E. John B. Allen, *The Culture and Sport of Skiing: From Antiquity to World War II* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007). Pp. xiv + 384. US$26.95. ISBN 978-1-55849-601-9.

In an expansive, richly illustrated and thoroughly researched book, E. John B. Allen tells the story of how skiing became a modern sport. *The Culture and Sport of Skiing* recounts the transformation of the ski itself, from its earliest, utilitarian origins as a humble mode of transportation, to a piece of sporting equipment; it also describes the evolution of ideas about the meaning and value of skiing, and charts how an industry first developed based on skiing as a pleasurable pastime.

Allen relies on reports of archaeological finds, depictions in rock art and Scandinavian sagas dating back thousands of years to recreate how our ancestors used skis, especially in hunting and warfare. Throughout, Allen’s enthusiasm for his subject is always apparent – he appears almost astonished that *Finds of Swedish Skis in Bogs* was only published in English in 1950! Medieval sources, such as an account of a battle near Oslo in 1200, are used to expand upon skiing’s long military history. In the early eighteenth century, Norway drew on that lengthy history and raised ski troops, but now the Norwegian army ‘started to ski for sport in a modern fashion’, holding downhill, slalom, jumping and cross-country competitions (31). Exploits like those of Fridtjof Nansen, a national hero who skied across Greenland in 1888, assured the Norwegians’ prominence in the story of skiing. In Norway and elsewhere, notions about the health-restoring properties of skiing furthered interest in the sport. Very soon, a ‘new breed’ of tourist, the ‘winter-sporting holiday maker’, could be found on the slopes and in the hotels in the alpine regions of France, Austria, Germany and beyond (89). By around 1890, when boots with bindings and steel-edged skis first made their appearance, skiing had become a modern sport. The rest of the book details not only how that sport grew, but also how different European countries in the twentieth century exploited skiing for nationalist ends.

This indeed is one of the strengths of this book. Allen places his narrative about skiing into a wider historical context, the growth of nationalism and its horrific consequences. Skiing once again became a mode of warfare during the Great War. The French employed ski troops in the Vosges region, while the Russians used them during their advance into Poland. A later chapter on skiing under Fascism (‘Skiing under Siege’) highlights how skiing was politicized by Mussolini and Hitler. Such efforts culminated in Nazi Germany’s triumph in alpine events at the Winter Olympics in Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936.
At times, *The Culture and Sport of Skiing* seems almost too encyclopaedic. Allen clearly aims at a comprehensive history, but turning to Japan, Australia, India or Canada for only a few pages at a time detracts from his overarching narrative about the intersection of the modernization of skiing and growth of European nationalism. More problematic, though, is Allen’s rather arbitrary choice of an endpoint, the Russo-Finnish War in 1940, which cuts his work prematurely short. Allen might have recounted, for example, how the German army, in 1942, issued an appeal to the public to donate its skiing equipment to Wehrmacht soldiers. Hotel owners in the Black Forest, resentful that some visitors therefore cancelled their planned ski holidays, sent angry letters to the regional tourism office. In return, the tourism office chastised those hoteliers for not doing their ‘national duty’. Such stories certainly highlight themes that Allen emphasizes, and since he claims to follow the evolution of skiing from ‘antiquity to World War II’, he might have included similar material from later in the war. Nevertheless, *The Culture and Sport of Skiing* is an invaluable resource for any historian interested in skiing, whether as a sport, mode of warfare, or tourist practice.

KRISTIN SEMMENS © 2009
University of Victoria

James W. Pipkin, *Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2008). Pp ix + 161, bibliography, index, £20–50. ISBN: 978-0-8262-1779-0.

The autobiographies of professional athletes have long been a popular, if critically maligned, sub-genre of sports writing. While being happy to mine them for the odd nugget of revealing quotation and insider gossip, historians and social scientists have nonetheless frequently dismissed autobiographies as hurriedly assembled, poorly written and banal accounts that conceal more than they reveal. They have tended to be deemed unsuitable for study as serious texts that can be ‘read’ for wider cultural meanings, and hence relegated to the status of useful but flawed source material.

James W. Pipkin’s concise and elegantly written book offers a convincing case for autobiographies to be taken seriously because, and not in spite, of their subjectivity. An Associate Professor of English and scholar of Romanticism, Pipkin’s interests are in the language and metaphors that athletes employ and the stories they tell about their experiences of sport. Positioning his analysis firmly ‘inside the lines’ of sport, Pipkin’s aim is to probe his chosen autobiographies for an understanding of the athletes’ ‘inner experience’, an experience that he feels most journalistic and academic accounts have been unable or unwilling to reach (3).

