

*Sports Illustrated*, were kind enough to help track down references to articles in those two estimable publications.

After completing this book I discovered that several of the concepts developed in *The Meaning of Sports* have been applied by professor Robert Keidel to the world of business and management, notably in his 1985 book *Game Plans: Sports Strategies for Success*.

*The Meaning of Sports* reflects the influence on me of two social scientists. From one of them, my late father, David G. Mandelbaum, a professor of anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, I absorbed an interest in the customs and rituals of different cultures, including my own. The other, David Riesman, a professor of sociology at Harvard University, taught a wonderful course for undergraduates on "Character and Social Structure in America" in which I served as a teaching assistant. That course, and many conversations and exchanges of correspondence with him, introduced me to the study of American society and culture. David Riesman died before this book was completed, so I cannot know what he would have thought of it; but I am certain that he would have been glad that I have written it.

## INTRODUCTION

THIS BOOK has its origins in two incidents separated by three decades. One summer afternoon in 1966 my brother and I were making plans to attend a baseball game in San Francisco, to see the San Francisco Giants and their star players, Willie Mays and Willie McCovey. Also present was our maternal grandfather, who had emigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe fifty years earlier and had never to our knowledge displayed any interest in the game. We asked him, half-jokingly, "Would you like to see a ball game, Grandpa?" "No thanks," he replied, "I've already seen one."

One Monday night in 1996, I was watching a football game on television. My wife entered the room and stopped to look at the screen. Puzzled by something she saw, she asked me: "Didn't they just show that?" "Yes, they did," I

responded. "They always show the play when it happens and then show it again, sometimes in slow motion. It's called instant replay." She thought for a moment and then asked, "Isn't once enough?"

These episodes illustrate two features of contemporary American society. One is that competitive team games play a significant role in the life of the nation. Millions of Americans devote considerable time, money, and emotional energy to following baseball, football, and basketball. The other is that, for many of their fellow citizens, their interest in sports defies rational explanation. Their intense preoccupation with men performing odd, combative group exercises all centered on a mere ball seems unaccountable.

The passion for sports can strike those who do not share it as distinctly eccentric, and even downright sinister. According to the writer Fran Lebowitz, "What is truly chilling is that there are a lot of smart people interested in sports. That just gives you no hope at all for the human race."<sup>1</sup>

The author Richard Reeves once observed that when American men gather, two topics of conversation tend to predominate: real estate and sports. The reason for the first is obvious—everyone has to live somewhere—but why sports? The answer to that question is the subject of this book.

The book's intended audience includes both those who, like my grandfather and my wife, find the question utterly baffling, and those, like my brother and me, for whom sports are so much a part of their lives that they would never think to ask it.\* For the mystified, *The Meaning of Sports* is an exer-

\* This is not to say that those preoccupied with sports are unaware of the gulf that separates them from people who do not share it. The journalist Simon Bourgin was once in a city where the World Series was being played and found himself in a hotel elevator with a well-known sportswriter. One of the other passengers

cise in anthropological explanation, which makes strange customs, in which they cannot imagine themselves taking part, intelligible by connecting these three games to more widely shared social patterns and human needs. For the committed, the book is like a family history. It traces the origins, the development, and the social functions of a world that, like the home into which they were born, is so familiar that they take it for granted and are unable to explain its profound appeal to them.

Why is America so interested in sports? What do these games mean to Americans? The answer that follows in the pages of this book has four parts. The first part—the first chapter—divides that large question into three closely related smaller ones. First, what human purposes are served by organized athletic competitions, which date at least from the time of the ancient Greeks? Second, what accounts for the rise, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, of organized *team* sports, matching two cooperating groups of players against each other, to a place of cultural prominence alongside long-established individual competitions such as boxing, wrestling, and racing? Third, why did the United States develop its own distinctive set of team sports? Baseball, football, and basketball all have roots, or parallels, in the major British team games of cricket, rugby, and soccer. When transplanted to, or reinvented in, North America these British sports took different forms. What is the significance of these differences?

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recognized the sportswriter and asked him which team he thought would win the baseball championship, but got no answer. When they got off the elevator Bourgin asked his colleague why he had not responded to the question. He replied, "I never discuss baseball with civilians."<sup>2</sup>

The answers to these three questions apply to all three major American team sports. But these sports also differ from one another, and the next three parts of *The Meaning of Sports* explore and explain the differences. The questions that Chapters 2, 3, and 4 of the book address are, respectively, why baseball? why football? and why basketball?

