

Manhood, Memory and White Men's Sports In the Recent South

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This paper examines whether or not southern white men have interpreted recent sports as part of a masculine tradition. White men looking to draw on a heritage of southern manhood could choose among at least five possible and often connected meanings for manhood. They could choose the notion of independence that said part of being male and white was not taking orders from anyone. They could draw on the notion of honor that said all esteem comes from the group and that each man had to prove himself to that group by: immediate and angry responses to challenge; physical bravery; and, efforts to protect women. They could draw on old notions of paternalism that portrayed a father-headed household as the best model for all social relations. They could draw on racist notions of manhood that included sexual control over African-American women and physical control over but also fear of African-American men. And, finally, they could draw on the *helluvafella* ideal that said it was a man's main "focus," as W.J. Cashe wrote in the mind of the south, "to stand on his head in a bar, to toss down a pint of raw whiskey in a gulp, to fiddle and dance all night, to bite off the nose or gouge out the eye of a favorite enemy, to fight harder and love harder than the next man." (p.52)

Most of those meanings for manhood have faced clear challenges in the South since World War II, but sport seems to represent ways of preserving, and in some ways building on masculine traditions, especially those of independence and the *helluvafella*.

For example, white southerners like to claim that they take football more seriously than people in other regions. This seems a thoroughly unsupported and ultimately dubious claim, but it is important because so many people repeat it. The recent successes in acquiring major sports franchises in the South suggest that people there are putting a traditionally southern imprint on national sporting culture. Football, auto racing, and hunting may seem to be especially clear examples of continuity in southern white men's culture, with their emphases on violence, aggressiveness, and sheer excitement. The football hero seems the *helluvafella*, the driver seems the independent hero, and the hunter seems the embodiment of traditional confrontations between man and nature.

On the other hand, it is certainly possible to argue that modern sport in the South includes very little continuity with male traditions. It would be very tempting to argue that modern southern *spectator* sports fit the model of southern identity formation that John Shelton Reed has offered in many of his essays. As the old defining features of southern distinctiveness decline or are beaten down, he argues, many people in the South, especially in the suburban middle class, want more than ever to own or buy or sing or eat or watch something that makes them feel connected to a clearly southern past. Thus it may be that most of modern sports in the South represent not traditions but the fruits of Sun Belt prosperity. Modern team sports offer the kind of brightly colored, quickly moving mass-media experiences that characterize American consumer culture more than the traditions of southern white manhood. College sports benefit from the dramatic expansion of the college-going population that has been one of the most dramatic changes in the modern South. White college sports fans, like white sports fans throughout the country, have found they can very easily cheer for African-American athletes without that fact changing their lives beyond their role as spectators. Even stock car racing, widely hailed or condemned as a rapidly growing sport with mass appeal for southern white men, includes a strong element of the modern consumer culture. A sport with a southern identity that still recalls Junior Johnson and moonshine running, it has clearly grown from a fascination with speed that fits clearly within the *helluvafella* tradition and a fascination with tinkering with limited resources that fits within the tradition of preserving independence. However, stock car racers announce themselves as salesmen with every inch of their automobiles, driving for Mountain Dew and Skoal and Union 76. Thus, it is possible to argue that modern southern spectator sports cater to audiences that are part of a national mass culture but that crave some sense of connection to a distinctively southern past. The ostensibly southern accoutrements of such spectator sports - barbeque in the stands, military college mascots, etc. - would in such an interpretation stand as examples of efforts to create ties to a past.

The more complicated issue is that most traditional meanings of manhood involve individual action and certainly not vicarious identification. Thus, this paper contrasts changes in participant sports since the 1960s with those changes in spectator sports. How, for example, has hunting changed with the declining access most men have to land? How has the traditionally patrician sport of golf changed with the drastic

increase in the number of southern participants? What has happened to the traditional fear many evangelicals had of competitive sports when, in recent decades, most churches have organized sports teams participating in church leagues? While being broadly interpretive, it relies in part on sporting publications written and produced in the South.