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Feminist sport studies: Sharing experiences of joy and pain

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BOOK REVIEWS

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Air Ball: American Education's Failed Experiment with Elite Athletics

By John R. Gerdy. Published in 2006 by University of Mississippi Press, Jackson, Mississippi (270 pp., \$28.00 US).

Reviewed by Troy S. Buer, Center for the Study of Higher Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia.

There has perhaps never been a more important time to examine and understand the role and impact of elite athletics on American society. This past year saw events ranging from poor sportsmanship to vicious brawls among and between parents, coaches, and players associated with community, high school, and college sports programs. Critics of big-time college sports point to rampant commercialism, a win-at-all-costs mentality, and the weekly, and sometimes daily, reports of academic misconduct, illegal gambling activities, recruiting violations, doping scandals, hazing incidents, and criminal behavior among athletes, coaches, and athletic departments as antithetical to the educational mission of colleges and universities. Such behavior certainly paints a gloomy picture of elite athletics at all levels. In *Air Ball: American Education's Failed Experiment with Elite Athletics*, John Gerdy presents a hopeful view that the most competitive community, secondary, and postsecondary athletic teams and programs composed of the most talented athletes (i.e., elite athletics) can be reformed and transformed.

Gerdy, a visiting professor in sports administration at Ohio University, is no stranger to competitive and elite athletics. He is the son of a high school football coach, and he later became an All American and professional basketball player. He also worked for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) as a legislative assistant and served as an associate commissioner of the Southeastern Conference. In *Air Ball*, Gerdy relies more on his vast athletic experience, knowledge, and passion and less on empirical data to argue for significant reform in American elite athletics. He calls for an honest and thorough evaluation of the appropriate role athletics should play in our society. He urges colleges and universities to take the leadership role by reforming and aligning big-time sports with the educational mission of the academy and insists that high school and community athletic programs will follow higher education's example.

Readers unfamiliar with the origins of and current controversies in elite athletics in America will benefit most from Gerdy's first two chapters. Chapter 1 provides an explanation of why interscholastic and intercollegiate sports programs are "uniquely American experiments" and how they have failed. Gerdy uses chapter 2 to question the role of interscholastic sports and examine why he believes elite athletics negatively affects the educational goals of secondary schools. He suggests that the divide between athletic and academic cultures continues to expand as athletic successes are glorified at the expense of academic achievements. Rather

than providing support for elite athletics programs that serve a small percentage of students, Gerdy believes that high schools should focus more on improving the effectiveness and quality of teaching and student learning. He recommends that high schools incorporate a more inclusive, long-term view of sports that involves more students and encourages stronger commitment to a lifelong healthy lifestyle by emphasizing wellness programs, physical education, and intramural sports. Finally, Gerdy suggests that high schools should follow the European club-sport model and shift elite interscholastic athletics programs to local or regional club teams thereby diverting scarce financial resources back to academically focused purposes and programs.

Gerdy uses the remaining six chapters to focus primarily on the central role higher education must play in leading the reform movement of elite athletics at all levels. He argues that the educational mission and integrity of the university have been sacrificed by the professional model of elite athletics in American higher education. In the professional model, college and universities are willing to pay any cost to hire and keep the best coaches and build the finest facilities. Nick Saban's reported \$4-million-a-year contract to become the University of Alabama's football coach and Boone Pickens' \$165 million donation to build an athletic complex at Oklahoma State University are two recent examples further bolstering Gerdy's claim.

Gerdy moves beyond contracts and facilities and centers his reform agenda on what he considers to be the keystone of the professional model of intercollegiate athletics—the “pay for play” arrangement of athletic scholarships. He believes that today's college athletes are on campus primarily to play sports thereby leaving educational interests as a secondary concern. In order to “fix” elite athletics, Gerdy argues that the professional model of intercollegiate athletics must be dismantled and replaced by a new model of athletics that supports the educational mission of the academy. The elimination of athletics scholarships in favor of institutional need-based aid is the central component of Gerdy's reform agenda.

