

LIFE ON THE RUN by Bill Bradley

Several years ago while researching the literature of American sport, I was surprised to find how small a body of serious writing there is on this universal activity. Sport moves the national imagination deeply, cutting through differences of geography, social class, economic circumstance, and ethnic background like little else in our society. A nucleus of significant material does exist, but its quantity and quality seems inversely disproportionate to the vast amounts of psychic energy Americans invest in sports.

One neglected strain of this literature, whose popularity was most evident from the turn of the century through the Great Depression is the inspirational sports juvenile as exemplified by the work of writers like Ralph Henry Barbour and John F. Tunis.

Clumsily structured, cardboard-charactered, this formula fiction had one feature that redeemed it—its overriding concern with moral behavior. Read one on the heels of another as they were, these “boys” books catechized their malleable readership in how to conduct themselves both on and off the playing field. And while their black and white standards seem not to bear close scrutiny in this more-sophisticated time, they influenced adolescent thought in a positive way and helped to shape the social attitudes of our fathers and uncles.

Bill Bradley’s “Life on the Run,” a first person account of some three weeks in the life of a professional athlete, is of that moral tone in the best sense of the phrase. It is concerned above all with character. Bradley’s uncompromising commitment to playing basketball in a certain way dominates the narrative and sets it a court-length pass ahead of the preponderance of trashy superjock accounts it superficially resembles.

After one of the greatest of collegiate basketball careers at Princeton followed by two years at Oxford on a Rhodes scholarship, Bradley, according to media reports of that time, walks over the ocean to sign an all-time record contract with the New York Knicks. With but a little help from his disciples, he will not only guarantee the championship, but as the “Great White Hope” in a league where three out of every four players are black, he will fill the arenas with paying fans eager to witness the miracles he will surely perform.

But it proves to be a tough year for our savior. He plays well enough to be sure, but he is slower, shorter, and cannot jump with

most other forwards. This Christ can only cruise while the rest of the world is in overdrive.

So Bradley makes the adjustment. He shifts down from superstar to quintessential team player. Minimizing individual talents, he becomes the team's catalyst, doing all the unnoticed things that lead to the sensational plays of others. He runs the court doggedly, setting the patterns out of which the team's winning style is to emerge. It is an index to Bradley's character that he has learned that the pass that leads to the pass for the winning basket is vital to what poet Edward Dorn has called "the cosmology of finding your spot."

Perhaps the book's deepest insight lies in Bradley's appreciation of sports as a bridge between the worlds of the child and the adult—the world of feeling and the world of knowing. "When something special happens on the court... I feel the power of imagination that creates a sense of mystery and wonder I last accepted in childhood, before the mind hardened."

Something special happened, all right. A special book has come our way.

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