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Books for Christmas Gifts

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As we head down the homestretch of the Christmas shopping season people are still looking for that perfect gift for that certain someone, as they say on TV. So as a public service I offer my suggestions for the last minute shopper: Sports books of quality for the discriminating sports fan.

Although baseball books dominate the shelves there are some other sports represented and I will start with them.

First basketball. In the past few weeks three notable books on basketball have appeared. Jordan Rules by Chicago Tribune writer Sam Smith is the story of last year's championship season with the Bulls. Naturally any story about the Bulls will be to a great extent a story about Michael Jordan. This book contains just the right amount of revelation, including the startling news that Michael Jordan is not perfect. The second of the basketball books is Charles Barkley's autobiography in which Sir Charles is so frank that the book has produced a small firestorm in Philly. The third is Confessions of a Coach by Norm Sloan with Larry Guest. It isn't really confessions so much as it is self-justification, thinly masked as confession. It reveals more about the dark underbelly of college athletics than perhaps Sloan had intended, and Guest as co-author explains why Larry spent last year using the pages of the Sentinel to defend Stormin' Norman. Ethics anyone!

Earlier in the year another controversial coach, John Thompson of Georgetown, was the subject of a superb biography by Leonard Shapiro titled Big Man on Campus: John Thompson and the Georgetown Hoyas.

On football there are several good books available. Maybe the best is H.G. Bissinger's Friday Night Lights which details high school football madness in the small Texas town of Odessa. It is a powerful and fascinating tale that has left Bissinger persona non grata in the state of Texas. At the level of professional football, not one, but two biographies of Al Davis have appeared in the last few months. The best is Mark Ribowsky's Slick: The Silver and Black Life of Al Davis, which explores more of Davis' pre-Raider life, and punctures some of the Davis mythology. Glenn Dickey's Just Win Baby: Al Davis and his Raiders although a good book concentrates more on the Raiders and less on the complexities of Al Davis.

For those looking for football fiction it is still hard to beat the two books by Pete Ghent which offer a fictionalized version of the Dallas Cowboys, North Dallas Forty and The Franchise. Don DeLillo's End Zone is also not half-bad.

Women's sport is the subject of Mariah Burton Nelson's Are We Winning Yet? How Women Are Changing Sports and Sports Are Changing Women. Nelson, a former basketball star at Stanford, traces the history of the development of women's sport over the past two decades and evaluates the changes, not only in terms of growth but also in terms of the qualitative issues.

For boxing fans Thomas Hauser's Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times is probably the best bet. There have been several previous Ali books, and this one focuses on Ali as a symbol of his times, a definer of his times, and as a man who has changed considerably over the years. Hauser also takes a look at Ali after boxing, and explores the questions surrounding both his health and his finances.

Baseball produced the largest number and the best of the year's sports books. Ted Williams alone has been the subject of three books all of which have been of high quality. Michael Seidel's Ted Williams: A Baseball Life is a full biography tracing the career of the Red Sox star in considerable detail. In Ted Williams: A Portrait in Words and Pictures edited by Dick Johnson with an essay by Glenn Stout, Stout does an excellent job of dealing with the complex character of Teddy Ballgame. But better than either of these is Ted Williams: Seasons of the Kid, by Richard Ben Cramer, Mark Rucker and John Thorn. Cramer's contribution is an extended version of his essay that appeared in Esquire about two years ago and is easily the best piece ever written on the personality and persona of the Splendid Splinter. This is accompanied by five photo essays assembled by Mark Rucker with captions by John Thorn which are stunning in their quality.

Another superstar who told all this year is Hank Aaron whose autobiography, I Had a Hammer: The Hank Aaron Story, reveals a sensitive man deeply scarred by the ignorance and prejudice which stalked him at every turn during his storied career. It is an excellent example of one black man's struggle to carve out a decent life in America in the second half of the 20th century. It is a revealing and therefore a disturbing book.

The other excellent baseball book of the year is Robert Creamer's Baseball in '41, which reconstructs the wonderful

season of fifty years ago when America prepared for war, while DiMaggio had his 56 game hitting streak and Williams became the last .400 hitter in the game.

For baseball fiction it's still hard to beat anything by W.P. Kinsella; one of his two novels Shoeless Joe or The Iowa Baseball Confederacy and either of his short-story collections, The Thrill of the Grass or The Further Adventures of Slugger McBatt. Or try Darryl Brock's splendid historical novel, If I Never Get Back and spend a season with the Cincinnati Red Stockings of 1869. And if you haven't read Robert Coover's The Universal Baseball Association Inc., J. Henry Waugh Prop. you haven't read the best sports novel ever written.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a Merry Christmas and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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