

Contemporary Affairs

DARWIN'S ATHLETES: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race.

By John Hoberman. Houghton Mifflin.
326 pp. \$22.95

USA Today recently carried a front-page story about Dexter Manley, the former Washington Redskins All-Pro defensive end, who was about to be released from prison and was trying again, after numerous failures, to recover from the cocaine addiction that was ruining his life. At first glance, this could have been a white athlete's story. After all, many notable white athletes, such as Detroit Tigers pitching star Denny McLain, San Diego Padres pitcher Eric Show, golfer John Daly, and boxer Tommy Morrison, have been compromised, even (in the cases of Show and McLain) destroyed by gambling, drugs, alcohol, or promiscuity. Such are the dubious privileges of the successful athlete—since the days of naked competition in Greece and gladiatorial combat in Rome. What is striking about Manley's story, though, and peculiar to his downfall as a black athlete, is that he managed to get through both high school and college without learning to read.

The unique tragedy of the black athlete is brought into bolder relief by the recent appearance of boxing champion Muhammad Ali at the opening of the 1996 Summer Olympics. So severe is the brain damage Ali suffered in the ring that his palsied hand could barely hold the torch to ignite the Olympic flame. Again, many white fighters, from Jerry Quarry to Billy Conn and Rocky Graziano, have met similar or worse fates. But Ali is different. In his prime, he symbolized a new kind of athlete, one with a sense, however inchoate, of his political and social significance. Ali made the world see that he was not simply a brute but a man with convictions, a man who refused to accept the injustice of his society. Therefore, it is especially cruel to see him end up like any other pitiable bruiser.

The cases of Manley and Ali illustrate the

need for a book on the impact of sports on the American idea of race. Hoberman, a professor of Germanic languages at the University of Texas at Austin, has a clear thesis: African Americans, foreclosed from many other pursuits, have entered certain sports in disproportionate numbers and, having tasted limited but real success in those areas, distorted the meaning of that success and, more important, failed to see how it is used by whites to keep them in a degraded condition.

During the last century, Hoberman recalls, sports were thoroughly racialized as proof of white superiority and justification for European colonial dominance. But Hoberman does not believe, as many do, that the rise of the black athlete has deracialized sports or made sports into a kind of egalitarian social utopia. What has happened, he says, is that the racial meaning of sports has been transformed. Now, instead of being a sign of white superiority, athletic prowess has become a sign of black inferiority—of blacks' inability to do anything mental or intellectual. Whites are willing to grant to blacks the ability



Jack Johnson (1996) by
Jessica Gandolf

to run faster and jump higher because such a concession does not in any way affect whites' status as the superior group. These specialized physical skills have no real function in the modern world, apart from entertainment, and no power apart from charisma. And whites have long cast blacks in the role of charismatic entertainers. For Hoberman, therefore, there is nothing liberating about black athletic achievement—not for African Americans generally, and certainly not for the athletes, regardless of how much money they make. The old racial myth—of blacks depoliticized, trivialized, reduced to the Freudian primitive in the white mind—remains intact.

There is a great deal of talk about "the black body" here (academics who work in this area have all read their Foucault, if not their Heidegger and Derrida), some of it frankly unconvincing. After all, the most eroticized presences in American culture

remain the bodies of white women (and men—try selling pornography without a significant number of white people in it to anyone of any race, and see how far you get). Moreover, Hoberman does not deal with the curious fact that black men are far more eroticized than black women, especially among athletes.

More trenchant is Hoberman's discussion of the meaning of black athletic achievement within the black community. Beyond the clichéd search for heroes, he finds a troubling core of anti-intellectualism, which he links to the terrible restrictions historically imposed upon black intellectual aspirations. A complete and honest understanding of black anti-intellectualism—how it differs from its white counterpart, and what its impact has been on blacks and race relations—is badly needed. By suggesting that black athletic achievement is something that black (and white) Americans should scrutinize instead of regard with unabashed pride, Hoberman has taken a good first step.

—Gerald Early

ASSIMILATION, AMERICAN STYLE.

By Peter D. Salins. Basic Books.
272 pp. \$26

"Three cheers for ethnicity, but no concessions to ethnocentricity or ethnic federalism." With this unwieldy slogan, Salins, a professor of urban affairs at Hunter College, seeks a middle way between radical multiculturalism and resurgent nativism. That middle way is the "immigration contract" that has long existed between American society and its newcomers. Its terms are a commitment to English as the national language, an acceptance of American values and ideals, and a dedication to the Protestant work ethic. Immigrants who accept these terms are welcomed and allowed to maintain certain elements of their culture, such as food, dress, and holidays. This arrangement, Salins argues, promotes a vibrant ethnicity while protecting against balkanizing ethnocentrism.

The trouble with America today, Salins claims, is that the contract is being broken. The trouble with this book is that it fails to prove the case. On one hand, Salins sounds the alarm about "opinion elites" who, lacking confidence in traditional American values, encourage ethnocentric education and

divisive group-based politics. On the other, he offers evidence that these elites are not having much impact: immigrants continue to have a stronger work ethic than natives, demands for English as a Second Language (ESL) courses are replacing calls for bilingual education, and radical multiculturalism has already proven vulnerable to a backlash.

Nonetheless, Salins proposes strengthening the immigration contract. Here he recalls sociologist Milton Gordon's useful distinction between assimilation, which results in devotion to American values, and acculturation, or mere participation in cultural trends (such as rollerblading to rock music on the way to the mall). Salins warns that acculturated individuals have not necessarily internalized the sense of national unity that protects America from ethnic conflict. Assimilation is a more demanding and complex process.

Unfortunately, Salins ignores this complexity when he suggests that immigrants and natives have avoided conflict in the past. This seriously underestimates the public tensions and political dilemmas that accompanied the last great wave of immigration. Indeed, harsh nativism and violent episodes had much to do with the termination of large-scale immigration in the 1920s.

Salins's view of the immigrant experience is similarly rosy. To meet the terms of the contract, immigrants must often subvert deeply held beliefs. Yet in a telling passage comparing assimilation to religious conversion, Salins oversimplifies the process: "Converts do not have to change their behavior in any respects other than those that relate to the new religion. They are expected only to believe in its theological principles, observe its rituals and holidays, and live by its moral precepts." By implying that one's "theological principles" and "moral precepts" are as easily changed as one's brand of after-shave, Salins sidesteps the deeper challenge of promoting Americanism while respecting ethnicity.

—Stephen J. Rockwell

WOMEN AND THE COMMON LIFE:

Love, Marriage, and Feminism.

By Christopher Lasch. Edited by
Elisabeth Lasch-Quinn. Norton.
223 pp. \$23

When American historian Christopher