

# Social hierarchies -- Sporting Gentlemen by E. Digby Baltzell / History of Colored Base Ball by Sol White and compiled and introduced by Jerry Malloy / Fleet Walker's Divided Heart by David W. Zang

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Review.

## FULL TEXT

Sporting Gentlemen: Men's Tennis from the Age of Honor to the Cult of the Superstar, by E. Digby Baltzell. New York: The Free Press, 1995. 420 pp. \$30.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-02-901315-1.

History of Colored Base Ball, By Sol White. Compiled and introduced by Jerry Malloy. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 187 pp. \$25.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-8032-4771-0.

Fleet Walker's Divided Heart, by David W. Zang. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. 157 pp. \$21.50 cloth. ISBN: 0-8032-4913-6.

We can learn a great deal about a society and its history by the study of its sports. Political and economic systems, social stratification, social and cultural change, racial and ethnic relations, values, and the uses of leisure are among the topics that are clarified by seeing them through the lens of sports. Almost daily while I have been reading these books, items relevant for the sociology of sports have been reported in the press, as these headlines from the New York Times, the Washington Post, and the Cleveland Plain Dealer indicate: "South Africa Uplifted by Rugby Cup"; "Violence Far From the Court"; "Winning the Ad Revenue Race"; "Indians Represent the Heart of the City"; "Wide World of Sports? That's Entertainment."

The books under review are mainly historical, not sociological. (For the latter one can turn to such studies as Stanley Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, or John Wilson, *Playing by the Rules*.) They are, however, valuable sources of commentary and information. They can help us to ask questions in the sociology of sport more sharply.

In writing his biography of Moses Fleetwood (Fleet) Walker, David Zang has skillfully used various archives, interviews, early issues of African American newspapers, Walker's own writings, and a wide selection of works about him and, more generally, about American race relations.

Fleet Walker's father, trained in a series of apprenticeships, was one of the first black physicians in Ohio.

Steubenville, like other northern Ohio towns, was quite integrated racially during that brief period of tolerance after the Civil War. Shifting from medicine to the ministry, the senior Walker became active in the search for full civil rights. His brief pastorate in Oberlin led his sons to the college there. Both town and college had been strongholds of abolitionism and links in the Underground Railroad before the Civil War. They remained active centers of equality and integration thereafter.

After three years at Oberlin, Walker and another black student were lured to the University of Michigan to play

baseball and study law after Oberlin had defeated the Michigan team, 9-2, with Walker as catcher. These were early days in intercollegiate sports, which the Oberlin faculty, as faculties elsewhere, reluctantly allowed in an effort to tame the "riotous" interclass sports. As Zang puts it: "Thus began a conscious recasting of athletic philosophy that combined elements from the British doctrine of amateurism, the belief in manly prowess, the need for healthy activity, and the growing quest for order to produce a rationale for sport as a character-building endeavor. College faculties and administrators increasingly believed that, controlled and pointed in proper directions, college athletes could become equal measures of Lancelot and Lincoln" (p. 19).

Although it is somewhat difficult to imagine now, when it is widely believed that Oberlin athletes are prone to tripping on their Phi Beta Kappa key chains, Oberlin was a leader in this shift in athletic philosophy. Walker carried it with him to Michigan.

At the same time, however, professional baseball leagues were springing up across the eastern and middle-western states. Good incomes could be made – up to \$1000 a month – by the best athletes. Fleet Walker left Michigan before finishing his legal studies to seize this opportunity.

There were racial incidents during the early years of his professional baseball career, 1882-1889, as he moved around among several minor and, by 1884, major league teams. During this period the incidents became harsher and Walker became more aggressive in his responses. His "good-natured public demeanor was fraying," coincident with the pressures to exclude him and other black players from the major leagues. By 1889 a majority of the teams' directors voted for total exclusion. Walker was the last to play, not to be replaced by another black player until Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers 58 years later.

Barred from "white" baseball, Walker moved in and out of several occupations and activities: inventor, railway postal clerk, author, and campaigner for emigration of black Americans to Africa. His biography tells us something about the growth of intercollegiate sports, about the personal successes and traumas of "double consciousness," in Du Bois's term, but especially about the closing of the window of racial tolerance that had been partially open for a few years after 1865.

Baseball, of course, was a small part of the larger process of exclusion that began, let us say, in 1876. The process drew in other sports, labor unions, residences, schools, politics, and most other aspects of American life. Only the smallest steps were taken to reverse these trends before 1945. Now, half a century later, sports are among the most inclusive elements of American society. Zang calls Walker's short book, *Our Home Colony: The Past, Present, and Future of the Negro Race in America*, "certainly the most learned book a professional athlete ever wrote." This judgment might be difficult to defend (one thinks of Arthur Ashe's *A Hard Road to Glory*, for example). It is easier to agree, however, with Zang's assessment that *Our Home Colony* "was a storehouse of race theory ... readable, coherent, articulate, organized. ... Deconstructed, it is the agonized outline of an autobiography, a prima facie case for a bitterly divided heart" (p. 97).

