

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Buck Turnbull. *From the Press Box: The Iowa Sports Scene.* Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996. x + 200 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8138-2689-9.

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Anthologies of reprinted sports columns tend to feature an editor's selection of the best sports journalism of a particular time period or a particular writer. Such collections can take the form of a single offering (for example, *The Red Smith Reader* from Vintage Books) or part of a series (*The Best American Sports Writing 1991; 1992*, and so forth, from Houghton Mifflin; or *The Sportswriter's Eye* series from Taylor Publishing). Herein lies the uniqueness of *From the Press Box: The Iowa Sports Scene*, a new compilation by the *Des Moines Register's* longtime and recently retired columnist, Buck Turnbull. Rather than highlighting himself as author, or favoring the annual retrospective format, Turnbull addresses the sporting interests of a specific geographical region, namely Iowa. The result: meat-and-potatoes sports journalism from the heartland, about the heartland.

Drawing from Turnbull's forty-one years of service to the *Register* (1952-93), *From the Press Box* includes over forty of his articles divided into fifteen chapters, most arranged according to either a specific sport or a sports figure. Given the book's regional emphasis, most articles can be placed under one of three thematic categories: reports on athletes or events of particular concern to sports fans in Iowa; accounts of Iowan athletes whose prowess led them to gain even greater fame outside of the state; and stories on sports celebrities who at one time or another visited Iowa. Although the state-centric nature of these topic areas may sound monotonous to some, this reviewer (who has no affiliation to Iowa, incidentally) found the approach refreshing. In the era of peripatetic free agents, frequent franchise relocations, and me-first attitudes, it is enjoyable to take in a collection that evokes a sense of community. And the book achieves this without falling into the trap of becoming a cloying reminiscence.

Among the lesser-known Iowa heroes for whom Turnbull's well-paced prose enables us to root are Don Medsker (whose last-second basket for Iowa State in 1957 defeated Wilt Chamberlain's Jayhawks), Jack Fleck (who upset Ben Hogan in a play-off for the 1955 U.S. Open title), Lafester Rhodes (whose 54-point performance led Iowa State to an overtime basketball victory over Iowa in 1987), and Jodevin (the two-year-old national trotter of the year in 1976). Meanwhile, some of the more renowned figures diligently portrayed in Turnbull's coverage include gold-medalist wrestler Dan Gable, world-class miler Steve Scott, and University of Iowa All-American tackle Alex Karras. These carefully detailed, entertaining stories and many others make the book a pleasure to read.

Through all of this quality work, there are only two shortcomings about which I would propose to offer constructive criticism. The first, and this holds for almost all specimens of the sports-column anthology genre, has to do with the scarcity of stories about women's athletics. (Only one is included here). True, it is quite possible that Turnbull was assigned to cover only a few such stories over the course of his career. Still, a book purporting to address the "sports scene" of an entire state should probably find a way to do a better job of including female athletes in its enterprise. Second, both the back cover and the page opposite the table of contents assert the following: "Turnbull twice was voted Iowa's sportswriter of the year. His stories won numerous honors, including four first-place awards in Iowa Associated Press writing contests." These observations beg several questions. Which stories, if any, in the collection won awards? What years (and therefore for what stories) did Turnbull win Sportswriter of the Year? Were these stories judged superior because of a style of writing, an in-

vestigative angle, or something else? Journalistic articles as strong as these should call more precise attention to their accomplishments, and could do so without sacrificing the community-oriented focus of the volume.

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