Although Gerdy can be criticized for presenting unoriginal reform recommendations, his explanation of why the context for meaningful and lasting sports change has never been better is an important and unique contribution to the literature. Many initiatives have been put forth, debated, and implemented over the past century by the NCAA. As vocal proponents of reforming big-time college sports, several independent “watchdog” groups including the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics and the Drake Group have been an essential part of the changing context. They have been influential voices in forwarding recommendations and framing the discussions and debates surrounding elite athletics.

The most important contextual change over the past 25 years, however, has been the increased involvement of college presidents in sports-reform initiatives. University presidents have had a historically poor track record in administering intercollegiate athletics. Although some presidents expressed concern early on about the growing corruption of college sports and the impact of athletics on their institutions, others neither actively supported nor vigorously condemned college sports. There has also been a small group of presidents that have contributed to (and continue to contribute to) athletic excesses, corruption, and scandal. Beginning in the early 1980s, university presidents began to assume control of the legislative and

governance structures of the NCAA. They now have more control and power than ever before and have shown more determination, commitment, and engagement in intercollegiate sports reform initiatives than their predecessors. As Gerdy effectively shows, change has been slow and has not been without conflict, but it has come.

In the end, *Air Ball* is an important book for administrators, educators, athletics personnel, coaches, athletes, parents, and sports fans concerned for the integrity of athletics at all levels. Many might dispute Gerdy's assertion that the athletic scholarship is the "biggest barrier to athletes getting a genuine educational opportunity" (p. 155). Few would argue, however, that the values and academic integrity of educational institutions have been frequently violated by the professional model of big-time college sports. Although Gerdy's recommendations are not novel, he is clearly passionate about reforming elite athletics and presents a compelling argument that the "time for systemic change has never been better" (p. 246). Superficial, cosmetic changes to this model are not enough. As Gerdy argues, and this reviewer concurs, meaningful reform must begin and end with college and university presidents leading the way.

Surfing and Social Theory: Experience, Embodiment, and Narrative of the Dream Glide

By Nick Ford and David Brown. Published 2006 by Routledge, London. (204 pp., \$145 US, hardback; \$44.95, paperback)

Reviewed by Douglas Booth, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

A book that dissects gliding along waves of oceanic energy might seem quirky. Nick Ford and David Brown, however, in their sophisticated theoretical and methodologically eclectic approach to this topic demonstrate that sports are infinitely complex social and cultural phenomena well outside the reach of one theoretical explanation. In the process they also offer a potential model for an embodied approach to sport sociology.

Surfing and Social Theory comprises an introduction, six substantive chapters, and a conclusion. Chapter 2 locates surfing in Western "perceptions and representations of the sea and beach" (p. 7). Traditionally a place of foreboding, the sea underwent "domestication" with Elizabethan technology, and from the nineteenth century, the sea and the beach became sites of pleasure. Today both constitute "nostalgic" places that "fulfill a need for escape," and are objects of the surfer's gaze (p. 14). In an examination of the historical trajectory of surfing, chapter 3 exposes core tensions in the culture: between soul surfing (riding to save the soul) and competition, between an aversion toward commercialization and its acceptance, and between soul surfing as a highly personal dance and performing for an audience of peers.

Drawing on theories of subculture, lifestyle, the consumption of lifestyle practices, and the distribution of social status, chapter 4 inquires into surfing's appeal and attraction to participants. Although Ford and Brown discover a plurality of surfing identities, they observe that long-term devotees tend to regard the "image- and fashion-related aspects" as "epiphenomena to the ... [riding] experience" (p. 82).

Chapter 5 employs Connell's theory of masculine hegemony to explore gender relations within surfing, which becomes another fly caught in the "complex web of patriarchal gender power relations" (pp. 83–4).