Pipkin’s decision to eschew detailed consideration of the conventional structures, themes and tropes of autobiography is an interesting one. While acknowledging the adoption by sports autobiographers of established models and narrative techniques, it
is the more subtle motifs that recur in a range of life stories that Pipkin identifies as unique to the genre and which he uses to structure his own analysis. Four distinctive characteristics are highlighted as common to the subjective experiences of the athlete: the importance of childhood and nostalgia; the body as a source of identity; transcendent moments of sports performance; and the anxieties associated with the end of a career. Building on his assumption that ‘the meaning of sports is intertwined with its narrativity’ (17), Pipkin argues for autobiographies to be seen as a valuable medium for making sense of American cultural life.

By and large, the case is well made. The first chapter, which examines allusions to the ‘echoing green’ of youth and childhood in a range of autobiographies, is a good example of Pipkin’s careful melding of empirical research and conceptual analysis. Developing links between the mythical association of sporting play with memories of childhood, and the athlete’s sense of him or herself as an eternal child, Pipkin intelligently probes the contradictory experiences and attitudes that flow from this. He offers some particularly revealing insights here into the cloistered world of professional sport, especially the interrelationship between athlete and coach. While athletes are free to play with the freedom and joy associated with youth, they simultaneously recognize how the ‘nurturing’ role of coaches and clubs infantilizes them, denying them the social power and responsibility to mature as rounded adults. The implications of this are complex, as Pipkin shows, reflecting both a problem endemic in professional sport and a wider American cultural obsession with youth.

Chapters 2 and 3 are devoted in different ways to the body as a site of identity in sports autobiographies. For Pipkin, the hidden story many autobiographers tell involves a coming to terms with the self through developing an intimate knowledge of one’s body. He demonstrates the different ways in which athletes are able to ‘read’ their bodies, from the intensity of feeling when in peak fitness and on top form to the sensitivity to pain and fear of serious injury. He also draws out the ambiguity in the relationship between body and mind, in the sense that although the athlete’s identity is bound up with his or her body, he or she is also conscious of the body as an object, distanced and separate from the self. This relationship is further examined in an excellent discussion of the performing body and the athlete’s experience of ‘magical’ or transcendent moments. Pipkin teases out a number of revealing examples of athletes contemplating their experiences of ‘peak performance’. He is helped by the fact that some of his subjects, such as basketball players Bill Russell and Bill Bradley and marathon swimmer Diana Nyad, are particularly articulate and reflective about the relationship between imagination and physical action. But there is every indication that the feelings of wholeness, balance, mystery, freedom and ‘magic’ they describe are central to the self-image of many elite athletes.

For a book so packed with ideas, it is perhaps inevitable that some sections are more fully realized than others. Pipkin is especially good on attitudes to retirement and its metaphorical links with death and the loss of personal identity. What might be dismissed as the hackneyed references of athletes to their love of, and addiction to,
sport are similarly discussed with considerable subtlety and sophistication. The lengthy analyses of gendered and racialized bodies in chapter 2 are, by comparison, rather pedestrian, while the final case study of Denis Rodman and autobiography in a media age sits uneasily with the rest of the book. It is also surprising that there is little engagement with theoretical ideas about the ghostwriter in autobiography (no mention is made of Philippe Lejeune’s work, for instance), and a little disappointing that the author sidesteps issues of readership and the changing social and commercial context in which his chosen texts were constructed.

Ultimately, however, Sporting Lives is a highly readable and an important book. Based on a study of over eighty autobiographies, it is a well-researched and imaginative exploration of a hitherto largely neglected subject. As such it should become a key reference point for future work and act as a guide for scholars to think creatively about how they handle sports autobiographies as sources and subjects of analysis.

MATTHEW TAYLOR © 2009
De Montfort University

John Harms and Paul Daffey (eds), The Footy Almanac: The AFL Season One Game at a Time (Melbourne: Malarkey Publications, 2007). Pp. xvii + 534, appendices. AUS$29.95. ISBN 978 0646 48195 1.

This is an important book and a fine initiative. With accounts of each game of the 2007 Australian Football League season, this is a yearbook with a difference. For these are the accounts of footy barrackers (fans), those who live and die each moment with their beloved clubs. Thirty-four writers between them cover the games, and although they do not always support either of the two clubs playing, they provide a strong sense of the rich experiences that the code of Australian Rules football offers its fans. There is the hope and absurd belief. The great tension and angst when victory and defeat hang in the balance. The abuse of the umpires whose adjudications all too often appear to favour the other team. The scapegoating of players whose mistakes and failure to put their ‘body on the line’ lead to such frustration. The moment of distraction and even boredom as the season peters out for some clubs. The despair and melancholia that loss can bring. The schadenfreude available when a bitter enemy is vanquished or humiliated. And the joy of victory that can at times approach an unspeakable ecstasy.

