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Sports Journalism as Moral and Ethical Discourse

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Abstract

This paper explores the marginalized practice of sportswriting to demonstrate the limited ways in which the question “who is a journalist?” has been answered within the profession. Following John Dewey and Raymond Williams, we offer an alternative view of democratic culture that values narrative as well as information. We also discuss how “New Journalists” (and other writers since), in their quest for fresh, sophisticated storytelling strategies, turned to sports as a cultural activity worthy of serious examination. Our goal is to demonstrate that sportswriting fundamentally resembles other forms of reporting and that journalism should not use sports as an ethical straw man against which to defend the virtue of its serious work. This suspension of our usual ethical judgments would deepen our sense of the moral significance of sportswriting and allow us to rethink journalism's relation to democratic culture in productive new ways.

Introduction

Journalism defines itself as a profession, in part, by proclaiming the moral seriousness of its most cherished story forms. The breathless on-the-scene account of disaster and war, the dramatic recreation of courtroom testimony, the shocking exposé, the shrewd and dispassionate political analysis, the stinging editorial, the tender-hearted human interest feature—such are the narratives by which journalism asks to be judged (and that working journalists use to take one another's measure). Journalists answer the question “who is a journalist?” by invoking such narratives as exemplars of their community's standards (Zelizer, 1993). Those who practice honorable forms of narrative and observe the ethical precepts of the tribe are deemed journalists. Those who traffic in narratives considered renegade, deficient, or false are not.

Sports stories struggle with just this burden. They are rarely imagined to meet the journalism profession's standards of social or political importance. Moreover, sports coverage routinely violates the ethical norms by which the profession asks to be judged. These shortcomings would not pose a problem except that audiences love sports stories, and news organizations unapologetically cater to their enthusiasms.

Stories about competitive sports became a mainstay of news coverage more than a century ago in the United States (Stevens, 1987; Oriard, 1993; Reel, 2006). Major newspapers now generously staffed sports desks and devoted considerable space to documenting the latest developments in elite leagues (Koppett, 2003). Broadcast radio and television expanded the sports media complex, and cable television and the Web have multiplied the quantity and extended the range of sports news. The ESPN franchise (*Columbia Journalism Review*, 2007), for example, owned by Disney, now includes an extensive and popular online Web site, more than ten cable channels, a book publishing arm, a nationwide network of radio stations, and a mobile telephone service. Its ventures, generating more than a half-billion dollars of profit annually, have demonstrated to other media entrepreneurs the astronomical profits to be gained by expanding coverage of sports. Fox, CBS, and others have similarly invested heavily in sports media, drawing enormous audiences and employing thousands of people who cover sports.

(W)e hope to use the question “who is a journalist?” to refigure sports reporting as a legitimate object of ethical reflection.

Our purpose is not to enumerate the ethical failures of sports reporting, nor is it to catalog all its suspect practices of commercialism, partisanship, and covert collaboration. Rather, we hope to use the question “who is a journalist?” to refigure sports reporting as a legitimate object of ethical reflection. We want to show how the journalism profession's normal ethical critique of sports reporting holds at bay equally troubling but arguably more difficult questions about the moral obligations of sports reporting as a form of cultural representation.

We begin with a discussion of the profession's normative commitment to information as a principle widely used to judge ethical behavior, and a critique of the limitations of that principle. We then document sports reporting's routine violations of those norms. We identify the New Journalism of the 1960s as a historical moment at which new understandings of the cultural and political significance of athletes and sporting events emerged in the work of journalists. We conclude with a brief analysis of a seemingly simple act of contemporary athletic behavior—the end zone celebration in professional football—that demonstrates the application of that emerging cultural perspective. We argue that journalism and sports reporting need to consider the ethics of not just their information behaviors but of their storytelling practices.

