

Sport, Culture, and Sex

By Toby Miller, Media and Cultural Studies



“Get fit, get hot, start sooner, last longer, look cool, be loved. It’s summer, so strip down!” incitements to look fit and be sexy are everywhere. Sport and sex jumble together. They cannot be kept apart, for they live cheek by cheek, cheek by capital, torso by torso, boot by boot, boot by Beckham just like the other major social categories that characterize sport: age, race, class, religion, region, and nation.

The paradox at the heart of sport, its simultaneously transcendent and imprisoning qualities, and its astonishing capacity to allegorize, is

most obvious, most dangerous, and perhaps most transformative when it comes to sexual culture. In elite sport, sex sells, and it does so through style. Dennis Rodman appeared on the basketball court with many earrings, many hair colors and a queer persona. Amy Acuff, frustrated that her consistently brilliant high-jumping over many years had not brought public attention, competed in a fur halter top and fur-lined bikini pants, then gathered top women athletes together to create a nude calendar. Anne Langstaff, veteran ultramarathoner and topless dancer, won sponsorship for her running

career from her night-time employer, Dreamgirls of San Diego. And the movie *Satree Lex*, based on a real volleyball team almost entirely made up of cross-dressing men that won the Thai national amateur title in 1996, quickly became the country’s second-highest grossing film. Why? Sport has always represented something beyond itself and linked to sex.

This is not all entirely new. Consider the nexus between male athletes, sex, and leadership in the Ancient World. Xenophon, Socrates, and Diogenes believed that sexual excess and decadence came from the



equivalent of sporting success. In sex and sport, triumph could lead to failure, unless accompanied by regular examination of one's conscience and physical training. Carefully modulated desire in both spheres became a sign of the ability to govern. Aristotle and Plato favored regular flirtations with excess, as tests as well as pleasures. The capacity of young men to move into positions of social responsibility was judged by charioteering and man-management, because their ability to win sporting dramas was akin to dealing with sexually predatory older males. Each success showed fitness not only physically, but managerially.

Women have routinely been excluded from sport for reasons to do with sex. In the late nineteenth century, gynecologists debated whether women should play tennis during menstruation, and biologically-derived alibis for

restricting women's participation in sport have continued. Medical articles and educational manuals frequently discouraged activities coded as masculine. During the inter-War period, the American Medical Association worried that basketball could impede 'the organic vitality of a growing girl,' placing undue strain on the uterus. Into the 1940s, tennis was deemed risky because it was thought to promote over-development of abdominal muscles, which might hinder childbirth. The corollary was that competing without regard to one's cycle was somehow to be less a woman. There are links to styles of play. By the 1960s, men were using power via a serve-and-volley game or vicious topspin, while women emphasized grace and finesse.

Women were not admitted to track and field events at the Olympics until 1928, in response to a separatist

event in 1922, and were not permitted to run further than 200 meters at the Games until 1960, while the marathon and the pole vault only became legitimate in the 1980s and 1990s. Playboy featured figure skater Katarina Witt, part of her successful sale of sexuality but tennis champion Martina Navratilova lost major endorsements when her lesbianism became public that same decade.

Contradictions are aplenty in sport and sex. It's not just women who are objects of the gaze, not just women who are physically damaged in the interests of social expectations, and not just men who are inspecting the bodies of others for foibles and follicles. In the past three decades, professional male sport has transformed itself into an internationalist capitalist project and new pressures accompany the spoils. ■



The Need to Compete

By Tom Scanlon, Comparative Literature and Foreign Languages

I was drawn to the study of Greek and Roman sport early in my career since the topic is a marvelously accessible window to ancient cultures, and since there are many constant aspects of sport through the centuries that evidence a deeper human need to compete in play. Huizinga's book, *Homo Ludens* ("Man

the Player"), offers the stimulating thesis that sport universally may in many ways be responsible for culture, namely pre-forming or somehow "road-testing" legal and social rule structures, contributing notions of borders, boundaries, and goals, and encouraging ethical behavior under supervision of umpire-like officials.

I would not go so far as to say that sports inspire order and structure in society, but it is clear that the presence of sport reinforces cultural values. Greek sport was crucially connected with that culture's identity, served as a distinction from non-Greeks, a gender marker, a display of civic and religious honor, and a medium of self-promotion.

