

Introduction

Sportsextro

Loving or hating sports has established a crucial divide between and among intellectuals and others. When I first started delivering papers about sports and gender more than a decade ago, this division emerged in audiences along gendered lines in a way that no longer holds true. In the 1980s, it seemed necessary to apologize to the cultural left for talking about this subject—now it is not. This is partly due to the spread of popular culture as an object of interest across the academy and partly to changes in advertising's political economy of looking and purchase. So it may seem anachronistic to revisit ambivalence about a critical investigation of sports. Yet I begin with a couple of stories that do just that. There are two reasons for doing this. First, these stories declare an ambiguous but distinct investment in the topic. Second, they model the ambivalence to come. This ambivalence has to do with unintended, potentially progressive, consequences of the capitalist marketing alluded to earlier. For while I welcome changes in cultural political economy that shift gender relations, I do so with profound caution. New forms of consumerism do not facilitate a wholesale democratic

cultural transformation—that would take more profound shifts in global economic politics and religion. But the new consumerism is generating a sea change in gender norms that is principally evident in sports. And this change seems too important to be left aside because it is not “real” politics or because it is occurring in a loved, or hated, sphere. Hence the book you now hold before you, and hence the two stories I am about to tell.

Story One

The athlete is already a being who has hypertrophized one organ, who turns his body into the seat and exclusive source of a continuous play. The athlete is a monster, he is the Man Who Laughs, the geisha with the compressed and atrophied foot, dedicated to total instrumentalization. —*Umberto Eco (1987 [1969])*

There are many reasons to loathe sports, and I’ve known a lot of them. My experience is probably quite typical. I had a brief literary introduction to sports from my father when he gave me a book about cricket. And sometimes we played the game together. I was enchanted by the heroism and grace in the book and the interaction in the garden. But that all changed.

Once these qualities became part of a disciplinary regime of brutality and negativity at school, they were forever compromised. In place of dashing, decent men working together to produce acts of beauty, I spent endless cold days wandering around rugby fields, being hit and kicked by opponents and shouted at by their parents, who bayed for blood. “Kill the Protestants” was a typical Catholic mother’s refrain, and vice versa—a sectarian imprint on the well-worn tracks of vicarious surrogacy imposed by under-achieving parents. We were nine years old. At home, my mother would seize my fingers every Saturday morning and apply her cuticle remover and tools as punishment for not having concentrated enough on the field earlier in the day. When sports wasn’t about compulsory after-school activity, it meant gym work, which saw fascistic physical-education teachers standing over us, giving

instruction in painful and pointless activities we never saw them deign to undertake—an early encouragement toward Maoism and participant observation! Sometimes we'd be lined up on the oval in our khaki uniforms to march—preparation for the cadet corps in high school and, later, the draft, “to fight communism and the Asian invasion.”

I'm writing here about Australian and English schools of the 1960s and 1970s. These were fee-paying, all-male, WASP sites for the social reproduction of elites. Students were instructed to avoid people from government-funded schools at social events and on public transportation and were repeatedly reassured (though it always felt more like a threat) that we were destined to become “leaders of society.” God knows what my fellow monsters became. This period also instilled fear of unwanted sexual advances in me—one of my instructors in English and fencing regularly forced us on an individual basis to strip and be beaten. This visibly and audibly excited him, and he added verbal humiliations. The rugby union and classics instructor rejoiced in shouting into my ear, from about six inches away, “Are you stupid or are you lying, Miller?” He also laughed at us on the field. The science-fiction and physical-education instructor took special delight one afternoon when he required me to continue pole-vaulting and high-jumping after I had broken my wrist in front of him two minutes before. (No doubt he thought I was faking.)

My stories are nothing compared with others we have all heard. I got off lightly—as someone who was no good at sports, I was basically left alone to look inadequate, a nonentity. Of course, the laughs were not all on the side of these pathetic older men. We hated them with a passion, as well we might, and privately mocked their inane expressions of force. I was also lucky in that many jocks liked me—not least because, unlike my fellow incompetents, I appreciated spectator sports and even enjoyed playing, provided there was no formal competition and I was among friends who were in it for fun and the expression of effort and skill

rather than the pulverizingly dull desire to win at the expense of others.