Journalism, Democracy and Ordinary Life

Journalism's crucial function remains the transfer of information, a role that frames and narrows this piece. Within this mode of thought, many key ethical questions involve matters of access and the collection,

distribution, and ideological balance of information. However, framing ethical quandaries in this way means that huge swaths of material that regularly appear in print and broadcast news may receive scant critical attention. Consider, for example, the absence of attention to the ethics of sports reporting on the Indiana University (2007) on-line ethics Web site. The site offers 173 case studies of journalism ethics, organized in 13 categories that focus on matters such as source relations, law enforcement, privacy, sensitive topics, and workplace issues. Only six of those cases deal with sports, and in each one the sports connection is incidental. Three factors may explain this lack of attention:

1. The cases included involve coverage of topics more routinely considered central to journalists' sense of professional identity.
2. If information is the framing idiom of journalism ethics, then sports may seem a less central topic to community and democracy, for it is not immediately clear what essential information sports reporting might convey.
3. Though the cases often discuss how stories are told, they focus more on the information gathered or included than on narrative strategies such as characterization, plot, or trope.

Using sports reporting as our example, we propose a more expansive view of the targets, tools, and purposes of ethical criticism. In imagining principles that might guide such criticism, we look to American pragmatist John Dewey and the Welsh cultural, political, and literary critic Raymond Williams. Though Dewey and Williams have significantly influenced contemporary thought about journalism as an institution, the ethical implications of their work remain, for the most part, unexplored. In particular, we hope to show how Dewey and Williams' conception of democracy as a social and cultural practice (rather than a procedural domain of laws, elections, institutions, rules, and routines) invites us to consider the ethical implications of morally discounted narrative practices such as sports reporting.

Dewey (1954), famously writing in 1927 in response to Walter Lippmann's *The Phantom Public* (1925), argued against the limits of a narrowly transactional model of news, insisting on the importance not just of domains of public governance, but also of "democracy as a social idea" (p. 143). For Dewey, "the idea of democracy is a wider and fuller idea than can be exemplified in the state, even at its best. To be realized, it must affect all modes of human association" (p. 151). Placing aside the concern for democracy's political machinery so central to Lippmann's critique, Dewey emphasized that democracies exist and are fostered in communities, and that "communal life is moral, that is emotionally, intellectually, and consciously sustained" (p. 151).

In *Public Opinion* (1965), Lippmann argued that democracy chiefly suffered from a longstanding knowledge problem: the absence of reliable maps with which to navigate reality. Though he would later become a strong advocate for the work of journalists, at that moment Lippmann believed that news could never make up for the failures of casual or vernacular knowledge, and that only a new class of nonpartisan social scientists could offer citizens the information and expertise they required in order to govern themselves. Dewey, in effect, rejected the equating of democracy with information.

Decades later, Raymond Williams (2001) would similarly argue in a seminal essay that "culture" should be understood not as "the outward and emphatically visible sign of a special group of cultivated people," but as an "ordinary" human activity (p. 12). Williams objected both to elite critics' dismissal of popular culture as an easily readable sign of readers' lack of education and to traditional Marxist critics' condemnation of popular culture as little more than a manifestation of false consciousness. Instead, he argued that culture and education were symbolic resources that belonged to everyone. Like Dewey, he refused to equate culture with information; he insisted that it was not the exclusive property of those with access to the proper channels for conveying

information. Williams spoke of culture as a “structure of feeling” that organized the “lived experience of a community.” A writer's job, as he saw it, involved making individual meanings common (p. 24).

The Sandbox of the Newsroom

Dewey and Williams' argument about the political significance of ordinary cultural practices opens alternative ways of imagining the ethical implications of sports reporting. Even when sports coverage does not offer citizens crucial information, it may offer them cultural narratives that frame and shape their understandings of the group identities and relations of democratic society.

As we have noted, in spite of its popularity and profitability (or perhaps because of it), sportswriting struggles to be taken seriously. Though journalists may grudgingly acknowledge the “writerly” craft of a Red Smith, Jimmy Cannon, Dick Schaap, or Gary Smith, the profession has long considered sports “the sandbox of the newsroom,” a comparison that suggests the work of the sports department is more playful and childlike than that of the rest of the news organization. In response, sportswriters have increasingly sought to be taken seriously by the journalism establishment. They have, for example, recently formalized ethical guidelines for their work, modeling their rules after those governing political journalism in an attempt to align themselves with more respected spheres of journalistic work.

(C)ritics fault the ethics of sports reporting because of its powerful commitment to narrative, its blurring of distinctions between news and advertising, and its acceptance of promotional stunts.

