***Out of Left Field: A Sportswriter’s Last Word***

Stan Isaacs

Edited and with an Introduction by Aram Goudsouzian

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Reviewed by Alan Zaremba

Northeastern University

*Out of Left Field: A Sportswriter’s Last Word* is an engaging and enjoyable read. It will be a valuable book for journalists, sports historians, and those interested in the interdependent relationships between sports and culture.

My family moved to suburban Long Island in 1960. We subscribed to *Newsday*, one of the two major newspapers on what locals called “the Island.” *Newsday* was a tabloid; the *Long Island Press,* the rival, was a conventional broadsheet. In its early days *Newsday* was known and distinguished itself--certainly among sports enthusiasts--as having a very good sports section, especially for high school sports. The local football and basketball teams received, it seemed, nearly as much coverage as the professional and college teams. The box score of every boys’ high school basketball game appeared in the sports pages of *Newsday*. Bench players on the varsity, keen on seeing their name in print, would hoist up shots as soon as they made their entry into a lopsided contest. Players did not receive any *Newsday* ink just for appearing. You had to score. We derisively called the bench players (often ourselves) *the Newsday boys*—reserves bombing away during infrequent court appearances, hoping to see their/our names in the paper.

*The* *Newsday boys* may not have paid much attention to it, but in addition to high school sports, a regular feature in *Newsday*’s sports pages was a column by Stan Isaacs called “Out of Left Field.” Isaacs wrote about issues that were not typically addressed in sports sections. He did not write articles about balls and strikes, but, implicitly at least, the columns were about the symbiotic relationships between sports and culture. He wrote, for example, about race issues, controversial events, politics and sports, and quirky personalities. After his retirement, Isaacs began compiling a memoir. It had not been published when Isaacs passed in 2013. Aram Goudsouzian, an editor for the University of Illinois Press *Sport and Society* series, learned of the project, obtained the manuscript, edited it, and wrote the book’s introduction. I don’t know what the book looked like before Aram Goudsouzian began working on it, but the final product is a well edited compilation.

The book is part memoir and part topical writings. It begins with Isaacs’s description of the so-called Chipmunks--writers like Isaacs who did not dwell on play-by-play, but aspects of the game that were, typically, considered peripheral to sports journalism. The Chipmunks label started when an old school scribe noticed the protruding teeth of one of these non-traditional writers and dubbed the entire collection of iconoclasts, Chipmunks. It was intended as a disparaging nickname, but instead of hiding from it, Isaacs and others of his ilk embraced the name. Isaacs wrote that the so-called Chipmunk journalists were “intent on covering sports as an adult activity with an underside of warts and imperfections like any big business.”

After the initial chapter about the Chipmunks and a second called “Chipmunkery” the book proceeds as a conventional memoir. Isaacs describes his childhood, family members, junior and senior high school years, how he became interested in writing, how he met his wife, early writing jobs, and then his start at *Newsday*. The book then changes direction, and the chapters are about various issues. Isaacs writes about: the hapless, yet endearing, 1962 Mets; the departure of the Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants from New York leaving loyal fans bereft and furious; Muhammad Ali; Jim Brown; the author’s very controversial interview with San Francisco Giant manager Alvin Dark; the 1972 Olympics; Don Larsen; Casey Stengel; Roberto Clemente; John Madden; the Pee Wee Reese/Jackie Robinson statue; other sportswriters--and several additional sports related topics.

The book is filled with humorous anecdotes. Isaacs relays, for example, how Stengel reacted to a journalist’s query about a young prospect’s potential. Stengel’s quip: “He is 20 years old; in 10 years he’s got a chance to be thirty.” Isaacs describes how maverick Chicago White Sox owner Bill Veeck attempted to gain revenge when a company sold him a mail order rocking horse that Veeck intended to give his daughter for Christmas. When Veeck opened the package, he saw that he had to put the rocker together. Unhappy, Veeck mailed in his payment: a check torn into little pieces. He included a note which read: “I put your horse together. You put my check together.” When writing about Walter O’Malley, the reviled Dodger owner who moved the Dodgers from Brooklyn, Isaacs recounts that two scribes identified the three greatest villains in history as Hitler, Stalin and O’Malley. Subsequently when Isaacs interviewed historian Doris Kearns Goodwin-a faithful Brooklyn Dodger fan-Isaacs reminded Goodwin of the “Hitler, Stalin, and O’Malley” reference. Goodwin had heard of it and tells Isaacs that the story has a coda in the form of a riddle: Hitler, Stalin, and O’Malley are in a room with you and you have a gun with only two bullets. What, she asked rhetorically, do you do? The answer reflecting the sense of betrayal of spurned Brooklyn Dodger fans: “You shoot the two bullets at O’Malley.”

