Review Essay

Muscular Culture: The Cultural Significance of Sports

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READING FOOTBALL: How the Popular Press Created an American Spectacle. By Michael Oriard. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1993.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN SPORTS. By Elliott Gorn and Warren Goldstein. New York: Hill and Wang. 1993.

COMING ON STRONG: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International. 1994.

In the March 24, 1995, edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, American studies scholar Elliott Gorn and American literature scholar Michael Oriard make a strong plea for cultural studies to pay more serious attention to sports. Fortunately, both Gorn and Oriard have helped to blaze that path themselves, each contributing volumes of writing and years of research to this potentially rich area of study. Yet, despite their efforts, and a growing body of work in the field of sports history that emerged during the 1980s, the disappointment that these two express is justified.[1] The three books discussed in this essay, two of which are written wholly or in part by Gorn and Oriard, promise to ignite

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interest in sports topics and fill in some of the gaps in our understandings of American sports.

As Gorn and Oriard argue in their *Chronicle* piece, sports should be of interest to cultural scholars simply because they are of such widespread interest in our culture. Yet, the very popularity and centrality of sports to everyday life in the United States also raises further questions. Why are sports so important to so many Americans? How do people experience them, and how do experiences with sports figure in the ways different populations respond to social formations surrounding the economy, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and politics? In short, what do sports tell us about American life? Michael Oriard's *Reading Football*, Elliott Gorn and Warren Goldstein's *A Brief History of American Sports*, and Susan Cahn's *Coming on Strong* each address these questions, but each from a different perspective. Oriard examines popular representations of sports, Gorn and Goldstein interpret sports as a reflection of broad social arrangements and historical trends, and Cahn examines sports as a location of both macro level and micro level struggles within the cultural politics of gender and sexuality. All books contribute to our understanding of how contemporary ideas about sports have historical antecedents, and of the ways the meanings we generate through sports are tied to history and society. Yet each highlights also some of the difficulties in understanding the relevance of sports in a scholarly manner.

I suspect that academics have not addressed questions about sports largely because they tend to see the meaning of athletics as self-evident. Sports seem simple and uncomplicated. As competitive, rule-bound play, enjoyed and interpreted as much by children as by adults, they appear to many to be superficial; not a place where one might find exciting, complex, or alternative cultural expressions. In fact, those who most often represent the sports establishment in the United States (egotistical team owners, authoritarian coaches, bombastic male sports analysts) make sports appear to be extremely narrow and conservative cultural forms.

Scholars like Gorn and Oriard argue that sports are unique because they are actually more open ended than a film or a television program. In their *Chronicle* piece, they argue (as Oriard does in *Reading Football*),

> Sports . . . are essentially 'unscripted.' They are real contests, in which many people have participated, at least at an amateur level . . . This makes sports different from other forms of entertainment, which are packaged by their creators.[2]

In some respects, Gorn and Oriard are correct: the outcome and actions of a particular sporting event are not known to anyone (except, perhaps, to a few Las Vegas bookies). And, indeed, most people have experienced sports as participants, whether on an informal, grass-roots level, or even as unwilling tortured

souls enduring their gym coach during their daily hour of P.E. in middle school. I am uncomfortable, however, with their assertion that this makes sports "real contests...different from other forms of entertainment." My discomfort is twofold. First, their statement implies that entertainment forms like *Star Trek* or *Oprah Winfrey* are more packaged, and therefore less "real" than athletic forms of entertainment. Yet, the most widely experienced sports are, in fact, very much packaged by and for television and an advertising industry. More importantly, Gorn and Oriard also imply that it is the "unscripted" production of athletic entertainment (to the extent that it is actually unscripted) that makes sports authentic. Alternatively, I would argue, drawing from the work of Henry Jenkins, that one can only understand contemporary entertainment forms, including sports, as authentic within the contexts in which audiences and participants use them, making them relevant and "real" components of their life experiences.[3] If we are to argue that sports are a cultural form, then we need to examine critically where and in what contexts they provide space for the creation of diverse and alternative cultural meanings, expressions, and forms of knowledge, and we need to evaluate honestly where sports also close off the expression of such alternatives.

