

Kerouac at Bat: Fantasy Sports and the King of the Beats
By Isaac Gewirtz
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Reviewed by Penny Vlagopoulos – Texas A&M International University

Sports have always played a central role in defining and contesting what it means to be American. During the first half of the twentieth century as the United States carved out its cultural and political identity, sports reflected anxieties surrounding shifting definitions of citizenship, region, and nation. From African-American Jack Johnson's victory over Caucasian James J. Jeffries in 1910 and the ensuing race riots, to President Roosevelt delaying a press conference for Seabiscuit's victory over Horse of the Year War Admiral in 1938, to the "shot heard 'round the world" as the Giants beat the Dodgers in 1951, sports served as markers of progress and hope, throwing into relief both the fragmentations of the modern era and a lasting adherence to communal values.

Kerouac at Bat: Fantasy Sports and King of the Beats, by Isaac Gewirtz, speaks to the power of sports in our national consciousness by excavating their influence during this period on one of our great American writers, Jack Kerouac. As curator of the Berg Collection—now home to the Jack Kerouac Archive—Gewirtz employs his archival expertise to detail a lesser known trajectory of Kerouac's writerly mind: an elaborate world of fantasy sports, primarily baseball and horse racing, documented in handwritten and typed newsletters and broadsides that Kerouac began during his teenage years. Kerouac's interest in sports is no surprise: much has been made of his football scholarship to Columbia University, for example, a fact often invoked to represent his homegrown, all-American side. Baseball, horse racing, and boxing were all prominently featured in the Lowell daily newspaper of Kerouac's youth and, as Gewirtz explains, Kerouac's father Leo was an avid fan of sports (even supplementing his income as linotype operator at the Sullivan Brothers printing firm by producing large racing forms for display). Gewirtz argues that for Kerouac, "sporting events glowed with the innocent promise of an idealized America, even as they recalled ancient, bloody rites of passage" (7). Recognizing that other writers have mythologized competitive sports, Gewirtz astutely understands that what makes Kerouac's interest unique, as manifested in the fantasy sports culture he created, is its degree of focus, even, one might say, obsessiveness.

At the age of fourteen, Kerouac created a baseball league and carefully charted the histories of the players, coaches, managers, and owners, including financial statistics and stories about player trades. In early versions, he began games by hitting a marble with a toothpick and eventually created a set of cards using a statistical system that estimated the outcome of each pitch based on the skills of batters and pitchers. At times, he incorporated actual pitching by throwing a projectile at a diagrammed board. Naming the teams after automobiles until the mid-1940s and then switching to color names (i.e., the Chicago Chryslers and the Boston Grays, respectively), Kerouac's unique flair for pop cultural humor emerges in the detailed biographical histories of players who have names like "Wino Love," "Loop Paige," "Warby Pepper," and "Zagg Parker," the latter taken from a nickname given to Kerouac during his teenage years to honor his

“zigzagging” speed on the football field. Like real leagues, Kerouac’s underwent changes—cities lost and regained teams, rosters and batting orders changed—and each season included an All-Star Game and a World Series. Using the name “Jack Lewis,” an Anglicized version of his French name, Jean-Louis, Kerouac employed an alter ego who functioned alternately as player, manager, and reporter for *Jack Lewis’s Baseball Chatter*. As a jockey in Kerouac’s fantasy horse racing, Lewis had a family, complete with a wealthy wife who owned a horse farm and a son named Tad who was “expected to become a greater jockey than his immortal dad” (Gewirtz 29).

While the fantasy Thoroughbred games only lasted, according to the available archival material, until Kerouac was sixteen, the colorful stories that flesh out these games in the hyperbolic sports writing style of his era suggest a substantial commitment that seems on par with his devotion to baseball. He wrote thorough background stories about races at imaginary New England tracks, including information about the horses, jockeys, trainers, and owners, sometimes using clippings of real horses on his newssheets, which included track conditions and weather. Kerouac enacted these games by releasing marbles and a ball bearing down a Parcheesi board and recording his results. The ball bearing, which traveled faster than the marbles, became known as the unparalleled horse Repulsion, “King of the Turf,” who triumphantly beat his rival Gunwale. As in the section devoted to Kerouac’s baseball leagues, the narrative arc of the Thoroughbred racing comes to life in Gewirtz’s adept presentation of the publications, including concise yet informative annotations for the reader.

