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We have previously acquainted ourselves with Dave Zirin – “the best young sportswriter in America” according to Robert Lipsyte, himself an old hand at sports writing. In October we carried a presentation of Zirin on our [front page](#) with a link to his website “[Edge of Sports](#)”; in November we re-published his [article](#) from *Contexts Magazine*, “Calling Sports Sociology Off the Bench”, where he calls on sport sociologists to fill the void left by modern sport writers, for critical analysis of contemporary developments within sports. In our last update we published a [review](#) of Zirin’s first two books, *What’s My Name, Fool?* and *Welcome to the Terrordome*. And in the present update, we’re pleased to include a review by Ian McDonald of Zirin’s third and latest title, *A People’s History of Sports in the United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protest, People, and Play* (The New Press). Dave Zirin is traversing a well-developed furrow within American history tradition with his new book.

The classic work in the field is Howard Zinn’s *A People’s History of the United States: 1492–Present* (1980), and Zinn is the editor for the series “New Press People’s History” of which Zirin’s book is a part. McDonald observes that Zirin, in keeping with the tradition, develops a bottom-up perspective on sports that puts them in a wider context of political activism and movement. Zirin’s is not an academic book of sports history, but rather, according to McDonald, a resolutely partisan stance for the oppressed, and his passionate and vivid prose stimulates all senses and holds a promise of continuing activism in sports.

Highly readable history of US sports

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Dave Zirin

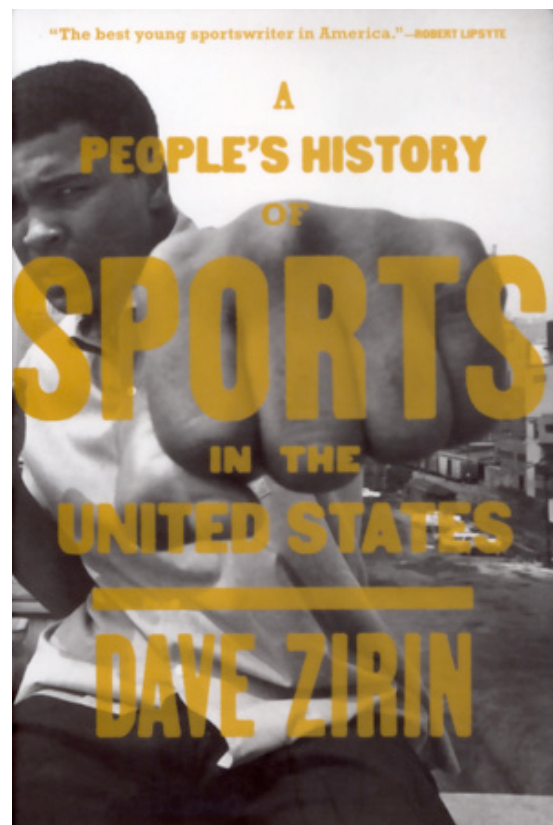
A People’s History of Sports in the United States: 250 Years of Politics, Protest, People, and Play

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A People’s History of Sports in the United States: 250 years of politics, protest, people, and play is a racy and rousing account of the various struggles for survival, respect, recognition and equality that have been waged by athletes over the past 250 years. In keeping with the notion of ‘A People’s History’, an approach that accounts for historical events from the perspective of the exploited, oppressed and marginalised, Zirin not only celebrates the heroic struggles of athletes, administrators and journalists against injustice, but makes the case for an understanding of sport that situates it as part of wider political struggles and movements. This highly readable book is a contemporary affirmation of C.L.R. James’s famous rhetorical question from *Beyond a Boundary*, “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know”. For Zirin, the history of



sport is wrapped up with the politics of slavery, of industrialisation, of wars, of civil rights, of equality, of globalisation.

The first two chapters deal with the emergence of modern sports in the US as it was shaped by the experience of colonialism and slavery, and events like the American Revolution (1775-83) and the Civil War (1861-65). The historical account will be familiar, both to those who know American history and to those who know sports history. As in Europe, the transition from traditional to modern sports in the 18th and 19th century was marked by the repression of undesirable pastimes and the codification of preferred activities; by disagreements amongst the dominant classes over whether sporting activities represented a harmless diversion or harmful debauchery. Certainly some plantation owners encouraged sports as a way of creating harmony – provoking the abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass into opposing sport for its role in accommodating slaves to their slavery.

In these opening chapters, Zirin also charts the emergence the key sports in the US: notably baseball (which like Rugby in Britain, was given an invented origin as part of securing its ideological place as a national pastime), and football (the sporting manifestation of Taylorism). And he introduces us to some familiar figures of this period: the jockey Isaac Murphy, Paul Robeson, Jack Johnson, as well as lesser-known heroes such as Moses Fleetwood Walker. Zirin reminds us that Walker preceded Jackie Robinson as the first African American player in baseball and endured a torrent of race hate: in 1887 Walker resorted to brandishing a loaded revolver to ward of racist fans before taking his place in the team line-up.

