*Playing Hard A Life and Death in Games, Sports, and Play*

Peter Unwin

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Peter Unwin’s *Playing Hard: A Life and Death in Games, Sports, and Play* is a superb follow-up to his 2011 story “The World in the Evening.” That story chronicles the death of the elderly Ray Bowlen, who “died on a beach in Waikiki, smeared in suntan lotion, in the company of young men who were also smeared in suntan lotion.” Or perhaps *Playing Hard* is a follow-up to Unwin’s poem “Daughter of God,” which appeared in the Winter 2024 edition of *Queen’s Quarterly*. Here are the first four lines:

It’s all very good to slip away

At night in bed without anyone noticing

But what about the ring around your finger?

Do we bury it with you or pawn it […]?

More likely *Playing Hard* is a follow-up only in the chronological sense. I mention the story and the poem as a plug for an under-known author who can write in any genre. Unwin’s latest volume is a memoir consisting of thirty-two short chapters that, for the sake of simplicity, I’ll call personal, linked essays.

Because *Playing Hard* is uniformly excellent, there’s no point inventing criticisms à la *Dončić lacks fitness* or *that middle-distance runner looks anorexic*. Before I get to the heart of this collection, allow me to list a few themes: migration, memory, history, masculinity, codes, and of course sports. But it is an injustice to reduce Unwin’s prose to themes and concepts and paraphrasings. Ignoring my sense of justice and continuing in the list vein… the sports Unwin covers include baseball, snooker, basketball, marathoning, rowing, and football and soccer, as well as the confusion Unwin’s Sheffield-born father faced on arriving in Canada: “he landed himself on the home turf of the Hamilton Tiger-Cats, where, to his alarm, they played professional North American–style football” (p. 20).

Though Hamilton (pop. 565,225) is Ontario’s fifth-largest city, many readers might not know it. As befits a memoir, Unwin roots his essays in the local and local players, mentioning Westdale, Stoney Creek, Etobicoke, and Burlington, as well as other towns and villages I, an Ontarian born and raised, have never heard of. *Playing Hard* is deeply personal without feeling self-absorbed – even as Unwin recounts his father’s attempts to coach “a local T-ball team on a small grassy lot beneath the escarpment” (22), or recalls his father’s dying days (“we talked mostly about sports” (12)), or ponders his early existence: “In the sixteenth week in my mother’s womb, I made the fateful decision to suck my left thumb instead of the right and by doing so greatly increased my chances of growing up to become a baseball pitcher” (23). I’ve been away from the lands of baseball for a while, so that quip took a moment.

I care little for billiards or snooker, but I nevertheless gobbled up Unwin’s tales about seedy, masculine realms of hustling and simmeringviolence but also comradery, such as when Unwin describes young men who “screwed two-piece cues together with the concentration of a duellist loading his pistol” (p. 55). Cool nerves and the hint of death.

Unwin’s non-fiction flows as smoothly as his short fiction and poetry, and you could chop up many a sentence into stanzas and pass them off as fine and lucid poems. I’ve heard that Clive James defined a stellar sentence as one that is clear on first reading but that reveals further delights on second and third reading. That definition fits Unwin’s writing, where language is the heart.

Here Unwin pins down a soldier companion from World War II: “Tommy was a short, mean-tempered, friendless young man who had attached himself to my father like a barnacle” (p. 13). The sentence is declarative without swagger, and the simile is functional rather than flashy. Elsewhere, Unwin notes that an infielder’s “soft hands” “could suck up a ground ball with the efficiency of a vacuum cleaner” (p. 54). I can imagine Unwin finding more original images, then rejecting bling in favor of narrative progression as he tells the story of his life.

Even the following comparison of his father’s last bunk is subtly brilliant: “The bed that he had been lying in for two weeks, and that he would die in, seemed not so much a bed as a piece of extremely sophisticated sports equipment, capable of long-distance travel” (p. 17). Sports equipment, like hospital beds, can be befuddlingly sophisticated. Note, too, that Unwin doesn’t opt for “complicated.” He lets the reader discern that aspect. Furthermore, is there any travel that’s more “long-distance” than the last exit?

One stylistic quirk may irk readers: about a dozen of the chapters in *Playing Hard* end with one-sentence paragraphs: “Like any man in love, he had become a champion of the world” (p. 18); “That was the year that Ed Walsh dominated professional baseball with his spitball” (p. 29); “To give it [play] up was to be counted among the dead” (p. 41). Unwin’s penchant for snappy finishes, however, is not a gimmick or a stylistic tic. These punchy sentences may be formally related but they work in different ways.

Sometimes the snappy conclusions to individual chapters lead, eventually, to further chapters, which makes *Playing Hard* a seamlessly constructed memoir. An early chapter about Unwin’s father playing soccer against some men from the French Foreign Legion concludes, portentously, “But we cheated.” (p. 33). That line is picked up in “We Won, But We Cheated,” which begins

“Dad,” I asked, “do you remember the score?” At this point, he was seated upright in his hospital bed. To me, he seemed dwarfed by the apparatus of medicine and death, the tubes and valves, the pixilated green digits that appeared on the screens. (p. 74)

If the final sentences were mere tricks, Unwin probably wouldn’t wait forty pages to pick up the thread. Unwin is clear without pandering to the reader.

*Playing Hard* evokes a simpler world of codes and masculinity. For example, the local pool hall “was a male space entirely,” implying a comfortable and understood separation between us and them; but the rest of the sentence slyly undercuts this simplicity: “though I can’t imagine anyone having the nerve to ban women from entering or put up a sign reading No Women” (p. 53). The line about lacking nerve hints at how slippery these male codes actually are.

Unwin wryly refers to “murky rules of masculine etiquette [...] that come from a simpler and more chivalrous time when identities were secure and impregnable, when rules were more firmly established” (p. 59). If the times were “simpler,” why are the rules “murky”? And is a rule helpful if it isn’t clear? In short, Unwin isn’t bathing in simplistic sporting nostalgia.

Any decent literary book on sports should be able to hook and enchant even the benighted who use court and field interchangeably and can’t tell a stick from a club. *Playing Hard* has done that, with heartbreak, laughs, and insights to take the author through his sporting life.