

Questions and Considerations for Week 4: American Sports Chronicles

Take a look at the following quotations from selected readings in this course:

A) “No one could fail to see the elegance of Russell—this great winged bird swooping about, long angles that magically curved, rising high before your eyes. In fact, Russell saw himself as an artist, his play as a work of art. “If you can take something to levels that very few other people can reach,” he says without vanity, “than what you’re doing becomes art.”

From “The Ring Leader” by Frank Deford

B) “Secretariat wasn’t just winning. He was performing like an original, making it all up as he went along...Secretariat suddenly transcended horse racing and became a cultural phenomenon, a sort of undeclared national holiday from the tortures of Watergate and the Vietnam War...You want to know who Secretariat is in human terms? Just imagine the greatest athlete in the world. The greatest...He isn’t a horse anymore. He’s a legend.”

From “Pure Heart” by William Nack

C) Most of all, Updike identified with the artist in Williams: his focus and perfectionism, his single-mindedness in mastering the difficult craft of hitting, the way that, proud and a little aloof, he would not kowtow to the Boston press or court the fans’ affection, refusing to the very end to tip his cap in acknowledgment of their applause. He embraced and understood Williams’s isolation, writing: “It is an essentially lonely game. No other player visible to my generation has concentrated within himself so much of the sport’s poignance, has so assiduously refined his natural skills, has so constantly brought to the plate that intensity of competence that crowds the throat with joy.”

From The New York Times, Charles McGrath, commenting on John Updike’s “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu”

Our “American Sports Chronicles” class features pieces by sports writers with artistic sensibilities as well as literary writers who venture into the realm of sports in their works of fiction and non-fiction.

As part of our ongoing inquiry, we are searching for universal human, social, and mythic (archetypal) patterns in these often character-driven chronicles. The three quotations above--describing iconic basketball, horse racing and baseball athletes--- may provide some clues that can enable us to dig more deeply:

What do all of these quotations tell us about the relationship between the writer and the athlete? Is it proper to say that both writers and athletes have the capacity to rise to the inspired and creative levels of “art”?

Though we revel in the heroic moments of these athletes, does artful sports literature also sometimes require us to remember that these performers are merely human and often succumb to poignant, even tragic, outcomes?

Is part of the attraction of these “chronicles” to enable us to remain “Forever Young” as Bob Dylan and Roger Angell characterize it?

On a lighter note:

What are your favorite Sports Movies that you found moving, nostalgic, entertaining or just plain funny?

What are your favorite works of fiction or non-fiction that feature athletes or sports-related themes? What is their attraction for you?

I encourage you to share your commentary/questions “live” or in writing (chat or e-mail).