The first step along these lines is to avoid all encompassing, allegorical, essentialist metaphors for sports which reject context as an important factor in determining the meaning of sports.[4] In this regard, Michael Oriard's *Reading Football* is an important contribution. Oriard offers the first contemporary study of football's early decades between 1870 and World War I (a fact that in and of itself testifies to the paucity of scholarship on sports). Drawing from Clifford Geertz, Oriard describes football as a text, which itself is understood and interpreted through a variety of narrative experiences. Yet he pointedly rejects what he calls "text centered, allegorical" [14] readings of popular culture, which he identifies with the theoretical stance of Frederic Jameson. Oriard feels that such perspectives might read something like football as a micro-cosmic metaphor with grand, universally understood significance.

Although he resists allegory, Oriard also expresses discomfort with reader-centered analysis, which he associates with Janice Radway's study of romance fiction. He writes that such work offers an important array of interpretations, but that it can make few claims for shared cultural understanding beyond the confines of a focus group. Oriard instead places himself, as he explains, between these two perspectives, arguing that football, as a text, offers shared stories, but that these stories also are sometimes contradictory and have changed over time.

For his primary material, Oriard draws principally from the pages of the popular commercial press that was booming in New York City during the turn of the century. He illustrates the intricate relationship between the boom in college football's popularity as a commercial entertainment form, and the attention the press devoted to football to sell newspapers. Oriard writes that the press engaged in a kind of dialogue with its audience, describing the action on the field in terms

of narratives that tended to define the daily lives of readers. These narratives included the game's "master metaphor," created by journalist and football promoter Walter Camp, which cast football as emblematic of "the hierarchically structured, efficiently run industrial corporation"(37). Yet according to Oriard, the narratives drawn upon in the papers also entailed conflicts between chaos and order, and work and play, as well as within ideas about manliness, race, and social status.

In the pages of widely read newspapers, Oriard feels that he has found a middle ground, something that expresses dominant readings (and the contradictions they entailed) of football articulated by its promoters, like Walter Camp, and the more varied readings of the game that emanated from popular audiences that read newspapers. The newspapers with the greatest circulation, like the *Journal*, the *World*, and the *Herald*, addressed a mass audience with sensational accounts that, to Oriard, are the most revealing. "Football's possibilities as cultural text were developed most fully in the papers with the largest circulations, in ways that made the game meaningful not just to a college-educated elite but to an audience that spanned social and economic groups"(75). Drawing from the work of Michael Schudson, Oriard notes how important story telling was to these early years of commercial journalism, and argues that the stories about football contained important narrative elements that spoke to the conditions of a middle and working-class readership at the time (78).

Throughout his book, Oriard makes a strong case that the meaning of football was and is inseparable from its representations. Yet his almost exclusive focus on the New York newspaper press is somewhat narrow. While newspaper readers were diverse in many respects, newspapers themselves were commercial mass media texts that aimed to assimilate and homogenize their readership. By relying so heavily upon the narratives found in the popular press, Oriard sometimes slips into the very kind of top-down, allegorical analysis he seeks to avoid. For example, he writes that press coverage of football displayed competing narratives driven by symbolic conflicts between the valorization of brain versus brawn, violence versus strategy, and physical strength versus scientific rationality (106). The presence of these conflicts in the New York press tells us a great deal about how newspapers, given their commercial imperatives, attempted to gain access to audiences by tapping into the cultural and social tensions which marked American life at the time. It does not, however, tell us the extent to which audiences themselves identified with these narratives, or generated subcultures where alternative narratives were created and explored.

The problems with Oriard's reliance on the New York press is most pronounced in his chapter that includes a section on football at the Carlisle Indian School. Oriard correctly reads narratives upholding widely held racist ideas that dominated press accounts of games involving teams from this government-run boarding school for Native Americans. Yet by focusing his analysis on such narratives, Oriard inadvertently renders Native Americans as invisible as they are

on the pages of the newspapers he cites.

> Carlisle's games, particularly in the first few years when the Indians were a novelty in college football, generated detailed narratives of racial assumption that would otherwise have gone unwritten. Indians were not a 'problem' in the 1890's; exterminated or confined to reservations, they posed no danger to white Americans. In their nonthreatening presence the Carlisle football players could thus be viewed without hysteria, their racial otherness considered more calmly. But behind the narratives of Carlisle football lay racial attitudes not exclusively tied to the Indians themselves. The unspoken subject of Carlisle football was probably the black Americans and southern European immigrants, who indeed posed unresolved problems for the shrinking Anglo-Saxon majority at the turn-of-the-century (233).

