

by

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OBITUARY

NOTICE

On August 29 of this year, Jeff Z. Klein and Andrew Hsiao, who were *Village Voice* sports editors for 1993-95 and 1992-3 respectively, penned an epitaph 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 Gorn who claims that “the booming 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 Oriard’s *Reading Football*, for example, is a study of football’s cultural narratives (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 *Jockbeat* and Mike Gefner’s baseball report, *Rundown*) and the one or two articles in each issue. For example, I was staggered by the implications for research of the recent casual cultural history in the *Voice* by Gersh Kuntzman of the “high-five” celebratory gesture in baseball, which turns out to constitute a rhizome crossing baseball and college basketball, involving the mutation of handshakes, butt-slaps, low fives (“giving skin”), high fives proper, high tens, the full moon, and the forearm bash (recalling with neanderthal enthusiasm the fist 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 wave” would be examined, so too would be the waving of all sorts of gimmicky objects such as “Homer Hankies” in baseball. In hockey there is the long-standing tradition in Detroit of throwing octopuses onto the ice; there is also the racist “tomahawk 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 Canuck Dave “Tiger” Williams’ celebratory rush 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, embracing, patting, 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 pickings are slim and, in Canada, at least, almost non-existent, the exceptions being few and far between: one thinks of Daniel Gawthrop’s queer hockey and sports reportage in *Xtra West* and elsewhere, as well as Doug Smith’s recent article in *This Magazine* on the political and fiscal follies of the drive to save the

“The truth is this: for alarmingly large chunks of an average day, I am a moron.”

Nick Hornby,
Fever Pitch: A Fan’s Life

BOXING AND DEATH

Winnipeg Jets

“When a boxer is “knocked out” it does not mean, as it’s commonly thought, that he has been knocked unconscious, or even incapacitated; it means rather more poetically that he has been knocked out of Time. (The referee’s dramatic count of ten constitutes a metaphysical parenthesis of a kind through which the fallen boxer must penetrate if he hopes to continue in Time.) Joyce Carol Oates writes this in her collection of essays *On Boxing*. To be out of time is to be counted “dead.” The knock-out constitutes a symbolic death with its own rhythm: the count of one-to-ten. To resist this rhythm and re-enter time, continuing the bout, is to return from the dead: succumbing to this rhythm and letting it run its course brings the fight to an end. Let’s note that this symbolic death is embedded in the rules of the sport; it is a dramatic part of the rit-

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 parentheses 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: death is not spirited away and dressed up for viewing, but remains in circulation amid the living who are simultaneously repulsed and fascinated by everything that happens in the parentheses. Boxing's refusal either to repress death or to hide it away in an extraterritorial space also explains why it is reviled by so many, without an investigation of other reasons, such as its interminable scams and scandals, alleged mob connections, and violent spillovers of every kind.

The history of boxing is littered with real thanatospraxis as well, in the ring itself, and the slow death of the retired boxer. Every time a "bum of the month" is produced from the ranks to face a superior opponent, every time a match is allowed to go on 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 rope-a-dope 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:

Elliot Gorn, "Taking Sports Seriously," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (24 March 1995).

Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch: A Fan's Life* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

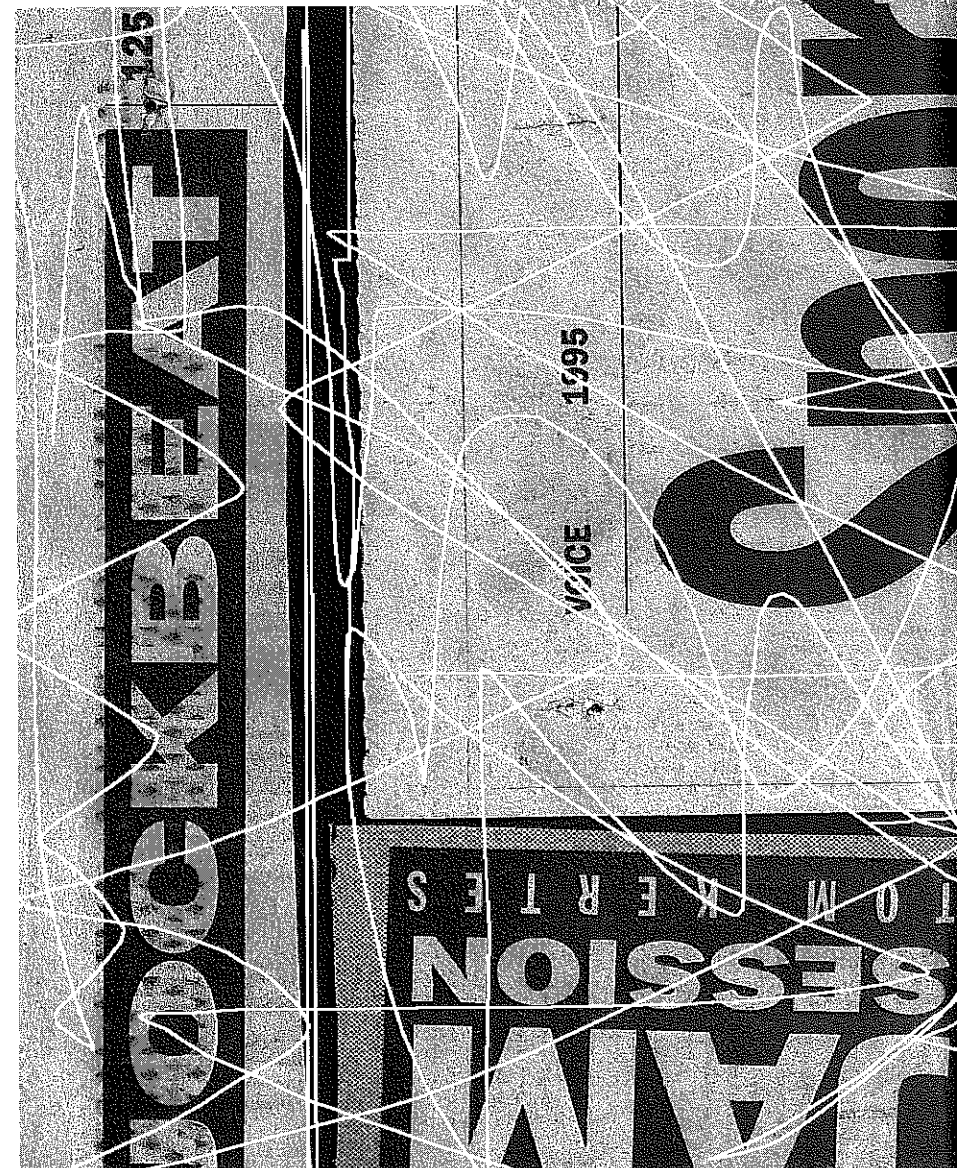
Jeff Z. Klein and Andrew Hsiao, "Game Over," *Village Voice* (29 August 1995).

Gersh Kuntzman, "The High Five: A Historical Overview," *Village Voice* (11 July 1995).

Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Hopewell, N.J.: The Ecco Press, 1994).

Michael Oriard, *Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created An American Spectacle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

Doug Smith, "Score!" *This Magazine* (August 1995).



Guidelines for CONTRIBUTORS

Who Are We? *Border/Lines* 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? *Border/Lines* 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 animators. 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 isms.

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).

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