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Book Notes #133

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Sporting America: Sports in American Society (Part One)



Beginning Thursday, March 2 at 7 p.m. at the Jefferson Educational Society with ***Sporting America: Part One***, I will examine how sport – not the churches, not the schools, not government – transformed American society by integrating minorities into baseball, football, and basketball; how sport assimilated immigrants into the American grain first in baseball then in other sports; and how sport has redefined notions of womanhood and female identity. While hardly a level playing field,

sport, in fact, is a great social leveler providing opportunity for all. This happened not out of any sense of social justice, or not *only* out of any sense of social justice, but out of a mixture of motives in pursuit of *victory*. In pursuit of victory, sports in American society became one of the prime engines – *the prime engine?* – in ***The American Tapestry Project's*** protean story's – the inclusive story's – ever expanding definition of the “*We*” in “We the People.”

Join me next Thursday for ***Sporting America: Sports in American Society (Part One)*** at 7 p.m. at the Jefferson Educational Society, 3207 State Street, Erie, Pennsylvania.

Are sports America's new religion?

If not “religion” in the theological sense, then are sports America's new “civil” religion?

However one answers that question, one can't ignore the reality that sports saturate American society. Whether as spectators or participants, Americans are passionate about sports.

Speaking of spectators, did you watch the Super Bowl a week-a-half ago? If you did, you were one of 113 million viewers in the second largest television audience in American history. In fact, of the Top Ten TV Programs of All-Time the first nine are all Super Bowls. Sitting at No. 10? The final episode of ***M*A*S*H*** (“Goodbye, Farewell and Amen”) which aired in February 1983. [1]

Sports participation approaches ubiquity. Among children 6-12 years old, 78 percent participate in team sports and, allowing for overlap, 52.3 percent participate in individual sports. Although the numbers decline marginally, among teenagers 13-17 74 percent participate in team sports and 51.8 percent in individual sports. In the latter cohort, participation among boys is 51.1 percent and among girls, 39 percent. [2] In the general population between 2010 and 2021, 23.4 percent of all Americans engaged in sport and exercise per day; the split between men and women was a narrow 21.5 percent for men and 19.6 percent for women. [3] Seventy-six percent of Americans identify as sports fans. [4]

All of that consumer participation and spectatorship boosts the economy by at least \$100 billion per year, with “more than half spent on attending games.” [5] That \$100 billion does not include the economic impact of investments in stadiums, equipment, media presentations, media revenues, player salaries, and a myriad of other variables. Sports in all its incarnations is a trillion-dollar industry within America's \$21.4 trillion economy.

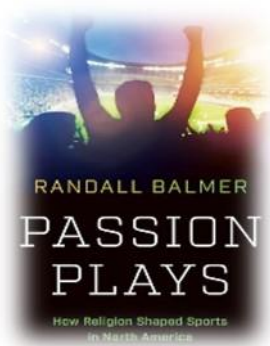
America, indeed, is a sports-saturated society.

It was not always this way.

Sports are ancient, ranging from the ancient Greek Olympics to Roman gladiatorial combat to medieval jousting tournaments to the peasantry of virtually all societies engaging in rudimentary “ball” games to indigenous peoples’ games of racing, hunting, etc. In America, however, widespread citizen participation in sports – running, aerobics, commercial health clubs, etc. – is a phenomenon of the past 50 years. In many ways, it’s one of the more positive, if arcane, spinoffs of the cultural turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s. American organized team sports, particularly at the collegiate and professional level with their attendant spectatorship, dates only from the middle of the 19th century. Team sports at all levels are an essential component of America’s entertainment industry. Sports stars were among the first mass celebrities of America’s early 20th century emerging culture of celebrity. Babe Ruth was the first “larger-than-life” celebrity to become a national icon.

In a virtuous circle, all of that sporting activity begot more spectators which begot more sports which begot more spectators, fueling Americans’ passion for sports.

