

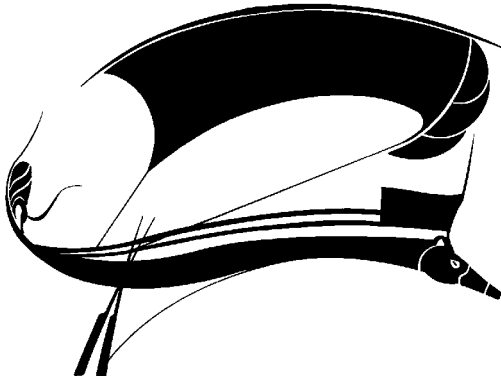
# Aethlon: THE JOURNAL OF SPORT LITERATURE



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*Aethlon* (*āth-lōn*): the original form of the Greek word meaning “prize of the contest; reward, recompense.” We like to think of it as also including the notion of the contest or struggle itself (*aethlos*), and skill or excellence (*arete*) that wins the prize.

# Aethlon



**AETHLON: THE JOURNAL OF SPORT LITERATURE**

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## Ours Alone

Jill Adams

I was awakened by a burst of harsh light that blasted the entire interior of the car, as though a film crew were setting up for a shoot in the dead of night. But no, it was a cop shining some kind of supersized flashlight in my face. I sat up from the back seat where I'd been sleeping as the cop ordered me to lower the window.

"You're not allowed to park here over twenty-four hours, ma'am," he said.

"I'll leave in the morning," I said.

"There's been a complaint from one of the local residents," he said. "Says you've been here for a week. So I'm going to have to ask you to move on."

"You enjoy your job?" I asked.

"I'd suggest you just get a move on. How about that?"

"I need to get dressed if you don't mind," I said. My jeans had been cutting into me, so I'd slipped them off and was down to my panties under a sheet.

"OK," he said, "but I don't want to see you when I pull back round this way, you hear?"

"Roger," I said.

I dressed and moved to the front seat, giving a finger to the Victorian house I was parked by, then drove to the other side of the city park block and found a spot there. I wanted to stay by the park so that I could pee behind a tree if needed during the night as the jar wasn't working out so well.

I got settled in the back seat, leaving my jeans on, but no sooner had I nodded off than the house I was now parked in front of threw on the porch lights. "Fuck you, too," I mumbled, and pulled the sheet over my head.

It was a green city I'd found myself in back in 1979, with a great shimmering river running smack through the middle, known for being eco-friendly and liberal, but with too much smugness oozing out the seams to be truly self-respecting. Homeowners might run for charity, vote blue, support Greenpeace and maybe have done a stint in the Peace Corps in some Third World country, but *don't park in front of my house, loser. Have to protect the neighborhood!*

Mornings I locked the car and walked to McDonald's downtown to wash up. After that I took a booth with my buddies as we proceeded to take advantage of the endless refills McDonald's had to offer. Henri, who lived under a bridge, worked crossword puzzles, zipping through the toughest ones, after his wash up, which included a hot-water scrub of his pits and then a blow-dry. Next to skinny, white Henri in his Goodwill garb was fat, black Bo in a suit and tie, who puffed on his cigar and took the role of leader. I couldn't tell you why exactly I say that. I guess because he wore the suit and tie, commanded a stogy, and had some height and age on him, maybe round forty. All full of talk.

Bo claimed to be a pimp and was right proud of it. We all kind of thought it was a bluff until black mamas with big sticky-out asses in hot pink, low-cut dresses or sequined short shorts would come in, pull wads of cash out of their fat bosoms and hand them over to Bo with a smile. He always did say his girls respected him 'cause he treated them right. He'd let them order whatever they wanted in McDonald's, I know that. I watched one dust four Quarter Pounders with two sides of fries and top it all off with a vanilla shake as she unabashedly lowered the side zip on her silver capris to ease the strain.

"I could set you up over on the east side," Bo used to say to me. "You could put a rod in a limp noodle at twenty feet." He always gave me a laugh, I'll say that for Bo.

