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# Fear, Loathing, and Adulation: Views of the Coach

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The profession that produced such figures as Amos Alonzo Stagg, Knute Rockne, Phog Allen, Lou Little, and Adolph Rupp always has been a public one. The coach is a highly visible figure become omnipresent with the advent of sideline microphones and compact, portable television cameras. Coaching is a difficult job, but because it offers the opportunity for both great success and abysmal failure, it should not be surprising to find the figure of the coach in the works of many American writers. The writings of novelists and poets are not subject to the pressure of sportswriters' daily deadlines, and so we are likely to encounter portraits reflecting measured, evaluative judgments on the roles of the coach.

The great majority of writers seem to present negative views of the coach. Poet Gary Gildner in "First Practice" offers a coach who is both brutal and a coward. In his novel *The Last Picture Show*, Larry McMurtry writes of Coach Herman Popper, a compendium of sins. Popper sleeps through his own high school civics classes, is ignorant, crude, vicious, a not-so-latent homosexual, has shot at a student with a deer rifle, and maliciously has arranged for the tiring of a harmless, defenseless fellow teacher. In *Rabbit, Run* John Updike gives us Coach Marty Tothoro, an alcoholic ex-basketball coach who lives in a dusty attic room above the Sunshine Athletic Association. The confused Harry Angstrom goes to his old coach for concrete advice, but he receives only cliches and cryptic statements such as "Women are monkeys." Emmett Creed in Don DeLillo's *End Zone* is as rigid as his name implies and Pop Fisher in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* cannot accomplish his team's salvation and must leave that task to someone else. The list

of characters to be despised, laughed at, pitied, or ignored could go on and on. In all of these portraits, not one presents us with a credible human figure. Gildner's coach is a mouthpiece; McMurtry's, a too heavily satirical character finally to be taken seriously. Neither does the humanity of Updike, DeLillo, or Malamud's characters strike us.

Perhaps the old mind/body dichotomy dating back to at least Euripides is partially responsible for these views. The Platonic exhortation to unite the physical and the intellectual seems to have gone largely unheeded. It may be surprising, then, that contemporary poet James Dickey offers what may be the most intelligent assessment of the coach in American letters. Dickey, a National Book Award winner for *Buckdancer's Choice* and nominee for the novel *Deliverance*, writes often about sport and its participants. In "For the Death of Vince Lombardi," he presents the legendary coach dying of cancer and asks sharp questions about the values represented by Lombardi. While Dickey does not sentimentalize Lombardi, he shows the coach as a man who could drive and inspire but was still subject to human frailty. In "The Bee" Dickey uses Shag Norton, his old backfield coach at Clemson College who pushed Dickey hard to do well. The poem does not romanticize the sweat and stress Norton evoked, but it is a moving tribute to the teachers of hard lessons, lessons that some day may save something valuable.

In the end, however, we are left with far too many Herman Poppers and Marty Totheros. While many authors have used sport, too little is found in the major works of major writers. Until this is corrected, a Shag Norton will receive an occasional tribute, but the brutal, the inept, and the innocuous will dominate literary portrayals of the coach.