Why are Americans so passionate about spectator sports? In particular, why are American men so passionate about spectator sports? Even more particularly, why are American *white* men so passionate about spectator sports? Why have they made spectator sports such a fetish?



An Episcopal priest, prize-winning historian, and Emmy Award nominee, Randall Balmer is best known as a historian of America’s evangelical movement. His *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (1989), which became a three-part PBS documentary, is a comprehensive study of American evangelicalism. His *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (2021) “debunks what he calls the abortion myth, arguing that race – not abortion – fueled the growth of the religious right.” [6] In his *Passion Plays: How Religion Shaped Sports in America*, Balmer attempts to

answer the question “why does sports invoke such peculiar passion.” [7]

The “immediate catalyst” for Balmer’s interest was his discovery of sports talk radio while living in New York City in the early 1990s. Sports talk radio began in New York in March 1964 with Bill Mazer on WNBC. Emmis Broadcasting’s WFAN emanating from Queens, New York in 1987 was the first all-sports station. [8] There are now literally hundreds and hundreds of “all-sports, all-the-time” media outlets. Actually, that’s an understatement. I just pivoted to my

other screen and did a quick search on “sports programs on the air.” I got back 211 million “hits”!

Idly listening to sports talk radio, Balmer became fascinated not with the sports themselves, but with the question why were men (and it was mostly men) so passionate about sports – talking about it for endless hours? As Balmer says, “I was utterly dumbfounded that radio hosts could sustain a conversation and a debate for hours and hours about whether or not Joe Torre... should have pulled the starting pitcher with two outs in the bottom of the sixth...” [9] My observation, not Balmer’s, how do radio hosts and listeners parsing each decision and utterance like Talmudic scholars seeking to drain the significance out of the merest hint hold their audiences? Balmer came to believe that American sports had “evolved into a phenomenon that generates at least as much passion as traditional religion...and (that) it is at least arguable that the real locus of popular devotion in North America has shifted from the sanctuary to the stadium.” [10]

In a short book of less than 200 pages, Balmer attempts to justify that assertion and to answer the question about North Americans’ “religious” passion for sports. He does it by detailing the history of North America’s four major spectator sports – baseball, football, ice hockey, and basketball – and in the concluding chapter makes the case for his religious metaphor. He is excellent at analyzing the social forces that drove the creation and increasing popularity of each of the four major sports.

As we have discussed in previous **Book Notes** about the creation of *The American Way of Christmas*, Lillian Faderman’s ***Woman: The American History of an Idea***, and Louisa May Alcott’s ***Little Women*** all of which can be found at [Book Notes - Jefferson Educational Society \(jeserie.org\)](http://jeserie.org), the 19th century was “a time of rapid, social, economic, political, demographic – and religious – change. From the emergence of baseball in the 1840s to the invention of basketball in 1891, North America was in transition.” [11] As Balmer says, “Each sport...reflected, or reacted against, the zeitgeist: baseball and the Industrial Revolution, football and the Civil War, hockey and the formation of the Canadian Confederation, and basketball and urbanization.” [12]

Of what did that 19th century American *zeitgeist* – a fancy word for “spirit of the times” or an era’s defining characteristics and values – consist? First, a quick note: the rise of organized sport was a middle and upper-middle class phenomenon. Only later did workingmen, minorities, and immigrants gain entry. With that note in the background, Balmer identifies three key characteristics. The first and most pervasive was industrialization, followed by the American Civil War and urbanization in the latter 19th century creating an urban versus rural divide that still bedevils American society.

