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*What is the best sports poem ever?*



A seemingly silly question, but, really, one that gets at a profundity: What is the greatest poem about sports?

Why might it be a good thing for an athlete to die young?

How is it the “crowd and the players are the same age always”?

Are athletes artists? Are dancers athletes?

How is it some folks, usually, but not always, men, find “Friday Night Lights” a sanctuary?

Recently, I have been trying to answer the question “Why are Americans so passionate about sports”? It’s not only Americans for whom sports have become a quasi-religious experience, but I am not qualified to speak about other cultures. As an American, however, I find the passionate intensity of American sports fans another lens through which to examine the tapestry of American stories that is *the* American story.

And Americans are sports fans.

According to [Statista.com](https://www.statista.com), as of January 2023, 75 percent of Americans identify as either casual or avid sports fans. Avid fans check box scores daily, watch at least part of a game daily, watch sports news, and follow at least one team intently. Casual fans follow sports at a more relaxed pace but look in on games and check scores at least several times per week. [1] In contrast, only 22 percent of Americans attend church weekly, another 9 percent go *almost* every week, and 11 percent attend about once a month. Nearly one-in-three Americans never go to church and another 25 percent say they seldom attend. [2] Or, in short, while a very similar 31 percent of Americans describe themselves as “avidly” religious and 33 percent “avidly” interested in sports, only 24 percent of Americans say they have no interest in sports while more than twice as many Americans (56 percent) say they never or seldom attend church. [3]

Clearly, something is afoot in American culture when for many people sports serve as a surrogate religious experience and as an engine of social progress. At the Jefferson Educational Society in a new series “**Americans and Their Games: Sports in American History and Culture**,” I have been exploring this phenomenon. Using *The American Tapestry Project’s* major themes as a lens, I am exploring how sports has shaped American society.

On Thursday, April 18, at 7 p.m., the next installment examines the experience of indigenous Americans and African Americans through the lens of sports.

And, having shared all of that with you, I have accomplished two things. First, as I am sure my editor Pat Cuneo will tell me, I successfully buried the lead! And, second, I managed to prove the truth of Marianne Moore’s observation in “Baseball and Writing:”

*from Baseball and Writing*

Fanaticism? No. Writing is exciting  
and baseball is like writing.  
You can never tell with either  
how it will go  
or what you will do ... [4]

Speaking of that buried lead or *lede*, after the first installment of the new series last Thursday (March 2), a member of the audience asked me, “In your **Book Notes**, you frequently discuss poetry. What is the best sports poem ever written?” To which I almost automatically replied, “Well, I don’t know if it’s *the* best sports poem ever written, and it’s actually not about sports, but I’ve always liked A.E Housman’s “To An Athlete Dying Young.”

Later, thinking about the question and my quick response, I noodled around the internet, which is awash in “Best This” and “Best That” lists, looking for sports poems I might have missed. As I suspected, there are hundreds and hundreds, but only one snagged enough of my notice to add to the list I was building from looking through my personal library. That one was James Wright’s “Autumn Comes to Martins Ferry, Ohio.”

As frequent readers of these **Book Notes** know, I believe that explication can kill a poem. A poem isn’t a puzzle to solve, but an experience to savor in two domains. First, sharing the experience of the glimpse of the *real* behind the veil of ordinary experience the poet sees and, second, the felicity of the language with which that experience is shared. A poem, like all art, makes us more **present-to-the-present** in language that makes the experience of the present indelible.

**Aside:** By an overwhelming margin, if tallies were kept of such things, Ernest K. Thayer’s “Casey at the Bat” ranks as the most popular sports-themed poem of all time. Like several of those that follow, using sports, in this instance baseball, as a point of departure, Thayer’s poem isn’t really about baseball at all. It’s a meditation upon one of the virtues sports teaches all who play – humility. As the “mighty Casey” discovers, you can’t win ‘em all’!

With the caveat of “Casey at the Bat” aside, here are a few candidates for a more thoughtful answer to that audience member’s question.

In 1964, he was brash and bold, young, and dazzling. Almost all boxing observers, both the avid and the casual and even those who never watched boxing at all but were caught up in the young challenger’s charisma, thought Sonny Liston might not only beat him but literally kill him. To which Cassius Clay, not yet Muhammad Ali, a rapper before there were rappers, famously rapped:

#### Boxing Poem

Float like a butterfly,  
Sting like a bee,  
Your hands can’t hit,  
What your eyes can’t see.” [5]

Ali (Clay) beat Liston that night – February 25, 1964 – and did it again a year later in Lewiston, Maine as he embarked on his journey to becoming an American icon, one of many words in the sports lexicon borrowed from religion’s vocabulary.

Another is sanctuary. A sanctuary is refuge, a safe space removed from the ambiguity, confusion, and strife of the daily world. In the past, church served as a sanctuary. In times of danger and strife, churches once literally served as a physical space providing safety. More metaphorically, a sanctuary is a space providing peace and removal from the chaos of the world. A sanctuary, then, is a holy place, a temple or church, giving refuge from life's strife.

