

Sport, Myth, and History

by

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For the past several years, America's obsession with sports has come under concerted fire. Critics have pointed to the ill effects of individual fanaticism, the mistaken priorities that lead whole communities to worship their teams, the economic dead ends resulting from ethnic identification with sport heroes, the distortion inherent in chauvinistic sports nationalism, and finally, the hypocrisy and trivialization in sports' manipulation of religion. Yet, for all this criticism, our nation's commitment to sports participation and spectatorship remains firm.

How can this fact be explained? By emphasizing some of Joseph Campbell's insights into the role of myth in human activity, we can find at least a tentative answer. Using a Jungian model, Campbell asserts that the main function of myths (which he defines as "fact of the mind") is to take humans both beyond themselves to a transcendent reality and back into themselves, refreshed and wiser.

From this perspective, the mythological function of sports can be seen in five broad categories (indeed, the same categories used by the critics of sports hysteria): individual, community, ethnic, national, and religious/universal.

Abundant evidence suggests that sports provide a cathartic release for many participants and fans. From Roger Bannister's assessment of sports as self-discovery to Malcolm Little's view of Joe Louis as personal symbolic hero, sports can add a mythic dimension to the lives of individuals.

On a wider scale, community pride can emanate from a city's identification with its sports team. The attention of the good folks of Denver, Colorado, for a moment at least, became riveted on its Broncos, leading to a sort of civic pride and recognition transcending the normal problems of urban living.

The career of Joe Louis illustrates both ethnic and national identification with sports. As I have suggested in my biography of Louis (Joe Louis, Grand Rapids, 1973), for black Americans, the Brown Bomber became largely a symbolic hero, one whose accomplishments helped engender that double mythic movement both outside of and back into oneself. He became an ethnic hero precisely because he was, in the words of Maya Angelou, "some black mother's son," beating the white man at his own game.

Most Americans, both black and white, felt a welling of national pride when Louis defeated the German Max Schmeling in 1938. Because Schmeling was so closely associated with arrogant Nazi nationalism and racism, and because official American policy forbade a stronger response, Americans who despised Hitler's regime saw the fight symbolically - us versus them. And Louis's victory confirmed our mythic view of America as open and democratic.

Implicit in the discussion of individual, community, ethnic, and national myths and sports has been a sense of religiosity. Michael Novak and Joseph Campbell make that connection explicit. In his *Joy of Sports*, (New York, 1976), Novak argues that America's obsession with sports can be explained in large measure as a religious quest; sporting events become for participants and spectators alike a kind of religious experience. Using what he calls the seven seals of sport - sacred space, sacred time, and the bond of brothers, rooting, agon, competition, and self-discovery - Novak concludes that sport subsumes the basic rituals and doctrines of religion and becomes ultimately a mythic, symbolic triumph over death. Campbell suggests that modern America seems bereft of traditional mythic heroes;

although he does not specifically say that sports figures have replaced the Odysseuses of old, he does note that once when watching a track meet on television he saw the runners as representing “the flowering of a moment of life in fulfillment.” The beauty of the sport transforms the athlete and the spectator, taking us beyond and back again into ourselves.