

A Native American man in traditional regalia, including a large feathered headdress and a fringed garment, is captured in a dynamic dance pose on a field. The background is a blurred crowd of spectators, suggesting a public event or performance. The lighting is warm and golden, creating a dramatic atmosphere.

calling sports sociology off the bench

by dave zirin

The job of the sports sociologist is to be a professional debunker of accepted truths.

So said Ben Carrington, sociology professor and author-in-residence at the University of Texas at Austin.

One of many of this new breed of debunkers, Carrington looks at sports in a way that challenges the “accepted truths” laid out by the athletic industrial complex and its stenographers in the press.

As a professional sports journalist who tries to do my own kind of debunking, I’ve found many sports sociologists’ research to be indispensable—Grant Farred on how globalization has changed the NBA, anything by C.L. Cole. All do a remarkable job of elucidating the past and present.

There are papers and studies on everything, from the world of Mixed Martial Arts to the politics of hockey fights, that demand a broader hearing. As University of Maryland professor Damion Thomas told me, “Sport sociology brings to bear a number of intellectual tools that allow one to look critically at power relations while connecting sport to large social issues, including race, class, nationalism, and gender.”

And yet there’s this frustration, that a variety of people in the field and I share, that the work needs to be more relevant, more accessible, and more public.

“Many sociologists of sport want to do more than simply make observations or apply esoteric theories. They direct their work to have an impact on sport. They hope to challenge and change sport and society,” said Rich King, president of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport. “I...use my scholarship against Native American mascots and other forms of racism in sport. I can point to some real impacts on public policy and have heard from some readers that my work has made a difference. Unfortunately, like much academic work, it has reached a very small set of readers—mostly other scholars and students.”

From my perspective as a sports writer interested in promoting social change in and through sports, I see that the sports sociology community has a real opportunity to break out of the academic ghetto, eschew excessively coded and obscure language, and fight to become part of the general discourse of sports conversation, both on campuses and in the broader sports world. It’s time to move beyond Pierre Bourdieu’s self-fulfilling prophesy, laid out in 1990, that “the sociology of sport...is disdained by sociologists, and despised by sportspeople.”

crisis in media coverage

As a humble sports writer, I asked one respected sports sociologist to explain the discipline and received this response:

As we know, sport is both a constituent, and a constituent, of the broader social context in which it is located. It is a vehicle through which the forces and relations of societal power are covertly communicated and, if infrequently, explicitly challenged, to the benefit of some groups within society, yet to the detriment of others. Thus, if we are truly to understand sport, we have to be able to identify the nature of its dialectic (two-way/product and producer) relationship—the manner in which it is articulated to and with—the broader cultural, political, economic, and technological forces which converge to shape the structure and experience of contemporary society.

Let me be clear: I have no idea what that means. I don’t

mean to take a cheap shot at the professor, academic writing, or my own intelligence. But the response illustrates the point that sports sociologists need more balance, more attention, and to expend more effort to inject their research into the larger world.

The opportunity for sports sociologists to find a hearing arises from the very crisis currently embedded and emerging in the world of sports. To speak to most sports fans, there is an inchoate fear about what sports has evolved into, and what it continues to become. The media and marketing power of sports, the salaries commanded by top athletes, the public gouging in the construction of stadiums, the rampant use of patriotic symbolism, the overbearing sexism—these all produce a sense of unease that fans are beginning to articulate. A short

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trip to the sports bar, sports radio, or blogosphere provides plenty of evidence.

In such a climate, establishment sports writers could be having a Menckenesque field day puncturing these unsacred cows. But far from rising to the occasion, the sports writing community has lowered the bar, trading analysis and investigation for commentary.

Witness the crisis in sports analysis. Sports departments at major newspapers have seen their budgets slashed. *Chicago Tribune* NBA expert Sam Smith, *Boston Globe* sports staple Jackie MacMullan, and legendary *New York Times* baseball scribe Murray Chass have all taken buyouts in recent months. As Gus, the craggy newspaper editor on *The Wire*, reminded us, when it comes to budget cuts, “You don’t do more with less. You do less with less.”

Yet, also witness the paradox. While sports pages are subjected to incredibly shrinking resources, sports writers—by attaching themselves to cable and Internet operations—are compensated beyond the venerable Grantland Rice’s wildest dreams. ESPN’s *Pardon the Interruption* host Tony Kornheiser—whom *The Washington Post* just bought out in a cost-cutting move—has said quite aptly that this may not be a golden age of sports writing, but it is a golden age for sports writers. There is more money, more fame, and more reward for those willing to play sports writer on television or radio. But it comes with a measure of privileged isolation that has taken sports writers away from the games, the stories, the players, and most critically, the pulse of the fans.