Chapter 6 delves into the "overlapping and interleaving of the natural and the social body" in surfing (p. 120). For example, despite the surfer's attempts to "construct" a social identity on the wave by displaying balance, timing, and bravado, more often the breaking wave dictates the performance and "lays bare the surfer's [natural] self identity" (p. 132). Yet, as Ford and Brown stress, none of this resolves the fundamental theoretical problem: How does a "fleshy," "living," "carnal," "organic subject" find agency within structuralist frameworks that cast the body as a "soulless, forceless object that merely does what its owner's (or other people's) mind tells it" (pp. 146–7)? To overcome this malaise and discover the essence of the experience, Ford and Brown turn in chapter 7 to, *inter alia*, dance studies, physiology, psychology (flow and peak experience), and nonrepresentational theory. They conclude:

Surfers experientially access a specific embodied world encompassing . . . the feelings of the sea and energies of the waves which have limited meaning beyond sensations and movement. While participants may find it difficult to verbally express such [sensibilities], there is in surfing as with all such expressive and vertigo-related practices, a sense of a shared embodied knowledge which takes on the form of a feeling of *communitas*." (p. 163)

The conclusion lists 20 "core propositions" that collectively make up "a tentative thesis concerning surfing as an embodied cultural practice" (p. 165) and offers suggestions for further research.

Ford and Brown's analysis proceeds from two interrelated assumptions. First, they conceptualize surfing as the "interplay of mind and body, thought and emotion, and image and experience" (p. 7). Examples appear throughout, such as in the discussion of the sea and the beach in Western thought. The relationship with the sea and the beach emanates from "evolving sensibilities and physical encounter with the waters and waves," what Alain Corbin calls "coenaesthetics" ("the development of sensibilities through the senses" [p. 7]), and from more abstract fears and historical myths. Second, in exploring these interplays, Ford and Brown set out "to transcend the mind–body dualism that dominates the Western scholastic tradition" (p. ix). This means tackling binaries. For example, in challenging the nature–society binary, Ford and Brown paint the former as "discursively ordered," "embodied," "spaced," "timed," and "related to models of human activity, risk, agency and trust" (p. 8).

Is this approach successful? The theoretical material dealing with the international diffusion of surfing and its subcultural and gendered dimensions neither captures the interplay of mind and body, thought and emotion, and image and experience, nor disrupts the dualisms of Western thought. Here the authors remain locked into a number of now rather tired-looking theoretical accounts. In the case of gender, Ford and Brown acknowledge that the "identities of individual surfers . . . *are not fixed*" and that gender is "relatively fluid, contested, embodied, interpreted, and enacted. Yet they insist that hegemonic masculinity "still remains the dominant force in surfing" and that "other ways of experiencing surfing are subordinated

and marginalized in relation to it" (p. 109). At this point I found myself recalling Miller's (1998, p. 433) dismissal of hegemony as a concept that tries to explain everything and all too often explains nothing.

This is unfortunate because other approaches engaged by Ford and Brown appear better able to reflect the interplay of mind and body or image and experience with respect to gender relations. Their contention that "aesthetic wonder with the image" is the "first and foremost impulse" of surfers who consume "classic surfing photography" (p. 39) might also apply to sexual representations in surfing magazines, a topic extensively analyzed in the literature. Perhaps "aesthetic perception," which includes "separat[ing] . . . the object from its visual environment," the transcendence of context, and a primary concern with the immediate present (p. 39), might negate sexism in surfing.

The strengths of *Surfing and Social Theory*, however, far outweigh these concerns. They begin with the theoretical excursions into historical narrative and embodiment. Ford and Brown place the "practical, interacting, and storied" body (p. 167) at the centre of their "non-dualistic" conceptualization of surfing. "Lived and experienced directly," the practical body is "constructed through *doing*" as distinct from represented by or constructed from thoughts (p. 167). Sparked by an "experientially sedimented stimulus," desire is one manifestation of the practical surfing body and encapsulated by the "addictive . . . search" for waves (p. 142). As well as "*interact[ing]* with other bodies, selves, objects and its environment" (p. 131), the surfing body is also storied. Unlike participants in aggressive contact sports whose stories tend to detach the body from the self, surfers' stories typically conjoin bodies, minds, equipment, and sea.

The capstone of the work is the quest to understand the experientially sedimented stimulus to surfing. Here Ford and Brown delve into an array of interacting concepts, approaches, and theories: genetics, neurophysiology, equipment, life history, personal dispositions, encultured narratives. According to the authors, these "function together in the brief instants of non-cognitive slide along the ephemeral wave." Critically, this "assemblage is a transient *structure* rather than a single model of causality" (p. 162).

