

A FEEL FOR THE BALL

Sport is a microcosm, a stitched, leather globe that I can almost get my hand completely around. As the slippery spheres of politics, economics, and science slip from my grasp, sport is a smooth ball with three holes conveniently drilled or with a pebbled grain that I can firmly grip on those rare occasions when I cannot get the entire thing in my hand. Only the medicine ball requires two hands, but its days have been numbered by the Universal weight machine and other technological innovations. Sport, like life, then, is ephemeral; a baseball, for example, takes eleven minutes to hand-stitch but lasts on average five pitches in the major leagues. The ball lasts just long enough for a player or a fan to feel its seams and stitches. Every dimple or protrusion on the ball's surface is a facet of life, an idea that fingers press hard against before the ball flies off into the dugout or space.

One of the first seams on the sporting "ball" that I could get a grip on was its language. I grew up reading Shirley Povich in the *Washington Post* and later Jim Murray in the *Los Angeles Times*, whom James Dickey has praised as "America's greatest poet who never published a poem." I still aspire to describe Rickey Henderson's "strike zone as the size of Hitler's heart," the Indianapolis 500 as "a run for the lilies," or the Chicago Cubs as "the Ursa Minors."

The word *sport* itself is a clipped form of *disport*, and ever since I could read, I have loved to disport myself in the language of athletes. Among the first words to dazzle my eye were the marvelous alliterative monikers like the Sultan of Swat and the Splendid Splinter. About the same time, I began using *can of corn*, *Texas leaguer*, and *southpaw* on the neighborhood sandlots. Years later, I discovered that life itself can be described as a ball game. (Indeed, the precedent for such metaphorical usage is very old: Genesis begins, "In the big inning."). Hardly anyone scores right off the bat fresh from the bush leagues, but if you keep your eye on the ball, you might get to first base. Should you fail, you can always take a rain check or go into extra innings. Eventually even those out in left field hit a home run. The trick is to know the score and touch all the bases. Unless you're sent to the showers, you're home free.

The trouble is that for many, perhaps the majority of men, talking sports may be as close as they can come to intimacy. One summer I worked for a Georgia foreman to whom masculine intimacy was an alien concept, who urged his laborers on by saying, "Hunker down, you hairy dawgs." Men who don't follow the sports page are left with only power tools to kindle the flame of manly conversation. Too often men at a social gathering are left feeling like Lefty Driesell's Maryland basketball team visiting the civilized confines of the neo-gothic Duke campus. Lefty's rag-tag, playground-style team was greeted by a sign that read, "Ain't no steel nets here."

Another "stitch on the ball" is the telling number or statistic. I do not have Ty Cobb's .367 lifetime batting average or Cy Young's 511 lifetime victories in mind, though these are meaningful numbers—ideals for the young to strive toward the way Hank Aaron spent a career chasing home run number 715. For mere mortals, who do hundred sit-ups every morning in order to swing a softball bat *and* mow the yard on the same weekend, I'm referring to numbers more mundane but still dazzling and true: running 526 consecutive pool balls, sinking 499 straight free-throws, or doing 37,350 pushups, each in twenty-four hours or less.

Related to the numerical "stitches" on the sporting ball are the mythic feats that may change lives. In high school I spent the better part of two years trying to exceed my personal best of 5' 4" in the high jump. I never succeeded, but when I read of the one-legged high jumper Arnie Boldt soaring over 6' 8", I vowed never to high jump again. Call it the

“anxiety of influence.” Feats such as Mantle’s 565’ home run, Ruth’s throwing two balls simultaneously from one hand both for strikes, and Abebe Bilika’s two barefooted victories in the Olympic marathon may have ended more athletic careers than we will ever know. But as any coach will tell you, quitting just because your golf partner hit a 170 yard drive into the cup without a bounce or a roll, or pulling your team off the field just because the opposition has a pitcher, who when his right arm tires, pitches left-handed, is flagrant defeatism.

