

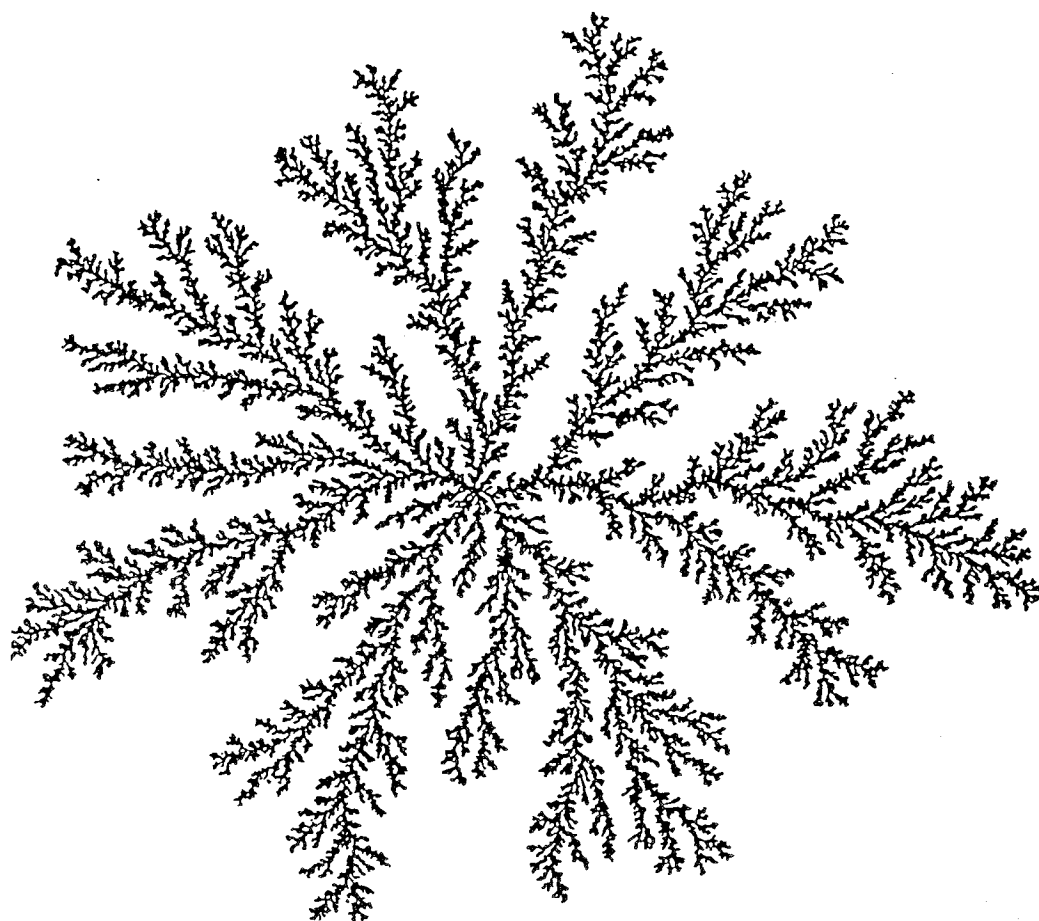
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'TWO STRIKES ON HIM': ONOMASTIC SPECULATIONS ON 'SOUTHPAW'

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Pop wanted me to be righthanded. Not that Pop had anything against lefthanders because he himself is lefthanded and pitched for a long time for the Perkinsville Scarlets. But Pop wanted me to be righthanded because when you come to think of it a lefthanded baseball player has got 2 strikes on him from the beginning.

Mark Harris, *The Southpaw* (1953, p. 14)

There has been a great deal of often heated debate during recent decades, over the nature and implications of brain asymmetry. Arguments range from the notion of a hemispheric typography which locates the main theatres of specific mental processes in one or the other of the brain's sectors, to the more emphatically binary 'two brains' theory, which argues a firm lateral division of faculties (see, e.g., Springer and Deutsch, 1993; Wells, 1989). Left-handedness, the disfavoured progeny of this asymmetry – associated in many cultures with the extraordinary, the 'sinister', the 'maladroit', the 'gauche' – has been intensively studied as a possible concomitant both of gifts and, more often, of disabilities (see, e.g., Blake-Coleman, 1982). From aphasia to cachexia, enuresis to alcoholism, the apparent pathology of left-handedness has been charted through the broad compass of adversity.¹ Sensationalists who wish to demonstrate the perils represented by the left-hander, will cite Tiberius, Jack the Ripper and a string of intellectually flaccid American presidents (James A. Garfield, Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan). Apologists, armed with perhaps a more impressive list, will put forward Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, C. P. E. Bach, Raphael, Hans Holbein, Pablo Picasso and Harpo Marx (see Wallechinsky et al., 1978, p. 6; and Lasden, 1992).