Industrialism created great social dislocations and anxieties as the locus of the economy moved from home-based handicraft industries to large scale manufacturing. Men (and many women in the textile mills of New England) left home and farm to work in city-based factories and offices. In broad strokes, this changed the roles of men and women. Women, or at least those white and middle-class, reacting to “the Victorian-era cult of domesticity” became “the sovereigns of their households and the moral guardians of both their families and society.” They dominated religious life in America. [13]

Fearing that American men working in offices were becoming “soft,” Protestant church leaders imported the British idea of Muscular Christianity “which valorized robust, athletic Christians” and advocated for “rigorous physical exercise as an antidote to the enervating effects of urban life.” Muscular Christianity gave rise to the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) that provided both athletic training and a stable home for young men recently arrived in the city. Rejecting the Puritan opposition to sports as frivolous, Protestant leaders “recommended a strenuous life marked by athletic pursuits and aggressive, even pugilistic, male behavior.” [14] The Roman Catholics CYO (Catholic Youth Organization) quickly followed. Later in the century, a defeated South adopted football with its military metaphors and the brute violence of the game as a means of restoring southern manhood’s pride. Growing out of the YMCA movement, basketball became the archetypal metaphor for navigating urban life.

Nicely avoiding any descent into sports trivia, Balmer traces the rise of the four major North American sports as they emerged out of the cauldron of 19th and 20th century social transformation. In a review in *Christianity Today*, Paul Emory Putz says that Balmer’s “understanding ‘the beginnings, evolution, and symbolism’ of those sports – as well as the ways they intersected with religious history and offered parallels to religious rituals and practices – provides crucial insights into the enduring allure of sports in American culture.” [15] As Balmer notes, baseball arose as an antidote to the tedium of office and factory. It provided a “sense of play.”

It evolved in metropolitan areas, primarily New York City, but it celebrated bucolic virtues – the “greensward” of the playing field; it emerged during the Industrial Revolution but rejected that revolution’s primary principle – the organization and regulation of time – baseball is the only game without a clock; and, while it celebrates its “indigenous origins” it embodies...and replicates the experience of immigrants and outsiders.” [16] Although challenged in the 21st century by basketball, baseball was the immigrant’s primary path to cultural assimilation.

Football arose as an antidote to individualism. It is quintessentially a team sport, in which any individual’s success is a result of the coordinated activities of

a group in pursuit of a common goal. Taming its original destructive violence, Walter Camp and others noted its “affinities with what he called the Game of War and the mimic of battles on the gridiron.” [17] Its militaristic undertones helps explain its popularity in the South where it restored pride to a defeated citizenry. Similarly, Catholic immigrants adopted it as “a confirmation of their own rising status in American society.” [18]

Canadian ice hockey arose out of the First Nations game of “baggataway” which the French renamed lacrosse. Adapted to playing on frozen ponds (whose rounded edges give hockey rinks their rounded corners), hockey became an essential component of Canadian identity as Canadians, forging the Canadian Federation in the mid-19th century, sought a cultural identity distinct from the British. [19]

Basketball, invented by James A. Naismith at the Springfield, Massachusetts YMCA in 1891 as game that could be played indoors, promoted “Muscular Christianity” to salve the urban transformation. Basketball taught “initiative, accuracy, alertness, cooperation, self-confidence, self-sacrifice, self-control...(basketball) is the quintessential urban game, where the object is to maneuver in tight quarters without impeding the movement of others. Any such obstructions, as Naismith stipulated in his Thirteen Rules, would be called a foul.” [20]

As founder of a women’s sports program at the intercollegiate level and an advocate for women’s sports, I was disappointed that Balmer had comparatively little to say about their rise. He does note how Naismith opened the Springfield YMCA’s gym to women, who in the late 19th century were beginning to become involved in athletics. They were sometimes called “bloomer girls” because of the trouser-like clothing they wore while bicycling, playing tennis, and other field sports. Naismith also made time for Sandra Berenson, the director of physical education at Smith College, to learn about basketball. Berenson wrote the initial rules for women’s basketball – the six on a side, only three permitted to cross center court, etc. – and organized the first women’s collegiate game on March 21, 1893. [21]