Sports reporting deserves more systematic ethical criticism not just because of its scale and popularity but also because journalists, in effect, use sports to mark the moral boundaries within which journalism as a professional practice habitually operates. In particular, critics fault the ethics of sports reporting because of its powerful commitment to narrative, its blurring of distinctions between news and advertising, and its acceptance of promotional stunts. The larger journalistic community regularly condemns these practices as departures from the profession's ethical norms. We also believe that these practices are more common across the profession than journalists like to admit.

Marginalized by their peers, sports journalists have developed a set of conventions that suit the needs of the profession but also seem to distance them from “normal” journalists. Sports journalism's credibility problem lies in part with the (quite accurate) perception that narrative invention is central to the enterprise. The work routines of sports journalists, after all, are organized around regularly scheduled, carefully managed, and orchestrated contests. The buildup to each game is replete with what Lawrence Wenner (1989) called “insider's gossip” and the self-conscious creation of a “script” or “storyline” for each event.

For example, in the days leading up to the 2006 British Open, newspaper and television sports news reports included frequent contributions by journalists anticipating possible storylines: How would Tiger Woods perform, given the recent death of his father? Would Phil Mickelson bounce back in his first major since blowing a safe lead on the final day of the Master's? Would the hard, dry ground and soaring temperatures affect play? As Tiger Woods stamped his authority on the tournament (he won by two strokes), the recently fatherless Woods would become the dominant storyline. After Tiger had clinched his victory, he broke down crying and remarked that he missed his father's presence and had been hit by the finality of his death. Post-game wrapups had now identified the most satisfying storyline as Woods' heroic efforts in the face of personal tragedy. Post-tournament analyses emphasized that Woods had played intelligently. He had won, the stories explained, in part because he had learned an important lesson from his father: to think one's way around the golf course. The victory was acknowledged as a fitting tribute to the man who had been Woods' first golf teacher. With remarkable consistency, sports pages and television reports quickly fell in line as this particular storyline was adopted. In

doing so, the sports pages succeeded, as Wenner put it, in “placing the game and its hero into a ‘fantasy world’ that both sportswriters and readers have a hand in creating” (p. 15).

That sports news has a narrative quality is not a taboo acknowledgement in sports journalism. The storyline-building that suffuses sports journalism routines is done so consciously that an unexpected turn during the course of a game itself is commonly referred to as a “departure from the script.” This storytelling function of sports journalism is celebrated openly in other ways as well. Anchors often stamp their personality on a sportscast by inventing catchphrases. Radio journalists, such as Chicago's Harry Carey or St. Louis' Jack Buck, who skillfully weaved play-by-play narratives, were frequently praised for their way with words and their storytelling abilities. An ability to convey drama (while maintaining an air of spontaneity) in lyrical ways is a valued and admired trait in sports reportage. As one author put it, “Talented broadcasters have provided a dramatic soundtrack to the moments we hold in almost magical regard” (Garner, 1999, p. vii). Occasionally, a play-by-play announcer's ability to wholly invent incidents even receives a kind of folksy admiration, as in popular accounts of Ronald Reagan's brief career rebroadcasting Eureka College football games (Wills, 1986). Sports journalism's inventive tradition and the reverence with which it regards the creative use of language places it in opposition to the profession's familiar claim to be reporting facts from a neutral position.

“Free Advertising:” Sports Journalism as Ethically Suspect

Sports journalism's acceptance of narrative invention also challenges another foundational ideal of journalism by ignoring the professional ideology that wishfully and inaccurately separates editorial and business interests. Where professional norms urge political journalists to declare an appropriate independence from those they cover and the advertisers who fund them, sports reporting proposes a quite different relationship. In recent years, for example, television broadcasters have attempted a near-seamless coordination of sports contests and advertising. The private corporations that stage those contests (the teams and the league) and the media that cover them have interests intersecting on so many levels that many media scholars prefer to speak of the “media-sports complex.” As Robert McChesney (1989) put it,

Sports and the mass media enjoy a very symbiotic relationship in American society. On one hand, the staggering popularity of sport is due, to no small extent, to the enormous amount of attention provided it by the mass media. On the other, the media are able to generate enormous sales in both circulation and advertising based upon their extensive treatment of sport. Media attention fans the flames of interest in sport, and increased interest in sport warrants further media attention.