Studies of Australian Rules football still tend to focus on the events and deeds of footballers and their clubs. This book has much of that as well – there are tables with each game listing the score, goal-kickers, milestones, debuts, umpires, odds before the game, the Brownlow votes (for the fairest and best player as adjudged by the umpires), the votes by the writer for the book’s Malarkey Medal and appendices listing some other relevant facts and figures from the season. But it also provides an
insight into arguably the most striking aspect of footy: the passions and zeal of its fans.

That said, this is not a scholarly book as such. Though there are moments of reflection, analysis and exploration, there is no systematic investigation or sustained scrutiny of the excesses of fans. This is not intended as a criticism, for the book does not aim to be a work of scholarship. It aims instead to give voice to fans rather than professional commentators, and in so doing provides an excellent resource for further scholarship into the so-called madness of ‘Aussie Rules’ barrackers, as well as for comparative studies of the passions of sports fans. The Footy Almanac is particularly valuable for the way it chronicles the 2007 football season, taking us back to the moments of surprise and the unfolding dramas of the year. The book is also useful for alternative accounts of games to those provided by the mainstream media, and thus is a source for a different, more personal historical context.

If the greatest strength of the The Footy Almanac is the voice it gives to fans, this absence of the voices of certain fans is its greatest weakness. Most surprisingly there are no female writers among the writers whose accounts we read. This absence is particularly notable for Australian Rules football, where women make up almost half the spectators at any given game. Fortunately the editors have included some women for their 2008 Almanac, but more are necessary to try and better capture the rich role that this unique code plays in the seasonal lives of its followers.

MATTHEW KLUGMAN © 2009
Victoria University, Melbourne

John Cordner, David Allen, Paul Daffey, Robin Grow and June Senyard, Black & Blue: The Story of Football at the University of Melbourne (Melbourne: Melbourne University Football Club, 2007). Pp. Xxi + 490, index. AUS$49.95 (hb). ISBN 9780646474083.

Educators and educational institutions played key roles in the development of several sports. In England, cricket and football were in disrepute until the sports were adopted by public schools in the first half of the nineteenth century. Reformers such as Thomas Arnold, the headmaster of Rugby School, saw the playing field as a means of keeping boys occupied constructively and teaching them the virtues of courage and teamwork. The establishment of sports clubs as voluntary associations that allowed their members to take exercise and enjoy the company of others reflected the spirit that public schools attempted to create. The rules of cricket had already been codified, but schools played versions of football with rules that varied according to the size and nature of the playing field available. A meeting of students at Cambridge University in 1846 that agreed on a set of rules was the forerunner of the Football Association (FA). The ‘house’ competitions of the public schools appear to have been the model for the FA Cup. Michael Cusack, founder of the Gaelic Athletic
Association, was a schoolteacher. In America, baseball was started by clubs for gentlemen, with the sport only becoming commercialized after the Civil War. In the 1870s, Harvard and other elite colleges were the drivers of rule changes that took American football away from rugby rules.

The University of Melbourne was established in 1853, and students began playing organized games of football in 1859, according to rules that had been drawn up by members of the Melbourne Football Club. The Melbourne University Football Club (generally known as the University Football Club, or University) was formed in the following year and began playing matches against other clubs in Melbourne. The rules of what later became known as Australian Football were then in a fluid state and the players themselves had to try and reach agreement beforehand on how games would be played. University’s history is informative, not because it played a leading role in the evolution of Australian Football, but as an exemplar of an amateur club. University, like Scotland’s Queen’s Park, was a club that retained its amateur status while those it competed with gradually, and surreptitiously, embraced professionalism. It joined the Victorian Football Association, the game’s major controlling body, in 1885 and applied successfully to join the code’s major league, the Victorian Football League (VFL) in 1908. Though it enjoyed little success in the VFL, University continued to operate on a strictly amateur basis, to the applause of the press that considered that such a club raised the ‘moral tone’ of the league.