Sports can do that, particularly the arena, stadium, or playing field within which the game unfolds – the athletes as the celebrants, the fans as the supplicants seeking succor. I grew up in Canton, Ohio, which among its many charms, along with its neighbor Massillon, Ohio, shares a mania approaching religious frenzy for high school football. In his "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio," which is the home of Lou Groza (Cleveland Browns fans will know who that is), James Wright captures how the town elders, parents, and alumni, many of them well past high school age still wearing their faded and frayed lettermen's jackets, seek surcease beneath the stadium lights on autumn Friday nights.

#### Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio

In the Shreve High football stadium,  
I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,  
And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,  
And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,  
Dreaming of heroes.

All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home.  
Their women cluck like starved pullets,  
Dying for love.

Therefore,  
Their sons grow suicidally beautiful  
At the beginning of October,  
And gallop terribly against each other's bodies. [6]

In fairness to Canton and Massillon, one sees the same phenomena all across the American landscape, including in Erie County, Pennsylvania. In fact, western Pennsylvania nourishes a passion for high school football only marginally less intense than that in northeastern Ohio. The line dividing the region into two states is a surveyor's straight line, but culturally northeastern Ohio and western Pennsylvania are, if not siblings, then no further removed than first cousins. For a particularly brilliant analysis of that steel valley football culture, read S. L. Price's *Playing Through the Whistle: Steel, Football, and an American Town*, which is a sociocultural history of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania and the Aliquippa Quips, a high school football power that measures its success

not in how many players go on to college football, but by how many are in the Professional Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio (see comments above).

Another audience member asked me after that first presentation, "Are athletes artists?" To which I replied, "Are dancers athletes?"

The answer to both is "yes." Athletes are artists and dancers are athletes. As A. Bartlett Giamatti noted in his *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (from which subtitle I borrowed the title of my new series, hence the quotation marks whenever it is listed), athletes and artists share the same performative temperament and approach to their sport or art, to their, in Dylan Thomas' words, "sullen craft." They each approach their art/sport with the same monkish discipline, work ethic, and dedication to perfection.

As Giamatti says:

The painter or sculptor, poet, architect, or composer ... is basically driven to express what begins as a gnawing hunger and becomes a rage to perfection ... on the spectrum of artists, it is those at the [performative] end who most clearly resemble athletes, in that they all interpret a preexistent creation, though in their re-creation there is much of the kind of primary hunger for control and expression that went into making the initial artifact, whether play or symphony, ballet, opera, song, or game. As performers, they all form or re-form through the conventions of the artifact, so as to transform themselves and others. [7]

Which is to say, as Lawrence Ferlinghetti did of the poet:

"Constantly risking absurdity  
  and death  
whenever he performs  
  above the heads  
  of his audience  
the poet like an acrobat  
  climbs on rime  
  to a high wire of his own making ... [8]

Ferlinghetti intuitively understands that poets and artists and athletes perform for their audience a high-wire act seeking to perfect a gesture or an utterance or a painting that reveals the extent of human possibilities. It might be dancers with whom athletes share the closest kinship. They both practice a physically taxing balancing act, as Ferlinghetti says, of "sleight-of-foot tricks" demanding both

aesthetic sense and physical acumen. If it is not dance, I am not sure what else one could call the artistry I saw Donovan Mitchell display last Saturday night in Cleveland at a Cavaliers game as he dipped and spun and literally flew scoring points, evoking for me the image Yeats meant in "Among School Children" when he asked, "Who can tell the dancer from the dance"?

Edward Hirsch captured it wonderfully in "Fast Break."

Fast Break

*In Memory of Dennis Turner, 1946-1984.*

A hook shot kisses the rim and  
hangs there, helplessly, but doesn't drop,

and for once our gangly starting center  
boxes out his man and times his jump

perfectly, gathering the orange leather  
from the air like a cherished possession

and spinning around to throw a strike  
to the outlet who is already shoveling

an underhand pass toward the other guard  
scissoring past a flat-footed defender

who looks stunned and nailed to the floor  
in the wrong direction, trying to catch sight

of a high, gliding dribble and a man  
letting the play develop in front of him

in slow motion, almost exactly  
like a coach's drawing on the blackboard,

both forwards racing down the court  
the way that forwards should, fanning out

and filling the lanes in tandem, moving  
together as brothers passing the ball

between them without a dribble, without  
a single bounce hitting the hardwood

until the guard finally lunges out  
and commits to the wrong man

while the power-forward explodes past them  
in a fury, taking the ball into the air

by himself now and laying it gently  
against the glass for a lay-up,

but losing his balance in the process,  
inexplicably falling, hitting the floor

with a wild, headlong motion  
for the game he loved like a country

and swiveling back to see an orange blur  
floating perfectly through the net. [9]

I don't know if they are the two best sports poems ever written, because I don't think one can ever say this or that poem, song, painting, play, film – whatever – is the best ever made, but the last two poems in today's **Book Notes** are very fine poems that while they talk about sports aren't about sports at all. Using sports – in one running, in the other baseball – as points of departure, they are meditations upon time, time's passing, and the mortality that embraces us all.

