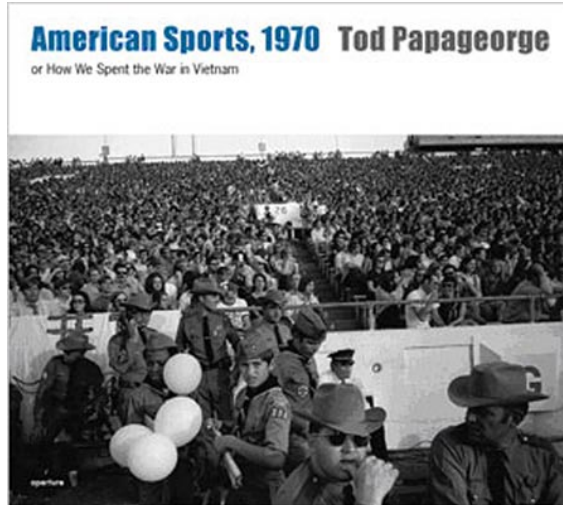


# SportsLetter Interviews

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## Tod Papageorge

In April of 1970, New York City-based photographer Tod Papageorge was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to document “the phenomenon of professional sport in America.” That year, he crisscrossed the country and photographed, among other events, the Indianapolis 500, two of the three Triple Crown horse races, the World Series between the Baltimore Orioles and the Cincinnati Reds, and several major college football games.



For three decades, these images were unseen by the public, as Papageorge, who holds the Walker Evans professorship at Yale and has headed the university’s graduate program in photography since 1979, concentrated on his career in academia. Now, some 37 years later, the Aperture Foundation has compiled 70 black-and-white images from that journey in a new book, “American Sports, 1970 or How We Spent the War in Vietnam.”

These aren’t “typical” pictures of baseball players swinging for the fences or quarterbacks throwing to the end zone. Rather, Papageorge concentrates on depicting the spectacle of sports in America, from the marching bands to the rowdy fans to the soft-drink vendors, against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. As he wrote in his application for the Guggenheim, “It takes a thousand brief acts to create the theater of spectator and sport, and my concern would be to present them with an

accuracy and power which would provide much more than the sports, illustrated.”

SportsLetter spoke with Papageorge in New York City, as he prepared to speak at a photography forum at the New York Public Library.

— David Davis

**SportsLetter:** You’ve spoken in the past about your major influences as a photographer: Robert Frank, Garry Winogrand, Henri Cartier-Bresson. How did each of them shape your development as a photographer?

**Tod Papageorge:** I think with any great artist — or photographer in this case — what’s most moving about them for me is how they demonstrate the possibilities of the medium. Bresson, Frank and Garry, who was a close friend of mine, taught me different kinds of things about the medium. Which doesn’t gainsay the fact that Bresson’s was the first work I came across, and so he was the one who first profoundly attracted me to the medium. It was just a few pictures, and it changed my life overnight. I was in college, writing a bit, and decided seeing those photographs of Bresson that I was going to be a photographer. Just like that.

I guess what I recognized in those few pictures was poetry of a visual form and that, although they were photographs, they weren’t very useful for understanding the world. In other words, I didn’t read them as documents. I read them as a new form, which is to say: poetry in photographic form. Their value was as artistic objects. That was the great lesson of Bresson’s, and it was one that never left me.

What I recognized in Robert Frank was, first of all, a photographer who looked at this country and saw it as a possible subject for a great body of work and who developed that, for the most part, through lack of motion, through a careful study of groups of peoples in stills. I think his book, “The Americans,” is, at some level, a repudiation of Bresson’s “Decisive Moment.”

With Garry, there’s no European in Garry. He took the example of Robert

Frank and extended that in investigating the American landscape — the social landscape, as it came to be called. He stretched this like a rubber band and snapped it into these incredibly zany, complicated, remarkable photographs, one after the other.

**SL:** You mentioned your friendship with Garry Winogrand. How did that develop?

**TP:** When I met him in New York [in the mid-1960s], he was inventing a new style of photography. It was tremendously exciting to be around him and work alongside him. There was a third photographer involved then — Joel Meyerowitz — and they were real New Yorkers who knew the city inside and out.

Garry was, at heart, a very modest person. For whatever reason, I intrigued him. He always treated me, from the first time he saw my pictures, as an equal. He'd never met anyone like me: the fact that I was from New England and that I was stupidly incorruptible because I wouldn't do commercial work, like every other New York City photographer was doing. I guess in this vein I served as a kind of teacher because he gave up all commercial work about five years after we met and just began to teach to make a living.

**SL:** In 1970, you received a Guggenheim Fellowship to do the sports photography project. What led you to apply for a Guggenheim?