Surfing and Social Theory far exceeds Nick Ford and David Brown's modest goal of contributing to the burgeoning area of surfing studies: This text will define the subject for a very long time. Sport sociologists should also look at the book as a potential template for analyzing individual sports as complex multidimensional and embodied phenomena, and even as an embryonic model for a fresh theoretical synthesis of the field. In this latter regard *Surfing and Social Theory* is replete with intriguing suggestions and ideas.

Reference

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Feminist Sport Studies: Sharing Experiences of Joy and Pain (SUNY Series on Sport, Culture and Social Relations)

Edited by Pirkko Markula. Published in 2005 by State University of New York Press, Albany (247 pp., \$25.95 US, paperback).

Reviewed by Victoria Paraschak, Department of Kinesiology, University of Windsor, Windsor Ontario.

This edited collection by feminist writers from North America, New Zealand, and Europe was dedicated to Arja Laitinen (1949-1999), a Finnish academic, feminist, mother, community activist, and teacher who died of breast cancer in 1999. “With this book, [the authors] wish[ed] to continue the legacy of her work and celebrate her life as a feminist sport researcher” (p. v). I believe they accomplished this goal. Although I didn’t know Arja personally, I came to know about her through the reflections of the various authors. This collection thus enables Arja’s influence to extend beyond her too-brief life by fostering reflections on the social construction of knowledge, feminisms (both process and outcomes), power relations within academia, self reflection as an integral part of the research process, and integrity to one’s vision for an equitable world. I also gained insights into many of the other writers’ lives; they successfully embraced the challenge to speak to the joys and the pain they have experienced as academics and feminists. Their accounts enable researchers and activists to glimpse the messy reality of the research process, as well as the struggles that feminists face in achieving legitimacy for their work.

Pirkko Markula, in her introduction, promises that we will read about “the vivid lived experiences of the first generation sport feminists . . . using critical personal narratives . . . [to learn] how feminists within sport studies understand the construction and control of knowledge in academia and in society” (p. 1). Contributions by 11 authors from a variety of social science disciplines (history, sociology, psychology, literature) are then arranged into three thematic groupings: the history of feminist sport studies, personal experience as a source for feminist sport inquiry, and narratives of the self by feminist sport scholars. Markula does an excellent job of summarizing these elements of feminist analysis. Her introduction could serve as a useful reading on feminist research processes for a senior level research methods course.

Three authors addressed the history of feminist sport studies. Through Ulla Kosonen’s writing, we learn about the life, feminist approach, and accomplishments of Arja Laitinen within the broader cultural practices of her Finnish homeland. This is a fitting first chapter because each of the authors that follow identifies her link to Laitinen at some point in her chapter. It’s like a puzzle with Arja and her 1987 presentation at the Jyvaskyla Congress on Movement and Sport in Women’s Life at the center. My recommendation for the next edition of this book is to include Arja’s 1987 presentation as a chapter in order to illuminate the comments others made about it. Ann Hall’s chapter discusses her 30-year trek through feminist thought as presented in her book *Feminism and Sporting Bodies*; her new contribution lies in the final comments in which she discusses challenges linked to third wave feminism and the lack of sport studies in feminist scholarship. Her position is supported

throughout the book—clearly, feminist sport studies have been marginalized from sport studies and from feminist scholarship. Joan Duda completes this section, intertwining personal reflections on Arja with her own research path in the area of motivation, including “the infiltration of values in my personal scholarship and applied endeavors . . . [and] the moral implications of my work” (p. 75).

The second group of chapters addresses personal experience as a source for feminist sport inquiry—they attempt to “illuminate the everyday politics of being a feminist within sport studies” (p. 4). These informative chapters enable the reader to reflect on the research process experienced by feminists in sport. Nancy Theberge clearly outlines the process that led her to and through her ethnography on women’s hockey. Carole Oglesby explores concepts related to trauma, particularly sport feminists’ trauma and how to address it. Sabine Kroner analyzes a feminist project she worked on from 1989 to 1996: The Women’s and Girls’ Center for Movement and Communication. She honestly recounts the difficulties faced when bringing into reality an alternative to the dominant culture of sport, including intergenerational challenges between feminists. Kari Fasting completes this section with an exploration of her work on sexual harassment and abuse in sport. She effectively discusses Arja’s 1987 conference presentation and the subsequent “chilly climate” in the room after she finished as an example of what she now would call “a gender and/or sexually harassing climate.” (p. 131).

