
OVERMAN, STEVEN J. *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation*. Aldershot, England: Avebury, 1997. Pp. x, 377. Notes, bibliography, index.

The author, a professor of health, physical education, and recreation at Jackson State University, seeks to explain how the Protestant ethic became linked to competitive athletics and shaped the spirit, forms, and meanings assigned to sport and recreation in the United States. The "Protestant ethic," of course, is Max Weber's term for a self-controlled, highly disciplined individualism that finds self-worth in achievement. Its sporting roots and branches—from the Reformation to yesterday's sports page, from youth sport to the Super Bowl—are clearly but tediously and repetitiously documented.

Much of this book attends to the Protestant ethic as it has developed historically, and that is the rub. The author's grasp on Clío's craft leaves something to be desired. His gaffes are numerous. He suggests that most traditional restrictions on economic activity had disappeared by the end of the English Civil War, which gives too much credit to the Puritan rebellion and too little credit to mercantilism, making both Adam Smith and Thomas Paine mere whiners. Overman has English aristocrats regularly matching brawn and wit with working-class pugilists and adds the dubious proposition that English sport displayed

fewer class distinctions than did the European continent. He notes that Louisville, Kentucky, was the home of a National League baseball club in 1871, although the National League was not formed until 1876. He depicts American college football in the 1890s as “experiencing inroads from Irish and other ethnic groups” and makes football into “a relatively classless sport” (p. 141). Even if the premise were true—which it is not—scarcely would the conclusion follow from the premise. Jack Higgs, by the way, would be distressed to read that the beloved cow pasture of his rural youth was in Texas rather than Tennessee.

Except for the Higgs mistake, the reason for these blunders stem largely from the sources the author consulted. Overman notes that this book has been about 15 years in the making. Apparently he consulted sources that were available when he began the research but failed to update his bibliography in any consistent manner. He frequently cites Dulles and Betts in references to sport history surveys, but makes no mention of Rader or Gorn and Goldstein nor even Spears and Swanson. Intercollegiate athletics, especially football, references are limited to Denny’s *Astonished Muse* (1957) and Cozens and Strumpf’s *Sports in American Life* (1953); neither Ron Smith’s *Sports and Freedom* (1988) nor Michael Oriard’s *Reading Football* (1993) is to be found. For various aspects of baseball history in the era of A. G. Spalding, Peter Levine’s *A. G. Spalding and the Rise of Baseball* (1985) is ignored. The limelight instead is on Bartlett’s badly outdated *Baseball and Mr. Spalding* (1951). Allen Guttmann’s *From Ritual to Record* (1978) is cursorily mentioned, a slight all the more glaring since Overman’s Protestant ethic springs from the same Weberian fount as does Guttmann’s modernization theme.

Still more curious is Overman’s tendency to cite sources on matters to which the sources have no claim of authority. For example, he refers to Dominick Cavallo’s *Morals and Muscles* (1981) for support of the assertion that the early Calvinists viewed children as morally depraved creatures who needed to be controlled (repressed) for the good of society. Cavallo’s research, of course, is primarily focused between 1880 and 1920 and on American playgrounds and urban reform. Similarly, Randy Roberts and James Olsen’s *Winning is the Only Thing* (1989), an assessment of recent American sport, is supposedly the authority on the origins of the amateur code in Victorian England. Worse still, sociologists Paul Hoch and H.L. Nixon are frequently cited as bona fide historians.

Questionable historical sources and methodology produce a golden age of sport before everything became too serious and professional. In the good old days, concludes Overman without a hint of irony, the leisure class represented “the true spirit of amateurism” while the common folk (especially children) played without middle-class prescriptions. Somehow that amateur ethos escaped the moral code of Puritanism to flower briefly in the nineteenth century, until professionalism and consumerism stifled the ludic character of real sport (pp. 348–49). One wishes it were as simple as that.

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