

# *Thematic Review*

## *Sports Madness USA: Sporting Experiences and Travel in America*

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**Bruce Adams and Margaret Engel**, *Ballpark Vacations: Great Family Trips to Minor League and Classic Major League Ballparks Across America*. Fodor's, New York, 1997. Maps, pp. 291. US\$16.50 paper.

**Bob Walstein and Phil Silverman with Wayne Ellis**, *Saturday Afternoon Madness*. Four Horseman Press, Boston, 1996. Illus., pp. 288. US\$13.95 paper.

It might seem strange to be reviewing these two books, one about two guys who travelled around the USA in search of great college football experiences and the other about vacations that can be taken at America's minor and major league baseball parks. Nevertheless, if one wants to gain a depth of understanding of the social and cultural meaning of football or to find out where to go to see real 'idealised' baseball, then these are excellent sources of information. And, after all, we are allowed some fun along with critical analysis.

I must admit that reading these two books was both a nostalgic and enlightening experience. *Saturday Afternoon Madness* was also one of the funniest reads of any book about sport and sports fans that I have come across as two average guys who love football and food roamed the country visiting famous college football sites such as Notre Dame, Penn State, LSU (Louisiana State University), Alabama, Michigan, Colorado, Florida and others during the 1993 college football season on what they termed their 'football jihad'.

Sprinkled throughout the humour and tales of their trip, Waldstein and Silverman recount historical events (and some tall tales) that have become part of the folklore of each university where they stopped. It is hard for the uninitiated to understand why and how over 80 000 football

fans can appear in places such as Clemson, South Carolina, a small town of about 10 000 people and 16 000 students to watch a university football game. This book provides as good a place to start as any, as, in a country where many people pick their university on the basis of the success of the football or basketball team, there is a remarkable dearth of sociological or cultural studies analysis of college football fandom and the tailgating party phenomenon. At LSU in Baton Rouge, for example, they start partying outside the stadium over a full day before the game, but then again they have Cajun food to eat, a good climate throughout most of the season and a stadium consistently voted the hardest for opposition teams with one of the loudest groups of fans where the LSU Bengal Tigers have played night football since 1931. As the authors recount: 'Nothing in our lives could have possibly prepared us for game weekend in Baton Rouge. As one fan warned us: "Saturday Night is LSU football. So is Saturday afternoon, Friday night, Friday afternoon. . ." [Another fan] maintained that the whole week in Louisiana builds to a crescendo of madness. He summed it up as, "You get six days of foreplay and one incredible bang on Saturday night"' (p. 81). The only regret is that the authors only had one season in which to travel and the reader is thus tied to their idiosyncrasies. For example trips to Knoxville, Tennessee to see over 107 000 fans packed along the banks of the Tennessee River belting out repeated choruses of *Rockytop* or to Lincoln, Nebraska where little else exists but football would have added further to the collection. However, the authors could not be at all places each week and they have done well in providing a sample representative of major college football from the south to the northeast, midwest and west.

We are told how the University of Georgia (who many feel have the most rabid fans)<sup>1</sup> nearly lost football due to the massive violence and deaths in turn of the century college football and the wishes of many state legislators to abolish the game as a result. In 1928 at LSU the university could not decide which was more needed more, rooms for students or larger stadium capacity. They got both by building 1500 dormitory rooms within the stadium and adding 10 000 seats. A few years ago the debate was between expanding the stadium further or renovating the library resulting in some fans referring to a new section of stands as 'The Library'. The authors do not recount uncritically, as do many popular accounts, idealised myths and legends such as the famous 'Win one for the Gipper' deathbed call of George Gipp immortalised by Ronald Reagan as the

Gipper in the film, *Knute Rockne: All American*. As football historians have now shown, Gipp was a womaniser, a drunk and a gambler, contributing to his early death in 1920. In an era of lax academic standards for players, especially at Notre Dame,<sup>2</sup> Gipp was even expelled from Notre Dame. He was, however, one of the best players of his era who played for arguably the best coach ever (unless you're from Alabama) in Knute Rockne. As for Alabama, the story of Paul 'Bear' Bryant and his influence over this state usually known to the outside world for segregation and the racist defense of white southerners led by Governor George Wallace. Bryant coached the last team to integrate and won national championships with all-white teams in the 1960s and integrated ones in the 1970s. He retired as the winningest coach in college football history then died three weeks after his retirement. No coach since has been able to shake the influence of 'The Bear'. The development of Clemson's IPTAY (for 'I pay ten a year'), founded in 1933 to raise \$10 000 needed to field a first class football team, is a model for sports fundraising and boosterism. The money needed to save Clemson football was raised \$10 at a time from local farmers and other boosters and, as the authors correctly point out, IPTAY emerged as the most successful athletic fundraising organisation in the USA, now at \$100 a member. Clemson's own fundraising efforts only caught up with those of IPTAY in 1984. IPTAY's strength is such that 56 000 of the nearly 82 000 seats at its Memorial Stadium (popularly known as Death Valley) are reserved for its members.