Michael Rowe wrote a brutal piece on the state of the art for *Utne Reader*, asking:

Does sports journalism suck? In terms of urgency, the question is less national defense and more spilled milk, but I do feel like weeping whenever I peruse ESPN.com, fending off the bilge and look-

Former University of Illinois mascot Chief Illiniwek performs during half time in 2005. Following protests about racial insensitivity, the school no longer uses the mascot.

ing for a piece that tackles an actual ethical or social issue. Or just tells a good story. Sportswriters don't deny me this material outright. It's simply the case that I have to wade through creeping sludge—predictable opinion, endless stats, finance-obsessed business news, empty profiles, and repetitive analysis—to read the kind of investigative and narrative reportage that appears sometimes in, say, *Play*, the *New York Times*' prestige sports magazine. Never mind that *Play* is a quarterly—an island in a sea of dead, beaten horses.

Through this "sea of dead, beaten horses," sports blogs and new media continue to rise in prominence. Bloggers have seized this opportunity—and sports sociologists could be doing the same.

Sports commentary has been almost completely collectivized by the web. The overarching effect has been the flowering of creativity in a grey medium, allowing all kinds of writing—some brilliant, some execrable—into the discussion.

The reaction from establishment sports writers has been fierce and bizarre. In an episode of Bob Costas's HBO show *Costas Live*, Pulitzer-prize winner and *Friday Night Lights* author Buzz Bissinger indulged in a profane rant against deadspin.com founder Will Leitch, blaming the blogosphere for the downfall of the sports writing medium, instead of identifying its popularity as a reflection of the failure of sports writing. Costas chimed in with Bissinger, likening the blogosphere to being forced to listen to what "a cab driver" thinks about sports. In the past, Costas has called bloggers "pathetic, get-a-life losers." His contempt is shared by many A-list sports columnists, who are quick to seethe red-faced that "some guy in his basement" gets to have equal voice, or in Leitch's case, even exceed the popularity of the self-appointed experts. (It's always "some guy in his basement.") Sports bloggers for some reason don't live in apartments.)

Besides sour grapes, the most pronounced feature of the bloghaters is their ignorance, demonstrated by the constant polemic that blogs are monolithic. There are sports blogs in every style, for every team, and they have changed both the way we read and the way we understand sports.

"It's pretty amazing," Leitch told me. "[Before blogs] when you didn't like your local sports columnist that was your only choice. Now there are new voices and new options.... [Traditional media has] to recognize that they can't just keep doing the things that they did and try something a little new, that's kind of what people want."

What infuriates sports writers are that people on the web—that contemptible cab driver—are calling them on their privilege, their isolation, and the fact that far too many are moonlighting as flacks, writing PR for teams on their BlackBerries as they rush to another TV appearance. Their inability to hold an audience has opened the door to Leitch

and his ilk. The audience of bloggers, and the continued decrepitude of celebrity sports writing should signal sports sociologists that fans yearn for new ways of seeing the game.

scholarship that fills the void

If sports sociology wants to affect how we think about our sports world, it has to change how it communicates.

"It would help the business of thinking sports tremendously if sports sociology, as a discipline, would demonstrate less professional anxiety. There is too little insistence upon argument, and too much emphasis upon citation...The refusal to argue is disguised as 'scientific research' or just 'science,'" said Grant Farred, a professor at Cornell University and author of *Phantom Calls: Race and the Globalization of the NBA and Long Distance Love: A Passion for Football*.

His point is well taken. There is far too little insistence on joining the fray and taking a position about the state of our sports world and too many heads in the academy. Instead, the field might consider the approach of Mary Jo Kane, who excels at using her research to make an argument and then fighting for that argument to be heard.

The sports sociologist from the University of Minnesota, who specializes in gender and sport for women, undertook a far-reaching study of images of female athletes putting their bodies on display for a wide-ranging focus group of both men and women. Kane and her research team found a very basic truth: Sex may sell magazines, but it doesn't sell women's sport.

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"And it alienates the core of the fan base that's already there. Women... 18 to 34 and 35 to 55 are offended by these images. And older males, fathers with daughters, taking their daughters to sporting events to see their favorite female athletes, are deeply offended by these images," she said.

