Nov-1987

Book Review: With the Boys

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol5/iss2/15

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There are millions (literally) of those classic fans who follow their favorite teams, typically the local team, and go to as many games as possible. The more passive fan occupies the sofa with the ballgame droning on the television and experiences the game at an almost subconscious level. By contrast, the more active fan keeps statistics, actually cheers at games and may follow the progress of minor league teams. In extreme cases a fan may even play the game in a local league or just in the yard with the kids. For any of these types of fans the game is experienced at its simplest (some would say purest) level, namely, what happens on the field - that is who wins the game? Who made the great and critical plays? Who got caught swinging a cork-filled bat or throwing a greasy baseball? I have learned not to underestimate the seriousness with which such fans take the game, even when apparently asleep before the screen.

There is also a more abstract level of appreciation of baseball according to which the game is weighted with meaning. Often this is expressed by an individual who has fond memories of his or her playing days. However, the "meaning" variety of tandem goes well beyond personal memory all the way to national and even universal metaphor. Writers and intellectuals as distinguished as Thomas Wolfe, Roger Angell and Stephen Gould have described baseball in poetic terms in which the playing of the game reveals something about the nature of success and failure generally or even about our national character or humanity. Wolfe, for example, has written of baseball as "a part of the whole weather of our lives," and Tristam Coffin of the way that baseball "symbolizes something typical about American hopes and fears." Pretty serious stuff for a game in which a great deal of spitting goes on. But now there is even more about baseball to consider seriously.

In the wide variety of ways the game has been appreciated and understood we can now add Gary Alan Fine's absorbing analysis of the inside workings of Little League baseball. Fine is a sociologist and approaches the game from his (and my) professional perspective. But don't let that put you off his way of seeing baseball. After all, you don't have to love ballet to know that at times a play in the field can be balletic, and you don't have to be a statistician to be impressed by a batting average approaching 400. You also don't have to be a sociologist to appreciate that Little League baseball is an important training ground for teaching specific cultural lessons to American children (still mostly boys), and that any of those lessons are not apparent to nor commonly acknowledged by the adults who organize and participate in these leagues.

For three summers beginning in 1974 Fine spent time with Little League teams in five communities, several of which were in the Boston area. (Fine was a graduate student at Harvard when he began the study.) He received the cooperation of league and team officials, and, over time, the confidence of a large number of the preadolescent players. Six nights a week, three months a year for three years he sat at games, among players on the bench or parents in the stands, and saw in more detail, and with more analytical detachment, that Little League baseball is a great deal more than a child's game.

To begin with, Fine recognizes that Little League baseball is not exactly child's play. It is organized sport which is structured and guided by adults. Adults arrange for the fields, equipment, schedules and, so far as they can control circumstances, establish the rules. By contrast, children's play is designed by children without the assistance of adults. The participation in Little League ball of adults (I hesitate to call them grownups given the type of behavior which Fine sees exhibited by some of the parents and coaches) insures the teaching of many social lessons, only a few of which have to do with the physical skills of baseball.

For example, team members are taught how to follow complex instructions, how to concentrate in the face of many distractions, the value of winning and of playing by the rules (which sometimes conflict with one another), and the importance of sharing both credit and blame for game results. Fine places quotes and anecdotes generously throughout his study to illustrate such points. Thus, we learn that Little League teaches some of the lessons of work and work incentives to the players, as when one coach is quoted offering a dime for each hit his players make.

But Fine goes beyond the more obvious adult lessons of Little League baseball to show that the players have their own world of rules to which the adults are not privy. They make fun of the coaches and parents at times, leading them on, making errors intentionally or not paying attention. They also spend a great deal of time talking about the problem of girls. That is, they seem to be between interest in girls as girlfriends and annoyance with females generally. As Fine shows, the boys had numerous ways of proving to one another that girls are not allowed to intrude on the important business of baseball. A favorite put-down was to accuse a player who made an error of "being a girl" or of "spending too much time with your girlfriend."

For readers who remember with fondness the few crystal clear moments of Little League heroism from a distant past, or who think of their own children's involvement with the game in narrow terms, Fine gives us the gift of the more complex inside view. Beginning with Little League, many of us learned the lessons about baseball that allowed us to believe that the game exists at the level of myth in our culture. Now we can see exactly how our affection for the game became so thoroughly mixed with the lessons of social life learned in play.