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The Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council

FALL 1998

PLAY BALL!
The Evolution of the Florida Sports Fan
The Sports Fan — Endangered Species?

When I think of a sports fan, I think of my brother. In our house, the talk around the dining room table was about trades in the triple A leagues. My favorite home movie from this era is of my brother playing all positions on two competing baseball teams — wearing a coonskin cap. Our backyard also had two regulation golf greens — and my mother’s rose gardens were used quite regularly as the bunkers. If my brother failed to loft his second iron shot high enough, my sister lost her window. Many times, my brother simultaneously watched two televised baseball games — without sound — and listened to a football game on the radio.

Because my father grew up in Pittsburgh, “our” teams were the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Pittsburgh Pirates. We spent our winter vacations in Ft. Myers so we could see Roberto Clemente play and often drove 600 miles to see Dick Groat, Bill Mazeroski and Smokey Burgess during the regular baseball season.

After reading Doris Kearns Goodwin’s book, *Wait till Next Year*, (excerpted in this issue of FORUM) I know that my brother was not the only child whose seasons were defined by sports, whose favorite reading was *Sporting News* and *Sports Illustrated* and who inherited a passion and a team from a parent. Kearns Goodwin also reminds us that fans aren’t just boys. In his recent lecture here in the Tampa Bay area, Robert Lipsyte stated that “Babe Zaharias was the best athlete I ever saw.” Later, an audience member began a question, “If Babe Zaharias was the best female athlete you ever saw...” Lipsyte interrupted, “No, the best athlete, female or male.” And not all great athletes are men.

For a while, my brother and I competed to see who could have the most worthless (defined as not useful for employment) academic degree. We thought he had won when he earned a Masters in Sports Administration. But, this degree led to a well-paying job with a major league baseball team. And this is when I became sure my brother was first and foremost a fan, at least in the way that I define “fan.” The business side of sports killed his interest in the team (in fact, after seven months with the team, he had an ulcer). He quit and drove to Texas to watch oil wells.

It’s hard to be a fan today. Hard to be loyal to a team that keeps moving. Hard to find heroes among the millionaires. Hard to decide what part sports play in our national conversation. Is it enough that sports can bring together very different people in a common cause? If, finally, there is no economic rationale to invest public dollars in stadiums, is civic pride still a compelling argument?

Sports has always given us heroes. But whether sports still help explain part of our humanity, such as courage, character and fate, seems an open question these days.

— Ann Henderson
Fandom Considered

4 Sports and values — losing our grip  By Robert Lipsyte
13 A fervent Dodgers’ fan recalls her girlhood heroes  By Doris Kearns Goodwin
18 Trafficking in nostalgia — a fan who writes for fans  By Peter Golenbock
21 A little losing is a good thing  By Wilfred Sheed
22 On the Florida Marlins and transient glory  By George F. Will

The Evolution of the Florida Sports Fan

29 Preface: the board  By Kevin McCarthy
30 Spring training paved the way for Florida’s own professional sports teams later  By Raymond Arsenault
32 The modern era — nine teams in three decades
36 Why we’re so darned good at football  By Bill Buchalter

Late Arrivals: Women and African Americans

40 Pioneers in satin — the odd case of women’s basketball  By Pamela Grundy and Susan Cahn
44 Jackie Robinson’s journey on the way to shattering baseball’s color barrier led through Florida  By Arnold Rampersad

The Last Word

50 Is football a religion?  By David S. Hackett

Correction: A photo on the back cover of the Spring 1998 issue of FORUM, described as showing development moving closer to Bok Tower Gardens, in fact showed a staff residence.
Robert Lipsyte is a veteran sports writer and columnist for The New York Times. He has also published more than a dozen books on sports topics including Idols of the Game (with Peter Levine), a more extended treatment of some of the personalities and themes in the piece that follows. His current contributions to the Times include non-sports topics and his most recent book is on the experience of illness from a patient’s point of view.

Lipsyte spoke in St. Petersburg this spring as part of a series on Sports and American Culture co-sponsored by the Florida Humanities Council. The following is an edited version of his talk.

The values that were taught in the arena through this American Century — honoring boundaries, playing by the rules, working together for a common goal, submitting to authority, equating victory with success — were values that shaped the American character for a very long time. For a very long winning season, in a sense, that started with the bare-knuckled days after the Western frontier closed down. And it probably began to fade somewhere around the first Super Bowl, which was, as you
A BITTER TASTE:

Two Marlins fans, May 1998, protest the latest in a series of trades breaking up their world championship team.
Gallico said the reason that Babe Didrikson recall, in the middle of the Vietnam War. I think this is probably why the Super Bowl seems so important to some people. Certainly to network executives, to politicians, it represents the sense of American empire, the last vestiges of it, perhaps.

Our longtime sense of sports may have ended, not as one might thought it would, with a Mike Tyson bite, or a Tonya Harding whimper, or even a Latrell Sprewell choke hold. Rather, it began to end with a commercial interruption on television when sports became just another American variety show, almost as sentimental as soap operas that are basically for women, almost as immediate as the talk shows, almost, but not quite, as exciting as Court TV. So we don’t really have a grip on what sports is anymore.

When something real happens in sports we don’t know how to deal with it. When an athlete, as happened last year, refuses to stand for the National Anthem because it conflicts with his religious beliefs, no one seems to know what to make of it. We have stopped thinking, “This is bad for the kids. Little Leaguers will no longer stand up for the national anthem. Is this the end of religion in America?” Nor does anybody think, “Hey he’s an individual, he has the right to express himself.” He doesn’t have a right to express himself; he’s an athlete, an object; he’s one of our performers.

With most athletes this isn’t much of a problem because most athletes don’t stand for anything much beyond themselves. Michael Jordan, Junior Griffey and plenty of others have nothing much to offer us beyond the gorgeous, breathtaking mechanics of what they do. And that has become not quite enough. Because there is no longer a dependable emotional return beyond the sensation of that moment. Because we don’t trust these guys, we don’t trust this team to be back next year. How can you fall in love with somebody who won’t be there in the morning? The changes in sports have made it impossible to count on a player, a team, an entire league being around for that long haul that a fan needs to make a commitment. I think that the moving of franchises and free agency irrevocably destabilized the connection between player and fan. I think that a lot of people say, “Well, plague on the locker room and the skybox, on the athlete and the owner. They are only out for themselves so we would be fools to care.”

People have started to wonder, “What ever happened to that myth of the ball park as the country’s true melting pot?” Our children were going there to learn courage and self control. Our elderly would find comforting nostalgia. And all our families would have this non-threatening way to communicate. It was a myth. But it was a myth that I grew up with. I suspect a lot of people grew up with it. But I was really very lucky because I have had three great teachers that put me on the path to enlightenment. One was a sports writer, Paul Gallico; one was a baseball player, Mickey Mantle; and one was a boxer, Muhammad Ali.

Gallico was a famous sports writer in New York in the 20s and 30s; he wrote for the Daily News. He’s more famous now, if he’s still famous at all, for writing The Poseidon Adventure and some other books. In the year that I was born, 1938, he published his valedictory, a book called A
WAS SO GREAT WAS THAT SHE COULDN'T GET A DATE.

Farewell to Sports. It had a big impact on me. I read it as an adolescent and I remember totally believing his passage about a famous woman athlete of his time named Babe Didrikson Zaharias — a woman who was the greatest basketball player of her time, won Olympic gold medals, went on to found and become the first champion of the Women’s Professional Golf Tour. Of course, she could hit a baseball thrown by a major league pitcher, throw a football, she could do anything. She was, arguably, the greatest athlete of the century.

Gallico said the reason that she was so great was that she couldn’t get a date. And she became proficient in all these sports because the most important sport, man-snatching, eluded her. I believed it. Well, sure. It made perfect sense to me. Why would a woman want to do all these things except because she couldn’t go out with guys?

When I got older and became a sports writer, and I reread this book, I decided that “Well, hey, Paul Gallico was just a sexist of his time.” We can forgive him; Jefferson had slaves, right? In my time, when I was starting out in the late 50s and early 60s, we didn’t let women into the press box. Forget about the locker room, we wouldn’t let them into the press box.

Then some years after that, doing some research, I found a story (and there were three good sources) that another famous sports writer of that time named Grantland Rice, realizing how vain Paul Gallico was about his own athletic ability (he had been an athlete in college), had set up a foot race on a golf course between Paul Gallico and this young woman who nobody knew too much about, Babe Didrikson. The two of them raced and, of course, Babe Didrikson left him for dead. Just ran away from him.

After that, he never wrote about her again without alluding to her Adam’s apple, the slight mustache on her upper lip, the fact that she was really not quite a woman. This dogged her for most of her career. It’s very interesting to read the sports-writing coverage of her career because at some point when she became involved in the ladies golf tour, she figured it out. She married a wrestler. She had a total makeover. The sports pages, quite blatantly, talked about how much better she looked. One story even said that how wonderful it was that, during the off season, Babe Didrikson had finally grown breasts.

It would be great to think that we are beyond all of this now. It would be great to pretend that the Ladies Professional Golf Tour doesn’t carry someone they call “The Image Lady” to instruct the young women on dress, cosmetics, earrings. All the things that are really important to your swing and your short game.

This also affected Billie Jean King who had to battle sexism and her own confused sexuality. For me personally, she is a hero, a great sports visionary, the most interesting and provocative athlete of our time. We have to remember that here was a working-class hero; her mother was an Avon lady, her father was a firefighter. Here was a working-class hero from Southern California, who learned to play tennis on public courts. Who was banned from the Southern California Tennis Association annual picture because she wore homemade shorts instead of the proper length skirt. And she came into tennis with a really fierce sense of what sports was really all about.

It was about the individual athlete, about the imperial soul
of the athlete. At the time tennis players were kind of the kept pets of the country club set. They literally got money under the table, even though they were nominally amateur athletes. She rebelled against this kind of infantilization of the athlete, control of the athlete. And it was Billie Jean King, more than any other athlete of that time, who forced open tennis, forced tennis to become professional.

But of course, her palimony trial popped in the 80s, and it was then very easy to marginalize her as a lesbian and a woman. Billie Jean's corporate sponsors evaporated. She's kind of making her way back now, but very slowly.

My second, major teacher was Mickey Mantle. In 1960, when I was a child reporter in the sports department of the *New York Times*, a fan jumped out of the grandstand in Yankee Stadium, ran to center field and hit Mickey Mantle in the jaw. Mickey was observed for several days after this, drinking breakfast, lunch, dinner through a straw.

As we found out later, getting in trouble was not aberrational behavior for Mickey Mantle, but we were all surprised. And the *New York Times* ambassador to baseball, some famous guy with a vest, who never deigned to actually interview ball players, was not going to ask Mick what happened. But the news desk wanted to know. A child, me, was sent from right rewrite to go and ask what happened.

I went to Yankee Stadium (this was just before the game) and Mickey and Yogi Berra were throwing the ball back and forth, warming up. I very politely, said “Mr. Mantle,” (I’m sure I said Mr. Mantle) I asked him what had happened. He said — well, he made a crude, and so far, impossible suggestion.

I had heard such language before. I had been in the Army. But I was stunned. Why would this golden god speak to me this way? What had I done wrong? How had I provoked him? Why was I being punished?

But I sucked it up and rephrased the question. And in reply to my second question, Mantle and Berra began throwing the ball through my hair. This was a signal that the interview was over. And I stumbled away, hurt and ashamed. It was my fault. These guys didn’t talk that way. I had no inkling. I read the sports pages, I read the biographies, I read all the books. They were American heroes.

Once I figured it out — once I spoke to older reporters, once they all started laughing at me — I just started getting angrier and angrier. Not so much at Mantle. Mickey Mantle was an ordinary guy with extraordinary talents who was very often a jerk. How could you be angry at him? I was angry at the sporting press that had betrayed me and the entire structure of false myth that had been erected around the game. Our grandfathers believed the famous Western writer, Zane Grey, who wrote “All boys love baseball; if they don’t, they’re not real boys.” Well, you can figure that one out. No fags, no crybabies, no girls allowed in this tree house. This last outpost of white Christian masculinity, the Americans. Whipped the redskins, whipped the greasers, the nicks, the flips, the Japs, the Huns in all the real world series.

