

OATES, BOB. *Football in America: Game of the Century*. Coal Valley, Illinois: Quality Sports Publications, 1999. Pp. 348. Index. \$19.95 cb.

Reading this book is akin to sitting at a bar, listening to a veteran reporter reminisce about players and coaches he has interviewed and games he has covered. The conversation is frequently fascinating and insightful. It can also be rambling and redundant, and the author fixates on particular themes. But the result is always entertaining. Bob Oates surveys the history of football and argues that it, rather than baseball, is the quintessential American game. Oates is well positioned to write such a tome. He has covered professional football since the 1930s in Los Angeles. Pro football was still in its infancy, and Oates received the assignment only because the writer ahead of him opted to cover bowling.

This volume is part memoir, part oral history, and part tribute. The book is divided into eight sections. Each chapter is divided into small subsections, and the author mixes chronological and topical approaches. This breaks the continuity of the book and adds to the impression that it is a series of anecdotes. Generally the first four chapters trace the historical development of the sport, while the last four are testimonies to great players and coaches. A ten-page appendix summarizes opinions that Oates did not seem to be able to work into the text, and a thirty-page afterward provides an autobiography of Oates's life in journalism.

The general theme is actually one of discontinuity. Oates argues that football has supplanted baseball as the American pastime because it has constantly reinvented itself. Unlike baseball, football is now a completely different game than it was in the early century. Oates develops this thesis through his profiles and stories about great players and coaches. Oates uses only success stories to tell his tale. He notes in the introduction that he tracks winners, and he never "voluntarily entered a losers' locker room" (p. 13). While this may be problematic in telling the story of football, it also provides some of his best material. He begins with a good chapter on Knute Rockne and then provides vignettes on dozens of players and coaches. For a fan of the game, these stories are the main reason to read this book.

The book borders on hagiography. The first seven chapters build to a crescendo in the eighth, which is a testament to a team that Oates feels is the pinnacle of achievement in professional sports: the San Francisco 49ers. Not only are the 49ers the greatest franchise, but also they produced the greatest quarterback (Joe Montana), the greatest coach (Bill Walsh), and the greatest owner (Eddie DeBartelo). In attributing the passing revolution to the 49ers, Oates discredits the San Diego Chargers of Don Coryell (who is not mentioned in the book but who paved the way for the West Coast offense). Oates unfortunately wrote this book just before the 49ers took their dramatic fall in 1999. Their success, Oates insists, is based on a "creative flair based on willful passing" (p. 276). It also was based, at least in the 1990s on a creative flair to manipulate the salary cap, for which the organization is now paying dearly.

Despite the ramblings, however, this book is entertaining and informative. It may not be the best book about football, but it is a good read for fans of the game.

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