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'Power Players' Review: Sportsmen in Chief

Ever since Washington tossed a stone across the Rappahannock, athletic prowess has been an asset to our presidents.

By Edward Kosner

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Ronald and Nancy Reagan. PHOTO: EXPRESS/GETTY IMAGES

From George Washington's fabled toss of a silver-dollar-size piece of slate 250 feet across the Rappahannock river to Donald Trump's touted 18 club championships at his 18 golf courses, athletic feats have been part of the legend of the American presidency.

By most measures, Teddy Roosevelt was the most athletically obsessed if not the most athletically gifted of America's 45 presidents. As a youth he'd sparred with a boxing coach. In the White House, he played energetic tennis on a court right outside his office, led cowed guests on rain-sodden hikes and runs, even climbed—and tumbled into a pond—in nearby Rock Creek Park, alarming his Secret Service guardians. All that exertion won Roosevelt the nickname "Mr. Strenuousity."

As it happens, Washington and TR are out of the lineup in the former CNN correspondent Chris Cillizza's "Power Players: Sports, Politics, and the American Presidency." Instead, the author focuses on the 13 presidents from Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 to Joe Biden today. The result is a lightweight but diverting recitation of sports prowess: high-school and college gridiron feats by John F. Kennedy, Dick Nixon, Jerry Ford, Ronald Reagan and Biden; George H.W. Bush's flair for baseball at Yale; Reagan and Kennedy's swimming heroics; Barack Obama's jump shot, and more.

Besides the stats, the author's focus is on how these politicians used sports to polish their public images—Kennedy's touch football as a (faux) paragon of robust health; Nixon's zest for bowling as a cloth-coated Middle American; Reagan's adroit horsemanship as a bronzed western hero (although he was from Illinois); patrician George H.W. Bush as a quick-witted first baseman; cool Mr. Obama as a brainy b-baller; Mr. Trump as a champ at mogul golf.

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Reagan's horsemanship at his Rancho del Cielo; George H.W. Bush's horseshoe-tossing rounds with world leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin and Queen Elizabeth; Bush 43's recreational cedar-clearing and trail-biking at his Texas ranch; and Bill Clinton's traffic-jamming morning jogs around Washington.

"The back of a horse was [Reagan's] happy place," Mr. Cillizza writes. The Secret Service felt otherwise: Skilled equestrians had to be enlisted to ride shotgun with him. Later, agents with peak stamina were needed to keep pace with the deceptively swift jogger Clinton. Matching strides with the 42nd president became a status game for some cronies and staffers, but so many had to drop out after a mile or so that a van trailed the pack to pick up stragglers. Mr. Clinton rewarded himself by ending his run at a McDonald's. "You can run for thirty minutes or so and then eat all you want and put on no weight!" he bragged to a pal.

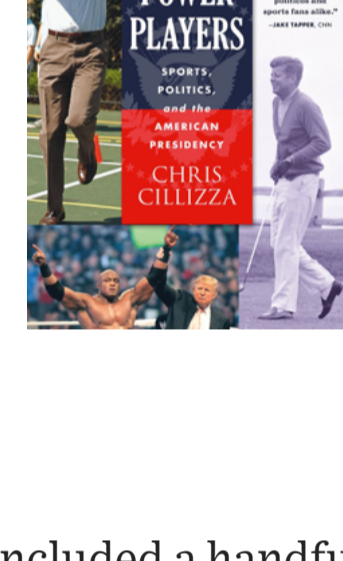
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Power Players: Sports, Politics, and the American Presidency

By Chris Cillizza

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But these off-beat presidential routines could backfire. The younger Bush tumbled off his trail bike and paid the price in scrapes and bad visuals. "President Carter, wobbling, moaning and pale with exhaustion, dropped out of a 6.2-mile foot race near . . . Camp David," the New York Times reported in 1979. A few months before, Mr. Carter had notoriously swung an oar to fend off a "killer rabbit" while fishing in a Georgia pond. Reagan swamped him in the next election.