The club folded in 1914, and after the war resumed in Melbourne’s amateur competition. ‘Professionalism’, the club argued, ‘does not stand for clean sport, because of the money element; it stands for underhand tricks, and dirty play, for winning by fair means or foul’. University saw itself as a bastion of ‘the cleaner, fairer atmosphere of amateur sport, where the game is played for its own sake’ (p.65). Since 1920, no University team has played against a professional team; the club’s only concession to professionalism was made when it began appointing paid coaches in 1960. It fielded two teams – the ‘Blacks’ and the ‘Blues’ – with Blacks having first choice of players. The Blacks won 11 premierships from 1921 to 1949, with Blues not winning a premiership until 1952, when the club decided to field teams of equal strength. University recruited players from among its current student population, with a committee made up of representatives of the Blacks and Blues allocating players to either of the teams. University footballers played matches mostly against public-school old boys’ teams and in intervarsity carnivals, representing Victoria against amateur teams from other states.

In Black & Blue, a group of authors, commissioned by the University Football Club, explores this rich history with flair and great skill. The five authors are all experienced writers of football history, but come from different backgrounds. Three of them are professional people who write as hobbyists, one is a journalist and one is an academic. They have each been given the task of writing about clearly defined periods in the club’s history – Robin Grow on the period before 1900, David Allen on the subsequent period until the Second World War, John Cordner from the Second
World War until 1952 (when Blues won their first premiership), June Senyard from 1953 to 1974 and Paul Daffey from 1975 to 2005. These sections vary in approach and style. For example, Daffey’s narrative follows a chronological format, while Senyard’s analysis is thematic. Allen’s four chapters have 311 endnotes, while Cordner’s five chapters have none. Cordner’s qualitative data come from questionnaires, Senyard’s and Daffey’s from personal interviews. But while the change in style as the reader moves from one part of the book to another is obvious, the diversity is never jarring. There is an index, but unfortunately it is of names only.

This is a long book that has something for everyone. Lengthy appendices detail the past achievements of University teams and players. The photographs – nearly all of them previously unpublished – are excellent. Both the Melbourne University Football Club and the individual authors have good reason to be proud of the book. It will provide much information to serious scholars who wish to understand how amateur clubs operated in the face of the rising professionalism of other clubs that competed with them for players and resources. There are fascinating anecdotes that reveal University’s ethos – such as the information that committee meetings in the 1950s were not allowed to start until The Goon Show had finished – on nearly every page. As one player pointed out, ‘we really did take it seriously but the pre-match tension, bravado and pugnacity was not for us – football had always been just a game you played for fun’ (pp.189–90).

LIONEL FROST © 2009
Monash University

Boria Majumdar and Nalin Mehta, Olympics: The India Story (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2008). Pp. xxiv + 195, index. Rs.695. ISBN 97881 7223 7592.

At a time when new books on the Olympic Games are in abundance, Olympics: The India Story by Boria Majumdar and Nalin Mehta stands out as a very special offering. Unsurprisingly, a number of books have already been written on the 2008 games in Beijing in the lead-up to the occasion, and no doubt several more books will review the occasion. While many of these books are worthy, their concentration on a particular Olympic Games necessitates them having a limited historical focus. This is not the case with Olympics: The India Story, a book that focuses on the history of a country at the Olympic Games and on that country’s relationship with the Olympic movement. As a result Majumdar and Mehta present their reader with a work of greater scope than might be entirely evident in the book’s title. This is not merely a sports book regaling stories of athletic triumph and downfall. Olympics is a work of serious cultural history in which, at every turn, political and social themes are interwoven with the discussion of sporting matters. As such it is no overstatement to say that the authors make an important contribution to the study of Indian history. Sport as a social institution of much significance in India offers a telling point of
connection with broader social and political events in that country, and it is the ambition of Majumdar and Mehta – successfully achieved – to make this connection as clearly as possible.

The authors, Majumdar and Mehta, are both academic historians, and their book is rightly regarded as a work of scholarship. However, this is not to suggest that *Olympics: The India Story* is exclusively a book for academics and university students. As with Majumdar’s previous books on cricket, this book is written in a highly accessible way and will be of interest to the ‘intelligent lay person’. It should be very widely read, not only within India but beyond, by anyone wanting to know about the evolving relations of colonialism and postcolonialism in that country. Indeed, by the end of the book, one would have to question how the history of these relations could be meaningfully traced without the type of articulation with sporting themes that Majumdar and Mehta provide.

The book is clearly a labour of love, the result of indefatigable and meticulous research that has taken its authors not only on excursions around India but to the International Olympic Committee’s Archive in Lausanne, Switzerland. The ‘treasure trove of material . . . uncovered in the vaults of the IOC’ mainly involving correspondence between Indian sports administrators and IOC officials, has been marshalled to reveal a fascinating story – or, more correctly, a series of stories – over generations. Unearthing such material is one thing, putting it to effective use something else again. Majumdar and Mehta are skilled in using documentary items in a way that not only provides the necessary factual basis for an historical account but serves to enliven the exchanges between key protagonists within India’s Olympic history.

