

S. L. Price. *Playing through the Whistle: Steel, Football, and an American Town.* New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2016. x + 550 pp. \$27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8021-2564-4.

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By now, the story of the American small town with an oversized reputation for, and success in, football has become something of a literary and popular entertainment archetype. In 1983, Tom Cruise starred in *All the Right Moves*, a film about a young high school football star from western Pennsylvania looking for an avenue out of a future life in the mills. In the early 1990s, H. G. Bissinger's *Friday Night Lights* perhaps set the gold standard for the subgenre by reporting to the country the insane devotion to high school football that he discovered in Odessa, Texas. Hollywood picked up his story, then NBC, showing, at the very least, that commercial media had found an audience for this trope. In his recently published book, *Playing through the Whistle*, journalist S. L. Price tells a story of high school football in the western Pennsylvania steel town of Aliquippa, a place that served as an inspiration for *All the Right Moves* and one that has produced a staggering number of star football players, including Mike Ditka, Tony Dorsett, Sean Gilbert, Ty Law, and Derrelle Revis. To his enormous credit, Price has not just written a tale for a comfortably complacent reader who might find pity or amusement in reading a romantically quixotic tragedy about hard scrabble dreamers in America's heartland pouring their deepest inner souls into petty, provincial sports rivalries. Instead, the book digs

deep into the history of Aliquippa, a small town along the Ohio River in which the Jones & Laughlin Steel Company (J&L) built its enormous Aliquippa Works in 1905. It is a story of working people in constant struggle, first to survive in the steel mills, and later, when the plant closes with stunning suddenness in the 1980s, to survive outside of them.

Price documents how football emerged from the slag heaps and rust as something that began as an interesting diversion for workers with little by way of food, money, leisure time, or energy, and ended up becoming an obsession in and of itself. This death-of-steel/rise-of-football story provides Price with a window into the daily lives of people who have lived in the trenches of what historians and economists have abstractly termed "deindustrialization." Less clear at the end of this 453-page account is what to make of these transformations, and how his investigation into football can help envision any alternatives for communities that have experienced such economic catastrophe.

Price begins his book with the story of John Evasovich, who, on October 14, 2011, came to Aliquippa's football stadium (affectionately referred to as "The Pit") and discretely dropped his mother's ashes on the field's fifty-yard line. It is a poignant story that sets up his narrative about the

importance of football to the people of this suffering town, and he begins each major section of the book with a similar vignette. It is an effective device that lets the reader know where the story is going, but also evokes curiosity about how it got there. But the intervening chapters, while ultimately focused on sports and football, dig much deeper into Aliquippa's history. With tremendous empathy for the people whom he got to know during his six years of research, interviews, and life among Aliquippans, Price tells the story of J&L's almost medieval rule over the town during the first decades of the twentieth century. He writes of the divisions between the Italian, Slavic, Polish, African American, Jewish, and managerial "cake eaters" that were established in the town plan that the company engineered during the first decade of the twentieth century, a plan that still defines Aliquippa's racial and ethnic geography. He writes about the low wages and potentially deadly working conditions that workers faced in the enormous mill built on the Ohio River. With details that echo Thomas Bell's *Out of This Furnace: A Novel of Immigrant Labor in America*, a landmark 1941 novel about nearby Braddock, Pennsylvania, Price describes the heat, danger, smoke, and the glowing halo over the night sky that erupted from the blast furnaces that were a part of daily life in a steel town.

While football assumed an important place in Aliquippa's social life during the 1930s (although one, arguably, no greater at that time than the place of baseball), Price locates the true rise of the sport in the decades following World War II, years in which the relationship of the workers at the Aliquippa Works to J&L changed dramatically. The war gave blue-collar workers real leverage, and the company took note. Price writes, "Peace meant a refunneling of the tribal urge, and the United Steelworkers was consolidating its new-found clout; wars had been won, home and abroad, by the working man. The town wasn't J&L's alone anymore. Now it belonged to the workingman's sons, too, and investing in the high

school football, basketball, and baseball teams was the easiest way to show that ownership, cheer that change. The shift in sensibility was one that some Ellis Island alums couldn't grasp. Sports? A game? Who cares? A job: that's what matters" (pp. 99-100).

