

SPORTS

by

Gary Genosko

GIRL JOCKS

"The equation," Victoria A. Brownworth explains in her contribution, "The Competitive Closet," to *Sportsdykes*, "has always been simplistic: sports are masculine; women in sports are masculine; therefore, women in sports are lesbians." Simplistic, but not simple: sports training masculinizes women's bodies, but this does not make them lesbians. The simplistic logic of the argument (and the punitive models of femininity it implies) has fuelled the dyke-baiting which has haunted women's sports for decades. Consider the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golf Association), which has been the target of such baiting and misogynist ranting since its inception in 1950. The LPGA continues to be stigmatized by the male sportswriting establishment because one of its founders, Babe Didrikson, had well-known affairs with other women on the tour. Today, nothing has changed, if one considers the recent example of CBS golf analyst Ben Wright, whose homophobic and misogynist rants were widely reported. Mary Jollimore, in *The Globe and Mail*, thought it sufficient to let him implicate himself with his own words, thus missing the opportunity to expose the fact that opinions like his — not to mention decisions like hers — have been replayed for some five decades. One

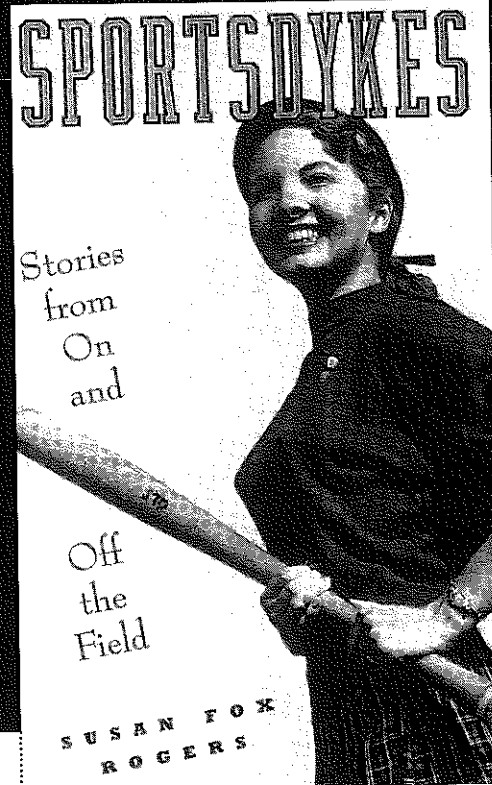
positive lesson is that an episode like this one puts into relief the significance of *Sportsdykes* in which several of the contributors directly confront the deleterious effects (on the careers of individual women and, ultimately, on everyone in the sportscape) of sexual stereotyping of women athletes.

While one never tires of revisiting the quite different episodes of the coming out of such stars as Martina Navratilova and Billie Jean King, *Sportsdykes* maps out the personal meanings of these events for spectators and young athletes alike. An entire section is devoted to "Our

Heroines, or, Martina." It is here, too, that Joan Hilty's comic strip, "Viva Barcelona," appears, first published in *GirlJock* magazine — an important source for material — telling the story of a viewer who becomes a spike-head dur

"Why, you might ask, would a man give up a promising literary career - there were some good notices - to become a sportswriter?"

Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*



ing the summer Olympics. Falling in love with the US women's volleyball team, she feels she has to be discreet, which wouldn't be necessary if there were more openly gay athletes. But this would require a revolution in sports and the sooner, the better, as the contributors to *Sportsdykes* testify. □