And I don’t want just to pick on baseball. Last year, Joe
Namath, the great Jets quarterback, the voice of the Wiz, broadcaster, said "There are no sissies on the field. No chumps, no punks. If there are, they don't last long." Hey, what's a sissy? We still haven't figured that one out. I guess, Greg Louganis, a homosexual, he must be a sissy. His tenth dive of his in the '88 Seoul Olympics was the nerviest act I have ever covered in my life. I was there, and I couldn't believe the sound of his head hitting that wooden board. The wound needed several quick stitches. There was no time for anesthetic. A few minutes later, he went back out again and nailed the dive, perhaps the best dive of the games. Some have tried to obscure that example of traditional manly courage with the debate over should he have told Olympic officials that he was HIV positive at the time. Did that really obscure the courage of his act? Who's the sissy?

I think O.J. Simpson is a sissy. One jury decided he didn't kill his wife, one jury did and should have to pay money. We all know he slapped her around... Maybe Charles Barkley is a real sissy of our time — a clever man who has allowed himself to be merchandised as the intimidator.

But the ultimate sissy is probably the male sports fan who is still hung up on the romance of the sports world that never quite existed. A theme park of courage and tragedy. Rolled out every season by people like me, scribes, who are willing to be treated with contempt by the athletes we cover in return for a limited access to their world. Sports fans really do want to wallow in this sweaty Oz. It's been a place where you could avoid your family in a socially acceptable way. You could drink your macho lite and pretend to care deeply about something that really makes very few demands. Baseball doesn't matter anymore. Now that St. Petersburg has a major league team, is that going to make people really happy in ways they have never been happy? Make the city major league in ways it has never been major league before? Will the team do wonders for the city's health care system, its educational system and its roads?

I don't think the game will die, though, if anybody has any doubts about that. A couple of years ago, with my tongue firmly in my cheek, I suggested that Cal Ripkin should take a day off. I was not serious at the time. I don't think you should ask a driven athlete to quit anymore than you would ask charging rhinos to stop. But, I thought it might be interesting to write about the streak in that way. And to look at our obsession — and I didn't realize what an obsession it was — with records and numbers and anointing heroes who make us comfortable.

First of all, I never got so much mail. I know on my headstone it's going to say "He asked Cal Ripkin to take a day off." I still get letters. My favorite though came early. It was "you are a liberal child molester and the son of a Nazi whore dog." My feeling is, as long as there are passionate fans out there who can write like that, baseball will never die.

What I did get out of the Ripkin interlude was this: That our capacity to delude ourselves through sports, perhaps especially through baseball, is infinite. Because I think that these games are less games, ultimately, than they are a way for men to daydream...

Most athletes are still conservative; they're nice guys. They are agreeable to authority, hobbled by an upbringing that stunted their emotional growth and channeled their energy. Most of them tend to be rather pleasant, if you aren't asking them for an
ALI DECLARED “I DON’T HAVE TO BE WHO YOU

autograph or for a quote. I think that they are probably more competent than athletes in the past. I don’t think that they are anymore one-dimensional as human beings than, say, ballet dancers or rocket scientists. But while fans still envy them, and sports journalists celebrate them, many civilians began to dislike them during and after the recent round of strikes. The sports writers said that it was because fans didn’t understand why these guys, who should be so grateful, who should play these games free, wanted better benefits, larger pensions, or more money. I don’t think that’s the reason why the fans turned on them. These guys appeared to be what the owners said they were: children who needed owners and coaches to tell them what to do.

And then the trials came. The real trials: O.J., Iron Mike Tyson, Lawrence Phillips of Nebraska. At the New York Times we have an agate page in which we report all the trades and salary negotiations, called Transactions. Somebody suggested that we have another column called Transgressions. It would need to be much larger.

My third teacher was Muhammad Ali. He was probably the most important. In 1964, he challenged Sonny Liston for the championship. Once again it didn’t seem right to disturb the New York Times ambassador to boxing. He wanted to go to Hialeah that February and so they sent me down. I was a feature writer at the time. They sent me down because I wasn’t important and Cassius Clay, as he was called then, didn’t seem important either. In fact, the instructions that I got from the desk when I went down were “As soon as you get down to Miami Beach, plot out the route from the arena to the nearest hospital so that you don’t waste any deadline time following Cassius Clay to intensive care.” The cynicism of this, of course, is that we covered the event while the editorial pages were inveighing against boxing and particularly against such a mismatch.

I went down to Miami — I thought it was going to be fun. The first people I met when I went to the Fifth Street gym were these four little guys, four little musicians who were on tour, and they had come for a photo op with Cassius Clay. They were really very angry because he was late, and they started to leave. And the Wackenhut troopers shoved them, and me along with them, into his dressing room and locked the dressing room. At which point I found out that these four little guys were the Beatles. After 15 or 20 minutes, the dressing room door burst open and we were just stunned at how big this guy was.

He said, “Come on, Beatles, let’s make some money.” And they went out and they pranced around the gym. It was as if they had choreographed a routine where he hit the first Beatle and they all fell down like dominoes. And I thought, wow, these guys are great. They must have practiced this the night before. When it was over, I asked him, “When did you practice with them?” And, he said, “Huh, who were those little (guys)?”

As you may remember, Cassius Clay beat Sonny Liston in Miami Beach. And then, the morning afterwards, we clustered around him because there had been rumors that he was a member of a group that really scared white people a lot in those days, the nation of Islam, then known, more popularly, as the

ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTOS
Black Muslims. He said to us, “I’m clean, I’m sober, I’m not raping anybody. But I know that red birds should be with red birds and black birds with black birds.” We said, “No, no, no. Don’t you know about integration? Don’t you know about equality? Don’t you know about civil rights? That’s what you should be fighting for.”

He looked at us with terrific pity and the contempt of a religious zealot, and he said, “I don’t have to be who you want me to be. I’m free to be who I want.”

And that, in many ways, was kind of an athletic declaration of independence. So much of what has happened in the 30 to 35 years since has flowed from that.

Slowly the American athlete, particularly the black athlete, these new gladiators, began to realize that it’s quite wonderful to stand up for something, but the system is going to slap you down. So if you’re going to stand up for something, stand up for something that the system is not going to slap you down for and that’s yourself. That’s making money. That’s dancing in the end zone. So what are you going to do about it? If you’re an athlete in this society, you don’t have a lot of choices. You want to have the ball. You want to have the chance to find the limits of your talents and your possibilities. Athletes are like artists, in a sense, but their shelf life is much more limited.

If you’re a fan, you’re caught between your passion for the sport and your fear of feeling foolish. And if you’re a journalist, speaking for myself at least, you’re confused. How do you cover these sports? This is particularly hard, I think, for high school and college journalists who live on campus and, in a sense, are going to school under the thumb of the sponsor.

A lot of people feel cynical about this. They feel that sports no longer reflects the America of our dreams and that the stars of sports are no longer the idealized version of ourselves. That’s true. Whether that fantasy had any reality at any time, I’m not so sure. But we are now in what I think of as the Mudville Cycle. Remember, Casey at the Bat? Everybody felt bad when Casey struck out. Casey was them, Casey was us. We could only hope that Casey would come back next year. But now, we’re too hip to be happy. We know that Casey is just out for himself. The owners can be counted on to betray him and us. They’ll move the Mudville team somewhere else. And, if the mirror of sport is truly reflective of who and what we are now, we are selfish, short-sighted, morally bankrupt, approaching impotence. Mighty Casey would probably not even be going to the plate to strike out, he would just go on strike.

Where do we go? Here’s a thought. Instead of stewing about all this, get up off your butts, stand up and walk out on these pampered, abused, hyped, exploited gym rats and their keepers. There are things that you can do. You don’t have to sit and watch this stuff. What are you complaining about? You’re saying that it isn’t what it used to be? Don’t watch it! Turn it off! Go next door, and turn off your neighbor’s set, too. We have known since the close of the frontier that sports is the most fun you can have with your body in public. So go have some. Listen to Nike. Just do it. You can. You’re Tiger Woods, baby.
A fervent Dodgers' fan remembers some cherished close encounters with her girlhood heroes

BY DORIS KEARNS GOODWIN

Baseball loyalties in our neighborhood were divided between the Yankees, Dodgers, and Giants. As earlier immigrants had brought their ethnic bonds with them to America, the settlers of suburbia had, for the most part, carried their baseball fidelity from their borough of origin — Yankee fans from the Bronx, Giant supporters from Manhattan, and, of course, the devotees of the Dodgers from Brooklyn. In each home, team affiliation was passed on from father to child, with the crucial moments in a team’s history repeated like the liturgy of a church service. Over time, each team and its fans had taken on a distinct identity, a kind of stereotype into which the features of the team and the characteristics of its followers were molded to produce an exaggerated caricature.

The Yankees were the “Bronx Bombers,” whose pinstriped uniforms signified their elite status, supported by the rich and successful, by Wall Street brokers and haughty businessmen. The Dodgers were “dem Bums,” the “daffiness boys,” the unpretentious clowns, whose fans were seen as scruffy blue-collar workers who spoke with bad diction. The Giants, owned since 1919 by the same family, the Stonehams, were the conservative team whose followers consisted of small businessmen who watched calmly from the stands dressed in shirts and ties, their identity somewhat blurred, caught, as they were, between the Yankee “haves” and the Dodger “have-nots.”

To me, however, each team was signified by a member of my small community. The Giants were my parents’ friends the Goldschmidts, the Rickards down the street, and, most of all, Max Kropf and Joe Schmitt, the butchers around the corner at the Bryn Mawr Meat Market. Loading me down with huge shinbones for my small cocker spaniel, Frosty, they would mock my Dodgers. I would pretend to be angry but the truth was I loved going into their shop, the feel of the sawdust under my feet as I moved from the muggy August heat into the cooling air of their enormous refrigerator with sides of beef hanging from the ceiling. Most of all, I loved the attention I received, especially when they called me “Ragmop” in honor of my unruly reddish-blond hair. These Giant fans were not dressed in ties and jackets, but wore white aprons, smeared with blood and marrow. Although I tried not to stare, my eyes were often drawn to the rounded stubs of the two fingers Max had cut off while slicing meat. When he caught me looking, he would hold up his hand as if the wound were a badge of honor. “See, Ragmop, this is what..."
happens if you want to be a butcher.”

The Yankees were represented by the Friedles, and especially Elaine, who was as devoted to her team as I was to the Dodgers. Since the two teams were in different leagues, our rivalry was muted during the summer months, only to peak again during those frequent Octobers when the Dodgers and the Yankees met in the World Series. She could not understand my idolatry of Jackie Robinson, while I, in turn, heaped scorn on her admiration for the shrill, wiry Billy Martin, the Yankee second baseman known for his quick fists and timely hitting. She would frequently take out her scrapbook of Billy Martin clippings to prove her point — how many hits, his latest batting average, his exploits in the field. How she could compare the tiny, pugnacious Martin to the noble Robinson defied my comprehension.

Her enthusiasms and knowledge seemed all the more remarkable since her father, also a Yankee fan, did not encourage her love of baseball but took her brother, Gary, to games and leaving her at home with the claim that she could never sit through an entire game. Finally, at the age of eight, she exploded in a tantrum of outraged anger, and he agreed to take her, choosing a doubleheader to prove his point. I can still see her look of delight and triumph when she returned to tell me she had loved every minute, and had demanded they stay until the last out of the extra-inning nightcap.

The Yankees also had fervent followers in the Lubars and the Barthas, who lived across the street. Elaine “Lainie” Lubar’s birthday was the day after mine, and her mother would host a joint birthday party to spare my mother the clamorous assemblage of our friends. Only by dint of their cabana at Lido Beach, a symbol of affluence on our block, did the Lubars fit the typical image of the Yankee fan. The Greener's home was the only one on our block with a side yard as well as a front yard. I would play with Marilyn, the youngest of their three children, turning cartwheels on their soft grass, lying on my back to divine the shapes of different animals in the clouds, and feeding the rabbits they kept in a hutch on the corner of their lawn. The Rusts’ loyalty to the Dodgers followed the more typical pattern. A large Catholic family with five children, the Rusts had carried their allegiance with them when they moved to Long Island from Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn. And, of course, in Flatbush, my father had literally grown up with Ebbets Field, his devotion to the Dodgers so intertwined with his own biography that my sisters...
and I could no more have conceived of rooting for another team than of rooting against him.

