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**BEST OF Books & Arts in Review** 

The 10 Best Books of 2022

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By Edward Kosner March 30, 2023 at 2:27 pm ET

BOOKSHELF

**Spring Books: Sports** 

Winning biographies from the worlds of basketball, golf, football and, yes,

professional wrestling.

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Ever since the days of the boxer Jack Johnson and the all-around great Jim Thorpe, sports has been a kind of underground railroad to fame and its rewards for those born on the margins of American society. Their stories are often poignant but always inspiring, and a number of recent books tell them with verve.

**GRABACOPY** LeBron By Jeff Benedict Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster 576 pages We may earn a commission when you buy products through the links on our site. **BUY BOOK**  $\checkmark$ 

LeBron James, the enduring star of the Los Angeles Lakers, is the NBA's all-time scoring leader, dethroning Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, another Laker legend, earlier this year. That turns out to be one of the less fascinating things about this magnificent athlete. James's epic success story exemplifies the hallowed but sparingly redeemed American Dream. Now he has found his Alger in Jeff Benedict, a sports writer and movie and TV producer whose new biography, "LeBron," is an absorbing chronicle of talent, character, pluck and luck.

James's mother, Gloria, was just 16 when he was born; she raised him alone in the slums of Akron, Ohio, often scraping by on food stamps

in subsidized housing. LeBron never knew his father, but he grew to be a sports phenom, excelling at basketball and football from middle school on. He forged a tight band of teammate pals, who remain his trusted circle into his days as a billionaire athlete, entrepreneur and philanthropist.

"LeBron" tracks his now 20-year career as the only rival to the NBA's G.O.A.T., Michael Jordan. Drafted out of high school, James led his near-hometown Cleveland Cavaliers to the brink of an NBA championship, but "took his talents," as he put it, to the Miami Heat, where he delivered two titles in four seasons while enraged Cav fans burned his jerseys. Then he redeemed himself and Cleveland's pride by returning to win the trophy there. His most recent stop is Los Angeles, where he's won another championship and broken the scoring record. Along the way, James won gold for U.S. Olympic basketball teams, sold more than \$340 million dollars' worth of Nike sneakers, married his first sweetheart and raised three children, and became an effective spokesman for black athletes on social issues. James might not be quite the paragon Jeff Benedict describes, but he is plainly a man—and a superstar—in full.

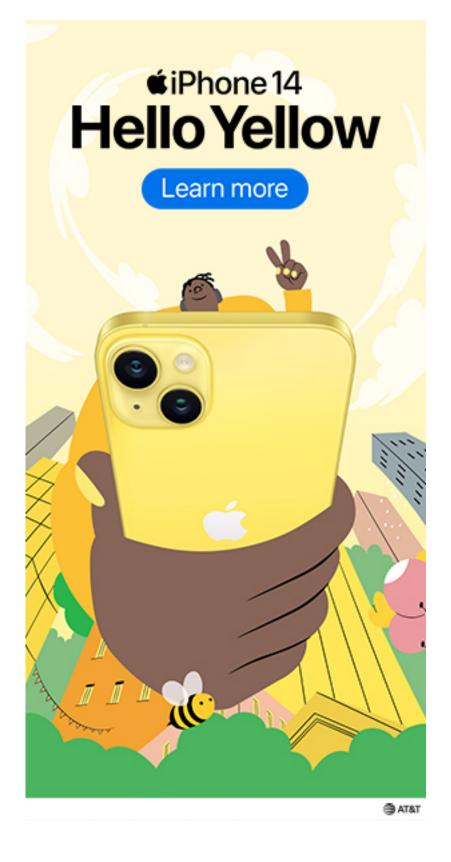


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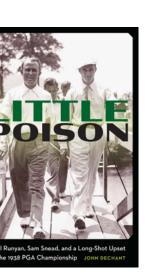
## **GRABACOPY**

Little Poison: Paul Runyan, Sam Snead, and a Long-Shot Upset at the 1938 PGA Championship

By John Dechant

University of Nebraska Press

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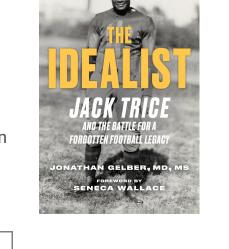
The Idealist: Jack Trice and the Battle for a Forgotten Football Legacy

By Jonathan Gelber

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When Willaman moved on to coach at Iowa

State University, he recruited Trice and some of his white star teammates to play at Ames. Already a married man at 20, Trice joined the freshman team and competed in the shot put with the track team. Next fall, he made varsity. In his second game, against the University of Minnesota, Trice was decked by the Gophers' fullback, then trampled by three other players. His injuries triggered peritonitis, and he died two days later, on Oct. 8, 1923.

