
ROSEN, CHARLEY. *The Wizard of Odds: How Jack Molinas Almost Destroyed the Game of Basketball*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001. Pp. 428. Bibliography and index. \$27.95 cb.

At last, it has been written—a book that you can read by its cover. It may be only the slightest exaggeration to claim that the dust jacket of *The Wizard of Odds: How Jack Molinas Almost Destroyed the Game of Basketball* captures the essence of Charley Rosen's thoroughly detailed life of basketball's master fixer. On the jacket, Molinas is depicted in action in his playing days at Columbia from 1950 to 1953. He is photographed in midair, stretching towards the basket in the last stage of what he called his "scoop shot," the ball rolling delicately off his extended fingertips. Molinas is soaring past and at the same time looming over his flat-footed opponent, who has obviously been faked out of position. Moreover, his would-be defender is wearing a Trinity College jersey: Molinas, the Sephardic Jew from the Bronx, scores over the goyim. The trickster triumphs; the rogue-hero enjoys another laugh at the expense of the suckers. Significantly, though, his left sneaker seems to be trapped under the "s" of "Odds," a word set in larger type than any other on the jacket.

While a semiotic reading of the dust jacket provides a real flavor of *The Wizard of Odds*, it would be a mistake to skip reading the book. Rosen's work will be nothing short of required reading for sport and cultural historians interested in basketball, gambling, and even the concept of the rogue-hero in America: "In his time, Jack Molinas was a world-class athlete, a lawyer, and master of the stock market, but he was also a big-time gambler and fixer in league with the Mafia, a double-and triple-crosser, a jailbird, a pornographer, a loan shark, and quite probably a murderer" (p. 19). Molinas is, in short, one of the genuinely fascinating characters of the second half of the twentieth century, and scholars studying his life and Rosen's book will be able to see strains of Melville's fictional *The Confidence Man* and all-too-real Arnold Rothstein.

Scholars will also become aware of details hitherto unknown of both the '51 and '61 point-shaving scandals and Molinas' expulsion from the National Basketball Association for gambling in 1954. Molinas' life served as the basis for Neil Isaacs' novel, *The Great Molinas* (1992), but full-blown biographies have stalled for a variety of reasons. While he was still alive (Molinas was murdered in Los Angeles in 1975), Molinas cooperated with the late sportswriter Milton Gross for a story of his life. However, Gross's book was never published, because, as Rosen notes, Molinas' Mafia connections objected, urging him "to stick to bookies and leave books to others" (p. 359).

Rosen picked up the project when he was contacted in 1998 by Julie Molinas, Jack's brother, who made available "scrapbooks, letters, photographs, and the core of his brother's story, 1,213 pages of transcribed dialogue between Jack and Milton Gross" (p. 8). To avoid simply parroting Molinas' version of his story, Rosen relied on research done by Neil Isaacs, Phil Berger, and Stu Black, as well as police interviews, court records, newspaper accounts, and his own interviews with people who were involved with Molinas. Molinas' ego was such that he always believed he could sell his story to Hollywood, and he was obsessive in keeping notebooks and clippings dealing with himself. Given free rein with such source material, Rosen has written a book in which he functions more as a reporter, letting the various sources tell and comment upon Molinas' story.

In addition to providing voluminous detail, *The Wizard of Odds* addresses the big historical questions about Molinas and the point-shaving scandals: Who was "doing business"?; what did the coaches know?; was there any truth to the Cardinal Spellman conspiracy claims that the former head of the New York archdiocese used his influence with District Attorney Frank Hogan's office to keep the names of players from St. John's and other Catholic colleges out of the '51 scandal?

The essence of the book, though, lies in the question that fascinates and puzzles anyone who considers Molinas' life: "How could someone who was so smart, so able, and with such a bright future, lead himself down the self-destructive path that he did?" (p. 417). Rosen floats a variety of possible answers, ranging from enculturation by the street-smart New York City basketball and gambling symbiosis, to classical hubris, to a briefly mentioned argument that is left unpursued that Molinas was the first genuinely modern man of the post-atomic age. The latter argument is unconvincing; maybe a postmodern man, one who works hard at losing a basketball game while at the same time winning a bet, one who is so smart he is stupid, comes closer to a proper historical category for Molinas. If nothing else, Rosen's work reveals Molinas as a man who lived life in the extremes of athletic talent, intellectual ability, power, and a terrible disregard or even disdain for what he might do with those gifts. The dust jacket has it right. Molinas could have soared, but the "Odds" were against him.

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