For all of us, the love was personal and familiar. We spent hours arguing about whether Duke Snider, Willie Mays, or Mickey Mantle was the best center fielder. The handsome, smooth-fielding Duke Snider was the most consistent home-run hitter of the three, but Mays had a balletic grace and a joyful fury, while the switch-hitting Mantle had the greatest raw power and speed. Who was the best announcer: Russ Hodges, Mel Allen, or Red Barber? Who was the better catcher: Roy Campanella — steady behind the plate, unequaled in calling pitches, but a streaky hitter — or the short-armed swarthy Yogi Berra, the most dangerous hitter in baseball in late innings? Was Pee Wee Reese, the “Little Colonel,” who held the Dodgers together, a better shortstop than Phil Rizzuto, who led the American League in fielding? And which team had the better double-play combination: the Dodgers with Reese and Robinson, or the Giants with Alvin Dark and Eddie Stanky, whom we called “Eddie Stinky”? For support, we each mustered our own statistics and anecdotes. We carried on our arguments on the street, in the corner stores, and in each other’s homes. If no minds were changed, we took great pleasure in our endless debates and our shared love for the sport.

* * *

Although the Giants improved steadily through the month of May, 1951, the Dodgers remained in first place. They were playing well, with the exception of Gil Hodges, who was hardly hitting at all. Reporters speculated that his new baby was responsible for his slump, causing him to stay up at night, making him continually exhausted, and ten pounds lighter than he should be. I planned to write Hodges a letter of encouragement until I heard he was coming to Wolf’s Sport Shop on Sunrise Highway that weekend to sign autographs. I had something that would surely help him break out of his slump and I wanted to give it to him personally.

Earlier that spring, while preparing for my Confirmation at religious-education classes in St. Agnes, I had entered a contest designed to test knowledge of the catechism. Actually, there were two contests, one among the parochial-school students and the other for students from public school. The winners in each group would then face off in a public competition. Every night after dinner, my mother would drill me in the articles of the Catholic faith. By the time the contest began, I felt unbeatable; I easily bested the others in my class and moved into a faceoff with the champion from St. Agnes.

That night, I looked out from the stage to see my mother, a few friends, and an impressive array of white-clad nuns, the teachers of St. Agnes. The contest was modeled on a spelling bee. We would each be asked a question, and the first one who made a mistake would lose if the other contestant knew the answer. After several opening rounds, we were asked to take turns in naming the seven deadly sins. “Pride,” my opponent called, and I responded, “Envy.” “Lust,” she rejoined with a smile, but I answered, “Covetousness.” “Anger,” she almost shouted. “Sloth,” I almost whispered. Six sins down. Only one to go. For almost a minute my opponent stood in silence, rubbing her forehead in a gesture of intense thoughtfulness, while I, seeing her difficulty, felt a rising sense of exultant anticipation. “Deceit,” she blurted out uncertainly. There was an audible sigh from the nuns in the audience. Now the moderator turned to me, and when I saw my mother confidently smiling in the audience I was unable to repress a grin of my own. “Gluttony,” I announced in a confi-
dent tone, knowing the contest was won. Instead of an explosive cheer, what followed seemed to me a most unpleasant and protracted silence. In that momentary pause, I feared the nuns were disappointed that the girl from St. Agnes had not won, but the applause began and grew, and the Mother Superior seemed delighted when she presented me with my prize—a St. Christopher medal blessed by the Pope. Now this fruit of my triumph would help end the hitting slump of Gil Hodges.

Since St. Christopher was the patron saint of travel, my parents, like most Catholic families, always kept a St. Christopher medal in our car to protect the safety of our voyage. For years, I had heard my father threaten to affix a St. Christopher medal to our washing machine in order to ensure the safe return of every sock to its mate. If St. Christopher could protect socks and travelers, perhaps he could ensure the safe passage of Gil Hodges around the bases, preferably in one swing of the bat.

That weekend, not revealing my intentions, I asked my mother to drive me to Wolf’s Sport Shop for my rendezvous with Gil Hodges. Slipping the small box from my pocket, I joined the line leading to Hodges, who looked uncomfortable, squeezed behind a small table. Nevertheless, he talked patiently to each person in turn, his manner warm and gracious. When I reached the head of the line, I handed him the small box, already opened to reveal the medal, and launched into an accompanying monologue. This medal has been blessed by the Pope, I explained, and I had won it in a catechism contest when I knew the seventh deadly sin was gluttony, and I thought St. Christopher would watch over his swing so that he could return home safely each time he went to bat, which would make him feel good and would make me feel good and would make Dodgers fans all over the world feel great. The people standing behind me greeted my rapid-fire message with good-natured laughter, but not Hodges. He accepted the medal with great solemnity. He told me that he, too, had once had a St. Christopher medal blessed by the Pope. But he had given it to his father, a coal miner in Indiana. Mining was a dangerous business, he explained, and his father had broken his back, lost an eye, and severed three toes in a series of accidents, so he thought his father needed the medal more than he did. He was thrilled, he said, to receive a medal of his own. He reached out in a gesture of gratitude, and my fingers disappeared in a palm four times the size of mine.

The next day, the Dodgers left for a long road trip, and Hodges began to hit. By the first week in June, he was leading the majors with seventeen home runs in forty-four games, three ahead of Babe Ruth’s mark. Sportswriters attributed his miraculous resurrection to his ability to sleep soundly since leaving his infant at home. But I knew better.

A

At the end of the day on Friday, July 22, 1955, as I was preparing to go to the movies with my girl-friends, my father called me excitedly to tell me he had managed to get us tickets to the thirty-seventh-birthday celebration of Pee Wee Reese. “A consummate professional,” he would always say when talking about Reese, “a gentleman who lives by a code, a work ethic that delivers the goods day in and day out.” Even though I was mildly disappointed at the thought of missing a movie date with my friends, I didn’t want to dampen his enthusiasm. When he suggested we go an hour or so early to see the pregame ceremony honoring Reese, I decided to take along my autograph book. As it turned out, I was glad I did.

Just before the celebration was to begin, I caught Jackie Robinson’s attention as he headed slowly to
the dugout. I didn’t care that Robinson’s hair was now almost totally gray. The aging warrior remained my favorite player. I had traded for Robinson’s autograph with Eddie Rust, but I had never made direct contact with him myself, never locked him in the eye, and I wanted his name linked to me in a more intimate way.

I leaned over the railing, and with my most beseeching smile waved my autograph book, opened to a page with an empty space surrounded by a wreath of florid messages: “Let’s never forget one another... Remember me until rubber tires and Niagara falls... May you have a succession of successive successes... I will always cherish our relationship.” Before signing, Robinson scanned these silly, affectionate sentiments, and I could feel my face reddening. Then he wrote for a long moment. “Well,” he said, “I can see I’m in good company.” He closed the book, handed it back to me, and, with a laugh, descended into the dugout. I was settled beside my father and the special celebration had already begun before I dared to open the book. My heart beat faster until I felt almost dizzy, for there in the middle of my dearest friends’ messages were the words:

Keep your smile a long, long while. Jackie Robinson.

I would not let the book out of my hand as I watched baseball executives and Reese’s teammates gather for the ceremonies. As Reese approached home plate, I thought about the very special relationship which existed between Robinson and Reese — the black pioneer and the Southern captain. When Robinson first came to the Dodgers, it had been Reese who quashed the petition against him by his teammates. And on an overcast day in Cincinnati, with fans yelling racial epithets and hurling containers toward the grim-faced Robinson, the respected Reese — team captain and Southern gentleman — called time, slowly strode across the infield, put his hand on Robinson’s shoulder, and spoke to him softly, one man to another. The crowd was quieted, as were the members of the Cincinnati team, and the story soon spread through the world of baseball. It was a pivotal moment in Robinson’s struggle, and, in retrospect, one of the finest moments in the history of baseball. Now, as Reese walked forward to receive the tributes of his peers and the loving acclaim of the crowd, Robinson reached out in a swift, barely noticeable gesture and put his hand on Reese’s shoulder. “Reese and Robinson,” my father remarked, “they’re a lot more than great baseball players.”

After tributes of mixed eloquence were spoken, birthday gifts were presented, including a new Chevrolet, three thousand dollars in war bonds, a television set, golf clubs, cameras, and fishing equipment. The master of ceremonies was Dodger announcer Vin Scully, who had replaced Red Barber the previous year. Scully guided the emotional Reese to the microphone. “When I came to Brooklyn in 1940, I was a scared kid,” Reese began. “To tell you the truth, I’m twice as scared right now.”

After the fifth inning, an enormous birthday cake was carried onto the field and the lights in the park were turned off. That was our signal to light the candles we’d been given when we arrived, and to join Gladys Gooding on the organ to sing “Happy Birthday.” The thirty-three thousand candles flickered in the night like the Milky Way. Not only did the Man of the Hour double twice and score a run in the Dodgers’ 8-4 victory, but the generous wit of Jackie Robinson had given me an unexpected moment I would treasure for the rest of my life.

What Makes the Sports Fan Tick?

Playing, Watching, and Then Remembering Make for a Potent Mix

Peter Golenbock has published 15 books on sports and has three more currently in gestation. His books are typically encyclopedic, anecdotal histories of teams (The Dallas Cowboys and Chicago Cubs recently) or entire sports (The NASCAR auto circuit). Golenbock plays in a senior baseball league, plays tennis and other sports as well and has coached youth sports most of his adult life. He was interviewed by FORUM editor Rick Edmonds in his writer’s study in St. Petersburg crowded with books, interview tapes and life-sized cutouts of NASCAR drivers. It was late July, and Golenbock had just returned from his son’s youth league state baseball championship in Key West.

RE: I see you as a sort of expert witness about fans. It is correct to describe your books as for fans by a fan?

PG: I'm a huge fan. I'm a fan of the sport and a fan of the people who play the sport. And a lot of different sports.

RE: And for you, at least, that starts with liking to play sports, lots of different sports.

PG: I don't think that it's necessary to have been a player, but I think that if you have played the game, you have a much greater appreciation for those who can play it at a higher level. Unlike a lot of my brethren, I have tremendous admiration for these guys. I don't particularly care how much money they are making. That doesn't mean much to me. All I do is focus on their performance.

RE: You have said that at its best, sports really does embody a lot of virtues: teamwork, courage, character.

PG: In the ideal it certainly does do that. Sports, taught the right way, prepares kids to be better able to function in the adult society, especially if you are playing on a team. If you are playing a team sport and you have somebody who is teaching the team sport the right way, your concern is mostly for the team. What can I do to help the team? Which is what most corporations strive for, as well, or law firms or doctors' cooperatives or what have you.

RE: And all this was interesting enough to you that you volunteered as a youth coach even before you had a son of your own.

PG: I had been doing it for twenty years before my son was born.

RE: Is it also fair to say that even some of the bad things in sports — poor sportsmanship, failing to perform in the clutch or just plain bad luck — is part of what is fascinating or what makes for good stories?

PG: Without a doubt. The interesting thing about a game like baseball is (and this has become somewhat of a cliche) that the best hitter at baseball still will make out 65 times out of 100 at bats. So one of the things you've got to learn is that you can't be the perfect player you'd like to be. If you watch the great pros in baseball, they'll go through 0 for 20 slumps without going crazy. Because they know that's part of the game, and they recover from that and they come back and they continue to succeed.

That's something that's difficult for a lot of young kids, because kids not only want to bat a thousand, but they are doing it in front of their peers, judgmental coaches, judgmental parents. The most negative aspect of Little League, from my vantage point, is that too many of the coaches and too many of the parents don't allow these children to fail. We had one kid (on his son's team), perhaps the finest 10-year-old pitcher in the country. He

Peter Golenbock

18 FHC FORUM
struck out two, walked one and then struck out the third kid. He came in and the father was berating him for walking that kid. Fortunately, he’s a very tough kid who doesn’t take his father all that seriously, because he’s got a lot of self-control and a lot of poise and a lot of self-confidence. But I know other kids whose fathers have made their approval the most important aspect of playing the game. So you’ve got these kids playing the game for their father’s approval, not because they love the game.