Many other stories and historical tidbits abound in the book, but it is the authors quest at each location for the soul of local supporters that makes *Saturday Afternoon Madness* a success. In each instance Waldstein and Silverman undertook to find the most rabid supporters, those who had seen the most games and other hard core supporters. As a result, the reader is drawn into the world that is major college football in the USA. As they argue, the relationship between fans and 'their' team is both more intense and special than for fans of National Football League teams (perhaps with the exception of Green Bay). Fans know that the university will not relocate to another state or across the country and this leads to greater fervour and love of the team. To understand America's love affair with football, it is at the college level that one must really start. Similarly, to grasp a sense of the idealised world of American baseball recreated in films such as *The Natural* and *Field of Dreams*, then a read of Bruce Adams

and Margaret Engel's *Ballpark Vacations* is the place to start.

Although the book is really a travel guide to minor league and 'classic' major league parks such as Wrigley Field and Fenway Park, the book provides detailed information about each location and other tourist attractions, some relating to baseball. It also doubles as a good accommodation and restaurant guide for travels around America (and into Canada). This is a valuable resource for scholars interested in baseball and the general integration of baseball and American society and summer leisure practices in large cities and small towns across the country. From early century parks like Wrigley and Fenway to the newly constructed parks in old style such as Baltimore's Oriole Park at Camden Yards, Cleveland's Jacobs Field and the Durham Bulls Athletic Park (all constructed by HOK Sport of Kansas City) to parks no longer in use, those with mountain views and parks where you bring your own lawn chair or blanket to sit on, *Ballpark Vacations* provides detailed information and brief park histories. While not every ballpark is included, for researchers as well as for sports fans this is an excellent tool. The bulk of the parks featured are historic or 1990s nostalgia influenced recreations of old-time baseball atmosphere. With such regional variation and large distances between places, a similar guide to sporting grounds and events in Australia would be a useful addition to the rapidly growing market of sporting travel guides.

Taken together, these books are invaluable resources for the historian and sociologist of American sport beginning research projects as well as for those seeking to undertake comparative analysis on topics such as those that test assertions about sporting madness, or the general cultural role of sport in a given society. Read alongside books such as Springwood's *Cooperstown to Dyresville*, Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* or Gildea's *When the Colts Belonged to Baltimore*,<sup>3</sup> these books form a valuable basis from which to launch an ethnographic investigation of sports and sports fans in the USA.<sup>4</sup> They are also a delight for the general fan of baseball and American football providing excellent detail and information for the sports traveller. In addition, these books help demonstrate the thousands of places where one can go to experience sport, some of them not even reached by Fox Sports or other global media interests and without corporate boxes, while others recreate for fans nostalgic experiences that have significant and real meaning that cannot be easily dismissed in our rush for economic analysis of sports events and their impact on society.

That does not mean sports studies scholars should lack critical vision — far from it, however, if we are to argue about the meaning of sports to fans, we must get involved by doing many more ethnographic studies in places such as those appearing in these books.

Finally, as they say in Louisiana, these books are pure *lagniappe*<sup>5</sup> for the lover of baseball and American football as well as for the scholar attempting to understand the social and cultural meanings of sport in the United States.

### Notes:

- 1 At least if one comes from any surrounding state: South Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama or Florida, though most large schools in this region have particularly vociferous fans. For more on football and southern culture see the forthcoming article by John Nauright and Tara Magdalinski, 'Rebel Yellin' from the Bayou to Rockytop: College Football and Southern American Popular Culture', *Football Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1999 (Special issue on football in North America).
- 2 For perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the history of college football at one university and of football at Notre Dame, see Murray Sperber, *Shake Down the Thunder: The Creation of Notre Dame Football*. Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1993.
- 3 Harold Bissinger, *Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream*, HarperCollins, New York, 1991; William Gildea, *When the Colts Belonged to Baltimore: A father, a Son, a Team, and a Time*, Tickner and Fields, New York, 1994; Charles Frueling Springwood, *Cooperstown to Dyresville: A Geography of Baseball Nostalgia*, Westview, Boulder, Co., 1996. Also see the recently published Terry Pluto, *When All the World Was a Browns Town: Cleveland's Browns and the Championship Season of '64*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997. These books frame well nostalgic sporting identification in the USA, though Springwood is the only scholar to date that has done a sophisticated and detailed ethnographic study of the meaning of baseball or football in American society. Unfortunately, his book is hard to find.
- 4 For more on these books, see John Nauright, 'Writing and Reading American Football: Culture, Identity and Sports Studies,' *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 1, Nov. 1996, pp. 109-127; and John Nauright, 'Trying to Reach Home: "Real" Baseball, Nostalgia and Hegemonic Masculine American Dreams', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 13, no. 2, May 1997, pp. 91-97.
- 5 *Lagniappe* is a term used by Louisianans to describe any unexpected bonus.