**TP:** I'm sure the fact that Garry got the Guggenheim [in 1969] made the notion very present in my mind. [Editor's Note: Papageorge curated and edited what became the exhibition of that work in 1977.] I seem to remember that he felt that my best chance of getting a Guggenheim at such a young age was to have a very good project. So, that's when I began to think: "What would be an interesting project to do that the Guggenheim Foundation would respond to?" And, I came up with this notion of photographing spectator sports in America.

I think John Szarkowski, the late director of the department of photography at MoMA and who we now know, and at the time suspected, was the behind-the-scene person at the Guggenheim Foundation, was very

intrigued by the project. But I think he was imagining it in a very different way from what it turned out to be. He loved all the vernacular forms of photography, and I think he was expecting to see wonderful photographs of somebody sliding into second base. The touchdown catch at the end of the game. But that is not what it came to be, not at all.

**SL:** Do you remember how much money you received for the grant?

**TP:** \$14,000.

**SL:** Why sports? What drew you to that concept at that time?

**TP:** I've always been a fan of the major sports, as any rational person — or irrational person — is. In high school, my connection to sports was not as an athlete, but playing in bands. I was a drummer and did a lot of marching at halftime on the football fields of my high school. That part didn't have much to do with why I applied for the grant, but once I started the project, it did have something to do with what I photographed: The whole spectacle of sporting events — the majorettes, the band, all the spectators.

It seemed to me that sports would be a kind of avatar or emblem of the state of the culture at that particular moment. I'm sure you've read the great opening chapter of the Don DeLillo book ["Underworld"] about the Giants-Dodgers game at Ebbets Field [the Bobby Thomson home run game]. Sports events, especially with men in this culture, are so deeply embedded in their understanding of not only what the culture is but even the great moments of the culture. It's odd that something that athletes do in a moment can become so resonant in the history of a particular group, but it's true.

But I was really interested in the spectacle of the thing. By that I don't simply mean being in a stadium with 80,000 fans and the marching bands. But taking coherent pictures of all of that, that could somehow have the intensity of condensed meaning and still, at the same time, fairly represent this crowd, this mass. In other words, at some level I was very intrigued by the notion of taking photographs of very complicated visual events and to make them clear and powerful.

**SL:** Before you applied for the Guggenheim, did you used to go to a lot of sports events?

**TP:** I had no money to go to games. I watched a lot on television. I was a fanatic Knicks fan. Eventually, I was a Mets fan. Never a Yankees fan.

**SL:** About the format of how you did this: Did you travel from event to event on one long road trip?

**TP:** I got notice of the grant in late March or early April. I got a telegram because there was a mail strike and they couldn't send me notice. In the very beginning I photographed baseball in New York: Opening Day at Yankee Stadium, games at Shea Stadium. Then, I figured out what I would do next, which was to travel across the country and photograph major college football games and a couple of professional football games. I did fly to Indianapolis for the 500, and I did drive out one day to the Little league World Series in Williamsport.

**SL:** Did you have any trouble getting access to events like the Triple Crown races or the Indianapolis 500 or the college football games?

**TP:** I have to thank, posthumously, a man named John Durniak, the picture editor at Time Magazine. He's the one who got me the credentials to be able to do all of this.

**SL:** Were there events that you attended and photographed that didn't make the book?

**TP:** I remember I went out to Forest Hills for the tennis. There just weren't any pictures that I thought were strong enough.

**SL:** What do you remember about the games and the events that you attended in 1970?

**TP:** They just look like photographs, but the kind of intensity of attention that's required to do that is enormous. I'm almost in a fugue state as I'm making these pictures. I'm not relating at all to anybody. I'm just completely obsessed and concentrated on this very odd and singular

thing that I'm doing. Nobody else in a stadium of 80,000 people is doing anything remotely like what I'm doing.

The one person I do remember meeting with affection and having a good time with was the wonderful writer from the New Yorker magazine, Roger Angell. This was during the World Series, when reporters are treated very nicely. I mean, I'll never forget the Oyster Bar in Baltimore [laughs]. Anyway, I spoke a bit with Angell, and we struck up a kind of acquaintance. He's probably the only person I met during the whole year that I had anything to say to.

**SL:** Did you watch the games when you were photographing, or were you concentrating just on taking photographs?

**TP:** [Taking photographs] is very similar to an athletic act. So, that's like asking a baseball player, "What were you thinking about or what were you looking for when you're up at the plate?" With hitting a baseball or taking pictures, there's a lot of training involved before you're able to do anything effectively, but once you reach that point, it's totally intuitive. It has to do with seeing something — a motion or a gesture — and feeling the rush in the conjunction of figures across the frame, even, at some level, being aware of translating from the world of color to black-and-white, and how things will work in black-and-white.

