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Guest Editor's Introduction

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Guest Editor's Introduction

MARY LOU SHEFFER

Sports in the South is more than the act of competing, it's a cultural staple ingrained into the very fabric of a Southerner's DNA. Sports has become a sense of pride, and its history is rich in Southern character, tenacity, and ingenuity. Some argue the surge of Southern sports began after the American Civil War. According to researcher Wes Borucki, in an attempt to overcome a sense of inferiority over losing the war, the South turned to sports to demonstrate dominance over the North. Borucki wrote, "College football became the means of reasserting a Southern sense of identity and superiority over their Northern neighbors" (477). This special sports issue of *The Southern Quarterly* examines sports through several different lenses, most notably the that of the media's influence on Southern culture that extends far beyond a "simple game of sport."

Media coverage has played a crucial role in sports becoming a cultural staple in the South. The 73-billion-dollar industry has the ability to influence public perception along with popularizing unfamiliar sport events. In our first article, "The Life and Service of Zeke Bonura in the American Media," authors Willie Tubbs, Tony Mixon, and Drew Drohan compare competing narratives from military and national newspapers of Zeke Bonura's (a WWII hero turned professional baseball player from New Orleans) life and service. Although Bonura never played in an All-Star game or competed in the World Series, he caught the eye of legendary baseball player Babe Ruth; in Bonura's rookie season, Ruth called him an exciting player. Bonura's life, however, became entwined with scandal and slanderous reporting by a vindictive sportswriter. The contrast is stark: military news articles sing of Bonura's praises while national papers based in the North like the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Times* belittle the man. The authors do an excellent job defining and explaining the polarized frames used by the media and the implications they had on Bonura's legacy.

Television also played a significant role in defining Southern sports culture. Author Daniel Marshall Haygood explores the crucial role television played in the spreading of basketball in the South in his article “Spreading the Gospel of Hoops: How Television Helped Make Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball a Cultural Fix in the South.” Prior to the rise of television, the game of football was the only game that mattered. However, through the prompting and insistence of a pioneering independent television sports producer, Castleman DeTolley Chesley, Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) basketball soon became a virtual religion. Haygood posits that it was through Chesley’s innovative ideas regarding the development and implementation of ACC broadcasts along with its funding and overall production management that established it as a preeminent sport in the South. Through this journey, Haygood conducted fourteen in-depth personal interviews with people directly involved with the production of ACC basketball and its sponsors. According to Haygood, following the sport “was a calling,” and it took only ten short years to establish itself as an integral part of Southern culture.

In the article “‘It Just Means More?’: Depiction of the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in ESPN Signing Day,” the theme of media effects on coverage, and the issue of Southern dominance, continues. ESPN has become a mammoth player in the world of sports media. And, in the South, one of the most watched events is Signing Day (Rooney). Within this event lies a correlation between recruiting victories and on-field success (Bergman and Logan 597). Authors Travis Bell, Melvin Lewis, Andy Billings, and Kenon Brown investigate whether ESPN perpetuates the perception of the SEC as the dominant conference in college football, based on its vast successes in recruiting and, in turn, on the football field, during its coverage of National Signing Day. Their research demonstrates that the media positions sport as a means to both emphasize and better define historical Southern culture.

The prominence of sports in academia became the focus of a fiery debate in the fall of 1929 with the release of a special report by the Carnegie Foundation. The report, *The American College Athletics*, criticized the excessive press coverage of collegiate sport, especially in the South. In their study, “Taming the Monster: The 1929 Carnegie Report on College Athletics,” John Carvalho and Daisa Baker analyze coverage of the report in four prominent newspapers. During the time of the report, both the integrity of universities with football programs as well as the game of football itself came into question. Recruitment issues by means of bribery by alumni along with professionals playing at the collegiate level were being scrutinized (Tew). The analysis shows that the Southern press was highly critical of the report.

As previously discussed, sport is intertwined within Southern culture. Major professional sports teams have found homes in Southern cities. One

such city that has transformed itself into a major sports complex is Charlotte, North Carolina. In his interview with longtime Charlotte sportscaster Jim Szoke, researcher Patrick McConnell discusses the evolution of Charlotte as a major league sports city. Szoke has covered sports in Charlotte for over thirty years: he began in radio and covered both the Charlotte Hornets (NBA) and was named as an original member of the broadcast team for the Carolina Panthers (NFL) radio network, a position he still holds today.

Finally, in the article “Sullivan vs. Kilrain: Mississippi’s Legendary Boxing Match,” authors Nicole Hendricks and Mary Lou Sheffer retell the story of the notorious boxing match that left its mark throughout the Pine Belt region of South Mississippi. Long before boxing greats like Muhammad Ali, Mike Tyson, and Manny Pacquiao, there was John L. Sullivan. Known as a rough and tough bare-knuckle boxer who drank whiskey out of beer steins and loved to challenge others to a fight, Sullivan became the first American sports hero through the help of media. The coverage of prizefighting by *The National Police Gazette* greatly influenced how Americans viewed sports. Richard Kyle Fox, owner of the *Gazette*, made sports exciting, and Sullivan became his main star. Two of Sullivan’s most notorious professional fights (both illegal) took place in Mississippi and are considered significant landmarks in early American sports history.

It has been a privilege to serve as the guest editor of this special issue of *The Southern Quarterly* on sports in the South. I want to especially thank Kate Cochran, editor, for making sure the manuscripts followed MLA style and for her guidance throughout the editing process. I hope you, the reader, find this issue engaging and informative.

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