

Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, Illus. pp. 286. US\$27.50

In *Serious Fun*, Robert Edelman delivers a well-researched portrayal of the history of spectator sports in the USSR. He presents a chronological overview of the development of spectator sports, and at the same time, attempts to analyse the status of spectator sports in the USSR, with varying degrees of success. Although most Western scholars have a very narrow image of Soviet sport, believing that the sports in which the Soviet Union excelled were synonymous with popular sports, Edelman attempts to debunk these images with a history of spectator sports.

The introduction represents a new and lively approach to the study of sport under communism, and suggests an equally exciting main text. Unfortunately, this was not to eventuate. Although the text is crammed with information—dates, places, teams, scores—the analysis does not fully set this information in context. Edelman's arguments become repetitive, leading the reader to think that the book would have been better served had it been organised thematically rather than chronologically.

Some examples of spectator sports were selected to highlight the discussion and analysis. Soccer made up the bulk of the essay and was certainly the most researched of the three sports. Ice Hockey and

basketball were not researched in similar depth to soccer. More integration of the sports would have been useful, rather than discussing each separately and repeating many of the arguments.

Edelman's analysis has several shortcomings. Gender is given scant attention. Considering that women made up a significant proportion of medal winners at the international level, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, more could have been done on the status of women in sports in general in the Soviet Union. If women made up a small percentage of spectators and participants, why then were there so many successful female athletes? Were women actively excluded from the Soviet sporting experience?

In dealing with the question of amateur versus professional sport, Edelman does not clearly explain the reasons for the Soviet transition from anti-amateurism to explicit devotee of the concept. If the Soviets were initially sceptical of the 'bourgeois' concept, how were they 'seduced' by it in the end? Why did the Soviets regard both amateurism and professionalism in sport as elements of the capitalist system? Perhaps consideration of the fact that the dominant model of sport in the Western world is incongruent with the aims of communism or socialism would have assisted Edelman's explanation. The rise of mass organised and performance oriented sport, coincided with the rise of state managed economic development, or state capitalism. This may clarify why performance sport, previously considered bourgeois and capitalist, became the dominant model for sport in the Soviet Union.

Edelman discusses the role of political-ideological education in and through Soviet sport. He suggests that multi-sport events such as the Olympics and Spartakiads were more effective in the overall political-ideological education of the citizens as it focussed attention on the spectacle itself rather than on the actual sports. Games between teams, on the other hand, had little real influence over the ideological behaviour of the spectators. Edelman suggests that despite concerted efforts, the Party was largely unsuccessful in modifying the behaviour of those who attended sporting spectacles, however, he fails to identify the reasons for the Party's failure to inculcate socialist behaviour. He makes passing reference to suggestions that spectator sport produced counter-hegemonic behaviours without examining how or why this occurred. It is not enough to simply say that spectator sport became resistant to the dominant hegemony of the ruling elites.

Despite the depth of research in *Serious Fun*, Edelman, on several occasions, makes grand generalisations which could have easily been substantiated with a little extra research. At one point, when discussing the political-ideological education, Edelman suggests that Soviet athletes did not take their regular political education classes terribly seriously, indeed, about as seriously as many present day American College athletes take their studies. Rather than making such an assumption, Edelman could have made an effort to find out whether Soviet athletes really reacted like this and indeed, whether most college athletes (such a broad description anyway) are less interested in their studies than other students. By making use of the current literature available on Olympic history, Edelman would have discovered that the Soviet entry into the Olympic movement was a little more complex than his explanation. Although the Soviets were invited to the London Olympics, (Edelman claims they were not), the Soviets first competed in Helsinki. Edelman explains their appearance in 1952 by suggesting that the Soviets 'appear to have changed their minds and decided to take part in 1952' (p. 122). Considering the depth of research in other sections of Edelman's book, it is surprising that he states simply that the Soviet 'changed their minds'. In such instances Edelman brushes over history, leaving a sneaking feeling of doubt in the minds of the reader. In view of his attention to the international political significance of sport for Soviet officials, it is alarming that a significant step in the international sporting relations of the Soviet Union is treated so poorly.

Edelman endeavoured to present the image of spectator sports as watched, consumed and valued in very similar ways to Western societies. His premise should have led him to this conclusion, but in the end he still felt the need to reinforce some kind of inherent difference between 'us and them'. Although he tries to dispel myths about sport in the Soviet Union, he is unwilling to take that final step.

While Edelman incorporates his own personal observations into the text, they cannot suffice as the entire 'truth' of the situation, especially in a Union of close to 300 million people living in such a vast expanse of territory. Were there differences between the city and the country? How does he know that women were less interested in sports? Were there any reliable surveys which indicate this? If the answer is yes, then more work needs to be done that analyses *why* this was the case.

Although *Serious Fun* is an important contribution to the literature on Soviet sport, as Edelman suggests at the outset, it is not a comprehensive account of spectator sports in the Soviet Union. It is an important beginning, however, and heralds a brand new area of research.

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