This dialogue was staged while the author was Katherine Edwards Gordon Rome Prize fellow, and Heather L. Reid was National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Post-Doctoral Rome Prize fellow at the American Academy in Rome. Reid is a professor of ancient philosophy and the philosophy of sport at Morningside College. She has published six books related to sports philosophy and the Olympics.

Cover image: Artemision Bronze, slightly larger than lifesize representing either Zeus hurling a thunderbolt, or, a point of controversy, Poseidon throwing his trident. Greek, found 1926, National Archaeological Museum of Athens.

2/1/2015: Super Bowl Sunday, TV room, American Academy, Rome

Rome is six hours ahead, which means the game will start in the middle of the night. We're waiting for the pregame show to finish while enjoying handfuls of the American-themed snacks made for the occasion by friends and fellow travelers. Tom Brady, the Patriots' star quarterback, has been in the news a lot recently in what seems an unusually self-aware PR push, and a battered *New York Times Magazine* currently serving as a trivet for a pot of chili reminds me to ask the academic assembly of sports fans for their reaction to Mark Leibovich's profile "Tom Brady Cannot Stop." A spirited discussion ensues, following mention of "Deflategate," a controversy over whether or not the Patriots deliberately deflated game balls to make them easier to throw in their earlier AFL Championship victory over the Indianapolis Colts. Heather Reid, a former Olympic cycling hopeful and present-day philosopher of sport, weighs in on both subjects. "Brady does give the impression of someone who can't be touched, who's in a league of his own," she observes. "With 'Deflategate,' especially in the article, it seemed at first Brady dismissed it, but then he saw it as an attack on his integrity. As tensions escalate, Leibovich observes this seems to settle Brady—which is so like an athlete. There's something about athletes, especially heroic athletes, that always rises to a challenge. And Brady has this. He loves a challenge, and he loves to win, to beat the odds." Her comments strike me as unusually perceptive, but this is literally her department, after all. At halftime the Patriots are tied with the Seahawks, 14-all, when pop diva/human cartoon Katy Perry takes the stage accompanied by a cast of dancing beach balls and poorly choreographed sharks. Seattle briefly leads in the second half, but Pats rookie Malcolm Butler makes a last-minute interception for the win. With an estimated 114.4 million viewers, this has been the most watched program in American television history. Reid and I agree to spend more time in the coming days talking over the Brady article in what will soon turn from a discussion club into a Socratic dialogue.

2/2/2015: Late Monday afternoon in Heather's office on the 2nd floor of the Academy

I awoke this morning, lightly hungover, with more questions for Heather

about the Brady article. I spotted her at lunch, and we decided to meet in her office. In the meantime, she's sent me a few of her articles for further reading, a chapter she wrote on "Sport to Art," another she wrote for a collection of pieces on *Football and Philosophy* called "Heroes of the Coliseum." I knock on her door. As we settle in and begin to talk, I notice an image of a gladiator pinned to her bulletin board. In his profile, Leibovich writes of Brady's live-in trainer, Alex Guerrero, describing him as the closest thing the QB has to a best friend. "While traditional training in football emphasizes the building of muscle strength, Guerrero's also focuses on pliability, which Brady equates to sponginess and elasticity." I ask Heather about this. Often flexibility is seen as a more feminine attribute. I describe Nicholas de Monchaux's incredible book *Spacesuit*, where he writes about how the original spacesuits were hard, like suits of armor, and they all failed. A suit was needed to expand and contract with different pressures, to puff up like a balloon, so it had to be soft. In the end, the suits were made by a bra company, Playtex. At first, there was fear about going into space in a soft suit, but the astronauts ultimately demonstrated the same courage as Brady in their faith that a different value should prevail.

"There's a refrain in Taoism," she replies, "'that the supple rides roughshod over the stiff.' The feminine, water, is a symbol of strength. The feminine is yielding and flexible, and the water will take down the mountain. The martial arts use this all the time, putting yielding to advantage in a competition, a strength that yields." I tell her I see this in performances by people like Houdini, struggling in his straightjacket, or James Brown, collapsing on stage after a concert. I also see it in Matthew Barney's work. Barney, of course, was both a model and a football player, two deeply bodily professions, before his interests in athleticism and aesthetics merged into a remarkable, mythic body of work. One of Barney's heroes is former Oakland Raiders center Jim Otto, who wore an iconic 00 jersey and legendarily never missed a game, even when his knees had to be replaced. Heather brings up Van Gogh's story as an example of a kind of endurance for the sake of aesthetics—like the astronauts without a suit of armor in the vacuum of space, Van Gogh conquered fear. "There is an aesthetic response that athletics can provoke that is special or universal in some way," Heather says. "All the Greek sculptures of athletes aren't pictures of

athletes but of gods. The athlete becomes like a god at his moment of peak achievement."