Some athletic feats, such as hitting a double and stealing first on a pitch to the next batter, are simply foolish. Others are not so much inane as they are excessive, for zeal is another of the ball’s “stitches.” A softball teammate of mine, for instance, was playing in a weekend tournament when a call came from his nine-month pregnant wife. My friend, who was in the on-deck circle when he received the word, told the excited messenger, “Tell her to wait until I hit.” Such zeal breeds odd excesses that are as grotesque as the lumpy tureen called the America’s Cup. Into this pot one might place the entire “sport” of body building, the Hawaiian Ironman Triathlon, and Jack La Lanne’s towing seventy dinghies loaded with seventy people one mile on his seventieth birthday. Also deserving of inclusion are the financial excesses of sport: baseball hitters who average \$30,000 a hit, pitchers who get \$1,500 a pitch, and Honus Wagner baseball cards selling for \$100,000 apiece. One of these rare items was crumpled recently and immediately lost \$40,000 of its value. Don’t get me wrong; I’m all for a free market, but I don’t think the team owners or the state should receive all that money. What I object to is the mad excess of sport—what one critic of Olympic swimming was referring to when he said, “All a swimmer’s youth evaporates in the pool.” But at least a swimmer finishes his or her competitive career with a healthy body; the zealous footballer, on the other hand, may finish his with the zippered, arthritic knees of a Joe Namath. As Merle Kessler wrote, “Football players, like prostitutes, are in the business of ruining their bodies for the pleasure of strangers.”

Nevertheless, I remain hopeful of change, for nowhere is change more evident than in the sporting microcosm. The winner of the first automobile race in history, for example, in 1894 averaged eleven miles per hour; today’s Indianapolis 500 winners average close to 200. The Matterhorn, which was not climbed until 1865, now has thousands who have claimed its summit. Johnny Weissmuller, who won five Olympic medals in the 1920s, could not make a good college swim team if he were in his prime today. Sadly, much change such as the proposals for thumbless gloves and head protection for boxers has been resisted in the name of “box-office.” Doubtless many of the approximately five hundred boxers who have died in the ring since 1918 would have lived if these innovations had been adopted. Some critics of sports like James Brady blame the “corruption” of sport on “aluminum bats, Technicolor tennis shirts, and double-knit fabrics.” But personally I’ve never been much of a purist. I like the designated hitter, the video-taped review, the Fosbury Flop, and soccer-style field-goal kickers because they’ve all made their respective sports fairer or more interesting. It’s hard to believe that before the jump shot was invented by Hank Lusetti in the mid-1940s, the flatfooted, two-handed set shot prevailed in college and professional basketball. Women’s basketball was even worse: as late as the 1960s, a player was allowed two dribbles, and then she had to shoot or pass the ball lest she “over-exert” herself.

With the exceptions of catcher/spy Moe Berg, running back/Supreme Court Justice Byron “Whizzer” White, and boxer/Shakespearean Gene Tunney, professional and amateur athletes are seldom esteemed for their intelligence. But when a better way of winning is found, jocks or

their coaches are quick on the uptake. Except for some lip service paid to physical fitness, the intelligentsia historically has been careful to observe the “seam” of the ball that separates sports and education. The former President of Harvard Charles Eliot Norton typifies the ignorance and opposition of academe. Norton proposed eliminating the entire Harvard baseball program because pitchers had developed the curve ball, and such “a deliberate attempt to deceive,” he said, should not be tolerated at Harvard. Coach Vince Lombardi, on the other hand, thought that a school without a football program was nothing more than “a medieval study hall.” Too often, educators, to paraphrase a former Oklahoma State president, are trying to build a university the athletic department can be proud of. Such a bias led one Florida State professor to give test answers and final grades of “A” to forty-two athletes in his Russian history class. And in 1989 at the University of Nebraska, athletes who were declared “learning disabled” after admission became eligible for all the perquisites of a blind or deaf student. Texts were taped by tutors for their charges to listen to, the athletes went to class with their own note takers, exams were read to them, and they were given extra time to complete them.