As for the young men excited to see race car driver Danica Patrick in leather, spread out on a car, "they want to buy the magazines but they didn't want to consume the sports," she said. This should be an earth-shaking revelation for every executive in the Women's Tennis Association, the WNBA, and the LPGA, who have for decades operated under the assumption that a little leg goes a long way.

But women's sports, Kane argues, will need more than logic to move away from the abyss of abject objectification.

"This is deeper. This is also about what runs in the bone marrow of women's sports, namely homophobia. They are very well meaning but they also want to distance themselves from the lesbian label...How do you do that? You reassure the viewing audiences, the corporate sponsors, the TV networks, and the female athletes themselves, that, 'No, no, no! Sports won't

make your daughter gay.' Women's sports will be more acceptable if you believe, even though it is stereotypical and inaccurate, that if you are pretty and feminine in a traditional sense then you are not gay."

But what about this individual culpability of the female athlete? What about those who say that provocative poses are about celebrating their bodies, and celebration of the body beautiful has been a part of sports since ancient Greece? Kane answers, "What muscle group do bare breasts belong to? You can show off your body without being naked in a passive, sexually provocative pose."

This question of women's athletics seeing "breasts as muscle groups" is about more than whether women's sports is taking itself seriously. It's whether universities, boosters, and donors take it seriously as well. And it is, Kane believes, about the future of college athletics.

"The end result of this is that when resources are precious, and you dole out those resources, and you don't take women's athletics as seriously as men, then there are tangible consequences. Athletic directors get a pass to just not take it seriously," she said.

Kane revealed her findings not at an academic conference but at the Women's Sports Foundation. Afterwards representatives from ESPN asked to speak further with her in the weeks to come. Whether she can make a dent in coverage is certainly to be determined. But at least she's entering the fray and becoming a party to the debate.

Another sports scholar doing something similar is the University of Illinois historian Adrian Burgos, Jr., author of *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line*.

"While those within organized sports at the national, league, or team levels tend to be most focused on and trained to look at the future development of the sport, scholars who study sport look long-range both forward and backwards over time. This produces insights into what has changed that those who look primarily at 'growing the game' can overlook," said Burgos.

With this approach Burgos developed a theory about why the number of African American baseball fans and players continues to dwindle. Major League Baseball's (MLB) attention to integration on the field came at the expense of those off the field who had shaped generations of black baseball players, he asserts. And the game for African Americans can't be reinvented without a major reinvestment in black baseball.

"Within this private institution, . . . the process of integration remained strictly in the hands of the very same individuals who had barred blacks (and the majority of Latinos) from participating in MLB for several generations. Through their refusal to incorporate the Negro Leagues and [their] expertise at the



Photo courtesy Erik Eckel

Photos of race car driver Danica Patrick in a swimsuit sell issues of *Sports Illustrated*, but they don't do much to interest men in women's sports. Here, in a more characteristic pose, Patrick prepares for a race.

management and ownership levels in any meaningful way, these owners basically wiped out the infrastructure of black baseball in the United States, something that would become manifest a couple of generations later," Burgos explained.

That impact was felt for generations to come, until 1974 when Frank Robinson became the first African American manager of a major league team. But in the meantime, a generation of African American men, devoid of off-the-field opportunities

at the highest levels of the game, turned their attention where they could most readily have an impact—local football and basketball.

This perspective, Burgos told me, came about after studying the history of black baseball, integration, and sports today. Together with similar work by fellow scholars Alan Klein and Milton Jamail on Latin American baseball, Major League practices in Latin America, and sport in U.S. society, the policy implications of this research have begun to influence front-office officials at several major league clubs. These new practices have the potential to transform the culture of baseball.

into the fray

Burgos and Kane both demonstrate how research can begin to breach the higher echelons of the athletic industrial complex. But much more humble, grassroots methods can accomplish this as well.

Sports sociologists and sports sociology programs—be they ghettoized on campuses in Cultural Studies or Kinesiology—should fight to have a sports and society column in their college paper. Every sports sociology student should try to intern in his or her school's athletic department. Professors should actively seek to intervene in local sports radio. Book proposals should be submitted to non-academic, commercial presses. The art of blogs should continue, as it has started, to be integrated into a curriculum.

In fact, sociologists interested in sports should take a cue from Providence College and actively liaison with athletic directors to break down divisions on campus between the jocks and those studying them.

The athletic industrial complex keeps throwing pitch after juicy pitch down the middle of the plate. It's time for sports sociologists to get the bats off their shoulders and begin to shape debates within the sports world.

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