CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: PLAYING BACK TO

Contemporary American sports fiction has for the best part remained conventional in the form and treatment of the subject matter. The ludic impulse among sports fiction writers is not as pervasive as in the writings of many postmodern writers. But the few writers who have experimented with *avant-garde* techniques in language, narrativity and theme have been the most successful achievers (Delillo, Roth, Coover and Morris). These writers do not conform to the dictum that sports narratives should incorporate into their structure the characteristic of games having a distinct beginning, middle and ending. It has been shown in this study that fragmentary narration and disjointed dialogue, as techniques to depict sporting themes are not uncommon in this sub-genre. The narratives on sport examined here justly represent the corpus of sports fiction written in the second half of the twentieth century.

Though the configuration of the antithesis, 'seriousness-frivolity' is still current in the critical circles, sports fiction in the present age is not derided upon. Strangely, the novelists themselves have often taken pains to apologise, for adopting sport as a subject matter in their works. One of the best known sports fiction writers, Mark Harris, dismissed his successful baseball trilogy as merely the apprenticeship
for his more 'serious' fiction. Philip Roth tried to establish that his baseball novel is not about baseball at all, but about more important contemporary American realities. The debunking of sport as a "serious subject" is taken up by sports fiction writers as well.

True to the protestation of Philip Roth, all the six novels analysed in the thesis, have much more in them, than the mere mimetic representation of a particular game, season or a player's career. "Serious" sports fiction cannot afford to be in the same vein as juvenile sports fiction. Delillo and Roth combine language play, literary games and sporting games in their narratives. The former reaffirms his faith in language and communication. For him language is the only means of "imposing order on random events" (CLC 78). Roth's protagonist indulges in an exhibition of language prowess to parody many things American at once.

Coover's narrative strategy is not the same in his two novels. His baseball novel is more experimental than his football novella. Such a difference is perceptible in the novels of Delillo and Roth. Delillo's football novel is narrated by his player-protagonist Gary Harkness, and he is sometimes used more as a narrative device than as character. Parenthetical asides scatter in the narrative. The authorial voice at times intrudes upon the protagonist's chronicle of football, war and philosophy of language. The circular structure of the plot is not in
accordance with football’s spatial metaphor of linear progression. The narrative begins where it ends.

The ambivalent relationship between sport and spectator and text and reader, provide the structural framework for two of the best sports spectating novels ever written in American literature. Christian Messenger observes that: "Exley has several of the most impressive scenes of spectating in contemporary sports fiction" (Sport 227). Unable to identify the centre of American heroism for himself, he tries to equate writing with football. Exley’s hero is an emasculated man, who in the process of spectating writes a discourse on the aesthetics of failure. The Field of Vision more pointedly probes the aesthetics of failure. In Morris’s narrative the power of transformation is the essence of witness-hero relationship. Messenger writes about the aesthetics of spectating:

Witnesses all have their own particular bullfight, or baseball hero and conception of heroism in the mind’s eye. The spectacle in the arena gives back what they need. What witnesses see in the arena is what is for them and they act accordingly, heroically, foolishly, but always in human desire for some revelation. (Sport 223)

In both narratives, the witness is at the centre of the narrative arena, replacing the hero at the centre.
The several levels at which 'playfulness' and 'gamefulness' exist in narratives of sports is manifest in the study. Language is the basic tool with which all writers represent illusion/reality. The intellectual capacity to twist words to effect various modes of textual play is varied among authors. Authors manipulate language to surprise and provoke the readers. The expectations of the reader of sports fiction is thoroughly undermined by the exuberant play at language and literature. The Saussurian prioritisation of speech over writing and the Derridian conception of writing as prior to speech become authorial concerns even in sports fiction. Football and language 'collide' in *End Zone*. The author's firm belief in the "ritualistic qualities of language" (*CLC* 78) prompts him to satire the rhetoric of nuclear warfare and "... that verbal plumage, which so often attend the sects and subsets of American life" (*CLC* 79). In his interview with Tom LeClair, Delillo comments on the use of language in his football novel. "... language was a subject as well as an instrument" (81). For Delillo, Roth and other experimental writers, language has transcended from the status of a tool to represent reality to one of experiencing reality through language. Roth's free play at language mixes the "credible incredible" and the "incredible credible," (Interview 76) of baseball and the bizarre reality. The double ordering of play is the characteristic feature of all fiction the study deals with. The structural framework of sport ordering the fiction is embedded with multilayered play within that matrix.
The reader's "ideational activity" cannot be laid to rest for a full understanding of the textual representation of sport. Imaginative and allusive playfulness is the challenge before any reader confronting this type of fiction. More often, Sport becomes only a formal element in such discourses. The author or the narrator becomes the real player, acknowledging the presence of self or the reader in his play. Though many of the novels discussed have a considerable number of pages of realistic description of a game of football, baseball or bullfight, the game and the players seem relegated to the background in most of the narratives. For every character-player his life within the sport—the actual game situations, and the immediate life outside his play-sphere is the initial reflexivity built into any sports narrative.

An important aspect of the novels considered is the depiction of its sporting characters/protagonist-spectator as heroes as the "Horatio Alger dream gone mad" (Oriard, Heroes 135). The juvenile sports novels of the early decades of the twentieth century are the "formulaic sources of American sports fiction" according to Wiley Lee Umphlett (Achievement 25). The school sports stories written by Horatio Alger, Jr. (1834-99) emphasised freedom of self-expression, discipline and hardwork as the principal guidelines of young heroes. The utility value of sports was largely restricted to finding an outlet for the pent-up energies of the ascetic demands of school and family life. "Strive-and-succeed" (Umphlett, Achievement 26) became the motto of young boys
engaged in sport. This is true of Frank Merriwell stories and other innumerable school and college stories of athletic contests, baseball and football.