¹ In 1992, The Associated Press reported the findings of Stanley Coren and Diane Halpern, of California State U: "their paper was one of more than 100 studies published in the past 20 years that showed lefties are more likely than righties to have reading problems, immune system disorders, wet the bed, itch, become neurotic, alcoholic, commit suicide, go to jail - so many deviations from the norm that Coren concludes left-handedness is pathological: it has the characteristics of a disease" (*Study Connects Left-handedness, Disease Traits*, 1992). See Halpern, 1988, p. 213; Coren and Halpern, 1991, p. 90; Halpern, 1991, p. 998; and Coren, 1992. For replies to Coren and Halpern, see Wood, 1988, and *Left-handedness and Life Expectancy*, 1991. Amongst the many studies of left-handedness and specific communication pathologies, see Manoach, Maher and Manschreck, 1988; and Krutsch and McKeever, 1990.

It is, however, not in public affairs or the arts or crime where left-handedness is most often openly identified, but in sports. This is so because the lateral orientation of a president or a composer may be neither immediately evident nor particularly significant to an assessment of that person's performance. But in those sports which rely upon the use of the hands – baseball, boxing, racquet sports and the like – the direction from which a ball or a fist may be arriving or in which it may be propelled is of the greatest importance.

Of the numerous epithets arising from left-handedness, many entered English early from Latin or Romance languages. But that most often associated with sporting activities, 'southpaw', is of both more recent and more obscure origins.² The word has been employed, over the past century and a half, not only in the journalistic discourse of baseball and boxing, but as a general term – used usually in jest – for left-handedness.

From this last arises the contemporary use of 'southpaw' to suggest leftist politics.³ Thus, *The Guardian's* political commentator Dave Hill, reporting on Britain's Labour Party: "Even as recently as the last Labour leadership contest, fully-fledged Labour southpaws were depicted as represented by the short-lived Ken Livingstone/Bernie Grant ticket" (Hill, 1994, p. 20).

The conjuncture of sporting sinistrality and left-liberal politics is effectively exploited in what is probably the first important American baseball novel, Mark Harris's *The Southpaw* (1953).⁴ The fictive *faux-naïf* narrator, Henry W. Wiggen, whimsically credited with authorship on Harris's title page (p. 1), is the archetypal 'Shoeless Joe', the intuitive rustic who progresses from the provincial Perkinsville Scarlets to the professional major league New York Mammoths and through a tetralogy of wry and often politically engaged novels.⁵ Henry is the quiet, but persistent nay-sayer, the independent, the compassionate rationalist. As his friend Holly says to him, just before he vanquishes Chicago, "You are a lefthander, Henry. You always was. And the world needs all the lefthanders it can get, for it is a righthanded world. You are a southpaw in a starboarded atmosphere" (p. 307).

Henry's southpawness yields a great deal more than just the confusion of his team's opponents. He befriends the team's sole African-American player, the infielder Perry Garvey Simpson, and they become roommates. Perry is cast as the team's

² 'Southpaw' is a modern amalgam of Germanic and Romance words. 'South' developed from the Old Frisian, through Old English, while 'paw' entered Middle English, after the Norman Conquest, from Old French. See *Shorter OED*, 1985, v. 2, pp. 1531, 2057.

³ The political terms 'left', 'centre' and 'right' seem to originate in the configuration of France's National Assembly in 1789, and from the practice of other European legislatures. See *Shorter OED*, 1985, v. 1, p. 1195.

⁴ Although baseball has been a focus of American self-definition for several generations, it has produced only a handful of major novels. Besides those of Harris, which were formative, one may note Malamud, 1952; Coover, 1968; Roth, 1973; Neugeboren, 1974; and Charyn, 1979. The baseball novel was probably introduced to young readers by Noah Brooks's *The Fairport Nine*, 1880; see Street, 1982, pp. 91-97.