Such a deplorable state is perhaps inevitable given the deterioration of the family in recent years. An examination of the miniature world of sports reveals a splitting of the “seams.” Children, it appears, are increasingly likely to be taught a sport by a coach than a parent. And even among intact families, the typical American father can ruefully confess along with Joseph Epstein that “I’ve spent more time with Curt Gowdy than with my own father.” When Pop Warner football and Little League baseball games become struggles of parental egos, how are children going to learn that one day they must mark their own score cards? Ideally, says Scott Russell Sanders, in an industrial/service economy:

Instead of consulting the stars or the entrails of birds, father and son consult the smudged newspapers to see how their chosen spirits are faring. They fiddle with the dials of radios, hoping to catch the oracular murmur of a distant game. The father recounts heroic deeds, not from the field of battle but from the field of play. The seasons about which he speaks lead not to harvests but to championships. No longer intimate with the wilderness, no longer familiar even with the tame land of farms, we create artificial landscapes bounded by lines of paint or lime. Within those boundaries, as within the frame of a chessboard or painting, life achieves a memorable, seductive clarity.

Frequently, the reality of parental involvement is more sordid. In 1991 Mrs. Wanda Webb Holloway was sentenced to fifteen years in prison for paying \$10,000 for an assassin to enhance her daughter’s odds of making her high-school cheer-leading squad by murdering the mother of her daughter’s chief rival. Heywood Hale Broun wrote, “Sports do not build character. They reveal it.” Alan Page agreed but added, “They also build *characters*.” He was too polite.

Admittedly Mrs. Holloway is not representative of the vast majority of parents who interest themselves in their children’s sporting lives. But the underside of the athletic “sphere” is not as taut as sport advocates would like for us to believe. Yankee pinstripes, for example, were adopted to make an over-weight Babe Ruth look svelte; John J. Audubon, progenitor of the modern conservation movement, painted only birds that he had shot, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, former President George Bush’s sport czar, used steroids to

help him win his four Mr. Olympia titles. When it comes to professional wrestling, everything that meets the eye is suspect. But candor is beginning to crawl out from under the thick mats and box springs of the wrestling ring. One promoter recently sued a wrestler in his stable because “he won too fast” and not as the promoter had choreographed it. A few diehards like Frank Deford think “pro wrestling is clean and everything else in the world is fixed.” Even the courts have ruled that professional wrestling is an entertainment, not a sport. Of course, Deford was simply being as candid as Bill Vukovich who claims there was no secret to winning at Indy, “Just accelerate and steer left.” If anyone thinks that any professional sport is that easy, just invite him to hit successfully against major-league pitching more than 26% of the time, the all-time batting percentage. If this foolish fellow is successful a mere 33% of the time, he will earn a place in the Hall of Fame! Even at Nebraska and Chico State, 33% is well short of honors.

The pressure to win and the commercial opportunities available today have made sportsmanship and fair play as welcome as a clean, dry ball on a muddy field. I have in mind such “stitches” on the ball as runner Emil Zatopek’s gift of one of his four Olympic gold medals to Ron Clarke, who had none despite setting numerous world records. Former Ohio State coach Woody Hayes, who Jim Murray described as “graceless in victory as in defeat,” would have been mystified by Zatopek’s gesture. Bill Tilden, who advised his students of mixed-doubles strategy “to hit at the girl whenever possible,” would likewise have been nonplused. And Knute Rockne, who wanted no one but “bad losers” on his team, would have despaired. Why is it that for years children are taught to shake hands with the opposition after a game, but as soon as they reach high school or college, the civil custom is dropped? Soccer is one exception as is boxing where opponents often embrace after a fight. After one welterweight fight in Miami, however, the boxer who had lost a TKO touched his gloves to the victor’s and then knocked the referee, a sixty-year old man who had his back turned, unconscious.