Still, Balmer’s trivia-free summaries of the well-known history of the evolution of the four major American spectator sports are excellent primers for anyone interested in their development. In particular, Balmer does a fine job organically linking their emergence and growth to American society’s major socio-political dynamics. His religious metaphor and his sub-title’s implication of religion’s shaping of American sports, however, falls a bit flat. As Jeanne Finley said in a review of *Passion Plays*, “As I read *Passion Plays*, the only feature that bothered me was the subtitle— “How Religion Shaped Sports in North America”—which I found somewhat misleading insofar as *Passion Plays* has few examples of religion shaping sports.” [22]

Regardless, Balmer's concluding chapter "Shut Up and Dribble," to borrow a sport's cliché, takes his book to 'the next level'. In it, he does three critical things: 1) he identifies multiple patterns of similarity between sports and religious practice; 2) he quotes A. Bartlett Giamatti about the major way in which sports and religion seemingly merge in American society; and 3) he identifies the key reasons men, white men in particular, are so passionate about sports. The similarities between sports and religion in American society occur within the context of declining church attendance and ever burgeoning sports participation and attendance. Regarding participation, just in Erie alone, two clergymen who are friends of mine noted the phenomena of empty (or nearly empty) church's on Sunday morning while both the stadium and other venues were crowded with families at youth sporting activities. Balmer notes the pastor of the Eastlake (WA) Community Church adjusting its schedule to accommodate Seattle Seahawks games. [23]

If sports are crowding religion out of the public square, what characteristics do they share that people find appealing? First, "both are premised on an agreement in principle, although many may disagree on interpretation." For sports, it's a set of rules. For a religion the agreement might be Islam's Five Pillars, Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, and Christianity's Nicene Creed. Second, both have sacred texts – sports' rulebooks; religion's Hebrew Bible, the Qur'an, and the New Testament among many others. Third, they both have "sacred spaces – various shrines and temples and for sports venerable arenas." Fourth, ritual is associated with both – Balmer compares teams entering a stadium or arena to liturgical processions. Fifth, sports fans and religious adherents both resort to prayer and use devotional aids, such as Pittsburgh Steeler's fans' "Terrible Towels." Sixth, both have authority figures – the referee and the clergy. Lastly, the language of each sometimes overlaps, such as Franco Harris' "Immaculate Reception." [24]

Quite frankly, although the comparisons are interesting, I didn't find them compelling. In fact, Balmer's comparison of the penalty box in ice hockey to a Roman Catholic confessional strikes me as – what's the phrase? – "*a bit too much*." A stronger comparison would have been to Puritan public shaming either in front of the congregation or in the pillory stocks on the village green. But, using two stunning quotations from A. Bartlett Giamatti, a professor of English Renaissance literature, president of Yale University, and former Commissioner of Major League Baseball, Balmer pegs the essence. The first quote gets at the sometimes religious tone, by which I mean ceremonial, ritualistic, and incantatory, surrounding sporting events at all levels from middle school through high school and college into the professional realms. As Giamatti says, "If there is a truly religious quality to sport, then, it lies first in the intensity of devotion brought by the true believer, or fan. And it consists, second,

and much more so, in the widely shared, binding nature – the creed like quality of American sports.” [25]

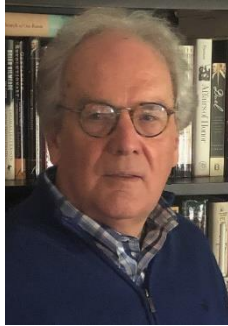
The key word is “creed.” People want to believe in something. People want to find some commonality with their neighbor. People want the world to make sense. Sports is one place amidst the turbulence of American society in the third decade of the 21st century where people can find something to believe in uniting them with their fellow citizens. As Balmer says, “The vernacular of sports provides a common vocabulary, especially at a time when the centrifugal forces of race, ethnicity, religion, economics, media, and politics are tearing us apart.” Sports then fulfill a gap in society, quoting Giamatti again, “Because no single formal religion can embrace a people who hold so many faiths, including no particular formal faith at all, sports and politics are the civil surrogate for a people ever in quest for a covenant.” [26]

