

# JEFFERSON EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

## Book Notes #144

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By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

### Americans & Their Games (Part One)



Why are Americans so passionate about sports?

Why have some commentators compared Americans' passion for sports to a kind of religious devotion?

What role do sporting events play in American society?

What are sports' cultural value?

Why do many Americans (most?) reject seriously discussing sports' impact upon American culture?

As a lens for examining *The American Tapestry Project*, what do sports reveal about the weave of stories comprising the tapestry of America's many stories?

Recently, I began to seek answers to these questions. That search resulted in a new ***The American Tapestry Project*** series: ***“Americans and Their Games: Sports in American History & Culture.”***

This new series joins my ***“America in 1968: The Far Side of the Moon & the Birth of the Culture Wars,”*** the original ***“The American Tapestry Project: We Tell Ourselves Stories,”*** and ***“American Holidays”*** as part of my quest to understand the weave of stories that are “The American Story.”

“The American Story” – that’s a big topic. Many say the story is so big it can’t be told.

I disagree.

While it’s true that there is no one, definitive, all-encompassing “American story,” my thesis is that there are many American stories, which when woven together into a tapestry of American stories tells the story, reveals the interconnectedness, of the mosaic of America’s many peoples.

Why is getting this right so important? It’s important because all of the jabber about “wokeness” and cancel culture rending America in 2023 challenge the American story. More accurately, they’re arguments between different groups of Americans about the American story. Some have called it a fight for the soul of America, but “soul” is too abstract, too intangible for many to grasp.

One finds a people’s soul in the stories they tell about themselves.

Why is this important?

Because humans are storytellers. As Joan Didion said, “We tell ourselves stories in order to live.” [1] We tell ourselves stories to make sense of our experience; stories tell us who we are, where we came from, where we might be going, and how we are to live as we make that shared voyage into the future.

Briefly, ***The American Tapestry Project*** is composed of five essential threads:

- 1) Freedom’ Story: At Home & Abroad
- 2) The American Dream: Economic Freedom
- 3) Freedom’s Faultlines: Tales of Race & Gender
- 4) The Immigrant’s Tale
- 5) The Fusion Thread

Those threads are dominated by two larger, thicker, competing threads. One tells an exclusionary story reserving America for only one subset of its many peoples: white, Christians within a patriarchal social hierarchy that appears to reject America’s founding values, “those truths we hold to be self-evident.” The other story tells an inclusionary tale of America’s many peoples adhering to America’s founding values as they struggle to sustain America’s experiment in self-governance all the while continually increasing the inclusiveness of the “**We**” in our founding documents’ “We the People ... .”

What does Americans' passion for sports tell us about the American story?

As we'll discover, quite a bit.

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**Aside:** When I first broached this concept with an audience, I was asked to clarify what I meant by “games” and “sports.” It was a good question, because I intend only to look into one aspect of America’s games- and sports-drenched culture.

“Games” has three key meanings:

- 1) “a physical or mental competition conducted according to rules with the participants in direct opposition to one another” – it can be a board game like **Clue** or an athletic contest like lacrosse
- 2) “game” also has a slyly nuanced meaning connoting “any activity undertaken or regarded as a contest involving rivalry, strategy, or struggle – e.g., the dating game; the game of politics”
- 3) a “game” can be “an activity engaged in for diversion or amusement – meaning *to play*.” [2]

Sports – game’s near cousin, means “an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment.” [3]

For our purposes, borrowing from those definitions, I am using “games” and “sports” to mean an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes (*plays*) against another or others for *entertainment*.

More precisely, this series will examine the socio-cultural importance of American games and sports as revealed in the history of intercollegiate and professional sports and what they tell us about the American Story.

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Why sports in America?

That’s a fair question. Americans can be uncomfortable discussing sports seriously. Some thinkers tend to sneer at sports, believing it beneath their notice; many sports fans want only to dissect their favorite team’s hopes and disappointments. It’s not that they are incapable of thinking seriously about sports; they just don’t want their fun disturbed. *Fun* is the key word here. Some scholars think anything fun can’t be serious, and fans don’t want their diversionary enjoyment interrupted.