That violence is an ugly gash in the cover of the “ball” should come as no surprise when often bodily harm is the very reason for a sport’s existence. The purpose of boxing after all is to separate a man’s *compos* from his *mentis* with punches that fly 135 mph and develop 1000 pounds of force on impact. Jack Dempsey, anticipating such violence in the ring, chewed pine tar to strengthen his jaw and marinated his face in pickle brine to toughen his skin. But even the fastest heavyweight boxer in history and one of the toughest, Muhammed Ali, could not avoid being hit in the head an estimated 1.5 million times. The result is a very rich man with Parkinson’s disease. If according to George Will, football is “violence punctuated by committee meetings,” then surely boxing is a few minutes of violence punctuated by handlers delivering long tantrums urging more violence. All this with no timeouts and no halftime. The only sport that is more violent is the Welsh game of “purring” in which two men in steel-toed boots hold on to each other’s shoulders and then kick each other in the shins until one falls or lets go.

“War minus the shooting” is what Orwell called sport, but in the film *The Last Boy Scout* (1991), a running back high on drugs pulls out a pistol and shoots his way into the end zone. If that sounds bizarre, try reality: in 1969, the Nigerian-Biafran War was suspended for two days to allow both sides to watch Pelé and his Brazilian soccer team play exhibition games in the warring countries. In the same year in El Salvador, a fight on the soccer pitch boiled over the stadium walls into the cities and countryside resulting in the deaths of 2000 people in the Salvadoran-Honduran “soccer war.” Whether war gives way to sport or sport gives way to war, there is no question that sport is a preparation for large-scale belligerence.

In Germany in the 1930s, for instance, a popular children's game was "I Declare War!" The strategy, strength, and endurance required of sports have obvious carryover values on the battlefield. That good athletes make good soldiers is the conventional wisdom. With this in mind, the Iroquois prior to battle would arrange two teams of about a thousand lacrosse players on a field several miles long. To keep the braves in motion over three days, squaws were stationed along the sidelines with birch switches that they freely used on any laggard.

The emphasis on winning, one of the loose threads in the sporting microcosm, is certainly understandable in a do-or-die situation, but realistically death is rare even in the boxing ring or the race track. In most amateur sports, you can always try again tomorrow. This is even true in some professional sport. Eddie Arcaro, for example, rode 250 losing mounts before winning his first race. What I worry about is the attitude summed up by famed billiard player Danny McGoorty, "Try to hate your opponent. Even if you're playing your grandmother, try to beat her fifty to nothing. If she already has three, try to beat her fifty to three." Professional football coaches like George Allen of the Redskins argue that "every time you win, you're reborn; when you lose, you die a little." Bill Veeck was perhaps closer to the truth when he observed, "A winning team can bring a city together, and even a losing team can provide a bond of common misery." One visit to Chicago during the baseball season in most years will confirm the truth of that observation.

The overemphasis on winning at the expense of everything else has inevitably led to a backlash—the anti-sport movement, which I personally have a hard time getting a "grip" on. This new trend has given us games like Infinity Volleyball in which two sides of six players chant the number of times the ball sails over the net without touching the ground. Everyone wins when the two sides break their previous record. Such games are fine when a parent is playing tennis or catch with a son or daughter because nothing sours a sport faster for a child than always losing to a crowing adult. But after adolescence, say, the game quickly grows cold without the risk of losing or the thrill of winning. The main stimulus that keeps me running and swimming during the week is the possibility of trouncing somebody on the softball diamond on the weekend.

