

Play Ball!

Sports in American Life

Play Ball!—a simple phrase that warms the hearts of many Americans. Our national passion for sports and athletic events is so pervasive that even time is measured in sporting terms—baseball’s spring training (April) and World Series (October), college basketball’s March Madness, and football’s college bowl frenzy (New Year’s Day). Unfortunately, “Going, Going, Gone” may be a more apt baseball metaphor for the usual circumstances when historic preservation and America’s athletic venues interface. Recent times have witnessed the demolition of several notable stadia including Seattle’s Kingdome, Detroit’s Tiger Stadium, Houston’s Astrodome, Milwaukee’s County Stadium, and San Francisco’s Candlestick Park. The Boston Red Sox are for sale and a political-economic intrigue surrounds the future of historic Fenway Park. Internationally, England’s 1-0 loss to Germany in October 2000 was the last professional soccer game ever to be played at the soon-to-be-demolished Wembley Stadium.

Sports play an increasingly important and complex role in American society. Baseball is characterized as the “national pastime” with its “World Series.” Basketball is referred to as a truly “American game” with its Olympic “Dream Team.” Indeed, athletic success often captures the attention of the American public. However, sports also mirror American society. Segregation, gender bias, moral turpitude, economic inequity, political corruption, integration and diversity, and management-labor relations have been (and continue to be) played out on the sports field. Baseball’s Negro Leagues reverberates a nation’s attitudes, a lack of social mobility, and injustice. Pumpsie Green’s much-delayed promotion to the “Biggs” reflects sadly on the Boston Red Sox organization, the last professional baseball team to integrate. The “gentleman’s” game of golf excluded both African Americans and females well into the 20th century (Cece recalls having to enter clubhouses through a separate “women’s

entrance” and being denied entry into the sacrosanct, men-only grill room). Pete McDaniel’s *Uneven Lies: The Heroic Story of African-Americans in Golf* (Greenwich: American Golfer, 2000) provides critical insights on the history and design of American golf from an important minority perspective.

Bill James’ observations on the criteria and selection process for baseball’s Hall of Fame are particularly cogent:

For 60 years the Hall of Fame has wandered this way and wandered that way, its border becoming more of a splatter than a map. The Hall of Fame teases its suitors with inconsistent favors and uncertain standards; yesterday I did, today I won’t; I did for him, I won’t for you. (page 35)

and

For 50 years there have been attempts to create a new and more rigorous standard, and for 50 years those efforts have always backfired, ultimately bringing into the Hall of Fame a class of very marginal candidates. (page 45)

Serendipitously, James’ comments ricochet aptly across the criteria for the National Register of Historic Places. Both the Hall of Fame and the National Register selection processes are occasional venues for unbridled public lobbying for or against particular candidates. Likewise, do questionable prior listings establish a permanent threshold for all subsequent decision making? Is the proper philosophical approach to be inclusive or exclusive, subjective or objective? How many “good” shortstops or “representative” Greek Revivals should be sanctified? Equally challenging is the professional evaluation of sports-related cultural resources that for the most part have been hitherto unassessed. In the following articles, Smead and Wagner’s experience with southern golf courses provides a comparative framework for National Register decision making. Likewise, Chandler provides a historic context for miniature golf, a passion for many historic preservationists.

America and sports are inseparable. Sports are more than statistical performances, meteoric careers, and tomorrow's headlines. Athletics are a window onto America's ever-changing sociological and cultural landscape. Will the success of Tiger Woods or the Women's World Cup translate into enhanced opportunities for minorities and women? Does the evolving popularity of the X Games and extreme sports echo merely the exuberance of a younger generation, media-created sports alternatives, or a significant cultural change from team sports to an emphasis upon individual creativity? Will professional sport owner's obsession for new and enlarged facilities eventually result in a bland sameness of sports stadia in the 21st century? Will National Register or National Historic Landmark designations for sports facilities serve a meaningful purpose? These are unanswerable questions and clearer reasons why the preservation community needs to better understand America's sports-related passion, its athletic infrastructure, cultural mythology, and surviving legacy.

Since sports are a significant component of American life, athletic-related issues impinge upon cultural resource management in diverse ways. The articles in this *CRM* highlight the intersection of sports and historic preservation which has become increasingly frequent with the new economic demands being placed on sport

facilities by owners, players, and fans. In this regard, Forrest and Jackman demonstrate in their articles the resulting pressure placed upon the archeological heritage of urban centers by the partnering of sport business and politics. Similarly, Konrad assesses the fiscal dilemma facing Boston Red Sox ownership and fans concerning the continued use of historic but "out-dated" Fenway Park.

If we are to better understand our lost and disappearing sport icons, whether at the national or neighborhood level, historical research and comparative analysis are critical. Hopefully, this thematic issue of *CRM* provides an introductory context for future in-depth discussions of America's ever-changing sports-related cultural landscape.

Reference

James, Bill. *Whatever Happened to the Hall of Fame*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.

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Rally behind Fenway Park's "Green Monster," All-Star Game 1999, see article p. 13. Photo by Kimberly Konrad, Save Fenway Park!

