

The Sinister First Baseman and Other Observations. Eric Walker. Millbrae, California: Celestial Arts, 1982, 170 pages, \$7.95.

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To be sure Americans take their sports seriously. Sports are, sociologists and psychologists assure us, microcosms of the cultures which produce them, representing and promoting the values of those cultures. The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga took this idea to its limits and declared that play is the foundation of human culture: civilized man is *homo ludens*. Sport is serious, and serious books and journals devoted to analyzing the social significance of sport have proliferated in the last few decades: *viz. International Review of Sports Sociology, Sport Sociology Bulletin, Sport and Social Order, Sport Sociology, Social Aspects of Sport, International Journal of Sport Psychology, Sport in the Sociocultural Process*, and their extremely numerous brethren.

It takes little effort to see that sport is big business, that it has penalized dissent, practiced discrimination, promulgated jingoistic narrowmindedness, and battled change. The world of sport is riddled with faults, yet it endures; and the sociological explanations for the triumph of sport, and especially the triumph of sport in America, fail to satisfy.

They fail to satisfy because unlike Eric Walker, author of *The Sinister First Baseman*, they invariably ignore the transcendent qualities of sport; they fear the word *spiritual*. Eric Walker recognizes the fan's soul; he *celebrates* baseball. He certainly realizes that in 20th Century America sport occupies the place that the Catholic Church occupied in Medieval Europe; but he does not bemoan the fact that bishops hoard material goods, that an occasional pope fathers a child, or that Pelagius does not get a fair shake because of the politics underlying the surface of theology. Cardinal Steinbrenner attracts only brief ire. No, Walker keeps his eyes on the monks of Iona and Lindesfarne, whose magnificent illuminated manuscripts captured the spirit of a joyous Christianity as no Council of Holy Politicians ever could, he venerates the spirit of the text—the game itself. If each sport were to have its Eric Walker, perhaps the sociologists and the psychologists could begin to investigate in earnest, with insight into the spiritual benefits of the New American Religion, Sport.

Eric Walker understands the importance of baseball as an American spiritual barometer; consequently, he approaches the game with the careful attention and love that theologians once gave knotty spiritual problems. Thus this book of various essays achieves unity not just by focusing on a single sport, but also by its serious devotion. Walker quite handily defends baseball against the usual charge made by the electronic generation perpetual motion addicts (who mistakenly think movement is action) that baseball is dull. Walker, in "Of Balls and Bats I Sing, And The Men," points out that "baseball's clock is eternal"; and in this it is unique. The length of the game is not determined by a clock—that artificial outside force—rather it is determined by the ability of batters to prolong it. Walker also points out that baseball's effect is cumulative. Seasons as well as games move toward tremendously exciting confrontations. Each at bat becomes more important as the game proceeds until, ultimately, the culmination of a game—or, indeed, a season—depends upon one final confrontation between batter and pitcher; the essence of the game is distilled and

magnified into huge proportions. Thus Bobby Thompson's home run assumed epic aspects; thus with one swing Bucky Dent illustrated Walker's thesis: pitcher and batter are avatars of armored combatants in the lists, of WWI pilots one on one in the skies, of western gunfighters moving inexorably toward a fatal decision at high noon. Baseball is *mano a mano* distilled into ritual.

Walker argues persuasively that researchers should pay attention to the difference between sport and sports. For example, the temperament of a nation has much to do with the sport it favors; *vide* the rise of baseball in Industrial Japan, and the corresponding rise of football in Electronic America. He who would settle the ongoing battle between England and Ireland had better have some notion of the appeal of hurley to Ireland as well as Imperialist England's devotion to cricket. If the United States is ever to mature in her International Diplomacy, where she has consistently acted the ignorant juvenile, she had better enter the World Cup competition.

Walker's book is a pleasure on all levels, and he covers *all* levels, from the surface of baseball's playing fields to the sanctity of the boardrooms. He is equally adept at explaining how astroturf has altered the playing of the game and at presenting the interesting history of its introduction into Houston's Astrodome (in the aptly titled "The Green, Green Plastic of Home"). Like the best and most devoted theologians Walker is willing to risk heresy. He punches holes in a number of sacrosanct theories: from the importance of the sacrifice bunt to the value of an excellent defense as opposed to a powerful offense (Dave Kingman, take heart).

While any baseball fan will take pleasure in reading *The Sinister First Baseman*, this is not a simplistic book. Walker affords intellectual pleasure as well, mixing in Santayana, Japanese Bunraku, Clio, fungibility, and stochastic theory. In fact, the book contains a heavy dose of statistically supported conclusions concerning strategy. Yet, while Walker is very adept at statistical analysis—and obviously well schooled in statistical theory—he is not embarrassed to embrace the "magic" of the game as well.

This is an enjoyable book for any fan, and it is a phillipic for any behavioralist who decides to study sport. It is a must for any behavioralist who would study baseball. Walker demonstrates that head and heart can work in tandem, that the rational and the spiritual do not have to be in conflict. Let the sociologists of sport take heed.