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Letter of Intent—"The Games That He Played"

My paper does not fall into the categories that you have listed. But it seems to me that there should be space for Bill Clinton's Personal Life or Presidential Character.

I have written a yet unpublished book, *The Games Presidents Play*, about presidential sport. But it is not simply a listing of sports played by presidents, but rather an attempt to use sports as a lens to view the twentieth-century presidents and the presidency. If I may stray slightly from Bill Clinton, let me reflect on Jimmy Carter. Here was a President who enjoyed individual sports; moreover, as in trout fishing and tying flies, he reveled in the technical side of sports. He enjoyed the solitary aspect of jogging and his ability to control tennis on and off the court (he famously reviewed the scheduling of the White House tennis courts). In a way, his sporting presidency was a microcosm of the micromanaging of the presidency and his remoteness from members of his administration.

Carter comes immediately to mind because Bill Clinton was so much the opposite. When he jogged, Clinton normally did so with friends, political associates, or people who wanted to know Bill. Unlike Carter, who gave up golf in his thirties after a brief interlude, Clinton made the game into a sociable, even Clintonesque experience. Whereas Carter followed Georgia Tech football and Atlanta sports teams discreetly, Clinton watched college basketball teams with gusto—and occasionally showed off his knowledge of sports. Whereas Carter played by the rules, Clinton invented his own rules.

My paper like my book is designed to look at the ways that Clinton used sports in the presidency and how his sporting legacy was shaped by the media spotlight on his presidency. No doubt Clinton lacked the athletic ability of Carter, not to mention Bush, Reagan, Ford, Kennedy, and Eisenhower. Yet, as in his politics, he showed an ability to use his sports both for personal mythmaking and for political fence building. I will mention a few of Clinton's sports-related activities that are not generally known or remembered (his attempt to mediate the baseball strike of 1994-95 so as to win points with residents of states and communities where spring training took place.)

Of course, Clinton's golf became an analogue for his problems during Monicagate and for the pardons that were liberally distributed. It is difficult to discuss his "billigans" and "gimmees" without mentioning the problems that beset him in the final two years of his presidency. Yet, unlike his Republican predecessors, Clinton was seldom criticized for playing too much golf or playing with wealthy cronies (though he did). People were willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. He was both amusing and newsworthy.

The term, Teflon presidency, was invented for Ronald Reagan, and indeed Reagan managed to cruise through his presidency without losing his credibility. Because Clinton never seemed to take his sports too seriously (though I think he did at times), the eccentricities of his sporting life, the time spent on golf courses and on the White House short-game range, and his own questionable rules never stuck to him. One cannot *not* say the same of Taft, Eisenhower, Nixon, or Ford.

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**“The Games That He Played;  
Bill Clinton’s Sports Presidency”**

Since Theodore Roosevelt descended from Mount Marcy to take the oath of office in 1901, Presidents have used sports to relax, build political alliances, and to burnish their images. From Eisenhower to Clinton, sports have helped to define presidents and their politics. Eisenhower golfed; Kennedy sailed; Nixon courted NFL coaches; Carter fished and presided over the White House tennis courts; Reagan delighted in the reflected cinematic glory of Notre Dame’s George Gipp (“win one for the Gipper”).

Compared to George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton was almost as unathletic as Calvin Coolidge or Harry Truman. Almost every president from Eisenhower to Bush Sr. played on a college athletic team; Clinton never even played high school sports, and the scholarship that he was offered by Louisiana State was a band scholarship. Not until he got to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar did he compete—on Oxford’s basketball team and also in rugby. A big man who stood 6’3” and weighted 230 as President, he lacked the coordination, speed, and the interest to pursue high school and college sports. When he became President in 1993, an intense interest in spectator sports, an obsession with golf and a running regimen combined to give sports in the Clinton White House a surprisingly high profile.

Clinton had a longstanding interest in college teams, especially the Arkansas Razorbacks. In 1969, he listened to the titanic struggle between Texas and Arkansas by shortwave from London. President Richard Nixon had flown to the game to score political points by proclaiming victorious Texas national champions. Like Nixon, **Clinton forged friendships with coaches, notably Eddie Sutton who coached at Arkansas when Clinton taught law there.** From Sutton, he learned the intricacies of basketball strategy. In 1994, he became the first president to attend a college basketball game—the showdown for the national championship won by Nolan Richardson’s Razorbacks over the Duke Blue Devils.

Like Lyndon Johnson, Clinton played to win politically—and to indulge his appetites. He ran to control his weight, which often meant stopping at McDonald’s. But he also ran with FOBs (friends of Bill) and candidates who wanted to be photographed with the President. He also became the first president since Teddy Roosevelt to interject himself into a sports controversy—the major league baseball strike in 1995.

If Clinton had a passion for a sport, it was golf. Unlike Democrats who usually avoided the game, Clinton was obsessed with a game that he insisted on playing by his own rules. His brand of golf allowed for extra shots (mulligans or “billigans”), practice in the fairway, and long “gimmee” putts—given by presidential privilege. When he broke eighty (“even a blind pig finds an acorn sometimes”), golf purists found inconsistencies in his scoring. Republicans in 1996, at a loss for issues, even criticized his integrity on the golf course.

Ultimately, his golf became the sporting equivalent of his dissembling during Monicagate and his lavish pardons on the eve of his departure from office. If he could pardon bad golf shots (notably, his own), he had every reason to rehabilitate those who were friends, donors, or political associates who had hit their personal drives, so to speak, out of bounds. And, he had remarkable skill in extricating himself from unplayable lies. Had he been able to run for a third term, he would likely have won.

That said, his sporting presidency reflected his ingenuity and enthusiasm. Even his