As might be expected, the chapters proceed chronologically, commencing with an opening chapter discussing the emergence of India’s Olympic movement and the country’s earliest games participation in 1920. As indicated, the authors go well beyond a merely descriptive history and the associated facts and figures. Chapter 1, for example, sets the scene of India as a colonized Asian country within the British Empire. It looks at how the ‘British games ethic’ and its underpinning value of ‘muscular Christianity’ found favour with the Indian elite. On the one hand sport became part of the colonizing process and acted as what some writers, including Majumdar and Mehta, refer to as a form of hegemony. By hegemony they mean a system of power relations based in culture. Colonial rule certainly works politically, but for the colonizer to gain the compliance of the colonized people it also works through culture, and in India sport became most important in this regard. The cultural hegemony of cricket in India has been well analysed in the writing of the Australian historian Brian Stoddart and subsequently by Majumdar. But importantly, their accounts of cricket are not entirely about how cricket was imposed upon the Indian people by a colonial ruler: this would be far too simplistic and also a historical misrepresentation. As Stoddart and Majumdar have observed, hegemony is not a watertight power process in which the colonizer has things all its own way. Just as the people of colonized nations fight back politically,
they also fight back culturally, and cricket is undeniably a most prominent example of this occurring through sport.

However – to reiterate – the counter-hegemony is not to be measured in terms of how many cricket matches India wins over England; it has to do with cricket being reclaimed as an Indian sport of indigenous cultural significance. Similarly, Majumdar and Mehta note that the most important thing culturally about the sports played at the Olympic Games is not the medals won but the significance that these sports have for peoples of rather different countries in their own ways and in how they are drawn together in a mutual quest for sporting excellence. Nevertheless, success certainly helps to highlight how certain sports have been mastered and often gives indication as to how deeply rooted a sport has become within what Raymond Williams referred to as a country’s ‘common culture’. There are only up to a few sports in each country that can aspire to this level of national prominence; in India, as Majumdar and Mehta suggest, cricket and hockey occupy this position. Understandably, then hockey – as an Olympic sport – receives considerable coverage in Majumdar and Mehta’s book. Indeed, hockey is at the heart of discussion throughout a number of chapters, particularly in the middle of the book. India won its first Olympic gold medal in hockey at the Amsterdam games of 1928, the inaugural occasion for hockey as an Olympic event. This success certainly, as indicated above, gave indication as to how deeply hockey had been embraced in India and, although not wanting to contradict what I have said above, gave the appearance of tweaking the imperialist nose: hockey had been brought to India by British servicemen towards the end of the 1880s.

India enjoyed dominance for a long period in men’s hockey at the Olympic Games, winning gold medals from 1928 to 1956 and then again in 1964. However, since then only one gold medal has come in 1980. Majumdar and Mehta note a number of reasons as to how the decline can be explained, including internal administrative incompetence. But the main reason appears to be the shift in the 1970s from the real ‘turf sod’ playing surface to AstroTurf and the replacement of leather balls with plastic balls. The deeply embedded tradition of play came to work against India as hockey became an increasingly global game and countries without a significant history in the sport moved straight into step with the new equipment, conditions and associated playing styles. Thus, what can be regarded as the cultural robustness of hockey in India can also be explained as the basis for its decline in international competition.

Globalization and sport emerges as a key theme in the latter chapters of *Olympics: The India Story* especially in the exceptional chapter on the role of the mass media in the hyping and privileging of cricket over other sports, hockey in particular. The penultimate chapter looks at what appears to be a desperate quest for Olympic gold, whereby young athletes are recruited into the Indian Army and given no military type duties but rather spending all their time training in their particular sport. In this way India has become a just another global sporting nation obsessed with the Olympic medal tally and the presumed kudos that comes with being well placed on the rungs
of that dubious table. Should the traditions of India in such sports as hockey, wrestling, weightlifting, badminton and tennis be nurtured within this new aspiration to Olympic success, then well enough. But should respect for tradition be cast asunder for all that seems to glitter, this would be rather sad.

I can imagine no better guides than Boria Majumdar and Nalin Mehta to our contemplation of India’s Olympic future, as well as reflection upon its past. Their *Olympics: The India Story* is required reading for anyone who regards sport as a serious social and cultural matter.

JOHN HUGHSON © 2009

*University of Central Lancashire*

Dick Booth, *Talking of Sport: The Story of Radio Commentary* (London: Sport Books, 2008). Pp. 320. £17.99. ISBN 978-1899807-64-2.