The final set of chapters focuses on narratives of the self by feminist sport scholars (p. 2), identifying “problems that the inclusion of a researcher’s personal experiences presents for feminist research” (p. 7). Celia Brackenridge starts the process with her discussion on reflexivity as an important research skill, “the subjectivity of a lesbian engaged in a gendered research process” (p. 150), and strategies for personal survival through self-management. Her suggestions are clear and useful. Gertrud Pfister provides a reflection on her own orientation toward biographies. Pfister uses her research on Sophie Peirce-Evans to lay bare the kinds of questions she chooses to ask and how they resonate with and stem from her own autobiography. Susan Bandy outlines her academic path and various transcontinental meanderings as a backdrop for her eventual adoption of transdisciplinarity as a concept and methodology when looking at ideas about physical and body cultures. Shona Thompson completes this section, recounting her academic path across four countries and what influenced the direction of her scholarly development. In each of these final chapters, we gain insights about these women academics, their challenges, and the impact those challenges have had on their professional and personal lives.

There’s an unevenness in the level of reflexivity, structure, and content of the various chapters, but I wasn’t troubled by it. Instead it reinforced to me the wide-ranging nature of feminist questions, methodologies, and insights on sports, academics, and community life. Reading them, I was convinced that feminist research, although difficult much of the time, draws strength from the community that surrounds it. Aspiring young female academics often ask me if an academic life is “worth it.” I will now encourage them to read this book as a part of their discernment process. They will be able to learn about the challenges women academics face, in particular when they take a feminist perspective. But they will also recognize some of the joys embedded in doing work that can intertwine with your

personal life and in the existence of a community of like-minded colleagues ready to share that path with you.

Carole Oglesby, who had never met Arja personally, expressed how she came to feel comfortable about her contribution to this edited collection.

I felt a sense of belonging, absolutely and perfectly, to a community of spirit of which Arja was an exemplar. She was a shining example yet one with all of us in terms of a set of shared experiences: feelings, set-backs, and satisfactions. (p. 101)

That was how I felt after completing this book—inspired by Arja, more connected to the women authors and excited by their lives, by my own life, and by the challenges ahead. Arja, I'm guessing, would be pleased.

Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture, and Commerce

Edited by David Whitson and Richard Gruneau. Published in 2006 by Broadview Press, Peterborough, Ontario (283 pp., \$24.95 US).

Reviewed by Jay Scherer, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta.

In his laudatory forward to *Artificial Ice: Hockey, Culture, and Commerce* (2006), *The Globe and Mail* columnist Roy MacGregor remarks that David Whitson and Richard Gruneau's new edited book "is as timely as the whistle at the start of a brand-new game" (p. x). It has been 14 years since the release of Gruneau and Whitson's seminal book, *Hockey Night in Canada: Sport, Identities, and Culture* (1993), and the game of hockey, "in all its cloaks and complexities" (p. viii), has undergone substantive changes. At the professional level, for example, the 2004–05 NHL season was cancelled, the result of a lengthy and vitriolic labor dispute. After substantive rebranding and marketing efforts, however, the "new NHL" appears to have been reembraced by Canadian fans, particularly in light of the appearance of the Edmonton Oilers, a small market franchise, in the 2006 Stanley Cup final.

In their introduction, which is an invaluable resource of readings and literature pertaining to hockey and Canadian culture, Whitson and Gruneau invite readers to look beyond the "happy naturalism" (p. 1) of the taken-for-granted meanings attached to hockey in Canadian culture. In doing so, the authors deploy the metaphor of "artificial ice" to focus on how culture and commerce have been intertwined virtually since hockey's inception, thereby encouraging readers to regard the game as a human and social product.