But if I can't win fairly, I don't want my name on the trophy. The Emperor Nero won every event he entered in the 60 AD Olympics, but how he lived with his "victories" is not recorded. Some unfairness, on the other hand, like Harvey Haddix's loss of his no-hitter, lies only in the eyes of the beholder. In one semi-pro game, a reliever came in with two outs, a man on first, in the top of the ninth with his team trailing by one run. The reliever took his warm-ups; then, before ever throwing an official pitch, he whirled and picked off the runner on first. His team scored two runs in the bottom of the ninth, and the reliever was given credit for winning the game even though he never pitched. The victory wasn't gained by cheating, but neither does it seem just. Perhaps as Eddie Quinn said, "the only sport on the level is mountain climbing." Of course, blatant cheating like missing a shot in basketball to beat a point spread or striking out to lose the World Series is rare. But the temptation to cheat is always there because the thrill of winning is irresistible and addictive. In 1973, a father paid \$20,000 for wind-tunnel tests and then built a "Soap Box Derby" racer for his son with a powerful electromagnet in the nose. The wiring and the battery were completely encased in fiberglass. At the top of the hill as the racers stood ready to start, the boy in the illegal racer pressed his head back against a switch buried in the seat cushion turning on the magnet in the nose of the car. The magnet was, in turn,

drawn to a hinged steel plate that held the racers in line awaiting the fall of the starting gate. The illegal racer got a slight forward tug when the gate fell because of the attraction of the magnet to the gate. Observers said that the racer seemed to leap from its starting position. Not until the boy had won the national competition did someone demand an investigation which included an x-ray of the racer, and eventual disqualification.

On the other hand when the rules themselves are inadequate, there should be some way to redress the injustice. In 1985, for example, the 49ers were visiting the Broncos, and on one 49er's field-goal attempt, a snowball flew out of the stands and landed a short distance in front of the holder just as the snap arrived. The holder mishandled the ball, tried to throw a pass, and failed. There was a futile protest before the Broncos went on to win 17-16. The rules allowed officials to call for more security at the 49er's end of the field but, bizarrely, not to take the play over. On other occasions, officials have been more flexible and creative when they've been faced with impasses not covered by the rule book. In a football game between Kentucky and Tennessee, Kentucky fumbled in front of its own bench, and in the scramble for the ball, a box containing eight footballs was tipped over. This meant that a total of nine balls were loose on the field, and no one knew which of the nine was the game ball. The game officials coolly counted the balls and awarded Tennessee the advantage because they had five balls and Kentucky only four. Just as the referee makes boxing more of a sport than an animalistic brawl, so do football's "zebras" make a sustained, orderly existence possible on the Serengeti gridiron.

Speaking of foreign locations, the microcosmic ball may seem strangely tattered to sports fans who travel abroad. Ties, for example, are possible in Japanese "*besuboru*," but the British see nothing wrong with running up the score, a practice that appalls Japanese and Americans. German soccer players usually suffer a kick in the shins stoically, but the Italians and Brazilians writhe in agony both mock and real. The Japanese once thought that being hit by a famous pitcher's fast ball was an "honor exceeded only by being crushed under the wheels of the Imperial carriage," so in World War II the most derogatory insult Japanese soldiers could think of to taunt the Americans was "Babe Ruth go to hell!" Americans thought they were joking. And when the King of Sweden pronounced Jim Thorpe the greatest athlete in the first half of the twentieth century, Thorpe brightly replied, "Thanks, King!" Proper Europeans were horrified by this rift in decorum, but most Americans understood that in a democracy, this is how one addresses a peer of the realm.

Often what appears to be a chasm in international sports is really just some powdered lime on a field. Cricket, for instance, which is unknown to most Americans, is a brother to our national pastime. An anonymous Englishman once tried to explain cricket to an American as follows:

You have two sides: one out in the field and one in. Each man that's in the side that's in goes out, and when he's out, he comes in, and the next man goes in until he's out.

Except for the term *side*, the above could serve as a rough description of baseball, for cricket and baseball are twins who were separated at birth from "rounders," their mother, the ur-bat-and-ball game. Of course in the broadest sense, most athletic values such as teamwork, courage, and determination are universal. Everyone understands, as Wilt Chamberlain said,

why “no one roots for Goliath” even when he scores 100 points in a game and averages 50 points a game over a season. And everyone can appreciate the astounding fact that Goliath or not, Chamberlain never fouled out of a basketball game in his pro career.