REVENGE OF THE PIGSKIN

After the sterling vulgarity of Super Bowl Sunday — a spectacle designed, after all, for those denied access to the *jouissance* of capitalist elites, and an event highly productive of a wide range of personal problems, making it a boon to the caring professions as well as to advertisers — it is therapeutic to reflect on the football experiences in Don DeLillo's *End Zone*. Enigmatic running back Gary Harkness, whose strange behaviour, at other, major colleges, qualifies him, in the eyes of the coach, to be a leader at the tiny and obscure Logos College, has a passion for scenarios of nuclear destruction. These scenarios are closely related to pass and defense patterns on the gridiron, which he treats with theological concern. *End Zone* is the portrait of a footballer as a young metaphysician. One day, the kicker, Bing Jackman, relates a strange insight to Harkness — the only one to whom such an unbelievable thing could be told: "I sensed knowledge in the football. I sensed a strange power and restfulness. The football possessed awareness. The football knew what was happening. It knew. I'm sure of it." The real question, Harkness adds, is not whether the football was aware of its footballness, but whether it was aware of its awareness. Self-awareness is set against the football's objecthood in DeLillo's post-modern theory of the object. Stop joking around, Jackman says. This is not the alienation of commodity fetishism, but what makes the game seductive: the discovery of a hidden rule.

This is the only compensation there can be for Super Sunday. ▮

THE LOUISVILLE LIP

In a previous column I mentioned Elliott Gorn's lament for the lack of attention given to sports by students of cultural studies. With the publication of his edited collection, *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, he comes across with the goods. Ali may have believed that Jack Johnson is the greatest fighter of all time, but for Gorn Ali is truly the greatest. It needs to be kept in mind that Miles Davis's soundtrack to William Clayton's documentary of 1970, *Jack Johnson*, is a jazz fusion juggernaut that has no equivalent in the Ali camp — at least not yet. Ali once refused an offer to play Jack Johnson in a Hollywood version of his life story.

Ali's career remains a contested text. His athletic accomplishments were political issues, sometimes provocations. His personal life was a political minefield. The explosions began when he changed his name upon converting to Islam. Let's not forget that with the murder of Malcolm X in 1965, Ali became the most visible minister of the Nation of Islam, even if Elijah Muhammad would suspend him in the late 1960s just as his boxing career was being revived. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that Ali was accepted back into the Nation's fold. Indeed, Ali was not alone, given that major black sports figures such as Lew Alcindor (basketball) and Bobby Moore (football) did the same upon converting to Islam. Ali also raised the political consciousness of black athletes during the Olympic boycott/protest of 1968 directed against the participation of South Africa. Perhaps most significantly, Ali's opposition to the Vietnam War precipitated a legal struggle with the American government

that lasted five years (1966-1971) and, for a time, cost Ali his heavyweight championship. He returned to the ring in 1970 to defeat Jerry Quarry, dubbed "the great white hope." Thus began his ascent to the title that he would recapture in 1974 with his stunningly orchestrated defeat of the younger and larger George Foreman. It was then that Ali, speaking to James Earl Jones, who played the part of Johnson in the film *The Great White Hope*, understood that his experience was parallel to that of Johnson's, and that the sixty-odd years that separated them had not changed the racism they encountered. (Johnson had to defend the heavyweight title he won in 1908 against a "white hope" contender.) Yet Ali had eschewed, for religious and political reasons, the flamboyant lifestyle that Johnson adopted in his acquisition and display, as one contributor notes, of "white prerogatives." Ali's sexism, his work for the Reagan campaign, and even his efforts to "re-gender" boxing, with claims of his own prettiness and the poetry that issued from his busy lips ("float like a butterfly, sting like a bee") — all are brought into critical focus in Gorn's book.

What these readings of Ali teach — despite the misgivings of one of the contributors — is that boxing is not removed by any representational device, whether it is by reflection or refraction, from race politics. The "race card" is not played in relation to boxing as if it was somehow separate. Boxing is a political medium and race (alongside death) is one of its constitutive features. ▮

Books and Articles Mentioned:

Don DeLillo, *End Zone*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1972.

Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*. New York: Vintage, 1986.

Elliott Gorn (ed.), *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1995

Mary Jollimore, "Wright in trouble again over lesbian comments," *The Globe & Mail* (Dec. 4, 1995).

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