**RE:** One more question on this particular point. Dealing with really successful athletes in a variety of sports: football, baseball and car racing — do they typically, have that kind of stage-mother, overly demanding parent or is it more likely that they were well taught by coaches and parents?

**PG:** My own personal experience is that most of those kids who end up making it not only are tremendous athletes, but they’re well taught, they’re not squashed emotionally.

They are well supported. For a lot of players, somewhere along the line, either the pressure from the parent becomes too great and they drop away or they run into some coach who treats them so abominably they drop away. But that doesn’t usually happen to the best players, because these players are handled with kid gloves.

**RE:** Let me go back to being a fan. You can obviously be a fan in the here and now and go to see the Bucs or the Magic or the Jaguars but there is an element for a lot of people, of nostalgia, remembering back when.

**PG:** The older you are the more nostalgia you have.

**RE:** So we grow up, in your case, as a Yankees fan or in Doris Kearns Goodwin’s case a Dodgers fan. In the books you have done about the Cowboys, the Cubs, and so on is that a big point of the exercise?

**PG:** It’s huge. This may sound kind of funny, but I’m trying to write Bibles for these people. In other words, if you’re a 10-year-old Cub fan or you’re a 70-year-old Cub fan I want the effect to be the same. Which is to say Genesis, how the team got started. Sometimes there is an Exodus — the Philadelphia As go to Kansas City and they go to Oakland. The most important thing is I want the fans of those particular teams to get to know the pantheon of gods and to know them as people and know them as teammates and know them as players and know not only what they did but who they were and what they were like.

**Kids who make it as professional athletes tend to be both well-coached and well-supported emotionally.**

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**YOUTH BASEBALL, DONE RIGHT, IS TRAINING FOR TEAMWORK OF ALL SORTS.**
RE: I read the chapters in Wrigleyville about the 1969 and 1970 Cubs with great pleasure — I suppose because I went to a few games those summers and that was one of the rare times the Cubs came close to winning.

PG: For some reason, that team is the best loved of all the Cubs teams by the most Cubs fans. They hadn't won since '45. You can't say they have a World Series team to compete with. But that's the closest that they got, and they had a lot of great players on that team, and the fans still remember and cherish them.

RE: Is there more to this than simple nostalgia? Recalling the good old days of a team you grew up with?

PG: Well, being successful has a lot to do with it. The more successful you are, the greater the nostalgia. The true Yankee fans are remembering the dynasty years between '49 - '64. They won 14 pennants and 9 World Series. Dodgers fans had pennants in '47, '49, '52, '53, '55 and '56. That's a lot of pennants. New York Giants fans, of course, also had pennants in '51 and '54. So you've got a tremendous amount of nostalgia coming out of New York. Now, you have a lot of nostalgia coming out of Los Angeles from a young generation, for the days of Koufax, Drysdale, Don Sutton and Maury Wills and all those great Dodger teams. You have the Big Red Machine with Pete Rose, Tony Perez, and Johnny Bench, and that incredible group of stars there.

RE: But you're not going to get a lot of nostalgia for the 1988 Bucs?

PG: Or the 1998 Devil Rays, for that matter.

RE: There are a couple of other fan types I want to ask you about. We all recognize the triumphant fan, dancing in the street to celebrate a winner. But what about the self-flagellating fan? I was in Seattle this spring when the Sonics were eliminated from the NBA playoffs. You might say they lost a couple of basketball games or that they played better during the regular season than in the playoffs. But according to the Seattle papers it was a whole lot worse than that, indicating dire things about the players' character and Seattle's civic character.

PG: When baseball or basketball becomes your addiction — and for a lot of people it is an addiction — losing can let you down pretty hard. It's like the place alcohol or drugs or gambling, occupies in other kinds of addicts' lives...

Also, remember that sports writers are some of the most passionate and emotional fans.

RE: So you would agree with
ON THE 'CLEANSING' PAIN OF DEFEAT

The following is an extract from an essay, “Why Sports Matter” by novelist and critic Wilfred Sheed in the winter 1995 Wilson Quarterly.

A sports fan who has seen a sure victory slip away in the bottom of the ninth, or the work of a whole season obliterated by a referee’s call in overtime, is disconsolate beyond the power of description, although Sophocles comes close. This author experienced such grief over the defeat of the Dodgers by the Cardinals in 1942 as an 11-year-old should not be asked to bear. An adult inflicting such pain on a child would be thrown in jail.

Yet I got over it, and was all the better for it, recovering sufficiently to root for the Cardinals over the hated Yankees in the World Series. This cycle of make-believe deaths and rebirths can actually be the healthiest thing about sports, or the most dangerous, depending on how you handle it. At its worst, it can cause riots and death, but at its best the pain of defeat is cleansing and instructive, a very good rehearsal for life.

One of the glories of the human imagination is its capacity for alternative realities and its ability to live other people’s lives to the emotional full, whether they be Oedipus or the Chicago Cubs (and that’s another distinction for the civilized individual — art and sports). But if you don’t learn that crying over something doesn’t make it important — if you forget which reality is which for too long, or can’t find your mental way out of Wrigley Field when the game is over — you might be better off if you’d never heard about sports to begin with.

Wilfred Sheed (see sidebar above) that the cycle of hope and disappointment is part of being a fan — just don’t overdo it.

PG: Yes, in moderation, it’s fine.

RE: You have also written about Rotisserie Baseball and now there is fantasy football too. As I understand it, this amounts to being a fan in a sort of parallel universe where you get to run the team. It’s both relatively recent and terribly popular, isn’t it?

PG: Danny Okrent (now editor of new media for Time Warner) and some of his friends invented the game at a Manhattan restaurant called La Rotisserie Francaise. This was in the early 1980s. They put it into book form, and it caught on in a big way. Some people even think it has helped save baseball’s fan base. Now there are six or seven million Rotisserie players. You are your own manager and general manager, and for some fans, it’s just a fascinating thing.

RE: There is another kind of fan like this Yankee fan, no offense, that I saw a few weeks ago at a Devil Ray’s game. He was a big guy in a sleeveless T-shirt rotating three or four homemade signs he would hold up. He was chanting various cheers, and when he wasn’t chanting, he was banging this clacker, non-stop. What is this? Some sort of mindless ritual?

PG: Well for him, the Yankees are a religion — probably have been since he was a little boy. And I would guess that for years, he has had to follow them from a distance watching them now and then on TV and following the box scores. So imagine how exciting it is for him that the Yankees are finally here, right down the street.

RE: Are there other kinds of fans or fan behavior I’m missing in this catalogue?

PG: Well, there are fans of individual players — Roberto Clemente dashing around the outfield with his cap blowing off. Or mention Ernie Banks to any 50-year-old Cubs fan and he’ll remember “Let’s play two.” Then there are fans who love the game itself. For them, just listening to the play-by-play is enjoyable, whoever is playing.

RE: Elsewhere in the magazine, we write about ‘the board,’ set up outside newspapers in the 1920s where crowds would gather to “watch” a posting of the World Series action.

PG: And remember the kind of recreations Ronald Reagan use to do on radio? Same thing, same appeal. Sometimes the wire transmission was delayed, and he would have to fill: “Foul ball, and another foul ball, and another.”

RE: Perhaps that segues to the last thing I wanted to ask. There is a lot written about how television and big money are changing baseball and the other games. But you seem to be saying that in the 20-plus years you have been doing this, the basic experience and pleasures of being a fan pretty much have stayed the same.

PG: Yes, I think so.

RE: So you — or your son — could come back in 25 years and do a book on the coming golden age of the Bucs and talk to Dilfer and Dunn and Alstott and that would work?

PG: Sure. My son asks me why I always write about “old guys.” Why don’t I write about today’s teams and players? Mark McGwire and so forth. Well, there is an answer. McGwire wouldn’t tell me anything he doesn’t tell the newspapers. By the time I get to these retired players, they have stories to tell they never felt they could tell before. And that will still be true of another generation of players in 25 years.

(As for being a fan), it hasn’t really changed. When we were kids, we used to imitate the way Moose Skowron or Gil MacDougall batted. Kids still do that — it’s just a different group of players now; McGwire, Griffey, Sammy Sosa for instance.)
The 1997 World Series was won by the Marlins, a franchise that began playing in 1993, and a team that was assembled — briefly rented, it turns out — for one season. Before the fans of south Florida could adequately savor the Series victory — just a few days after the savory game seven — the dismantling of the team began. Before the 1997 season began, the Marlins spent $89 million in long-term contracts for free agents. It worked, and did not work. They won the World Series but attendance rose only 600,000, to only 2.3 million, and they lost more money than any other team in an industry in which most teams continued to lose money. Within a month of the Marlins’ Series victory it was clear that in 1998, for the first time ever, there would in no meaningful sense be a defending champion: The 1997 Marlins would be dispersed before the next opening day.

That was no great subtraction from baseball’s supply of greatness. The 1997 Marlins were a team never far above mediocrity, but the team got hot at the right time — late in the season, and in a season subsequent to baseball’s adoption of a multilayered playoff system that maximizes the chances for mediocrity to suffice. The Marlins became the first wild-card team to win a Series. In the regular season they did not just finish second in the National League Eastern Division, they had only the third-best record in that division against National League teams (that is, excluding interleague play). Well, things could have been even more unsightly. As late as September 1997 it seemed that the Houston Astros might win the National League Central Division with a record under .500. (They won it with an 84-78 record.) Someday something like that will happen and the people who administer baseball (to the extent that there are such people) will wonder why the World Series seems like something less than it used to be.

Less than two weeks after the 1997 World Series, voters said, in effect, an emphatic “no” to spending public funds on new ballparks for the Minnesota Twins and Pittsburgh Pirates. Baseball seemed to be approaching a new period of franchise fluidity. In the 1880s franchises had been so evanescent that the National League stopped listing its teams on its stationery. But after that the Milwaukee Brewers moved to become the St. Louis Browns in 1902. And why not? Missouri was the nation’s fifth most populous state. It had sixteen congressional districts, seven more than it has today. Booming St. Louis, the nation’s fourth-largest city, was about to host the 1904 World’s Fair. Then as now, demography was destiny for baseball. However, after the Brewers’ rebirth as the Browns, Major League Baseball did not bend to charted demographic realities for fifty-one years.

That span of stability ended in 1953 when Milwaukee got back into the big leagues by acquiring the Boston Braves. In 1954, not only were gloves removed from the field during play, but the Browns became the Baltimore Orioles. The most recent franchise shift occurred in 1972 when the second incarnation of the Washington Senators became the Texas Rangers. In 1961 the first incarnation had become the Twins, who by the end of 1997 seemed destined to decamp for North Carolina just as soon as baseball had a commitment from someone there to build a satisfactory ballpark. Erelong the sky may be darkened by flocks of migrating franchises. Even before their stadium was ruined to accommodate football’s Raiders, it was clear that the Athletics could not long survive in Oakland. Are they headed for San Jose? Sacramento? Las Vegas? (The Athletics played some regular-season games in Las Vegas early in 1997, because work was in progress on the ruination of their Oakland facilities.) The Pirates and Expos seem likely to hemorrhage money and export talent as long as they stay where they are.

Furthermore, the demographics of baseball fandom are becoming increasingly ominous. Put bluntly, baseball’s fan base is too old and too white. Anyone who regularly consorts with young people — say, those between twelve and twenty-five — knows that interest
Money matters. In the long run, large and chronic differences in teams’ resources will destroy in many cities that which draws fans through the turnstiles — the hope that springs each spring.

in sports has never been higher, and that interest in baseball runs a distant third to interest in the National Basketball Association and the National Football League. Time was, the “national pastime” thought it was unnecessary and, anyway, beneath its dignity, to sell itself. But now there obviously is much marketing work for baseball to do. Fortunately, there is a favorable environment for it.