Kerouac at Bat is most gratifying when Gewirtz traces the ways in which the fantasy teams intersected with Kerouac’s literature and his approach to the world at large. With respect to the latter, Kerouac named his center fielder for the Boston Fords “Pancho Villa,” after the Mexican revolutionary leader, and the pitcher of the Chicago Nashes “Rob Roy,” after the Scottish folk hero and outlaw Robert Roy MacGregor, displaying his affinity for the bandits and revolutionaries of history. Accommodating changes in the national make-up of the sport after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, Kerouac added a black Cuban shortstop to the Philadelphia Pontiacs in 1949, calling him “El Negro.” Even more fascinating is the subtle dialogue that emerges between Kerouac’s teams and his literary works. In the 1950s, for instance, he called New York Greens pitcher “Pic,” the name of a character who first appeared in a proto-version of *On the Road* in 1949 and eventually became the protagonist of the novella *Pic*. In another example, “Cody,” the name that Kerouac used for Neal Cassady in early experimental versions of *On the Road*, which eventually became *Visions of Cody*, first surfaced as early as 1936 in “Phegie Cody,” a pitcher for the Chicago Nashes.

The texts that Gewirtz compiles using only a small percentage of the available documents convincingly showcase fantasy sports as an integral component of Kerouac’s oeuvre. The imaginative scope of Kerouac’s painstaking verisimilitude resonates strongly for the reader. However, while *Kerouac at Bat* implicitly makes a solid case for the value of archival work in understanding Kerouac as a writer, what’s missing is sustained scrutiny that could illuminate the point of all of this. This rich source material begins to come to life when Gewirtz ruminates on what propelled Kerouac into such a lifelong obsession, but his answer—escape and refuge—barely scratches the surface. In particular, he turns to Kerouac’s trauma, resentment, and guilt over the death of his brother Gerard, who died at age nine when Kerouac was four. This is a specious argument at best. Creative expression rarely fits easily into systems of psychoanalytic

causality, and Kerouac, rather than avoiding the most painful aspects of his life, confronted them repeatedly in his published work. The most compelling explanation that Gewirtz gives is that fantasy sports provided a kind of safe space from the embattled dualism that critics have long identified as an integral part of Kerouac's cultural and literary legacy, "his dichotomous, warring identities: small-town football hero versus sensitive, big-city artist; all-American writer versus fiercely proud Breton-Canuck, resentful of the Anglo culture in which he often felt like a despised stranger; warmth and generosity at war with embittered bigotry" (8). People with artistic impulses, however, always waded through conflicting notions of selfhood and belonging, and Kerouac channeled these tugs-of-war into every aspect of his life. Subterfuge wasn't his style.

Gewirtz offers revealing hints and shrewd gestures at analysis, but they fall short of the complexity that a careful reader might perhaps glean. His subtitle calls attention to the "King of the Beats" moniker that, along with the spotlight that attended it, proved problematic for Kerouac throughout his life. Is Gewirtz being a bit tongue in cheek? Does he want the reader immediately to sense the contradictory impulses that seem to attend Kerouac at bat and Kerouac the King? The brief explanations could go further. Escape, for example, doesn't tell us a whole lot. One could argue that any artist is always escaping, negotiating, and reframing his/her marginality in some way. What would be more useful is a probing look at the aspects of Kerouac's fantasy sport that seem unique: the meticulousness, for one. Why go to such great lengths to ensure that every aspect seems entirely plausible within the fantasy sports world itself, particularly when he was sharing this information with almost nobody? Yes, a good writer is first and foremost a good storyteller and Kerouac obviously felt impelled to sharpen this skill throughout his life, but he had numerous outlets for rehearsal, as evidenced in journals and multiple drafts of novels. If fantasy sports functioned as a hidden refuge, did it counterbalance his literary work, which often served as confession or exposure, or did it create a kind of escapist parallel universe, throwing into relief and deeply impacting his novels, poems, and essays? More importantly, what, ultimately, can these fantasy games reveal about Kerouac's writing—his spontaneous prose, his unique blend of fact and fiction, his Duluoz legend? Intentions, in other words, seem less interesting than how one might understand the larger implications.