Each of the three sports is a cultural practice, and like other cultural practices each has a social function. Each expresses part of the experience and some of the values of the wider society in which it is embedded. In particular, as the chapters describe, baseball, football, and basketball each reflects a particular era, with distinctive social and economic arrangements, through which the United States, and other Western countries, have passed: the agrarian, the industrial, and the post-industrial.

Baseball, football, and basketball are also American social institutions and, like other institutions, they have histories. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 therefore also deal with the origins and development of each sport. They chart the evolution of the rules of each game and the birth and growth of the associations—the leagues and conferences—within which competition at the highest levels takes place. These three chapters cover, as well, the most successful teams, the most important games, and the outstanding players and coaches in the history of each game. An historical overview of baseball, football, and basketball could no more exclude the New York Yankees, the Green Bay Packers, and the Boston Celtics, or Babe Ruth, Red Grange, and Michael Jordan, than a history of Hollywood could omit Charlie Chaplin, Marilyn Monroe, and Marlon Brando.

A few years after Elvis Presley died someone observed that the accumulation of memorabilia, legend, and rumor about him—the Elvis industry—was like the universe itself: vast,

unknowable, and expanding. So it is with the literature of team sports. Where does *The Meaning of Sports* fit into this literature? Most of the immense outpouring of writing about sports, much of it printed in the pages of daily newspapers, concerns the teams, the players, and the games. For these voluminous accounts this book provides a cultural and historical context.

A smaller part of the literature of sports is polemical in purpose, with two subjects in particular commanding special attention. One stems from the uniquely American relationship between major team sports and institutions of higher education. Universities in the United States, although not in other countries, play host to teams that perform at a high level of skill and attract huge audiences for their games. To qualify to play on one of these teams an athlete must enroll in the university. Whether this is a match made in heaven, enlivening campus life and providing otherwise unavailable opportunities for education to poor, deserving, athletically gifted youngsters, or, on the other hand, an unholy alliance that, because the ethos and the commercial orientation of major sports are at odds with the purposes of the university, has a corrupting effect on institutions of higher education, is a fiercely contested issue. *The Meaning of Sports* embraces neither position wholeheartedly but does explain the circumstances—especially the national popularity of collegiate sports—that give rise to the issue.

The second of the regularly debated topics concerns the comparative merits of teams and individual players. Sports are inherently comparative. The purpose of a game is, after all, to compare the performances of the opposing teams. So it is natural to make comparisons between individual players and between teams across time. It is natural to ask whether Barry Bonds, a star of the early twenty-first century, is the equal as a baseball player to the great Babe Ruth, the prime

of whose career came in the 1920s, or whether the Green Bay Packers football teams of the 1960s could have defeated the San Francisco 49ers of the 1980s.

Because there are no agreed-upon standards for judgment there can be no final answer to such questions, which means that discussions of this kind are destined to be what the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl said the writing of history necessarily is: "an argument without end."<sup>2</sup> *The Meaning of Sports* does not concentrate on these ongoing controversies, the subjects of innumerable conversations over the years, although the book does explain why individual comparisons are more common and more important for baseball than for football or basketball.

One other set of contributions to the literature of sports sees them through the eyes of the athletes themselves, telling what it is like to play the game. This book, by contrast, concerns what it is like to witness the game being played. The chapters that follow adopt the perspective that the military historian brings to war, surveying the broad patterns and investigating the origins and consequences of the clashes that are his or her subject.

This book's concerns are less the experience of the man in the arena than those of the person in the seats, the person who regularly travels long distances, pays substantial sums of money, and endures inclement weather to watch a game of baseball, football, and basketball in person, and who also devotes hundreds of hours each year to sitting in his or her home watching broadcasts of such games on television. *The Meaning of Sports* tells why so many Americans watch these games, and what they see when they do.

## CHAPTER I

## A Variety of Religious Experience

We sell fun. We sell the answer to "What do you want to do tonight?"

MARK CUBAN, *Owner, Dallas Mavericks basketball team*

## A MODERN CREATION

Baseball, football, and basketball loom large in American life. The annual professional football championship game, the Super Bowl, regularly attracts the largest television audience of the year: As many as half of all Americans tune in to watch it.<sup>2</sup> The attention that team sports command is not only broad, it is also intense. A Web site for loyal supporters of the perennially unsuccessful Chicago Cubs baseball team called CubsAnonymous offers a 12-step program for curing an addiction to the team.<sup>3</sup> Why are these sports so important? Why do people invest so much of their time, money,<sup>4</sup> and emotional energy in following them? Why do team sports mean so much to Americans, and what is it that they mean?

One way to begin to answer these questions is to note