And there lies the secret of something alongside my hatred of sports: the thrill when someone passes a football expertly and you run onto it; the sensation of receiving a hard-hit stroke and using its strength to return the ball to your colleague; the fun of running alongside others; and the pleasure of swimming in a creek with friends. Adrienne Rich (1997) refers to this as “what makes the body shoot . . . into its pure and irresistible curve.” Such joys are quite distant from the horror-show world of competition, authority, and critique that characterized the ritual humiliation of schooldays. At the same time, this notion of transcendence has itself been commodified and romanticized: The clichés I deployed earlier could have come from a Nike advertisement or the gung-ho alibis of sports disciplinarians. Part of the reason for the success of these tropes is that they reference the work of both players and spectators, the excitement that can transcend the capitalist complex of sports—even as this transcendence is the promise on which that commodification is founded.

Sports embodies the distinction between a world of domination, scientific management, and an artificially generated dislike of others, and a world of collaboration, spontaneity, and fellowship. These are the “bad” and the “good” of sports, what I hate and what I love. My specific memories of coaches form a small part of a mosaic. In the case of that particular class, gender, and racial experience, they have a terrible legacy, of course. This legacy connects practices of power and knowledge to control of a domestic proletariat, to misogyny, and to colonialism. We must never forget this history and what it still symbolizes, produces, and governs. One example came in AT&T’s 1999 campaign to win the local U.S. telephone market. The company advertised itself by playing with memories of childhood. A blurred graphic of children sprinting, captioned “Remember racing with your friends?” was offset with “Competition helped everyone run faster.”¹ Perhaps,

but it made me shy away, as does its metaphorization in the service of capital. At the same time, when tempted to express disdain for the banal competitiveness and disciplinary obsessions of sports, the untrammelled ecstasy of catching a wave or seeing someone else do so is a perfect utopian alternative to this seemingly most capitalistic of metaphors.

And this alternative can be realized at improbable moments because of sports' high allegorical value and nostalgia quotient. CBS television's coverage of the 1997 U.S. Open Tennis Final included footage of Arthur Ashe. I remember the interest in Australia when he won the 1968 Open—not because he was an African American in a predominantly white sport, but because we were astonished that any American could win a Grand Slam. A few years later, with new global powers in tennis displacing Australia, Ashe was up against the apotheosis of arrogant white masculinity—Jimmy Connors—in a Wimbledon final. (Remember those bloated white guys in the expensive seats at any number of U.S. tournaments, rising to punch the air in mimesis of his juvenilia?) Our exhilaration that Ashe's subtle variations and skill won the day was enormous. When his heart condition was revealed, and when he died so young, those traumas combined with his ability, philanthropy, and vision to leave the legacy of a cultural hero.

On this day in 1997, CBS's montage sequence included a shot of Ashe on the court, joking and laughing with Bobby Kennedy. I hate to join the ranks of romantic bores/boors raving about lost possibilities of the '60s. But this moment of hope reminded me that sports and youth culture do not have to be aggressive, dismissive, or "pumped up" to be progressive and the best. At the same time, seeing those men together is a reminder of trauma: the Americans and Australians in Vietnam and Kennedy's stance on ending the war; AIDS and Ashe's infection and death; and the stalled momentum of the civil-rights movement following the assassinations of '68, all brought together and nostalgically memorialized in sports.

The paradox at the heart of sports—their simultaneously transcendent and imprisoning qualities and their astonishing capacity to allegorize—is most obvious, dangerous, and transformative in its gendered form. Sports have long been regarded as a “masculine preserve,” where men can congregate as men without women to assist in their definition as people.² Sports are frequently criticized as a “resonant symbol of masculine hegemony,” because they superficially “embod[y] the natural superiority of men over women,” despite the fact that sporting capacity is rarely readable through size.³ A brutality toward the self is there, too, as per Alan Klein’s ethnographic findings:

The first time I witnessed a bodybuilder suffer a nosebleed while lifting weights it was triumphantly explained to me that the man in question was a true bodybuilder, paying dues, training in earnest and willing both to risk and to endure injury for his calling. Sometime later, when I watched another bodybuilder doubled over in pain from what would later be diagnosed as a symptom of hepatic tumors on the liver, it was again interpreted by the behemoths in the gym as testimony to his commitment to the subculture. In both cases I watched men reinterpret signs of clear and present danger to their health as ringing endorsements of character.⁴