She describes seeing Jamaican sprinter and Gold Medalist Usain Bolt break back-to-back world records for the 100m and 200m Dash at the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. "The Greeks had a crown of vegetation that winners would receive. It was blooming when one received it, but would wither and die over time. Victory is beautiful, and fleeting." This makes me think of hair, like that of Brady's amazingly named teammate BenJarvus Green-Ellis, whose dreads cascade from his helmet in what seems to this overly cautious non-athlete like an obvious occupational hazard. Nevermind the ever-bearded and rather scruffy-looking Red Sox in Boston's Fenway Park. Heather agrees. "Hair and sex are both associated with youth—look at long-haired Achilles." She goes on to describe the moment of greatest male beauty for the Greeks, a highly sexualized moment, when a young man's first fuzz of facial hair appeared—the so-called "bloom of youth." At this time, these young athletes would often receive sexual "training" from their smitten eldermen before they became husbands and fathers. I tell her that I remember my high school hockey team attempting the opposite—to abstain from sex in order to win. It's a constant trade-off between acknowledging the body's life force and refuting it.

Heather returns to the idea of endurance and denial of bodily pleasure in an athlete. "In the Greek statues of the athletes, the penis is small and often infibulated [the end of the foreskin tied with a string, concealing the glans], which is meant to show chastity—all that power could then be used for the contest. *Sophrosyne* in Greek is self-control." Perhaps the modern version of this is not sex but diet. Leibovich writes of Brady's protein shake, full of "kale and collards" with little or no berries. On certain days, Guerrero allows Brady to indulge in treats like raw macaroons and ice cream made from avocados. "It doesn't seem as glamorous as *Bull Durham*," I joke, referring to the steamy baseball movie where Susan Sarandon's sexual tutelage helps Kevin Costner break into the big leagues.

Meanwhile, Heather schools me in some tamer basics: "Athletes embody values we like to see in ourselves. That's been the case since ancient

times, and it's wrapped up in the idea of heroes." She explains that "not long after the Trojan War but before the Olympic Games, which start in 776 BC—basically in the Bronze Age sometime, 12th or 13th century BC, heroes from the Trojan Wars had local cults around them. Cults would usually center around the heroes' tombs which were mounds called *tumuli*. After death, the hero's spirit would give life to the Greeks, their animals, and their crops. And to ensure this, continued rituals would animate the hero's spirit. Often, they would imitate what the hero was famous for—throwing a javelin, running, and so on. This is one of the origins of athletic games." So, sports are mimetic. A hero is a mortal who dies but then achieves a kind of immortality through greatness, and athletes re-enact the dead hero's virtues.

Virtues? I press her on this point, which turns out to be the cornerstone of her entire approach, an ethical value that is deeply connected to aesthetics. "Virtue is a gift, it can't be bought or sold," she says, evoking one of my own heroes, the writer Lewis Hyde. "Some people translate [the Greek word] *arete* as virtuosity because it's not a state as the Greeks describe it, it's something that can only be expressed in action. Aristotle is very clear about this. You can imagine a virtuoso as a musician, and there's also an aesthetic connection there. The same is true of sport—a virtuoso on the field is beautiful to watch." As coaches around the world have always said, it's not whether you win or lose but how you play the game. "Tom Brady, virtuous or not, is someone we associate with virtue, *arete*, excellence," she continues. "That's why we're fascinated with him, that's what makes him valuable to us. In the end, moving a ball up the field doesn't directly help us out as a society out that much. But his defiance of setbacks, his endurance—this is virtue."

As the afternoon goes by, we return again to aesthetics, and to the idea that virtuous play is "fair play," and to be fair is to be both just and beautiful. "Something can be morally beautiful," Heather concludes. "And in sport, where we're used to seeing value as something we can quantify or something we can analyze, fair play can't simply be reduced to following the rules, or simply produced with money." She tells me there's much more to say, and I have more questions as well. We decide to meet for lunch the following day.