Part of the problem in taking sports seriously as a socio-cultural phenomenon is that while sports are ancient American organized team sports, particularly at the collegiate and professional levels 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. Attempts to understand the sociological importance of sports date only from the late 20th century.

So, in many ways, trying to understand sports' cultural importance is a new undertaking.

There are two ways to approach the question, "Why sports in America?" We can ask *profound* questions, such as, "Are sports America's new religion? Are sports America's new *civil* religion?" Or, we can ask more *familiar*, less exalted sounding questions about sports' role in popular and commercial culture.

On the *familiar* level, American pop and commercial culture swarms with entertainment options in music, movies, video, TV, and live concerts, but sports swamps them all. Sports' appeal cuts across all social, class, economic, racial, gender, and generational categories. Of the Top Ten most viewed television programs of all-time, nine are Super Bowls. The only non-athletic program to crack the Top Ten is 1983's final episode of *M\*A\*S\*H*. The seventh most popular American holiday gauged by consumer spending is the Super Bowl; it is closing fast on No. 6 Halloween.

Sports is big business. How big?

Well, it depends on what is counted, but annual estimates range from \$500 billion to \$1.3 trillion. That large spread depends upon whether the capital value of franchises and facilities is somehow annualized and added to the yearly revenue. To put that \$1.3 trillion into perspective, the United States domestic economy, the world's largest, equals \$21.3 trillion; sports equals about 6% of the total. That is twice as much as public education's 3.1% share and about a third of housing's combined contribution of 15 to 18%. [4]



As robust as sports' economic impact is, its cultural impact increasingly defines American society. As the two collages I've created above illustrate, sports images are among the most iconic in all of American culture. On a national level, from 19th century "Bloomer Girls" to "The Miracle on Ice" at the 1980 Olympic Winter Games to Jesse Owens on the medal stand at the 1936 Berlin Olympics to Michael Jordan to Muhammad Ali to Babe Ruth to Brandy Chastain at the 1999 women's World Cup, sports images define major moments in 20th century American history.

The Super Bowl is only one of many sporting holidays dotting the American calendar. Sports events, like equinoxes and solstices, define America's changing

seasons. Baseball means springtime and the approach of summer; the World Series is the “autumn classic;” college and high school football signal summer’s end; football on Thanksgiving signals winter’s beginning; New Year’s Day bowl games its apex; and the NCAA’s men’s and women’s basketball Final Four’s “March Madness” mark winter’s end.

If those are sports’ *familiar* symbols, on a more *profound* level what do sports tell us about American culture? Why have all those images mentioned above become iconic? How have sports come to be America’s seasonal markers? What is it about sports that grasps the imagination?

There are a number of approaches to those questions. First, how did the divide between those who take sports in American culture seriously and those who dismiss sports as trivial begin? Second, what is the value of sports in society at both the societal and the individual level? Third, is there a dark underside to sports in society? Lastly, why have some commentators recently taken to calling sports America’s new religion?

The divide between those who take sports seriously and those who think them frivolous goes back to 17th century English Puritans. In seeking to reform the Church of England, Puritans sought to banish idleness and “devilish” activities. The struggle between the two came to a head over *playing* (there’s that word again) games on Sundays. The Puritans sought to make Sunday a Sabbath holy day reserved for religious observance. The movement was called Sabbatarianism. In 1581, a Puritan divine named Philip Stubbes wrote ***The Anatomy of Abuses*** condemning sports and games. It railed against “frivolous ... devilish activities ... and an idle use of time.” It banished dancing, drinking, prostitution, violent sports, games, and wild festivals. [ 5]

In contrast, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and the English aristocracy found sports, such as hunting, lawn tennis, and horse racing, socially acceptable. In 1618, King James I wrote ***The Book of Sports*** defending sports as socially acceptable. He endorsed horse racing, lawn tennis, lawn bowling, hunting, and other gentlemanly pursuits as appropriate to elite culture. It gave rise to the cult of amateurism that persisted into the late 20th century. King James thought lower-class sports, such as foot racing and an early version of football (soccer) pitting towns against one another, were acceptable because they conditioned the lower orders for military service. [6]

The earliest English settlers brought this divide to the New World. New England Puritans banned all sporting activities. In Virginia, however, early Cavalier settlers continued their High Church Anglican and aristocratic culture. In Virginia and the Carolinas sports flourished, in particular horse racing. So, America’s bifurcated attitude towards sports goes back to the beginning. Although in 21st century America “Cavalier attitudes” have clearly prevailed, we sense the lingering Puritan ethos in those who find it difficult to take sports seriously.

