
Michael Mandelbaum has taken on an imposing task in his latest book: to explain why Americans become ardent fans of sports. His answer is that the Big Three sports of baseball, football, and basketball produce a microcosm of an idealized American society where meaning is transparent, the rules are the same for everyone, success is based solely on merit, and heroes rise to magnificent heights that we mere mortals can only dream about. Baseball, football, and basketball have been anointed as the chosen sports for America because they further embody the three major stages of American culture: baseball represents our agrarian past, football our Industrial Revolution, and basketball our innovative information society. As such, these three sports define what is "American," thereby uniting their fans into a symbolic community, reassuring us of our humble beginnings, and providing us a glimpse of our limitless potential. Sports is our brave new world.

Mandelbaum then devotes a chapter to each of the three major sports, stringing together history, rules explanations, statistics and records, literature, and pop culture references to demonstrate each sport's importance to our past and its message for its fans. He recounts a history of each game's rise to prominence that mirrors events in American history, such that each sport gains relevance because of its connection to the past. In these chapters, Mandelbaum is at his best when he is telling individual stories. His anecdotes are warm and funny, and present the human side of each sport. There are few books on American sports that mention Yogi Berra in one paragraph and Marcel Proust in the next, yet Mandelbaum manages to make these links without seeming condescending. Of the three chapters, the baseball chapter is the most compelling, perhaps because so many other writers have commented on the game's idyllic timelessness.

Ultimately, this book is written for the novice who needs simplistic rules explanations and recounting of these sports's most famous stories. Mandelbaum's narrative hits the highlights (Babe Ruth, the Dallas Cowboys, the Boston Celtics) that most sports fans already know. And his explanation finally comes down to seeing sports as America's secular religion. Each day that we spend perusing box scores or watching Sunday afternoon football, we enter a mythic world where we can clearly define right and wrong, heroes and villains. But his model seems a bit simplistic. To cite one example, it seems that baseball's resurgent popularity can be traced as much to the explosion of fantasy baseball as an entertainment industry as it can to the Sosa-McGwire home run race or
the sport's escape from everyday life. Yet Mandelbaum's nostalgic vision places fans as passive receptors for the game's grand old message. *The Meaning of Sports* gives us a lot to debate, and as the author notes, that's part of the thrill of sports: "argument without end." So if I argue with Mandelbaum a bit, I am sure he would find it the highest compliment.

*David Magill*