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# INTRODUCTION: SPORT AS SPECTACLE

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I can still remember the deafening thunderclap, amplified by the acoustics of the Pasadena Rose Bowl, immediately following the faint swoosh of the ball as it soared past China's goalkeeper into the back of the net. In that chaotic historic moment, Brandi Chastain, and her iconic if accidental Nike sports bra advertisement, changed the trajectory of women's sports, and the sports apparel industry, forever. In clinching the U.S. National Team's victory in the final match of the 1999 FIFA Women's World Cup, Chastain immediately became both fledgling soccer hopefuls' idol, myself included, and Nike's answer to a growing female sports apparel market. As an attractive white woman who had just revealed her spectacular ripped physique in front of millions in an extemporaneous moment of joy, Chastain had also become a national spectacle and the center of media buzz for months to come. Meanwhile, hopefuls like myself awaited the day we too could get a scholarship, and wearing our own Nike apparel, join the growing ranks of budding female soccer stars, who, day in and day out, sweated it out on grassy patches. They were our version of postmodern "girl power."

Like millions of other Americans, I grew up breathing, eating, sleeping, and playing sports. Soccer, track, volleyball, cross-country, basketball, swimming and diving—you name it, I played it. Of course, I had the benefit of being a girl born in the United States well after the establishment of Title IX in a household that was likewise supremely physical and sport-oriented. Thus, I had the privilege of growing up naive to the notion that sports were "a boy thing." My own mother, very athletic in her own right, married and had children early, yet she continued to play softball and soccer throughout my childhood, serving as a model and inspiration for my own sporting interests. I can still remember attending many of her games on the weekends and watching her take joy in the physicality and camaraderie

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of team sports. Or the ceremonious summers and winters when our family would spend nights together glued to the television screen watching U.S. Olympians compete for gold. My mother's commitment to the demands of being a "soccer mom" also meant both our days were engulfed by the love for and logistics of sports. And so, as a child, sports were my life. If I wasn't at practice, I was in the gym or training somewhere, doing sprints on a dusty graveled high school track (before the days of the high tech all-weather stuff), or training slow twitch muscles and logging miles in the soft sand at the beach. And let's not forget the injury rehabilitation protocol for torn ligaments and broken bones that began long before my stint in Division I ball. Almost always, there was a soccer ball at my feet. When I wasn't training, I was fidgeting, squirming, counting down the minutes until I could get back out and have at it again: a body perpetually in motion.

As a lover of team sports and a tomboy, I grew up with dozens of girls and boys who seemed to feel similarly, who passed away hours after school and during summer enjoying the wonders of cultivating an athletic form. Of feeling our bodies tighten and harden, our lungs burn and adapt, our minds sharpen in focus and determination, our bonds deepen with our teammates as we succumbed to the rhythm and repetition of sporting competition.

Western culture has been fascinated by athletes since at least as early as the ancient Greek and Roman times. Indeed, athletes were thought to encompass many ideals of the human form, and the ancient Olympics were an important moment for celebrating athletes' bodies and their spectacular feats. But, athletes are controversial as are the spaces they inhabit: pitches, courts, tracks, greens, fields, slopes, courses. Sports and their bodies are spectacles. Spectacular. Public. They have a way of drawing attention to themselves and their performances, both on and off the pitch. Perhaps nothing speaks more strongly to this than the notion of the athlete as celebrity or role model. The iconic status of modern athletes is in part a response to a growing sports media industry, as are growing sports fandom and sports journalism sectors. All are enmeshed in a lucrative if nuanced industry whose success depends largely on sport's bedazzling hold on American culture, leading some skeptics to argue sport is, borrowing a term from Karl Marx, America's great "opiate of the masses."

Sports also draw money—lots of it. They compel large scales of economy and production that globalize certain cultural values and bodies, often at the expense of others. Sports dictate cultural norms, policy, reform, and research—expensive research in biotechnologies and performance enhancement, and nutrition and exercise genetics. Too, sports channel public funds to revitalize urban development through sports stadia construction, outreach and urban development programs, and they inspire international policy and foreign diplomacy initiatives that use sport as a low-cost high-impact tool for international socioeconomic development and promoting gender equality. Sports also serve as an interesting backdrop for ruminations on the complexities of a postcapitalist

society driven largely by celebrity culture. As media blitzes surrounding the incivilities and criminal actions of athletes from O.J. Simpson to Aaron Hernandez to Michael Vick go viral through mass, micro, and social media alike, many question the tangled threads that weave sports into a broader tapestry of social ills: violence, homophobia, racism, sexism, and classism. Finally, sports are an interesting place to examine the ways in which cultural perceptions of gender, sexuality, and race are normalized and or resisted, as evidenced by the recent Michael Sam and Donald Sterling controversies.

