Occasional piece

Poetry and sport

Even if one forms the subset from the set of those interested in literature and the set of those interested in sport, there is a substantial proportion who do not know of the many poems that feature sport. Not only are there many hundreds of such poems, but there is a substantial corpus of good poetry within that number. On the other hand, great world poets of the 20th century, such as Anna Akhmatova, Juan Luis Borges, T S Eliot, Odysseus Elytis, Garcia Lorca, Somhairle MacGill-Eain, Pablo Neruda, Ezra Pound, W B Yeats, and others, have, collectively, written little about sport. An outstanding exception is Lorca’s magnificent Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias.1

In some cases this may have been due to a misplaced feeling of contempt, as implied by Kipling’s “...the flannelled fools at the wicket/The muddied oafs at the goals”, and Yeats: “If beauty is not a gateway out of the net we were taken in at our birth it will not long be beauty, and we will find it better to sit at home by the fire and fatten a lazy body, or to run hither and thither in some foolish sport.” However, Pablo Neruda, in his 1935 advocacy of “Impure poetry” could talk of: “...a poetry consistent with shameful, disgraceful deeds; with dreams, observations, sleepless nights, presentiments, eruptions of hatred and love; animals, idylls, shocks; negotiations, ideologies, assertions, doubts, tax demands...” Sport, in all its facets, could easily slip onto to such a list.

One difficulty for poets is that sport is an activity that has to be actively sought out, either as spectator or participant. In major events, access is especially hard, and television—for the poet—is not at all a satisfactory substitute. Thus, although there are many hundreds of poems on sport, very few feature high level sport or its participants, which is due in no small measure to sheer difficulty of access. However, excellent sports poetry abounds, of which the following excerpts provide a minute sample.

First is an early sports medicine poem from the Maitland Folio manuscript 1582 (translation in parentheses):

Brissit brawnis and brokin banes,  
Stryf, discord and wastie wanis,  
Cruiket in eild, syne halt withal,  
Again against so stout a tree,  
These are the beauties of football.)

On the physiological side is Peter Meinke’s To an athlete turned poet:

...and now his stomacht’s soft, his books press out his veins as he walks and no-one looks but deep in his bone stadium the roar of the crowd wells.

While on the motor skill side, from Stanley Matthews, by Alan Ross:

...Now gathers speed, nursing the ball as he cruises,  
As from Vivaldi to Dibdin, pausing, and leisurely, swings  
To the left upright, his centre, - on hips  
His hands, observing the goalkeeper spring, heads rising vainly to the ball’s curve  
Just as it’s plucked from them; and dispassionately  
Back to his mark he trots, whistling through closed lips.

From another ball game is Basketball by Stephen Vincent:  
...You never came to see me spread my warm fingers like the edges of stars round the ball as I went like a smooth fox down the court, my tennis shoes squeaking faster than a grasshopper through clover. At sixteen I travelled fast, father.

Critic W B Stanford1 has written “The scientists seek facts. The moralists seek virtue. The poets and artists seek—to use an old-fashioned term—beauty, i.e. the effect of artistic excellence on the senses, emotions and mind.” This is exemplified by the following three extracts, starting with Robert Francis’ Watching gymnasts:

Competing not so much with one another  
As with perfection,  
They follow follow as voices in a fugue  
A severe music.

How flower-light they toss themselves, how light  
They toss and fall,  
And flower-light, precise and arabesque  
Let their praise be.”

And Robert Wallace’s After the swimmer:

Clear, the shaken water busies in its claws clouds, light,  
from which she climbed.

And Robert Francis’ The skier:

He swings down like the flourish of a pen  
Signing a signature in white on white.  
On incandescent feet he falls  
Unfalling, trailing white foam, white fire.

Another side of skiing is shown in Conrad Diekmann’s parody Winter trees:

I think that I shall never ski  
Again against so stout a tree,  
A tree whose rugged bark is pressed  
In bas-relief upon my chest.

Golf has a major literature, including many poems, such as Betjeman’s Seaside golf:

How straight it flew, how long it flew,  
It cleared the rutty track  
And soaring, disappeared from view  
Beyond the bunker’s back -  
A glorious, sailing bounding drive  
That made me glad I was alive.

Highland Games have their own poetic adherents, such as Norman MacCaig:

The chieftain leans his English accent  
On a five-foot crook and feels one of the natives.  
The rope ring is full of strenuous metaphors.

