

HATING SPORT

Toby Miller

There are so many reasons to loathe sport, and I've known a lot of them. My experience is probably quite typical, but perhaps not for many people who regularly read these pages. Before I was required to play sport at school, I had a brief literary introduction to it from my father, when he gave me a book about cricket. And sometimes we played in the backyard. I was enchanted by the heroism and grace in the book and the interaction in the garden. But that all changed.

Once these qualities became part of a disciplinary regime of brutality and negativity at school, they were forever compromised. In place of dashing, decent men working together to produce acts of beauty, I spent endless cold days wandering around football fields, being beaten up and kicked by opponents and screamed at by their parents, who bayed for blood: "Kill the Protestants," was a typical Catholic mother's refrain and vice versa. We were 9 years old. At home, my mother would seize my hands every Saturday morning and torture me with her cuticle remover as punishment for not having concentrated enough on the field earlier in the day. When sport wasn't about compulsory after-school activity, it meant gym work, which saw fascistic physical education teachers instructing us in painful and pointless activities we never saw *them* deign to undertake. Sometimes we'd line up on the oval in our khaki uniforms and march, ready for the cadet corps in secondary school and, later, conscription to Vietnam "to fight communism and the Asian invasion."

I'm writing here about Australian and English schools of the 1960s and 1970s. These were fee-paying, all-male, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) sites for the social reproduction of elites. We were instructed to avoid people from government-funded schools at social events and were repeatedly reassured (although it always *felt* more like a threat) that we were going to be "leaders of society." God knows what my fellow-monsters became. This period also instilled fear of unwanted sexual advances in me—one of my instructors in English and fencing regularly forced us on an individual basis to strip and be beaten. This visibly and audibly excited him, and he added verbal humiliations. For his part, the rugby union and classics instructor rejoiced in screaming into my ear from about 6 inches, "Are you stupid or are you lying, Miller?" He also laughed at us on the field. A physical education instructor took special delight one afternoon when he required me to keep pole-vaulting and high jumping after I had broken my wrist in front of him 2 minutes before (no doubt he thought I was faking).

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My stories are nothing compared to others we have all heard. I got off lightly—as someone who was no good at sport, I was basically left alone to look inadequate, a nonentity. Of course, the laughs were not all on the side of these pathetic older men. We hated them with a passion, as well we might, and privately mocked their inane expressions of force. I was particularly lucky to find many jocks who liked me—not least because, unlike my fellow-incompetents, I actually appreciated spectator sport and even enjoyed *playing*, provided there was no formal competition and I was among friends who were in it for fun and the expression of effort and skill rather than the pulverizingly dull desire to win at the expense of others.

And there lies the secret of something alongside my hatred of sport. The thrill when someone passes a football expertly and you run onto it, the sensation of receiving a hard-hit stroke and using its strength to return the ball to your colleague, the fun of running alongside others, and the pleasure of swimming in a creek with friends—these joys are quite distant from the horror-show world of competitiveness, orders, and criticism that characterized the ritual humiliation of school days.

This is a distinction between the world of domination, scientific management, and an artificially generated dislike for others, versus a world of collaboration, spontaneity, and fellowship. This is the “bad” and the “good” sport, what I hate and what I love. My specific memories of those men form a small part of a mosaic. In the case of that particular class, gender, and racial experience, they have a terrible legacy, of course. This legacy connects practices of power/knowledge to control of a domestic proletariat, to misogyny, and to colonialism. We must never forget this history and what it still symbolizes. At the same time, when tempted to express disdain for sport’s banal competitiveness and disciplinary obsessions, the untrammelled ecstasy of catching a wave or seeing someone else do so is a perfect utopian alternative to this seemingly most capitalistic of metaphors.