After the end of World War II, a series of legendary coaches led the high school football team to a decades-long string of regional and state championships: Carl Aschman (after whom "The Pit" is officially named), Don Yannessa, Frank Morocco, and Mike Zmijanac. Price profiles each of them, along with local stars like Ditka, Law, and Revis. Price also writes about Dorsett, a native of Aliquippa who opted not to attend the local high school, instead choosing nearby Hopewell. These biographic interludes provide intimate portraits of the players, and the author draws on extensive interviews with family, friends, and the players themselves to paint them. They are remarkable not only for the insights Price makes into their individual personalities but also for the way that he shows how each player is tied to the community and its history. With no less energy, Price also profiles less well-known football players, and he devotes significant print to others from the town. After all, not everyone from Aliquippa who achieved remarkable success during the 1950s and 1960s played football. Basketball coach Press Maravich, and his hall of fame son "Pistol" Pete Maravich, dominated the hardwood; composer Henry Mancini wrote the score to Hollywood's soundtrack during the 1950s and 1960s; and Jesse Steinfeld served as the eleventh surgeon general of the United States. These are just the most pronounced of the remarkable individuals to thrive after emerging from the shadows of J&L's hulking factory.

Beginning in the late 1960s, however, J&L began to decline. In 1968, Texas-based Ling-Temco-Vought (LTV) purchased a controlling interest in the company. In 1984, it closed most of the Aliquippa Works, and, with a violent suddenness,

eight thousand workers found themselves out of a job. The factory was, for all intents and purposes, the reason that the town existed, and its loss was a catastrophe. Aliquippa's population plummeted from almost thirty thousand after World War II to nine thousand in the early decades of the twenty-first century. From this point forward, the only natives of Aliquippa who have achieved fame and fortune seem to have been a few lucky and athletically talented young males who performed exceptionally in The Pit.

Price does not blame industrial disintegration for all of the town's problems. He also pays particular attention to the contentious relationships between European American and African American residents of Aliquippa. In fact, in one important passage, he notes how, while all ethnic groups were prone to fight with one another, animosity toward African Americans could unite even the most hostile of white ethnic groups. Price acknowledges how J&L gave black workers the worst jobs with the least chance of advancement; how the high school denied students of color opportunities to attend college; and how "redlining" denied home mortgage loans to African Americans in town, undermining their ability to pass on perhaps the most important financial asset to future generations that most Americans can hope to obtain. Ultimately, the suppression of African Americans led to riots in the high school, and, according to Price, these precipitated a flight of white students and a disinvestment in public education.

In the final third of the book, Price describes in detail horrific and tragic scenes of violence that have gripped Aliquippa since the 1990s. He portrays for readers a dying mill town caught in the grips of drug addiction and gang warfare. Once again, he clearly cares about the people about whom he writes, and while sometimes graphic, he does not write with pornographic fascination about Aliquippa's pain. At the same time, his moments of analysis are not without problems. For

example, he writes at length about the complacency of the union during the 1960s, an era in which he portrays the company as willing to accept any demand that workers made. He seems to blame the failure of the factory as much on the thirteen weeks of paid vacation that the company gave its workers as he does on anything else. Both unions and management might have taken for granted their dominant position in the world after World War II, but Price exaggerates the role of unions in the decline of the steel industry, a process that has far more complex roots.

In fact, if anything, Price seems to blame the town's current sad state on a cultural complacency that he describes as gripping the country as a whole, not on the closing of steel mills like the Aliquippa Works. We can see this in Price's reaction to one of his informants who recalls the story of a fifty-two-year-old man who still lives with his parents, and concludes, "If J&L was here, he would have his own home and be different than he is now." Price responds, "Perhaps. But for decades now, there has been an oft-floated notion that most Americans—no matter their lack of skill—simply find menial labor beneath them. Hence the need for, say, illegal Mexican immigrants: *they do the jobs no one else will*. That this is actually a logical by-product of the American Dream doesn't make it easy to discuss on the stump or at 4th of July celebrations" (p. 400).

