
RAITZ, KARL (ed.). *The Theater of Sport*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. Pp. 460. Notes, photographs, references, index. \$19.95 pb.

When I was a graduate student, none of my family quite knew what to make of my field—something exotic called sport studies. My dear aunt once introduced me to an old family friend in Maine. I was “Irak’s son,” she said, “getting his Ph.D. in sports.” The old Mainer looked at me and replied, “Ayah, that sounds like a good one.” In 1973, sport studies was not much more than an administrative convenience, a place to house faculty and students who felt more affinity for their parent disciplines (principally history, sociology, and psychology) than they did for their own department. Things haven’t changed much since then. Most “sport studies” scholars work from a single discipline. Sport just happens to be their topic. Perhaps that is why I enjoy the work of Allen Guttmann, Alan Ingham, Rick Gruneau, and Synthia Sydnor. They cross disciplines in their pursuit of questions and answers. Their novel approaches offer a sense that sport studies can be something more than just a name in a catalog. Such interdisciplinary

efforts might be the best means to examine my ultimate question: “What has made sport a unique domain of human experience?”

The Theater of Sport is a distinct contribution to this end. Karl Raitz and his colleagues offer a version of sport studies that weaves together geography, history, ethnography, and architecture in ways that offer novel insights. As Raitz argues in his preface and introduction, anyone’s sport experience “is not simply the playing or viewing” of a game or an event (p. ix). It also involves an “interaction” with the “ensemble” of place, artifacts, traditions, people, and subsequent memories that constitute the landscape of any sport. In other words (for example), baseball is never a universal experience. For me, “baseball” means O’Hara’s Field, a neighborhood sandlot where I first learned to play. Or it means Bicycle Park, where I sometimes hung out to eat licorice and watch the older kids play Little League. Or it means the first time I went to Fenway Park with my dad and my brothers (the Red Sox lost to the Braves in a Jimmy Fund benefit). Each landscape, each ensemble created a different type of baseball experience.

Historians should appreciate this argument since it accentuates uniqueness, diversity, and context. It should also comfort anyone concerned with the homogenizing tendencies of satellite television and global marketing. Let the National Football League, the National Basketball Association, and Rupert Murdoch promote standard brands worldwide. The *Theater of Sport* reminds us that even David Stern cannot easily clone the rich, local, well-rooted culture of a sports landscape. There may be only one Michael Jordan, but his game plays in a diverse set of theaters, each grounded in a unique history that ever so slightly alters the experience for every fan and every player. With different shades of emphasis and success, the book’s next 12 chapters examine the historical and contemporary theaters of baseball, cricket, soccer, tennis, basketball, football, golf, stockcar racing, rodeo, thoroughbred racing, fox hunting, and climbing. The authors provide many interesting and provocative insights, especially in comparing theaters and styles of play across time and cultures. In some respects, the book is like a scholarly travel log. A quick skim whisks the soccer reader from the fields of medieval London to Maracana Stadium in 1970s Brasilia; the basketball reader can dribble from an armory in 1920s Paterson, N.J., to a barnyard court in 1950s Indiana; the climbing reader can rappel from Mont Blanc in 1786 to Alaska’s Denali National Park in 1992. Every author emphasizes the past, and the chapters on understudied sports such as climbing or stockcar racing appear to offer helpful historical primers. Change and continuity are central to the notion of sport as theater. But herein lies one of the books—and the concept’s—problems. The authors are not historians; they are geographers. Most of their history relies heavily on a narrow range of secondary sources. Some of it is simply rubbish. For instance, Raitz claims that “About 1869, Ivy League colleges organized sports clubs, established consistent rules, hired officials to monitor games, and formed a national regulatory association” (p. 14). Does “about” mean “sometime in the next half century”? Along similar lines, Brian Neilson glibly claims that late 19th century “period pieces show that the [baseball] fans were working-class men, neatly, soberly, and fully attired” (p. 35). Neilson offers *no* supporting references for his working-

class notions, and he contradicts the detailed work of Steven Riess and Dean Sullivan, who argue convincingly about middle-class crowds at this time. Finally, the football chapter claims that interscholastic high school leagues, particularly in Boston, spurred Rutgers and Princeton to intercollegiate action in 1869 (p. 212)—no reference (and no basis in history). Such errors make me hesitant to believe the histories of the sports I know less about. How far can I then trust the theater portraits?

There is also some troubling nostalgia and elitism in this book. The large, multipurpose venues of the 1970s especially come under criticism for their cold, commercial, “placeless” personalities. In Raitz’s words, “the sports places that make games interesting and gratifying are not the placeless cookie-cutter concrete stadiums with plastic seats set along standardized fields covered with plastic turf” (p. xiv). Raitz even provides a chart (p. 28) to determine which types of sports places provide high or low levels of gratification. Although more subtle in his analysis, John Bale uses Raitz’s chart in his cricket chapter (p. 90). Neilson is aggressive in his disdain for the modern “domes.” He even claims that “a game in Cincinnati’s Riverfront Stadium, for example, simply cannot be experienced (or remembered) in the same way as a game in Old Crosleyfield” (p. 61).

But who is qualified to judge the “gratifying” experience? Only scholarly experts like Raitz, Bale, or Neilson? Isn’t gratification really a personal matter? Further, were all the old venues as gratifying as Neilson suggests? Anyone who has sat along the right field line in Fenway Park (where the seats face center field) knows how gratifying a sore neck can be. Raitz’s nostalgic elitism also neglects family economics. Places like Pittsburgh’s Three Rivers Stadium have provided cheap seats to many young families (like mine in the early 1980s), especially for baseball. The quaint, new, critically acclaimed “retro” ballparks—Jacobs Field and Camden Yards—gratify freeloading journalists and upscale suburbanites. My guess is they also welcome fewer firefighters and assistant professors.

Fortunately, most of the book’s authors are not concerned with such quasi-policy science. They offer analysis, not prescription. While every chapter is grounded in history, they also emphasize geography (most of the authors are geographers by training) and ethnography (c.f., tennis, car racing, fox hunting). The *Theater of Sport* offers a valuable glimpse at the merging of place and past in the sport experience. Historians might compare the wide-ranging use of place in this book with single-case history in Bruce Kuklick’s book on Philadelphia’s Shibe Park (*To Every Thing A Season*, 1991) or with John Bale’s work (c.f., *The Landscape of Modern Sport*, 1994). Somewhere between geography and history is a rich brand of sport studies. Karl Raitz and his colleagues are leading the way.

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