

Reflections on Teaching Sports Literature in the Academy

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To write about boxing is to be forced to contemplate not only boxing, but the perimeters of civilization—what it is, or should be, to be human.

—Joyce Carol Oates (1987: n.p.)

The role of sports in the academy is increasingly troubled. To keep athletes eligible to play, especially in gate-revenue sports, colleges and universities allow rampant cheating, lower their standards, and concoct bogus programs. Indeed, we have let institutional cynicism obscure how serious education should embrace sports. At the same time, the votary discourse, literature about sports, has acquired a sometimes doubtful status, and we can use assurance that it has integrity and high-cultural import.

I taught “Sports and Literature,” a 200-level general-education English course whose students tend to come from outside the humanities and read little literature. In my section, many said that they took the course because they liked sports and had to meet a literature requirement. A number of them also played a university sport.

Sport is a complex phenomenon that acts as an agent for both social change and social control. It works on an individual level, because so many young people search for a personal identity through it. It can also describe a ritual of banding and social immersion that meets the need for community membership and safety. Our readings exposed this collision between sports as both a liberating and a subversive activity for individuals, as well as one that galvanizes groups in society (see appendix). Sports literature concerns athletics, of course, but it can be used in any literature course to understand racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, and the combination of these biases as a living mythology. From a menu of possible conceptual agendas for the course (myth, discourse analysis, literary-critical, literary-historical), I assembled a loosely deployed cultural studies approach whose antecedents could be found in a duel between Nietzschean and Marxist visions. Nietzsche’s celebration of the

triumphant individual's self is one paradigm for the role of sports in society. A Marxist paradigm endorses the behavior of individuals (fans and teammates) homogenized through a blissful, anodyne ritual as though members of a herd. My students and I also found that feminist theory helped us understand the liberation of female protagonists through sports.

We started with two very different basketball novels: *In These Girls, Hope Is a Muscle*, by Madeleine Blais (1995), and *The Basketball Diaries*, by Jim Carroll (1963). *In These Girls* follows the Amherst, Massachusetts, Hurricanes girls' basketball team to a state high school championship in 1993. The girls acquire the behaviors associated with team success; at the same time, the story shows how basketball is culturally liberating for them. It allows them to explore their physical and mental selves beyond the usual gender paradigms. *The Basketball Diaries* is the coming-of-age story of a rebellious, streetwise teenager in New York in the mid-1960s. In this autobiography Carroll tells how basketball saved his life. It gave him discipline and structure in the midst of chaos, and it spared him from a desperate existence on the streets by socializing him and giving him realistic aspirations for an ordered life.

Next we read *On Boxing*, by Joyce Carol Oates (1987), and *End Zone*, by Don DeLillo (1972). *On Boxing* is a series of essays about boxing and women, boxing and racism, and boxing literature. Most important, according to Oates (1987: n.p.), "no other subject is, for the writer, so intensely personal as boxing." Her essays explain how sports are a social analogue and a crucible-like environment for the individual. The conformity-liberation dichotomy established with the first two books we read is explored more complexly in Oates's book. Boxing becomes a metaphor for war, business, family, love, and art. Meanwhile, war is more central to DeLillo's novel, which features members of a college football team who play war games in their free time. For my students, the association of football with war games, which is almost a cultural cliché, was strange at first. *End Zone* allowed them to understand in another translation what Oates (1987: 86) writes about boxing and nonwhite males: "One of the standard arguments for *not* abolishing boxing is in fact that it provides an outlet for the rage of disenfranchised youths, mainly black or Hispanic, who can make lives for themselves by way of fighting one another instead of fighting society." Another effect of DeLillo's novel was that it finessed us into looking at ourselves: it is a mirror. We had to ask ourselves if we might be using sports to diffuse our anger over forms of our own disenfranchisement. We also asked how sports might induce the underclass and the disenfranchised, especially, to turn inevitably violent tendencies on each other

in an arena of games rather than on the property and persons of the ruling class.