⁵ See also *Bang the Drum Slowly*, by Henry W. Wiggen: *Certain of His Enthusiasms Restrained* (1956); *A Ticket for a Seamstich*, by Henry W. Wiggen: *But Polished for the Printer* (1957); and *It Looked Like Forever* (1979).

unacknowledged intellectual: "Perry is always thinking. He always has ideas. It is true that he sat on the bench most of the year, but he did not just *sit* there. He studied. Mostly he studied pitchers, for that was how he learned to steal on them so good. . . . He is studying and thinking all the time". The relationship between Perry and Henry is spontaneous, uncalculated: "Perry said Negroes are better off then ever before, and Red said true, but they are better off in a worsed world. Perry said he don't care about the world, just about Negroes. . . . Yet he seemed to care about me. . . . It is important who your roomie is. . . . I told him my troubles and he told me his, and time and again, laying there, we would figure it out" (p. 248).

But the 'righthanded' world is hostile to this inter-ethnic friendship. The Cleveland team barrack Henry, who finally loses his equanimity:

"Say boy", said they, "it cannot be true that you are roomed with a n---r."
 "Maybe Henry is a n---r himself," said another. "Say there, Wigger", said yet another, "I run into your brother this morning. He shined my shoes at the barber shop." I scarcely minded what they said. It is all part of the game, and I never answered them, though 1 time they said something that was just a little bit *too* nasty and I stopped working and faced the Cleveland bench and give them the old sign, 1 finger up. (p. 222)⁶

Later, when Perry has retired from baseball to attend Howard University, Henry again takes a reflexively principled stand against a proposed team visit to the American forces in the Korean War. In a conversation with the sports writer Crazy Kress, Henry makes honest statements which will later be distorted in the tabloid press:

I wanted to go to Korea if it would do the boys any good, but at the same time I couldn't see where it would.
 "Ain't you behind the boys over there?" said Crazy.
 "I'm behind the boys," said I, "but I'm against the war" (p. 240).

Kress resembles any of countless urban American journalists of the 1950s – Walter Winchell, perhaps – who alternated scurrilous gossip, tear-jerking melodrama and jingoistic tirades to keep their readerships buoyant. Henry's pacifism,⁷ his concern for justice and equality, his distress at social asymmetry make him the odd-man-out in a political environment dominated by the thunderous figure of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, who was appointed to the chair of the Congressional Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in the year *The Southpaw* was published.

That there is a dedicated term for the minority left-hander in sports, while there is none for the right-hander, is in itself significant. Right-handedness is the 'unmarked case', the default setting, the unchallenged norm. In the American vernacular, other physical characteristics are labelled in pairs and groups. In the

⁶ On the historical predecessors of Perry Simpson, see Riess, 1988.

⁷ Violence and non-violence are central to Harris's later novel, *Something About A Soldier*, 1957, set during World War II.

stories of Damon Runyon and Ring Lardner,⁸ in the gyms and the bullpens of America's sporting subculture, for every Shorty there is a Stretch; for every Blondie, a Red, or a Ginger, or a Blackie; for every Four-Eyes, a Gimp; for every Kid, a Pop. But there is no commonly-used dextral form of 'Lefty' or 'southpaw'. The southpaw is the ultimate sporting 'other', set apart not by physical or ethnic differences which are not instrumental in the performance of the sport, but by a laterality which directly affects interaction with other competitors.

In boxing, a face-off between two same-handers – in which each forward defensive glove faces a rearward offensive one – forms a continuously resizing parallelogram, with two axes of symmetry and a consequently wide range of configurations. But, when a right-hander meets a left-hander, their pattern is that of a trapezoid, which pivots on only a single axis of symmetry.

Sylvester Stallone's outsider-hero, the boxer Rocky Balboa, struggles to articulate this:

You know, like I always say, before, on the way over here, you know, fightin' used to be tops for me but no more, you know? See, all I wanted to do out of fightin' was prove I was no bum, that I had the stuff to make a good pro, you know? . . . Aw, hey, you know I ain't cryin' about it, 'cause I still fight, I kind of do it like a hobby. Ya see, what the trouble is, see, I'm a southpaw. . . . A southpaw means you're left-handed. A southpaw throws your timing off, you see? Other guys, throws their timing off, makes them look awkward, nobody wants to look awkward (Stallone 1976).