Here, Price reflects a common set of ideas about American cultural declension, ideas that actually often appear in accounts of Pennsylvania's industrial history that Carolyn Kitch has identified in her study of industrial heritage sites in the state, *Pennsylvania in Public Memory: Reclaiming the Industrial Past* (2012). Kitch traveled to nearly every corner of Pennsylvania looking at historical sites commemorating bygone railroad industries, coal mines, and manufacturing plants. She writes that exhibits about Pennsylvania's industrial past often tend to portray the struggles of labor in the past as examples of heroic sacrifice. This becomes

a problem when it creates a nostalgic mythology about a simpler time, one that distracts from the exploitation and abuse that companies like J&L and LTV inflicted on workers in places like Aliquippa. Price's comment about the American work ethic makes it seem as if the exploitation that he describes so well in the first half of the book was natural, necessary, and even beneficial.

The idea of Aliquippa as an object study in America gone soft is a strong theme in Price's narrative, and it seems to be one that he picked up in his interviews with many of the town's residents. Given the power of such ideas, it is not hard for one to see how the people of Aliquippa might respond to their condition by being drawn to football. Football coaches, from Aschman forward, treated their players like managers treated workers in the mills of the 1920s. Coaches long ago accepted for an excuse neither a sore shoulder nor broken femur nor a concussion. Football remains a bastion of masculine toughness in a world of consumer comforts and industrial automation.

Price describes this aspect of football but avoids asking any real questions about it, exposing an important blind spot in his profile. *Playing through the Whistle* is very much a male-centered story. Any story about football will be, but this does not mean that he could not have probed more into ideas about gender that football promotes. He misses some fairly easy avenues for doing so. For example, one key controversy that angered African Americans had to do with the unwillingness of the high school before the early 1960s to accept African American cheerleaders. Price quotes numerous men, both African American and white, in his discussion of this issue, but comments from women are minimal. He might have asked more critical questions about the cheerleading squad: what it meant to both females and males and what gender might have had to do with the violent conflict that erupted over this controversy.

Clearly, the culture of football and its historical roots demonstrate a strong tradition of, and faith in, the virtues of masculinity among people in Aliquippa. Yet one might ask whether such faith in male physical strength and toughness has been sadly misplaced. During the 1920s, masculinity was certainly a survival strategy for workers, but it ultimately has proven to be an inadequate tool for dealing with postindustrial life. Even in earlier times, stubborn allegiance to patriarchal clan identities served to divide workers from one another, and it was only when they overcame ethnic differences and embraced mutuality and cooperation that they won victories on the shop floor. In fact, insofar as the current violence gripping the city is based on a tribal defense of territoriality and pride, masculinity is more of a problem than a solution. Far from the people of Aliquippa failing to embrace masculinity, it seems more likely that masculinity has failed Aliquippa.

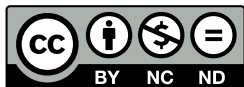
Of course, at its best, football, and sports in general, can provide an important rallying point for a struggling community. Toward the end of his book, Price tells a touching story of the Aliquippa football boosters providing sandwiches once a week for all of the football players because so many were going hungry. Stories like this one show that even a violent game like football can provide the setting for acts of compassion. Yet we must also remember that football ultimately provides a long-term benefit to only a very few physically talented male students, and produces a limited set of alternative ideas for how we might shape the future. Despite these questions, Price writes a fascinating account of football in an American town. This is not a voyeuristic melodrama by a journalist who observes a football-crazed town from a safe distance. Instead, it is an empathetic portrait by a writer trying to understand a history behind the game. In the end, he raises as many questions about the fate of postindustrial cities, as seen from the grassroots lives of ordinary people, as he does about football itself. If he helps the reader understand why Aliquippans might be

drawn to football, we might ask whether our collective future might be better served by looking at alternative cultural sources for inspiration as we navigate into a postindustrial future.

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