

Commentary on Mrozek's and Levine's Papers

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The psychohistorical and demographic methodologies can be useful in studying sport history, but I want to stress the importance of understanding sport and the sporting life in its own terms and not as an adjunct or a metaphor in describing a social ethos in general. When Peter Levine cites T. S. Arthur's 1834 praise of recreation as an important respite from the "warfare" of social life, I am struck by the realization that by the end of the nineteenth century, many ideologists and sportsmen considered sport not recreation but a continuation of warfare by other means. Journeyman catcher and linguist Moe Berg said of Ty Cobb, "To him, a ball game wasn't a mere athletic contest. It was a knock-'em-down, crush 'em, relentless war. He was their enemy, and if they got in his way he ran right over them." A student in the 1970s wrote in a sports autobiography that his father had told him the lessons of sports were, "You gotta give it all you got and you gotta learn how to take a beating."

Whatever the origins of exceptional athletes, rich or poor, black or white, parentally pressured or abandoned, the historian of sport must always look to the special conditions of the sporting life and the athletic sub-culture for his frame of reference. Journalists and writers have much to offer us. Poet Donald Hall has expanded on journalist Roger Kahn's insight into the "dying twice" of the athlete (first as a player, then as a human) in his concept of the country of baseball where "time is the air we breathe, and the wind swirls backward and forward until we seem so reckoned in time and seasons that all time and all seasons become the same." Journalist Leonard Koppett has also recently provided a brilliant distinction between the concept "champion," which suggests "standards of noble behavior and high honor," and the mania for being no. 1, which "is a vapid redundancy devoid of content." The journalists, the students of comparative cultures (eg. comparing baseball in the U.S. with baseball in Japan and Cuba), and the sophisticated historians ideally will soon merge to give us a sport history worthy of Roland Barthes' elegy, "Sport reveals the fatal combat of life in perspective without shame and with magnificence."