

The losing game

David Papineau

TONY MASON

Sport in Britain

127pp. Faber. Paperback, £4.95.

0571 151582

E. M. ROSE

How to Win at Cricket: or The skipper's guide

267pp. Hodder and Stoughton. £12.95.

0340 401710

In the past couple of months, three different British rugby teams have been badly beaten in Australasia, and the English soccer team has failed to win a match in the European championship. The national cricket team's problems on the field have been matched by their difficulties off it and the annual humiliation of British entrants at Wimbledon was no less painful for its familiarity.

I put it down to the unnaturally high level of mass participation in sport in Britain. In other countries adults stop playing games when they leave school, and get down to the serious business of watching the experts on television. But in Britain people want to do it, as well as watch it. No doubt this is a good and healthy thing for the participants, but it doesn't help our national performances. Our national teams are of course mostly composed of full-time professionals. But they are governed by bodies which answer to the legions of amateur practitioners. This, with cricket being the most glaring example, consistently distracts the professionals from their natural function of making money by winning.

The professionalization of sport has reached its highest form in the United States. The national games of baseball and American foot-

ball are simply too difficult for amateurs to play. Non-experts who insist on mimicking the real thing have to make do with watered-down park games of softball and touch football. But in Britain there are over half a million active club cricketers and a staggering 1.5 million regular soccer players – not to mention the half million golfers, the 1.75 million squash players, and the 3 million snooker players.

Most of these statistics come from *Sport in Britain*, Tony Mason's useful short survey of historical and current developments in British sport. Mason makes some interesting observations about the nineteenth-century background to the amateur regulation of professional sport. I had always supposed that the British antipathy to professional sport was a simple matter of moral disapproval of mercenary conduct. But Mason makes it clear that it was originally as much to do with preventing the wrong sort of person getting into the right places. In 1865, for instance, the Henley Regatta Committee extended their reasonable enough ban on full-time watermen to anybody who had ever been employed as a mechanic, artisan or labourer. As late as 1920 one John Kelly was banned from competing there because he had been a bricklayer – some years, it is true, before he became a prominent American business man and the father-in-law of the Prince of Monaco.

The Amateur Athletic Club was even more straightforward in its definition of an amateur. In 1868 it simply decreed that "an amateur is any gentleman". Of course this extreme exclusiveness was disappearing even in the latter part of the nineteenth century. But the idea that amateur administrators have the right to tell the professionals how to run their business is still with us.

The most amateur of amateur sports is Brit-

ish club cricket. On Saturdays and Sundays fields and parks all over the country are covered with white-clothed players. This kind of cricket is one of the most pleasant things in the world, not least because the participants, if not the spectators, take it so seriously. But it has precious little to do with either excellence or winning. E. M. Rose, a Surrey club cricketer of many years' standing, has written a most instructive handbook for club cricket captains, but even he effectively admits that the game isn't really suited to serious competition.

For one thing, the standard is often very mixed. Many local sides simply consist of all the able-bodied men in the village, while a lot of keen club players owe their enthusiasm to their not having been good enough to play much at school. As a result, one common problem for club sides contemplating a holiday tour to the West Indies, Australia, or even Holland or Denmark, is to locate opposition weak enough for it not to be embarrassing. Yet in each club match the captain has to ensure that everybody gets a game, and so even the worst rabbit who doesn't bowl has to bat at a respectable place in the order.

The other barrier to competition is the rules. Even for five-hour afternoon matches, most club cricketers still prefer the subtleties of the traditional arrangements to the forced result of a limited overs match. But this means that the side batting second can nearly always hold out for a draw. Much of Rose's book is about the way the fielding captain can tempt such stonewalling opponents into indiscretion by offering them the chance of victory. I am sure that Rose's club side has a lot of exciting games under his captaincy. But imagine telling Ivan Lendl that he would have more fun if he gave his weaker opponents a few points to make a game of it.

The flying cup

Desmond King-Hele

HENRY SERRANO VILLARD

Blue Ribbon of the Air: The Gordon Bennett races

272pp. Washington, DC: Smithsonian

Institution Press. £25.95.

087474 9425

When the Wright brothers achieved powered flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903, the world was slow to respond. The first obstacle was the age-old belief that anyone claiming to be able to fly was either a lunatic or a liar. Once this hurdle had been cleared, the inventors had to face a second – the belief that flying-machines were mere toys, of no practical use. So it was that Wilbur Wright travelled to France in 1908 to give demonstration flights in his Model A biplane. The struggling French aviators were amazed at his ability in manoeuvring his aircraft: Louis Blériot said, "it is marvellous... Wright is a genius", and the Secretary of the British Aeronautical Society (Major Baden-Powell), after flying as a passenger, commented that "Wilbur Wright is in possession of a power which controls the fate of nations".