Dick Booth’s book recounting the story of sports commentary on radio in the UK and in selected nations across the world is a fascinating and rare analysis of an overlooked aspect of broadcasting and sports culture. Its attempt to trace the origins of commentary technique in the BBC and beyond should be welcomed as an important contribution to our understanding of how a new vocabulary of sport was literally invented and innovated from the 1920s onward. Based on over 70 interviews with sports broadcasters, written archive material and hours of listening to recordings in the British Library’s sound archive, this book is packed full of interesting biographical information, transcripts of key sports commentaries and reminiscences of life behind the microphone.

Booth clearly has a passion for his subject that comes through his extensive narrative of sports commentary. The book is divided into four main sections: how radio commentary became a part of life; the making of the commentator; radio, sport and the nation; and the challenges of different sports. The main theme is to explore the nature of sports commentary, how it was practised and the problems and issues faced by commentators in broadcasting to the radio audience. The focus on commentators, as both skilled broadcasters and radio personalities in their own right, runs throughout the book. How commentators strive to inform and entertain their listeners is of prime importance. As Booth suggests in his prologue, ‘the voices in which we speak are statements of our selves, and of our individuality. This surely, along with the fascination of sport itself, is why radio commentary is still popular.’ The outside broadcasting department of the BBC certainly garnered a whole array of familiar voices – many, like John Snagge, who from the mid-1930s was *the* voice behind the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race, would become synonymous with particular sports and events. Details of the BBC’s trailblazers in running commentary are all given their due status. H.B.T. Wakelam, George Allison, Howard Marshall, John Snagge and the important producers of the inter-war period such as Lance...
Sieveking and the BBC’s first Head of OBs Gerald Cock are lauded as true pioneers. There is an interesting small section in chapter 6 on sports broadcasts during the Second World War that brought names such as Raymond Glendenning and Rex Alston to the microphone. Others, for instance Brian Johnston, Peter Dimmock, Kenneth Wolstenholme and Max Robertson, having served in the war also got their starts in broadcasting.

The most influential figure in the BBC’s formative years of sports commentary, however, was Seymour Joly de Lotbiniere, known as ‘Lobby’, who set the benchmarks for commentators from John Arlott to Wynford Vaughan-Thomas – two of the greatest broadcasters of their generation. Booth provides detailed anecdotes based on the written archives and biographical accounts of just how influential Lobby became and how his Monday-morning review of ‘programmes since we last met’ became legend in the department. Nearly all of the commentators Lobby worked with were men and one of the more interesting stories Booth recounts is Lobby’s exploration of the use of women commentators. They remained ‘excessively rare’ (p.57). Booth does not critically reflect on the reasons for the gender bias in the BBC’s recruitment of commentators but, in a citation from ‘Some Notes on Commentary’ written by Lobby, Booth reveals it was ‘for technical reasons’ connected to the pitch of a woman’s voice. Lobby may have contributed to sports broadcasting as a male enclave but he also introduced the ideas of ‘homework’ and the ability for commentators to ‘bring in the broad context of the event’ (p.57). This often connected the drama of sport to wider meanings and identity of the nation through sports broadcasting.

In later chapters Booth analyses the role of radio sport in everyday life, in particular the way in which major encounters in different sports – whether it be boxing, athletics, baseball or football – brought people together through the popular imagination of sport and the nation. One of the most fascinating aspects of Booth’s story of commentary is how this imagining affected different sports in different nations. His comparative analysis is both rare and refreshing in relation to other histories of media sport. In a series of short profiles we are introduced to Nicolo` Carosio, who is celebrated as an iconic figure of Italian broadcasting from the 1930s, Finn Amundson and Peder Christian Anderson, who were synonymous with sport in Norway, and the Georgian Kote Makharadze, whose renown across the former Soviet Union was born of his commentaries on Dynamo Tbilisi.

Outside the UK, the most detailed account of a nation’s sports commentary technique comes in Booth’s analysis of Brazilian football commentary, characterized by the extended cries of ‘Goooooal!’. Booth explores the connections between broadcasting, football, music and culture that combine to create commentaries full of ‘inventive and playful language’ (p.150). Booth also reflects on the wider influence of television on the declining popularity of radio commentary, particularly after the 1970s. Yet there are some great quotes from past commentators and players that emphasize the importance of radio commentary in Brazilian football culture. Paula Cezar, a former footballer and expatriate living in London compares the two styles to suggest ‘English commentators commentate only with the mind. Brazilian
commentators play the game as they talk, and commentate with the heart’ (p.155). The book also connects the power of radio with the spread of cricket in India. Even if the concept of cricket as ‘the national game’ is overstated, there is little doubt that access to the BBC’s post-war commentaries on Test cricket by John Arlott and others combined with the rising popularity of Hindi commentaries on All India Radio had a profound impact on the accessibility to the game. Booth briefly acknowledges the complexity of language and identity in India and how after a shift in policy in 1962 AIR began to broadcast in several languages in different parts of the nation. A final connection between sports broadcasting and national sporting cultures is made in a chapter on New Zealand, where the commentaries of Winston McCarthy contrasted with the ‘disembodied BBC-style’ through his ‘conversational, plain-speaking, and passionate’ approach to sport (p.191).