I need to correct one error in Zang's account. Although it refers to Oberlin, it could also apply to many other colleges and universities. Oberlin College, he writes, continues to fight dehumanization, but, sadly, like the rest of society, has to struggle to stay ahead. "Many of its black students reside in a segregated African heritage dormitory" (p. 130). In fact, about 40 of over 200 black students have chosen that dormitory. It may be unfortunate that on many campuses racial and ethnic groups have sought, and have been granted, such centers. But to call self-selected and optional housing arrangements "segregated" is a serious distortion. In my judgment, it leads one to focus attention on the wrong issue: the tendency among some students toward balkanization that draws strong separating boundaries between racial groups, severing even "weak ties."

In *History of Colored Base Ball*, Jerry Malloy skillfully introduced and edited Sol White's *Official Base Ball Guide*, first published in 1907. In his lengthy introduction, Malloy traces the early years of colored baseball and describes the career of Sol White as a player, manager, and writer, placing it in the context of the increasingly harsh American race relations after 1885. He compares White's optimism, or perhaps one should say hopefulness, with Fleet Walker's despondent views, as expressed in *Our Home Colony*.

White's *History* begins with the organization in 1885 of the first professional colored baseball team, discusses the

brusque removal of all black players from predominantly white teams during the next four years, and then traces the growing strength of "colored base ball" into the early years of the twentieth century. This short book-within-a-book is history, but it can also be described as an almanac, a scorecard, an archive, a who's who of colored baseball up to 1907. Take off your thinking cap and put on your baseball cap, if you have one, to enjoy the dozens of photographs of players and teams reproduced from the 1907 edition.

The book concludes with a series of newspaper stories, from 1887 until 1936, commenting on Sol White, black teams and players, discrimination, and the baseball scene of the moment. Neither these stories nor the book as a whole is sociological. Sociologists of sports, however, will find raw material and valuable commentary on which to draw.

The third book under review, E. Digby Baltzell's *Sporting Gentlemen: Men's Tennis from the Age of Honor to the Cult of the Superstar*, shares with the other two a focus on sports. One might add that they also share an interest in social stratification, but that theme plays a very different part in *Sporting Gentlemen* than in the other two. In most ways, Baltzell's book is quite different. The noted author of *The Protestant Establishment, Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia*, and *Philadelphia Gentlemen*, historian as well as sociologist, is uttering here a *cri de coeur*. What was once a gentlemen's game, setting a standard of civility and good sportsmanship, has been corrupted, in his view, by commercialism, by undivided emphasis on victory, and by consequent mean-spirited behavior, even by some with enormous talent.

One must remember that Baltzell is discussing only, or mainly, men's tennis, and only high-level, or at least highly visible tennis at "the best" clubs. Has he in his illustrations, I am wondering, generalized too far by leaving out the hundreds of thousands of players like me who learned the game mainly on the cracked concrete public courts with their terrible wire nets? Having been *bien eleve* as a mainly WASPish fellow (in his sense of the term), I too lament what seems to be a rise in boorish behavior – and not only in the world of sports. (Actually, because I am not entirely English, I am a WAIF – a White American International Fellow.) I cannot, however, share his wistful desire for the return to a trendsetting aristocracy with the power to "level up" the standards of the nonelite. Even if that were possible, the political and economic side effects would be, in my judgment, very costly.

Baltzell makes his view clear by citing John P. Marquand, "who knew that it was only with the traditional establishment of upper-class authority and the hegemony of its mores throughout society that a civilization would ever be able to defend itself against total domination by money-power, on the one hand, or some form of democratic despotism, on the other" (p. 218). Students of comparative civilizations, please check this out as if it were a hypothesis.

Sweeping generalizations have been fun to read, but they have agitated my analytic tendencies:

Henri Cochet, the great French champion, was blessed with God-given athletic ability (p. 190), but this was reinforced by the luck of the Devil (p. 189). No wonder he was a champion.

Tilden ("the greatest player who ever lived") and Perry, the two men he writes most about, did not fit very well the gentlemanly model Baltzell holds up as dominant in the years before open tournaments, weakening his interpretation. Give me Laver and Ashe. But they weaken the interpretation from the opposite direction.

In the book there are dozens of well-written descriptions of tennis matches that will hold the interest even of readers who are not tennis bums. The most detailed is a 10-page quotation from Don Budge's autobiography that spells out, shot for shot, his five-set Davis Cup victory over Baron Gottfried von Cramm. Hitler called Cramm, minutes before the match was to begin, to wish him luck. Cramm lost in a grueling contest. A few months later he was in a Nazi jail. If not "the greatest classic in tennis history," as Baltzell calls it (how can that be measured?), this description is certainly classic.

There is a lot of autobiography in *Sporting Gentlemen*, with changes in the world of tennis serving as a metaphor for larger changes in the world that are hinted at, if not fully discussed.

I kept wishing for a chapter on the effects of professionalization (of many sports), reinforced by the enormous money-machine called TV. Here we read about the decline of the standard-setting elites and their displacement by more raucous populace standards. We would also profit by discussions of the effects on universities, on race

relations, on cities, and other topics of sociological interest.

But a heartfelt cry is also valuable, exposing – if in a somewhat biased way – the costs, the injuries that can occur as a result of turning yet another activity, a sport, over to the market.

## DETAILS

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