A wealthy and flamboyant American, James Gordon Bennett, publisher of the New York *Herald* and its Paris edition, was living in Paris at the time. He had presented a trophy for road races by horseless carriages in 1899, and another for balloon races in 1906. In December 1908 he announced the "Coupe Internationale d'Aviation" for powered flight. Though known as the "Gordon Bennett Cup", the trophy is a silver statuette of a winged, androgynous figure springing into the air from a rocky peak, with an exact model of Wright's biplane just overhead, as if in flight.

The first contest for the Gordon Bennett trophy took place at Reims in August 1909, before a crowd estimated to be about 100,000. The favourite was Blériot, who had recently conquered the English Channel, but the American Glenn Curtiss beat Blériot by five seconds, completing the twenty-kilometre course in 15 minutes 50.6 seconds, at an average speed of forty-seven miles per hour. The second contest was held in 1910, on a difficult course at Belmont Park near New York. The distance had been increased to 100 km (twenty laps) and the race was won by a Briton, Claude

Grahame-White, in a French aircraft at an average speed of sixty-one miles per hour. The 1911 race was held in England, at Eastchurch in Kent, and was won by the American Charles Weymann at an average speed of seventy-eight miles per hour. In the next two Gordon Bennett races the winners were French aviators, Jules Vedrines in 1912 and Marcel Prévost in 1913, at speeds of 105 and 124 miles per hour respectively. After the war there was one further race, in 1920, won by Joseph Sadi-Lecointe of France at an average speed of 168 miles per hour. These three successive victories gave France outright possession of the trophy, and the races ended. As the donor had hoped, the discipline of a race helped to stimulate aviation into forced growth.

The Gordon Bennett races have now found a dedicated historian. Henry Villard has been an

enthusiast for aviation throughout his long life: he attended the Belmont meet in 1910 as a schoolboy and first flew in 1912. Working chiefly from contemporary newspapers and journals, he has put together an expert narrative of the races, with all the details that most of us would ever wish to know. The yearly repetitions would have become tedious to read about if they had continued much longer, but the six completed races gave rise to many unexpected incidents and accidents, as a result of which there was never a race with more than four finishers. No pilots were killed in the races, though some were injured: the majority lived to a ripe age, to belie the old joke that a girl who looks good in black should marry an aviator. This well-researched and well-written book will be a lasting contribution to aviation history.

Not actually that mad

Kathleen Jamie

AL ALVAREZ

Feeding the Rat: Profile of a climber

152pp. Bloomsbury. £11.95.

07475 01785

Feeding the Rat is a book about Mo Anthoine. Mo is a good friend of Al Alvarez. He is a climber. He and Al have been pals for ages. The book recounts some of their adventures together – in the Dolomites as young men, on the Old Man of Hoy in their middle age. Mo has been climbing for a long time, and has made many trips to the Himalayas and South America. He is married, apparently happily, and runs a small business in Wales. But why are we being given this "profile of a climber"? The book is clearly, rather beautifully written, but easy-going to the point of banality. Incidents and quips that were side-splitting at the time are dull in the telling. Despite being a climber and spending a lot of time being scared or uncomfortable in distant parts of the world, Mo Anthoine is an ordinary bloke.

It is for the lay public that Alvarez writes, not climbers. His profile of his friend is an exercise in demythologizing, and as such it is valuable. He wishes to show by example that climbers are not mad, wild, or death-before-

dishonour "heroes". Neither are their trips to the Himalayas or wherever all big, sponsored, media events; if ever they were, they're not now. The words "assault", "conquered", "submit" and the like have no place in this book, as they have no place in modern climbers' vocabulary.

