

The Failed Athlete in Modern Literature

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Writers ranging from Zane Grey to F. Scott Fitzgerald to J. F. Powers have thought the athlete to be prime material for fiction. However, aside from juvenile literature (works following the old Horatio Alger and Frank Merriwell formulas) and comic novels aimed toward best seller lists, fictional athletes do not seem to fare well. In fact, many fail badly. This paper deals with five athletes from three sports, each of whom fails at some stage in his life. None fails simply because he is an athlete, but sport does contribute to the various problems each man encounters.

Jack Keefe, the comic protagonist of Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al* (1916), dampens the public's adoration for professional baseball players. Vain, naive, bumbling, and funny, the Chicago White Sox rookie Keefe is no different from the rest of humanity. Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) points out the need we have for heroes and the pitfalls of being heroic. Malamud's hero Roy Hobbs quests for the National League pennant like a knight errant for the Holy Grail. But Hobbs, constrained by hubris and blindness, fails totally. John Updike's Flick Webb in "Ex-Basketball Player," and Harry Angstrom in *Rabbit, Run* (1960) are high school stars who cannot find substitutes for the comforting rituals of sport. Both are men without direction or purpose. Finally, Don DeLillo's *End Zone* (1972), a novel yoking nuclear war, football and language, presents a character who cannot or will not make decisions and distinctions. Gary Harkness, a halfback at Logos College, tries to understand the boundaries of his own existence, but fear of commitment ultimately plunges Harkness into chaos.

Breaking the tradition of last minute touchdown passes and game-winning hits, writers have used athletes not to deify them or to perpetuate the American Dream but to examine the human condition. The athlete is an excellent choice for the purpose of scrutinizing individual human behavior and seeing the effects of social expectations.



Discussion and book looking follow one session