
GUTTMANN, ALLEN. *The Erotic in Sports*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. Pp. 256. Notes, illustrations, two appendices, index. \$27.95 cb.

This book is receiving a lot of play, notably in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, which recently abstracted for its wide readership Guttman's description of rugby players' "elephant walk." Guttman describes it as "positively orgiastic... To someone who has not experienced the intense male bonding of a rugby match, this might seem too much of a good thing, but it does suggest how much of the macho male's sexual identity is expressed on the athletic field and in its environs" (p.144). Certainly the most colorful, and now notorious, example of sports' erotic components disclosed in this book, this description also is an index of the author's colloquial style. The publicity (and the book cover, a photo of Greg Louganis' backside as he completes a dive) will attract a wide range of readers, even those suspicious of Guttman's arguments.

But Guttman's description of the "elephant walk" might mislead readers into thinking that his book is primarily about participants in the erotic of sports. Generally organized as a traditional historical overview, beginning with the Greeks and ending with the sports culture we inhabit, Guttman emphasizes spectators' eroticized responses to the more aggressive sports. The early chapters on antiquity, the medieval and early modern world, and the post-Enlightenment periods trace cultural shifts in attitudes about sexualized bodies engaged in sports. In these chapters, Guttman demonstrates that earlier generations of spectators commented more explicitly than we do about what makes sports eroticized entertainment, that is, a spectacle, a visual pleasure.

Despite some blurring historically of individual cultures and their distinctive ideologies, Guttman is convincing in documenting how earlier people's eroticized responses were part of why they sometimes played but mostly watched sports. He is less convincing in the remaining two-thirds of the book when he turns to an analysis of twentieth-century views of athletic experience. Avoiding more than a brief discussion of how commercialized organized sports have become most Westerners' experience of sports—and given the implications of his historical survey, exactly what is it we're paying to watch and why?—Guttman instead reviews how various sports figures negotiated with and were represented by Hollywood, depictions of sport in films and novels, how sports have impacted changing definitions of masculinity and femininity, and academic critiques of the powers of representation in a visual field. This shift in focus from a history of the erotic in sport to a critique of how that eroticism both reflects and is reproduced in the larger culture allows for the marketing of the book under the rubric of "cultural studies." But Guttman's handling of cultural critique finally weakens the book's worth.

Primarily Freudian in his methods of analysis, Guttman historicizes, in effect normalizes, his evidence of the erotic view in spectators, and demonstrates how such looking was culturally sanctioned. His discussion of how homosexual liaisons were facilitated and celebrated in Greek culture, for example, is not

qualitatively different from his analysis of German body-builder Eugen Sandow's popularity as a "pin-up" for European and American women during the Victorian age, a popularity Sandow encouraged in "private viewings" for those willing to pay the \$300 (p. 76). This particular perspective on the erotic has been further complicated by gay and lesbian theorists, chiefly Eve Kohofsky Sedgwick, whose book *Between Men* (Columbia University Press, 1985) first gave currency to the idea of *homosocial* behavior as a category for identifying and explaining culturally condoned, potentially eroticized, same-sex experience. Guttman does cite this work (without substantial comment), and initially he would seem to be extending Sedgwick and others' insights to suggest that various cultures allow for, even encourage, the expression of various, usually repressed or prohibited sexual behaviors in sports.

But in the later sections of the book, Guttman's earlier link of the erotic pleasures of looking at the human body with potentially aggressive play is confronted by "the dismayingly large number of radical female sports sociologists" (p. 159) who similarly have analyzed the voyeuristic components of what is called "the power of the gaze" to explain pervasive forms of sexualized violence in our culture. His earlier insight about how the dynamics of eroticized, often violent spectacle in sports lead inevitably to their commodification as paid entertainment becomes a harsher consequence of what he terms Neo-Marxist and radical feminist critique than he would allow for. He tempers his thesis and excuses: polymorphic eroticism becomes an unexplained mystery, explicit misogyny and homophobia don't necessarily lead to violent actions, and men, as well as women, may suffer a loss in self-esteem as a result of playing badly and watching sports. "In the last analysis," he concludes, sports are a "harmless distraction, a source of innocent amusement, a chance to socialize" (p. 172). The earlier chapters of Guttman's analysis of the erotic in sport suggest something more complicated.

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