H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey S. Gurock. *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005. x + 191 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34700-8.

Reviewed by Richard C. Crepeau (Department of History, University of Central Florida)
Published on H-Florida (October, 2006)

Old Stereotypes Die Hard

There is an old joke that goes something like this:

Q. What is the shortest book in the world? A. *Famous Jewish Sports Stars.*

The joke is built on the notion that Jewish culture showed a preference for the life of mind over the life of the body and thus Jewish athletes were an anomaly. As Jeffrey Gurock points out, this notion has some basis in Jewish history. However, this was not the case for many Jews across the world from ancient times forward, and it was certainly not the case for the second generation of Jewish Americans.

Jeffrey S. Gurock is Professor of Jewish History at Yeshiva University and a scholar-athlete who has been an assistant basketball coach at Yeshiva University for a quarter-century. He is a distance runner and has competed in the New York City Marathon twelve times. He is the author of thirteen books including a prize-winning biography of Rabbi Mordecai M Kaplan.

Judaism's Encounter with American Sports is a history of the conflict within American Judaism over the role of sport and physical activity in the community. What is its place within the synagogue, the educational institutions, and particularly as it relates to the education of the young? The focus is on the Orthodox and Conservative Jewish religious movements, although the Reform movement is not neglected.

This book is also a bit more than a history. At several points along the way Gurock references his own personal experiences at the nexus of sport and religion, both as athlete and coach, child and adult. Many historians believe that the worst examples a historian can use are those drawn from their own experience, as memory and historical evidence are often at odds. It is difficult to know whether that is the case here. It is clear, however, that there are biases that creep into the evaluation of movements and conflicts as a result of Gurock's own experiences.

That aside, Professor Gurock presents, in this tightly drawn volume, a very thorough examination of the conflicts over sport in the American Jewish community. The basic conflicts between the Orthodox and Conservative communities are played out both on and off the field. The questions of accommodation to modern American culture are central to the place of sport in both branches of Judaism. He sees questions of assimilation and accommodation as central to the Jewish community in America, as it is for nearly all immigrant and religious communities. The lure of sport was often viewed as a threat to sustaining Jewish culture in America.

Gurock begins with a survey of Jewish sport in the ancient and medieval worlds, pointing to some very contemporary-sounding conflicts between religion and sport. The rabbis in the Greco-Roman societies condemned the entire scene at sports venues, although not those individuals who sought perfection of the body without interference with traditional religious practices. There were concerns about what followed the games in terms of singing and dancing, not to mention the immodesty in evidence when girls played ball, and violations of the Sabbath.

After pointing out that Jewish participation in sport came nearly to an end between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Gurock chronicles the changes in the nineteenth century, particularly among the Turners in Germany and America. It was, however, not until the twentieth century that Jews once again competed against non-Jewish athletes as a means to gain social status and acceptance. In America sport and physical activity quickly became a central part of daily life, especially for the young.

Participating in sport and being identified as a sportsman were signs of becoming American. Sport was pervasive in American culture and Jewish young men and women were drawn to it as much as their non-Jewish counterparts. Institutions such as the Young Men's He-

brew Association (YMHA) placed sport and physical activity high on the agenda. The Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTSA) became the training center for those who became the agents of change. Knowledge of sports came to be seen as essential for those working with young Americans.

Some within the Orthodox world welcomed sport into the community and included it among synagogue-related activities. Others were not so sure, especially those of Eastern European origin who looked to recreate in America the purity of Eastern European Judaism. Gurock walks us through the ebb and flow of these developments and conflicts as he moves through the twentieth century. The range of issues and the playing out of the arguments are thoroughly and clearly presented, and the struggles are fascinating.

What is striking are the similarities one sees between sport and Judaism and sport and Catholicism, where sport was seen in some quarters as a signal of Americanization and in other quarters as the means of entree into the WASP-dominated mainstream. There are similarities with Protestant denominations and their encounters with sport. All three main religious groups, Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish, came to the conclusion that sport could be a very useful device to attract and hold the young. With a stroke of luck and a lot of effort, the young might even absorb some of the religion that came wrapped in the sports package.

In the late twentieth century, when Jews were fully immersed into the mainstream of middle-class America, they faced a new threat, namely the survival of Jewish identity. Mixed marriage became more than common and by the 1980s in some parts of America six of ten Jews married outside the fold. Rabbis complained that their congregations would never miss a kickoff while they were habitually late for services.

On the other side of the spectrum, deeply religious Jews were more in conflict with one another than ever, and that conflict was fueled by an aggressive form of Orthodoxy that came out of Brooklyn. Gurock recounts the case studies of boxer Dimitriy Salita and the highly recruited high-school basketball player Tamir Goodman, both of whom publicly identified themselves as Orthodox Jews. Goodman's case in particular gets several pages of analysis. Gurock also elucidates the conflicts within the inter-scholastic sports leagues in New York and Baltimore, and the attempt to transcend differences and unite the Jewish high-school sports community.

Judaism's Encounter with American Sports is a thoroughly researched and documented study. Jeffrey Gurock has produced an important work that cuts across a range of topics in American culture including sport and class, sport and religion, and sport and immigration. These are topics that need further research and thought, not only as they apply to Jews but as they apply to other religious movements in America, including both outsiders and insiders.

It is work of this quality that demonstrates the importance of sport history as a sub-field of American history. One would hope that Professor Gurock, and others who write sport history, will no longer feel the need to apologize for their entrance into the field. Sport is a central institution in American life, and one should no longer feel a need to justify its study as a means of understanding American life.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Richard C. Crepeau. Review of Gurock, Jeffrey S., *Judaism's Encounter with American Sports.* H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. October, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12374

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.