2/3/2015: Tuesday, late morning outside the Academy Dining Room

I meet Heather in the high-ceilinged Salone with views into the Academy's airy Cortile, and we settle into a pair of wingback chairs placed in the morning light. She suggests we look at Leibovich's profile a bit more closely. Re-reading it last night, she kept thinking about the joke he captures about "NFL" really standing for "Not for Long." We begin to discuss the relationship of sports to youth. "For the Greeks, who are always in relation to their immortal gods, when you bloom"—here she refers again to the "bloom of youth"—"it's the beginning of your peak—not your scientific peak strength, but something more symbolic. Heroes were mortals who became immortal through their deeds—so the blooming is the first chance you have to do something that makes you immortal. Remember, Achilles dies young, doesn't marry, and has glory," she says as I note how for her even the most ancient philosophy is always told in the present tense. "People grumble about how much athletes make—but if you're at Brady's level, you've had a full time job since you were 12 or 13, and you weren't paid at all. When you finally get a huge salary, it's just for a few years, and then it's over—it's not as lucrative as it seems to be."

I ask her if she thinks this is fair, and we begin to talk about Lance Armstrong and the problem of doping. I share that I was reading earlier about experiments done around drug addiction with hamsters in cages. One bottle of water was normal, another was laced with cocaine. And routinely, hamsters would pick the laced bottle, drinking so much that they would die or come close to death. Initially, this was thought to be proof of addiction. But more recent studies have focused less on the drug and more on the cage. Remove it, leave the two bottles, and the hamster prefers regular water. "It's a fairness and beauty argument in a different realm," I tell Heather. "Given a beautiful life, a fair existence, the hamster will choose clean water. Given a horrible life, it will choose chemical enhancement."

"For Greeks," she replies, "the nature of the human being is to be limited—in time and power, both related to mortality. When you ask athletes why they dope, they so often say, 'I needed to get to the next level.' Well, if you assume there's always a next level, then it never ends." She doesn't think Brady's doping. I don't either. I ask if age is one of the "levels" she's

describing and whether or not Brady is falling into that trap. He does almost seem like he's trying to defy the laws of physics or something. He says he doesn't hurt after the game, which is difficult to believe, but he's trying all these treatments, focusing on massage and flexibility, etc. The virtuosity in that would be the courage and curiosity to try something different than the norm. Still, she decides, thinking about the body as a machine is "hard to escape. The NFL now has a robot character that appears during the Monday Night Football broadcasts. He has no head, just muscles. I talk in my work about the dehumanization of the modern athlete. Athletes are looked at as specimens, their bodies are regulated and fine-tuned, there's weight control, etc. The whole phenomenon of coaches calling plays directly into the players' helmets is unsettling, it's as if they were remote-controlled." I'm reminded of the mask, the puppet, the avatar, the motion-capture suit. If athletes must express argument through action, then to separate the mind from the body becomes a very dangerous path to follow. "Again, this differs from the ancients," Heather points out. "They understood the distinction of mind and body, but they saw movement as an act of the mind."

Issues of mortality, like issues of gender, have deep roots in the area of metaphysics — what your mind knows about your body, what your body knows about your mind, and the degree of interdependence throughout the system. I bring up Brady's wife, the supermodel Gisele Bündchen, who appears the superfemale counterpart to Brady's supermaleness, yet both are both male and female, engaged with yoga and flexibility, so there's a kind of merging in their relationship, even while they're able to represent more stereotypical male and female roles. And this merging has been on my mind in the case of former Olympian turned Kardashian reality star Bruce Jenner, who has been in the news recently for being in the midst of an apparent transition from male to female.

Heather interrupts, "It's an interesting case. In the late '70s, early '80s, there was a big institutionalized doping program in East Germany, and athletes were given performance-enhancing drugs without their knowledge. Many of these athletes have had gender issues, including requests to undergo gender reassignment surgery. By tampering with the hormonal systems, you really destabilize other things. Jenner was competing in track and field at a time when doping like that was really common. So you

have to wonder." But she's quick to temper that idea: "Anytime you talk about top athletes, you're talking about genetic outliers, people who are just not normal. But you could also look at what's followed for Jenner through the virtuosity point of view, as well. The courage that made him become such an incredible athlete has allowed him to go through this much more difficult set of circumstances." She sees parallels in Jenner's story to that of South African runner Caster Semenya, who was disqualified based on gender testing after early career success, only to return to carry her country's flag in the 2012 Olympic Games.

