SPORTS

Gary Genosko

August 29 of this year, Jeff Z. Klein and Andrew Hsiao, who were Village Voice sports editors for 1983-95 and 1992-3 respectively, penned an epistle as the paper ended its sports coverage. Since 1983 the Voice had cultivated, as they put it, “an irreverent, progressive point of view” on sports. Race, gender, labour—did I mention queer-issues were all part of this unique reportage that blazed a trail for cultural studies of sport in North America.

Whether cultural studies in its American incarnation will pick up the trail remains as yet unanswered, although indications are strong that it will, despite the recent remarks of those such as Elliot Croll who claims that “the learning field of cultural studies seems oblivious to the work done on athletics. This is ironic, because cultural studies... is exactly where the study of sports is most needed.” Michael Oster’s Reading Football, for example, is a study of football’s cultural narrative (the gladiator, “scientific” football, heroic masculinity, etc.) in the popular journalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

There were treasures to be discovered in the Voice sports columns (the gossipy Jackbeat and Mike Gellman’s baseball report, Random, and the one or two articles in each issue. For example, I was staggered by the implications for research of the recentivial cultural history in the Voice by Gersh Kuntzman of the “highfive” celebratory gesture in baseball, which turns out to constitute a rhizome crossing baseball and college basketball, involving the mutation of handshakes, bat slaps, low fives (“giving skin”), high fives proper, high tens, the full moon, and the formal bash (resulting with unabashed enthusiasm the big bash)....

Where do we go from here? Specifically, a comparative analysis of the history and meaning of the celebratory gesture across sports remains to be written, in the context of a broader study of gestural sporting behaviour of athletes and fans alike. The “wien” would be examined, so too would be the moving of all sorts of gymnastic objects such as “Homer Hankies” in baseball. In hockey, there is the longstanding tradition in Detroit of throwing octagons onto the ice; there is also the recent “cuckoo chop” used by Atlanta Braves fans and widely protested by native and other groups. In hockey, equipment imposes a set of what may be called syntactic constraints upon innovation. Within these confines, one may recall retired Maple Leaf and Canucks Dave “Tiger” Williams’ celebration cash down the ice, arms pumping, as he positioned his stick between his legs in order to ride it like a hobby horse. Then there is the usual fist pumping, air punching, stick swinging, twirling, embrazing, potting, petting, and rubbing, etc.

More generally, the progressive reader of sports has to become a writer (even though, as Nick Hornby reminds us, the word progressive has, for some, the unfortunate connotation of the music of King Crimson and Emerson, Lake and Palmer) Short of this, the pickpockets are slim and, in Canada, at least, almost non-existent. The exception: being far and few between, one thinks of Daniel Gauthier’s queer hockey and sports reporting in You West and elsewhere, as well as Doug Smith’s recent essays in This Magazine on the political and fiscal follies of the drive to save the...
ual. Despite being extra-temporal, it is not altogether separate for this death takes place in the ring. It is for good reason that Oates uses the concept of para-ness to describe the knock out. This turns the referee into a kind of priest with exclusive control over a restricted domain. It is by means of the referee’s power to mediate between the temporal and extra-temporal, between the living and symbolically dead, that a boxer can return from the dead. The referee mediates the communication between the living and dead. These symbolically dead boxers have a crucial role to play in the match because, in boxing, it is normal to be, in this way, dead. This is what is extraordinary about boxing deaths: death is not spatially dispersed and dispersed for viewing, but remains in circulation amidst the living who are simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by everything that happens in the parentheses. Boxing’s ritual either to express death or to hide it away in an intimate space also explains why it is revived by so many, without an investigation of other reasons, such as its interminable scars and scandals, alleged mob connections, and violent spillers of every kind.

The history of boxing is littered with real thanatopraxis as well, in the ring itself, and the slow death of the retired boxer. Every time a “bum of the mouth” is produced from the ranks to face a superior opponent, every time a match is allowed to go on for a few seconds too long before being stopped, every time a boxer suffers a career-ending injury, death becomes a factor. Boxing does not refuse the boxer his death; it does not have the power to suspend death. The boxer’s death is always at stake, and this is especially true in mismatches, in which a boxer is not properly protected by his handlers, and in the strategy adopted by a fighter, such as the innovative but physically costly boycott introduced by Muhammad Ali against George Foreman in Zaire in 1974. The rules do not prevent a violent death from being at stake.

Books and Articles Mentioned:
Doug Smith, “Score” This Magazine (August 1995).

Guidelines for Contributors

Who Are We? BorderLines is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to exploring all aspects of culture—including popular culture, fine arts, visual arts, gender, literature, multiculturalism, mass communications and political culture. Although its geographic focus is Canada, this is taken as meaning anything that is relevant to understanding Canadian culture.

Who Are You? BorderLines aims to fill the gap between academic journals and cultural magazines. Our audience is diverse and eclectic, so too are our contributors. Drawn from a broad base of writers, artists, culture producers and analysts. Potential contributors should bear this diversity in mind and try to address cultural issues with spunk, humour and the occasional sideways glance. Please avoid pedantry, footnotes as well as excessive allusions and jargon.

We Welcome New Writers. Send your feature article, commentary, review, poetry, fiction, etc., to our editorial address below. All correspondence should be accompanied by a self-addressed and stamped return envelope. If your manuscript is on disk, please send it, too. (Mac format is preferred.)

We Want Your Visuals. We encourage you to send illustrative work with your manuscript. We also encourage visual artists to submit work. Please carefully consider the reproductive qualities of your submissions, as well as the page proportions of the magazine. Include any captions.

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