

## Rassegna Libri

Lawrence Baldassaro and Richard Johnson (eds.),  
*The American Game. Baseball and Ethnicity*  
Introduction by Allen (Bud) Selig  
Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale and Edwardsville, 2002, pp. 213.

Over the last few decades, Major League Baseball has played with great success on the notion that it has served as a testing ground for American society, successfully dealing with major socio-economic issues and providing a model for the development of a multi-racial, multi-ethnic United States. Owners have been particularly keen to celebrate the dramatic integration of baseball by Jackie Robinson (and a few other Afro-American athletes) as a critical moment not just in the sport's history but also in the development of racial tolerance in the United States. While the Robinson saga was a milestone in ending Jim Crow, it is harder to argue that other ethnic groups have found in baseball a similar footpath to full equality. Give baseball credit. As the introduction to this volume by Commissioner Bud Selig testifies, professional baseball, which invented the «Hall of Fame,» is at its best when creating myths that burnish its public image.

The story tells is more complex. Baseball is an important part of our national experience. It has a critical role in our leisure industry. It has a unique legal position as a protected monopoly. It's economic and political connection with local and state government reaches into our pocketbooks. In a few cases, it has been an arena in which our pressing social issues are fought out. It merits scholarly attention. *The American Game* does a good job of outlining the roles that various ethnic groups have played in developing and playing the sport. English Americans were critical to creating the sport and providing its professional side management. German and Irish Americans provided a large number of players in the early game and continue to have a major role in the game. In the process, of course, as one author notes, the athletes «became essentially un-German», losing their ethnic identifications. Afro-Americans were able to use the integration of baseball as a weapon to batter Jim Crow but at a cost to the black entrepreneurs who ran the racially segregated Negro Leagues (pp. 68-69). For American Jews, baseball had a role in the process of Americanization. Latinos have faced problems associated with race and with their status as «foreigners». Asian-Americans too have dealt with racial prejudice that ironically, comes largely from other minorities (p. 187).

Individually, the essays in this volume were uniformly readable if quite uneven in their scholarly content. Essays by Peterson (Irish Americans) Tygiel

(African Americans) and Reiss (Jewish Americans) are models of analysis. They ask the right questions, carefully define terms like race, and look beyond the achievements of individual stars to the larger issues. Other essays are largely laundry lists of players from major ethnic groups and piously repeat the notion that the entry of particular group into the major leagues was overcoming discrimination. Overall, the picture this volume presents left this reader with some major reservations. A major problem is the lack of a firm definition of terms that are central to the discussion of ethnicity and sports. The volume mirrors an unfortunate tendency to muddle the concepts of ethnicity and race that are so regularly confused in public dialogue (See for example the comments of the 1931 Sporting News, quoted on p. 56). Terms like «discrimination» are frequently thrown about haphazardly. Finally, the volume stresses the importance of sports in the ethnic experience. This reader was left wondering to what degree this was true. Irish, Blacks, Jews, Latinos, and perhaps Asian Americans, in varying degrees used sports to catapult themselves into individual prominence. This may have lessened anti-ethnic feelings. On the other hand, German-Americans, ethnic groups from East Europe, and probably Italian Americans, entered the sport without great resistance and played without a great deal of opposition or even negative comment about their ethnicity. Referring to someone as a «Dutchman» need not have been a pejorative statement. Individual's success in sports did not automatically or necessarily lead «Anglo»-whites to embrace the equality of other ethnic or racial groups. I can recall comments in the stands about home team black players even in the racially more tolerant Baltimore of the 1980s that recognized their athletic prowess without accepting their human equality. In writing the history of sports with an eye to its role as a great social unifier, we may be pushing issues that were in many cases secondary to the forefront and giving the «National Pastime» an importance it does not merit. The Lords of Baseball will surely be pleased with the triumph of their myth making; historians may wish to be more careful in weighing the impact of sports on the processes of ethnic integration into U.S. society.

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