

Daniel A. Nathan
Miami University

Reading and Remembering Shirley Povich

The distinguished *Washington Post* sports columnist Shirley Povich died on June 4, 1998. For myriad reasons, his life and career merit historical attention. In some ways Povich lived the American Dream. His story reads like a Horatio Alger novel. Like the typical Alger hero, Povich made it in the world due to talent, hard work, and (as he often admitted) luck; moreover, he was renowned for his integrity, generosity, and modesty. Born in 1905 to Lithuanian Jewish immigrants, Povich grew up in Bar Harbor, Maine, one of ten children. In the summers he caddied for wealthy vacationers, including Edward B. McLean, who owned the *Washington Post*. In 1922, McLean, who called Povich “the greatest caddy in the United States,” invited him to come to D.C. to attend his alma mater, Georgetown University, and to work on his newspaper. Starting as a copy boy, Povich wrote for the *Washington Post* for the next seventy-five years. His first byline appeared in 1924. His final column ran the day after he died.

Over the course of his career Povich covered sixty World Series, twenty Super Bowls, and hundreds of golf tournaments and championship prizefights. He covered Babe Ruth and Walter Johnson, the Gene Tunney-Jack Dempsey and the Joe Louis-Max Schmeling fights, Jackie Robinson’s re-integration of baseball, the basketball game-fixing scandals of the 1950s, the massacre at the 1972 Summer Olympics, and Muhammad Ali’s tumultuous career, among countless other subjects. After he “retired” in 1974, he filed an additional 600 columns. All told, Povich wrote approximately 15,000 columns (in addition, he served as the *Washington Post*’s sports editor from 1926 to 1933), hundreds of magazine articles, and two books. In other words, for most of the twentieth century Shirley Povich witnessed and chronicled American sports history in the making, and he did so with intelligence and unusual perceptiveness.

This paper examines and contextualizes Povich’s life and career (with special emphasis on the way Judaism seems to have shaped his world view and sensibilities) and his unique contribution to our understanding of some of the most significant sports events and figures during the past seventy-five years. Drawing on Povich’s columns and autobiography, *All These Mornings* (1969), and a few secondary sources, this paper reconstructs a remarkable life and career and argues that some of Povich’s columns represent American sportswriting at (or near) its very best. In particular, this paper pays close attention to how Povich represented ethnicity, race, and gender, as well as his writing style, the historical consciousness which emerges in his columns, and his historical legacy and significance. Less well-known nationally than the acknowledged deans of American sportswriting, Grantland Rice (1880-1954) and Red Smith (1905-1982), Povich nonetheless provided us with an invaluable record of one of our most revealing and popular cultural institutions.