Unusual sports are not neglected, as Sky diver by Adrien Stoutenberg:

Grotesque, jumping out like a clothed frog, helmet and glasses, arms and legs wading the sky, feet flapping before the cloth flower opens.

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Or the sub-aqua Diver by Robert Francis:
Diver go down
Down through the green
Inverted dawn
To the dark unseen
To the never day...
Deep beneath deep.

And, still on water sports is First lesson, by Philip Booth:
Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped in the cup of my hand.
... when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive,
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember, when fear
clamps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Surprisingly vivid poetry can be found in Billiards as by Walker Gibson:
Painted, polished, here these spheres
Rehearse their civilised careers -
Trapped in a geometric tool,
Exhibit impact and recoil
Politely in a farce of force...

Of a huge number of climbing poems, none is better than Shelley's Mont Blanc:
In the calm darkness of the moonless nights,
In the long glare of day, the snows descend
Upon that mountain; none beholds them there,
Nor when the flakes burn in the sinking sun,
Or the star-beams dart through them:
Betjeman has written the classic club tennis poem, on the
prowess of Miss Joan Hunter-Dunn, but Paul Petrie's Old Pro's Lament takes a more metaphysical view of the game:
Each year the court expands,
the net moves back, the ball
hums by — with more spin...
But nightly in dreams I see
an old man
playing in an empty court
under the dim floodlights of the moon
with a racket gone in the strings
— no net, no ball, no game —
and still playing to win!

Still in a philosophical mode, The Stan Cullis blues by Martin Hall exemplifies many a soccer club's predicament: the night Stan Cullis got the sack
Wolverhampton wandered round in circles
like a disallowed goal
looking for a friendly linesman.

Blood sports have always attracted poetic comment, as in Winter: East Anglia by Edmund Blunden:
But the cornered weasel stands his ground,
Shrieks at the dogs and boys set round,
Shrieks as he knows they stand all round,
And hard as winter dies.

And two poems of the bullfight: Death invited by May Swenson:
Six coloured agonies deck the summit of his muscular pride.
Death invited to die...
Glittering life, in tight pink thighs
swaggers round a rotunda of screams and Olés.

And, possibly, the greatest of all sports poems, Lorca's Lament for Ignacio Sanchez Mejias:
And the bullring alone with a high heart!
At five in the afternoon.
When the bullring was covered in iodine
at five in the afternoon.
Death laid eggs in the wound
at five in the afternoon.
And now his blood comes out singing;

singing along marshes and meadows,
sliding on frozen horns...

Boxing too has its victims, as Dave Smith records in Blues for Benny Kid Paret:
And blood growing wings to fly up in your eyes,
and there, the puncher no one feels grows weak,
as the wall looms, break through the best prayer you had
to dump you dizzied and dreaming in the green grass...

Ezra Pounds' elegiac poem, For E. McC,
took on an added poignancy after the death at the 1982 world championships in Rome of Ukrainian Olympic champion Volodymyr Smirnov, pierced through the brain by his opponent's snapped foil:
Gone while your tastes were keen to you,
Gone where the grey winds call to you,
By that high fencer, even Death.
Struck of the blade that no man parrieth...
Pierced of the point that toucheth lastly all.

In contrast, there is much humorous verse on sport, some of the best of it written by Roger McGough as in Cousin Caroline, the sprinter who:
... in the winter of 1968 with a
bandaged knee
ran the 100
metres in 10.3;
But her best time
was in the dressing room afterwards.

Finally, poets have not neglected ethics, as in Good sportsmanship by Richard Armour:
Good sportsmanship we hail, we sing,
It's always pleasant when you spot it.
There's only one unhappy thing:
You have got to lose to prove you've got it.

It is hoped that the above at least indicates the range of sports poetry. Robert Frost (who thought that writing poetry without rhyme was like "playing tennis without a net") always maintained that there was a connection between all of the sports and poetry, and Lilian Morrison would agree: "There is an affinity between sports and poetry. Each is a form of play; each is a form of ritual. Each has the power to lift us out of ourselves. They go together wherever there is a zest for life." Let Eleanor and Herbert Farjeon have the last poetic word:
But memory will play again
Many and many a day again
The game that's done, the game
that's never done.

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The poetry of sport, in the Badminton Series (Longman's Green and Co), form an excellent introduction to poetry and sport.

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