Various studies indicate astonishing levels of interest in sports among Americans generally. Huge majorities of Americans in every age cohort but the elderly express “strong” or “substantial” interest. We have come a long way from the America of President Calvin Coolidge, who thought that the Chicago Bears were an animal act, to the America of President George Bush, who worried about the intersection of the Gulf War and the Super Bowl. To Coolidge, the business of America was business. By the time Bush became president, the play of America was big business: It took 16 million avocados to make the guacamole consumed during the Super Bowl.

Money matters. In the long run, large and chronic differences in teams’ resources will destroy in many cities that which draws fans through the turnstiles — the hope that springs each spring. When the late Edward Bennett Williams owned the Orioles he said that life had taught him that money could not buy three things — love, happiness and the American League pennant. But money bought the 1997 World Championship for the Marlins, which event was not a happy harbinger for baseball.

Oh, well. In the long run, as John Maynard Keynes famously reminded us, we are all dead. But baseball somehow will abide. It will in spite of the mismanagement and shortsightedness all around. It will because, although it is tiresome as a business, it is interesting and lovely as a game.

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Bill Maxwell and Beverly Coyle
grew up in Florida in the 1950s.

But, while they were raised
in towns only a few miles apart,
they lived in the parallel universe
that was the South,
a universe that kept blacks and whites
in separate worlds.

More on *Parallel Lives* in a future issue of FORUM.
The contemporary sports fan is often inseparable from his television set. But this extract from Kevin McCarthy's *Baseball in Florida,* suggests that some Florida baseball fans took a little hiatus from work to follow World Series action in an era pre-television, in fact, pre-radio.

Floridians became enamored with baseball, especially as news gathering services gave them more immediate access to what was going on in distant cities. Historian James McGovern wrote that Pensacola "was wild about big league baseball. Fans gathered at the offices of the *Journal* at World Series time in the early 1920s to obtain immediate news of the game from Associated Press Service. Games were afterward described on the *Journal's* front page. The newspaper also ran features on how to play baseball, replete with pictures of star players."

At World Series time in cities around America, including Jacksonville and Miami, fans would gather outside local newspaper offices to see the board, a large replica of a baseball diamond, on which operators would indicate the progress of the game. Before radio and television enabled stay-at-homes to enjoy the game in some privacy, thousands of devoted baseball fans could enjoy World Series action through the board.

The board gave a play-by-play record of the game just seconds after each play. Sometimes an announcer with a megaphone would tell the assembled fans what was going on, while his colleague moved the pieces on the board. If a city had more than one newspaper, each might try to lure more spectators by using bigger boards and more elaborate paraphernalia to indicate the bases, the diamond, and the outfield. Reporters at the game would relay by telegraph wire each pitch, each play just as it happened. The operators would then move the "ball" and "ballplayers" around the board to indicate what happened.

Newspaper boards might follow a local team's away games, but most cities used the board at World Series time, usually in late September. This was especially true after newspapers began covering baseball more extensively in the first decade of the 20th century. The boards were usually outside and free, but occasionally, especially where a newspaper did not have any other competition, the board would be inside a casino or local club, and fans had to pay a quarter to "see" the game inside. After radio station KDKA in Pittsburgh broadcast the first major league game on August 5, 1921, the boards began to disappear, especially as more and more people bought radios.
THE EVOLUTION OF THE
FLORIDA SPORTS FAN

OUR ROOTS RUN DEEP

FLORIDA'S EXPERIENCE WITH PRO SPORTS STARTED WITH SPRING TRAINING. IT BROUGHT THE STARS HERE BEFORE FLORIDA HAD PRO TEAMS OF ITS OWN

BY RAYMOND ARSENAULT
Big league baseball — the spring training version — is a Florida tradition dating to the early years of the century. Nearly all the immortals — from Ruth and Hornsby to Mays and Clemente — have trod the basepaths of St. Petersburg, Bradenton and points south and north in the state.

In Central Florida the tradition began in October 1908, with a single exhibition game between the Cincinnati Reds and the semi-pro St. Petersburg Saints, and resumed in February 1913, when the Chicago Cubs arrived in Tampa for the region’s first spring training.

Lured to Tampa by Mayor D.B. McKay’s promise to cover the team’s expenses up to $100 per player, the Cubs began workouts at Plant Field (just north of the elegant Tampa Bay Hotel, the present site of the University of Tampa) on February 19, as a crush of curious fans looked on.

Even the vacationing William Jennings Bryan, soon to be sworn in as President Woodrow Wilson’s Secretary of State, was on hand to watch player-manager and future Hall of Famer Johnny Evers, the sure-handed second baseman of the famous Tinker-to-Evers-to-Chance combo, work his players into shape. National League champions in 1906, 1907, 1908, and 1910, the mighty Cubs had slipped to third place in 1912. But Evers had high hopes that training in the warm Florida sun would boost his team back to the top.

By February 26, the Cubs were ready for the first game of a three-game series against the Havana Athletics, a team of barnstorming Cuban stars, most of whom had played American college ball. With ticket prices ranging from 25 cents for a bleacher seat to one dollar for a box seat, nearly 6,000 fans, at the time the largest crowd ever to witness a sporting event in
As a young reserve catcher for the Washington Senators in 1888, Mack (the grandfather of Connie Mack III, Florida’s junior United States senator) had played in Jacksonville’s first big league exhibition game, won by the New York Giants 10-2, and in 1903, as the skipper of the American League champion Athletics, he had been the first manager to bring a major league team to Florida for an entire training season.

The team did not return to the state for 11 years, largely because the 1903 Athletics finished a disappointing 14-1/2 games behind the Red Sox. Predictably, Mack blamed the year-long slump on the tropical temptations of Jacksonville, where his star pitcher, Rube Waddell, had been distracted by several misadventures, including a wrestling match with a live alligator and an attempted suicide following a jilting by a local brunette.

By the time Mack returned to Jacksonville in 1914, the Athletics were the reigning World Champions, and Florida, no longer an isolated backwater in the world of baseball, was on the verge of becoming the hub of spring training. As improved train and auto travel made the state more accessible, the natural advantages of Florida’s warm, dry winters and the enticements offered by local boosters began to draw the attention of baseball executives.

In the years immediately preceding the great Florida boom of the 1920s, offering a major league training site became an essential part of the high-stakes competition for tourists and winter residents. At one time or another, nearly every Florida city tried to acquire a spring training franchise, but no community devoted more time and effort to the baseball bidding wars than Al Lang’s St. Petersburg.

A prominent Pittsburgh businessman who moved to Florida for health reasons in 1910, Lang tried unsuccessfully to convince Pirates owner Barney Dreyfuss to bring his team to the “Sunshine City” in 1912. “You must think I’m a damn fool,” Dreyfuss told Lang, “suggesting that I train in a little one-tank town that’s not even a dot on the map.”

Bloodied but unbowed, Lang went after Miller Huggins’ Cardinals in 1912 and the Cubs in 1913, but in both instances came up empty. Finally, in 1914, he persuaded Branch Rickey, the fledgling manager of the cellar-dwelling St. Louis Browns, to

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1960s

1966 - The Miami Dolphins join the upstart American Football League. A world championship competition with the established National Football League (later renamed The Super Bowl) begins that same season. The two leagues merge in 1970, making the Dolphins — and Florida — indisputably big league.

1970s

1971-'74 - The Golden Era of the Dolphins climaxes in a perfect 17-0 1972 season and a Super Bowl victory against Washington. Teams coached by Don Shula and led by quarterback Bob Griese, running back Larry Csonka and a host of defensive stars, also played in the 1972 Super Bowl against Dallas and won the 1974 Super Bowl against Minnesota.
bring his team to St. Petersburg. Although the exact terms of the agreement were later disputed, Lang’s syndicate of local boosters reportedly promised to pay all of the Browns’ expenses, including the tab for five Missouri newspapermen covering the team.

When the Browns arrived, they were pleased to discover that Lang’s group had turned a brush arbor at the northern end of Coffee Pot Bayou into Sunshine Park (also known as Coffee Pot Bayou Park), a state-of-the-art facility with a 5,000-seat grandstand, batting cages, sprinting lanes, and sliding pits. Historians would later regard Sunshine Park as “baseball’s first all-purpose training camp,” and the first game held there, played before 4,000 fans and won by the Cubs 3-2, was a milestone in the history of spring training.

The Browns did not return to St. Petersburg in 1915, but for the next three springs Sunshine Park was home to the Philadelphia Phiffies. It was during these years that the famous Grapefruit League took shape. When the 1915 Phillies won 14 of their first 15 games and went on to win the National League pennant, St. Petersburg’s — and Florida’s — reputation as the nation’s premier training ground was sealed.

1939 ST. LOUIS CARDINALS JOHNNY MIZE, ENOS SLAUGHTER AND PEP MARTIN AVOID THEIR SPRING TRAINING TURN IN THE BATTING CAGE.

1980s

1976 - The Tampa Bay Bucs join the NFL and establish a record of sorts, losing all 14 games that year and 12 more in a row the following season. By 1981 the Bucs, coached by John McKay and starring LeRoy Selmon and Ricky Bell, advance to the league championship.

1983-'94 - Bucs are terrible — record 12 seasons in a row of double-digit losses with a variety of coaches (Ray Perkins, Sam Wyche) and quarterbacks (Jack Thompson, Vinny Testaverde).

1984-'85 Dolphins, led by quarterback Dan Marino are resurgent. Make it all the way to the Super Bowl but lose there to the San Francisco 49ers.

1990s

1988-'89 NBA Pro basketball arrives in Florida with the Miami Heat beginning play in 1988 and The Orlando Magic following in 1989. Neither team is initially a winner but games, especially in Orlando, sell out consistently.

1992-'93 NHL pro hockey expands into Florida with the Tampa Bay Lightning beginning play in 1992 and the Miami-based Florida Panthers starting the next season. The Lightning play in a converted livestock show arena at the Florida State Fairgrounds, pending construction of their own arena.
Under Lang’s leadership, the Grapefruit League organized a five-week slate of exhibition games and, although wartime restrictions slowed the league’s growth, by 1919 four teams were criss-crossing the state to the delight of a growing number of fans. The league had little stability from year to year, as teams hopped from city to city in search of better arrangements, but, as the seasons passed, Florida’s identification with spring training became an indelible part of American life. “Dateline Florida” became commonplace in American sports writing, as the springtime exploits of hot prospects and grizzled veterans became the stuff of legend, especially after Babe Ruth and the World Champion Boston Red Sox spent the spring of 1919 in Tampa.

Already one of baseball’s finest left-handed pitchers, Ruth would soon change the nature of the game with his ability to hit home runs. During the 1919 season, he clubbed 29 homers, eclipsing the previous record of 27 hit by Ned Williamson of the Chicago Colts in 1884. Yet the great change began not in Boston but in Tampa, where Ruth had a spectacular spring. Day after day he awed the fans at Plant Field with towering drives, and on April 4, in a game against John McGraw’s Giants, he hit what may have been the longest home run in baseball history—a colossal 587-foot dinger. Astonished by what they had witnessed, several writers covering the game soon joined in the growing clamor to make Ruth an everyday player.

Despite the misgivings of Red Sox owner Harry Frazee, who did not want to give Ruth additional leverage in salary negotiations, the irreplaceable Babe played in the outfield and batted clean-up throughout the season. That year, 1919, proved to be Ruth’s last season in a Red Sox Uniform, but no trade or managerial quirk could stop the home-run revolution that had begun in the shadows of the Tampa Bay Hotel. Neither the game of baseball nor the art of American hero worship would ever be the same again.

In 1920, Ruth and his new team, the New York Yankees, trained in Jacksonville, where a loud-mouthed fan nearly did him in; after Ruth crawled into the stands to silence the heckler, the man pulled out a knife and slashed at the slugger. The Babe escaped unhurt, but owner Jacob Ruppert and manager Miller Huggins moved the Yankees’ training site to Shreveport, La., the following year. Ruth and the Yankees did not come back to Florida until 1925, but when they did return they came to stay. For the next three and a half decades — spanning the glory days of Ruth and Gehrig, DiMaggio and Dickey, Mantle and Berra — the Yankees trained at St. Petersburg’s Crescent Lake Field (renamed Miller Huggins Field and later Huggins-Stengel Complex, which is today one of three St. Petersburg complexes used by the Devil Rays).