Davie B and Nils were two other regulars. They had both put time in at the state mental institution and sometimes it showed. Davie B was a good poet and occasionally read at a club down in Old Town on Friday nights where he passed as a normal Joe with his preppie-like good looks, but he could slip off, lose touch with the moment, and you never knew what was going to pour out of his head. If it got particularly colorful, we'd all chime in and ask if he'd taken his Haldol. He couldn't hear us, so we'd wait out his episode and hope the other customers didn't make a complaint. Nils, with his furry blond cowlicked hair, would sit quietly most of the time, but at any moment he could start boxing the air and growl and curse. Him, we could sometimes talk down. I was particularly good at calming him for some reason. When he did speak, he was surprisingly articulate. Nils once explained to me the difference between, and the inner workings of, hedge funds, mutual funds and private equity funds with such clarity that I've never forgotten the details.

Both Davie B and Nils were pulling in S.S.I., and Davie B received some kind of small allowance from his parents in addition to that, so he had a low-

rent apartment in an old brownstone where I stored my clothes and typewriter. But one day this chick named Freni came up to our booth dressed in a nice pair of my wool slacks along with a neatly pressed white shirt and black sports jacket, mine as well. Davie B introduced her to the table as his new "girlfriend" and said she'd blow anybody for seven dollars. She was pretty, with long black hair, and well groomed, but there was something goofy in her eyes, and an unwashed smell wafted off her. Bo invited her to sit down, but she said, "I have to take a shit," and then walked off. She was gone a long time. So long that Bo suggested I go have a look, so I did. I could see my slacks under a stall door. I asked her if she was alright and she told me it took her a long time because of her meds. "That's OK," I said. "Do you get enough fruit?" She didn't answer, so I carried on. "Say, Freni, those are my clothes you're wearing and I'm not mad, OK, but I'd like them back."

"Davie B said I could have them."

"Well, that's not for Davie B to say," I said. "Because they're *my* clothes. I'm just storing them at Davie B's."

"Will you get the fuck away from me, please."

I returned to the booth. "Davie B," I said, "for fuck's sake, man." He gave an intense look to the wall behind me, my presence in the middle not registering.

"You know what's weird, man," he said. "*Volcanoes* are weird."

"Amen," Bo said.

"Do either of you dicks remember *Freni*?" I asked.

"Seven dollars a pop," Bo said. "Hard to forget that."

It was Henri who introduced me to the plasma center. You could give twice a week and collect seven dollars the first time, and ten the second. He had craters in the veins of both arms, but his only addiction was to the seventeen bucks he picked up for coffee money and cigarettes. It was a time-consuming procedure back then, but time was the one thing we had plenty of. The days drifted along without any more thought of the hour than a mountain stream gives its run.

When Bo heard I'd been selling plasma, he offered me a job, which didn't involve dropping my panties, and a room in his house to go with it. His modest brick two-story had a cavernous interior, with several bedrooms. I could never discern a regular, but on any given night most of the rooms saw one or another of his male colleagues filling a bed.

Though Bo didn't talk about it at McDonald's, he'd seen something in me that elicited trust, so I was shown the basement room where twice-weekly poker games took place. He'd just lost his room guard, so he offered me the job.

"Me?" I asked.

"I see you doin' real good at it," he said. "You're hungry. Like a gal with smarts got that hunger in her. And you're clean. *And* you can use a gun."

I'd blown off at the booth about the gun skills my daddy'd taught me which must have first put the idea in Bo's head. Other than that I figured he found it a novelty to have a white chick in the place because two things I never saw at Bo's: females and white skin.

"You just stand inside the door here with this here .357 strapped on and keep your baby blues on the table. Got a .38 in the car if that suits you better."

The players had to check their guns in upstairs, so the door guard held the only weapon in the basement room.

"And if there's trouble? Bo, I'm not about to shoot anybody, christ's sake, man."

"But you could nick a fella, yeah?"

"I'm not shooting anybody, man."

"No need, I'm just razzin' ya," he said. "Nothing ever blows up. Just be diligent."

"But if something *did* blow up?"

"I trust you to handle it. And I'll be here. It's your presence that counts is all."

"I don't know, Bo."

"You got something' better goin' on?"

"No, but—"

"Come on, girl."

"Hang on, man." We stood there a moment and studied each other.

"OK, show me that .38," I said. It wasn't so much for the room; it was more for a lark. Because that's the way you roll when you're young. I don't know how else to explain it.

