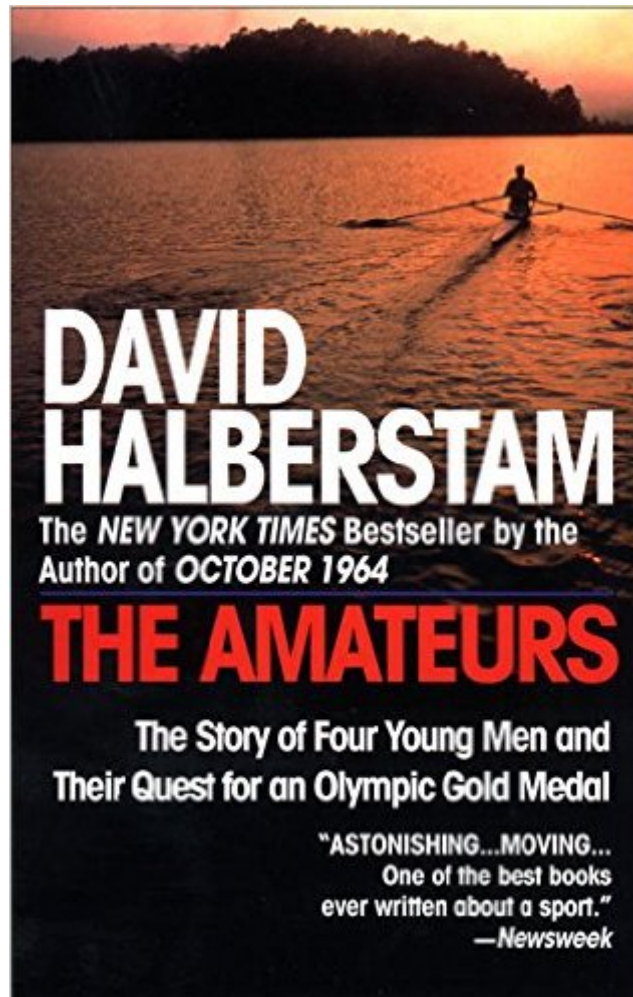


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The Amateurs: The Story Of Four Young Men And Their Quest For An Olympic Gold Medal



Synopsis

"Astonishing . . . Moving . . . One of the best books ever written about a sport." *Walter Clemons Newsweek "A PENETRATING, FASCINATING AND REMARKABLY SUSPENSEFUL NARRATIVE." *David Guy Chicago Tribune In *The Amateurs*, David Halberstam once again displays the unique brand of reportage, both penetrating and supple, that distinguished his bestselling *The Best and the Brightest* and October 1964. This time he has taken for his subject the dramatic and special world of amateur rowing. While other athletes are earning fortunes in salaries and-or endorsements, the oarsmen gain fame only with each other and strive without any hope of financial reward. What drives these men to endure a physical pain known to no other sport? Who are they? Where do they come from? How do they regard themselves and their competitors? What have they sacrificed, and what inner demons have they appeased? In answering these questions, David Halberstam takes as his focus the 1984 single sculls trials in Princeton. The man who wins will gain the right to represent the United States in the 84 Olympiad; the losers will then have to struggle further to gain a place in the two- or four-man boats. And even if they succeed, they will have to live with the bitter knowledge that they were not the best, only close to it. Informative and compelling, *The Amateurs* combines the vividness of superb sportswriting with the narrative skills of a Pulitzer Prize-winning correspondent. "RIVETING." *Christopher Lehmann-Haupt The New York Times "[A] MASTERFUL JOB . . . Maintains the suspense to the very last stroke . . . Halberstam makes us care about the four men, their disappointments and the brutal testing of their friendships." *Dan Levin Sports Illustrated

Book Information

Paperback: 221 pages

Publisher: Ballantine Books; 1st Ballantine Books Ed edition (May 7, 1996)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0449910032

ISBN-13: 978-0449910030

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.6 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 3.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars Â Â See all reviews Â (61 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #292,573 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #89 in Â Books > Sports & Outdoors > Miscellaneous > Olympic Games #170 in Â Books > Sports & Outdoors > Miscellaneous > Essays #226 in Â Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > Sports