Sports’ value to society has both individual and societal implications. For the individual, sports teaches the virtue of perseverance (“winners never quit and quitters never win”), hard work, teamwork, and collaboration. Sports also teaches one to treat others with respect and courtesy. Sports develop the ability to take intelligent risks; as a result, they nurture courage. Sports teach humility;

it's the rare athlete who never loses. Learning how to lose and to persevere might be sports' greatest object lesson. They also teach respect for authority, which, of course, can be double-edged.

Socially, sports provide entertainment and economic advantage to individuals and communities. Sports generate school, community, and national pride. In fact, at both the school and community levels, almost nothing can create school and community pride as rapidly as sports. Once, in the "20-ouhgts" at a meeting of the City Club in Cleveland, I shared the head table with the editor-in-chief and the architecture editor of the Cleveland Plain Dealer. One of them noted I had spent years in western Pennsylvania. Pittsburgh and Cleveland are very similar towns, but Pittsburghers are unabashed in their civic pride, while Clevelanders are self-deprecating. They asked me why Pittsburghers had so much civic pride. I said because the Steelers and the Penguins win. The architecture editor shot back saying, "Oh, you mean if the Browns won all would be well?" "No," I replied, "we would still have problems, but Clevelanders would walk a bit taller and think more positively about the future."

Is it rational? Who said anything about rationality? Still, sports are the great uniter and social booster. Nothing, not world-class orchestras and museums – which do generate civic pride even among those who never attend them – can match sports' ability to inspire school and community pride.

Sports have a dark side. All of that school and community pride; all of that individual benefit; all of that iconic familiarity; all of that economic power have a cost. It can be measured in bodily injuries, such as football's struggles with CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy); it can be measured in athletes' use of PEDs (performance enhancing drugs); it can be measured in numerous sexual abuse cases of coaches, sports doctors, trainers, and therapists harassing, assaulting, and raping athletes of both genders; it can be measured in gambling scandals that have periodically plagued all sports; it can be measured in "trash talk" and on-field or on-court fighting; and it can be measured in increasingly empty church pews as families and fans take to the fields and arenas on Sunday mornings.

We touched upon the latter phenomenon in an earlier **Book Note** about Randall Balmer's *Passion Plays: How Religion Shaped Sports in America*. As church attendance plummets (note the recent article in **the Erie Times-News** [7] about the collapse of attendance at Roman Catholic masses in the past 20 years) Balmer, like others, wonders if sports have become America's new religion. Superficially, there are several uncanny similarities between sports and religion. As I said in that earlier **Book Note**:

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 Steelers 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.’ [8]

Balmer’s comparison of religion’s and sports’ secondary characteristics hints at sports and religion’s real connection. That connection is the intensity of sports fans fidelity to their favorite team and how it binds them together in a creedal devotion. A. Bartlett Giamatti explored this in his ***Take Time For Paradise: Americans and Their Games***. [9] In his ***Address to First Year Yale Students, 1984***, Giamatti said, “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.” [10]

This theme, that Americans search for a communal meaning, for a common purpose, has left the churches is a major focus of my “Americans and Their Games.” Having left the churches, Americans have gone in search of shared meaning. Some have become obsessed with cable news, politics, and what has become a seemingly endless presidential election. Others have turned to *e-Entertainment* and found in celebrity-land avatars of communal values. Others have turned to drugs and gun culture. Still others have chosen to swim in the murky currents of the “dark web” – those niches on the internet where conspiracy theories blossom and lone-wolf civil warriors bloom. But an overwhelming number of Americans have turned to sports that they follow with a passion, which can only be called religious in its intensity.

