

Literature and History: The Literary View

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I take it to be a fundamental law governing our respective enterprises that the study of sport literature cannot *not* be historical, and that the study of sport history cannot not be literary. The literary and historical perspectives on sport cannot be imagined without some common ground; our question is how much, and to what extent we want to embrace the other discipline. No literature can be wholly divorced from history, but "literature" itself, as a type of written expression, is distinguished from other types on aesthetic or formal terms. "Sports literature," however, is named by its content and directs us toward its meanings - which can only reside in history. On the other hand, historians mad "texts," as literary critics mad texts. and historians must wrestle with questions of "fact" and "fiction," "truth" and "reliability." that to outsiders seem more obviously the domain of literary studies. The question is not whether history and literature ought to have anything to do with each other in the study of sport, but how far we want to go to Join cur disciplines. As case studies demonstrating what history and literature offer each other in the study of sport, I consider Eric Solomon's essays on Jewish-American baseball fiction and Peter Levine's historical study, Ellis Island to Ebbets Field: Sport and the American Jewish Experience.

My second point concerns what I would call the cultural study of sport, where history and literature are most obviously indispensable to each other, and where, I believe, sport scholars have the most to contribute to our larger disciplines. If we want to understand what sport - mass mediated spectator sport, that is - has "meant" to its actual fans and viewers, we have the rich resource of the popular press as a continuous record

of nearly instantaneous interpretations, that are a unique resource for understanding cultural expression in the United States. If sporting events are the "primary cultural texts" that actual fans and spectators "read," sporting journalism offers a range of "secondary texts" through which these fans and spectators gain much of their understanding. My example for considering the possible uses of popular journalism in order to bring us close to the meanings held by sport's actual audiences is drawn from the representations of football in the popular press in the 1890s, a time when the popular press was uniquely influential in teaching an emerging mass audience what the game meant.

The value of history and literature to each other is most apparent in cultural studies of sport but equally real in its other aspects, too. Sports novels can be used by sport historians as "interior history" to complement the historical record. In relation not to what texts we read but how we read them, interpretation and empirical data are the dialectical poles that define both of our respective disciplines, as well as their conjunction in sports studies. Interpretation must make sense of the always partial empirical record; the facts that can be known must check the possible distortions of interpretation. The materials and the methods of both disciplines are not only useful to each other, they are essential for the full flowering of sports studies, which should be both historical and literary in the richest sense of those terms.