



FORUM: SPORTS IN THE 1970s

Welcome to SportsWorld: An Introduction to the 1970s

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In 1975, *New York Times* sports columnist Robert Lipsyte published *SportsWorld: An American Dreamland*, a critical examination of how the values of American sports had become corrupted and distorted by power brokers who pulled the purse strings. “SportsWorld” was an infrastructure first built in the late nineteenth century by industrialists, educators, politicians, promoters, journalists, and military leaders who believed in the potency of sports and American exceptionalism. For the faithful, SportsWorld represented a positive cultural force that unified the nation, strengthened vigorous manhood, and advanced the country’s democratic ideals of equal opportunity and fair play. “In sports,” Lipsyte reflected, Americans believed “children will learn courage and self-control, old people will find blissful nostalgia, and families will discover new ways to communicate among themselves. Immigrants will find shortcuts to recognition as Americans. Rich and poor, black and white, educated and unskilled, we will all find a unifying language. The melting pot may be a myth, but we will all come together in the ballpark.”¹

Lipsyte punctured the myths of SportsWorld, an imaginary playland that separated people from “the economic and political systems that direct their lives.” The prominent sportswriter described how an athletic culture of consensus had fractured along with the nation. In the 1970s, a cynical time when inflation, pollution, and unemployment warped the idea of the American Dream, when citizens increasingly questioned authority and the nation’s established institutions, critics like Lipsyte developed greater skepticism about SportsWorld’s virtues. He wrote:

Here in America, SportsWorld’s insidious power is imposed upon athletics by the banks that decide which arenas and recreational facilities shall be built, by the television networks that decide which sports shall be sponsored and viewed, by the press that decides which individuals and teams shall be celebrated, by the municipal governments that decide which clubs shall be subsidized, and by the federal government, which has, through favorable tax rulings and exemptions from law, allowed sports entertainment to grow until it has become the most influential form of mass culture in America.²

By the 1970s, SportsWorld had come to define American popular culture and the national mood. Yet, in our collective memory, many Americans still think of the decade as an insignificant period that took place between the tumultuous 1960s and the so-called “Reagan Revolution” of the 1980s. Remembered for the end of the Vietnam War, Watergate, stagflation, and long gas lines, this misconception about the 1970s overshadows the historical reality.³ The

¹Robert Lipsyte, *SportsWorld: An American Dreamland* (New York, 1975), ix.

²*Ibid.*, xii–xiv.

³For an excellent survey of the decade, see Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York, 2001).

truth is that the 1970s proved transformative in the history of American culture—a period when sports moved to the very center of society. Prominent athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Billie Jean King widened the audience for spectator sports and shaped American life as political symbols.⁴ Against the backdrop of growing political polarization, while Americans “increasingly valued competition and even conflict,” spectator sports, author Michael MacCambridge notes, “would serve as both the last big tent in American popular culture, and a stage upon which many of the nation’s most nettlesome issues in morality, ethics, and values would be played out.”⁵

In this *Modern American History* forum on the 1970s, a distinguished group of sports historians explores how crucial cultural, political, and economic shifts shaped SportsWorld. It was the moment when spectator sports entered prime time on national television, and the lines between sports and show business became more blurred than ever before. It was the dawn of a new age: labor unions fought for free agency, and professional athletes gained greater autonomy over their careers; racial integration in team sports—at least, on the field—became commonplace; and an unprecedented number of women, propelled by Title IX legislation, broke numerous gender barriers as athletes, administrators, coaches, and fans.

If there is a central theme across these five essays, it is that, during the 1970s, SportsWorld became a political battleground that formed the broader culture. While liberals championed the expansion of athletes’ rights, conservatives resisted labor advancements and greater freedoms for athletes. In an increasingly confrontational climate of campus unrest, Black college athletes protested racism and demanded reforms that would end exploitive power dynamics, especially in the commercialized sports of football and men’s basketball. Furthermore, the establishment of women’s varsity athletics threatened the grip men held over college sports. In response, the ruling class of college athletics—mostly white male coaches, athletic directors, and National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) officials—feared that feminists and militant radicals would destroy college athletics.

In her essay on “Sporting Revolutions,” Amira Rose Davis explains how the NCAA mobilized to regain control over intercollegiate sports. NCAA officials, led by executive director Walter Byers, made three significant moves: 1) In 1970, the NCAA passed the “manifest disobedience rule,” which effectively allowed schools to terminate athletic scholarships for athletes who violated team rules; thus, the NCAA neutralized politically active athletes and coaches gained greater power over athletes. 2) Three years later, the NCAA tightened its grip over athletes by replacing the four-year athletic scholarship with a one-year scholarship—essentially requiring college athletes to sign contracts renewable at a coach’s discretion. That legislation was clearly designed to discourage dissent and further emphasized the professionalization of college sports. 3) By the end of the 1970s, after ignoring women’s sports for decades, the NCAA realized the profitability of women’s sports and wrested control from a competing organization, the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women. Reflecting on the 1970s, Davis demonstrates how the NCAA had become a big business at the expense of college athletes.

Theresa Runstedtler writes that political activism among college athletes inspired greater collective labor action among the professionals. In her essay on the National Football League (NFL), Runstedtler explores the growing tension between the NFL Players’ Association (NFLPA) and team owners over free agency and the league’s drug testing policy. Twice during

⁴For works that explore the politics of Muhammad Ali, see Jonathan Eig, *Ali: A Life* (New York, 2017); Elliott J. Gorn, *Muhammad Ali: The People’s Champ* (Urbana, IL, 1995); and Randy Roberts and Johnny Smith, *Blood Brothers: The Fatal Friendship Between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X* (New York, 2016). For an insightful perspective on the life and times of Billie Jean King, see Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women’s Sports* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2011).