But accounts of sports as an exclusive zone of male privilege are not tenable. When the legendary homophobic, Christian Green Bay Packers tight end Reggie White writes an op-ed piece for the *Wall Street Journal* protesting “female reporters and camerawomen ogling guys in the locker room,” as he did in 1999, and the *New York Times* notes that 160 of the country’s 900 male jockeys have been treated for substance abuse as they have tried to make their bodies weigh less than 117 pounds, we know that change is afoot and contradictions are aplenty in sports and gender.⁵ It is not just women who are objects of the gaze; it is not just women who are physically damaged in the interests of social expectations; and it is not just men who are invigilating the bodies of others:

The discourse on sports is like no other in our culture insofar as its object is the male body; its currency is statistical comparison of performances, of exchange rates and ownership, of strategies for deployment of bodies, and of the particular weaknesses, quirks, and gradual submission to injury, illness, and aging of those bodies. At the center of this discourse is an image of fascination, the perfect machine of a body-in-motion choreographed with others as a vision of grace and power: “Now, there’s an athlete!”⁶

Ambivalence lies at the heart of this book. For in the two decades between Ashe’s Grand Slam victory and his death, professional men’s sports were transformed into an internationalist capitalist project. As part of the desire to address TV spectators and capture their attention for advertisers, the male body became an object of lyrical rhapsody and the gaze of the other. In keeping with that shift, *Sportsex* analyzes masculinity not as a property or essence, but as contingent signs and practices.

These signs exercise power over both men and women. Paul Smith says that “masculinity isn’t always a pleasant thing to behold, and it’s always difficult, sometimes unpleasant to write about—it’s certainly a difficult thing in just about every respect.”⁷ Through analyzing this “unpleasantness,” I have found evidence of transformation, not stasis, and that animates the chapters to come.

Story Two

When he [my father] sat down at the television to watch a baseball game, volume blaring, cigar smoke wafting across the room (or a wet, extinguished butt in the ashtray, sending off its acrid fumes), it seemed that he owned our collective space absolutely. . . . Even today, I can’t listen to the sounds of a televised sports event without feeling irritated, and vaguely queasy. —*Susan Bordo (1998, 10)*

My friend Rob Nixon and I watched the 1998 men’s World Cup soccer match between Colombia and England in a lower-west-side Manhattan nightclub that had opened its daytime doors to soccer fans. The crowd was English. The man next to me was wearing a T-shirt that identified him as someone from a working-class area

of London. His voice went with it. We never spoke, but he clutched at me whenever England did well and embraced me with each goal and the ultimate victory. Initially uncomfortable, I found myself looking forward to these shows of emotion. That encounter made me think about the masculinities on display in the competition, the strange gamut of passions and passionate exchanges—players blowing kisses, driving one another into the ground with projectile cuddles, and adopting strange poses for the crowd, for all the world like fey, queer-acting models. (Think of Michael Laudrup celebrating his goal for Denmark against Brazil.)

Our location embodied this change. The sports bar has undergone massive gentrification and feminization. From its 1940s origins as a TV added to the tavern in order to bring men back out of the home, the sports bar evolved into a male-dominated sphere until its dramatic transformation in the 1990s. Whereas the old single-set and long bar live on in a few venues, the dominant “post-modern sports bar,” as Lawrence Wenner has called it, “is an extension of domesticated mall design,” with an emphasis on cleanliness, multiple TVs and sites for viewing, diverse satellite signals, airiness, and a successful appeal to female customers.⁸ No surprise, then, that my friend and I should be in the millennial incarnation of “Nell’s,” one of the hottest New York bars since the ’80s, and not generally thought of as a masculinist or sports venue.

Those who saw the wonderful England-Argentina World Cup game may have followed later denunciations of David Beckham, the brilliant midfielder who had helped win the Colombia match but this time was sent from the field for retaliating against a foul. That left his team a player down, and they went on to lose. The reaction in Britain was predictable, with lynchings threatened and the usual Fleet Street atrocities.

