

Duty, Honor, Victory: America's Athletes in World War II

Gary Bloomfield

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The ceremonies commemorating the second anniversary of September 11, 2001 remind Americans how relatively lucky they have been, how relatively unscathed by the horrors of the violence that occurs on foreign shores. It also reminds them—and makes them appreciate—the difficulties and sacrifices that their parents and grandparents faced during World War II.

The author, the son of an Army veteran and a veteran himself who served two tours in Korea during the 1970s, pays special tribute to America's athletes who were pulled away from their careers on the mound or the gridiron or the links when duty called. He has written an admirably researched volume that blends the chronology of the war with the stories of those who fought—and in some cases died—in defense of American ideals.

Sports fans will be familiar with many of the higher-profile names in the book. Ted Williams flew fighter jets in both WWII and the Korean War, losing several prime playing years, as did Bob Feller, Hank Greenberg, Warren Spahn, and other baseball players. Jackie Robinson never saw action overseas, but fought his own battle for civil rights within the military.

For every superstar, however, there were scores of unheralded ballplayers, golfers, boxers, and swimmers. Bloomfield notes that schools lost so many able-bodied players that they weren't able to put teams on the field. Pro sports were populated by "4Fs," has-beens, and never-would-bes. The St. Louis Browns even had a one-armed outfielder, Pete Gray, on their roster. (The Browns, a perennially poor team, won the American League Championship in 1945 thanks to the "leveling" effects of the draft.)

Bloomfield quotes the melancholy words of the poet John Greenleaf Whittier to echo the sentiments of those who fought on the battlefields rather than the playing fields: "For all the sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: It might have been!" Some athletes tried and succeeded in resurrecting their careers upon their return; others had been badly injured or came back without the fervor for such relatively unimportant pursuits. Bob Feller downplayed the attention to his own military service when he said: "I'm no hero. The real heroes were the ones who never came home. They had a one-way trip to the beaches at Normandy or the Islands in the Pacific."

The men and women who served America during World War II may find such praise superfluous, but *Duty, Honor, Victory*, which reaches the bookshelves as we celebrate Veterans Day, is a most welcome appreciation.

RON KAPLAN (January / February 2004)

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