Henry Wiggen, in introducing himself to his reader, candidly anatomises the otherness of the baseball southpaw:

. . . a lefthanded baseball player has got 2 strikes on him from the beginning. First off, as everybody knows, a lefthander has got only 5 positions he can play. He can pitch or play first base or 1 of the outfield spots. But he can't be a catcher or a second baseman or a third baseman or a shortstop, not usually. If you are righthanded you can play anywhere. Then too, even a lefthanded pitcher is considered a sort of a risky proposition because many of them are wild and most hitters are righthanded, and a lefthanded pitcher is supposed to be at a disadvantage against a righthanded batter (pp. 14-15).

This conception is animated in the hard-hitting, manic, disruptive left-hander in Ring Lardner's *My Roomy*: "Before the trainin' trip was over, Elliott had roomed with pretty near everybody in the club. . . . Then John tried him with some o' the youngsters, but they wouldn't stand for him no more'n the others. They all said he was crazy and they was afraid he'd get violent some night and stick a knife in 'em" (Lardner, 1935, p. 330).

The behaviour of such stereotypically 'wild' southpaw pitchers would seem consistent with the dual-brain theorists' location of the intuitive, impulsive and subjective in the right encephalic hemisphere, which is presumed to dominate in the left-handed (see Wells, 1989, p. 8). One should note, however, that recent

⁸ See Runyon, 1944; and Lardner, 1992.

findings challenge this sharply bifurcated model and suggest that left-handers may, indeed, be less lateralised than right-handers (Springer and Deutsch, 1993, *passim*).

But if the left-hander is thus uniquely identified in the manual interactive sports,⁹ where does the rather odd sobriquet 'southpaw' arise? The use of 'paw' to refer to the hand of a baseball player or a boxer probably reflects the somewhat condescending public attitude towards participants in these sports, most of whom have come from either rural or inner-city America and would be seen by some as rough-hewn, as elemental, even as 'animals'. One rarely hears tennis-players referred to as southpaws except jokingly, as they are more usually drawn from the bourgeoisie. In Britain, a southpaw is likely to be a boxer, not a cricketer, as cricketers, whatever their origins, are considered gentlefolk.

The class nature of the word is demonstrated in two recent thesauruses. In the British *Bloomsbury Thesaurus*, southpaw is indexed only under 'boxer' (1993, ¶ 55.4). The American *Roget's International Thesaurus* locates southpaw within two categories, 'baseball player' and 'left-hander' (1992, ¶745.2, ¶220.3-5). Class assumptions are similarly evident in H. W. Fowler's citation of this unattributed passage: "Eagle-eyed viewers may have noticed a left-handed violinist fiddling the opposite way to everyone else This fiddler was James Barton, the only southpaw in the business at the moment." Fowler notes that this "seems to be an example of novelty hunting for the purpose of elegant variation" (Fowler, 1965, p. 573).

If, then, it is likely that 'paw' is a verbal act of social condescension, more difficult to determine is the onomastics of 'south'. It is curious that, while many writers have employed 'southpaw', few have been moved to speculate on its provenance. Indeed, not even in the only book ever to bear 'southpaw' as its title does Harris conjecture on the origins of the term. And what formal explanations have been offered remain unsatisfying.

Most attempts to deal with the word have been in the largely speculative realm of folk etymology, as in this exercise in historical linguistics from Stallone's *Rocky Balboa*:

You know where southpaw came from? . . . Huh? I'll tell ya. A long time ago there was this guy, maybe a couple hundred years ago, he was playing in the uh . . . he was fightin' around, I think it was around Philadelphia. And his arm, he was left-handed, his arm was facing towards New Jersey, you see? And that's south. So then naturally they called him 'south paw'. You see? South *paw* . . . south *Jersey* . . . south *Camden* . . . south *paw*. You know what I mean? (Stallone, 1976).

The confirmable fact that some three-fifths of New Jersey lies to the north of Philadelphia need be of little concern to Rocky. For what he is saying is, in essence, "I have no idea where the word came from".

More confident are the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, who devote almost half a page to 'southpaw'. They cite an apparently plausible explanation offered by

⁹ Non-interactive sports - like golf, billiards, darts, swimming - are not as affected by lateral dominance, as a competitor's performance is not primarily determined by the simultaneous actions of others.

London's *Sunday Times* in 1959: "In the ball-parks all over the United States the so-called 'diamond', formed by the track between the bases, is always oriented to the same points of the compass, so that in whatever park a team is playing the pitcher on his mound will always have his right hand on the north side of his body; hence a left-hander is a 'southpaw'" (*OED*, 1991, v. 16, p. 73).