While serving as mayor in 1920, Al Lang oversaw the construction of Waterfront Park, a beautifully situated field (one block north of present-day Florida Power Park: Home of Al Lang Field) that lured the Boston Braves to the city in 1922, and in 1925 he landed the Yankees with an even more impressive facility at Crescent Lake.

American League champions in 1921, 1922, and 1923, the Yankees had slipped to second in 1924, behind right-hander Walter “Big Train” Johnson and the Washington Senators (who trained in Tampa from 1920 to 1929). Huggins hoped the move to St. Petersburg would help put the team back on top but was nervous about letting Ruth loose in a tourist town.

Despite an early incident in...
which fielding practice was interrupted by a curious alligator — "I ain't going out there anymore," he vowed to Huggins — Ruth grew to love St. Petersburg. The thousands of fans who jammed into the stands at Crescent Lake Field and Waterfront Park to watch him play joyfully returned his affection. Whether he was swatting one out of the park, playing golf with his cronies, carousing at local nightclubs, or simply swapping stories with sports writers in the lobby of the Don CeSar or Princess Martha Hotel, the Babe was the toast of the town.

Spring training — and a spirited competition among Florida communities for the six-week franchises — has flourished in the years since. Traditionalists feared the coming of regular season baseball — the Marlins in 1993 and the Devil Rays in 1998 — might eclipse the spring game. But at century's end, that hasn't happened — the tune-up season and the real thing now co-exist in the Sunshine State.

(This is a condensed version of an article that appeared in the Tampa Bay Devil Rays' opening day program. Reprinted courtesy Raymond Arsenault and the Devil Rays. Arsenault is Professor of History at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg.)

Beyond the big four team sports, other opportunities for Florida fans have flourished. Tennis has always had a Florida presence with home-grown stars like Chris Evert and Jim Courier and imports like Pete Sampras. Florida is also a golfing mecca, site of numerous tournaments and home to Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods and an international who's who of current players. And as auto racing has come on strong in recent years, the Daytona Speedway gives Floridians a top spot for watching the NASCAR circuit.

In Florida — as elsewhere — the courting of franchises has been accompanied by a stadium building boom fueled with public funds. Tampa Bay taxpayers lead the league in this category, having ante'd up for lavish homes for the Bucs (opening this fall), Lightning and Devil Rays — with a stylish spring training facility for the New York Yankees thrown in. But there is public money too in most of the other arenas, stadiums and renovations around the state. In recent years the Marlins, Panthers and Heat have all been clamoring for new quarters. Nationally, there has been growing taxpayer resistance to stadium proposals and their dubious economic impact claims. Big cities like Houston, Los Angeles and Cleveland have lost teams. So far, sports-hungry Florida has paid the price to attract or retain franchises.

Besides, Sports Illustrated's NFL preview issue, is predicting a Jaguars-Bucs Super Bowl next January in Miami.
WHY WE’RE SO DARNED GOOD AT FOOTBALL

Used to be those speedsters headed elsewhere to college. No more.

BY BILL BUCHALTER

As August gives way to September in Florida, the sun is as bright as ever, and the temperatures are still blazing. But for thousands of young Florida men, swimwear has given way to mesh and shoulders are covered with pads not lotion.

High-school football practice began August 10. Florida State kicked off this year’s college season with an August 31 matchup with Texas A&M at the Meadowlands in New Jersey. The Seminoles and Gators are again ranked in the pre-season top five. In the NFL, the Bucs, stocked with fleet Florida-bred backs and receivers, are billed as Super Bowl contenders.

Fall brings a revival of football passion, and lately no one has had a more fervent case of it than Florida. Fall football is for bragging rights, a time to paint faces, wear school-color casuals, scribble signage on automobiles, and proudly display license tags of various national championship teams.

On any given fall Saturday, some 250,000 Floridians find their way to Florida Field, Doak Campbell Stadium, Houlihan Stadium, the Florida Citrus Bowl, and the Orange Bowl to watch college football.

This is the season that a special core of frenzied Floridians live for. Keep in mind, though, that this same population group believes in maintaining a year-round football calendar.

Orlando Digital Cities launched a football recruiting website last December, building slowly toward National Signing Day, the first Wednesday in February. In the mad-cap month of January, more than 500,000 page views were recorded for the website.

That’s a figure that describes the hard-core intensity of college football in Florida, and just one of the ways fans have devised to make it a year-around sport.

Whether it’s the actual playing of games in the fall or the fever-pitch of recruiting in the winter or spring football preparations, football has become a preeminent part of the culture of the state.

Go back 40 years and the cradle of hard-nosed football in the U.S., at least by reputation, was the steel belt on either side of the Ohio-Pennsylvania border. Florida prospects, particularly African Americans, went to black colleges or were recruited out-of-state to Big Ten and Big Eight powers. But now the football action — along with the lion’s share of population growth — has shifted to the Sun Belt with Florida, Texas, and Georgia in the lead.

How the Sunshine State got so good at football is a two-part story. First came a remarkable succession of college coaches and programs. Numbers and high quality of high school prospects have followed.

Florida was a peninsula starved for success when The University of Miami began winning national championships in 1983. Howard Schnellenberger, then the ‘Cane coach, laid the groundwork for future rings won in 1987, ’89, and ’91 by declaring Palm
Beach, Broward, and Dade counties as part of his “state of Miami.”

Dade County annually produces 30 percent of Florida’s large crop of college football talent. Add populous Broward plus adjacent Palm Beach counties and the winner of the recruiting wars there gets a good start on national recognition. For the last 20 years, the state has averaged between 275 and 325 NCAA Division I (IA and I-AA) football signees, adding to the South Florida mystique.

In 1987, Miami outlasted FSU, 26-25, in a nationally-televised game that put the state in the middle of the national spotlight. FSU went into the game ranked No. 1, Miami No. 2. Voters were so impressed with the game and the intensity of play that FSU fell only to No. 2, and the final rankings wound up that way.

The two programs had roughly 130 Floridians on their two rosters that year. More than 25 eventually made it to the National Football League.

That game, more than any other, built the state’s reputation nationally.

“The Big Florida,” 30-year FSU coach Bobby Bowden used to call the rivalry among the Seminoles, Gators and ‘Canes. “If you can win the Big Florida, you can win the Big One (national championship).”

Success breeds success. FSU fans, stung by Miami’s repeat titles, gave Bowden unprecedented support leading to a national title of its own in 1983.

Florida fans, tired of hearing the insults of their football neighbors, anointed Steve Spurrier, the school’s Heisman Trophy winner in 1967, as their football savior. Spurrier returned to Gainesville in 1990 and since has sparked an unprecedented turnaround. Under Spurrier, the Gators are 83-16-1, a gaudy .835 winning percentage for the ’90s.

With excellence now the norm, it is easy to forget that for years, Florida’s schools did not win big, and top athletes used to leave the state, citing opportunities to play in bowl games, to be seen on national television, and play for schools that traditionally were pipelines to the pros.

Now, the Florida programs have built those pipelines, play weekly on television, and have bowl game revenues penciled into annual operating budgets.

How hot has Florida become in the last 15 years? Try these figures on for size:

Miami won four national titles, Florida State added one in 1993, and Florida joined the club in 1996. During that same 15-year span, the Gators finished No. 3 in 1984, No. 2 in ’97 and six times in the top five. FSU was ranked No. 2 behind the ‘Canes in 1987 and No. 2 behind Alabama in ’92, reeling off an NCAA-record 11 consecutive Top 4 finishes. Miami’s record included No. 2 finishes in 1986 and ’88 and No. 3 in 1990 and ’92.

Two other state universities — University of Central Florida and University of South Florida — have started their own football programs in the ‘90s. And Schnellenberger is now back at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton doing fundraising groundwork for a football launch there.

How did Florida become such a hotbed for college football recruiting? Let me count the ways:

- A large population — Florida trails only California, New York and Texas in census numbers. And the population shift from the former industrial states have added families with football-playing sons to the mix.
- Spring football — Only a handful of states allow spring football practice — 20 days in May in Florida — which gives college coaches an opportunity to evaluate players for the coming recruiting season.
- A speed state — The best high school track is usually run in California, Texas and Florida. Not surprisingly these are the three largest producers of football prospects. Colleges from coast-to-coast recruit the state for speed and skilled athletes.
- Florida always had great athletes but became nationally known for it recently.

For example, St. Augustine’s Willie Gallimore did not become a household word until he played running back for the Chicago Bears. Many still believe him to be the state’s greatest high school runner although others would point to the statistics and success enjoyed by Pensacola’s Emmitt Smith, now of the Dallas Cowboys.

Eatonville’s David “Deacon” Jones came from tiny, all-black Hungerford High School, a relative unknown before he made a name for himself rushing the quarterback as a member of the Fearsome Foursome of the Los Angeles Rams. He now is a member of another elite group — the NFL Hall of Fame.

And Jacksonville’s Bob Hayes didn’t earn national recognition until the 1960 Tokyo Olympics when he won the 100 meters and anchored the 4x100 relay. Bullet Bob then used his gold-medal speed to catch passes for the Dallas Cowboys.

Gallimore and Hayes both played for the legendary Alonzo S. “Jake” Gaither at Florida A&M. In an era where opportunities for African American athletes were closed at the big public universities, Gaither built a 24-year winning tradition (203-36-4) include “national championships” among the black colleges in 1947, 1953, 1957, 1959, 1961, and 1964.

These days Florida football players are even more often the stuff of legend — especially legends of speed.

In 1986, when Florida held its first
Sanders continued to live a double life as a millionaire football player and a millionaire baseball player, perhaps the greatest two-sport athlete of modern times.

There is no single dominant high school or area of the state for breeding football talent. Pensacola was hot during the Smith years but since has cooled. Manatee High School was dominant in the early '90s in the era of Tommie Frazier, later a University of Nebraska All-American.

If there is a pattern here, it may be that the hordes scouting a potential superstar spot other talent. Reidel Anthony, a first-round draft pick and starting receiver for the Tampa Bay Bucs, was the second best prospect his senior year at Belle Glade, joining running back Fred Taylor at the University of Florida (Taylor, in turn, was a first-round pick this year for the Jacksonville Jaguars).

Florida has the biggest high schools, on average, of any state. Division 6A behemoths in South Florida, drawing on student populations of 4,000 to 5,000, as noted earlier, generate plenty of the prospects. Plenty, but not all. Andre Wadsworth, a walk-on at FSU who became the first lineman taken in this spring's NFL draft, was an honors graduate of Florida Christian School in Miami. Tony Milton, one of the most prized recruits among this year's high school seniors, attends little North Florida Christian School.

Ronnie Cottrell is now assistant head football coach and recruiting coordinator for tradition-rich Alabama. He grew up in Brewton, Alabama and understands the mystique of Bama football and the late Paul "Bear" Bryant.

But for the last nine years, Cottrell was on the staff at Florida State University, and he saw firsthand the intensity of the Florida fan.

"There is such a diversity of football fans, and they all love their school, so they follow recruiting as well as the season with great fervor. It's an interesting environment for college football," he said.

"Because of the success of the programs, you also get a very educated college football fan," he said. "Not only does he know good football when he watches it, but he also understands how important recruiting is to the process. So they go from football season to recruiting to spring football, and it starts over again."

One of those highly educated, intense fans is Dr. Paul Tocci, a urologist from Fort Lauderdale. Tocci is a Florida grad and fan. So are his wife and one of his two sons. His other son and his brother are FSU fans and grads. Tocci understands, and appreciates, the passion each has for his own school team.

"That's the right word," Tocci said. "Passion."

"I have followed football all my life, including the pros," he said, "but college football is so different. It's exciting to be around the games, experiencing the atmosphere that surrounds the games, and especially since my team, all the teams, are doing so well."

"And now it has become a year-around passion, following the team in recruiting, and on the Internet. For years, information was known only by a few, but with the Internet and everything that is available to the fans, nobody is left out. That adds to the passion," he said.

John Lilly, who succeeded Cottrell as recruiting coordinator, came to Florida State from West Virginia. For Lilly, it was like coming to "one of the meccas for football, whether it's college or high school.

