From Ritual to Record:  
A Retrospective Critique

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In 1855, when Walt Whitman published *Leaves of Grass*, he guaranteed himself at least a few favorable reviews. He wrote them himself and inserted them in friendly newspapers. As Program Chairman of NASSH 2000, I have been encouraged by his unethical example to arrange for this opportunity to comment on my first book of sports history.

Part I

*From Ritual to Record,* which I wrote in the winter and spring of 1977, combines two related arguments. The first three chapters are an attempt to produce a paradigm within which to understand—perhaps even to explain—the uniqueness of modern sports. The last three chapters are an attempt to identify some of the salient differences between American and European sports.

Why did I combine these two related arguments in one book? It happened like this. In the spring of 1969, I saw a game of soccer in Berlin's famous *Olympiastadion* and wondered—naively—why Europeans were fanatically committed to a game that was then relatively unknown in the United States. Three years later, when my scholarly decks were clear, I decided to study the differences between American and European sports. I was intrigued by the thought that sports preferences might correlate with personality types. Sports might be a clue to national character. (In those distant days, we still talked about national character.)

After a year of research into American sources, during which I received a great deal of help from John Loy, I returned to Germany in 1973 and delved into the European sources. I became convinced that the difference between traditional sports and modern sports is far more important than the difference between American and European sports. In other words, the contrast between *now* and *then* is much more important than the contrast between here and there.

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By the time I sat down to write *From Ritual to Record,* I was excited by the first contrast *(now and then)* but did not want entirely to abandon exploration of the second *(here and there).* That explains why a book about the nature of modern sports includes chapters on baseball, American football, and the American tendency to prefer team sports rather than individual sports.

Looking back after some twenty-three years, I still believe that baseball and American football are a medley of premodern and modern characteristics. I see no reason to retreat from my interpretation of those two sports. I do, however, have doubts now about my use of literature as one kind of evidence for that belief. Jack Berryman, reviewing the book dismissively in the *American Historical Review,* objected strongly to what he called "fictitious literary characters."

I hope, after the recent "linguistic turn" in sports studies, that the use of literature is no longer a problem and that my discussions of fiction no longer detract from my argument about baseball and football, but I must admit that Susan Birrell was right about the chapter on team versus individual sports. Reviewing the book for the *ICSS Bulletin,* she saw the methodologically flaws in that chapter. I had read scores of essays by psychologists attempting to correlate sports preferences with personality types. I concluded that their decades-long attempt was a fiasco. The most one can say on the basis of the psychologists' hopelessly contradictory conclusions is that people who are attracted by team sports score lower on autonomy subscales than people who prefer individual sports. Big deal. Still, despite my disillusionment, I took that meager result and looked at patterns of team and individual sports participation in Europe and the United States. Unfortunately, the available surveys were not all done at the same time nor did they have entirely comparable samples. And my classification of sports was somewhat arbitrary. Seeking to buttress my shaky argument with more evidence drawn from literature, I observed that European novelists tended to write about individual sports while American novelists tended to focus on team sports. I suggested, finally, that we Americans delude ourselves when we imagine that we are more individualistic than Europeans. I still believe that we delude ourselves when we boast of "American individualism," but Chapter Six does not prove the case. Fortunately for me, *From Ritual to Record* has been judged, for the most part, on the basis of its first three rather than its last three chapters.

**Part II**

And now to the heart of the matter. What I *most* wanted to do back in 1977 I did in the first three chapters. I devised a paradigm *designed* to clarify the formal-structural characteristics of modern sports and I suggested ways in which these characteristics did or did not appear in the sports of earlier times. In order to do that I felt that I needed a working