(M)edia outlets cover sports with a clear conflict of interest.

In essence, then, media outlets cover sports with a clear conflict of interest: Their very enterprise is deeply invested in the continued success of commodified sport. Because the most elemental structures of sports news ensure free exposure for the teams of elite leagues, Mark Douglas Lowes (2000) called media coverage of sports “publicity-as-news.” He cited a media relations veteran who notes that, for pro sports teams, “Coverage is really important. You know, it's like free advertising” (p. 13). Many other corporations are willing to pay large sums of money for advertisements in print, on radio, Internet, or television, or do so more subtly by actually owning teams themselves.

Marketers seek the male audience that sports gathers. Most viewers, readers, and listeners are men. Thus sports media's ability to “deliver the male” to advertisers is well-known; and recently, vendors have shown an increasing receptiveness to marketers wishing to reach consumers in creative ways. As TIVO and other DVR technologies have entered the market, advertisers have found ways to circumvent the traditional 30-second spot in favor of marketing that is more integrated with programming. ESPN's SportsCenter, for instance, includes

a number of segments devised in close cooperation with marketers. ESPN also uses SportsCenter to promote its other programs on the network by inviting the commentators from “NFL Live” or “Baseball Tonight” to offer analyses on recent developments. Reviving a tradition begun more than a century ago by yellow journalism, the program also displays a willingness to engage in promotional stunts; the program recently broadcast from all 50 states in 50 consecutive days. Recently, ESPN and Disney have teamed up with the Make a Wish Foundation to sponsor “My Wish,” a ten-part chronicle of sports-themed wishes granted to seriously ill children, which ESPN then recorded and broadcast as news.

In short, the cherished “wall” that is said to separate the business from the editorial function is quite evidently not in place for most sports journalism, which is foundationally promotional of itself and its corporate partners (the teams and leagues) in its coverage. Critics take this blurring of promotion and reportage as prima facie evidence that sportswriting is not really journalism. But this judgment sidesteps the uncomfortable reality that all mainstream commercial journalism displays this same mix of business and editorial content, though not always as plainly. Like sports journalism's open acknowledgement of news as a “story,” the unapologetically commercial nature of its content disturbs fragile myths about journalistic practices.

A critic might conclude that sports journalism's indiscriminate mixing of editorial content and business rules it permanently out of bounds for serious critical attention. But the spoiled reputation of sportswriting (to borrow a concept from Erving Goffman [1963]) also presumes a series of cultural distinctions that treat the substance of sports as socially insignificant when compared to that of civic life. The visible playfulness of sportswriting's narratives leads critics to conclude that sports writers tell stories in a way fundamentally different than other journalists do. For all these reasons, sports journalism may appear to lack gravity, or to admit personal voice in a way that undermines professional credibility and allows storytelling to overwhelm the journalist's commitment to an impartial rendering of the facts. Within the profession, the invocation of sportswriting as an ethically flawed form of journalism allows journalists to affirm the presumed ethical righteousness of their normal professional work.

The New Journalism and Sports As Moral Discourse

Journalists have not always dismissed sportswriting as inherently trivial, culturally low, or ethically tainted, however. At key moments, some have discovered in sports contests and characters a sociologically rich domain worthy of their best craft. We want to note one such moment—the New Journalism of the 1960s and 1970s—in order to create a historical context in which to reconsider the work of contemporary sports journalism. The debate over “who is a journalist” represents a recurring (and probably permanent) feature of the profession. The New Journalists, in their quest for fresh, sophisticated storytelling strategies, turned to sports as a cultural activity worthy of serious examination. Our goal is to demonstrate that in many ways sportswriting fundamentally resembles other forms of reporting, and that the journalism profession should not use sports as an ethical straw man, against which to defend the virtue of its serious work. This suspension of our usual ethical judgments would also deepen our sense of the moral significance of sportswriting (Tomlinson, 1999).

