



## A HOLY TRINITY

*by Michael Novak*

"I find more genuine religion at the baseball match than I do at my father's church on Fifth Avenue," Ernest Howard Crosby, the 19th-century New York social reformer, is said to have remarked. This observation may also apply, for some, to football and basketball, the other two American sports that are public liturgies as well as games.

For certain sports are rather like religions—not like Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or any of the world's other great faiths, but forms of secular religion nevertheless. The elements of religion are visible in them: dramatic re-enactments of struggles representing life and death, involving moral understanding and development, evoking awe for powers not wholly in an individual's control, and employing public liturgical figures who stand in for the people as a whole.

I concentrate on baseball, football, and basketball—a holy trinity—because I love them most and because these three sports, invented in the United States, have captured in symbolic form elements of American life (urban and rural, rich and poor, white and nonwhite, highly educated and hardly educated) as other games have not. Tennis and jogging may have more direct participants, but when it comes to public participation in a visible liturgy, these three sports appeal across regions and classes as no others do.

The combination of baseball, football, and basketball represents a unique expression of the American consciousness; in no other countries have these three sports together seized the national imagination. Many nations play basketball with enthusiasm, if not finesse;\* within two years of its invention in

---

\*Since men's basketball became a regular feature at the Summer Olympics in 1936, the United States has won the gold medal every time but once. It lost to the Soviet Union in a controversial game in 1972.

1891, it had already spread to 11 nations (among them France, India, and Japan). A few—Japan, Canada, and some Latin American countries—play baseball. Only Canada loves anything similar to American football.

Not all Americans love these sports, of course. Some find all three profoundly boring. A theologian once asked me how I could possibly dignify football with theology; she called it “Neanderthal,” found baseball “tedious beyond belief,” and described basketball as “silly tall men in short pants.” For such nonbelievers, the only hope is prayer and fasting.

Some Americans are excited by one of these games but not by the others. This should not be surprising, since each differs in mythic substance and narrative form. These variations evoke important diversities in the American character.

Consider the matter of time. Baseball is clockless. Barring an act of God, a baseball game lasts as long as it takes to go through nine innings of six outs each (even more innings, if after nine a tie score exists). The longest major league game occurred May 31, 1964, when the San Francisco Giants and the New York Mets played 23 innings for 7 hours and 23 minutes. (San Francisco won, 8 to 6).

By contrast, a clock (frequently halted) limits football to 60 minutes. Each actual play on the field lasts an average of four seconds, with approximately 140 plays in a game. Thus, the real action may require as little as seven minutes. Like chess, football is a game of sets, formation, deliberation.

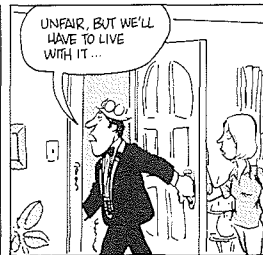
In professional basketball, play is limited to 48 minutes (unless a tie score forces a game into overtime) and in college basketball to 40 minutes, but virtually every second contains hectic action. Unlike football, basketball teams cannot “run down the clock” by spending time in huddles or on the line of scrimmage.

Each of these games involves its players in quite different social bonds. In baseball, the individual is always the center of attention. Each member of the team is chosen as the focus of

### TANK McNAMARA



### by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



Copyright 1979 Universal Press Syndicate.

---

action by the tiny white ball. The central drama is a duel of direct intimidation between the pitcher and the batter. The most painful accusation in baseball is to “choke,” to buckle under pressure.

### Separation of Powers

Baseball dramatizes the myth of the lonely individual; football, the myth of the collective. Whereas the batter goes to the plate in total solitude, a football player is (so to speak) part of a committee. A hitter hits alone, but a passer can do no better than his blockers and receivers permit. Football is a game of social liberation (“running for daylight”). It is not an acquisitive game; the winner is not the team that acquires the most yardage—yardage is won only to be surrendered—but the team that breaks through for the most points.

Basketball is as corporate as football, but it gives far more latitude to the soloist. The individual can rarely go his own way in football; in basketball, the individual's style gives the game more than half its pleasure. Basketball is like jazz: separate virtuoso instrumentalists improvise along a common melodic line.

