
HOWELL, COLIN. *Northern Sandlots: A Social History of Maritime Baseball*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. Pp. 285. Notes, index, 24 b/w photos. \$50 cb., \$18.95 pb.

This book, which makes a serious attempt to analyze the social significance of baseball in historic New England and Atlantic Canada, provides a welcome antidote to the miasma of snobbery about sport that suffuses some scholarship.

Having stated publicly that this work is the best piece of sport history ever done in Atlantic Canada, nonetheless, I remain unconvinced by Colin Howell's central argument.

Howell correctly demonstrates that baseball was an integral part of small-town life in northeastern America from the latter half of the 19th century until the end of the 1950s. Howell interprets baseball's demise in a summary statement early in the book:

Gradually detached from its roots in community and neighborhood experience, the game was relentlessly drawn into the post-industrial consumer-oriented society, where it could be marketed as a commodity in a mass marketplace. Contemporary baseball has since become an integral component of the "society of the spectacle," revealing all of the slickness, glitter, and seductive rationality of the modern capitalistic world. (p. 10)

While the quote accurately describes the evolution of modern major-league baseball, to say that the change explains the demise of the sport in the Maritime Provinces assumes much that does not withstand critical questions and comparisons. For example:

1. How is it that hockey, basketball, and soccer, which underwent the same transition at the commercial level, are more popular than ever in the Maritimes?

2. Softball has usurped baseball's role in the Maritime community, a transition that took place for far more mundane reasons than those espoused by Howell. Softball was played in street clothes, making it cheaper; it required relatively little equipment, it took up less space; it could be played at a much lower economic level; and it allowed women to participate (Women were generally unable to make the long throw in from the outfield that baseball required). Softball also enjoyed a dedicated administration that developed youth teams with the inevitable feed into more serious competitive levels.

Northern Sandlot skillfully debunks the myths surrounding baseball's origins; it explores well baseball's importance in the lives of African Americans, Native Americans, and ethnic subgroups such as Irish Catholics. It also explores the relationship between sport and theater. It allows the reader to re-live the glory days of Maritime baseball in all its nostalgic magic. It examines in detail semi-pro baseball and its failed attempt to make profit. It treats the gambling ethic of the day and its preponderance in Maritime sport. Howell's youthful baseball days in Nova Scotia's Annapolis Valley have helped direct this very serious scholarship toward a subject with which he is obviously enamored. While the book teaches much about baseball history and sport in society, the anecdotal materials keep the reader smiling as all this learning takes place.

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