The New Journalism of the 1960s took shape in a moment of turmoil and skepticism (Pauly, 1990; Polsgrove, 1995; Weingarten, 2006). Both defenders and critics began using that term around 1965 to describe what they liked best or least about the forms of reporting in magazines such as *Esquire* and *New York*. Admirers of Tom Wolfe, Norman Mailer, and Gay Talese praised the new styles of reporting as being more in tune with the cultural changes of the time, more hip in tone, more cosmopolitan in their cultural judgments. While *Esquire* and *New York* led the way, similar experiments were appearing occasionally in other magazines such as *Life*, *Look*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. The visibility and growing popularity of the new styles of storytelling among both writers and readers attracted fierce criticism (Weber, 1974), particularly from newspaper journalists and from an older generation of *New Yorker* writers (who saw the new work as nothing

new), New York intellectuals, and *Partisan Review* essayists such as Dwight MacDonald and Irving Howe. Newspaper journalists condemned what they considered a hyperbolic approach to popular culture, an inappropriately personal involvement of the reporter in the story, and the carelessness in the New Journalism's handling of factual details.

Today such debates have subsided—in part because the literary techniques popularized by the New Journalists are now widely used (Boynton, 2005). What media historians have not fully recognized is how often sportswriting figured in this tale. We are not used to thinking about the New Journalism as a moment of exemplary sportswriting. We more commonly remember the New Journalists as reporters who specialized in discussions of politics and popular culture. And yet, many of the signature stories of the movement were profiles of sports figures: Gay Talese (2003) on baseball legend Joe DiMaggio and heavyweight champion Floyd Patterson, Tom Wolfe (1965) on race car driver Junior Johnson, and Hunter Thompson (Wolfe & Johnson, 1973) on the Kentucky Derby. For many years, George Plimpton made a virtual career of documenting his experiences as an amateur athlete—as a pitcher in *Out of My League* (1961), a quarterback in *Paper Lion* (1966), a golfer in *Bogey Man* (1968), a fighter in *Shadow Box* (1977), and a hockey player in *Open Net* (1985). Contemporaries not associated with the New Journalism were similarly exploring sports themes. For example, during this period John McPhee published books on Princeton basketball star Bill Bradley (1965) and on tennis champions Arthur Ashe and Clark Graebner (1969).

Sports themes in magazines and books are now so popular that it may be hard to remember that in the 1960s, news coverage of sports was far less ubiquitous than it is today. Though accomplished writing on sports was appearing occasionally in newspaper columns and in magazines such as *Esquire*, *True*, and *Playboy*, *Sports Illustrated* struggled to meet its costs for its first decade and survived only because of the deep pockets and determination of the Luce empire. Similarly, nonfiction books on sports did not hit the bestseller lists as frequently as they do today. Thus the nonfiction bestseller lists of *Publishers Weekly* from 1960 to 1980 included only 18 books on sports—nearly all of them memoirs by well-known players or sports figures such as Jerry Kramer, Jim Bouton, Billy Martin, Joe Garagiola, Leo Durocher, Dave Kopay, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sparky Lyle, Bill Veeck, and Howard Cosell. *New Yorker* writers Roger Kahn and Roger Angell would both publish bestselling books on baseball in 1972, and Jim Fixx's *The Complete Book of Running* would spend 75 weeks on the bestseller list from 1977 to 1979, including 13 consecutive weeks at No. 1 in 1978, much of it alongside George Sheehan's *Running and Being*.

David Halberstam's (1999) edited collection of *The Best American Sports Writing of the Century* includes a significant number of stories from the 1960s and 1970, suggesting that such work had begun to deepen in its quality and intention and also had begun to attract higher-caliber writers. Most of that work appeared in magazines rather than newspapers. Halberstam's own career illustrates the general trend, moving from political and war reporting in his early career to a series of books on sports and American culture more recently.

The New Journalism's encounter with sports can help us reimagine sports journalism as a serious domain of moral experience worthy of sustained discussion and critique. Most obviously, the journalists who turned to such work had often already proved themselves as political reporters. They chose to write about sports not because it was merely entertaining or fun but because it evoked wider cultural themes that interested them. Among the most important of those themes that emerged across the work of Talese, Wolfe, Mailer, Thompson, and others was the cult of celebrity built around sports heroes, the public's symbolic identification with particular teams, the existential and agonistic qualities of competition, the increasing resemblance of politics to sporting life, sports as a stage for the dramatization of cultural difference, and the behind-the-scenes connections between journalist and sporting event. A single example illustrates this theoretical point. One might say, without much exaggeration, that the career of Muhammad Ali embodied powerful and complex reasons for writing about sports. In Ali, writers discovered new reasons to take sports seriously—his principled resistance to

the draft, his witty and outspoken public persona, his transformation of the aesthetics of heavyweight boxing, the derision of his competition. So many journalists wrote about Ali in the 1960s and 1970s that Halberstam included a whole section of stories by Murray Kempton, Dick Schaap, Norman Mailer, Jim Murray, and Mark Kram (and he could as easily have included stories by Wolfe, Plimpton, and many others). *New Yorker* editor David Remnick's book on Ali (1998) documents much of this interest.