On the morning of the match, prior to Beckham’s dismissal, the egregious Rupert Murdoch’s equally egregious newspaper, *The Sun*, had depicted Beckham as Eva Peron, perhaps because he had recently been photographed at a party in France dressed in

a sarong with his affianced, Posh Spice (yes), on his arm. So the knives were out before his mistake—and this clearly had to do with questions of masculinity and patriotism. Beckham was punished for being pretty and flash. His looks, his style, and his sex life feminized him for the British tabloid papers and parts of the public. This was his crime—to be on the edge of conventional manliness. Throughout the next two domestic seasons, Beckham was taunted by crowds throughout England, who queered his masculinity. Yet he was also a high-profile commodity, appearing, for example, on the cover of London's *Time Out* magazine depicted as Christ and fielding questions about anal sex in an accompanying interview. This attention depended on his looks and sexual aura. Similarly, Oscar de la Hoya's defeat in a 1999 world-title boxing defense was seen in some quarters as a moral punishment. Well ahead on points, de la Hoya, whose appeal rests on beautiful style and beautiful looks, elected to move away from his opponent in the closing rounds, lest he be hit hard. The controversial decision against him was thought to have been a punitive reaction to this "unmanliness."

Clearly, repressive gender conventions are some of the first memories we have of sports. But the brutal deindustrialization that has cut the underpinnings of First World working-class masculinity has also seen a dramatic shift of capital into the service sector, with sports a huge part of the entertainment complex that is a cradle of First World wealth. Beauty is as much a part of male sports discourse today as toughness, while grace is the avowed compatriot of violence. These antinomies have always enjoyed frottage on the field, but their relationship has become crucial to marketing both individuals and sports itself in ways that were occasional and casual in earlier times. Sports have become governed not by administrators *tout court*, but by venture capitalists, with the body their target. Governmentality—the refinement of human bodies through rationalization and utilitarianism—connects to capital accumulation in a dispersed network of power that cannot be

explained in terms of a unilinear connection between all sports and all laboring and consuming forces. It is equally driven by the search for individual health and happiness via the conditioned and consuming body, sex appeal, and self-discipline.

Spectator sports reference all the complexities of contemporary capitalism, played out over the public bodies of headlined workers. Sports' gender politics at the elite level today are far from a functionalist world of total domination by straight, orthodox masculinity because of the niche targets that these commodified signs are directed toward (such as straight women and gay men). There is, of course, a regressive side to commodification and its reproduction of heroism, because they displace public attention from structural social inequalities. We are all too familiar with the claims of corporate feminism about social change. But the beneficial aspect to cataloguing sports is its challenges to gender convention. For example, Calistoga bottled water was advertised in the official program of the 1994 Gay Games with the slogan: "We don't label people. Just bottles." Such corporations have seen potential profit in supporting fringe actors and activities in sport, ameliorating the chauvinism of traditional amateur-games bodies. Adidas realized long before the International Olympic Committee (IOC) did that emerging sovereign states should be courted. The company dedicated resources in the '70s to forwarding the claims of African and Central European sports federations, and drew a consequent reward—in addition to free advertising—when sporting attire was selected to outfit teams. From the very first days of women's activism for access to marathons in the 1960s, Avon tied its door-to-door globalization strategies to the struggle, funding races, hiring lobbyists, and connecting the sport to beauty and makeup. (This support is contingent, of course. The company felt very differently about lesbians' involvement, cutting sponsorship of women's tennis after the 1981 "galimony" suit against Billie Jean King.) Avon sponsors the U.S. Olympic Team as part of its bizarre

“Avon Salutes the Woman Inside the Athlete” campaign. A double-page spread in *Vanity Fair*’s issue on the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta invited readers to look at an image of an elderly woman in evening wear surrounded by four swimsuited young men and “guess which one’s the Olympic gold medalist in springboard diving.” The answer was Aileen Riggins Soule, who had won the event in 1920. She was described in bold type as “just another Avon lady.” Nike learned the lesson: A 1990s female-empowerment campaign sent sales to women up 40 percent.⁹

These challenges and inconsistencies in the sight of heightened commodification make sports exciting at an analytic and political level. Clearly, sports continue to be a space of heteronormative, masculinist, and white power, but they are undergoing immense change, with sex at the center. Objectification is a fact of sexual practice within capitalism.¹⁰ Excoriating evaluation of women’s bodies has long been the pivotal node of this process, with the implied spectator a straight male. Now, slowly in many cases but rapidly in others, the process of body commodification through niche targeting has identified men’s bodies as objects of desire and gay men and straight women as consumers, while there are signs of targeting lesbian desire. Masculinity, understood as a set of dominant practices of gendered power, is no longer the exclusive province of men as spectators, consumers, or agents. “Female masculinity” can now be rearticulated as a prize rather than a curse,¹¹ and the longstanding ambiguity of macho sportsmen dressing in drag has become a point-of-sale rather than a suds-laden moment of excess.