**SL:** A couple of images in the book had nothing to do with sports per se, like the scene from Jackson Square in New Orleans. Why did you include those?

**TP:** To remind the reader about the fact that I was traveling on the road. That it wasn't simply me landing by helicopter in the middle of the field and concentrating on the event. This endeavor involved elaborate preparation.

**SL:** The title of the book references the Vietnam War. Why did you decide to include that?

**TP:** I started the project right in the middle of the Vietnam War. And then, on May 4th, Kent State happened and it really put me in a state. I was full of anger. The country was almost in a communal psychotic state at that

point of the war. It's hard to imagine that today, given what we're going through and the fact that there's no reaction at all. So, I began to look at this project as a collective picture of the psychic state of America at a key point in the history of the Vietnam War.

It was really a terrible time because the war had been going on for so long. What you can't understand today is it really seemed as if it would never end. There was such a feeling of hopelessness. It was brutal.

**SL:** Could you do this type of book in the sports world today?

**TP:** I don't know what I would do today because it's all very different. You know, when I watch sports on television today, it's all become corporatized, like so much in America. You go to games on a field named for a bank, and it's all about the logos. Where's the game?

**SL:** These images are obviously unlike most "standard" sports photographs. Are there any sports photographers, or photographers who take photographs of sports that you admire?

**TP:** Well, Garry [Winogrand] and his rodeo pictures. I sequenced his book ["Stock Photographs: The Fort Worth Fat Stock Show and Rodeo"]. Larry Fink and his boxing photographs. And [Jacques-Henri] Lartigue, with his incredible auto-racing images. But there's nobody I looked to. I think the book is more in the stream of photography in an American tradition, rather than in the sports tradition.

**SL:** What sort of equipment did you use during the project?

**TP:** I used a 35-millimeter Leica, with a 28-millimeter Canon lens. It's a very wide-angle lens — the lens covers a wider field — so you're taking in more. Effectively, it means you stand closer to what you're photographing than you normally would. The other reason to use it is it has a much deeper depth of field, so you get more things sharp in focus. That's something I wanted.

**SL:** There are 70 images in the book. How many photographs did you take for the project?

**TP:** I numbered the rolls of films to make contact sheets. The numbering isn't completely consistent, but the numbers stop in the low 300s.

**SL:** How difficult was to winnow it down to 70 photos?

**TP:** It seemed like it was endless. I think I expected a slightly larger book, but I do like the editing a lot. Lesley Martin was the editor [at Aperture], and we worked very intensely together.

**SL:** You shot these in 1970, but only now is the book coming out. Why did it take so long and where were the photographs during this time?

**TP:** Sitting in a box [laughs]. When I finished the project, I made a couple hundred small rough prints, and I showed them to Szarkowski. Basically, that's all you could do back then. There was no gallery scene with photography. There was no museum interest in photography outside of Szarkowski at MoMA. If he wanted to do something with them, he would. If he didn't, he didn't. And, he put them back in the box. That was it. The fact is, the pictures he saw were quite unlike what the book ended up being because when I went back, years later, in many cases I printed different pictures.

**SL:** How did the project coalesce into the book?

**TP:** It really happened with the entrance of the computer into my life and programs that allowed me to put together little maquettes. Not that the process of learning those programs was easy, but finally a program that was simple enough for me came out and I was able to use it. I had a group of pictures that I had taken in Paris over the years that I wanted to publish, so that was my training: taking those pictures and putting them into a sequenced book. Once I did that, I started working on other things, including what became the Central Park book ["Passing Through Eden"] and then the sports book.

Without the computer, I think they'd still be sitting in a box. I was so preoccupied with family and teaching at Yale, and, as I've said, there was nobody calling me up.



**SL:** The Central Park book was published by Steidl. How did you end up with Aperture with the sports book?

**TP:** You know how these things get born: it was capricious. Tim Davis, who wrote the essay in the book, is a former student of mine. He loved the work and wanted to write an essay about it for Aperture Magazine. When Tim brought this disc I had prepared into Aperture to propose an article, Lesley Martin, the editor, looked at it and said, "Is this a book proposal?"

**SL:** Will there be an exhibition of the sports photographs?

**TP:** Yes, at Pace/MacGill [Gallery in New York City], in the fall of '08.

**SL:** Do you still go out and shoot?

**TP:** I don't really go out and shoot very much. Mainly, I photograph my family and extended family's summers up at Lake George. I'm sure that will result in some sort of publication at some point.