It's clear that Gewirtz understands the value and impact of this creative output. In a *New York Times* review, for example, he says, "To me it's another indication of the kind of mind that allowed him to be the writer he was" (McGrath). Unlike the material that makes up *Beatific Souls*, however, which riffs on knowledge already existent in public conceptions of Kerouac as a result of scholarship by Ann Charters, Tim Hunt, George Dardess, and Howard Cunnell, among others, *Kerouac at Bat* gives us raw, undigested information in need of stewardship. A deeper investigation of the recycled character names, for instance, could help broaden our understanding of Kerouac's complex intertextual play, particularly when taking into account the fact that he kept his fantasy world almost completely secret. This decision is a striking for a writer who wrote in his "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" that "the best writing is always the most painful personal wrungout tossed from cradle warm protective mind—tap from yourself the song of yourself, *blow!—now!—your way is your only way—'good'—or 'bad'—always honest, ('ludicrous'), spontaneous, 'confessional' interesting, because not 'crafted'*" (Kerouac 58). Kerouac's literature always encoded the reader and established a kind of pact in the writing itself. Even his private journals, which are excerpted in a volume that Douglas Brinkley edited,

engage explicitly with public readers. His fantasy sports writing, however, implied a readership but remained almost exclusively within his own purview. This disparity unsettles our conceptions of what drove Kerouac to write and suggests new, as yet untheorized interventions.

Throughout the book, Gewirtz hints at larger meaning. In a parenthetical afterthought regarding Repulsion's victory over Gunwale, for example, he explains, "Even at this early age, Kerouac realized that a true champion can achieve greatness only by defeating a great rival" (19). Similarly reflective when discussing the short-lived West Coast life of the fantasy teams, he writes, "By 1961, and probably a year or two earlier, the California teams have disappeared, along with Kerouac's enchantment with the Golden State and his youthful, beatific vision of America's spiritual renewal" (39). These are hidden gems of critical thought and inquiry that leave the reader wanting more. How did Kerouac's competitive instinct infuse and shape his writing? Did he identify, in a sense, with Repulsion? One can't help but make the connection—in a quote from the unpublished *Memory Babe* scroll of 1958, which Gewirtz enlarges and sets off on its own page, Kerouac explains that he named his horse Repulsion "because I knew he would repulse all other horses forever . . . Which he did" (22). To repulse is not merely to vanquish. It suggests a stronger sense of outsidership as well as an active role in sustaining it, which gives insight into Kerouac's own vexed relationship with critics, friends, family members, and lovers throughout his life. Repulsion resurfaces in *Doctor Sax* and thus remains a potent figure in Kerouac's literary imagination, a fact that Gewirtz never mentions. In the case of California serving as a barometer of Kerouac's disenchantment—a conclusion that needs supporting evidence—if these fantasy teams elucidate the fluctuations of Kerouac's belief in the promise of America, they can give us a lens through which to chart the course of his literary voice in ways that might prove refreshing and unexpected.

In a 1938 issue of *Jack Lewis's Baseball Chatter*, Kerouac wrote, at age sixteen, "Woe is Bob, the gum-chewing, apple seed chucker, and spontaneous individual who fills the seat in the office below the office of Edward Janke, Chevvy impresario. Didn't he have enough trouble with those Farr Flambasters already. Why do such people roam this land of liberty?" (Gewirtz 45). When discovering moments like these, readers of *Kerouac at Bat* feel a sense of wonder and intrigue, and find fertile terrain for reimagining Kerouac as a writer. Gewirtz is less concerned with theoretical exploration than with unveiling this virtually unknown side of Kerouac, which is a significant contribution, considering that the combined effect of an inaccessible archive and a caricatured literary movement has severely distorted our general understanding of Kerouac and relegated scholars of his work to a kind of dispossession. Because Gewirtz presents this material in an adroit manner, we have a new portal through which to examine one of the twentieth century's most important writers. Still, one can't help but wonder what *Kerouac at Bat* might have been as a collaborative effort conjoining archival work and in-depth critical evaluation. Then, when stumbling onto literary delights like the one above, readers could find signposts to help steer them through the startled sense of having arrived at the early stages of spontaneous bop prosody. On a broader level, we could find new strategies for investigating Kerouac's profound entrenchment in the potentialities of America.

Works Cited

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