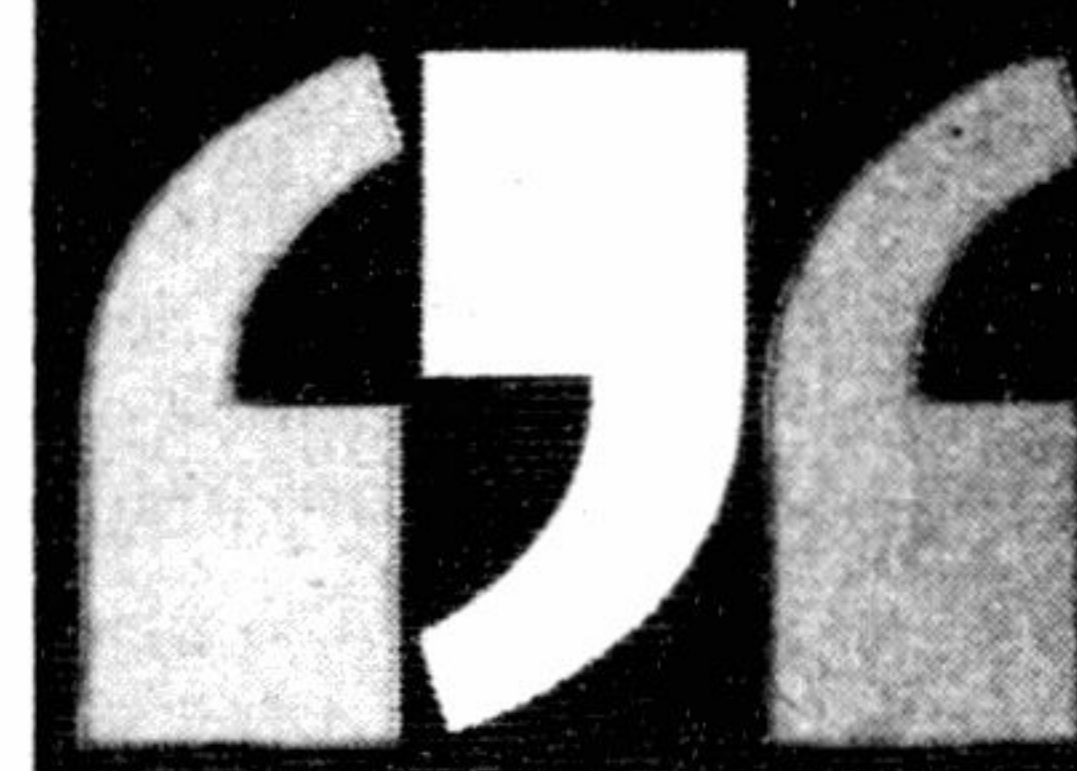
Unfortunately, Alvarez does say that Mo Anthoine is into "deep play": activities in which what you stand to lose seems out of all proportion to what you stand to gain. This assertion is at odds with his quiet insistence that climbing is not an activity of the disturbed. There is of course much truth in this insistence: climbers will tell you that integral to their enjoyment is the reduction of risks and the solving of problems, not the acceptance of them. Anyone who professes himself willing to die on the hill will soon find himself short of partners. If Alvarez uses the example of Anthoine to rid us of the notion that climbers are fit subjects for serious psychological study, it's a pity this term was brought in – it even features on the dust jacket. A real debunking exercise would have revealed this as part of the myth. Anthoine says "To snuff it without knowing who you are or what you are capable of... I can't think of anything sadder than that." And the pity is that we do now know what Mo Anthoine, mountaineer, is capable of, but not, alas who he is.

A REMARKABLE OFFER TO NEW SUBSCRIBERS TO THE TLS

"... a compendium that deserves shelf-space in every home interested in language."

THE CAMBRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LANGUAGE

DAVID CRYSTAL



"The strengths of CEL lie in the enormous variety of information it contains from sign languages to automatic speech recognition, from glossolalia (speaking in tongues) to the complexities of the world's languages – nearly 1,000 are cited.

A further cardinal virtue of the Encyclopedia is its accessibility. The whole production is imaginative and arresting."

Terence Moore. TLS February 12 1988

Take out a year's subscription and we will send you your weekly TLS plus a copy of THE CAMBRIDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LANGUAGE published by Cambridge University Press (worth £25) free. Simply complete the coupon below and send it with your remittance to the address shown.

Annual subscription rates: £55; Europe (incl Eire) £79; USA & Canada US\$90; Rest of the World (Surface Mail) £73, (Air Mail) £88.

Please send me a year's subscription of The Times Literary Supplement plus my free copy of The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language.

Name _____ (CYH)

Address _____

Postcode/Zip Code _____

I enclose my cheque for £/US\$ _____ made payable to The Times Supplements.

Please charge my credit card £/US\$ _____

Date _____ Signed: _____

Expiry date: _____

☐ VISA ☐ AMERICAN EXPRESS ☐ MASTERCARD ☐ Diners Club

Please send this coupon together with your payment to: Linda Bartlett, The Times Literary Supplement, Priory House, St John's Lane, London EC1M 4BX, England.

If this is a gift order we must have the sender's as well as the recipient's name and address.

Offer is open to new subscribers only and closes on 30 September 1988. Please note that delivery outside the UK can take up to 28 days.

TLS
THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Papineau, David. "The losing game." *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 4451, 22 July 1988, p. 817. *The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200455603/TLSH?u=tlshacc&sid=bookmark-TLSH. Accessed 23 Sept. 2023.