"The ball doesn't care what gender you are," she tells me. "Under the basic logic of sport, sex classes don't make sense, just like race classes don't make sense. Let the game decide. Let the ball decide." Sports even blend mortal with immortal through the figure of the hero, I point out. "There's a Greek heroine named Atalanta—she's in the Caledonian Boar Hunt, which is a big deal. She wrestles Peleus and wins. She makes a deal with her father that she will marry the first man who can outrun her. Heroes take care of public problems. There's still a town in Greece named for her today." Since myths and sports knit societies together and form collective moments, leaving women out of it entirely doesn't make for a very good myth. If Atalanta is in the Boar Hunt, society is much more collective than if she's not. "Plato felt that too," says Heather, describing one of her own heroes. "He had women exercising in the gym, and female athletes were in the guardian class, they were educated equally with men, and they didn't have to raise their children, they had nurses to help with that so they could become the philosopher rulers."

We decide to turn to questions of Brady's psychology, which begins with a discussion of the quarterback's autonomy. Initially, she relates to the story as a former Olympic hopeful herself. "There's always a tension in athletics with the idea of autonomy. I felt that when I was an athlete trying to make the Olympics. The closer I got, the more all these people were reminding me I owed it to them to make it."

"Sport and art are both descendants of play," Heather begins. "And that's part of why voluntariness is important—you must choose to play. You must feel free to make that choice. A classic hero, Achilles, liberates himself from his master." I mention Brady's blankness, and how one

reading of this is that he understands that he is someone whom people project things onto, so this blankness is actually helpful in serving his role, but it is also conveying a true tough-mindedness, a lack of concern for how he may be judged. "There's something about him that comes across as independent, thinking, self-directed," Heather says. "It gives him a greater sense of depth while it makes him more conflicted."

This puts Brady routinely at odds with those who try to control him — people like fathers, coaches, and owners. "The article sometimes paints the team owner, Robert Kraft, as a villain, morally suspect, with Brady sometimes getting swept into it," Heather says. "When I was reading it, this story of the poor hero who has to serve the king, all I could think of was Achilles and Agamemnon." I agree with this reading — Kraft calls Brady his son, but Leibovich later emphasizes that he sees his team and his players as a business. Brady was close with his father, but then there was a rift, and there have been a series of paternal stand-ins, from guidance counselors to the live-in nutritional expert, ever since. Training, coaching, guiding, fathering: how are they different in the hero's life? Describing the story where Brady consciously separated from his father by choosing Michigan over Berkeley as a college athlete, Heather decides that Brady "is almost fatherless in a way." Later, when discussing what the end of Brady's career might look like, she points out that "when Brady asks his father if it will end badly, his father is candid about it. The break with the father changes the relationship. It goes from something familial to something more businesslike." Father as advisor. Trainer as live-in chef. Brady is trying to beat the emotional needs of an athlete as well.

2/4/2015: Wednesday, just after lunch and coffee

For our final discussion, we return to Heather's office and to questions of ethics. Brady plays for the Patriots. So, let's talk about patriotism and athleticism. Were gladiators athletes? Were they patriots? Heather thinks for a moment. "Gladiators were not Romans in general. Usually, they were slaves. Just like now, there were levels, and the lowest was *infamia* — at this level, you were socially dead. Even if they were killed, they were already condemned. If you were a citizen who wanted to become a gladiator, you had to formally renounce your rights of citizenship

before you could compete in the arena." She says that though Gladiators stood apart, they nonetheless reiterated and continually demonstrated Roman virtue, fighting virtue, the key virtue. "Gladiators are almost always bare-chested," she says, pointing to the image on her bulletin board, "they don't have full armor like a soldier. Their bare-chestedness is a symbol of their willingness to die for Rome. Their faces were covered, but their chests were almost always bare."

Referring back to our discussion of autonomy the day before, Heather notes that "Gladiators didn't always have the right to kill each other. Once one gladiator disables the other, he must look to the emperor or what they called the editor—the presiding official of the game. That person, who's paying the bill, has to make the decision. And there's lots of political pressure in the moment to yield to the will of the crowd. Marcus Aurelius joked that he wished the people would think about how much of the empire's money they were spending before they became so thirsty for blood, but for me even that shows an obedience to their commander, again a Roman virtue."