And, so, sports, and their spectacular athletes, do not always make for good news. Nor, it seems, do sports whet the appetite of those who feel conflicted over the endless wake of “beer and circus” splashed across a global stage by sports’ jocks and its media. But, when organizations like the United Nations declare 2005 the International Year of Sport and Physical Education and use sport as a strategic part of their Millennium Development Goals, when sports continue to be lauded as a mainstay for personal, professional, social and economic well being, one is compelled to ask, can sports and their bodies really be all that bad? Throughout this book, we’ll think about questions like these as we read and write and think hard about the complicated and controversial terrain of sport, its spectacular doings and its spectacles, its spectacular and its deviant bodies, and its spectacular claims and research that are changing the way we understand our relationship to sport as athlete, fan, and consumer.

### **A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY: “SPORTS” VS. “SPORT”**

Rather than the word sports, the term used throughout the remainder of this book is the singular form, *sport*. By sport I mean an institution with a certain set of ideologies and practices that shape the way we act in and come to understand our society. Individual sports are therefore a part of the larger institution of sport. One goal of this reader then is to help us think critically about sport and the way it impacts our everyday lives and identities.

### **READING SELECTION**

As we work our way through the readings and assignments in this book we will be prompted to reconsider our assumptions about sport and the role it plays in contemporary American society. From the normalization of bodily ideals, to the technologization of the athlete’s body—part machine/performance enhancement, part human—to the intertwining of racial, gendered, classed, able-bodied, and heterosexual privilege in sport culture, sport powerfully shapes the way we come to understand and value certain bodies and bodily practices over others. Sport also influences the way we socialize and the identities we assume in society, be it by way of directly playing a sport and identifying as an athlete, or by sharing in the joy and pain of spectating sport as a fan, playing sport video games as a gamer, even protesting against or advocating for sport as an activist. All

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of these identities are tied up in and contribute to the heartbeat of modern sport culture and its influence on American society.

To wit, working within the spatial limits of a textbook, *Sport* cannot cover everything interesting or important about sport. *Sport* also focuses, for the most part though not unproblematically, on American sport culture, as American sports remain the “center” of modern sporting culture, business, and ideology writ large. While not intended as an exhaustive overview of sport, included readings nonetheless present a diverse range of contemporary and important sporting issues and encourage you to reflect on your own relationship to sport and to reconsider your assumptions about both sport and sporting bodies.

To do so, selected readings and images connect sport to broader social issues: modernity, racism, sexism, homophobia, economic and international development and globalization, to name a few. A glance at the Table of Contents reveals readings have also been strategically arranged to introduce you to various genres of sports writing and rhetoric as well as to provide a balanced discussion surrounding some of the more controversial topics in sport, from “Pay for Play” to advancements and applications of sports genomics. The book thus begins with an invitation to reflect on how “sports talk” and its dominant metaphors shape our understanding of everyday cultural values. We continue our appreciation of language and sport with a survey of a few of literary sports journalism’s most iconic and anthologized pieces, Giamatti’s “Hyperbole’s Child,” Thompson’s “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved,” and Williams’s “The Crowd at the Ball Game.” The book then shifts to readings and discussions surrounding sports and identity, focusing on opinion editorials, feature articles, magazine cover images, and scholarly articles and blogs that survey the complex landscape of sport and identity. From issues surrounding ritual, culture and sport fandom to discussions of sport and race, including the role of black athletes in historical activist movements (see Carlos, “1968”) and the much heated debate over the ethics concerning “Pay for Play” in college athletics, readings, visuals, and activities push our thinking about how sport and identity and language are intimately bound. Likewise, they provide an opportunity to reflect on timely issues concerning sport as a gender-segregated institution, from the historical consequences of Title IX for women as well as current debates over how sport impacts LBGQTI communities. In “Either/Or,” for example, Levy depicts the fascinating if tragic struggles of intersex track athlete Caster Semenya and her struggles to “fit in” to the binary gendered logic of Olympic-level sports. These kinds of ethical complexities also inform discussions around sport for disabled communities, and Keith Storey’s “The Case Against the Special Olympics” provides a compelling if unexpected critique of the disabled community’s major global sport platform. Likewise, Behar’s “Will Genetics Ruin Sports?” and Macur’s “Born to Run?” introduce us to current and fascinating discussions around advancements in the burgeoning world of sports genetics. Closing materials prompt us to consider the limits

and potentials of sport in a global world, including the ethics of global sports markets and the use of sport and events like the World Cup as opportunities for activism concerning international development and human rights. The judiciously selected texts included herein provide both powerful critiques and celebrations of sport in a vast array of contexts so that you might consider and, ultimately, come to appreciate the complexity of modern American sporting culture and its growing impact on the world.

