

discussant were I the giver of the paper. I believe that the theme of our seminar “Baseball and the Academic Historians” requires that we invoke prevailing standards of historical criticism. Such an effort must continually be made if we are to keep the historical study of sport from languishing in the toy department of historiography.

Reaction

by

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Sport fans tend, by and large, to be rather on the conservative side. This is at least partly because they typically glamourize and idealize the past. Has there ever been a shortstop to rival Honus Wagner, a fastball to match Walter Johnson’s, a home run hitter who could equal the Babe, an all-around athlete who could compare with Jim Thorpe? For those over forty, the answer is invariably in the negative.

This conservative bent spills over into social and political arenas as well, so that rabid fans are not often found in the forefront of those advocating the liberalization of social or political institutions. Indeed, quite the opposite. Those in charge of professional sports have typically enshrined their pursuits in the mantle of Motherhood and the Flag, and players and fans—aided and abetted by sports writers—have enthusiastically followed suit.

Against this background, it is refreshing to realize that the two historians who have presented papers here this morning—Drs. Neel and Riess—have not allowed received folklore to hamper their objectivity as historians. Both document, in some detail, the fact that the early days of baseball were characterized by more than a little chicanery and no small degree of manipulation intended to serve financial ends. From these papers, the typical baseball fan would hardly recognize the glorified early days of America’s National Pastime that he has read about since childhood.

You may be surprised to hear this praise of muckraking—an honorable term—from one who, through *The Glory of Their Times*, has contributed at least to some extent to the nourishment of that very mythology. This apparent contradiction contains within it a methodological lesson that most historians know but that they need to be reminded of continuously. That lesson can be summarized in the form of two closely related propositions—namely (1) the better one gets to know a person, as an individual human being, the less objective one becomes about that person’s life and times. And, partly for that reason but for other reasons as well, (2) the broad sweep of history, including its underlying forces, can rarely if ever be brought into focus by concentrating primarily on the lives of one or a few of those who lived through the period, regardless of who they might have been or the roles they may have played.

This is not to say that personal memoirs or reminiscences have no value to historians. They do indeed, provided they are kept in their proper perspective. The old-time players I interviewed in *The Glory of Their Times* are glamorous today because they were there when it all began. But they rarely thought—then or now—about the role they were playing in American life. Nor did they ever take time out to reflect on the interrelations between their pursuits and the changes that the country was undergoing at the time. These are for the historian to unravel, and Neel and Riess have given us a promising beginning.