The distinguished British etymologist Eric Partridge, who identifies the word as originally American, defines it as 'a left-handed boxer' and quotes a fairly recent anecdotal American source on its origin: "On regulation baseball fields, the batter faces East, so that the afternoon sun won't be in his eyes; the pitcher, therefore, must face West, which in the case of the lefthander puts his throwing arm and hand (or 'paw') on the South side of his body."¹⁰ A similar origin is credited by the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.¹¹

This would all be quite persuasive but for two disconcerting facts. The first is that the earliest known use of 'southpaw' identified by the *OED* dates to an 1848 publication called *Democratic B-hoy*: "I say, Lewy, give him a sockdologer!" "Curse the Old Hoss, what a south-paw he has given me" (*OED*, 1991, v. 16, p. 73). Baseball, while it seems to have started life in 1842, with Alexander Cartwright's Knickerbockers in New York's Madison Square, did not begin substantially to disseminate its own culture and conventions until the mid-1850s and did not claim any national attention until after the Civil War (Thorn, 1988, pp. 14-18).¹² The brawlers of the *Democratic B-hoy* are using a word which clearly predates its use in baseball, and probably predates baseball itself.

The second awkward fact is that, whatever lexicographers may claim, it is evident from an examination of randomly-chosen baseball fields that the playing 'diamond' (actually a square, rather than a lozenge, across half a diagonal of which the batter and pitcher face one another) is not always laid out to a standard directional grid. In John Thorn's lavishly-illustrated *The Game for All America*, an official publication of America's corporatised Major League Baseball, several photographs show the sun setting to the pitcher's right, placing the southpaw's throwing arm in the east (see Thorn, 1988, pp. 170-71, 174, 178, 181). And, in fact, it should be remembered that all pitchers, whatever their laterality, when 'winding up', stand (like the batter) along the field's diagonal and hold their throwing arms towards the outfield. It is, perhaps, significant that in his detailed instructions for the

¹⁰ "An American correspondent of Mr. John Moore's has sent him, ca. 1967, this convincing explanation . . ." (Partridge, 1984, p. 1117).

¹¹ "From the practice in baseball of arranging the diamond with the batter facing east to avoid the afternoon sun. A left-handed pitcher facing west would therefore have his pitching arm toward the south of the diamond" (*American Heritage*, 1992, p. 1724).

¹² The origins of baseball may be even more obscure than those of 'southpaw'. As early as 1803, Jane Austen wrote in *Northanger Abbey*, with a probable reference to the game today known as Rounders, that "it was not very wonderful that Catherine, who had by nature nothing heroic about her, should prefer cricket, base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country at the age of fourteen, to books . . ." (Austen, 1803/1969, v. 5, p. 15). For a less conventional view, see Axelrod, 1989.

N.B. I should like to acknowledge the wise and witty counsel offered to me, while exploring these matters, by my colleagues Professor David Jenkins (Education), Dr. France Mugler (Linguistics) and Dr. Robin Taylor (Psychology), of the University of the South Pacific.

construction of 'good ball fields' – including measurement specifications, a discussion of appropriate turf and a list of maintenance equipment – the former manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Walter Alston, nowhere mentions compass orientation (Alston, 1972, pp. 510-15).

There are, of course, many other possible southerly references, perhaps even a war-ingrained Yankee notion of southern American eccentricity and inferiority. Certainly, until the Milwaukee Braves moved to Atlanta in 1966, American major league baseball was a northern and mid-western phenomenon (Thorn, 1988, p. 24). In the South were the 'bush' leagues, the farm teams and the winter training grounds. In *My Roomy*, Lardner's narrator consoles his demoted team-mate: "Brace up, boy! The best thing you can do is go to Atlanta and try hard. You'll be up here again next year" (Lardner, 1935, p. 344). And in 'Women', the northernised Lefty counsels the newcomer, Young Jake:

"Oh, I don't know!" said Young Jake. "I didn't get along so bad with them dames down South".

"Down South ain't here!" replied Lefty. "Those dames in some of those swamps, they lose their head when they see a man with shoes on. But up here you've got to have something" (Lardner, 1984, p. 100).

These speculations, however, may have no greater validity than those which have been challenged above. Indeed, the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* scrupulously avoids the problem, by omitting 'southpaw' entirely (1985, p. 848). Like so much in the etymological enterprise, the matter remains, in the phrase of Oscar Hammerstein's King of Siam, 'a puzzlement' (Hammerstein, 1951).¹³

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