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BOOKS | BOOKSHELF

# Five Best: Gordon Marino

The author of ‘The Existentialist’s Survival Guide’ on sports.

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## **Carlisle vs. Army**

By Lars Anderson (2007)

In 1912, 22 years after the massacre at Wounded Knee, the undersized Carlisle (Pa.) Indian Industrial School football team was riding on the back of Jim Thorpe. Blocking their path to the national championship was a West Point squad led by the dogged running back and linebacker Dwight Eisenhower. Before the Army showdown, Lars Anderson writes, the Carlisle coach, Glenn “Pop” Warner, jacked his players up, bellowing: “Remember that it was the fathers and grandfathers of these Army players . . . who killed your fathers and grandfathers . . . who destroyed your way of life. . . . Remember all of this on every play.” The record of Thorpe’s feats is astounding. Playing against the University of Pittsburgh in 1911, the future Olympic gold medalist in both the decathlon and pentathlon blasted a long arching punt from near his own goal line. Thorpe rocketed downfield and recovered his own kick, then “broke three tackles and staggered twenty more yards to score a touchdown.”

## **The Silent Season of a Hero**

By Gay Talese (2010)

Gay Talese’s early training taking measurements at his father’s tailor shop required a talent for unobtrusiveness. Not for nothing did he, later on, call his writer’s craft “the art of hanging around.” This veritable museum of Mr. Talese’s best sports reportage includes quiet miniatures

like the one about “ Mike Gillan, the Capezio of horseshoe makers” and another about Billy Ray, the last of the bare-knuckle fighters. That’s in addition to his justly famous portraits of Joe DiMaggio, Muhammad Ali and Joe Louis. Having tagged along with Joe Louis in New York in the early ’60s, Mr. Talese recalls how, as Louis walked down Broadway, “cabdrivers waved at him, bus drivers honked at him, and dozens of men stopped him and recalled how they had once traveled 130 miles to get to one of his fights, and how they’d put their heads down to light a cigarette in the first round, then before they could look up, Louis had flattened his opponent and they had missed everything.”

## **Ball Four**

By Jim Bouton (1970)

In 1969, after having helped the Yankees win a World Series, pitcher Jim Bouton was traded to the Seattle Pilots. He decided to publish a chronicle of his time with the expansion team, one replete with memories of his tenure in pinstripes. Ironic but never mean-spirited, the tales of pills, boozing, philandering, incessant voyeurism (“beaver shooting”) and numbskull coaches came like a fastball through the picture window of American jockocracy. The resulting vilification directed at Mr. Bouton was roughly equal to the kind that might descend on someone who had betrayed the American nation. In a later edition, Mr. Bouton wrote that “after the book it was no longer possible to sell the milk and cookies image again.” The knuckleballer had even dared to ding the myth of Mickey Mantle. Mantle drank as hard as he hit a baseball. Mr. Bouton recalls that the night before a game, Mick got smashed. The next day, “he could hardly see.” Still, sent up to pinch-hit, “he staggered up to the plate and hit a tremendous drive to left field for a home run.” Mantle got a standing ovation. Back in the dugout, “he squinted out at the stands and said, ‘Those people don’t know how tough that really was.’ ”

## **Ghosts of Manila**

By Mark Kram (2001)

This “Iliad” of a boxing book orbits around the 1975 “Thrilla in Manila,” the third and final showdown between Muhammad Ali and Smokin’ Joe Frazier. The champion, Ali, resented Frazier, repeatedly labeling him an Uncle Tom and worse. Frazier never stopped seething about

Ali's toxic slurs. He instructed his trainer: "Whatever happens, don't stop the fight. . . . I'm gonna eat this half-breed's heart out. . . . This is the end of him or me." In fact, it would be the beginning of the end for both men. The fight itself was so brutal, Mark Kram writes, that it made "one want to seek out the nearest confessional for the expiation of voyeuristic lust." Ali owned the early frames, but Frazier soon found his savage rhythm, and with the cruel weapon of his vaunted left hook he slammed Ali's body "with nonstop digging, a wild boar going for a truffle." By the end of the 11th round, which Ali later described "as the closest thing to dying," the Greatest looked finished. Then, miraculously, the phoenix arose, and Ali "started to part the Red Sea of Frazier's face." Frazier's trainer stopped the contest before the final frame. "No, no, no!" Frazier shouted. "You can't do that to me."

## **Cut Time**

By Carlo Rotella (2003)

While an English professor at Lafayette College in Easton, Pa., in the 1990s, Carlo Rotella would make daily treks to the nearby gym of former heavyweight champ Larry Holmes. Mr. Rotella also covered innumerable boxing matches. By turns ironic and tender, the wide sweep of Mr. Rotella's prose captures the sweat parlors of boxing gyms as well as the way that pros respond to having their faces split open. The deeper you go into the fights, he tells us, "the more you may discover. . . . Lessons in space and leverage, or in holding part of oneself in reserve even when hotly engaged, are lessons not only in how one boxer reckons with another but also in how one person reckons with another. . . . Boxing conducts an endless workshop in the teaching and learning of knowledge with consequences."

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