

# Reactions to the Zang and Taylor-Roepke Papers

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One of the most identifiable problems with the history of sport in the United States as written by the contemporary generation of scholars centers on the question of “place” or the value of the topic in the overall scheme of historical development. One of our presenters succeeded much better in placing the subject matter into its place in history.

As scholars who wish to foster a continued development of scholarly authority as well as a schema for the historical framework of sport in society, it will require a continual effort to remain fully cognizant of that issue. If we fail to do that our work, as valuable as it has been, may continue to be deemed ephemeral and generally of little importance. This is a particularly critical time in our development as a subdiscipline within history or physical education as we have been able to view the results of our many labors begin to bear fruit. The publication by prestigious publishing houses such as Greenwood, Columbia University Press, Little, Brown, and Prentice-Hall of work done by our colleagues is a clear signal that sport history has moved into a status clearly advanced of those days when John Betts died of a broken heart while searching for a publisher.

The ability to publish in the high quality journals, which at one time barely considered sport a topic for serious study, now seems relatively common. Scholarly meetings in the historical profession which I know best now regularly schedule sessions on the history of sport. Just this past week I received a list of those to whom the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a prestigious “Fellowship for College Teachers.” Steven Riess has been awarded a year long fellowship to continue his work on the social history of sport. Don Mrozek has been a previous recipient. Reviewers obviously feel that sport history has become legitimate.

We now have a greater obligation to ourselves to upgrade our work and keep it within the context of valid history rather than ephemeral pedantry. I am not indicating that either of the individuals who presented papers today falls deeply into that trap. Rather, I would indicate that David Zang's portrayal of the role of Moses Fleetwood Walker succeeds far more than Sharon Taylor-Roepke in placing Walker into the context of the historical place and role.

Zang does not approach his subject from a filiopietistic position. Rather, he indicates quite immediately in his paper that Walker's place in history has been determined neither by the quality of his play nor by the superlative role which he played as a forerunner of modern black athletes. Walker was a persistent pioneer who achieved his place in history nearly by accident. Despite this, Zang has been able to create a clear, though by no means unflawed, portrait of Walker who was a very complex person.

What we do find out about Walker is that throughout his life he carried significantly different ideas about American racial situations. It is quite obvious that his expertise in the major leagues (at Toledo) had scarred Walker. It also becomes quite obvious that other experiences contributed to his "Back to Africa" attitudes, which were in fact consistent with the attitude expressed by a few other black leaders. Zang quite successfully points out the qualities of this man, places him within the context of baseball, racial attitudes, mainstream occurrences, and problems of the black in the late nineteenth century.

Ms. Taylor-Roepke creates a sentimental and appealing portrait of the reunion, but is less successful in analyzing the impact of those adventurous women who embarked on an exciting venture. What was it that we were to learn via the reunion of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League. I am never sure what the point of Taylor-Roepke's paper is. Is it intended as an account of the reunion which must have been a rewarding experience for those who played as well as for our colleague on the program today? Or, was the intention of the paper to allow us a glimpse of the historical information and analysis which was gleaned from that fabulous gathering? From the paper written I must confess that I was never certain.

There exists so much of what should become a dynamic study. We must hope that the end result of Taylor-Roepke's study is a "Girls (women) of Summer" a la Roger Kahn's brilliant portrayal of the meaning of baseball in the lives of those who played on the 1953 Dodgers. But from this particular work we do not gain the confidence that the role of the women's league will be developed in order to find out more about the experience of these women in and after those summers spent in Fort Wayne and Racine. We have to explore the complexities which struck these young women's lives. They lived in an era which Betty Friedan easily evaluated as one in which women returned from World War II to more traditional roles. If "Rosie the Riveter" was an unusual occupation for women in the 1940s playing baseball was certainly a quantum leap beyond that. In fact, women playing professional sports (except for tennis and golf) is still not a traditional role. But in an age when the contemporary version of what columnist Ellen Goodman calls the "superwoman" did not exist, the impact of playing for the Wrigley-led league had to be quite significant.

Yet we are left with little of a picture of how playing baseball in the summers of the late 1940s and 1950s impacted the lives, loves, and careers of the women we believe came largely from rural sections of the country or from ethnic (largely Polish) sectors of the population. If this is correct, we find the participation in this league to be consistent as a pattern of Americans seeking to use sport as a ladder of mobility, but we do not know if the young women returned home to the farm and the enclave or whether they mainstreamed into American life. I would like to know

either through case studies or through some quantitative data (sorry Voigt and Crepeau) what impact playing in this league had on the quality of life for the many who played.

It would be informative to learn what long-range impact the Helena Rubenstein experiment had on the women from rural America and from the ethnic enclaves. One claimed it to be “a joke.” Others saw it as a success. Did these women return to normative roles as keepers of the house and domestic roles as Friedan noted to be the process for women in post-war America? Recall the Doris Day movies of the 1950s – a house in Connecticut: two cars (one a station wagon): 2.33 children, resulting in one tittering, frustrated, though on the surface, quite happily married blonde. Did participation produce Doris Days or were they more like Joan Crawford who in their business attire preferred professional and business lives to the thrills of child rearing. Obviously these are sharp extremes, but we gain little knowledge of what impact the league had on the women’s lives. Toward which polar opposite did these women lean?