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## Review of "Masters of the Games"

### **Abstract**

A review of Joseph Epstein's *Masters of the Games*, a collection of essays, profiles, short stories, and opinion pieces about sports.

### **Keywords**

Review, Masters of the Games, Joseph Epstein, sports, essay

### **Disciplines**

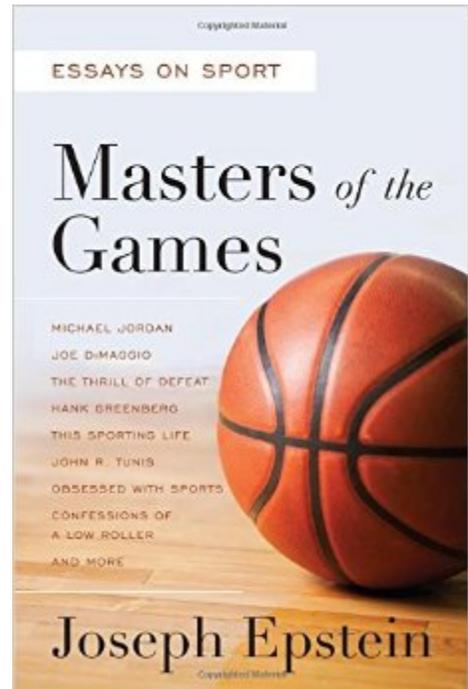
English Language and Literature | Sports Studies

# masters of the games

Reviewed by Jack Ryan, Gettysburg College

28 august 2017

In a recent New York Times profile, Norman Podhoretz, who edited *Commentary* from 1960-1995 and famously moved from liberal intellectual to conservative intellectual during that time, scoffed, "All Americans really care about is sports. They pretend to care about other things, but what they really care about is sports" (NYT 24). Joseph Epstein, the literary editor and writer, would agree with Podhoretz, albeit up to a point. In *Masters of the Games*, Epstein's wide ranging collection of essays, profiles, stories, and ruminations on sports, he observes, "Sports in America may well be the opiate of the people, but, as opiates go, it isn't a bad one" (41). A Cubs fan by birth, Epstein understands the inscrutability of being a fan, which, he points out, is short for a fanatic. Growing up in Chicago in the forties, Epstein was surrounded by sports, including boxing, high school football, baseball, softball, swimming, and hockey. More important, Epstein consumed *Sport* magazine, first published in 1946, well before ESPN and the colorful presentation of *Sport Illustrated*. Both sport and writing are, according to Epstein, forms of craft, and craft involves imitation, and the young Epstein was an exceptional mimic, both on the field and on the writing tablet.



Epstein excels at the personal essay. He's observant, intelligent, thought provoking, and he doesn't mind clearing the air while offering fragments of his autobiography. The book is comprised of six major sections: "Essays," the longest set of offerings; "Jocks," profiles in the Sport style; "Stories," three pieces of short fiction; "Short Takes," snapshots of sporting culture; "Opinionations," thought pieces on sport; and "Summing Up," which is not really the end of it all. Epstein's final passages includes the last two words uttered by the dying father of a Cubs regular: "Trade Kingman." Baseball fans of a certain age and probably every Chicago Cubs fan understands why Kingman needed to go. According the Epstein, "They will understand because they are a little crazy, which may well be, come to think of it, the first requisite for being a serious sports fan" (309). While Epstein's well-established bona fides are literary, he does spend a great deal of his time watching sports, for watching sports, as he notes, provides "great delight" and on occasion he learns a thing or two from the games and the people who play them.

Epstein's introduction, "Obsessed with Sport," explains the why behind his passion for sports, athletes, and the role of the spectator. Performance at "a very high order" is essential for Epstein because sport is about the "absence of fraudulence and fakery" (8). Living in a culture that is dominated by both fraud and fakery, he sees sport as anodyne for the spectator, because locating the "real thing" in society becomes more and more elusive. All of Epstein's work in this

collection features a density not commonly found in writing about sport. For instance, he suggests that he "knows very well what Wallace Stevens meant when he spoke of the 'necessary laziness' of the poet" (31). However, Epstein longs for an "equally distinguished" writer to speak about his condition – "the unnecessary laziness of the non-poet." In this case, the sports fan, a person who spends vast amounts of time watching people in odd costumes running, jumping, hitting, fielding, smacking, kicking, or stroking various sized balls into equally various "cylinders, goals, gloves, or nets" (31). His essays on "Jocks," including Joe DiMaggio, Michael Jordan, Hank Greenberg, and Bob Love all value their subjects, but Epstein himself is always present, for he recognizes the intrinsic, unsurpassed physical skill of each of these players is coupled with his own take on who they are as people.