Balmer supplies three lenses for making sense of this phenomenon. First, Balmer suggests that sports provide “the safety of a subculture, a place of refuge from the broader world.” In short, sports provide a *sanctuary*. Secondly, Balmer notes that “increasingly, moral leadership emanates from the world of sports,” with figures like Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James speaking out for civil justice. And, lastly, sports provide a sense of community, for, as Balmer says, increasingly (Americans) allegedly devoted to an individualistic ethos have fixed on team sports, which suggests “that the fundamental lure of community, once satisfied by religious affiliation, has migrated to a secular venue: the stadium.” [11]

At first, I was not sure I agreed with Balmer, but a week or two ago was the 10th anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombing. As I read about that anniversary, I noted that 10 years ago when the curfews and stay-in-place orders were lifted Bostonians did not go to churches or even Boston Commons to reconnect and rejoice. The iconic coming together of Bostonians celebrating their communal release was at a Boston Red Sox game at which Neil Diamond sang “Sweet Caroline.” Some years earlier, “Sweet Caroline” had become Red Sox nation’s song of choice for the seventh-inning stretch. In April 2013, with Diamond as de facto pastor, a jammed Fenway Park celebrated its liberation singing “Sweet Caroline.” It has become one of the iconic moments in Boston history. A video of it can be found [here](#).

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So, in this new series we’ll explore the impact of sports on American history and culture through the lens of ***The American Tapestry Project***. One of that project’s key analytical lenses examines American history through the experience

of those first excluded from America's promise to build a society in which "all people are created equal" by fighting for inclusion by appealing to those very values. As the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said the night before his assassination in April 1968 – "just be true to what you said on paper." In Part II, we'll explore that struggle through the experiences of indigenous Americans and Americans of African ancestry. We'll discover lacrosse's sacred origins, we'll learn about "Muscular Christianity" and the YMCA movement in the 19th century, and hear the stories of such people as Jim Thorpe, William Clarence Matthews, Rube Foster, Jack Johnson, Larry Doby, and Marion Motley.

In Part III, we'll examine the relationship between sports and the quest for women's rights. We'll examine The Cult of True Womanhood, meet Catharine Beecher and her fight for women's physical education, discover the bicycle's role in women's emancipation, and discover that Nellie Bly and Annie Oakley were real people. We'll meet women's sports pioneers, like Helen Wills Moody, the "Texas Tomboy" Babe Didrikson Zaharias, Althea Gibson, and Wilma Rudolph. We'll meet Bernice Sandler, the Godmother of Title IX, and examine Title IX's transformational impact on American culture.

In Part IV, we'll explore how sports empowered generations of immigrants' assimilation into American culture. We'll revisit 19th and early 20th century American baseball's domination by Irish immigrants; we'll discover the roots of Italian Americans' undying affection for the New York Yankees; we'll meet the odd couple of Lou Gehrig and Hank Greenberg – the children of German and Jewish immigrants; we'll learn how boxing paved early 20th century Jewish immigrants' path into American society. We'll discover how the immigrant's tale continues into the present in the stories of athletes like Patrick Ewing, Martina Navratilova, Daniel Levy, and Enkelejda Shehaj.

It's a fascinating story.

Ironically, because of the divide between those who take sports seriously and those who still think them frivolous, it is often missed. It's almost as if the cultural power of sports is hiding in plain sight.

Join me in this voyage of discovery as we seek to understand "Americans and Their Games."



-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.  
*Scholar-in-Residence*  
The Jefferson Educational Society  
[roth@jeserie.org](mailto:roth@jeserie.org)

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"The Familiar collages" created by A.Roth [roth@jeserie.org](mailto:roth@jeserie.org).



## End Notes

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8. From **Book Note #133** quoting Balmer, Randall, **Passion Plays: How Religion Shaped Sports in America**. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022), pp. 122-125.
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10. Balmer, *cited above*, p. 26.
11. Ibid., pp. 122, 128, 19, and 125.

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