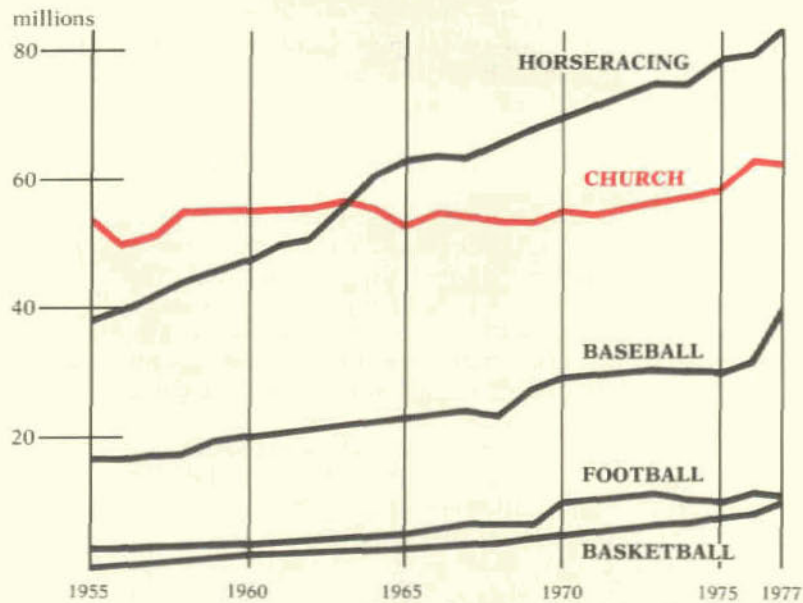
A third area of difference is each game's relationship to the law. In virtually every single play, baseball requires tremendous dependence upon the force of law. It is a game of exquisite checks and balances and in some ways exemplifies republican government. The offensive players step to the plate one by one like solitary executives battling a hostile nine-member congress. The umpires provide an independent judiciary. Distances, the weights of ball and bat, the height of the pitcher's mound, and other elements are exquisitely calculated, statistically, to keep the game in balance.

Football is another story. Given its number of players and the rapidity of its collective action (during blazing seconds of actual movement), it is impossible to police completely. Its inherent violence is tempered by rules, regulations, traditions, ex-

---

*Michael Novak, 45, currently a Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, was until recently the Cadden-Wilson distinguished professor of religion at Syracuse University. Born in Johnstown, Pa., he received his A.B. from Stonehill College (1956), his B.T. from Gregorian University in Rome (1958), and an M.A. from Harvard (1965). His books include Belief and Unbelief (1965), The Experience of Nothingness (1970), Ascent of the Mountain, Flight of the Dove (1971), The Rise of the Unmelt-able Ethnics (1972), Choosing Our King (1974), and The Joy of Sports (1976). He is currently working on a study of democratic capitalism.*

### CHURCH ATTENDANCE VS. SPORTS ATTENDANCE



Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1961, 1970, 1978; Gallup Opinion Index.

*Sports may be America's civic religion, but attendance at sporting events still lags behind churchgoing. An exception: horse-racing, perhaps because it holds out to its faithful the promise of an earthly reward.*

pectations, and specified equipment; still, there can be no doubt that football is essentially a celebration of physical and psychological aggression, something like war without death.

Although designed to be a noncontact sport, basketball is also exceedingly physical. Like football, it cannot be completely policed. Fakery and deception are essential to it; on virtually every play, there is a violation of the game's clearly stated laws. Thus, basketball demands, in a sense, a constant violation of the law in order to achieve perfection of the law. Legally, one should never touch anyone else, but to play the game properly, one must be in frequent, powerful, restrained, but well-executed physical contact. The referees control the game in roughly the same way that police control highway traffic: they make no attempt to stop every speeder, but they do make symbolic arrests in order to preserve the general rule of law.

San Jose State College psychologists Bruce C. Ogilvie and Thomas Tutko once reported finding no empirical evidence that

---

sports builds character.\* Unfortunately, critics of sports misunderstand an important point concerning the relationship of sports to moral understanding and development: the kind of virtues celebrated in our sports have more to do with helping us to understand the basic human situation than with offering us practical guides to moral behavior.