⁵Kevin Kruse and Julien Zelizer, *Fault Lines: A History of the United States since 1974* (New York, 2019), 3; Michael MacCambridge, *Big Time: How The 1970s Transformed Sports in America* (New York, 2023), 5–6.

the 1970s, the NFLPA went on strike, demanding guaranteed salaries, better pensions, impartial arbitration, the elimination of the college draft, and the abolishment of the “Rozelle Rule,” legislation named after commissioner Pete Rozelle that restricted free agency. The players also resisted the implementation of mandatory drug testing. Despite the systematic distribution of performance-enhancing drugs by team trainers, the owners denied any responsibility for addictive and dangerous practices promoted by coaches and team physicians. Instead, Runstedtler argues, the owners embraced the racial politics of the Nixon administration’s War on Drugs, recentring the debate about drug use in the NFL—a predominantly Black league—on the alleged abuse of illegal narcotics and the need for policing players.

Writing in the context of labor strikes and political activism among professional athletes, Frank Guridy argues that America’s stadiums proved to be more than arenas for athletic competitions. Rather, he emphasizes how stadiums, as public facilities, became crucial gathering sites for various events: civic meetings, business conventions, political rallies, and religious revivals. During the 1970s, sports fans influenced by social and political movements—the Black Freedom Movement, the Antiwar Movement, and the Women’s Liberation Movement, among others—conceived of the stadium as a space for political expression and inclusion. “The racial and gendered desegregation of the stadium, on the field, in the stands, the locker room, and the press box,” he writes, “dramatized the larger changes enveloping the United States during this period.”

For example, in November 1977, 20,000 people gathered at the Houston Coliseum, an aging Public Works Administration relic constructed during the New Deal. For years, the Coliseum hosted rodeos, rock concerts, wrestling matches, and basketball games. Yet the most publicized attraction at the Coliseum that year was the National Women’s Conference, not a sporting event. The Conference organizers hoped the rally would unite women and encourage the government to develop a Plan of Action for establishing various legal protections for women. In her essay, Jaime Schultz explores the politics surrounding the Conference torch relay, a fifty-one-day event sponsored by runners who, with every stride, personified the idea of progress—“women on the move.” Yet, the relay, Schultz reminds us, revealed partisan cleavages among feminists and antifeminists. Furthermore, she demonstrates how some feminists rejected the idea that sport had anything to do with the movement and that many athletes distanced themselves from the movement out of fear of being labeled as unfeminine, radical, or gay—subversives in the world of sport. Schultz complicates the idea that feminists prioritized women’s sport as an important cause and that advocates of women’s sports were dedicated to the larger women’s movement.

During the 1970s, the sports pages reflected the cultural collisions taking place on and off the field. Within SportsWorld, tensions between different groups—men and women, young and old, Black and white, conservatives and liberals—unfolded in the nation’s newspapers and magazines, redefining the political boundaries in the press box. In his profile of writer Hunter S. Thompson, Aram Goudsouzian illustrates how sportswriters increasingly abandoned the adulatory perspective that had characterized the profession in previous eras. Now journalists investigated the greed, graft, and excesses that permeated SportsWorld. Yet Thompson created a whole new literary genre by submerging himself in the Kentucky Derby. Examining his seminal article, “The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved,” Goudsouzian reminds readers that Thompson’s “gonzo” techniques changed the way other journalists thought about SportsWorld. Writing in a novelistic fashion, Thompson did not focus his attention on racing horses. Instead, he wrote about “the outdoor loony bin of boozed-up burgher spectators. It was the first look through the other end of the binoculars usually trained on the four-footed beasts.”⁶

⁶This quote comes from Thompson’s biographer William McKeen. See Michael MacCambridge, “Directors Cut: The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved,” *Grantland*, May 3, 2013, <https://grantland.com/features/looking-back-hunter-s-thompson-classic-story-kentucky-derby/> (accessed May 17, 2024).

Read together, these essays demonstrate that the 1970s was a consequential period in the history of American sports—a subject that more scholars should integrate into their teaching. For historians who teach modern American history, incorporating sports can deepen student interest in the past. This forum provides a compelling reminder that SportsWorld has long functioned as an important site for debates about race, gender, class, labor, nationalism, and political power. Drawing on the dramatic stories of prominent athletes can inspire meaningful classroom discussions about a broad range of significant historical subjects. For example, “The Battle of the Sexes,” one of the most important sporting events of the decade, a tennis match between the top-ranked women’s champion Billie Jean King—“Ms. America”—and the former men’s Wimbledon champion Bobby Riggs, offers an important opportunity to investigate the broader culture clash over feminism and competing visions of America.⁷ That event transcended sports and served as a flashpoint that defined the decade. If scholars and students want to understand better when spectator sports became our national obsession, “the last remaining ‘big tent’ in the increasingly balkanized, narrowcast landscape of American culture,” as MacCambridge puts it, then they must return to the 1970s.⁸

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⁷Curry Kirkpatrick, “There She Is, Ms. America,” *Sports Illustrated*, Oct. 1, 1973, 30.

⁸MacCambridge, *The Big Time*, 401.