The subsequent chapters are each devoted to a different decade. Chapter 3 is on the 1920s: it heralds the emergence of the sports radio, the sports columnist and the rise of the first sports celebrities such as “Babe” Ruth, Jack Dempsey and Bobby Jones. But for African Americans, Zirin calls this ‘a dark period’, with the Klu Klux Klan in the ascendancy and the emergence of the Harlem Globetrotters as the “equivalent of the minstrel shows so popular in vaudeville and the big screen” (p. 57). But it was also the period of the Harlem Renaissance and the Negro Baseball Leagues. Though borne of hardship, poor pay and discrimination, these leagues were also “an independent locus of power and a source of pride and support” (p. 57). The success of the Negro National League was primarily due to Rube Foster ‘the father of black baseball’, who turned the league into the most geographically diverse black-owned business in the US. The 1930s are dealt with in chapter 4, where we learn about Communist Party’s “clumsy” foray into sport politics with the Chicago Counter-Olympics, as well as the more sophisticated and effective work of Lester ‘Red’ Rodney as sports columnist for the Communist Party newspaper, *The Daily Worker* from 1936 to 1958. And of course, these chapters cover the well-known stories of Jesse Owens and Joe Louis in the 1930s.






Chapter 5 covers the impact of the war on sports in America and the tale of Branch Rickey’s ‘noble experiment’ to integrate Baseball by signing Jackie Robinson for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1948. It is also the story of the temporary rise of women’s professional baseball, which lasted from 1943 – 1954. Though this development signalled very real changes in the social position and aspirations of women in post war American society, patriarchy was still dominant: thus these women were required to attend charm school, where they studied manuals instructing them to be “at all times presentable and attractive, whether on the playing field or at leisure” (p. 96).

Chapter 6 deals with the 1950s and the struggle waged by Paul Robeson against McCarthyism, as well as the struggles of female athletes like Althea Gibson, the black star in tennis “the most country-club and lily-white of sports” (p. 122). Chapter 7 is the longest chapter in the book, reflecting the tumultuous 1960s in the USA and across the world. Zirin is at his polemical and passionate best here: the links between the civil rights movement and sport are well summarised and the nuanced politics of black nationalism and anti-war movements are astutely articulated. This is the chapter of Muhammad Ali’s rise from world champion to global leader: of the Olympic Project for Human Rights and protest by Tommie and John Carlos at the 1968 Games. Chapter 8 is about the 1970s. This was a fascinating period in US sports history: social and political radicalism had by now well and truly carried over into sport. This was the decade of a radical new sports writing, of women asserting their rights in sport (culminating in the passing of Title IX); of Arthur Ashe’s moral crusade against Apartheid, of Jack Scott’s radical experiments in sports coaching, of Roberto Clemente tragic demise, and of Curt Flood’s militant stance against the reserve clause in Football.

Chapter 8 is evocatively titled “The 1980s: Welcome to Hell”. Here Zirin charts the political backlash against the progressive gains of the 1970s. This is the decade of 24-hour cable television that brought millions of dollars into sport, of right wing Reaganomics, and of a Cold-War driven ultra-patriotism in sports. Zirin offers an insightful analysis of the symbiotic relationship between hip-hop and basketball: paving the way for the first corporate sponsored black superstar, Michael Jordan. But paradoxically, the 1980s is also the era of the Gay Games, which emerged to challenge the hysterical and homophobic response to the AIDS crisis. However, the dominant narrative is of the accelerating corporatisation of sport, which continued into the 1990s, and of the role of sport in buttressing the war effort of the Bush regimes. Despite the orgy of corporate greed, the rise of the apolitical superstar athlete and the use of sport to legitimise war, Zirin uncovers numerous stories of rebellion and resistance within the sports world.

A People's History of Sports in the United States is not a scholarly excavation of the past: its strength is breadth rather than depth of coverage; there are no claims to originality or uncovering lost or hidden histories. Some readers may feel that Zirin's treatment of the social struggles of women, the working class and gays could be more developed. Others will note that there is much in this book that Zirin has already covered in his two previous texts, *What's My Name, Fool! Sports and Resistance in the United States* (2005) and *Welcome to the Terrodome: The Pain, Politics and Promise of Sport* (2007). But repetition will not concern Zirin. His project is not a scholarly enterprise, though academics and students will find much to chew on in his various works, but a political mission in the tradition of Lester 'Red' Rodney, the radical sport journalist of the 1930s. For Zirin too the notion that politics should be kept out of sports is at best naïve, but more usually disingenuous: when Avery Brundage condemned the anti-Olympic protesters in 1936 for bringing politics into sport, he was in reality bestowing his approval of the Third Reich and the politics of white supremacy. Like Rodney before him, Zirin's passionate and vivid prose is resolutely partisan: he is always on the side of the oppressed, the marginalised and anyone fighting for social and sporting justice. In this sense, Zirin has written an account that not only informs us about the past but holds out the promise of legitimising and inspiring activism in sports in the future. "If we challenge sports to be as good as they can be – a force to break down walls that divide us, a moor for inclusion – they can propel us toward a better world, a world worth playing in – and worth fighting for" (p. 268). And this interventionist agenda is the key to understanding and evaluating the importance of this book.

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