DiMaggio, for example, had what Epstein calls "first-name fame," which started at Yankee Stadium but soon took on iconic status, making the Yankee Clipper a brand. The essay is a literate review of Richard Ben Cramer's *DiMaggio*, a biography that destroys its subject. Epstein praises DiMaggio's competitive drive as a player, which often brought out his ugly side, as well as his gallantry in the aftermath of Marilyn Monroe's death, when he took care of her funeral details and saw to it that fresh roses were placed on her grave in perpetuity. When he mentioned the latter to his friend Saul Bellow, Bellow quoted Arthur Miller, Monroe's husband after her divorce from DiMaggio, who substantiated that DiMaggio beat up Marilyn Monroe fairly regularly: "You know, he [Miller] added, "brutality is often the other side of sentimentality" (136).

Epstein calls himself a Jordanologist, having observed Jordan since he landed in Chicago, and he uses the opportunity to extol Michael Jordan to provide a micro-history of professional basketball; he goes back to its "medieval phase, being old enough to remember when Jews were a strong presence" (141). Epstein recognizes that Jordan, like DiMaggio, achieved iconic status because of his strength, speed, hand size, and his ability to stay in the air longer than other players. He also acknowledges that Jordan worked hard to improve himself, and he "possessed, along with great court savvy, an indomitable, a really quite fanatical, will to win" (144). Though not as renown as Jordan, Hank Greenberg holds a special place for Epstein because of the relatively small number of Jewish ballplayers who made it to the major leagues, and because Greenberg, who was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1956 and who, according to Epstein, was one of two great Jewish ballplayers (the other is Sandy Koufax), not only excelled at the game but participated in World War II. Epstein's essay on Greenberg is also semi-critical of John Rosenberg's biography of Greenberg, *Hank Greenberg: The Hero of Heroes*, a title Epstein finds irksome. Epstein himself views Greenberg realistically: "Hank Greenberg's place on this all-time team, for which he has no rivals in major-league baseball, would be that of designated mensch" (153).

Epstein is at his best when describing the underappreciated Bob Love, "the most deceptive player in the National Basketball Association" (157). Epstein excels at uncovering what made Love, who played for the Chicago Bulls from 1968-1976, such an unsung talent. Primarily, Epstein sees Love as a team player in a league that celebrates individual talent. Love was consistent, a player who helped his team win by doing everything necessary to win, albeit not with the high-flying theatrics of a Michael Jordan. Epstein's "Jocks" section provides insight into how he thinks about sports, how he thinks about athletes, and how the culture surrounding the games we

watch has evolved. From Epstein's perspective, things are not the way they used to be, which is not surprising coming from a writer who compiled an All-American Pomposity Team made up of people who offer opinions on things only important to them.

His three short stories evoke the past. All set in Chicago, each story addresses how sport and the athletes who play sports are subject to adulation as well as life's crooked road. "The Goldin Boys," the most melancholic of the three stories, includes the perspective of Sid Goldin, father of Buddy and Eddie Goldin, the "Goldin" boys of the title. An accomplished lawyer, Sid attempts to make sense of how his sons came to such sad ends after such promising beginnings, which were anchored by athletic achievement. Epstein displays a highly polished and well controlled fiction writing style, a talent he developed over time after reading his first John R. Tunis book at age thirteen. Titled *All-American*, the novel contained a character named Meyer Goldman, and a fit moral, an ideal start for a young, talented reader like Epstein. What Tunis understood about sport, and what Epstein embraces, too, is the ability to accept defeat, an acceptance that is anathema to most Americans. According to Epstein, "Character, in Tunis, is won through discipline, through perseverance, through learning from defeat" (28). While Epstein suggests that these core elements are missing from the sporting scene today, they have not lost their currency.

Years after Epstein first encountered John R. Tunis, Norman Podhoretz would publish Epstein in *Commentary Magazine*. It's doubtful they discussed sports, a passion Epstein reserved for himself, especially among the designated intelligentsia. Still, unlike his one-time editor, Epstein recognizes that "sports talk is the closest thing we have in this country to a lingua franca, though I wouldn't use that phrase in, say, a bowling alley or pool hall" (38-39). Erudite, snooty, and provocative Epstein's collection on sport makes for pleasurable, engaged reading, even for those readers who will, from time to time, disagree with some of his ideas.

Epstein, Joseph. *Masters of the Games: Essays and Stories on Sport*. New York: Rowan & Littlefield, 2015, 309 pp.

Leland, John. "Still Picking Fights and Dropping Names: Norman Podhoretz Looks Back at the Fierce, Argumentative Parties of New York's Intelligentsia." *The New York Times* 19 March 2017: A23-24.

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