The coolness with which Oriard treats genocide in this passage insinuates that Native Americans themselves were not important to the meanings generated by Carlisle's football team. In fact, because Oriard focuses entirely upon the popular press, American Indian boarding school players and students are almost entirely invisible in his analysis, serving merely as stand-ins for other "others" who "posed unresolved problems" for whites. My own research on athletics at federally-operated Indian boarding schools indicates that Native Americans interpreted and responded to their athletic teams, like those that were made famous at Carlisle, in ways that were related very specifically to their history and experiences. Not only does Oriard's oversight contribute to marginalization of a Native American life and history, it misses an important possibility that he might have explored for understanding some of the complex uses and responses to sports that different populations had during the time period he studies.

This does not dispute that Oriard has begun an important conversation about the relationship of football, and sports in general, to their popular representations. Yet his book also highlights the problems of creating a complex, non-allegorical cultural analysis which depends too much upon a narrow range of written source material. In their book, *A Brief History of American Sports*, Elliott Gorn and Warren Goldstein draw upon more traditional social history sources and methods, as well as secondary source material. Instead of focusing on popular representations, they interpret sports more generally as a reflection of social relationships that define a particular historical moment.

Their book is divided into two sections. The first pertains to sports before the twentieth century, and the second takes readers up to the present (in their introduction, the authors state that, by and large, Gorn is the author of the first section, Goldstein the author of the second). Those familiar with the work of these

authors will not be surprised by their relatively non-sentimental approach. They state early on that they do not aim to create a jeremiad which documents the "fall" of sports from a purported "golden age."

The book moves chronologically, tracing the roots of early American sporting culture back to pre-industrial England. The authors illustrate how variations in the ways colonial American populations treated sports generally were divided along regional lines tied in some way to the Anglo world. British sporting traditions, employed by an aristocracy to maintain order and loyalty among their peasants, were largely transported to the southern colonies like Virginia. The puritan opposition to "non-productive" play, most common among an emerging middle class of property owners, spread most deeply into New England. And a new sporting culture of horse racing and blood sports emerged in commercial centers like New York City and Philadelphia. Throughout the early portion of the book, the authors never lose sight of gender, constantly explaining the relationship between sports as largely male rituals, and structures of patriarchal authority that existed in early America (10-46).

Understanding this kind of social history behind sports allows readers to see how predominant meanings associated with athletics are historically created and are related to the structure of society at any given moment. Like Oriard, their approach shows how the meanings of sports are not essential but contextual and subject to dramatic change. For example, they show how the character and position of sports in society were transformed during the twentieth century. At the end of their chapter on colonial sports, they write,

> The ways that colonials played . . . bore little resemblance to our twentieth-century practices. No one in the colonies ever claimed that athletics built character, or made men out of boys, or inculcated the ethic of fair play. There was no sporting goods industry, and the only athletic stadiums were a few crude racing tracks . . . the distinction between players and spectators was always tenuous, and the categories of amateur and professional did not even exist (45).

This point disrupts some of the most fundamental values that Americans have tended to associate uncritically with sports over the past century. Gorn and Goldstein tie the emergence of a moral rhetoric surrounding sports to the formation of a new sporting culture during the mid-nineteenth century. They see these changes in cultural attitudes toward sports as reflecting a society grappling with the radically new work and time patterns of industrial production. The new sporting ethic was an outgrowth of Victorian culture, principally the belief in universal moral principles and the possibilities of human perfection. The authors note how the rise of movements like "muscular Christianity" in the 1850s were tied to a belief that "spirituality infused the material world," and to the idea that "humankind was perfectible, and that individuals controlled their own destinies"

(85). In addition, sports spoke to the gendered fears of middle-class men who worried about their own "feminization" through the very material comfort which served as a sign of their success (93).

Gorn and Goldstein also critically examine the idea that American sports are emblematic of any unique beliefs in democracy and "fair play." They argue that modern sports are not symptomatic of a progressive, "rational" society. In fact, they point out that the very organizing structures that have characterized modern sports often were initially implemented to make exclusion of groups like African-Americans and women easier to institutionalize. Instead of seeing modern sports formations as evidence of social progress, they interpret them as reflecting the contradictions of capitalism, providing a symbolic setting for the display of human action defined by struggle, conflict, and competition. "Sports taught the character values necessary to cope with such an existence, and, equally important, they made the new Darwinian worldview palatable" (148-9).

By viewing sports in this manner, Gorn and Goldstein interpret athletics as a reflection of the society from which they emerge. Such points are important to make, but they also overshadow some of the complex ways that people actually felt and experienced sports in their daily lives. For example, in what ways did people engage with sports that made social Darwinism palatable? Were sports always successful in this regard, or did some groups generate alternative, unanticipated meanings from the sports they enjoyed? Did some actively resist sports because of the social Darwinist ideologies they often connoted?