"All you have to do," he said, "is to scan the last 15-to-18 years when Miami started winning national championships and the Big Three has figured prominently in the championship even when they didn't win it. The road to the championship came through Florida."

The fever might break sometime soon, but don't count on it. Florida and FSU are again ranked in the top five in pre-season polls, Miami figures to be improved and UCF's Daunte Culpepper is among the nation's leading quarterbacks.

Bill Buchalter has been covering sports for the Orlando Sentinel, and, before that, for the St. Petersburg Times, for 36 years. This summer he was inducted into the Florida High School Activities Association Hall of Fame. He helped establish the annual Florida-Georgia High School Football All-Star Game.
Vacations should be more than just beaches and umbrella drinks.

While there's nothing wrong with a little rest and relaxation (we should know – we invented the sport), there's also nothing wrong with expanding your horizons. So pack up your sandals – and your curiosity – and head down to the Florida Keys.

Here, your thoughts will find endless ways to be provoked. From the Theatre Festival, Hemingway Days and the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum in Key West to the Historic Seacraft Race and Island Art Fair in the Lower Keys. From the Florida Keys Renaissance Faire and Sombrero Cup Regatta in Marathon to the Indian Key Festival in Islamorada and the Island Jubilee in Key Largo. Of course, what would a cultural mecca like this be without some equally enlightening fishing and diving?

For reservations and information on cultural events, call 1-800-FLA-KEYS. Or visit our web site at www.flakeys.com. Because while the Florida Keys are a great place to unwind, we'd like you to get to know our deeper side.

THE FLORIDA KEYS & KEY WEST
Come as you are
Women have been eager to play basketball since the 1890s, but full participation has proved problematic. Playing sports and watching sports have traditionally been ways for American men to help define their masculinity, many cultural historians have written. Some even see sport as a reassuring male preserve at a time when women are challenging in other realms.

So what happens when women play one of the traditionally "manly" games? Two historians—Pamela Grundy of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Susan Cahn of the State University of New York, Buffalo—spoke on the question at a spring series of lectures in St. Petersburg on Sports and American Culture. Each found in the up-and-down saga of women's basketball, a case study of our ambiguous feelings about women's participation. Following are extracts from the two talks, starting with Grundy's.

In January of 1892 in Springfield, Massachusetts, a group of elementary school teachers paused to investigate an unusual noise emanating from the gymnasium at the Springfield YMCA Training School. When they peered inside the gym, they saw a dozen young men on the floor doing their best to launch a soccer ball into one of two peach baskets that had been nailed to either end of the gymnasium. The game that they were playing, a new invention called basketball, was not yet an impressive sight. The game's inventor, YMCA instructor James Naismith, had specifically designed his set of thirteen rules to create an orderly and non-violent game, trying to avoid some of the violence that occurred when the young men attempted to play football inside. But the early contests belied those attempts. As Naismith later recalled of those early games, "there was no teamwork. Every man did his best. Forwards tried to make goals and the backs tried to keep the opponents from making them. The team was large, and the floor was small. Any man on the field was close enough to the basket to throw for goal and most of them were anxious to score."

Still, despite this somewhat chaotic picture on the field, the young women were anxious to join in the new sport. Barely a month after basketball had been invented, in December 1891, this group of teachers became the first team of female players to step onto the basketball court. They were not disappointed in their experience.

A decade later, basketball had become one of the most popular pastimes at women's colleges all across the country. Now, this story of the start of women's basketball in the 1890s contrasts with conventional wisdom about the sport, judging by what people tell me when I talk to them about these early games. Time and again, I run into people who assume that women's basketball really didn't get started until the 1970s or the 1980s which is when it first began to make its way into national mass media. That's not true at all. Over the past century, hundreds of thousands of women have played on competitive basketball teams at schools, on playgrounds and in industrial leagues. Many of those teams attracted large and eager audiences. In fact, in many communities it was not unusual for a high school girl's team to draw more fans and attention than the boys' team...

By the 1940s, there were also several barnstorming women's professional teams who traveled around the country taking on local men's teams. They would show up in a community, challenge the local men's team to a game and often come out on top, because as one of the women said: "We were playing every night, sometimes we'd play two times a night, and so these men's teams didn't have much of a chance against us." Most famous of these were the All-American Red-Heads. They all either dyed their hair red or wore red wigs and were very well-known, particularly across the South. Other women got to play at higher levels too, although women's colleges still did not really sponsor competitive basketball. A lot of two-year colleges, junior colleges and business colleges sponsored teams. Companies that employed a lot of women also sponsored teams, and often they were very good.

These institutions took great pride in their teams.

At Wayland Baptist College in Plainview, Texas, the college sponsor was so proud of the team that he bought them an airplane to fly from match to match. Observers promptly dubbed them the Wayland Flying Queens.

Talented young women were heavily recruited. One perennial All-American of the 1940s and 50s was a 6'2" player named Eunies Futch, who was recruited out of Jacksonville, Florida. She went from high school to...
Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to play for the powerhouse Hanes Hosiery team, which was one of the best teams in the country. Another highly recruited player was Babe Didrikson. She was probably the most famous female athlete of the first part of the century, if not even now. She was brought to Dallas to play on a team when she was already quite well known, and she made quite a bit of money at it.

Starting in the 1920s, the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), sponsored a national women’s championship, which became a coveted prize for team sponsors. Women’s teams would come from all over the country and play in front of serious fans.

By the end of the 1940s, in fact, women’s basketball had become so popular that there was talk of adding it to the Olympic Games.

Then in the 1950s, much of this activity came to an end. Women’s basketball was really shut down, for a number of reasons. In part, women’s basketball players ran into the image of a typical 1950s housewife with a wonderful washing machine. There was a renewed commitment to very conservative ideas of women as housewives and mothers — an image that clashed with the idea of competitive women’s basketball. And even though women’s basketball had flourished in the ’20s, ’30s and ’40s, athletics was still viewed as a primarily male activity. Female athletes had to be very careful about their images, especially as the century advanced, and awareness of homosexuality and lesbianism grew. Usually the strategies for avoiding criticisms of this kind meant devoting particular attention to players’ appearance. A typical picture
of a 1950s women's basketball team shows players wearing very short shorts, with their hair curled, and with make-up. They look more like beauty queens than women about to step on the basketball court.

The film “A League of Their Own” does a good job of showing how in the All-American Girls’ Baseball League there was a great deal of emphasis on putting the women through charm school, teaching them how to apply make-up, look very feminine, so they would remain within the sphere of what was considered appropriately feminine, even though they were playing a competitive sport. And in the 1950s, as definitions of womanhood narrowed, it became more difficult to walk this line.

Women’s sports, and women’s basketball in particular, was also affected by a structural shift in national culture and national entertainment. With the advent of television, and the increasing mobility of the period, there was a huge drop in interest in local spectator sports of all kinds. People who had formerly gone to local sporting events decided to stay at home to watch television, or get in their cars and drove off to do things they couldn’t do before. Minor league baseball went through a very rocky period in the 1950s when it lost much of its audience. A lot of industrial teams, both men’s and women’s, were dropped during this period because spectator interest went down. This was particularly devastating to women’s sports because women’s sports had generally been supported only at a local level.

There were no nationally known female basketball stars. In fact, there were virtually no nationally known female athletes, other than Babe Didriksen. While television brought a boost to national versions of men’s sports, particularly to college basketball and to professional football, it did nothing whatsoever for women’s sports. There were no women’s sports on television. This rise of interest in men’s sports had a negative effect on women. You see this very clearly in North Carolina, when the ‘50s is the time that men’s basketball really takes off. Its new visibility and the increasing number of college scholarships being offered to male basketball players gave high school men’s basketball added support. And women’s basketball teams started to feel pressure to give up some of their practice time on court so the men could practice more.

Susan Cahn takes up the story with a discussion of alternate rules, in the interest of a more lady-like game and of image in contemporary women’s basketball.

It was not until the 1970s that college basketball finally adopted the more competitive (men’s rules) version of basketball. The women’s game went to five players who could run the floor. Remember the six-player basketball game? I actually played it my first couple years in grammar school. The rules that the physical educators developed had six players, initially with three divisions of the court; a back court, a middle court and a front court with two...
players in each section of the court. And the players couldn't go beyond their sections. Nobody ran the full court. They could pass the ball only. The dribble was limited at first to one dribble and later three dribbles. There were also limitations on the level of physical contact in guarding, how close you could guard and how actively you could guard. This was designed to create a version of modest sport that protected girls' propriety and their image and would keep them from becoming too rough or too masculine. They also dressed in bloomers, pennys, very unfashly modest uniforms.

This was in contrast to the AAU. Those players tended to wear satin uniforms, knee pads — much more flashy. Their national tournaments, every year, had a beauty contest where each team would nominate a couple of players who would parade in front of a panel of judges. So at the same time that they awarded the most valuable player of the tournament and the free-throw contest winner, they crowned an annual tournament beauty queen and her runners up.

So you see two different versions of a sport that reflect two different athletic ideals for women. On the one side, you have the wholesome moderate athlete who plays a feminized version of the sport. That is basketball, made more feminine, in the six-player, three-court game. On the other side, you have the athlete as beauty queen who plays boys' rules, a more masculine game. But in this case, it is the athlete, rather than the game, who is feminized through the beauty contest. Each ideal acknowledges that there is a conflict between femininity and sports. One tries to feminize the sport to resolve that tension. The other leaves the sport alone but tried to prove the femininity of athletes through beauty and sex appeal.

As long as the legitimacy of women athletes is in question, as long as it's acceptable to play basketball only if you play a lesser version of the real sport or you have to show beauty, we will continue to see this conflict. Athletic skill, by itself, is still understood as masculine. So the athlete-as-beauty queen is still around. In the early '90s, there was Heidi Gillingham, a 6'7" or 6'8" basketball player who played for Vanderbilt. Sports Illustrated ran a feature on her that had four photographs. One of them was her playing basketball. Three of them were her as the Homecoming Queen at Vanderbilt. More recently you see the beauty-queen image in terms of basketball players who are models. Lisa Leslie, who played for the University of Southern California and now plays in the WNBA, is constantly described as having this modeling career on the side.

Other women athletes — notably track stars — have been subjected to negative comment about their alleged manliness, Cahn continued. And even in the enlightened '90s, college basketball programs compete for recruits with whispers that rival programs are "gay." But, Cahn concluded (echoing Grundy's initial point) women athletes generally find the joy of participation outweighs any sidelong comment on their femininity.

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These photographs of Jackie Robinson were taken on March 4, 1946 in Sanford, just a few days after he arrived in Florida to begin spring training with the Dodgers’ minor league affiliate, the Montreal Royals.

Jackie Robinson in Florida
Late on February 28, after Jack played a round of golf in Los Angeles, a small, excited group of friends and family, including their mothers, gathered at the Lockheed Terminal in Los Angeles to see the couple off. To Rachel’s mortification, Mallie, who had never flown, pressed on them a smelly shoebox of fried chicken and boiled eggs for the airplane ride. Rachel was dressed to kill; she wore the dyed three-quarter-length ermine coat that had been Jack’s wedding present to her, a matching black hat, and the brown alligator-skin handbag he had bought for her in Venezuela. Although the weather hardly called for fur, “that piece of ermine was my certificate of respectability,” she would admit. “I thought that when I wore it everyone would know that I belonged on that plane, or wherever I happened to be.”

She flew out with twin fears: a dread of the Jim Crow South and a dread, also, of what Jack’s defiant spirit, and perhaps even her own, provoked by unaccustomed Jim Crow, might cause. “I couldn’t be sure what was going to happen,” she would say. “I worried that something might happen, some incident, and we would be harmed, or killed.” But the first leg of the journey went smoothly; they reached New Orleans around seven o’clock in the morning. Strolling through the airport, Rachel now saw Jim Crow signs for the first time in her life. With Jack looking on uneasily she decided to make her own small protest. “Very deliberately I drank from a water fountain marked ‘White.’ Nothing happened. I wasn’t killed. So then I walked into the Ladies’ Room marked ‘White.’ The women stared at me, but nobody said or did anything. I sort of liked the women staring at me. I felt very strong.” Jack had misgivings about what she was doing, but he did not try to stop her.