### **Risk and Ridicule**

Sports form our character at a level deeper in some ways than the merely ethical. They show us what it is to be an individual confronted with one's own terrors and what it is to show persistence and courage. They establish one of the most fundamental meanings of the community—not the community of eye-to-eye encounter, full of sensitivity and communication, but the sort that occurs in teamwork under great stress and provocation.

This type of community is characterized not so much by tender feelings toward one another, although these may indeed be both present and quite powerful, as by the ability to accomplish together a common task, picking up one another at the point of weakness of each, gaining strength from one another, adapting almost unconsciously to one another's needs and requirements, and coming to recognize and achieve effortlessly the "click" of disparate individuals acting together as one. This is a rare and precious experience. There are many other meanings of community, but this is a basic one. It is a meaning crucial in pluralistic societies, in which cooperation rather than tender love is absolutely necessary. It is not entirely an accident that in later life many former athletes look back on this experience of community as one of the most profound of their lives, in the light of which they judge all other meanings.

Everyone fails at something at some point during life; likewise, no athlete wins all the time. Teaching oneself how to lose, how to learn from errors, how not to make excuses, and how to rise to struggle again on another day are ordinary lessons in sports. Most athletes fail more than half the time. (In baseball, a batter who hits successfully even one-third of the time is a star.) Each athlete discovers in himself stark limitations and finds himself inferior to others in many skills.

Teams, as well as individual athletes, serve as a symbol of the inevitability of defeat as well as victory. In baseball, for

---

\*"Sport: If You Want to Build Character Try Something Else," *Psychology Today*, October 1971.

---

example, major league teams rarely win 100 of 162 games in a season. Yet almost all win at least a third of the time. In the last 10 seasons (1969–78), major league teams have had records of .667 or better only three times, of .333 or worse only twice.

Moreover, our major sports are played under the eyes of connoisseurs, and ridicule for failure is quite open and unabashed. One of the most important experiences in sports is the experience of public failure—to which is added, sometimes in good humor and sometimes meanly, an element of humiliation. Since every exercise of freedom involves risk, there is in sports an excellent preparation for trying things publicly, even at the risk of public failure, and for accepting with grace both failure and defeat.

To learn such things is not quite the same as acquiring moral virtue. Yet it is no small thing to learn how to be reconciled to one's own human assets and liabilities. The benefits? A certain insight into the human situation, the uses of craft, and the limits of will—into "character" in that sense, rather than as it is spoken of by Sunday School teachers. Athletes, like artists, may achieve a species of excellence and create work of considerable beauty while not excelling in the moral virtues. Often, indeed, like the rest of us, they are moral mediocrities. Babe Ruth was a hero on the baseball field but a drunken, gluttonous buffoon off the field.

The virtues taught by sports, like the virtues involved in artistic excellence, are in this sense nonmoral. To learn how to think clearly under the pressure of impending defeat and humiliation is an important human gain. The conditions of an athletic contest are appropriate conditions under which to learn such skills, which pertain to the survival, even to the possible improvement, of the human race. They have a certain existential, if not directly moral, weight.

Sports also function as a religion by providing a source of emotional release. They are fun largely because they are an aside, separate for most spectators from the "game of life." Of our three national sports, football especially fulfills this function. In a culture like ours that praises sentimental virtues and represses destructive ones, some way must be found to channel aggressive tendencies. Football is one such channel. *Partisan Review* editor William Phillips once wrote:

Football is not only the most popular sport, it is the most intellectual one. It is in fact the intellectuals' secret vice. Not politics, not sex, not pornography, but football, and not college football, but the real thing. Pro

### SOCCER AND HOCKEY

*If baseball, football, and basketball are America's national sports, what are the athletic "faiths" of other countries? Soccer, of course, is supreme throughout much of the world, particularly Europe and the Third World; ice hockey is popular in northern countries. In his book, *The Joy of Sports*, Michael Novak discusses the cultural significance of these two sports:*

What kind of show does the public want? And why? In different cultures, people find different skills exciting. There is nothing inherently spectacular in catching a ball or swinging a bat (or in running, tackling, shooting a ball in a basket). Jugglers in Hungary show greater skills. . . .