## WRITING PROCESS

We might imagine sport as a metaphor for the writing process. Like an athlete, a writer becomes a writer by way of practice. Through what Debra Hawhee calls the “3 R’s”: *repetition*, *rhythm*, and *response*, athletes’ develop a habitude in sport that makes them proficient at their craft. If we apply Hawhee’s heuristic to writing we come to understand writing as a rhetorical process—a game?—that equally requires the honing of the 3 R’s: repetition (invention and drafting), rhythm (style, voice, and delivery), and response (logical argumentation and evidence). And, just as with any athlete, there are good days and bad days. Some days we simply can’t perform. Just as our most beloved athletes have the occasional bad games, as writers, we can also encounter days where the dreaded writer’s block creeps in, or we simply flub a draft.

But, also like any good athlete, if we believe in and abide by the 3 R’s, then we continue to write and revise and polish our performance, and slowly, steadily, our writing improves. This is the writing process in action as we develop the muscle memory required to flex our writing muscles with the strength and vigor necessary to write cogent, concise, convincing prose. And, also like sport, the more we play with writing, the more we come to appreciate the beauty of writing as a game that, at its best, provides us with endless opportunity to play with our voice; to revise and sharpen our perspectives and to craft logical arguments supported by sound evidence and research. These are the essential technical skills every good writer needs to play their “A game.” This reader is intended to give us ample opportunity to develop these skills through the continual practice of reading, writing, and thinking critically about the role sport plays in contemporary society.

A final word about writing and sport: We might also think about writing as a *team sport*. Just as any athlete on a team knows she must perform as an individual, she also understands the indispensable role played by her teammates in achieving victory. So it is with writing. As we practice writing draft after draft, we ask our teammates to peer review our writing to provide constructive critique and feedback that helps us improve our writing. And, just as any good coach serves as both a mentor and teacher, in writing, instructors provide models of the kinds of successful writing “performances” that help students eventually reach their “A game.” And, while the “team” is the core of an athlete’s experience, they often reach out for extra help from trainers, nutritionists, doctors, and other professionals to help them improve their performance. So it is with writing. While

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we rely on the mentoring of our writing instructors, and we benefit from the help of teammates, we can also improve our writing by seeking outside assistance from other writing professionals, like writing tutors, often found on campus at writing centers. Here, we can get the one-on-one attention needed to really improve our writing so that we can achieve one writing victory after another as we engage with writing assignments that ask us to think about how the very sporting notions of competition and victory inform our understandings of American culture.

I have taught writing courses on sport, its media, its bodies, its conflicts and its celebrations for the past five years and I am always amazed at how much I learn from students as we work our way through sport and society by way of the writing process. As we work our way through the writing process in this reader, my hope is that we will come to develop an appreciation for both the world of sport and its bodies as much as the kinds of writing, thinking, and researching that help us thoughtfully articulate sport's impact on society in ways that are ultimately as challenging as they are inspiring. Happy practicing!

### Works Cited

Hawhee, Debra. "Bodily Pedagogies: Rhetoric, Athletics, and the Sophists' Three R's." *College English* 65.2 (2002): 142-62. Print.

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### Compose



This exercise will help prepare you for Major Assignment #1: The Sports Memoir. Compose a two to three page essay in which you recount a vivid sporting experience and reflect on its significance. Why do you remember the event? What did you learn from the event? What important lesson(s) might you want to teach others about sport as it relates to this event? Remember to use descriptive language and other aspects of memoir and storytelling: setting/scene, moral or “so what,” character development, and conflict to help you craft a compelling and coherent reflection. Share your reflections with the class during the next meeting.

### Collaborate



In small groups, spend about 15 minutes informally researching one of the topics/themes mentioned in the Reading Selection section of the Introduction. What kind of information do you find about this topic? What prominent and current headlines and textual documents turn up in your search? As a group, brainstorm and collaboratively draft a 250-word journal that outlines your initial findings and asks interesting questions to help further research on the topic. Share your findings with the class. Your instructor might help collate responses to help start the beginning of a “research map” for topics related to readings in this book.

### Explore



Read one of the selections from the Table of Contents and write a 300-500 word blog post summarizing its major argument and reflecting on its significance as a potential source for a broader research project. What would the project look like? What other kinds of sources might you want to include in the project? How would this source inform the project and serve as a springboard for future research?

### Invent



What questions do you have about sport and culture and identity after reading the Introduction? Spend about ten minutes reflecting and free writing your reaction to the Introduction. What selections might you be most interested in reading and why? What kinds of research projects do you imagine yourself pursuing in this class concerning sport and how did the Introduction inform this direction? What other areas of sport might you be interested in exploring that were not considered in the Introduction?