**Matthew Ehrlich *Kansas City vs. Oakland: The Bitter Sports Rivalry that Defined an Era***

**Reviewed by Richard Black, Northwest Missouri State University**

Two small-market sports cities. A panoply of legendary and even infamous names. Charlie Finley. Al Davis. Lamar Hunt. Len Dawson. Hank Stram. John Madden. George Blanda. Kenny Stabler. Catfish Hunter. Vida Blue. George Brett. Fred Biletnikoff. Reggie Jackson.

Matthew Ehrlich’s *Kansas City vs. Oakland: The Bitter Sports Rivalry that Defined an Era* is a 2019 addition to the University of Illinois Press’ Sport and Society series. In narrating his expansive cultural history, Ehrlich cites and then builds upon a snide, yet telling statement from Kansas City native Calvin Trillin, that “the United States is divided neatly into two parts…the part that had major-league baseball before the Second World War [and] all the rest” (14). The majority of the book concerns the attempts by these two cities to shed the Cowtown label, in the case of Kansas City, and the Bay Area inferiority complex of Oakland by way of professional sport franchises. But the stories on the gridiron and the diamond only account for part of the study; as indicated in the title, the book is also invested in the larger contexts of the 1960-1970s era, not just in terms of sport but also in relating to the larger socio-economic concerns of race and labor in these two cities and in post-WWII America more broadly.

The book’s structure alternates between the NFL and MLB franchises in Oakland and Kansas City to explore both the burgeoning rivalry between the two cities and also the social, political, and economic woes that the sports entities were meant, and largely failed, to rectify. A contextualizing opening chapter entitled “Striving for the Big Leagues,” acknowledges the rich pre-existing baseball history in Kansas City reflected by the Monarchs of the Negro Leagues and the minor league Kansas City Blues of the American Association before addressing the city’s boosters attempts in luring the Philadelphia Athletics westward in the wake of the geographical relocations of the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers. And Ehrlich reads the California migrations of these ball clubs as a catalyst for Oakland’s efforts to enlarge its own profile by way of sports: “Now with San Francisco and Los Angeles having joined the big time via the Giants and Dodgers, Oakland wanted to follow suit” (34).

Throughout, Ehrlich analyzes the reversal of fortune promised by professional sports on both civic and individual levels: “If Oakland and Kansas City hungered for respect, so too did the athletes who played in the two cities” (174). And while great strides in equity and agency occurred during this period, the cost of some of its other elements are just now starting to come due. Ehrlich persuasively reveals how “The heyday of the Kansas City-Oakland rivalry corresponded with profound changes to professional athletes’ working conditions;” both to their benefit, such as in the emergence of free agency, but also to their detriment, such as with the widespread adoption of artificial turf which “may well have exacerbated the neurological symptoms that many NFL players would develop later in life.” He thus concludes that “Many athletes paid a price to be ‘big league’ just as cities did” (174).

One of the intriguing elements of Ehrlich’s treatment, introduced in this opening chapter, is the way in which he uses this story from the 1960s and 1970s to comment upon the current state of sports and society by invoking both a sense of nostalgia for what was, and also an awareness that past is merely prologue. For instance, he outlines the immense political power the local press and its newspapers possessed and wielded in efforts to recruit sports franchises but and to shape public opinion concerning the financing of these efforts. Ernie Mehl, sports editor of the *Kansas City Star*, “one of the nation’s most influential newspapers,” was integral in the campaign to lure the A’s to Kansas City, and Joseph Knowland, the owner of the reactionary *Oakland Tribune*, possessed an influence that “has run through every facet of city life” which, of course, included fervent support of “Oakland’s efforts to land major league sports” (22, 33-34). For the reader in 2019 who daily witnesses the slow decay and shuttering of local newspapers and the proliferation of the media multiverse, the idea of local media possessing such power seems like a quaint historical footnote. Such wistfulness stands to reason; Ehrlich is professor emeritus of journalism at the University of Illinois, and his previous books include the title, *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*.

In addition to these nods of nostalgia, Ehrlich also relates the story of these cities and this period to several contemporary cultural characteristics of professional sports. In keeping with the iconoclastic character of the period, Ehrlich quotes from Dave Meggyesy’s tell-all memoir that derided professional football’s “‘maudlin and dangerous pre-game patriotism’ directed toward the flag and national anthem” (95). And he addresses Oakland’s homegrown Black Panther party, founded in 1966, stimulating race pride and consciousness and their platform that demanded “an immediate end to POLICE BRUTALITY and MURDER of black people” (59).

The study is at its best when it stays close to the parameters of sports and culture in this sense; however, the scope is sometimes strained when it colors a little too far outside of these lines and attempts to weave in other urban labor histories such as plumbers’ and carpenters’ strikes. The book is meticulously researched—it contains thirty pages of notes—and although it is apparent that Ehrlich is interested in linking the sports history to the larger progressive spirit of the era, these digressions can sometimes bog down the otherwise methodically paced and plotted structure of his main narrative.

*Kansas City vs. Oakland* provides a compelling, detailed, and exceedingly well-documented story of big-league aspirations, outsized owners, legendary athletes, and the pitfalls of considering professional sports as a kind of civic panacea. Such was the tale of the efforts to lure the Athletics and the Dallas Texans to Kansas City, only for the authoritarian Charlie Finley to uproot the A’s to Oakland. And as history would have it, Ehrlich’s story comes full circle in its conclusion with the owner of an historic but beleaguered franchise, in this case the Oakland Raiders, making the move to the ostensibly greener pastures of Las Vegas. As Faulkner famously stated, “the past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

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