If we ask why hockey still has not caught on in [much of] the United States, contrasting symbolic values come to light. . . . The game is played on ice. Its symbolic matrix lies in the lands of snows, blizzards, and dark freezing nights. Hockey is a Slavic sport, Eastern European, Scandinavian, Canadian. One gets suggestions of an Ice Age once again smothering the planet. One senses the sheer celebration of hot blood holding out against the cold, of the vitality of the warm human body, of exuberant speed rejoicing in its own heat, of violence and even the sight of red blood on white ice as a sign of animal endurance. There are stories about young hockey players saving as trophies the stitches pulled from their own healed wounds. "Twelve more stitches, dad!" the teenager boasts, entering home after a bloody game. Against the possibility of freezing, against the omnipresent threat to human survival, hockey celebrates the heat and passion of survival. . . .

The images surrounding soccer are those of Africa, Brazil, Pakistan, and India: green fields, leisure, space, effortless running and grace, freedom, an almost total absence of violence or force, an almost total commitment to fluid form, to kinesis, to the patterns in motion of a unit of runners. Running and passing are the steady pleasures of the game; the sudden appearance of the great players just as they are needed, flashing in from out of nowhere to execute a perfect kick, suggests the intelligence and instinct of anticipation. Soccer is freedom and flow, and it weaves its graceful tension back and forth, up and down the field, resolving it only infrequently with sudden charges upon the goal and the slashing, spinning projection of the ball, by head or foot, into the large net.

Hockey is swift, soccer graceful. Hockey is physical, brutal, violent; soccer evasive, flowing, quietly impassioned. The net in hockey is small and narrow, and the puck whizzes toward it almost as swiftly and invisibly as a bullet; the net in soccer is larger than a mother's arms, ample, and the slower flight of the large, black-white ball leaves a visual image almost as permanent as the trail of a jet.

© 1976 by Michael Novak. Used by permission.

---

football is the opium of the intellectuals. . . . Much of its popularity is due to the fact that it makes respectable the most primitive feelings about violence, patriotism, manhood.

Neither football nor other sports will purge the male spirit of violence, but they do give that spirit shape, form, and beauty.

A respect for fate is taught by the three American sports. Each of our national games is, in a powerful way, decided by fate. The way the ball bounces decides many a baseball or basketball game. And, in baseball, victory or defeat is never certain until the last out. William Saroyan once expressed this valuable feature of the game:

With a score of 6 to 0, two outs, two strikes, nobody on, only an average batter at bat, bottom of the ninth, it is still possible, and sometimes necessary, to believe that something can still happen—for the simple reason that it *has* happened before and very probably will again. And when it does, won't that be the day?

The football was deliberately designed not to be round, to be unpredictable in its bounces. Many astute football coaches have well understood that close games are decided by the breaks; they train their teams, accordingly, to press hard for the breaks—a fumble by the other side, a pass interception—and then suddenly to exploit such graces from the gods.

### The Flight of the Dove

As for basketball, on any given night, almost any team, "getting hot," can defeat almost any other, and even in the closest and most evenly matched contests, the contingencies and tricks of fate of the last few seconds often decide the outcome. The player who makes 80 percent of his free throws over a season either does or does not make his one critical free throw drop. Often the last shot of the game, surely as much by luck as by skill, decides the outcome.\* (A whimsical proposal for the National Basketball Association: why not give each team 100 points and then play for only one minute? Without loss of excitement, it would save a great deal of wear and tear).

We are supposed to be a puritan, pragmatic, calculating people. Yet it is astonishing how inwardly satisfied we are by liturgical images of luck and fortune. Indeed, the importance of

---

\*Of 902 regular 1977-78 season games in the National Basketball Association, 119 (13 percent) were decided by one or two points.



### SPORTS IN THE AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Sports appeal to people on the same level as do novels and plays—the level of imagination, the stage on which agents in conflict decide, act, and meet their destiny. For this reason, the most illuminating route to an understanding of sports lies through the fields and valleys of our historical and literary imagination.

The first European settlers stood in awe of the cunning and craft of the American Indian—the “noble savage,” “athlete of the wilderness.” They learned to track in the forest, delighted in marksmanship, and tested themselves in feats of agility and endurance.