Rolf Humphries' "Polo Grounds" resonates with me after more than 50 years in higher education. Teaching college students offers many consolations, including the company of bright young people keeping one youthful, if not in fact, then in attitude. Although the company of the young offers that consolation, as the crowd and players in Humphries' poem never age, the students never age. They are always 20-21. As the years flow by, one feels the students receding before you, whether in profound ways – their vigor and one's no longer quick energy – or in trivial ways, such as having to explain to them cultural references which to the aging professor seem self-evident but are a mystery to the students.

Humphries gets it as he concludes "Polo Grounds" with:

*from Polo Grounds*

... Time is of the essence. The shadow moves  
From plate to the box, from the box to second base,  
From second to the outfield, to the bleachers.



Time is of the essence. The crowd and the players  
Are the same age always, but the man in the crowd  
Is older every season. Come on, play ball. [10]

A.E. Housman, whose clear language and limpid lines echoing a touch of sophomore wisdom, captured the imagination of many an undergraduate in what seems like another age. I am not so sure he resonates quite so strongly with contemporary youth, more attuned to the clash and bang of TikTok. In his “To An Athlete Dying Young” Housman does not mourn but feels the dead athlete fortunate to have **not** outlived his fame, to have avoided, unlike Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, the empty fate of forever yearning for the excitement, the life affirming energy of some long ago autumn afternoon’s football game. Or, not of the TikTok era, but more contemporary to us than Housman, to have avoided the fate of Bruce Springsteen’s high school buddy in “Glory Days” who, when they met years later, only wanted to talk about:

*from Glory Days*

Glory days, yeah they'll pass you by  
Glory days, in the wink of a young girl's eye  
Glory days, glory days ... [11]

Well, he didn’t have Clarence Clemons backing him up on the saxophone, but Housman said it first.

To An Athlete Dying Young

The time you won your town the race  
We chaired you through the market-place;  
Man and boy stood cheering by,  
And home we brought you shoulder-high.

Today, the road all runners come,  
Shoulder-high we bring you home,  
And set you at your threshold down,  
Townsmen of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away  
From fields where glory does not stay,  
And early though the laurel grows  
It withers quicker than the rose.

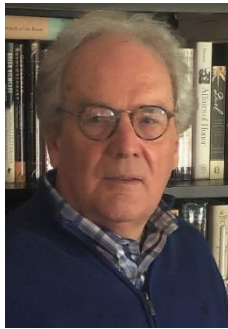
Eyes the shady night has shut  
Cannot see the record cut,

And silence sounds no worse than cheers  
After earth has stopped the ears.

Now you will not swell the rout  
Of lads that wore their honours out,  
Runners whom renown outran  
And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,  
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,  
And hold to the low lintel up  
The still-defended challenge-cup.

And round that early-laurelled head  
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead,  
And find unwithered on its curls  
The garland briefer than a girl's. [12]



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### End Notes

1. “Share of sports fans in the United States as of January, 2023” at [Statista.com](#) available at [Sports fans US 2023 | Statista](#) accessed March 5, 2023.
2. “How often do you attend church or synagogue – at least once a week, almost every week, about once a month, seldom, or never?” at [Statista.com](#) available at [Church attendance of Americans 2021 | Statista](#) accessed March 5, 2023.
3. Cf. each of the two sources noted above for a detailed parsing of this data.
4. Moore, Marianne. “Baseball and Writing” at [Academy of American Poets](#) available at [Baseball and Writing by Marianne Moore - Poems | poets.org](#) accessed March 5, 2023.
5. Muhammad Ali, “Boxing Poem” at [Sports Poetry: Best Poems from Baseball, Boxing and Football](#) available at [Sports Poetry: Best Poems from Baseball, Boxing and Football \(sportsfeelgoodstories.com\)](#) accessed March 5, 2023.

6. Wright, James. "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" at **American Academy of Poets** available at [Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio by James Wright - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#) accessed March 5, 2023.
7. Giamatti, A. Bartlett. **Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games** (New York: Summit Books, A Division of Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 40.
8. Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. "15" in **A Coney Island of the Mind**, 16th Printing (New York: New Directions Paperbook #74, 1958), p. 30.
9. Hirsch, Edward. "Fast Break" at **American Academy of Poets** available at [Fast Break by Edward Hirsch - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#) accessed March 5, 2023.
10. Humphries, Rolf. "Polo Grounds" in **Baseball: A Literary Anthology**, Ed. Nicholas Dawidoff. (New York: The Library of America, 2002), p. 194.
11. Springsteen, Bruce. "Glory Days, lyrics" at **SongLyrics** available at [BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN - GLORY DAYS LYRICS \(songlyrics.com\)](#) accessed March 5, 2023.
12. Housman, A. E. "To An Athlete Dying Young" in **The Collected Poems of A.E. Housman**. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), pp. 32-33.

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