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John Ditsky

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STEINBECK REVIEW

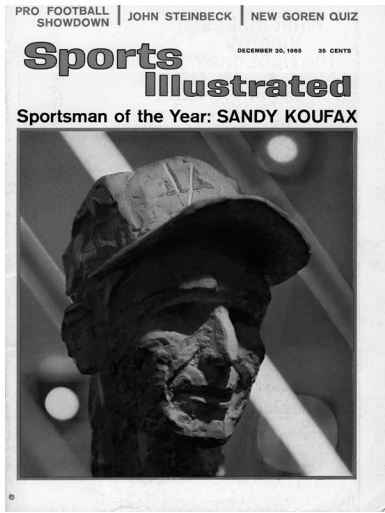
JOHN DITSKY, UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR
(RETIRED)

As *I AM WRITING THIS*, it is Kentucky Derby Day, 1 May 2004. Of the Derby, John Steinbeck is quoted as saying, “This Kentucky Derby, whatever it is—a race, an emotion, a turbulence, an explosion—is one of the most beautiful and violent and satisfying things I have ever experienced” (Rose 24). This line of Steinbeck’s appears as an epigraph for a chapter from Pete Rose’s apologia *My Prison Without Bars*. We might tend to think about Steinbeck as a writer not much interested in the sporting life. But we would be wrong. As Pete Rose might say, “You can bet on it.”

But I suspect that Pete Rose’s contacts with John Steinbeck have been fleeting at best, and that the chapter opening quotation was picked by collaborator Rich Hill. I could be wrong, of course, and I hope I am. I should have asked Rose when we crossed paths years ago, at Honolulu Airport. I was heading back from the Third International John Steinbeck Congress, and Rose was most likely *not* going there, pug nose and all. It was, in any case, no place to begin a discussion of Steinbeck and sports.

Sports Illustrated editor Ray Cave, however, did ask Steinbeck for a contribution to the magazine’s pages in 1965; and the writer complied in time, choosing as his title the “inside” baseball apologia “Then My Arm Glassed Up.” (This is in marked contrast to Rose’s own apologia, though each one is disingenuous on its own terms.) Steinbeck begins by adopting the epistolary mode when he is writing back to Ray Cave to tell him why he cannot fulfill the editor’s request: that “sometimes the letter of refusal is longer than the article would have been.” He adds, “I have

always been interested in sports, but more as an observer than as a participant” (Steinbeck 446).



SANDY KOUFAX WAS CHOSEN “SPORTSMAN OF THE YEAR” BY SPORTS ILLUSTRATED IN THE SAME ISSUE IN WHICH STEINBECK’S “THEN MY ARM GLASSED UP” APPEARED (DECEMBER 20, 1965)

Thereafter Steinbeck adopts the mode of structural irony, by which he fills out his assigned essay space by showing why he cannot possibly do so, and in the process shows why he is eminently fit to do just that, should he care to stay on the subject. (In so doing, he becomes yet another instance of the meandering narrator who sets out to say a thing yet never quite gets to the point at all.) In Steinbeck’s case this means never quite showing why he is inadequate to the present task while amply demonstrating how well he could do it, if he would. (This device is of course reminiscent of Mark Twain, an obvious influence upon Steinbeck, and of the late Canadian writer W. O. Mitchell, who confessed [to me] to having been influenced by both Twain and Steinbeck.) Thereafter, having learnedly dealt with the origins of the word “sport,” he begins to run the gamut of his “inadequate” experience—beginning with javelin throwing, where he “once threw the javelin rather promisingly until my arm glassed up” (447). Hence our title, and with it a disguised historical tour of the sports Steinbeck feels unequipped to write about.

Steinbeck next returns to hunting, admitting pity for the man so insecure in his manhood that he needs to surround himself with trophies. He digresses to mention the specimens on the stuffed display in Red Square, and then he goes on to talk wittily (how else?) about the pleasures of fox hunting (447). From there it is only natural to speak of fishing, during which discussion he deliberately makes himself the liar by showing how well he understands the psychological need to fish, as well as that of those who fish merely to triumph and discard.

Steinbeck hereafter heads back to the paddock, having affirmed that his "interest in sports is catholic but cool," "quiet but deep" (448). From this point on, his strategy is to seem to limit himself to talking of baseball, mentioning that both he and Elaine are now "Met" fans (is it still ever singular)? (448-49). His last digression is largely a dismissal of bullfighting and its mystique; and here his earlier allusions to Ernest Hemingway come to fruition. For whatever reason, Steinbeck finds it necessary to state that he has seen Manolete perform oftener than Hemingway; and that there is a certain hollowness, shallowness, to the bullfighter's courage (450). He much prefers that of an Ed Murrow, a Dag Hammarskjöld. Here is the newly-public Steinbeck taking deliberate aim at his recently-deceased predecessor at the Nobel awards. It is of course interesting to wonder, Why?

For whatever reason, Steinbeck chooses to end his essay on why-I-can't with a baseball reference. He concludes after saying again why "it was a mistake to ask" him to write about sports, "Hell, I don't even know the batting average of Eddie Kranepool" (450). I'll bet he did. Eddie Kranepool was a New York native born in 1944, and he played out his entire career at first base for the Mets from 1962 to 1979, with a career average of .261. By 1965, when Steinbeck was writing his piece, Kranepool was in the midst of a .253. season. No Ted Williams, he—but a reliable professional like Steinbeck, who had already shown his suspicions about that universal sports expert Hemingway. Maybe the kind of a player only a pretentious "fan," or an idiot-savant, would know the batting average of. Maybe a bit of a mudder, like this day's Smarty Jones.

Just as not all Nobel Prize winners show the same traits, Steinbeck seems to be saying, there is virtue in quiet professionalism; and I know who Eddie Kranepool is even if he isn't in the Baseball Hall of Fame. (But then, neither is Pete Rose.)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE:

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