As much as I recommend the book, I do have some constructive criticisms. One is a caveat. If you read Isaacs’s book *Ten Moments that Shook the Sports World*, you will find that a number of sections in *Out of Left Field* address the same subjects. The chapter in *Out of Left Field* about the 1962 Mets is, in large chunks, word for word from the other book. There are other instances as well when topics and stories relayed in this book, appear in the previously published work. Isaacs’s comments about the 1972 Olympics, the description of Richard Nixon’s White House reception before the 1969 All-Star game, comments about Harvard’s 1968 29-29 “victory” over Yale, all appear in the earlier book.

There are also a few inaccuracies. One is seen early in the book. It is not a major error except that it makes one wonder about the possibility of other inaccuracies in the pages to follow. When writing about Bobby Thomson’s shot heard round the world in 1951, Isaacs writes that Thomson took the first pitch in that at-bat for a ball. There are those of us who have heard radio announcer Russ Hodges’s call of that at-bat dozens of times. The first pitch is not a ball. Thomson takes the first pitch for a strike. This is hardly a major gaffe except it could be jarring to some historians since it appears on page four of the book and may make readers wonder about subsequent retellings. When writing about Veeck’s ploy of signing Eddie Gaedel, a 3’ 7” player and pinch-hitting him to ensure a walk, Isaacs writes that Veeck acknowledged that he got the idea from reading the James Thurber story, “You Could Look It Up” in which the fictional team’s mascot, also a little person, is sent up to bat. (In the story, the mascot decides to swing. Gaedel, in real life, took the walk). It may be the truth that Veeck had read the story, but in his autobiography, *Veeck-as in Wreck*, Veeck writes that this is not where he got the idea. He writes: “I have frequently been accused of stealing the idea from a James Thurber short story, ‘You Could Look It Up.’ Sheer libel.” Also, the incident about Ohio State coach Woody Hayes punching an opponent, Charlie Bauman, after Bauman intercepted an Ohio State pass, is described inaccurately. Isaacs writes that Hayes punched Bauman as he [the player] was “running freely past him.” When Hayes punched Bauman, the play was over. Charlie Bauman had run out of bounds after intercepting the pass and was standing on the Ohio State sideline.

Not one of these are close to major problems, nor do they detract from the overall value of the book, but they are errors that Isaacs could have caught. As someone who has penned several books and often shudders when some inaccuracy appears even after I have read and reread the manuscript, I know this can happen despite the industry of authors and editors.

It is not a factual error, but I do have to comment that I strongly disagree with Isaacs’s position on the 1972 men’s gold medal basketball game between the then Soviet Union and the United States. In both this book and *Ten Moments that Shook the Sports World,* Isaacs criticizes the US team for not accepting the silver medals and depicts the U.S. players as sore losers. Not so. That game was a travesty, and the players were, and are, absolutely correct in their intransigence about not accepting the medals. Readers might want to review a chapter entitled “Hornswoggle” in David Sweet’s book *Three Seconds in Munich*. To “Hornswoggle” is to get the better of someone by cheating or deception. That is what happened in the last three seconds of that basketball game. I fear that those who have not studied that game might come away from Isaacs’s comments with an inaccurate picture of the players and what transpired.

Concerns aside, this book was a joy to read and it grew on me as I continued reading. Isaacs writes about important matters and writes well. Not only will professors and students find the book useful, but anyone with an interest in sports will enjoy the reading, even the erstwhile *Newsday boys*.

A last comment here about the editor. I have never met Aram Goudsouzian. I did contact him in preparation for writing this review and we exchanged e-mails, but I don’t know him personally. Goudsouzian has done a very good job with the book. It cannot be easy editing a manuscript written by someone who is no longer with us. Goudsouzian’s introduction to this book is simply excellent and not something to skip over. He includes a substantive Notes section at the end of the introduction that academics may find very valuable.

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