Fittingly, we ended this spring-semester course with baseball, reading Robert Coover's (1968) *Universal Baseball Association, Inc., J. Henry Waugh, Prop.* and Karen Joy Fowler's (1996) *Sweetheart Season*. Coover's novel takes us into the imaginary baseball world of J. Henry Waugh, creator of the Universal Baseball Association, a fantasy league in which a roll of the dice determines everything from pitch selection to managerial decisions, and which is so addictive that by the end of the novel Waugh has left reality completely. Thus Coover represents sports ironically as an antisocializing, even a perverse, rubric, in that the fantasy encourages its users to disengage from the world and other people. In plot Fowler's book resembles the well-known movie *A League of Their Own*, starring Geena Davis and Tom Hanks. However, the women's baseball team in *The Sweetheart Season* has been organized not to replace male players, as in the movie, but to encounter them, and perhaps eligible bachelors among them, on the men's teams in the league. By this point in the semester the students understood that stories about sports have many meanings, and they were quick to see that these women's involvement in baseball, although seemingly intended to bring about stable, heterosexual marriage, really allows them to explore their sexuality and innovative models for domestic life.

The course grade was based principally on three major writing assignments, each of them related to the theme of liberation versus socialization that the students pursued throughout the semester. The first assignment was to write a poem about a piece we had read in class. We then read the poems together and noted which ones interpreted sport as a liberating agent based on the subject matter and which ones reinforced the mythology of sport as culturally socializing. Class members quickly saw in personal terms how natural this dichotomy is. The second assignment was to create a piece of sports-journalism discourse by writing a feature article on any sporting event the students had attended. They related the details of the event, showed how it was a metaphor of human meaning, and focused especially on whether the role of sports was either liberating or socializing. This assignment was the most interesting for the students, because they realized how difficult the polarizing mythologies (made popular in such magazines as *Sports Illustrated*) of sports are to escape. The third assignment was to review a sports film (see appendix). The students chose a favorite film, explained what its sports content was, and described why it moved them. This assignment allowed them to

consider discourses of sports mythology in nonprint medium. Once more the students found that their films fit into the categories of sports as liberating or sports as socializing. By this time, in fact, they found it difficult to describe sports in any other terms.

No one can deny that sports and academics are powerful presences in the modern American university, but their arenas are traditionally defined as mutually exclusive, and their objectives appear to be at cross-purposes. The course that I have described defies this false dichotomy. It combined extensive readings with rigorous class discussions and writing assignments designed to make the students investigate sports as either a socializing or a liberating agent. Though they may have enrolled in “Sports and Literature” for a “nonacademic experience,” they came away with far more.

Appendix: List of Materials Used in “Sports and Literature”

Coursepack of Poetry and Short Nonfiction

Anonymous. “Cambridge University: The Freshman’s Sports”

Anonymous. “Meet the Engineer”

Ashe, Arthur. “The Burden of Race”

Betjeman, John. “Seaside Golf”

Housman, A. E. “To an Athlete Dying Young”

Lamport, Felicia. “Clobber the Lobber”

Leand, Andrea. “There’s Something about Mary”

MacGregor, Jeff. “Less than Murder”

Milne, A. A. “Pat-Ball”

Sillitoe, Alan. “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner”

Silver, Michael. “Sittin’ Pretty”

Updike, John. “Ex-Basketball Player”

Volkman, Karen. “The Pregnant Lady Playing Tennis”

Students’ Movie Choices

Any Given Sunday (1992)

Blue Chips (1994)

Breaking Away (1979)

Bring It On (2000)

Caddyshack (1980)

Eight Seconds (1994)

Field of Dreams (1989)

Happy Gilmore (1996)

He Got Game (1998)

A League of Their Own (1992)
Love and Basketball (2000)
Major League (1989)
Mr. Destiny (1990)
Mystery, Alaska (1999)
The Natural (1984)
Prefontaine (1997)
The Program (1993)
The Rebound (1996)
Remember the Titans (2000)
Rudy (1993)
The Sandlot (1993)
Tin Cup (1996)
Varsity Blues (1999)
The Waterboy (1998)
When We Were Kings (1997)
Without Limits (1998)

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