Getting at these questions requires more of a grass roots perspective, which is, of course, very difficult to achieve in a survey book. Yet some of the authors' oversights could have been addressed by more directly examining sports as a cultural form of expression. In a section on urban basketball before World War I, for example, the authors discuss the game's popularity among urban, ethnic, working-class groups. While mentioning institutions that existed within these communities (settlement houses, B'nai B'rith, Catholic Youth Organization, Police Athletic League, and eastern European community organizations), the authors stop short of discussing how ethnic groups have used the game in ways that have transformed twentieth-century urban culture. In this regard, they almost completely ignore the history of African-American urban basketball. On institutional and non-institutional levels, urban, African-American basketball provides a rich, complex, and important part of the game's urban history. No group has creatively defined the urban game more than African-Americans. On city playgrounds and in urban gyms, blacks changed the game profoundly, and made the sport one of the most visible components of African-American cultural expression in the twentieth century. If this is so, then sports are more than a reflection of society's norms and conflicts, but are also a powerful and complex cultural resource.

Like those criticisms directed toward Oriard's book, these should not take away from the strong merits of *A Brief History*. In fact, it is worth asking, given the complex ways people have experienced sports in the twentieth century, how

might we go about studying athletics as a cultural expression—alternative or otherwise? People participate in sports on a variety of levels—as fans, consumers, community participants, organizers, professionals, amateurs, criminals, and casual critical observers. Which of these perspectives is more authentic than any other? How do we account for one without ignoring the rest?

In her book *Coming on Strong*, Susan Cahn illustrates one way of doing so. Cahn casts a net nearly as wide as Gorn and Goldstein, examining the entire history of twentieth-century women's sports. Yet she also employs the recollections of female athletes themselves, drawing upon insightful oral history interviews she conducted to tell stories of how some women creatively used sports as a resource for the expression of alternative ideas about gender and sexuality.

Cahn begins with a critical treatment of how the main-stream commercial media tends to represent female athletes. She recounts the discomfort many male sports journalists have expressed with the image of strong women like Martina Navratilova and, earlier in the century, Mildred "Babe" Didrikson Zaharias (1-5), and discusses how muscular strength and athletic prowess often conflict with conventional expectations of feminine behavior. Like Gorn and Goldstein, she also analyzes the various ways in which male sports cultures historically have glorified masculine prowess, and helped to justify male privilege.

As her book unfolds, however, Cahn chooses specific stories that illustrate some of the complex ways that women have responded to such ideas about sports, and in turn used athletics in meaningful ways. For example, Cahn devotes a chapter to the All American Girls Baseball League (immortalized on the silver screen by the movie *A League of Their Own*). In it, she discusses how the male promoters of the League attempted to mediate between the aggressive action and competition that was a central part of the game of baseball, and a more passive, feminine image of women with which men would feel more comfortable. Drawing upon oral history research, Cahn describes how women experienced, and sometimes resisted, the often bizarre codes of the AAGBL, which mandated charm school, makeup, and feminine dress as much as hitting, pitching, and fielding. She discusses how, against its institutional constraints, players struggled to make their own game, sometimes successfully, and other times, as in the case of a women barred from the league for being a lesbian, unsuccessfully.

> Although AAGBL policies mandated a concept of femininity consistent with firmly entrenched norms, the existence of highly skilled, well-attended women's softball and baseball leagues subverted the notion that athletic skill belonged in the province of men (163).

Throughout her book, Cahn describes and analyzes how women, on the level of their everyday participation in athletics, contested, or at least negotiated, gender boundaries and norms. Her most original chapters deal with sports and

sexuality, and, once more, draw a great deal upon oral history. Here, she describes how women created an athletic culture which helped "to generate an expansive definition of womanhood that eliminated, or at least eased, the dissonance between athleticism and femininity" (209). Although Cahn pays careful attention to social institutions, such as those which defined female athletic life in educational institutions during the twentieth century, she also provides a nuanced analysis of social worlds created by female athletes. Her book is largely about women who struggled to create and maintain sporting communities within these institutions. Cahn writes that such communities were an important source of pride and affirmation for many women. Quoting from an interview she conducted with Audrey Goldberg Hull, a former athlete, Cahn provides a beautiful example of this.