I share an observation made earlier in the year by the Academy's Director Kim Bowes that the most powerful thing about the Colosseum is that it got all Romans to face in the same direction at once. And these highly orchestrated spectacles—the gladiators, the Colosseum, all of which still enthrall visitors to Rome today—they're what start to get Romans used to the idea of a Roman being someone other than a person born in Rome. Rome as an idea rather than a territory starts there. In this way, I suggest to Heather, the performance in the ring or on the field functions as a kind of social engineering. Seeing Jackie Robinson play on a racially integrated team starts to change us. But the controlled nature of sport, the rules and the higher aims, this makes large-scale political change possible at first in a small-scale way. Leibovich is a political writer, after all, and he brings this interest in performance, endurance, and higher aims to his profile of Brady. Both sports and politics are performances, and both are competitions.

She begins to talk about class and income inequality. "I've written a lot about ancient Roman gladiators and contemporary college football players," she says. "If you think about an elite college, who are the people in that community? They tend to be well-educated, relatively wealthy.

But who's playing on the football team? They may not be the same kids. But they represent the school and the virtues of the school. And some people think there's exploitation, and I think that like the gladiators there are some problems that come up, but then there's the other side of it that normally someone who might not be chosen to represent this place is doing just that through their athletic play." She laments the stereotype of the dumb jock, again spotting a mind-body cultural distinction rather than a more integrated understanding of the two. She's rankled that Leibovich seems to play into this by noting the frequency with which Brady says the word "awesome." "He may be 37, but he's always around guys who are 25, and he's a leader, and that's entirely appropriate," she decides.

If sports is argument through action, I ask her, then can we see philosophy as a battle of ideas? She responds immediately: "There's lots of evidence that Plato was an athlete, and he applied athletic techniques to philosophy. His highly constructed dialogue with his mentor Socrates is a contest, with a winner and a loser, and the real goal, again, is virtue. So, Platonic philosophy is very much an agonistic, competitive enterprise, but it's aimed at the good life and at mutual benefit. It's an enlightened athleticism." She continues, "Sports have a purity — athletes played in the nude, stripped of all their worldly possessions, because it removed context, it removed bias. In my own life as a scholar, I think about how philosophy is so male-dominated, but I always played with the boys. When I got frustrated I used to think about how I could get on a bike and kick anyone's ass. Knowing that I was physically strong helped me to stay mentally strong. Before a lecture, I would remember how I felt before a game."

As I get ready to go, I start to thank her for the last few days of conversation, and she tells me two stories from her time in Olympic training and preliminary competition. In the first, she rides hard, wins a race, but, in crossing the finish line, celebrates too much and falls off her bike in the velodrome in front of hundreds of people. In the second, she loses, having finished with a personal best, to a rider she recognized as truly better than herself. They were striking in contrast: to win but feel like you've lost, and to lose but feel like you've won. "I've always felt that athletics is like philosophy because your goal is to find out, to learn what you can know and what you can do. I think Brady is driven by this question — what he can do, how far he can go."

5/11/2015: Monday evening at my home in Brooklyn

Back from Rome, I'm still thinking about Brady and my conversations with Heather. Today, the NFL suspended Brady for four games based on his role in Deflategate. On ESPN, journalist Ian O'Connor described the suspension as "firm but fair." In just a few weeks, the story of Brady's career seems to have been rewritten. Describing the 243-page report filed a few days before the suspension, *The New York Times* concluded that "it could have been boiled down to a single sentence: Tom Brady — one of the most accomplished N.F.L. quarterbacks ever — is more probably than not a cheater." According to the report, Brady had started referring to himself as "the deflator" prior to the 2014 season. Leibovich's profile may not have helped in the court of public opinion. With his rigorous attention to diet and training, "if you think [Brady would] be less meticulous about this football thing, it's more probable than not that you'd be wrong," wrote one columnist for the *Times*, who suggested that even sadder than Brady's probable cheating is the prospect that he has been "doubting himself." The fortitude required to defy the odds of a 37-year-old body clearly weighs on Brady. In the meantime, Pats owner Kraft and head coach Bill Belichick were cleared of any wrongdoing. Like a real hero, Brady will bear the blessings and burdens of judgement alone.

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Tom Brady