Reagan's movie roles included a handful of sports figures, most famously the doomed Notre Dame football player George Gipp in "Knute Rockne, All American" (1940). He also played the alcoholic big-league pitcher Grover Cleveland Alexander in 1952's "The Winning Team." Pre-Hollywood, Reagan broadcast Chicago Cubs and White Sox games for a Des Moines radio station, re-creating the action from telegraphic messages from the ballpark.

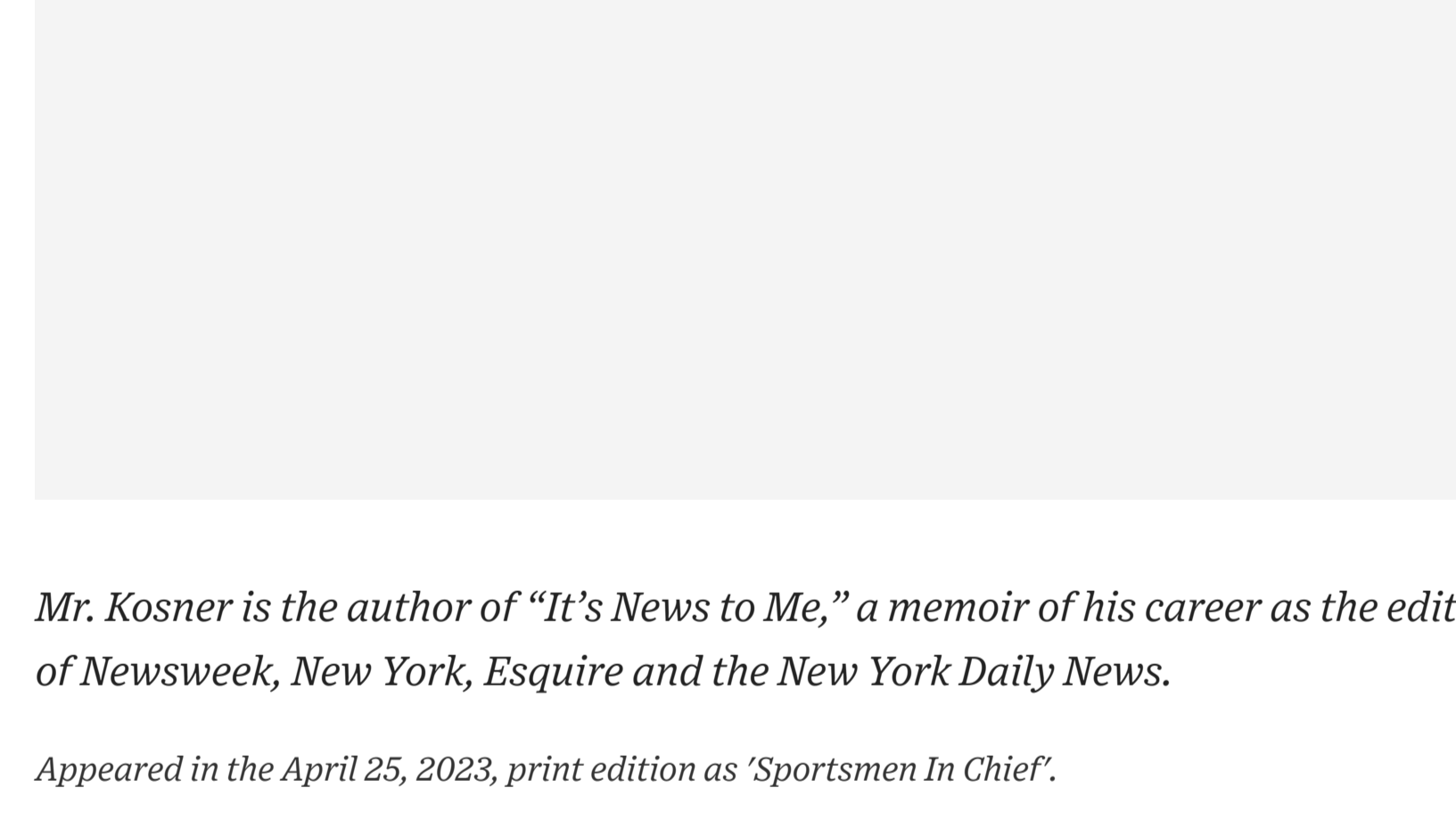
His real athletic prowess was as a swimmer. Starting at 14, he spent seven summers as a lifeguard on the Rock River near his home in Dixon, Ill., later claiming that he'd saved 77 lives. The other heroic presidential swimmer was John F. Kennedy, who stroked miles rescuing his crew after their PT-109 was rammed by a Japanese vessel during World War II. As president, JFK liked to frolic in the White House pool with two nubile White House secretaries nicknamed Fiddle and Faddle.