Unlike *Hockey Night in Canada*, *Artificial Ice* is an edited collection that brings together a diverse array of fine scholars, many of whom will be familiar to readers of this journal. Like its predecessor, the essays in *Artificial Ice* are readable, insightful, and will stimulate critical discussions in undergraduate and graduate classes. *Artificial Ice* is divided into two sections: the first contains a collection of six essays on hockey and the cultural politics of identity in Canada, while the second focuses on a range of political and economic issues. Jean Harvey's excellent

opening chapter on the changing meanings of hockey in Quebec sets the stage for the first part of the book. Harvey explores a wide range of historical issues surrounding the role of the Montreal Canadiens for French Canadians, as well as the more recent decline of the representative significance of the Canadiens. The chapter culminates with Molson Breweries' sale of the Canadiens in 2001 to US ski developer George Gillett. As Harvey notes,

Although most media stories focused on how the ownership of one of Quebec's "national" institutions was passing into the hands of an American, the deeper story, arguably, is that the pillars of Quebec's most powerful business interests . . . all came to the conclusion that NHL hockey in Montreal was no longer a good investment. (p. 48)

Indeed, it is telling that in August 2006, Molson announced the sale of an additional part of its interest in the Montreal Canadiens to Gillett.

Next, Brian Wilson questions hockey's centrality to Canadian culture and the dominant mythologizing process routinely articulated by a range of interest groups, including the capitalist culture industries. Focusing specifically on Canadian youth, Wilson notes that leisure patterns are increasingly neotribal, particularly as young Canadians negotiate an expanding cosmopolitan, mass-mediated world. Indeed, it is soccer, not hockey, that is the most popular participation sport among Canadian children ages 5 to 14. Meanwhile, in her chapter dedicated to hockey, gender, race, and Canadian nationalism, Mary Louise Adams challenges the taken-for-granted assumptions about the game of hockey embodied in the title of Peter Gzowski's (2004) lauded book *The Game of Our Lives*. In contrast, Adams's chapter entitled "The Game of Whose Lives?" challenges the belief that hockey is representative of all aspects of Canadian society. Adams, for example, recounts the minimal role that hockey has played in her life while also analyzing the gendering of national mythmaking and the gendered practices around hockey—including the availability of ice time. As Adams pungently observes, "If hockey is life in Canada, then life in Canada remains decidedly masculine and white" (p. 71). The sixth chapter, by Rob Pitter, focuses on issues pertaining to race and the legacy of racism in Canada's national sport. Pitter fills a major void in the scholarly research on hockey by outlining the experience of aboriginal and black hockey players, who, despite Canadian media personality Don Cherry's public refutation of racism in hockey, continue to encounter racial hostilities.

The second section of the book, while insightful, will likely be relatively familiar reading to those who follow the political economy of hockey. Some exemplary chapters include an account by Mark Rosentraub on the challenges facing all professional sports in maintaining a competitive balance between large- and small-market franchises, and Robert Bellamy and Kelly Shultz's analysis of the NHL's ongoing impediments with respect to the US television market. Despite the marketing optimism of the 1990s, the authors rightly question whether the NHL will ever be more than a small niche market in the US. Dan Mason builds on this by commenting on the NHL's decision to expand its "footprint" in the US and by questioning the viability of NHL franchises in nontraditional hockey markets like Nashville and Atlanta.

The book concludes with a discerning discussion by Julian Ammirante that compares the economic agendas of European football and NHL hockey in relation to a range of issues including the delocalization of sporting loyalties and the construction of consumer identities through the consumption of “world class” teams and players. Moreover, Ammirante’s discussion of the liberalization of sporting labor, which nicely extends Hart Cantelon’s earlier chapter on the changing hockey labor market, and the promotional imperatives of commercial sport seem particularly timely in light of global sporting icon David Beckham’s impending departure from Real Madrid to play for the Los Angeles Galaxy of Major League Soccer for a contract valued at \$250 million US over 5 years.

Overall, this compilation provides readers with a wide range of critical essays on the shifting position of hockey in Canada and beyond, and it will be of much value for both graduate and undergraduate classes in the sociology or business of sport. Indeed, through *Artificial Ice*, *Hockey Night in Canada*, and other contributions to the study of hockey and the politics of culture in Canada, David Whitson and Richard Gruneau have contributed an enduring scholarly legacy of the best kind: one that will continue to influence scholars and students for years to come.

References

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