination at work in society and in sport. Thus, sport history is largely (and literally) a whitewash,

reinforcing accounts by the powerful about how they, in the end, were able to shape mainstream sport institutions to their specifications, often using their privileged ethnicity to that end! The “others” in power then selectively made sport available to “others” outside of the power bloc, to achieve ends which were often not sport-related, such as the calming of agitated populations (e.g., the Japanese Americans in internment camps) or the exploitation of athletes (such as Irish, Italian, and African American boxers) for economic gain. This anthology demonstrates that one discrete analytic category—ethnicity—provides a partial explanation of sporting behavior. It has, however, been left to other researchers and/or other accounts to explore how ethnicity intertwines with various of our identities, connecting us as well as separating us, making each of us, and none of us, the “other” in sport.

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