Golf has been the sport of choice for American presidents. Since William McKinley first teed off in 1897, only a few—among them Teddy Roosevelt, the disabled FDR, Herbert Hoover, Harry Truman and Mr. Carter—stayed off the course. The obese William Howard Taft was a dedicated White House golfer, as was Woodrow Wilson. JFK, back trouble and all, is said to have had the best pure swing. Dwight Eisenhower averaged 100 rounds of golf in each of his eight years as president, often teaming up with the iconic Arnold Palmer.

But Donald Trump has eclipsed all his predecessors as golfer in chief, and Mr. Cillizza devotes a meaty chapter to his 2+ handicap game, his propensity to boast about all the championships he's won at his own clubs—and to cheat. (It's a trait Mr. Trump shares with Mr. Clinton, who took so many mulligans that they came to be known as "Billigans.") The author reports that Mr. Trump claimed to be the best high-school baseball player in the state when he attended the New York Military Academy but actually wound up on the squash team at college.

Two years before running for president, he tweeted: "Can you believe that, with all the problems and difficulties facing the U.S., President Obama spent the day playing golf?" In his single term, by one tally, Mr. Trump played golf every 5.6 days, easily outpacing Mr. Obama's two-term average of once every 8.8 days.

Sports can hold a mirror to the character of our presidents, Mr. Cillizza concludes, "showing them for who they really are when all the spin, hype, and hyperbole are stripped away."



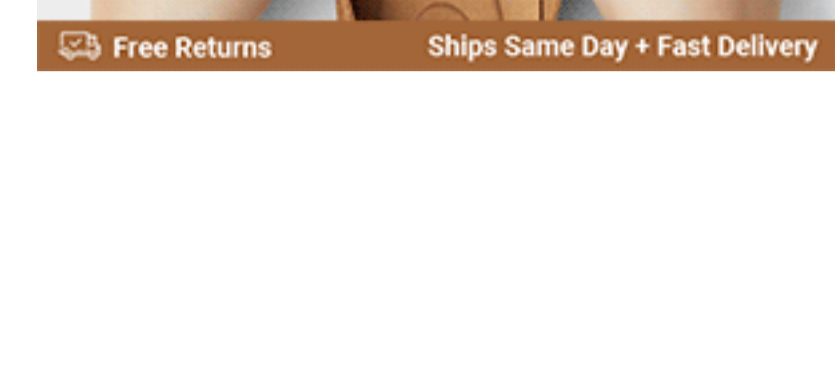
Mr. Kosner is the author of "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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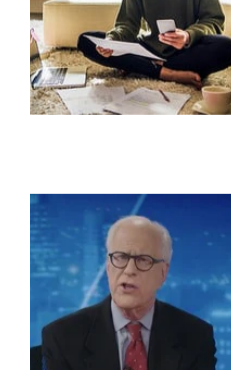
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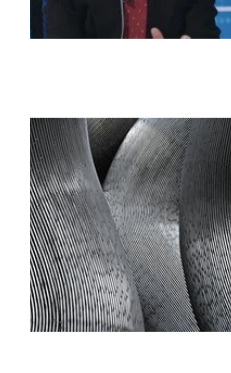
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