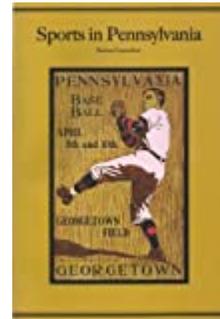


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Karen Guenther. *Sports in Pennsylvania.* Pennsylvania History Studies Series. Mansfield: Pennsylvania Historical Association, 2007. Illustrations. 117 pp. \$12.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-932304-39-8.



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In 2001, I was a senior at Northeastern High School in York County, Pennsylvania. At the time, Northeastern was one of the few school districts that did not have a football team and a well-organized group of boosters was trying to initiate a program. Concerned with the drain a new football program would place on the district's already limited resources, I naively founded the Anti-Football League (AFL). The AFL was a loose gathering of students who attended public meetings and spoke about the need to fund computer technology, drama and music programs, and facilities, before we "squandered" money on a frivolous sport. Needless to say, I ran into a juggernaut of angry parents, administrators, and fellow students who literally shouted me down, arguing that a life without football was not a life worth living.

Back in 2001, I could have used Karen Guenther's *Sports in Pennsylvania* to provide some historical context about the uphill battle I faced. Sports, as Guenther clearly and effectively argues, have played a central role in Pennsylvania's social and cultural history, from their origins in colonial amateur sports and hobbies to their emergence as professionalized, big business in the twentieth century. The Pennsylvania Historical Association published Guenther's *Sports in Pennsylvania* in 2007 as part of its Pennsylvania History Studies Series and the vol-

ume has held up well during the subsequent nine years. Like many titles in the series, *Sports in Pennsylvania* is intended to offer an introduction to its topic that could prove useful in the classroom and potentially reach audiences beyond the academy. In this, Guenther certainly succeeds.

Over the course of five roughly chronological chapters, Guenther describes the rich history of sports in Pennsylvania; she includes sections on baseball, football, basketball, soccer, and more. Within her narrative, she offers numerous pieces of trivia to impress your friends at the next Super Bowl party. For example, did you know the Pottsville Maroons played in the National Football League from 1924 to 1928 and would have won the 1925 national championship but for a controversial suspension following an unauthorized exhibition game? Did you know President Richard Nixon denied Penn State a football college championship in 1969 so he could court southern votes? Did you know that the Schuylkill Navy, a rowing club near Philadelphia, is the longest running sports association in the country? Even for those of us familiar with Pennsylvania sports, there is a lot of great information here.

But the comprehensive nature of *Sports in Pennsyl-*

vania and the abundance of information means that the book sometimes comes off as encyclopedic rather than driven by an argument. There is an implicit trend of professionalization that underlies much of this story, but Guenther does not indicate what was lost and gained for athletes and spectators during this process. Although the author does an excellent job of highlighting times when sports have intersected with gender, race, and class, I am not sure what she wants us to know about the influence sports had in those areas. For example, there are sections devoted to women's team sports and African Americans and baseball, but they primarily recount the specific contributions women and blacks have made to sports and do not necessarily attempt to tie them to larger historical questions. This is the balance that Guenther is forced to find in writing a book on a serious topic, while trying to make it accessible to all audiences. In the classroom, it may be wise to pair *Sports in Pennsylvania* with other books that delve more deeply into the historical context in which sports were played.

Going forward, would-be historians of athletics in the state should not be dissuaded by the comprehensiveness of *Sports in Pennsylvania*. There are still many areas of this history that demand more thorough study. Aside from early chapters, the book largely neglects amateur sports in favor of professional teams. This is unfortunate because most Pennsylvanians primarily experience sports as children playing tee-ball, baseball, and soccer, or as parents standing on the sidelines of their children's games. One could argue that youth sports associations and the social aspects of youth sports have more influence over the way we think of sports than periodically tuning in for an Eagles's or Phillies's game. Guenther discusses the financing of large arenas, but the fascinating ways in which Pennsylvanians pay for community

sports infrastructure, such as basketball courts, baseball diamonds, and soccer fields, is equally important. Public-private partnerships between voluntary associations and state agencies, such as the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Department of Community and Economic Development, have allowed sports to flourish in communities of all sizes yet have also made community sports contingent on the whims and opaque priorities of these agencies. Finally, Guenther mentions fishing, hunting, and other forms of outdoor recreation in her first chapter, but never returns to them later in the book. In Pennsylvania, hunting and fishing have been and remain very important social and cultural activities that have experienced a fascinating evolution in the twentieth century, especially as demographic shifts have begun to reduce the numbers of participants.

Nearly a decade after it was published, *Sports in Pennsylvania* remains a valuable study that could be used in a high school or college setting, either in whole or as selected chapters. It is also a reminder of how quickly the historical topics we study dramatically change. On page 35, a photograph is accompanied by a caption that reads, "A statue of Penn State Coach Joe Paterno, located outside Beaver Stadium in University Park, attests to his longstanding contributions to football and the university." The statue was removed in July 2012 in the wake of sexual assault allegations against longtime football booster and Paterno colleague Jerry Sandusky. Eventually the controversy would lead to sanctions from the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), criminal prosecutions, and some would say the downfall of Governor Tom Corbett. Corbett would learn, as I did in 2001, that you should never get between Pennsylvanians and their sports.

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