In short, writers and readers discovered in the New Journalism deeper lessons about sports, exploring the moral implications of sports as a cultural activity. It was not so much that the New Journalism “discovered” sports as a topic; to the contrary, newspaper, magazine, radio, and television had covered events and athletes for decades. What the New Journalists did was to undermine older narratives of sports as heroic or epic. Halberstam himself did not always make this connection. For example, he praised Talese's famous *Esquire* profile of Joe DiMaggio as an example of a very traditional journalistic virtue: Talese's willingness to unmask a public hero, to show the “real” person behind the idolized public figure. This assessment praises sportswriting as best when it mimics the forms of normal political journalism, exposing the truth behind the public façade. But as David Eason (1984) astutely observed, the problem confronted by the New Journalists was precisely the experience of living in an age that constantly blurs and intermingles image and reality. Journalism can do little to settle such moments of existential angst, but it can dramatize their impenetrability. The New Journalists found those themes as easily in sports as they did in other domains of society.

The New Journalism's encounter with sports can help us reimagine sports journalism as a serious domain of moral experience worthy of sustained discussion and critique.

New Journalism offered an uninvited critique of normal journalistic conventions and assumptions. Taking up sports as a serious topic was part of this critique, but shifting the focus from the structure and apparatus of games and events to sports participation, spectatorship, production, and display as culturally complex activity was the other part. Despite the challenging and innovative approach these writers brought to their work, sports remains one of the more mystified social practices in contemporary life, a tangle of amateur and professional experiences, contested meanings, and organizational and commercial relations waiting to be interpreted. Presented with such rich material, many writers continue to imagine sportswriting as an invitation to social criticism, understanding sports as a significant site where the (sometimes troubling) assumptions that shape our social world are given shape.

Because such writing remains at the margins of journalistic practice, however, we do not subject it to the rigorous ethical criticism we more normally direct at other forms of reporting, except to stigmatize it as an obviously defective practice that proves the worth of normal journalism.

End Zone Celebrations and Moral Judgments

We want to offer one last instance of how sports narratives routinely offer moral judgments that are not systematically subjected to ethical critique: the customary manner with which sports journalists relate incidents of end zone celebration in professional football. For years now, the National Football League (NFL) has punished “premeditated” or “excessive” post-touchdown celebrations with a 15-yard penalty, and the television and print journalists who cover the sport frequently (almost reflexively) describe such incidents in disapproving and disappointed terms. These incidents, it is frequently noted, set a poor example for young players who are undoubtedly in the audience, learning new forms of egocentric self-promotion that undermines the morally unquestionable team ethic that sports ideally impart. If such critiques were not so common, it might be difficult to understand institutional sanctions on unscripted, improvised entertainment in the midst of the carefully organized entertainment spectacle that is NFL football, especially when one considers how commentators universally celebrate the improvisation of its athletes at other moments. The stated preference of many

commentators—that athletes, upon entering the end zone, simply hand the football to the referee and act subdued, “like they've been there before”—runs counter to the elaborately staged, exuberant, and frequently over-the-top production of the game-as-entertainment.

To explain such anomalous moral judgments in American sports journalism, we must first recognize the delicately balanced terrain sports journalism has constructed for professional football. This game has not come to occupy a central position in mainstream articulations of contemporary masculinity without careful crafting by its expositors. Indeed, journalists and broadcasters have had an important role to play in elevating the game to battles of sometimes transcendent importance on par with labor or warfare. Decades ago, Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi could, in all seriousness, draw direct comparisons to warfare: “I believe that any man's finest hour, his greatest fulfillment of all he holds dear, is the moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle—victorious” (Lombardi, Jr., 2003, p. 182).

