
Sport, Myth, and History: A Reaction

by
RONALD A. SMITH
Penn State University

Tony Edmonds, in his paper “Sport, Myth, and History,” has built a case for the importance of sport as a living inspiration. To do this he uses Joseph Campbell’s concept that sport can be mythological in the sense that we interpret reality taking us beyond ourselves to a transcendent reality and then back into ourselves refreshed. If this is true, sport then becomes dynamic, central, and gives significance to human experience, and as such sport may be one of the most significant of human experiences for a sizable number of individuals.

Edmonds has developed a logical-enough scheme so that he could now look more closely at the sport and myth phenomena to place it in a greater historical setting than he has done. He has not taken us deeply into history in his paper. What was, for instance, symbolically and mythologically important in colonial American horse racing, fox hunting, cock fighting, and gouging matches? How did myth or symbol manifest itself in nineteenth

century pedestrians such as Deerfoot and Edward Payson Weston or “Benicia Boy” Heenan and John L. Sullivan in boxing? How did the sporting myth or symbol affect sport as we know it in the twentieth century? What about Jack Johnson, possibly the most important black sport hero and symbol in American history? What about Jim Thorpe, Jack Dempsey, or Babe Ruth? What about the myth surrounding women’s sport and of competitors such as Gertrude Ederle or Babe Didrikson?

One of Edmond’s stronger points that needs expansion is that sports offer symbolic meaning for larger communities. This may be a major justification for sport whether it transcends geographical limits as occur in ethnic or college sport. If one takes the latter for example, how have myth and symbolism been important in the development of college athletic contests? How did the athletic symbolism become important to students and soon become important to alumni, administration, the public, and even a fair number of faculty? Why was symbolism surrounding college sport important to the develop of American colleges? Was it as one college professor pointed out over a half-century ago that college athletics are “a tradition that fuses together all the forces of an institution in enthusiastic social consent”? Is this fusion true in class status groups, ethnic groups, religious groups, occupational groups, sexual groups, or geographical groups? What Tony Edmonds has said in framing the outlines of the mythological picture makes a good deal of sense. Now we can hope that he and others will begin to paint with depth an historical picture rather than concentrating on the theoretical model.