

# Sporting Lives: Metaphor and Myth in American Sports Autobiographies (SPORTS & AMERICAN CULTURE)

James W. Pipkin

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Sometimes the crack of the bat or the roar of the crowd fails to capture the meaning of sports as athletes themselves understand it. Books about sports have ignored this dimension of the subject, particularly the athletes' own autobiographical accounts. In *Sporting Lives*, the first book to examine the two popular realms of sports and autobiography, James Pipkin looks at recurring patterns found in athletes' accounts of their lives and sporting experiences, examining language, metaphor, rhetorical strategies, and other elements to analyze sports from the inside out.

Sporting Lives takes a fresh look at memoirs from baseball, football, basketball, golf, and other sports to explore how American athletes see themselves: not only how those images mesh with popular perceptions of them as heroes or celebrities but also how their accounts differ from those of sports journalists and other outsiders. Drawing on the life stories of such well-known figures as Wilt Chamberlain, Babe Ruth, and Martina Navratilova—both as-told-to and self-authored works—Pipkin follows players from the "echoing green" of eternal youth to the sometimes cultlike and isolated status of fame, interpreting recurring patterns both in the living of their lives and in the telling of them. He even considers Dennis Rodman's four autobiographies to show how the contradictions of his self-portrayals reflect the Janus-faced quality of sports in the era of celebrity culture.

As Pipkin shows, the life of the athlete involves more than mere athleticism; it is also a world of nostalgia and sentiment, missed opportunities and lost youth. He sheds light on athletes' common obsession with youth and body image—including gender and racial considerations—and explores their descriptions of being "in a zone," that transcendent state when everything seems to click. And he considers the time that all athletes dread, when their bodies begin to betray them . . . and the cheering stops.

While the lives of athletes may often suggest the magic of Peter Pan, Pipkin's engaging study reveals that they are in many ways more like the Lost Boys. *Sporting Lives* shows that the meaning of sports is intertwined with the telling. It is both an eminently readable book for fans and a critically sophisticated analysis that will engage scholars of literature, sports or media studies, and American popular culture.



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