This is especially striking given that the United States has not traditionally gone in for “humorous” sports cross-dressing in the way that many Anglo societies have done. Today, the retired track star Carl Lewis appears in fuck-me pumps for Pirelli tires, a company traditionally associated with calendars of heteronormative women; the New York Knicks forward Larry Johnson sells Converse products dressed up as his grandmother; the Ottawa Senators rookie

Alexander Daigle poses as a female nurse for trading cards; the world-champion boxer Chris Eubank models a Vivienne Westwood frock on Milanese catwalks; the lapsed power forward Dennis Rodman wears a white wedding gown to his book signing; and the Thai kickboxer Pirinya Kiatbusaba uses his purses to fund transsexual surgery. The former New York Jets quarterback Joe Namath is still renowned for pitching Hanes pantyhose in the 1970s.¹² Of course, there are misogynistic aspects to drag of this kind, but it is a new and burgeoning practice that suggests other changes, as well.

I do not celebrate these changes unproblematically. Our conjuncture continues to be one where, for example, invisible and unpaid women's work, such as ferrying players, mending uniforms, and so on, is the *sine qua non* of most sport, while men's power over women continues.¹³ But a decade ago, Beverley Poynton noted that this invisibility extended to fandom—female spectators were excluded “from the discourse of football” in their voyeurism, as well as in their emotional and physical labor.¹⁴ Since then, changes have come. The American Dialect Society decreed “soccer mom” its 1996 Word of the Year, as politicians vied for electoral support from middle-class women who drove children and men across the country.¹⁵ In 1999, David Letterman troped the term when he coined the expression “Soccer Mamas” for the World Cup winners—both sexy and maternal now. In the mid-1990s, National Football League (NFL) administrators discerned a threat to the game's man appeal from other media forms and faced mothers who objected to their sons' playing so mindlessly violent a sport. The NFL responded by hiring Sara Levinson to run marketing—the first woman to be employed in the league's central-office executive group in a position other than secretary. Levinson was selected because her previous job had been co-president of MTV. The NFL wanted her to push merchandising spinoffs and attract female audiences. This became known as the “Women's Initiative,” named because “our research indicates that women like the tight

pants on the players.” Co-educational high-school football was introduced, along with Levinson’s new argot, which talked of the NFL as a brand, not as something quasi-holy.¹⁶ NFL broadcasters are employing more and more female announcers and experts to cater to the increasing numbers of women watching on TV in response to the feminizing initiatives taken over the past five years.¹⁷ Meanwhile, male players were complaining about the ritual objectification of standing near-naked as hundreds of administrators, owners, coaches, medics, scouts, and other men calibrated their bodies at meat-market conventions.¹⁸ Somewhere across town, female wrestlers in the United States make big money from telephone and apartment wrestling, simulating bouts with male callers or visiting them for the real thing. These workers do not see themselves as part of the sex industry, despite the semiotic similarities.¹⁹

How should we make sense of these developments? Just as the bourgeoisie has managed to be the most revolutionary class in history, so its means of reification, in all its sophistication, has had both beneficial and baleful consequences. Gerald Early quotes a contemporary boxing manager describing his sport as “capitalism gone crazy.”²⁰ That “craziness” is undercutting crucial aspects of patriarchal relations in a series of limit cases that I investigate in this book.

After the 1999 Women’s World Cup of Soccer, the *New York Times* journalist Richard Lipsyte wrote a column entitled “Sports and Sex Are Always Together.” In it he argued that “sexuality may be so intrinsic to sports that unless the audience is sexually comfortable, the game just won’t sell.” Despite a few pieties about gender and commodification, Lipsyte fancied this aspect to the game: “I say the more flesh the better.” A week later, his column offered a pseudo-apology after significant public criticism.²¹ Both the initial claim and the powerful reaction to it are pointers to the Sportsex *Geist*: The present moment of change is a radical one, and I guardedly welcome it. Sportsex is everywhere—sold as such. It is

both intensely discriminating in its identification of commodities and consumers and increasingly attuned to difference. A truly progressive politics that will transform the labor process? That would take another revolution, from a different class. For the moment, the urgent drive toward the creation of markets to deal with overproduction has turned the Sportsex body to the forefront of contemporary capitalism. It is both a sign and a source of social change.