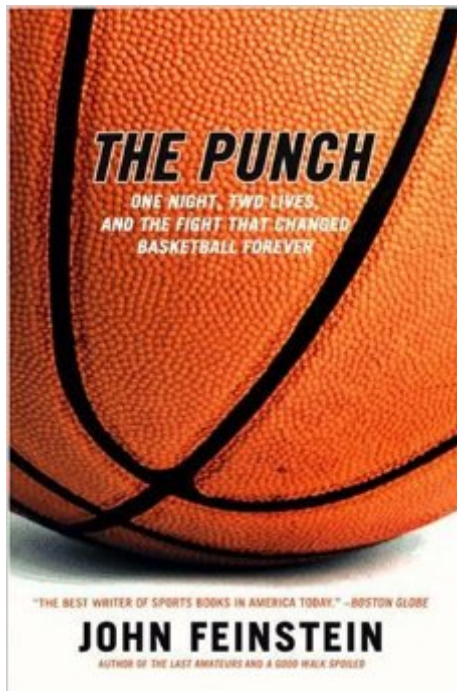


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The Punch: One Night, Two Lives, And The Fight That Changed Basketball Forever



Synopsis

With unerring insight into the deeper truths of professional sports, John Feinstein explores in riveting detail what happened one night in December 1977 when, as a fistfight broke out on the court between the Houston Rockets and the Los Angeles Lakers, Kermit Washington delivered a punch that nearly killed All-Star Rudy Tomjanovich. The punch-now legendary in the annals of American sports-radically changed the trajectory of both men's lives and reverberates throughout the National Basketball Association to this day. Feinstein's compelling investigation of this single cataclysmic incident and its after-math casts a light on the NBA's darkest secrets, revealing the true price men pay when they choose a career in sports. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

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Customer Reviews

First I'll begin with the book's flaws. For one thing, Feinstein was frequently redundant in mentioning the details of the incident over more than one chapter. More editing in that area would have made the book stronger. Also, I would have liked Feinstein to have done a more in-depth exploration on the way race played into this incident instead of merely mentioning that Washington received racist death threats in the aftermath of the incident and the fact that the NBA at that time was regarded as being "too black." By whom? The media or the fans? (Personally I believe it was both but I will save this for another discussion.)Now on to the book's strengths: for one thing, Feinstein described Tomjanovich's injuries and the scene at the Forum and the hospital with vivid detail. When I first read what he meant by "dislocated skull" (after having heard Feinstein discuss the book on the Jim

Rome Show), I gasped rather loudly at the bookstore and I actually felt a bit nauseated. Feinstein also did a good job describing the remainder of that evening for the two principals, showing how Washington already felt horrible about what he had done and how Tomjanovich, long portrayed as the harmless, gentle victim, actually asked the doctor working on him to allow him to go back to the Forum to get back at Washington, after they had nearly gone at it near the Laker locker room. I also had never known that Tomjanovich HAD been in a fistfight in an NBA game, in the 1971-72 season (his second season) against an Atlanta Hawk player, nor had I known about his post-incident anxiety attacks and drinking problem for which he finally got help a few years ago.

John Feinstein, author of THE PUNCH, is renowned for the fresh insight he shines on the cliché-bound world of sports. Yet he has written a frustratingly lazy book about an event that deserves better. The book's subject --- a harrowing haymaker thrown by Kermit Washington that nearly killed Rudy Tomjanovich in a 1977 NBA game --- raises issues that transcend the sporting event in which it happened. But Feinstein shrinks to the challenge, never approaching matters of race, rage, class and family in a way that rounds out the story. Feinstein begins the book with a description of the punch, an act so barbaric that it dislodged Tomjanovich's skull, causing spinal fluid to leak into his body. It took five surgeries to try to undo the damage from a single punch. In so doing, Feinstein introduces Washington as a mindless brute, ready to fight at any provocation. In this sense, the reader is pitted against Washington from the outset. No amount of "good guy" testimonials on Washington's behalf --- and there are many --- can shake the awful imagery. Moreover, Washington's bizarre behavior immediately after the punch --- he is remorseless and, incredibly, ready to go after Tomjanovich again, near the locker rooms --- doesn't help. It was not until Washington left the arena that he finally understood he had done something very wrong. But even then, he understood not because of his common sense and not because of what he saw on the court, described by one teammate as "just so much blood. I kept thinking, 'How can there be so much blood from one punch? Something is wrong here.'" What registered with Washington were the words of the parking lot attendant: "Kermit, you're in a lot of trouble. Big trouble." Feinstein fails to pursue basic, important facts.

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