Which in part explains the powerful attraction sports has for men in our current society. As the role of men has shifted under the impact of technology, second wave feminism, and globalization some men have struggled to find their cultural moorings. Sports provides a refuge – in religious terms, a *sanctuary*. With its clear rules and precise parameters, with its inherent meritocracy – sports might be the purest example of a meritocracy in our culture: hard work and talent prevail – sports, as Balmer says, “bears at least a family resemblance to religion, provides a respite, an alternative universe to a world that seems unfair and out of balance.” [27]

I think Balmer’s on to something, and is right. Because in addition to all of the above, the rise of organized sports in America, which began as a middle and upper-middle class phenomenon, quickly “confounded the intentions and aspirations of its founders ... (by) functioning as an engine for social change, especially on matters of race and ethnicity.” [28] In fact, Balmer notes, “another way that sports has eclipsed traditional expressions of religion is in the realm of moral clarity and leadership.” [29] Today we see sports figures feeling empowered to speak out for social justice while some religious figures, particularly on the right, advocate for narrow, sectarian views.

Balmer does not develop the idea that sport eclipsed its origins and took on a life of its own transforming American culture. But I am going to make it a central part of my ongoing ***The American Tapestry Project***. On my WQLN/NPR podcast, in a series of ***Book Notes***, as well as in a multi-part series of presentations at the Jefferson Educational Society this spring and at The Chautauqua’ Institution’s Road Scholars program this summer, I will explore the role of sport in American society.

Join me next Thursday at 7 p.m. at the Jefferson Society as we begin this exciting voyage of discovery!



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“*Randall Balmer Passion Plays*” at **University of North Carolina Press** available at [Passion Plays | Randall Balmer | University of North Carolina Press \(uncpress.org\)](#) accessed February 19, 2023.

End Notes

1. “*List of most watched television broadcasts in the United States*” in **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at [List of most watched television broadcasts in the United States - Wikipedia](#) accessed February 19, 2023.
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3. “*Average percentage of U.S. population engaged in sports and exercise per day from 2010 to 2021*” at **Statista** available at [Americans engaged in sports and exercise per day US 2021 | Statista](#) accessed February 19, 2023.
4. “*Share of Sports fans in the United States as of January 2023*” at Statista available at [Sports fans US 2023 | Statista](#) accessed February 21, 2023.
5. Kutz, Steven. “*\$100 billion – that’s how much Americans spent on sports over the past 12 months*” at **MarketWatch** available at [\\$100 billion – that’s how much Americans spent on sports over the past 12 months - MarketWatch](#) accessed February 19, 2023.
6. Finley, Jeanne Torrence. “*Randall Balmer – Passion Plays [Review]*” in **Englewood Review of Books** (October 26, 2022) available at [Randall Balmer - Passion Plays \(U of North Carolina Press, 2022\) \[Review\] \(englewoodreview.org\)](#) accessed February 20, 2023.
7. Balmer, Randall. **Passion Plays: How Religion Shaped Sports in North America**. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022 Kindle Edition), p. 14.
8. “*Sports radio*” at **Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia** available at [Sports radio - Wikipedia](#) accessed February 20, 2023.
9. Balmer, **cited above**, p. 13.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
15. Putz, Paul Emory, “*Mine Eyes Have Seen the Thrill of Victory, and the Agony of Defeat,*” in **Christianity Today** (September 20, 2022) available at [Mine Eyes Have Seen the Thrill of Victory, and the Agony of Defeat | Christianity Today](#) accessed February 20, 2023.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
18. *Ibid.*, p.62.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 77-80.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

21. Ibid., p. 104.
22. Finley, **cited above**.
23. Balmer, **cited above**, p. 119.
24. All of the quotes in this paragraph and the next are from Balmer, **cited above**, pp. 122-125.
25. Balmer, **cited above**, p.119.
26. Ibid., p. 122.
27. Ibid., p. 128.
28. Ibid., p.19.
29. Ibid., p. 125.

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