

Sport, Authenticity, Confession

Toby Miller

University of California

This article appeals for an end to drawing on personal experience as sports scholarship and pedagogy. It questions the value of autoethnography. Too much work on sport, in particular, is based on appeals to sporting ardor or expertise rather than analytic and political acuity. Instead, what is needed is a supple blend of political economy, ethnography, and textual analysis.

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Many faculty at research-one universities manage to teach largely what they please, often via the special privilege of graduate seminars that can be designed to fit in with their research projects. This has always seemed faintly decadent to me, perhaps because I've also taught at low-rent institutions elsewhere, and because my work of editing a sport journal and book series, and of producing some writing on the topic, was never related to my teaching responsibility or departmental position, which have largely been tied to the media, often in art-school environments, albeit with many of the privileges accorded to professors at research-one universities.

This disarticulation from actually teaching about sport and writing about it has run parallel to a second and more important disarticulation. The curious thing about sport, whether it is studied within kinesiology, history, sociology, management, economics, literature, or anthropology, is that it encourages researchers and students, regardless of the scientism or otherwise of their field, to wax lyrical or act critical—in other words, forever to be taking positions on whether or not sport, in its many incarnations, is a “good thing.” This is a persistent binary. Within the waxing and acting, there can be some crossover, of course, with fans being critics and vice versa. But by and large, sporting academics start off their conversations, and occasionally their conference presentations, with an almost automatic incantation of their closeness to sport or distance from it. Their love for what they profess becomes a badge of membership, rather like cinéphiles bleating on and on about their passion for film as a qualification for talking about it.

Are knee doctors required to do this, or keen to do so? What about sewerage engineers? Or prison architects? Must they demonstrate their bona fides as fans of

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femurs, feces, or felons, in order to speak? I know that this kind of love for the topic is rarely evident when I speak with political economists of the media, for example. But it is present within sport discourse, among the left, the right, and the purportedly value free. And of course, in cultural studies, we are all too familiar with the peculiarly US genre of autoethnography. Occasionally it arises elsewhere, but it is most powerful in this benighted land, replete as it is with tens of millions of selves miraculously convinced of the importance of their experience and the social value of expressing it. Perhaps the ur-example of this is the unfortunate series of memoirs produced from the Duke Literature Program via such modest souls as Frank Lentricchia. We all know variants.

Sport itself has of course been the source of many autobiographies and biographies, given its star system, leading one notable swimmer to declare after the publication of her fifth volume about herself that she had written more books than she had read. But it is the performance nature of personal memory and authenticity in sport that concerns me here. To teach jocks and jockettes about sport, as many of my colleagues have told me, it helps to be able to lay claim to have “been there and done that,” to have experienced the elite level of sport. Experience validates critique. When I have attended sport conferences, I’m often the only person who cannot lay claim to success on the sport field. It is significant that in order to make the critical points that are crucial to their academic practice, so many Faculty speak of the utility of personal achievement as a lever of authenticity.

This is rather like the legitimacy conferred on professors who, when teaching television, supposedly break down the hierarchy between themselves and students by asking, “Who here loves soap operas? Come on, let’s seem some hands,” prior to humanizing themselves by sharing with the group their own fandom—and prior, of course, to returning to the syllabus, the assessment schema, the grading regime, and so on, all of which they have constructed and police. These active student audiences are said to be weak at the level of cultural production, but strong as an interpretative community. All of this is supposedly evident to scholars from their perusal of lecture rooms, audience conventions, Web pages, discussion groups, quizzes, and rankings, or by watching television with their children. Very droll. But can fans be said to resist labor exploitation, patriarchy, racism, and US neoimperialism, or in some specifiable way make a difference to politics beyond their own selves, when they interpret texts unusually, dress up in public as men from outer space, or chat about their romantic frustrations? And why have such practices become so popular in the First World at a moment when public policy fetishizes consumption, deregulation, and self-governance? It seems as though there is something about qualitative inquiry in the present US moment that licenses and even endorses confession as pedagogically innovative, intellectually experimental, and politically empowering.

And why sport, specifically? It seems to me that there is something about attempts to communicate about sport in popular contexts that licenses this kind of confession. Again and again, media commentators, notably former players,

refer to atmospheric factors to account for the victory or loss of teams and individuals. Tension, confidence, stress, and deity are allotted responsibility for success and failure. Planning, organization, ideas, and probability are not privileged in the same way. The emotional identification of sport, its extraordinary interplay of exclusion and inclusion, and its arguably unequalled capacity to stand for the nation, disavow the Tayloristic scientific management at its core. The affective claims made for sport, its allegedly ineffable qualities, routinely separate it from other areas—in newspaper offices, the sport staff is often a breed apart, for instance, and sport is part of making TV news conclude with a comfortingly apolitical finale. Progressive political economy, textual analysis, and multisited ethnography have never been at the core of sport studies, dwarfed as they are by the scientism of instrumental research and teaching, and delegitimized by the love of the game.

Given the rather arch tone of this article in its discussion of confession as rectitude, what should be done about this? Should progressive sport sociologists et al. abjure their methods of licensing critique? I think so, because it is a bad-faith argument—"I was good at this, so I can criticize it"; "I love this, so I can attack it"; and both things mean, "I understand it." Apart from the dubious nature of these claims, it seems to me that they encourage an entirely misleading valuation of the personal as a sign of knowledge and legitimacy, which is quickly departed from in order to do what faculty are actually good at (knowing things beyond themselves). And it buys into an affect-laden system of legitimacy that underpins sporting practice. Therefore, rather than weaving a few tricks for 5 minutes of Freirean populist legitimacy interlaced with 55 of actual institutional legitimacy, let's stop playing games. That might enable us to be honest about our educational position and honest about the way affect is Taylorized on the field.

Toby Miller is chair of media and cultural studies at the University of California, Riverside. He is the author and editor of more than 30 books on various topics, including *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World* (London: Sage, 2001), which he coauthored, and *Sportsex* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).