Jim Thorpe’s candid reply to royalty quoted above is a sharp reminder that in the athletic microcosm sport operates as a pure meritocracy devoid of nepotism in which the last shall be first if he can hit the hard slider. Mickey Mantle’s son could not and, therefore, despite his father’s influence, never played major league baseball. Critics of the apparent “advantage” that blacks have in basketball charge that the sporting meritocracy has been violated by evolution. Boston Celtic star Bill Russell answered these critics by saying that natural selection gave nothing to blacks that eight to ten hours a day of shooting basketball wouldn’t give anyone. Indeed racial and class differences in most cases are blurred by sport, but a strict hierarchy still exists among sports with golf and tennis near the top, and bowling and boxing near the bottom. Tex Cobb summarized the difference between the ends of the scale, “If you screw up in tennis, it’s 15-love; if you screw up in boxing, it’s your ass.” Geoffrey Bocca claimed, rather mistakenly I think, that “the personal charm of any sportsman is in inverse proportion to the social standing of his sport.” Bocca cites John McEnroe (decidedly uncharming on the court) and Archie Moore (charming?) as examples of their sport but neglects to mention Arthur Ashe and Sonny Liston, a gentleman and a brute respectively from opposite ends of the sporting and social spectrum. Perhaps, as George Plimpton suggested, the differences can be explained by the size of the ball: the smaller the ball the higher the class. But while polo and squash are aristocratic games which use small balls, the handball is also small and in many urban areas it’s played off tenement walls without the benefit of gloves. And basketball, which uses the largest ball of all, is a popular after-hours recreation for yuppies in “fitness Meccas” across America. Indeed, until social and economic justice prevail and everyone plays some middle-class sport yet to be devised, the rich, it’s safe to predict, will continue to scorn their divots at their country clubs, and the poor will bowl in the alley. Until that time, we will continue to enjoy the spectacle of the arrogant being brought to earth as when Muhammed Ali told a flight attendant, “Superman don’t need no seat belt,” to which the attendant replied, “Superman don’t need no airplane.”

But high and low, rich and poor, finger the same rosary. Regardless of socio-economic class, many who find spiritual rewards in the sporting microcosm are unaware perhaps that a baseball has the same number of stitches as a rosary’s loop has beads and spaces (108), and that the first baseball game was actually played on the Elysian Fields. Coincidences notwithstanding, there’s no question that sports confer a spiritual dimension to people’s lives, and as a result, sport and religion are often spoken of together. Red Smith called the 90’ between the bases “the one absolute truth.” Bartlett Giamatti said that speaking to Yogi Berra was like “talking to Homer about the gods.” Many baseball fans think that you stretch in the bottom half of the seventh inning because God rested on the seventh day. And when the US beat the USSR in ice hockey in the 1980 Winter Olympics, good finally defeated evil, many claimed, because “the evil empire” had cheated to win basketball gold in 1972. Here was a nation’s redemption; America was saved. But sport and religion in many ways are odd bedfellows. Christianity’s ideal is one of poverty, meekness, and loving your neighbor, not just your teammate. Many athletes, however, are selfish, materialistic, and intemperate despite their use of words like *faith*, *sacrifice*, and *spirit*. The antics of some over-exposed ballplayers, however, who have kids everywhere

spitting, chewing tobacco, and brawling, have only slightly diminished the meaning and cohesiveness that athletics can contribute to individuals, families, and, indeed, the nation and the world. Fans who stay long enough at the game eventually learn through a personal epiphany that it's not the goals scored but the assists that truly matter. And while the day of muscular Christianity is waning, the "doctrine of the strenuous life" is enjoying a renewed respectability "Sweat," as Heywood Hale Broun wrote, "is the cologne of accomplishment."