Customer Reviews

With the Summer Olympics coming up, this book should be read and savored for its extraordinary writing quality and insights. As a college oarsman (single sculls, then coxswain, bow and stroke of an eight), as a persnickety reader since childhood and as a writer of 20+ books, I approached the work of non-rower Halberstam with skepticism, reluctance to be touched by him. Was I wrong! Rowing is one of the most unusual and difficult sports, and it seems remote to outsiders, almost mechanized. Insiders know the real world under that surface: the loneliness of training, the necessity for precise skills and relentless focus, the gut-wrenching pre-race [jitters] and fear that vanishes at each start, the sense of being asked to perform brutal acts on one's own body, the appalling effort (especially for stroke) of trying to stage an attack or recover from being in arrears, the ecstasy and elation of winning, the soul-searing agony of losing with its message of inadequacy, of being bested by a superior human or group of humans, the need to get back and try harder, to push the body further and further into pain. Halberstam captured it all, and went deeper, into the minds and hearts of some of the greatest oars the U.S. has produced, to bring back a masterpiece of reporting. He managed to show the idiosyncratic nature of dedicated single-sculd oarsmen, and the way these loners look at their lives and chosen sport. As a rower, I was consumed by this book. As a critical reader, I was entirely satisfied. As a writer, I was envious of Halberstam's skills. My only regret is that rowing is not perceived as the great participant and spectator sport that it is, and that too few of us have the chance to enjoy it in either sense.

This is easily the best "sports" book I have ever read. On the recommendation of a close friend and former Harvard rower, I dove into this book thinking only that I would know a few stories about a sport buried in the agate type of a few sports pages. I was wrong. As a competitive marathon runner, I related to everyone in this book. I know what Tiff Wood goes through every morning with his training. I understand why he does what he does to the dismay of family, friends, and teachers. Why would someone with an Ivy League education waste all that to row in relative obscurity? Why place money, family, and the other trappings of "normal" American life on hold? Because. Because some people aspire to things a little more than measly paper. Because some want to accomplish things. Because some haven't given up on dreams.

It is incredible that David Halberstam, a non-rower and outsider to the cliquish or solitary types found in boathouses, was able to write such a penetrating and accurate picture of the amateurs in this book. His descriptions of the feeling of rowing, of "swing," and of the bizarre politics of single

sculling are right on the money. They are recognizable to long-time rowers and comprehensible to those who have never rowed before. His character depictions are at times almost frighteningly dead-on. To put it succinctly, Halberstam gets everything right in this book. If you are a rower or any other sort of athlete, or if you want to read a masterfully told story of competition, read this book.

When I first started rowing in 1987 I happened across a copy of the *Amateurs* at a local bookstore. I was thrilled with the fact I found a book on my new sport and written by one of our best journalists. I devoured it in a scant five hours. Even though I was a novice to the sport I found that Halberstam captured the pain, fears, joys, and disappointments of boat racing perfectly. Later as a coach I would recommend this book to my rowers so they could see that the feelings they were experiencing are not unique to them, but also shared by even the elite scullers that Halberstam observed. I also recommended this book to the parents of my rowers so they could better understand the level of commitment it takes to row. Halberstam has done a rare thing, he has written about a subject so precisely that it will not be scoffed at by those who row, and those who do not row will not be lost in the explanation of technique and rowing history.

For someone who's not a rower, Halberstam gets most of this right - the technique, the atmosphere, the obsessiveness (which is common to all levels of rowing, just intensified among Olympians). In some ways the selection for the '84 Olympics was a crux point in the US rowing system, and Halberstam shows just why. If you want to get a view into a sport most people ignore, written by a top author, this is a good place to do it - same if you just want a peek in the mind of world-class athletes. If you want to really learn about the '84 Olympics selection camp, I'd recommend reading this in combination with Brad Lewis' "Assault at Lake Casitas", for another viewpoint from one of the main actors (and the '84 doubles gold medalist). Incidentally, the movie *Rowing Through* was based on *The Amateurs*. It's quite divergent from the book, but not too bad if you can ignore a good bit of gratuitous sex and some hardly-Olympic-caliber rowing in the scenes on the water.

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