The final chapters of the book are given over to various sports, including football, boxing, golf, tennis and cricket. Booth traces the history of specific styles and the transformations that have occurred over the years. One significant change here has been the inroads of expert summarizers, who are given their own analysis in chapter 15, and the wider question of whether a commentator should be an expert in the sport or an expert broadcaster. Booth concludes: ‘Voice, knowledge, broadcasting technique, small-group facilitator: the commentator needs it all’ (p.298).

This is an important book for its array of sources and the comparative approach to commentary in different parts of the world and across different sports. There are limitations to its insight of both the history of radio and sport. At times there is a need for some wider historical context either regarding the place of sport in the BBC or the wider social and cultural importance of sport in society and its connection with broadcasting. There are also some key areas of BBC sports broadcasting that are not developed or explored, such as the rise of regional sports programming (particularly in the north of England, Scotland and Wales), the importance of the programme Sports Report in developing sports news and its competition with the outside broadcasting department, the role of commentaries in the BBC’s overseas service and the eventual competition that came from commercial radio that introduced another dominant feature of sports broadcasting – the post-match phone in. These are, though, minor criticisms of an excellent celebration of the radio commentator.

RICHARD HAYNES © 2009
University of Stirling

Mark Bowden, The Best Game Ever: Giants vs. Colts, 1958, and the Birth of the Modern NFL (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008). Pp. 240, bibliography, index. $23.00 (hb). ISBN 978-0-87113-988-7.

In a calculated step away from his larger current-event writing efforts such as Black Hawk Down and Guests of the Ayatollah, Mark Bowden has taken a page from author
David Halberstam and written a shorter, lighter book focusing on sports history, *The Best Game Ever: Giants vs. Colts, 1958, and the Birth of the Modern NFL*. At a mere 240 pages, Bowden’s commentary on the game is smartly concise and his treatment of the players and coaches is detailed, including well-researched insights into their varying motives, successes and shortcomings. Bowden’s objective is simple: to define a pivotal moment forever frozen in American time by stressing its significance in the lives of the participants, both on and off the field.

Bowden joins the ranks of other authors trying to capitalize on the upcoming 50th anniversary of the 1958 NFL Championship. Among the volumes are Lou Sahadi’s *One Sunday in December: The 1958 NFL Championship Game and How it Changed Professional Football*, Dave Klein’s *The Game of Their Lives* and Frank Gifford’s *The Glory Game: How the 1958 NFL Championship Game Changed Football Forever*. And these are just the most recent offerings; the fabled game has been written about since it was played. Each author tries for original insight in his rendering of this oft-told tale. If the purpose of Bowden’s book was to simply relive the game from 50 years ago, his account will pale in comparison to Gifford’s memoir, since Gifford played in the game. But where Bowden’s account stands out from the competition is in his accounts of the athletes’ histories and his interpretation of this game’s significance in context of the history of professional football. In short, Bowden works to limn the cultural importance of the Baltimore Colts’ ‘sudden-death’ overtime upset against the favoured New York Giants on a cold December evening at the Cold War’s height.

This was the National Football League’s first success in national television. Far more used to the college gridiron game, or perhaps local broadcasts of the professional variant, American viewers this time collectively experienced the drama of a live NFL championship. What followed was promptly labelled ‘The Greatest Game Ever Played’. Over 50 million tuned in to witness the 1958 title tilt between the Colts and Giants. It was a classic match-up between the Giants number-one defence and the Colts number-one offence. The game featured 17 future members of the NFL Hall of Fame, players and coaches, including the Giants’ Frank Gifford, Sam Huff, Mel Triplett, Pat Summerall, Vince Lombardi and Tom Landry; and the Colts’ Johnny Unitas, Raymond Berry, Alan Ameche, Art Donovan, Gino Marchetti and Weeb Ewbank. Regulation time ended in a 17–17 tie, thanks to the Colts’ Unitas-directed drive for a late field goal. Even the players were uncertain what the rules called for next. For the first time, the championship game was decided in overtime. The overtime would be ‘sudden-death’, that is, ending whenever a team scored first. On their first drive, the Baltimore Colts drove the length of the field behind Unitas’s passing, scoring the clinching touchdown when Alan Ameche rush through a hole cleared by Lenny Moore’s critical block. The photo image of Ameche ploughing into the end zone, with Moore on the ground and an imperturbable Unitas already turning toward the sidelines, was an instant icon.

