BOOK REVIEWS

Fame to Infamy: Race, Sport, and the Fall from Grace

Reviewed by Maureen M. Smith, California State University, Sacramento

Ogden and Rosen have edited a collection of essays loosely fit around the themes of athletes who have fallen from grace and how race plays a role in their fall. The title, Fame to Infamy: Race, Sport, and the Fall from Grace, fails to encompass the collection. Moreover, although some essays address the concept of falling from grace and the athlete’s own individual role in the downfall, the collection would be better served if it took into account the role of the public in these public descents. One might suggest that the expectation of sport fans that their favorite athletes behave in prescribed ways indicates a lack of reality on the part of fans. The concept of “falling from grace” says more about us and the expectations we have of athletes to represent and symbolize values than it really says about them as individuals. Moreover, the actions of an athlete are remembered differently as time passes, and often upon their death.

Among the strengths of the collection are the interdisciplinary approach and the varied backgrounds of its contributors, with essays from academics in English, African studies, communications, kinesiology, history, and American studies. There is also diversity in the topics, as the sports of baseball, basketball, football, and boxing are represented from the 1930s until the present time. There is little diversity in respect to the issue of race; each essay focuses on race as meaning African American, with two essays including white athletes. Do Asian athletes fall from grace? For that matter, have no female athletes fallen from grace?

Several of the articles are especially timely and engaging. Lisa Doris Alexander’s “Barry Bonds: of Passion and Hostility” and Shelley Lucas’s “Lost in Translation: Voice, Masculinity, Race, and the 1998 Home Run Chase” both engage the reader with their portraits of baseball’s three most recent home run kings (Bonds, Mark McGwire, and Sammy Sosa). Lucas’s essay nicely juxtaposes the racialized images of the Black Dominican Sosa and the White American McGwire as they traded home runs. She skillfully illustrates the media’s role in the creation of the athletes’ racialized images. Alexander’s essay on Bonds is especially resonant, as Bonds’s trial has recently concluded finding him guilty on one charge of obstruction. Her argument that his image has been affected by three factors—his personality, his relationship with performance-enhancing drugs, and his race—make it clear, in a way that most of the other essays do not, that the athlete is sometimes part of the process of falling, although this is not always transparent.
Several essays focus on athletes from earlier time periods, giving the book an interesting perspective on the historical trajectory of athletes, fame, and celebrity. Gregory Kaliss’s essay “A Precarious Perch: Wilt Chamberlain, Basketball Stardom, and Racial Politics” is less about Chamberlain’s reputation for his sexual exploits, and more an analysis of the ways fans interacted and responded to Chamberlain during his college career and later during his time in the NBA. This essay is useful in recognizing the role that fans play in the rise and fall of athletes. Other historical essays inform readers about boxers Joe Louis and his opponent Max Schmeling, as well as an essay on Branch Rickey, the general manager who helped integrate major league baseball when he signed Jackie Robinson with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Robert Lewis’s “Branch Rickey: Moral Capitalist” is the only essay to address a nonathlete. While it is compelling to consider the ways that Rickey’s reputation has shifted over the years, the average major league baseball fan would not consider Rickey’s reputation to have declined. Moreover, using moralist and capitalist as descriptors removes the racial element in the essay, so Rickey’s whiteness, which afforded him the power and privilege in sport (and society), is not acknowledged explicitly.

Each essay has something to offer the reader, from methodology, topics, athletes, to time periods, as well as to have the reader reconsider the rise and fall of athletes and the role of fans and the media in that process. Many athletes enjoy a repairing of their reputations in old age or death; this is the case with former major league baseball player Kirby Puckett and boxer Joe Louis. Michael Jordan’s reputation seems more sullied from his grudge-filled Hall of Fame induction speech than from his failure to speak out on issues of racism and social justice during his career. Former NFL running back Jim Brown, despite a rebellious streak in the late 1960s, recently appeared in a “Declaration of Independence” promo before the Super Bowl—hardly nonconformist. Even Mike Tyson, who seems to have hit bottom at least a few times, is enjoying a slight rise in his own image, with the documentary Tyson and his role in both Hangover and Hangover 2. So the passage of time can soften images and allow for reconsiderations of images.

It would be interesting to critically read a “fall from grace” for an athlete who is currently still participating in sport. An athlete currently in their plunge might offer another perspective on the concept on which the collection is based. It would also be fascinating for readers to consider race beyond the behavior of African American male athletes, especially within the theme of “fall from grace.” Several white athletes, mostly male, have behaved in ways that would earn them entry into this collection (cyclist Lance Armstrong, NFL quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, and WWE and Olympic wrestler Kurt Angle, to name a few).

The Afterword, written by Jack Lule, pins the collection’s argument on myth. However, perhaps the world of sport is the myth. Plenty of research supports the idea that sport is not the character-building enterprise the public has been led to believe. This is a more romantic and nostalgic view of sport—that our athletes should exhibit certain values for their fans. An essay on the fall from grace of sport fans would be well suited as the concluding chapter for this collection. The book has several essays that would be suitable readings for students at the undergraduate and graduate levels.