

Stephen Fox. *Big Leagues: Professional Baseball, Football & Basketball in National Memory.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. 522 pages \$21.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8032-6896-8.



Reviewed by Jeff Powers-Beck

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Stephen Fox's *Big Leagues* is a big book—not just hefty in page count, but truly gargantuan in its appetites and ambitions. The book hungers to digest America's three major league sports in all their cultural complexity and tawdry lore from the nineteenth-century to the present. The courses at this lavish training-table banquet are many, some spicy, others bland, but all filling. There are chapters on airborne feats, fans, ballplaying life, the early evolution of each sport, black athleticism, national teams, and big money; and the featured athletes at the banquet table are too numerous to mention.

Fox, an independent historian, has made a career of writing big books on vast subjects. His previous works include *The Mirror Makers*, a history of U.S. advertising, and *Blood and Power*, an account of organized crime in twentieth-century America. To his credit, Fox's work is exhaustively researched and well documented. The nine chapters of *Major Leagues* make hundreds of citations of early sports periodicals, newspapers, scrapbooks, manuscripts, interviews, books, and articles. While this historical detail is impressive, it is

never daunting, as Fox's writing is lively, accessible, and entertaining. Indeed, the author almost never lets fussy matters of fact and statistic interfere with his buoyant spinning of anecdotes, quips, legends, and gossip.

Fox's *Big Leagues* was first published by William Morrow in 1994. The new paperback edition, published by the University of Nebraska's Bison Books in 1998, will now make the title more widely available to a general readership. Although all of the material in the original edition has been retained, including illustrations, it appears that no new information has been added to the second edition of the book.

So why do we Americans care so much about major league sports in the twentieth century? Why are they such prominent parts of our history and culture? Fox has a rather straightforward answer to these questions. A "basic cause of their dedication," he says of sports fans, is that the major league sports have been "at their cores quite stable and therefore familiar" (p. 61). When the games have changed, says Fox, they have done so in long, recurrent cycles of offense and defense.

Thus, the sports have extended to middle-class America a refuge, "a high, dry rock in the swiftly flowing stream" of modern technological and social change (p. 61). The childlike and childish love of play has constantly invigorated these relatively unchanging sports, giving lasting solace to adult denizens of the industrial and information ages.

One clear instance of the book's thesis concerns the advent of the jump shot in collegiate and professional basketball. Fox details how the jump shot was not simply invented once, but was discovered and rediscovered by six different players--Johnny Cooper, Glenn Roberts, Bud Palmer, Belus Smawley, Kenny Sailors, and Joe Fulks--between 1927 and 1950. This long pattern of discovery and rediscovery occurred, Fox assumes, because each sport has a "stable core" or set of "eternal verities." In the case of basketball, "the essence ... has always been jazz improvisation, with the mind yielding to the body and muscle memory" (p. 16). That is, after periods of neglect, shots like the fadeaway jumper inevitably reemerge, as part of the improvisatory essence of the game.

Similarly, Fox makes a series of "nothing's new" arguments for each of the sports. He claims that the longball heroics of Babe Ruth were a recurrence to the slugging age of Billy Hamilton and Harry Stovey of 1880s and 1890s; that the passing game promoted by George Preston Marshall and Sammy Baugh in the 1940's returned to the wide-open offensive play of Benny Friedman and saved the National Football League; that black power and speed have been persistent forces in major league sports; that pay for professional athletes has always been gratuitous, in a sense, and has not changed the character of play in the sports; that national teams like the Yankees and Packers have transcended local allegiances because of their traditions of winning ways; that ballplayers' personal lives have always been exuberantly childish and risky, extensions of the games they

play; and that fans too have belonged to "the stable historical tradition" of their favorite games.

In the words of Ecclesiastes, "there is nothing new under the sun," or as the other old chestnut puts it, "the more things change, the more they remain the same." The central point of *Big Leagues* is such a cliché. It is true enough in one way--the major league sports in the United States have often been conservative institutions, resistant to change--but it is the kind of cliché that is inimical to historical understanding. While Fox attempts to write a book about "the timeless pleasures of these games," one "without the usual linear structure of historical time," he also writes about "national memory," which necessarily has to comprehend the historical and diachronic. "The times," counters the Bob Dylan cliché, "they are a-changing." Indeed, all three American sports have evolved significantly from their early days--baseball from a rough-scrabble run-and-tag game to the current longball heroics; football from rugby-style running to aerial bombardment; and basketball from a smaller man's passing game to a tall man's soaring contest. Games, products of their times and places, change, sometimes radically, as their rules, equipment, and playing techniques change.

Throughout the book, one finds that the historical analysis of the unchanging is often at cross purposes. Fox documents amply that the games have evolved, but in the same breath he holds tenaciously to their "timeless" qualities. When he discusses how black speed changed baseball, he is at pains to hedge against the implications of his own observation. He writes that the baseball of the Negro Leagues was "hyper-baseball," "faster, rougher, more daring and exuberant than whiteball," but he adds that black managers "taught the scientific' game ... that dominated the majors before Babe Ruth" (p. 312). One is left to think that Jackie Robinson was kind of, sort of, a return to the base stealing of Ty Cobb, but not really.

Or, to take another example of Fox's "nothing's new" mantra: "Babe Ruth also brought his game back to an older style," the style of Hamilton, Stovey, and Gore (p. 60). Yet, to be perfectly clear about it, Ruth's new era of the home run in the 1920s was nothing like the offensive era of the 1880s and 1890s, when the leading sluggers hit perhaps twelve or fifteen home runs in a season, many of them inside the park, and when fielders had just begun to don primitive gloves. Whereas Ruth used a fierce new swing to hit a new cork-center ball farther than anyone before him had done, the hitters of the 1890s had another reason for their booming production. The pitching distance was lengthened significantly to 60' 6" in 1893, and pitchers adjusted awkwardly to the change.

While the central course of Fox's *Big Leagues* may be unsatisfying, there is still much to relish in this major league banquet. The legends of Ruth, Lombardi, Russell, Rose, Marshall, and other sports personalities are always engaging, and the colorful tales are spun with brio. Fox's chapter on ballplaying life clearly dispels the illusion that drug use and sexcapades are recent inventions of major league athletes. New sins, after all, are difficult to invent. His chapter on black athleticism points up well how commentators have exhibited uncertainty and paralysis in discussing black athletic accomplishments, a legacy of America's racial division. The chapter on big money also argues persuasively that the money explosion in professional sports has changed lives off the field more than the play on the field. For both the players and the fans, "the ballgames remained the real point" (p. 447). No doubt, it is this love of the games that makes *Big Leagues* a big pleasure to read.

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