Nature and humanity were viewed as part of one whole; man did not walk on the earth so much as in it—listening to nature, adapting to its limits and laws. An image developed of a wholly natural man who by superior sensitivity lived up to the potentialities of nature. The first U.S. fictional hero, Natty Bumppo, the central character in the “Leatherstocking Tales” of James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851), achieved this new ideal, living by a code of wisdom, agility, and stunning athletic prowess, in which he found a deep and quiet satisfaction of spirit.

Nature, in the American imagination, was not always beneficent: “Dan’l Boone kilt a b’ar,” but the b’ar might just as well have killed Daniel Boone. As a result, the new athletes acquired a special reverence for the ability to accomplish perfect physical feats with frequency and grace. To do so yielded a sense of immortality.

The vision of living in unity with nature while performing perfect

luck may be the most fundamental assumption in the American view of the world. We believe in equal opportunity, yet experience teaches us there is no equality of results. We believe in hard work, yet we can see quite vividly that individual rewards are not directly equivalent to hard work but are decisively affected by a little luck here and there. By freedom and by equality, we seem to have in mind a kind of lottery in which luck might strike anyone at any time, regardless of social class or position. Not mere, random good luck, of course, but a luck for which one has trained and prepared oneself—luck, nonetheless.

Our greatest athletes have a knack for “coming through” at the most critical moments. They are graced. Fortune blows out their sails. They have prepared themselves, they have trained, they have worked hard, but at the last moment it is the flight of the dove that bears them aloft, not the patient climbing of the mountain. This, at least, is what our games seem to celebrate. It



*Natty Bumppo spears a buck.*

*Drawing by F. T. Richards (1893).*

acts lives on, to a large degree, in our major sports. The green expanse of baseball and football fields is reminiscent of nature uncluttered by urban encroachment. There, heroes of craft and cunning struggle against the elements, against others, and against their own natures, seeking in themselves “rhythms” and mysterious potencies (being “up” for the game), craving opportunities to perform flawless, perfect acts.

—M.N.

happens to fit, as well, what our scholars have to tell us about the actual evolution of equality of opportunity in the United States.\* Nothing seems to correlate with results as much as luck or chance.

America loves the underdog. Our national *ethos* is based upon the lucky discovery of an untried New World, full of wonder, upsetting the Old Orders of the ages.

Finally, sports involve the mysticism of numbers. Americans take an eerie delight in numbers, as if numbers were the inner structure of reality itself. Baseball especially reflects this oddly pragmatic, down-to-earth mysticism, delighting in the ancient mystic numbers, three and four: three strikes, four balls,

\*“Economic success seems to depend on varieties of luck and on-the-job competence that are only moderately related to family background, schooling, or scores on standardized tests.”—Christopher Jencks *et al.*, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America*, New York: Basic Books, 1972, p. 8.

---

three outs, four bases, 360 feet (a perfect circle) to "home." Every aspect of the game is quantified: runs, hits, errors, hitting percentages, home runs, stolen bases, earned run averages. Counting makes it real.

Individual athletes are the priests of sports, and like the priest, its ritual victims. In a sense, athletes are heroes of a spiritual order. They are not necessarily handsome, physically well-formed, godlike—Babe Ruth had the shape of a pear on spindles. But they do overcome overwhelming odds (Jackie Robinson stealing home, making incredible catches; George Blanda winning magical, last-second games for the Oakland Raiders while in his mid-forties). Sometimes they represent causes larger than themselves (black Hank Aaron breaking white Babe Ruth's career home run record, Billie Jean King beating Bobby Riggs at tennis). Sometimes they simply perform perfect and beautiful acts again and again (Reggie Jackson hitting three home runs in one World Series game, pitcher Mark "the Bird" Fidrych bringing life to the otherwise hapless Detroit Tigers). But this is on the field. When their careers in the public liturgy are ended, they are often burnt-out cases, ritual victims—dropped from public sight.

Sports are not all-important, and they obviously are not a full religion. But they do help fulfill important secular religious needs. It is a little sad that many intelligent persons, not least some employed at universities, are blind to the powerful realities of the sports in their very midst. It is a shame to overlook this field of fundamental experience, from which many Americans have learned so much about harsh, humanistic virtue. To overlook it, indeed, is to squander a precious national resource. Without the games we have—baseball, football, basketball, and all the rest—we would be far poorer than we are. Their loveliness, though limited, deserves to be sung.

