

BOOK REVIEWS

H.G. Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, a Team, and a Dream.* Harper Perennial, New York, 1990. Illustrations. pp. xiv + 364, \$US10 paper.

There are probably two major reasons for conducting research into sport. The first is because of an individual's innate interest in that sport; the desire (or is it need?) to develop a deeper understanding and knowledge of the particular sport which has attracted the interest of the investigator. The second reason is not so much that sport is interesting in its own terms, but rather that it provides a window through which we can learn about ourselves and the nature of the society we find ourselves in. Sport is not so much an activity or pastime of interest to aficionados, but is a phenomenon which has the potential to reveal insights into social and cultural behaviour.

In 1988 investigative reporter H.G. Bissinger travelled to Odessa, West Texas and persuaded the head coach of the Permian High School football team (the Permian Panthers) to allow him to spend time with the team during the football season. As Bissinger explains he wanted to undertake such an exercise because of 'the idea of high school sports keeping a town together, keeping it alive' (p.xi). During Bissinger's tour of duty Odessa was economically depressed because of the low price of oil, and financial excesses which occurred in the 1980s. Odessa was also ranked as one of the worst cities to live in, in the United States of America. Despite, or because of (?), these reasons the Permian Panthers played on Friday nights before crowds of up to 20,000. Odessa is also famous because it was once home to George Bush and his family for a time when he worked in the oil industry. Bush in fact made a reference to high school football on Friday nights in his acceptance speech when he won the Republican nomination for the American presidency (p.193).

Friday Night Lights is organised around an account of the progress of the Permian Panthers during the 1988 football season; of their successful attempt to qualify for a place in the play-offs for state champion. On a wind-swept and rainy night they were finally beaten in a semi-final by the Carter Cowboys. *Friday Night Lights*, however, is more than an account of the highs and lows of a school-boy football team. In Bissinger's skilled hands high school football constitutes a means to reach an understanding of the broader currents and themes which seemingly dominate American society.

America is based on the notions of rugged individualism and competition, of success being linked to dedication, determination and hard work. Governments, and government intervention, are abhorred because of the stifling of initiative, and because of fears of producing a society of layabouts who become dependent on welfare, and a drain on society and the national purse. Gridiron football, like all (team) sports, is based on competition. It is a sport, however, where size and sheer strength are of paramount importance. Gridiron is undoubtedly the most physical - and hence injury prone - body contact sport. It is based on the idea of physical domination of opponents, where devising strategies to physically injure opposing players is an accepted, if not revered, form of play. In this most macho of sports, players who cannot handle the physical and mental pressure are regarded as 'sissys' or 'pussies' who will be replaced by others with the appropriate qualities necessary for success.

For the people of Odessa and Permian High the fortunes of the Panthers became an overriding passion or obsession, almost a quasi-religious experience. It is as if the fortunes of the football team provide a collective identity, something to hold onto in the vacuum created by the iron law of rugged individualism. Communities invest an inordinate amount of time, energy and resources into high school football. Football is not so much sport, or even entertainment, it is a means to dominate and assert prestige over other communities.

High school football imposes important costs for those who play it or are associated with its production. Members of the team are lionised. Their function is to help ensure that the school has a successful year on the football field. Players are not expected or encouraged to be scholastically inclined. Attendance at classes is something one does between practice and training sessions. Staff members, including school principals (these examples occurred at Carter High) help players cheat on grades, or even provide false grades to ensure that they fulfil scholastic eligibility criteria for playing. Players assume god like status within their schools and local communities. Girls desperately compete with each other to attract the interest and attention of players. One girl offered \$50 in an unsuccessful attempt to entice a player to sleep with her. At Carter High a girl skipped classes one afternoon to have sex with three members of the team, and insisted on having the session photographed so that she could prove to her friends that she had finally made it. Players at Carter High became so impervious to any form of social constraint that they decided to participate in armed robberies just for a bit of fun. Black players are actively recruited by white schools. They hardly receive any education to help them with the life that awaits them if they should fail to attract a college athletic scholarship. A black coach ruefully noted that blacks 'fit as athletes, but we really don't fit as a part of society' (p.107). In addition, players confront adulthood with the prospect of a twisted and broken body. When major knee injuries put an end to the career of a black player, persons associated with the Permian Panthers suggested that he should just kill himself as he no longer had football as a part of his life. A friend retorted that bullets aren't wasted on lame horses (p.262). Players are just slabs of meat served up to an audience living out a vicarious existence.

Friday Night Lights is a powerful and disturbing work. It constitutes a fundamental critique of those who view sport as an enriching and ennobling experience. Bissinger not only raises major questions

about the role of high school football, but also the morals which underpin the operation of American society.

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