As the only black player on the squad. Trice endured racial humiliation. Indeed. "The Idealist" documents lynchings of black men and youths, and less lethal but pernicious forms of racism, throughout the Midwest in the 1920s. Black students and white allies at Iowa State waged an admirably tenacious decades-long campaign to rename the football stadium for Trice. The eventual success of the drive gave Jack Trice—at least in retrospect -the recognition he'd earned as a pioneering black athlete.

# **GRABACOPY**

**Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America** 

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Depression-era golf champion, was "a peanut of a man," as he was once described. Fully grown he stood 5-feet-6 and weighed 130 pounds. Runyan is little remembered today except by golf scholars, and that's a shame. Like James, he escaped humble origins—a dairy farm outside the spa resort of Hot Springs, Ark.—and climbed to the pinnacle of his sport. His climactic victory over another country boy is told by John Dechant in "Little Poison: Paul Runyan, Sam Snead, and a Long-Shot Upset at the 1938 PGA Championship."

If LeBron James is a giant, Paul Runyan, the

Runyan (1908-2002) was just 29 when he won that final round, 8-up with 7 to play, at the Shawnee Country Club in Pennsylvania. It was the high point of his seven-decade career as a professional golfer, revered instructor, club designer—the epitome of everything golfers love about their sport. He was routinely beaten off the tee, Mr. Dechant writes, by Snead and many other huskier pros. But Runyan's short game kept him among the leaders in tournament after tournament, year after year. "David tees off against Goliath," wrote one of

the press pack before that PGA match. "Lawdy,

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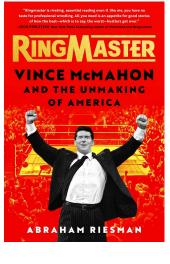
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carnage that has propelled many of the lowly, including Hulk Hogan, André the Giant and Jesse Ventura, to fortune and fame. Like the circus, pro wrestling had an argot: "heels" (villains) and "babyfaces" (heroes), "marks" (gullible fans) and "smarts" (those onto the game). The whole production was "kayfabe" derived from old carny word for "fake"—the fictional face of pro wrestling, staged for the audience, the "marks."

"Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the

"sports entertainment"—professional

Unmaking of America" isn't actually about

sports. It's about what its subject dubbed

wrestling, the carnival of scripted pseudo-

Abraham Riesman, the lively biographer of Marvel's Stan Lee, focuses this encyclopedic story on the promoter and one-time wrestling "heel" who, as the billionaire majority owner and chairman of World Wrestling Entertainment, became a big buddy of Donald Trump. The bond grew so tight that Vince and wife, Linda, donated millions to Trump's 2016 campaign and 45 named Linda to his cabinet. The book traces Vince's relentless longtime crusade to drive out competitive promoters, his campaign to rid his "sport" of state supervision, and WWE's troubles with dope and steroids. The lord of the rings emerges as a Machiavellian figure; he "retired" last year at age 76 amid disclosures that he paid more than \$12 million in hush money to women staffers he'd sexually harassed or coerced. Then he had to reimburse WWE another \$17.4 million, the cost of its investigating his transgressions. But he's still in the game: Just last month he proposed legalizing gambling on scripted wrestling bouts!

*—Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.* 

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# **Books in Bloom: The Best Reading for Spring**

Our reviewers welcome the season with an overview of bright new arrivals in sports, gardening, exploring the great outdoors and more.

NATURE

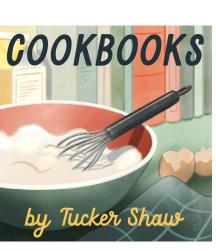
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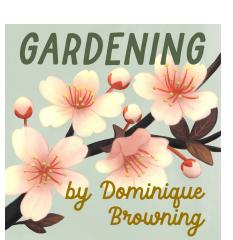
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**Spring Books: Sports** 

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