In contrast with such matters of life, death, and honor, the contemporary player sometimes prefers, with his words or actions, to unmask the game as a spectacle (and occasionally, as silly rather than serious). When Terrell Owens signs the football with a hidden pen, or joins a line of cheerleaders to celebrate with a choreographed shake of the pom-poms, he pierces the mythic comparisons to combat by (intentionally or not) exposing their absurdity.

Owens has had company. Lately a long line of wide receivers and running backs, almost all of them African-American, have come in for considerable attention from a mainstream press that overwhelmingly and unreflectively denounced their antics in strong terms. In recent years, this kind of violator had become so recognizable that Budweiser was able to launch a successful advertising campaign based on his caricature. Leon (the actor Nigel Thatch), the cynical, self-promoting fictional black football player at the center of a 2003 Budweiser advertising campaign, offends the sensibilities of his team's authority figures with his selfishness and insubordination. Significantly, he also repeatedly undermines the game's cherished warrior myths with his repeated insistence on approaching the game as commodified entertainment. In one advertisement, Leon is commanded to enter the game by his white coach, but suggests that he might better help the team if he sat down “and let the camera focus in on me and see all the pain and anguish all over my face. Watching a great athlete suffer is very powerful stuff.” Of course, Leon is not the first person to recognize the narrative potential of such moments. His comic faux pas is in acknowledging that sporting events become material for social narratives and in acknowledging his own role as a performer in them. Like choreographed end zone celebrations, such acknowledgements are understood to mock the macho sentimentality that the press has constructed around professional football, and so both become the object of ridicule in media culture.

But while mainstream sports journalism made the figure of Leon recognizable with a consistent narrow interpretation of player performance, other voices continue the traditions of New Journalism's insistence on exposing sports' mythic façade. When the NFL responded to one Owens celebration as “extraneous to the game,” *New York Times* columnist William Rhoden (2002) observed that “most of what is attached to the NFL is extraneous to the game, beginning with scantily clad cheerleaders. Once again, the NFL is trying to have its cake and eat it too” (D1). For Rhoden, the NFL's attempts to curtail these celebrations reveal a contradiction at the heart of the contemporary game. Football is carefully manufactured entertainment that pretends to entertain purely by accident, and the usual air of life-and-death seriousness can only be maintained with the cooperation of sportswriters. Increasingly, however, sportswriters representing traditionally marginalized groups are rejecting this narrative. Like the New Journalists who were their ancestors in approach, if not in style, these writers, many of them African-American or women, refuse to accept the narrative boundaries of sportswriting, preferring instead to frame sports as a significant cultural site that has much to teach us about public life.

Race, Rhoden (2006) insists, is a significant factor in these struggles. His book *Forty Million Dollar Slaves* is inspired, he reports, by a comment delivered to NBA star Larry Johnson by a white spectator. The book, like those written by New Journalists, views sport as an opportunity for a political and moral critique, one that reveals significant features of the political landscape to the careful reader. The stories Rhoden tells in the book span decades and are connected by a desire to demonstrate “the reality of exploitation and contemporary colonization” (p. xi).

Likewise, other African-American sports journalists, including Scoop Jackson, Jason Whitlock, and the late Ralph Wiley, make frequent interventions that insist on viewing mainstream, black-dominated sports such as basketball and football as important cultural sites for the construction of racial meaning in a “colorblind” society. A 2003 Selena Roberts column noted disparities in the negative public reaction to Owens, an African American, and Caucasian New York Giants tight end Jeremy Shockey, who was praised by commentators for his confrontational style. Roberts, a white woman, used that discrepancy to challenge broader assertions of the league as a culture of color-blind meritocracy.

Conclusion

The refusal of these writers to accept the dominant myths surrounding the game is an ethical act. Writing about commodified sport is a community-building exercise. Yet there is little in our usual approach to journalism ethics that would help us capture the moral significance of such writerly activity. The games may be of little social consequence, but the stories told about them routinely give shape to deeply felt communal values, including the value of self-sacrifice, the possibilities of group achievement, the power of the individual will, and the capriciousness of social hierarchies. How such stories are told raises vital ethical questions. That they are told is vital to our shared experience of democratic culture.

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