Then, around ten o’clock, reality began to set in. They had been “bumped” from the eleven o’clock flight. Disappointed but calm, they accepted the promise of seats on a flight one hour later. Then that flight left without them and without an adequate explanation. Angry now, they were also hungry. Jack went scouting for food. “Blacks could not eat in the coffee shop,” he found out. “We asked where we could find a restaurant. We learned there was one that would prepare sandwiches provided we did not sit down and eat them there.” He felt rage surging in him. “Jack almost exploded at this suggestion,” according to

By Arnold Rampersad

As most sports fans know, Jackie Robinson was chosen by Brooklyn Dodgers’ owner, Branch Rickey, as just the right man to break baseball’s color barrier. Robinson was a gifted athlete in football and track as well as baseball; he had attended U.C.L.A. at a time when few ball players were college-educated. Above all, he had the fire and courage, combined with strength of character and restraint, to weather the vicious taunts and provocations that would inevitably be directed his way. Already, as a second lieutenant in the Army in 1944, Robinson had been court-martialed — and acquitted — for insubordination when he refused to move to the back of a bus at Fort Riley, Kansas.

Robinson’s life journey to a pioneering role in American sports, led through Northern Florida. In 1946, married just two weeks, he and Rachel set out from Los Angeles to the Dodgers’ spring training camp in Daytona Beach. The following is excerpted from Arnold Rampersad’s 1997 biography, Jackie Robinson.
Rachel. “The pride in both of us had rebelled, so under no circumstances would we accept food on this basis.” Now they understood why Mallie Robinson, in her wisdom, had packed that shoebox for her children.

The black couple’s pride mattered little or nothing to the airline authorities; the Robinsons should go into town and wait to be called when a flight became available. They agreed to go. From an earlier visit on a barnstorming tour, Jack was sure he knew of a hotel that would have them. A taxi driver then took them to a building of appalling shabbiness, a “dirty, dreadful place” of cobwebs and grime, Rachel recalled, and a bedroom with plastic mattress covers, from which she recoiled: “lying on the bed was like trying to sleep on newspapers.” Hurt and degraded, she was further upset because Jack seemed satisfied. Meanwhile, no call came from the airline. When Jack finally telephoned, he was told to return at once to the airport. At seven in the evening, some twelve hours after their arrival, Jack and Rachel secured seats on a plane and left for Pensacola.

As they touched down at Pensacola, they heard themselves being paged:

When Jack revealed at last his link to the Dodgers organization, the officials became more solicitous; they offered the Robinsons a limousine into Pensacola. The white driver knew of no black hotels in the city; at a whites-only hotel, bellhops provided him with the address of a black family who rented out rooms. Stopping at a small frame house, he deposited their luggage on the front porch and sped off. Inside, the woman of the house was sympathetic, but Rachel could see that “the family was using the living room to sleep in, and it was obvious that there was no place for us.” She and Jack made a decision. Giving up on the airline, they would take the next bus leaving for Jacksonville. After a hurried long-distance telephone call to the Dodger camp, they boarded the bus.

They were dozing in reclining seats to the rear, certain that they were complying with Jim Crow law, when at one stop the white driver, with a wave of his hand, ordered them back to the last, fixed row. Jack roused himself from sleep but was alert enough to keep himself under control. “I had a few bad seconds,” he would recall, “deciding whether I could continue to endure this humiliation.” By now, Rachel had lost all her nerve; “I made sure that we moved to the back.” The bus ride lasted sixteen bitter hours. Jack fell asleep, but Rachel found that she could not. “I buried my head behind the seat in front of me and started to cry.” She was crying more for Jack than for herself, but in the end she was crying for them both. She saw how Jim Crow customs sought to strip her black husband of his dignity and turn him into a submissive, even shuffleing creature. “I finally began to realize that where we were going with Mr. Rickey’s plan, none of us had ever been before. We were setting out on something we really didn’t understand. And right in front of me, it was changing my life, changing who I was, or changing who I thought I was.”

Just after dawn, the Jim Crow section of the bus began to fill up with black working men and women, many on their way to the fields, their dresses and overalls torn and soiled, heads wrapped in country bandannas. With many seats empty in the “white” section of the bus, the blacks took turns sharing the few back seats among...
themselves. What the laborers made of the strange couple — the man asleep in his rumpled suit and tie, the lady with her massed curls and her ermine coat and alligator bag — Rachel could only imagine. She could see clearly, however, their kindness to one another. In the humiliation she shared with these poor Southern blacks, "I really felt the beginning of a new understanding on my part. Now I understood about how black folks living under those terrible conditions really had to look out for one another, or we would all of us go down. I began to feel a great bond I had never felt before. I took comfort from those people, because I could tell they wanted to comfort me. And I needed comfort badly at that time."

When they pulled into Jacksonville, the bus station only added to their misery. The building was hot and fly-ridden, its Jim Crow section crowded and stinky as they waited for a connection to Daytona Beach to the south. Aside from apples and candy bars, once Mallie’s shoebox was empty, they had eaten nothing on the journey by air and bus from New Orleans. Jack himself would have bought food from the holes in the wall where blacks were brusquely served, but Rachel refused to eat that way: "I wouldn’t do it, and he said he would go along with me if I felt that way," Rachel remembered, "I had never been so tired, hungry, miserable, upset in my life as when we finally reached Daytona Beach." But she would also believe that her descent with Jack into the Jim Crow hell of the South "had made me a much stronger, more purposeful human being in a few hours. I saw the pointlessness, the vanity, of good looks and clothes when one faced an evil like Jim Crow. I think I was much more ready now to deal with the world we had entered."

On Saturday, March 2, in the late afternoon, after thirty-six hours of travel, Jack and Rachel at last stepped off the bus at Daytona Beach. On hand to greet them were three men sent by Branch Rickey. One was Wendell Smith, Jack’s champion from the Pittsburgh Courier (an African-American newspaper); another was Billy Rowe, an enterprising Courier photographer and writer who, the year before, had covered the Japanese surrender on the deck of the USS Missouri. In an agreement with the Courier, which thus had the inside track on the baseball story of the century, Rickey had put Smith and Rowe on the Dodgers’ manifest, picking up their expenses. Their task was to stick with the Robinsons, to be protectors and advisors and friends, and a liaison with the local black community.

The third man was John Richard Wright, another black player signed by Rickey. In 1943, the quiet, lanky twenty-seven-year-old from New Orleans had won thirty games and lost only once in league play with the Homestead Grays of the Negro National League. In the Navy, he once beat a Chicago White Sox team and, in Ebbets Field, had pitched six shutout innings against a major-league all-star group.

Bitter, Jack reached Daytona Beach ready to return to California. "I never want another trip like that one," he told Smith and Rowe. But the writers
worked quietly to bring his mind back to the job at hand. Jack could also see that his arrival had created a sensation in the bus station. Blacks and whites pressed forward to glimpse the man who had already rocked the world of white baseball, who would challenge Jim Crow in his own lair. In a phenomenon that would be repeated over the coming months and even years, few paid much attention to any other black ballplayer with him. The focus was on Jackie Robinson.

Luck is the residue of design, Branch Rickey had declared; and his design was almost everywhere in evidence, starting with the choice of Daytona Beach for the major phase of spring training. (To the press, Rickey had blamed Robinson’s absence from camp on “bad flying weather in the vicinity of New Orleans.”) After Jack and Rachel’s harrowing experience, Daytona Beach, where the Halifax River flowed into the Atlantic, was a distinct lift. City leaders, including Mayor William Perry, seeing a financial windfall in having the Dodgers in town each spring, had agreed to welcome black players; Perry had known of Robinson’s coming even before he signed with Montreal. “No one objects to Jackie Robinson and Johnny Wright training here,” the mayor announced boldly. “We welcome them and wish them the best of luck!”

Compared with almost all other Southern towns, Daytona Beach was a liberal community. Here, some blacks were allowed to drive public buses and even to try on shoes — though not clothing — in local stores. One major reason was the influence of a black leader, Joe Harris, to whose home on Spruce Street Wendell Smith and Billy Rowe drove the Robinsons that afternoon. Harris, a pharmacist, was also an energetic organizer who could deliver the black vote on election day. A few steps from the home of Harris and his wife, Dufferin, was Bethune-Cookman College, whose founder and president, Mary McLeod Bethune, then seventy-years-old, was one of the best-known blacks in America. A tireless educator, Mrs. Bethune was a particular friend of Eleanor Roosevelt; after the President’s death, his cane arrived as a gift to her. On Spruce Street, Duff Harris, “a dear, sentimental romantic,” as Rachel recalled with affection, received them warmly. Squeezing the “love birds,” as she liked to call them, into her idea of a honeymoon nest, a tiny room at the head of the stairs, she promised them their privacy. There Jack and Rachel unwound after their ordeal.

Spring training was not without incident. The Robinsons were hustled out of Sanford after rumors of local protests. Authorities canceled one of the Dodgers’ exhibitions in Jacksonville. But Robinson went on to have a successful season for the minor league Montreal team and started for the Dodgers at second base in their opening game at Ebbet’s Field, April 15, 1947.

Though some white writers and players had initially voiced doubts about Robinson’s ability, he went on to a career that included a batting championship, being named the league’s Most Valuable Player and induction into The Baseball Hall of Fame before his death at age 52.

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Is Football a Religion?

BY DAVID G. HACKETT

Thousands of faithful followers, dressed in ritual clothing, go on long pilgrimages to sacred shrines where they writhe in emotional fervor, enacting bizarre rituals in worship of their god-like leaders.

A new religious cult spreading throughout the country? No. It's college football. Just a sport or something more?

Every fall weekend thousands of students and alumni at my university drape themselves in sacred colors (orange and blue), bear on their bodies images of their religious totem (gators), snake across the Southeast in long pilgrimage lines (car caravans) in their journey to houses of worship (football stadiums), where they sing hymns ("We Are the Boys of Old Florida"), drone chants ("Defense, Defense"), and participate in rituals (the Gator chomp, the Two Bits Cheer) in worship of their saint-like leader (Danny Wuerffel and his successors) and superhuman coach (Steve Spurrier). Up in Tallahassee, the coach's biography is titled "Saint Bobby and the Barbarians."

Further north, at Notre Dame, the "Touchdown Jesus" mural, on a library beyond the end zone seems to bless every Irish passage across the goal line. Has football become a religion?

Sociologists tell us that every community must have some sort of religion that organizes and reinforces the purpose of its members. In essence, football's sacred pageantry and rituals appear to act in that fashion for many colleges and universities. People come together from all walks of life on a Saturday afternoon to participate in an experience that affirms their common bond as members of the same college tribe.

Alumni particularly embrace this sport with passion, both for what it symbolizes and for the association with their college years with football. Although we spend only four or five years in college, this is a very important time developmentally. We move from adolescence into adulthood and gain our identity while in school. Taking on the identity of one's school through ritual participation in football weekends seems to be a part of this rite of passage.

But let's not take this too far. Big-time college football is vulnerable to a "winning-is-everything" mentality, just as "big-time" religion is vulnerable to measuring success by the number of church members or the size of a budget. In each instance, the community forgets that its real purpose is to celebrate and affirm common bonds.

And, unless we take such bumper sticker lines as "Floridian by Birth, Gator by the Grace of God" as somehow profoundly meaningful, the religion of football offers precious few explanations for life's purpose and meaning. Following Spurrier cannot easily be confused with following Christ, can it?

Then there's the matter of a sacred burial ground that should be located somewhere near the stadium. If this were truly a religion, we would have a little Bull Gator cemetery. You would put little gators on the graves and have pilgrimages and visitations. Some might even choose to have their ashes scattered across the field.

On second thought, that has probably already happened.

(David G. Hackett is an associate professor of religion at the University of Florida at Gainesville.)
Every child deserves a chance to hope and dream.

As a society, we tend to believe that any problem can be fixed by throwing enough money at it. This approach to problem-solving may work when a road needs repair or a bridge needs to be built. But when it comes to assuring a brighter, healthier, happier future for our children, the “fix” requires something much more precious than money.

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