Before sweat stains the clean jersey, however, a new ball on the green turf is sweet and spotless as the interior of a new car. Indeed, though few men admit it, beauty is one of the sporting microcosm's strongest "stitches." Bill Russell said Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's sky hook was "the most beautiful thing in sports," but my preference (probably because Kareem was taller than Goliath) is the image of Jackie Robinson stealing home, Roger Bannister slipping by John Landy on the homestretch, or one of Bill Bradley's "hope passes." Bill Sharman admitted that the hardest thing about guarding Bob Cousy was the "temptation to stand back and admire him." Simply put, Sharman was in love with the beauty and grace of Cousy's play. The heart aches for the graceful achievement of a perfect pole vault, three-meter dive, or triple axel. Robert Frost, who admired individual accomplishment more than a team's success, thought a sprinter in full gallop was beauty personified. The ugly, Frost thought, was a three-legged race. But a perfectly executed 400-meter relay with three fluid baton exchanges at break-neck speed moves me profoundly every time that I see one. Sport is beautiful, and the aficionados of any sport are voyeurs.

Of course no ball lasts forever anymore than a ball player does. Some athletes know "death" before they die Reinhold Messner, for instance, climbed all fourteen mountains in the world over 8000 meters (26,250') without oxygen. Now, rather than climb anything under 8000 meters, he is, I imagine, weeping for new peaks to conquer. Other athletes even of Messner's caliber expect to be killed by their sport. Grand Prix driver Jim Clark said before he died in a fiery wreck, "Racing is one sport you get better and better at before it kills you." More than one athlete has suffered premonitions of their death. Coach Bear Bryant, for instance, told a reporter that he'd "probably croak in a week" after he stepped down as head coach at Alabama. He died a week after he retired.

Fans run a similar risk. One Pakistani cricket fan yelled, "Long live Pakistan!" as his country was receiving the World Cup and then suffered a fatal heart attack. Other fans let the team they support die for them. After Bill Buckner let Mookie Wilson's slow roller meander through his legs in the 1986 World Series, the Red Sox lost countless fans. The team effectively died for them. Buckner, however, did not take the loss as personally as Donnie Moore. Moore and his California Angels were one strike away from winning the American League pennant in 1986 when Moore served up a home-run pitch to the Red Sox's Dave Henderson. The Sox went on to win, and Moore, haunted by the pitch, committed suicide three years later. He apparently was not consoled by the argument that it was his pitching that led the Angels to the playoffs, or that a game, even a playoff or World Series game, is just a game.

Former Commissioner of Baseball Bartlett Giamatti said that baseball is "designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and the evenings, and then as soon as the chill rain comes out, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone." This is the sentimental view of a man near death. I prefer to think that the end of baseball is the start of football

and just a point on the continuum of my own softball, biking, and swimming. Incidentally, I've got my eye set on Ted Mumby's record for the 100-meter freestyle for the 80-84 age group. I figure if I live long enough and stay fit, I can shave a few seconds off his record of 3:14, for I plan to go down swimming or swinging at that microcosmic ball.

**THE OLDER THE VINTAGE THE BETTER THE BUZZ:
REFLECTIONS ON AND OF A RETIRING TEACHER**

Black and white and every shade of gray,
Skip gathered himself to give it away.

Knowing a damp sponge drinks more than one dry,
he urged his students to ask the world why.

Look hard, he said, at the sand in the pearl.
He taught them to see all of the world.

The sword's in the book, not buried in stone.
Until it is freed, none takes the throne.

Skip never sent any students to jail,
but he did think they had a right to fail.

When no one was watching, he seized the poor dears
and bit the shrink wrap that covered their ears,

saying: *We each have a rudder but lack a sail—
we're shipping water, but we can bail.*

*Shoulder your small part with a fragrant grace—
every rose petal holds the world in place.*

*People, like water, are cleared by motion—
wind, waves, and current sweeten the ocean.*

*People, like arches, are strengthened by weight
and toppled by wind unless there's some freight.*

*Life without grit is a knob without knurls—
if oysters had claws, there'd be no pearls.*

But—when each orifice dried up or leaked,
Skip knew that he was a drip-dry antique.

Though he hates growing old, it beats dying young—
better an old song than no longer sung.

When the leaves fall, ice hones every breeze,