The development of sports fiction from campus sports heroics to ritual sports heroes of Hemingway, Faulkner and Lardner and to that of the modern "collective sports heroism" and "anti-heroism" (Messenger, Sport 30) amply underscore the fact that sports narratives are products of the socio-political conditions of the age. It is not merely the social and political conditions of the age in which the narratives are written for that matter. Factors of economy, cultural changes and the role of media determine the way in which heroes are modelled in sports narratives. The ritual sports hero represents modern man's struggle to define himself. These fictional heroes thrived in their "encounter with nature, taking sustenance from the "pragmatic philosophy of Franklin ... and the idealism of Ralph Waldo Emerson" (Umphlett, Achievement 36). Self-reliance and individuality were the high points of such characters.

The protagonists of the narratives in the thesis wallow in the realms of anti-heroism. Sharing only a few qualities of the Horatio Alger mould of hero and the ritual sports hero, they predominantly display a helpless groping in the labyrinth of uncertainty. Sports novels, taking the path of contemporary experimental writing, has to a very large extent done away with the traditional notions of heroism and
strength of character. Many of the protagonists in these sports novels are not character-players themselves, and the character-players lack individuality. They are mere voices and the author holds the centre in all the narratives.

Delillo’s Gary Harkness and Coover’s Gloomy Gus are the only true character-players in the mould of a sporting hero. Both are football players and protagonists who actually play a sport. But anti-heroism is their essence and their author-creators play hidden games with them. Anti-heroism is used as a thematic device to mask the linguistic, aesthetic and political concerns of the writers. Coover’s hero Henry Waugh and Roth’s hero Word Smitty are victims of a godgame played by the authors. These two novels are sports fiction’s exemplary representatives of ‘new writing.’ The aesthetic construct of utopian worlds in the two novels create diverse paradigms of confronting the inhospitable outside world. Coover’s Henry Waugh constructs a completely internalised world of baseball, by means of which he removes himself from the society around him. Roth’s Word Smith fights against the insidious reality around him through the construct of the history of a utopian baseball world. The former silently resigns to the fantasy world and the latter blatantly uses his fictional world to fight omissions in history. Neither of them plays a real sport.

Coover and Roth have not contributed to a further growth of literary self-consciousness. Authorial self-reflexiveness is however
central to the conception of these baseball novels. The 'Prologue' and 'Epilogue' of Roth's narrative is a direct address to the reader of the novel, rather than Smitty's monologic talk to the fans of the Patriot League. The narrator-writer takes up the role of an informant about his/author's text. The intrusion of the author is prominent in the 'Epilogue' and the meta-fictional motives become very obvious. In the final chapter Smitty apprehends the possible rejection of the manuscript of the text by publishers. The obliteration of the protagonist Henry in the last chapter of Coover's novel facilitates "a self-reflexive (authorial) consideration of some larger problems involved in fiction-making" (CLC 50).

Spectating is an important dimension of any sport spectacle. Every organised sports competition presupposes the presence of a huge crowd. Exley's narrative is obsessed with football and his hero, while Morris's spectators are not madly after the sport of bullfight. American football or 'gridiron' (as the rest of the English-speaking world calls it) is a spectator's delight. Through the electronic media, the players have become household names among the fans and the identification with them is easier. "... the objectification and fetishisation of the athletes' bodies and selves creates a bond with the other which becomes a bond with the self" (Reinhart 32). Exley's protagonist views life through the prisms of football and one of its heroes. The spectator in him makes a reading of not just the games
that he witnesses, but the contemporary America and its absurd heroes as well.

The witness-characters in the study come through to no victories. They are a frustrated lot, constantly trying to mend the broken threads of their life. Of utmost importance is the relationship between the hero and his witness(es). Exley’s hero is known to him personally from his college days, but he keeps away from him throughout his life. In Morris’s narrative the act of heroism in a bullring attains more significance than the persona of the hero. In such narratives, the hero does not appear as the chief character, but the effect of the hero (and/or his heroism on the field) upon his witness(es) is important. The power of transformation is central to these novels. Exley inwardly turning to himself understands that he is just another emasculated American male and Boyd as hero/witness tries to hold the centre of the arena. Both do not conform to Joseph Campbell’s conception of heroism:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (41)

The two narratives of sports spectating marginalise the sporting hero in the middle, replacing him with the witness-hero at the centre. But
the witnesses are all lonely individuals in a crowd. They play upon their hidden desires and the hurdles to it. Frustration is their lot. As messenger comments: "The voice of the spectator is most often an intelligent and vivid confessional voice, richly dialogized with accents acquired through rueful experience" (Sport 212). Identification with the hero and the heroism at the time of sporting action is naturally followed by an estranged feeling. Sports spectating, more often than not, result in the construct of texts, which record the personal insights.

In the end, defining the sub-genre of sports fiction becomes the most difficult task. Oriard's simple definition "... a sports novel is one that is about sports" and sports novel as one "... in which the protagonist is an athlete or in which athletic activity is given considerable space ..." (7) is faulty and insufficient according to himself. Play and many forms of games are pervasive in American and world fiction. The writers can play with narration, language, form and a variety of other literary plays. Novelists make use of different game structures and game situations especially in experimental writings. Sport orders play and structures games. "Part of the dynamism of sport is that it not only carries play into the center of simulated winning and losing, but that the tally sheet of a sports contest is a control against life's randomness" (Messenger, Sport 426). The representation of sport in fiction is not easily done. It cannot merely
cast sporting heroes and depict or describe sporting situations and actions. Conversely, sports fiction would cease to be sports fiction if all writers engage in 'unbounded play' to venture way beyond the sporting fields.