

BEST OF Books & Arts in Review

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The 10 Best Books of 2022



by Edward Kosner

ILLUSTRATION BY JENNIFER POTTER FOR THE WSJ

BOOKSHELF Spring Books: Sports

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

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

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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.

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LeBron

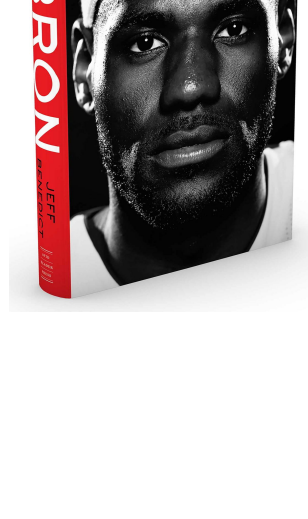
By Jeff Benedict

Avid Reader Press / Simon & Schuster

576 pages

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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.

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, excelling at basketball and football from middle school on.

"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.

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

By John Dechant

University of Nebraska Press

320 pages

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If LeBron James is a giant, Paul Runyan, the 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.

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the man ain't human!" Snead exclaimed afterward.

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

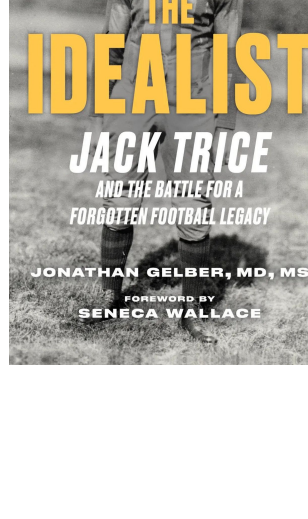
By Jonathan Gelber

Triumph Books

256 pages

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Jack Trice's life story is far shorter than the others—and ends in tragedy. As Jonathan Gelber tells it in "The Idealist: Jack Trice and the Battle for a Forgotten Football Legacy," this grandchild of freed slaves from Tennessee grew up in Cleveland in the first decades of the 20th century and was already a muscular 6-footer as a high-school freshman.

When Willaman moved 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 admirable tenacious decades-long campaign to rename the football stadium for Trice.

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Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America

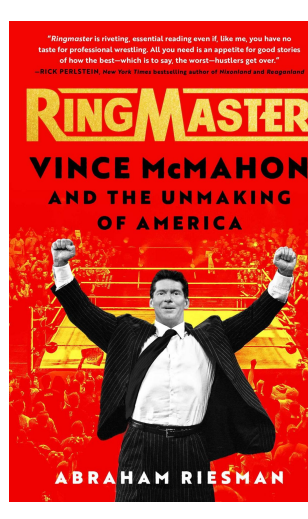
By Abraham Riesman

Atria Books

464 pages

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"Ringmaster: Vince McMahon and the Unmaking of America" isn't actually about sports. It's about what its subject dubbed "sports entertainment"—professional wrestling, the carnival of scripted pseudo-carnage that has propelled many of the lowly, including Hulk Hogan, André the Giant and Jesse Ventura, to fortune and fame.

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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Spring Books: Sports



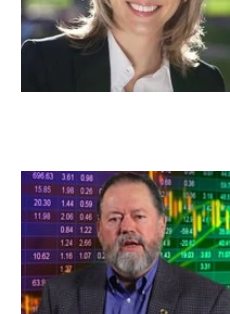
Spring Books: Gardening

Appeared in the April 1, 2023, print edition.

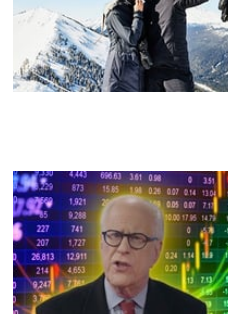
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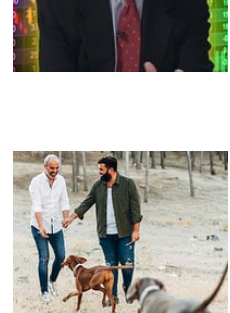
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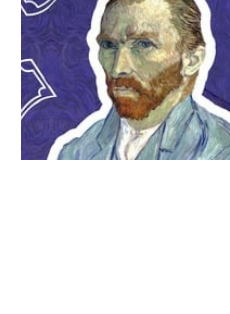
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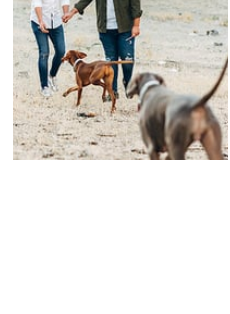
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