



The Strenuous Life: Theodore Roosevelt and the Making of the American Athlete

Ryan Swanson

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Imagine a US president abandoning decorum during an Army-Navy football game, fleeing his security detail, and charging down to the sidelines to fire up both teams. Or using a thunderstorm as an excuse for an impromptu jog through the swampy lands around the Potomac. Such was the life of Teddy Roosevelt, and his love of athletic exploits is the subject of Ryan Swanson's rambunctious *The Strenuous Life*.

Roosevelt's abiding obsession with improving his physical health and tackling athletic challenges with vigor was a tonic for a nation staggering under the burdens of the Industrial Age. Showing how Roosevelt's presidency intersected with societal changes that vaulted sports to the forefront of American life, Swanson details numerous events: initial strides towards racial equality (the first black heavyweight boxing champion), America hosting the Olympics for the first time (in 1904), and the codification of phys-ed classes and interscholastic leagues that would lead to the modern NCAA.

Although Roosevelt's involvement in some of these events was only tangential, Swanson demonstrates how the president was often called upon for guidance, as when he kickstarted discussions about player safety with collegiate football's arbiters, leading to sweeping changes that redefined the game. Swanson's affectionate, free-flowing narrative is at its liveliest when he focuses on memorable anecdotes like Roosevelt's predilection for "point to point" hikes that often endangered the high-ranking government officials he dragged along for the ride; how his reaction to the "unfair" results of an Olympics race nearly created an international incident; or how his undersized son Teddy attempted to earn his old man's respect by playing football at Harvard, resulting in mixed feelings from Roosevelt Senior about his son's safety.

While it works best as a portrait of Roosevelt and his athletic peccadilloes, *The Strenuous Life* is a lighthearted, enlightening look at how Americans became crazy about the sporting life, as seen through the eyes of their most sporting president.

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