Immediately, Commissioner Bert Bell named it the ‘greatest game’ he’d ever seen. As Bowden points out, the designation applied because the game’s importance
transcended the gridiron; the game served as the catalyst that brought professional football from the relative obscurity of the 1950s into the limelight as one of the most popular and most viewed sports in America today.

Bowden’s methodology is deceptively simple. The first half of the book is dedicated to the history of the men who played the game. Using insights gleaned from personal interviews and research, Bowden explains the lifelong preparations by the players that made this game a culmination of years of hard work. The second half of the book describes the game itself. Drawing from radio achievements and interviews, Bowden’s account is detailed and includes reactions from people on the field, in the crowd, and watching at home.

A highlight in the book is Bowden’s description of Baltimore Colts wide receiver Raymond Berry. Bowden describes Berry as a Texas boy with a gigantic love for the game that helped him overcome his physical limitations. Characterized as remarkably non-athletic, Berry spent hours practising to master his position. Berry was the rare player/scholar; he kept meticulous notes on fellow wide receivers and defensive backs. He would watch hours of game film, visualizing his position, mastering techniques, timing and his opponents’ tendencies. His pass routes were legendarily precise; his rapport with Unitas appeared mystical.

For an international audience unfamiliar with the history of American Football or with questions about American’s obsession with the sport, Bowden’s placement of the 1958 NFL Championship in a cultural context gives important insights into the collective American unconscious. This obsession has long been described as a ‘weekly re-enactment of the Adamic myth of the frontier’ [1] – where athletes are engaged in the epic battle between good and evil, to the victors go the prized land. But Bowden takes this idea a step further. To Bowden this game served a symbolic purpose best evidenced by the literal collision of the great dichotomies represented by the teams. The 1950s in America was a period of great economic prosperity enjoyed by many but not all. In this game, the teams and the athletes represented the ongoing struggle between the rich and the poor, the white- and the blue-collar workers, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and even the brains and the brawn. In one corner, the New York Giants embodied the prosperity of New York City. They were the glamour team, serving as a representation of the white-collar worker at a time when Manhattan ruled New York, New York seemed to rule the United States and the United States looked at the world as its sphere of influence. The faces of the team were plastered on billboards and magazines. Most recognizable in popular culture was running back Frank Gifford, the handsome blond University of Southern California grad. Gifford was a crossover star, with showbiz appeal transcending football. He had already begun acting in Hollywood and went on to an illustrious career as a sports commentator. Another star was the Marlboro Man himself, quarterback Charlie Conerly, who endorsed the favoured cigarette brand. The Giants were anchored by a brawny defensive linebacker Sam Huff, whose self-proclaimed mission was to inflict pain on the opposing players.
On the other side, the studious and mild-mannered Berry would compile multiple notebooks containing his calculated plan of attack. Baltimore itself was a blue-collar port city with little gloss and plenty of brawn, known mainly for its inhabitants’ crab-eating habits, its situation as an east coast traffic bottleneck and a newly prominent football team. Football players on the whole, but particularly the Colts’ players, were generally paid little, usually a few thousand dollars a year. The Colts’ players worked multiple jobs, even during the season, to make ends meet. The players — black and white alike in a still-segregated southern city — were thus embedded into the community. At the same time, with their efficient offensive attack, the Colts looked emblematic of the well-oiled industrialized machine with multiple parts running smoothly to create an unstoppable force. Literally, these smooth-running parts are best by represented by Bowden’s treatment of Unitas and Berry, both men surprising non-athletic, yet perfecting the meticulous timing of the professional passing attack through hours of practice.

The relative brevity of this book does not distract from its overall message. Bowden’s writing is straightforward and his work well-crafted and supported by primary sources. Bowden relies heavily on personal interviews, which results in a short bibliography with but a few titles for additional study. This book’s intended audience would be both the general fan of American football and the scholar looking for insights into the culture of the American 1950s. This reviewer felt the strength of the book resides in Bowden’s clear-eyed depiction of the players and the resultant depiction of 1958 America.

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Note

[1] Ian Johnston, ‘God Rides a Harley in the Land of the Free’, public lecture, Malaspina University College, Vancouver Island University, Canada, 19 Feb. 1997, available online at http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/introser/adam.htm, accessed 22 Oct. 2008.