

---

KOPPETT, LEONARD. *Sports Illusion, Sports Reality: A Reporter's View of Sports, Journalism, and Society*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994. Pp. xiv, 296. \$13.95.

In *Sports Illusion, Sports Reality*, Leonard Koppett presents a clear and thorough analysis of both the business and illusion of sports, the way journalism helps to sell the illusion, and the way sports and sports journalism reflect and reinforce societal trends and mores. He also offers “immodest proposals” on such topics as amateurism, the role of the NCAA, and restructuring the Olympics.

Koppett's thesis—that the popularity of spectator sports rests on the illusion that the outcome of the games matters, and that newspapers and broadcasting shape our perceptions—is sound and well supported. Unlike other forms of entertainment, sports need constant commentary, the narrative provided by sportswriters and broadcasters being critical to a fan's ongoing involvement with the games. Koppett neatly sums up the symbiotic relationship between sports and journalism: “It's the awareness that the New York Yankees and Los Angeles Dodgers are playing in the World Series, with all the overtones of who they are, how they got there, what the World Series means. . . that makes the occasion exciting” (p. 4). This passage not only underscores the importance of the reporter to our enjoyment of spectator sports but also puts into focus a whole century of baseball history.

Systematically breaking down sport and journalism as businesses, Koppett explains their marketing strategies, allies, and conflicts, as well as the ways each business ensures the other's survival and growth. He also analyzes the appeal of sport to Americans, showing how and why spectator sports have become the most popular form of mass entertainment today. As one would expect from this acclaimed reporter, he is especially strong on the changes occurring in sports journalism over the years, for example, the increased reliance on quotes and statistics in sports stories, as well as the difference between writing for newspapers and broadcasting on radio or television, and on ethical considerations of journalists; he explores obligations to children and the potential threats to a reporter's objectivity. Most of his examples come from baseball, which makes this book particularly appealing to the baseball fan.

Although Koppett believes that, ultimately, sports do more good than harm, he is most compelling when he argues that sports and sports journalism have certain negative effects on society or reinforce already existing evils. Examples include his claim that "sports-think" encourages us to reduce life, war, and politics to a game with a shallow win-lose mentality; his argument that the concept of amateurism in sports is hypocritical and unethical; and his objection to Little League, which he believes harms children both physically and psychologically.

Unfortunately, this book suffers from a noticeable weakness. Because it is only a reprint of a 1981 book and not a new edition, it is frequently out of date. In his new preface, Koppett claims that because the sports industry is so well established, and because his analytical approach stresses "formulation, not documentation" (p. x), "no substantial adjustment" was needed (p. ix). However, the sports world has seen many dramatic changes and disruptions in the last fifteen years. The most important in baseball, the strikes, are not dealt with simply because when the book first went to press none had yet taken place, not even the strike of 1981 with the resulting split season. It is crucial to include the strikes not because we expect a complete history of baseball, but because they have profoundly affected our perceptions, damaging many people's willingness to accept the illusion. One wonders about the role sports journalists, traditionally allies of the sport, are playing these days. Do sportswriters, for example, try to minimize the damage? How much of the changing attitude toward baseball can actually be attributed to sportswriting and television?

Updates are needed particularly in connection with his proposals. Many changes have in fact occurred, especially in the debate over amateurs and professionals in the Olympics. Koppett provides important background, but without incorporating some recent events, some of the chapters no longer make sense. He anticipates this criticism in the preface, saying, ". . .precisely because we can track what has happened since 1981, we can see exactly which trends have continued along which lines, confirming the basic shape and noting the deviations" (p. x). But the general audience for which this book is intended is probably not fully aware of the trends and deviations, and would expect to find enlightenment from Koppett on these points.

Essentially however, this is a minor fault in what remains a sound and valuable book. I recommend *Sports Illusion, Sports Reality* to all sports fans, but especially to students of journalism and marketing, to college athletes, and to school administrators at every level.

—Michele Schiavone  
*Marshall University*