

American Sports Chronicles: Introduction/ Reading Resources

Prof. Alan Goldberg
Fromm Institute/Fall '21

As many of you at the Fromm Institute may recall, I taught a two -semester class some years ago about baseball's imprint on American life and the nearly mythological spell that it casts on its devotees. I include myself as a lifelong fan, player, coach, umpire, and sometimes sportswriter. We examined baseball through a number of lenses, from its colorful history that evolved into America's Game during the 20th Century, through notable literary works--several of which spawned big screen productions. We recall Bernard Malamud's "The Natural", August Wilson's "Fences", and W.P. Kinsella's "Shoeless Joe" (rebranded as "Field of Dreams" for the cinema and site of a recent MLB Yankees/White Sox game). We also featured Ken Burns' monumental PBS Baseball series that remains the gold standard for American sports documentaries, followed more recently by his Jackie Robinson piece. As I have discovered more recently through ongoing research on The Negro Leagues in concert with other marginalized baseball entities, a wealth of first-rate documentary material from Ken Burns to Bob Kendrick (Negro League Hall of Fame), to an array of other distinguished documentarians has been produced celebrating such as Latin Americans, Japanese, Jews, and women in baseball.

Though baseball may serve as the bedrock, this class will expand the realm to embrace the entire cavalcade of sports. We will consider other mainstream American sports from basketball, boxing, football, tennis, golf, and The Olympic Games to the more specialized niche sports such as horse-racing, surfing, rowing, soccer (in America, not as the world's dominant sport)—among others, as they arise. We will consider sports through similar lenses—a multiplicity of art forms, visual and documentary history, but the primary emphasis will be on "sports writing" in all of its iterations—fiction and non-fiction books, longform magazine articles, and—prominently-- the daily beat of our newspaper scribes.

The intention here goes far beyond the realm of nostalgia—though this is an inevitable part of the human experience to resurrect life's vivid moments and reconnect through shared memories--- and will reach far beyond the white male bastion that was for decades the province of the sporting scene. Sports has always been a conduit to express the full range of the human condition through intimate, sometimes raw, portraits of its cast of colorful characters. Likewise, sports has always been inextricably intertwined with more complex societal issues and, in a few notable cases—Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier, Muhammed Ali's political dissent—has led the way to alter the very fabric of society. Indeed, the timing couldn't be better, as Ken Burns' current documentary production on PBS celebrates the life and times of Muhammed Ali, certainly one of the most charismatic and influential athletes of the modern era.

From issues of racial inequities to gender discrepancies, sports has left a profound imprint. We need look no further than the global platform that is the Olympic Games: Who can forget the

images from the recent Tokyo Olympics held in near empty venues with the specter of Covid hovering over the world? Recall Hitler's 1936 Berlin Olympics, countered by the dignity and grace displayed by Jessie Owens and The Boys in the Boat. So many indelible images are seared into our memories, for better or for worse: the 1968 Black Power Salute, the 1972 tragic murder of the Israelis in Munich, and the ecstatic 1980 "Do you believe in miracles?" shocking upset that was the US Hockey Team's defeat of the Soviet Union.

Chad Harbach, author of "The Art of Fielding" and one of the founders of the prestigious literary magazine, "N + 1" says, "I do think that sport is really central to American culture. There are not that many really great novels about sport, and I'm surprised by that, because it affords a lot of dramatic possibility. It seems to me like natural fodder." He goes on to speak of sport as part of the mythic foundation of American culture, though dismissed as somewhat trivial by highbrow critics. I hope to show how the writers and documentarians who have cherished sports in America are every bit as pivotal, every bit as creative, as those in other genres. After all, these "Chronicles" are not really about winning and losing games. They're about life itself.

