
BARRY, JOHN M. *Power Plays: Politics, Football, and Other Blood Sports*. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001. Pp. viii+214. Index. \$28.00.

In 1989 a former high school and college assistant football coach turned journalist named John M. Barry was following Jim Wright, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, around Washington, D.C. Barry had set out to write a book about power in Washington. Wright had given Barry access to any meeting or conference in which he allowed members of his staff to attend. Everything discussed in the meetings would be on the record and fair game for the reporter to use. Wright later admitted he gave Barry this access because of the writer's coaching background. One of the speaker's first goals in life had been to be a football coach. He thought Barry might understand him a bit more than other journalists. Barry never wrote this book. Instead, he ended up as an eye-witness to the battle between Republican Congressman Newt Gingrich of Georgia and Wright, which resulted in the speaker's fall from power. Barry's account of this duel *The Ambition and the Power: A True Story of Washington* is so even handed that both Gingrich and Wright consider it a fair examination.

With *Power Plays: Politics, Football, and Other Blood Sports*, Barry has, to a certain degree, produced the book he originally wanted to write. "Even in my days as a coach I wondered about . . . how power can be used or abused, not only in the abstract or en masse but in individual relationships. I wondered as well about force, dominion, might, sovereignty, rule, authority, and how those aspects or synonyms of power affect the shape of society" (pp. 3-4). He also notes that analogies of sport are regularly used in describing politics and war: "This makes at least some sense: in sports and in politics

the competitiveness, the dedication to a goal, the abilities of a particular individuals, and in many instances team effort all play a role in determining who wins and who loses" (p. 4).

What follows this passage is a highly readable collection of essays that often have little in relation to one another. Many of his chapters are sections taken from *The Ambition and the Power*. Wedged in between these excerpts we have reprinted magazine articles Barry wrote for publications as diverse as *Sports Illustrated*, *The Washington Post Magazine*, and *Esquire*. The topics he covers in these portions include profiles of American athletes training for the 1980 summer Olympics, accounts of college athletes adjusting to the end of their playing days, his recollections of coaching a high school football game in which a member of the opposing team ended up paralyzed, and the story of a classmate of Barry's killed in Vietnam.

Barry scores a number of tactical victories with this book, but in the end he fails strategically. What does that comment mean? Many of Barry's pieces are powerful and thought provoking. The essay on the role the media plays in Washington and how journalists practice their profession is exceptionally perceptive and is worth reading for any scholar that has an interest in the workings of the fourth estate in politics, sports, or any other topic. The last essay in which the author attempts to tie together his varied subjects with a metaphorical description of power lacks analytical rigor and is not convincing. Sports and politics are two different things regardless of certain similarities. The acquisition of political power is different from the drive to win an Olympic gold medal or a Super Bowl, even if both efforts require focus, concentration, dedication, and ambition. It is difficult to see how this book would be of use to scholars of sport history or the classroom instructor teaching in this subject. The book might be of use in a political science classroom, but even that possibility is suspect.

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