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'The Strenuous Life' Review: Sportsman in Chief

Teddy Roosevelt inspired and bullied the lethargic citizenry into better shape and transformed organized sports in America.



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By Edward Kosner
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The rain came pouring down, ending the doubles match on the tennis court just a short volley from the president's new office. Instead of retreating inside, the president insisted the three other players join him on a forced march in the deluge through the marshy outskirts of the capital and into Virginia. Four miles from the White House, he announced that they would run all the way back. Another time, he jumped out of his seat in the stands at the Army-Navy football game at Franklin Field in Philadelphia, vaulted a low fence and ran across the field to join the Navy sidelines. "Go it, man!" he would cry at the players. "Wasn't that tackle a sockdolager!" The crowd cheered.

That president could only have been Theodore Roosevelt, whose mania for sports and physical fitness earned him the nickname "Mr. Strenuousity." T.R. had come into office just 77 days before that Army-Navy game, after President William McKinley was assassinated. He easily won a full term in 1904. After his second term, he toured the world—including going on an African safari during which he slaughtered 296 animals. Then he returned to torment his successor, the 350-pound William Howard Taft, and to run for president again as a Bull Moose in 1912.

He is the subject of "The Strenuous Life: Theodore Roosevelt and the Making of the American Athlete," a new book that argues that T.R. inspired and bullied the lethargic citizenry into better shape and transformed organized sports. The author is Ryan Swanson, a history professor at the University of New Mexico, one of those enterprising academics who have perfected slicing American history into ever finer layers and then subjecting the results to ever more detailed scrutiny of less and less.

Mr. Swanson's case is buttressed by some facts: During the Roosevelt presidency, the first Olympic Games staged in the U.S. were held in St. Louis; the National Collegiate Athletic Association was established to reform college football, reducing violence and enhancing fan appeal; the National and American baseball leagues played the first World Series; and New York's mammoth Public Schools Athletic League was formed, the first big youth-fitness program in America and a model for other cities. Much of Mr. Swanson's recounting of these developments is tedious padding, but Roosevelt is such a compelling figure that the book snaps awake when he's in action.

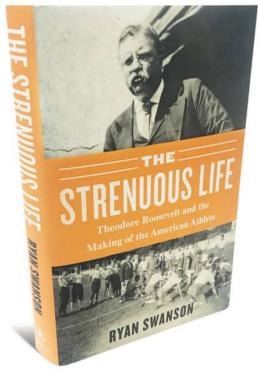


PHOTO: WSJ

THE STRENUOUS LIFE
By Ryan Swanson
Diversions, 329 pages, \$27.99

water. After one exhausting stint on the White House lawn, he asked his best workout buddy, the French ambassador, what he'd like to do next. "If it's just the same with you," replied the diplomat, "I'd like to lie down and die."

Over the years, T.R. also found time to meddle in all sorts of sports issues, even engaging in long letter exchanges with his son Ted Jr. about whether the boy should play on the second- or third-string football squad at Groton. He argued with Charles Eliot, the president of Harvard, over whether two oarsmen should be barred from the Harvard-Yale crew race for swiping a pamphlet from the library. He got involved in the national controversy about the dangers of college football. After the black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson beat the washed-up white hope Jim Jeffries in a controversial bout, he lobbied for the abolition of prizefighting in America.

Roosevelt's all-but-last gasp came at what would later be called a "fat farm." In October 1917, about to turn 59 and 35 pounds overweight, Teddy checked into a facility in Stamford, Conn., run by a retired middleweight boxer named Jack Cooper. For the next two weeks, he cheerfully underwent a routine of hikes, runs, abdominal exercises, massages and torture in special equipment invented by Cooper. This involved pedaling furiously on the Reducycle while covered with leather wraps and enclosed in a steam-filled oaken box, followed by a 40-degree shower. By the time he escaped Cooper, Roosevelt had lost 14 pounds and sweated 3/4 inches from his waist. He emerged exuberant. But just 26 months later, he had a heart attack and died in his sleep. He was only 60.

A century later, the sports Roosevelt adored—college and professional—are a multibillion-dollar industry. In his time, people worried that sitting in classrooms and offices would drain Americans of the vigor that farm work and manual labor instilled. Now, the concern is that social media, cellphones, robots and artificial intelligence will turn humans into pallid drones. In any case, at last count, more than 61 million Americans spend more than \$32 billion on exercise clubs each year. Still, the latest survey found that more than a third of American adults and 17% of children and adolescents are obese, and millions more overweight. Teddy Roosevelt would be appalled. "In life, as in a football game," he liked to say, "hit the line hard."

Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, is the author of a memoir, "It's News to Me."

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