Reading Resources

THE NEW YORKER MAGAZINE ("REQUIRED" MAIN SOURCE)

The class will be far more pleasurable and rewarding if you can access the sources and links to the shorter assigned readings. First, as we did in my "Black and Brown Lit Matters" Zoom class last year, please obtain a short-term subscription to the New Yorker Magazine (and don't forget to cancel unless you want to extend to a full year's subscription). Over the decades, the New Yorker, has offered a substantial body of sports-themed pieces, including the now iconic John Updike 1960 essay on Ted Williams' final game, "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu". They continue to publish shorter musings ("The Sporting Scene"), now featuring Louisa Thomas. The long-standing editor of the New Yorker, David Remnick, has also edited a fine 2011 anthology, entitled "The Only Game in Town—Sportswriting from The New Yorker", dedicated to the most revered of all baseball writers, Roger Angell, alive and well at age 101.

Here's the link to the best deal I could find at this moment (though The New Yorker often changes their offers)—16 weeks for 6 dollars for both the print and digital editions.

https://subscribe.newyorker.com/subscribe/splits/newyorker/NYR BX ExitPop?source=BCX_NYR_EXIT_POP_0_Site_ZZ

As a traditionalist, I much prefer to read the print edition at my leisure but for the purposes of accessing the archives, you will need to navigate the digital edition. Throughout the session, I will provide the proper links, week by week.

THE GREAT AMERICAN SPORTS PAGE (Ed. SCHULIAN). PUBLISHER: THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

The second primary “recommended” source--which fortunately provides free links to several of their shorter pieces-- is The Library of America whose “The Great American Sports Page” Anthology, edited by John Schulian, will be consulted on a weekly basis. The Library of America presently is offering this book at a deep discount (\$18) and I think it would be a delight to have this book in hand as we once again hear the voices of the greatest newspaper sports scribes over the past 100 years. Again, this is optional.

How many of you began your day pouring over the sports page of the New York Times, LA Times, The Boston Globe, The San Francisco Chronicle’s Sporting Green to read the latest missives of the likes of Dave Anderson, Jim Murray, Bob Ryan, Red Smith, to name but a few? I confess that the first thing I do with the morning coffee is to jump directly to the “Green” section and peruse the latest from Ann Killion or Bruce Jenkins or Scott Ostler, well before checking out the “gamers” -- which are often redundant, as I already know the results in our digital age of instant gratification.

Here’s the Library of America link to this book, other sports-themed books and anthologies, as well as access to the complete Library of America catalogue, including many hardbound sets by the best American writers in every genre from fiction to history to essays. The third link below offers an example of material that can be freely accessed from The Library of America without subscription (Robert Lipsyte on Muhammad Ali’s meeting with The Beatles).

<https://loa.org/books/600-the-great-american-sports-page>

<https://loa.org/news-and-views/1505-john-schulian-the-deadline-artists-who-brought-the-sports-pages-to-life>

<https://loa.org/news-and-views/906-robert-lipsyte-describes-how-cassius-clay-met-the-beatles>

SPORTS ANTHOLOGIES:

In addition to the aforementioned New Yorker Sports Anthology (ed. David Remnick), I can recommend several others, as follows:

“The Best American Sports Writing of the Century”, edited by David Halberstam, series editor Glenn Stout. (Halberstam spent a celebrated career as a sports and political journalist and as an influential historian).

“The Best American Sports Writing 2020” (most recent in series), edited by Jackie Macmullan (Macmullan recently retired after a long career with The Boston Globe and ESPN. She authored a number of books featuring basketball celebrities.)

“Bodies Built for Game: The Prairie Schooner Anthology of Contemporary Sports Writing”, (2019) edited by Natalie Diaz. (Pulitzer Prize winning poet—Native American/Latina with a decidedly alternative view of sports through mostly poetic minority perspectives)

“Baseball: A Literary Anthology”, (2002), edited by Nicholas Dawidoff (This is the work I used as the main resource in my Fromm Baseball class, featuring many of the literary greats who incorporated baseball into their work.)

“Basketball: Great Writing about America’s Game” (2018), edited by Alexander Wolff, foreword by Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. (Post NBA, Kareem has become a respected cultural critic and historian of the African American experience).

