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More Than Just a Game: Sports in American Life Since 1945, by Kathryn Jay

Wade A. Laffey

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Catholic teachers would benefit from reading the stories of the Catholic tradition and Weigel's reflections for their own ministry of mentoring.

Bradden R. Kluesner teaches physical education at St. Charles Borromeo School in Port Charlotte, FL.

MORE THAN JUST A GAME: SPORTS IN AMERICAN LIFE SINCE 1945

KATHRYN JAY
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004
\$29.95, 304 pages

Reviewed by Wade A. Laffey

The complete education of a child includes the concept of sport as a purposeful physical activity. Increasingly in modern times, sport has transcended a mere physical diversion to become part of the social fabric of America—mirroring ethical norms, standards of justice, and behavioral tendencies.

In *More Than Just a Game: Sports in American Life Since 1945*, Jay tracks the ascent of both amateur and professional sports in the collective psyche of Americans following the end of the Second World War. Using a narrative tone, Jay follows the progress of sports through time, sharing an anecdote about women's golf and recounting the image of Vince Lombardi. The on-field successes and failures are not of paramount interest here; the emphasis is rather on how the popularity of sports has impacted society and how changes in societal norms have affected the nature of sports. Great teams, players, and coaches are remembered, but the impact of cable television, Title IX legislation, and the Black power movement on athletics is also considered in this modern history.

Jay does not follow an exact chronology, but considers various topics and issues in sports relevant to a general time period. For example, professional baseball receives much attention from the author during the late 1940s and 1950s, during which baseball popularity may have reached its zenith in terms of the percentage of the public interested. During later years, as other sports became more popular, baseball stories appear less frequently.

Jay focuses on the moments that change the sport or the culture forever. A good example of this is the account of the famous “Battle of the Sexes” tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs. This exhibition, made-for-television event, had little impact on the game of tennis, but King’s win over the aging Riggs nevertheless sent a message to American society.

Her victory did not demonstrate that women could compete with men since there was no doubt that reigning champion Jimmy Connors would have dispatched King easily. But the match did show that King, and by extension, the women she represented, could concentrate and win under extreme conditions. (p. 164)

Money is a consistent theme. Jay points out the enormous differences in budgeting for men’s and women’s sports at major universities before the NCAA and the U.S. government decided to enforce federal Title IX legislation that demanded equal treatment. Michael Jordan’s rise to fame and fortune, while initiated by his basketball talent, really is more attributable to his shrewd endorsements and television spots, particularly involving his Nike Air Jordan shoes. These examples also demonstrate how people treat these issues in sports today; women’s collegiate sports are as popular as ever and it is commonplace to see athletes reap millions by sponsoring various products.

Jay also shows how American society affects the athletic culture as well. The author recounts how Southern football teams resisted racial integration long after their sponsoring universities had done so. Changing cultural norms and convincing proof that African American athletes could compete led to the teams’ integration. Similarly, the cultural impact of women playing professional sports was eased by the fact that many women had to work to replace men fighting as soldiers during World War II. “The idea of female ballplayers was more accepted during the war since 5 million women joined the labor market between 1941 and 1945” (p. 15).

Jay argues that societal pressures or short-minded members of the media can also have the negative effect of putting down athletes. The difficulties Jackie Robinson had in his first year with the Brooklyn Dodgers are well documented, but Jay additionally communicates the mean-spirited treatment of homosexual athletes by the general public and press. The author reminds the reader about cheating scandals and the use of illegal drugs, all of which are as controversial now as they have been in past years.

For the casual reader and fan of sports in general, this book makes for entertaining reading. Jay spins interest in a topic, makes an observation, and then segues to the next sport or athlete. Jay’s breadth of examples involving games, personalities, and issues is wide and varied enough to interest most sports enthusiasts. A person could open up the book at any point and start

reading. The author evokes many great images and moments in sports over the last 60 years and meshes them into one tale of an American ethos of sport. The educator of American history will find these stories excellent for capturing the soul of the nation in the late 20th century while providing rhetorical questions on the nature and meaning of sport.

While Jay admits in her introduction that “[s]ome of this information is not new” (p. 2), one could argue that most of the content in this text is nothing new to the reader. This is especially true considering the vast amount of research and books available on this subject as well as the constant inundation of sports by ESPN and other sports media in this country. Jay has artfully compiled these moments and issues, but does not really draw any new conclusions—at least none that most people likely to read this book have seen. This, however, is probably not the author’s intent.

While Jay is critical of abuses in sports over the years, she is careful not to overextend, letting the reader draw his or her own conclusions. “Even as televised spectacle, even as a prepackaged entertainment to sell consumer goods, sports offer moments of transcendence and a sense of powerful possibility” (p. 242). Jay decides to err in favor of sports being a positive thing overall. Television has increased sports’ exposure, but the same problems exist and the games go on.

Wade Laffey is principal of St. Joseph Catholic School in Enid, OK.

CRITICAL ISSUES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

OLIVER BRENNAN, ED.
VERITAS HOUSE, 2005
\$12.44, 124 pages

Reviewed by Jocelyn Pierre-Antoine

Critical Issues in Religious Education is a book that takes into consideration the cultural context of today’s society and provides a new perspective on religious education. A series of three experts in religious education investigate