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The Playmasters (Book Review)

Joshua Stuart

Sacred Heart University, shuartj@sacredheart.edu

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The Playmasters (2000)

Author: Eldon Ham

Publisher: Contemporary Books

ISBN: 0-8092-2602-2

Reviewer: Joshua A. Stuart

Billed as “an unauthorized history of the NBA,” *The Playmasters* is Eldon Ham’s elegantly crafted, albeit somewhat biased, take on how the league—along with the aid of several “playmasters” (powerful owners, agents, players)—was transformed into the ultimate “entertainment marketing partnership” in all of professional sports. The book is broken into three sections: “Survival of the Fittest,” “The Architects of Fate,” and “Playmasters on Trial.”

The first section, “Survival of the Fittest,” starts with a brief current state of affairs, complete with the marketability of Dennis Rodman and the Bulls. Then we are taken on a whirlwind tour of the early days of the NBA, starting with peach baskets in Springfield and moving on to Abe Saperstein and the Globetrotters, big man superstar George Mikan, the evolution of Dr. J. and his impact on the modern game, the ABA vs. the NBA, and the impact of the NCAA. An interesting anecdote documents the beginnings of formalized “hardship” rules, as a result of the debacle with Spencer Haywood, a minor who was coerced into signing a confusing contract that also had him unknowingly investing in a truck company that was slyly disguised as a “growth mutual fund.”

The second section of the book, “The Architects of Fate,” focuses on

some of the integral people and events that helped to shape the current NBA. This section starts with an excellent overview of the Magic vs. Bird days and continues with the fade of Larry and the Celtics and the rise of the “Bad Boy” Pistons and the hard-nosed Knicks (as well as introducing Michael Jordan in 1984). The Jordan years are well reported, as is the impact of Phil Jackson as co-orchestrator of the Bulls dynasty. Disregarding stylistic changes in the modern game, the author comments that Bob Cousy (1960s) wouldn’t be able to hold his own against a minimal contributor such as Tim Legler (1990s); he also goes as far as transforming bench warmer Felton Spencer into a potential fantasy one-man wrecking crew of the athletes of the past. Ham makes a good point, however, suggesting that taller players such as Toni Kukoc, if matched against the legendary but significantly shorter players (including those from the Celtics dynasties), would be virtually unstoppable. Some of these far-fetched comparisons between athletes from the 1960s and the 1990s, in conjunction with some unfortunate spelling and grammatical errors, blemish this portion of the book. The second section wraps up with a good discussion of salient salary-cap issues and the impact of high school players’ jumping directly to the NBA.

The final part of the book, “Playmasters on Trial,” begins with an investigation into potential manipulation in the NBA, covering topics like home court advantage, biased officiating, and individual team efforts to gain a competitive advantage (e.g., turning up heat in visitor’s locker rooms, tightening opponent’s

rim). Perhaps the most insightful chapter of the entire book is the second chapter in this final section, “Sprewell and the Player Psyche.” Obviously discussed is the Sprewell-Carlesimo choking incident, but the crux of Ham’s argument centers on the “burgeoning hero worship” that all professional athletes deal with on a daily basis. The author concludes by pointing out the league’s role as a ruling class that is so dependent on “public perceptions” that it has, unfortunately, shown tremendous tolerance of deviant behavior.

Ham drafts an entertaining, tightly composed chronicle on the NBA that is both compelling and thoroughly researched. We quickly realize that the NBA is not a prototypical “business,” but rather very much like the “sports macrocosm of money, marketing, collusion, show business, and—above all—a swarm of id-driven egos racing out of control” that the author so eloquently describes.

It should be mentioned that Ham is a sports law professor in Chicago who has legally represented many professional athletes. With his Chicago background comes an inherent proclivity towards all things relating to the Bulls. Obviously, the Chicago Bulls were influential in helping to shape the National Basketball Association into the raging marketing enterprise that it is today. However, to start and end a “history” of the league with the Chicago Bulls is a bit narrow-minded. As a sport marketing tool, *The Playmasters* might be an intriguing case study, but as an actual “history of the NBA,” it strays too far from what one would expect and instead becomes a Chicago Bulls lovefest. As Ham himself states, the latter-day NBA entertainment machine centered on one unique factor: “Michael Jordan is an icon, a class of one. And therein lies part of the problem: what worked for MJ may not pass the logic test when applied to others in other settings.”

Dr. Joshua A. Stuart is an assistant professor of sport management in the College of Business at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, CT. Inquiries regarding this feature may be directed to Linda A. Sharp at linda.sharp@unco.edu or to Anita M. Moorman at amm@louisville.edu.