> Athletics were 'a way of expression, I think, that was the main thing. And I knew I was good at it. And when you know you're good at something and you feel good about it, it was a fantastic feeling. It was the best feeling I ever had . . . that was who I was' (236).

Cahn's discussion of athletics as a resource for lesbians during the 1940s and 1950s is particularly powerful. She recounts how a great many physical educators began to fear lesbianism among their athletes during the 1930s, and how such fears came to a crescendo during the 1940s and 1950s.[5] Yet she also discusses how athletics still provided an important area in which lesbians created and sustained communities of affirmation. Athletics provided somewhat of a free space where friends and lovers could erase their sense of isolation and loneliness, bond with one another, and develop intimate relationships under some degree of protection through highly contextual, coded behavior.

From the outset, Cahn establishes that sports have no inherent, essential meanings. However, she also asserts that women who have challenged gendered social conventions associated with athletics by extension have created a cultural alternative to gender norms as a whole: "As in the past the conflict sparked by women's pursuit of athletic access and excellence tells two stories—one about the dynamic interplay of gender and power within the world of sport and the other about the complicated synergy between women's sport and gender relations in the wider society" (248). Female athletics have not only been important for what they have contributed to the world of sport, but also for the imagined possibilities for women that they have unleashed.

By illuminating an alternative use and set of expressions through sports, Cahn provides an exciting new direction in which sports history and sports studies can go. Furthermore, using methods which draw upon a diverse range of sources, Cahn provides examples of how the meaning of sports can be strategic and political, something important to the way individuals negotiate their subject positions with the world around them.

There are lots of possibilities where one might begin such explorations beyond the experiences of athletes. Even though Cahn chose to focus on females who actively participated in sports, other, equally important studies could be made of fan communities and subcultures which cross over or combine different ethnic groups, genders, races, and economic classes. Like Cahn's book, these might tell us not only about sports and society, but where and when we might look to sports as a cultural expression where people articulate critique, and imagine more open ways of living and understanding.

Notes

1. A sample list of the sports history published during the 1980s include Melvin L. Adelman, *A Sporting Time* (Urbana, Illinois, 1989); Elliott Gorn, *The Manly Art* (Ithaca, New York, 1986); Stephen Hardy, *How Boston Played* (Boston, 1982); Peter Levine, *A.G. Spalding and the Rise of American Sport* (New York, 1985); J.A. Mangan and Roberta Park, *From "Fair Sex" to Feminism* (London, 1987); Benjamin Rader, *In its Own Image: How Television has Transformed Sports* (New York, 1984); Steven Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Champaign, Illinois, 1989); Riess, *Touching Base: Professional Baseball and American Culture in the Progressive Era* (Westport, Connecticut, 1980); Rob Ruck, *Sandlot Seasons: Sport in Black Pittsburgh* (Champaign, Illinois, 1987); Jeffrey Sammons, *Beyond the Ring* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989); and Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*. Also see issues of the *Journal of Sport History* published during the decade.

2. Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard, "Taking Sports Seriously," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 24, 1995, A52.

3. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York, 1992).

4. The view that sports contain universal and transcendent meaning is best articulated by Michael Novak in his book *The Joy of Sports* (New York, 1976). For any sports fan, Novak's book is a lot of fun to read, but he offers little room for sports to be interpreted outside of the model that he provides. Furthermore, not only does he not believe that the meaning of sports is contextual, he dismisses the very idea that meaningful historical change is possible.

5. Unfortunately, such fears are still very much a part of public discourse over female athletics. Penn State women's basketball coach Rene Portland has been forced not to discriminate against lesbian players, but has not backed down from her public discomfort with homosexuals. More recently, former CBS golf announcer Ben Wright told a *Sports Illustrated* reporter that homosexuality is "paraded" on the LPGA tour, and that "lesbians in the sport hurt women's golf." He was recently fired by the network for these and other comments, yet LPGA commissioner Jim Ritts has still had to respond to concerns that lesbians turn away network audiences and sponsors. In fact, it is far more likely that Wright was fired for attracting attention to lesbians in women's professional golf than he was for denigrating and insulting lesbian players. See Robert Lipsyte, "Penn State Coach Will Abide by Lesbian Policy, but Won't Discuss It", *New York Times*, December 20, 1991, B, 14:1; Alexander Wolf and Christian Stone, "He Said, She Said," *Sports Illustrated*, May 22, 1995, 16; and Glenn Sheeley, "Ritts Calls Lesbianism Non-Issue," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 19, 1995, D, 8:4.