Sports Illustrated: “Fifty Years of Great Writing (1954-2004)”. Dozens of articles by some of the best in the business, covering a myriad of sports: Frank Deford, Robert Creamer, Dan Jenkins, Alexander Wolff, Roy Blount, George Plimpton, Ron Fimrite, Leigh Montville, John Schulian, Tom Verducci and a host of others. Women and minority writers, however, are curiously missing from this anthology, though currently, the magazine writers and editors reflect more gender and racial diversity. If you aren’t already a subscriber, some articles are in the public domain. I will provide links to free articles during our first session.

SINGLE AUTHOR ANTHOLOGIES AND BOOKS, A SAMPLING:

“Everything They Had: Sports Writing from David Halberstam”.

“American Pastimes: The Very Best of Red Smith”, edited by Daniel Okrent.

“African American Athletes and the Republic of Sports”, by Gerald Early (Ken Burns consultant on Baseball and Professor of African American Studies).

John Feinstein (44 books—e.g. “A Good Walk Spoiled: Days and Nights on the PGA Tour”, “A Season on the Brink: Bobby Knight and Indiana U).

“Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African American Baseball”, by Larry Hogan. (Best comprehensive book of the dozens on the Negro Leagues).

“A.J. Liebling: The Sweet Science and Other Writings”, The Library of America.

“The Top of His Game: The Best Sportswriting of W.C. Heinz”, edited by Bill Littlefield.

Roger Kahn “The Boys of Summer”—The Brooklyn Dodgers.

Jane Leavy (“The Big Fella”—Babe Ruth, “The Last Boy”—Mickey Mantle, “Sandy Koufax”).

Roger Angell (any of his baseball books, though his most recent book, "This Old Man", is more about aging gracefully. "Late Innings" is my favorite).

David Foster Wallace "String Theory" (author of "Infinite Jest", remarkable essays on tennis).

Leigh Montville (longtime SI and Boston Globe, latest "Tall Men, Short Men" about the 1969 NBA finals).

Hunter S. Thompson (The irrepressible gonzo journalist considered himself a sportswriter. "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" is a classic in this genre),

Doris Kearns Goodwin (acclaimed historian--"Team of Rivals", "Leadership in Turbulent Times"--was also a diehard baseball fan—featured on Ken Burns "Baseball"—"Wait Till Next Year").

A FEW NOTABLE WORKS OF FICTION WITH SPORTS THEMES AND CONTENT:

John Edgar Wideman ("Collected Stories", many about basketball. He was a star guard at Penn).

E.L. Doctorow ("Ragtime" (chapter about John McGraw's Giants).

Chad Harbach ("The Art of Fielding"—a recent classic, featuring baseball at a small college).

Bernard Malamud, ("The Natural", not his typical Jewish immigrant story).

W.P. Kinsella, ("Shoeless Joe". On the "Field of Dreams", life imitated art as the Yankees played the White Sox in a real MLB game).

Don De Lillo ("Underworld" --his opus that begins with Bobby Thompson's '51 Homer).

David Foster Wallace ("Infinite Jest"—his 1000 plus page post-modern masterpiece).

Ernest Hemingway ("The Old Man and the Sea"—fishing and DiMaggio).

Philip Roth ("Portnoy's Complaint"—Oh, to be in centerfield, Doctor).

Paul Theroux ("Under the Wave at Waimea"—a surfing and authentic Hawaii novel—brilliant).

Peter Gent ("North Dallas Forty", fine football novel by ex NFL player).

James McBride ("Deacon King Kong"—his most recent, set in '69 Brooklyn with baseball motif).

Martin Espada (Poetry Collections—esteemed Puerto Rican poet uses baseball as a motif).

August Wilson ("Fences"—playwright—baseball motif part of his famous Pittsburgh Cycle).

Bob Dylan ("Hurricane"—a story song about Ruben Carter, the jailed boxer framed for murder).

Other favorites sports-themed writings, fictional or non-fictional? Let me know! And, let's not forget sports-themed movies. That's an entire world unto itself.

Week by week reading agenda will be posted shortly.