I liked this side of town much better. No one calling the cops for a parked car, that's for sure. Of course, you might not have any tires in the morning, but that was something I understood. It didn't make it OK, but it didn't make me feel like a spewed piece of meat to be swept up off the street.

I swung by Davie B's to get my stuff. Not surprisingly, all my clothes were gone.

"Where's Freni?" I asked.

"Back in Dammasch," he said. Dammasch was the state mental hospital, so the clothes were a lost cause.

"And my typewriter?"

"She didn't take that."

"OK, good . . . so where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The typewriter."

"Oh, that," he said. "I pawned it."

"Davie B! When the fuck did you do that?"

"Can't remember. Last month?"

"Do you still have the ticket?"

"I never keep those things," he said.

"Fuck's sake, man."

So that was that. At least I still had a trunk full of a few clothes and other personal belongings, so not all was gone. But the typewriter was important. Before I'd had to flee an abusive relationship in the dead of night, driving two days straight, due north to get away. I was at work on a project that I hoped someday to pick up again, but all was on hold for now anyway. I accepted the loss and kept it to myself.

I joined Henri on a trip to the plasma center. He'd placed two large pigeon feathers in the band of his beat-up fedora, one on each side, which, along with his pointy goatee, gave him a sly, devilish look, though the slightly oversized white patent leather loafers brought some comic relief. We took our earnings and splurged on pancakes at Denny's where I learned the more obscure currencies of far-flung countries. Basic knowledge in the world of crossword puzzles.

Bo's table hosted eight men, and never varied from a straight-up game of seven-card stud. He introduced me the first night. Bo's judgment in all matters concerning the game was unassailable, so the men paid me a nod and then promptly ignored my presence: they were here to play. Besides Bo, the host, there were four fairly regular players though not always on the same night: Junior, one of those black men with a pale, reddish-brown complexion, full of freckles, with a gray-haired afro that lacked kink and looked like a head full of steel wires, was prone to play aggressively, to take the most risks; Hank, a sloe-eyed stud who, as there were no gyms in the area, looked straight out of the joint with his pumped-up arms, showed the least expression and was good with the bluff; Sammy, who looked like a coal-black Gandhi, the only one without a stogy for a prop, was quick with the fold; and Preston, a banker in a Brooks Brothers three-piece, all weather, mixed up his plays though I got better than the players at reading his tells. It was hardly discernable, but there was some lip tension on a bad draw, and the further in he was, the higher the stakes, the more visible it became. The other four players varied somewhat, and, as I learned, drew in white players as well as a few young Vietnamese. Poker knew no color or economic barriers. Black, white, rich, poor, old, young. The only thing I didn't see back then was a woman, but I doubt one would have been turned away if she were in earnest. Junior, the eldest, who hailed from Texas, and had broken his nut on the colored circuit down there in the 1950s, said it was not uncommon to have had white men join the table on occasion,

the great Doyle Brunson being one. Poker, as rough and tumble as it could get, was a humble leveler.

Bo's two nephews, big as pro linebackers and ripped like racehorses, sat upstairs watching the boob tube and smoking doobies while guarding the front door. The police were not the worry, but hijackings were. The place'd been hit once before. "Don't your boys ever play?" I asked Bo. "Them two stray of the gray matter," he said. "Got their place right where they are."

Bo ran the table, and he set the limits at \$1/2 on a Wednesday and \$2/4 on a Saturday, putting the average swing on the weekend in the \$100 to \$200 range, not a large amount for the time but hardly small either. The game ran smoothly, beginning at eight and ending at midnight during the week, but running later on Saturday. Bo dealt, made the necessary rulings and usually played in the game when a seat was open. He had these big meaty hands with gold-nugget rings, but the way he handled a deck was downright sexy—the cards whirred and came fully alive, mesmerizing the table before coming magically to rest. Then he'd rap the table lightly to signal a deal, and with the barest motion of his wrist and a snapping movement of his fingers, he'd pitch the cards toward the players, each landing exactly where he wanted it to, the card never traveling fast, all the movement coming with the slick, polished spin. No chips used back then, only cash on the table. Rarely was there a dispute, but all deferred to Bo if there was. I never got tired. I took the job seriously, for one thing, and I was absorbing every last detail about the game and the players. I didn't mind running out to get food, usually burgers or Chinese, though sometimes Bo made up a batch of ribs or chicken livers at the house. The men brought their own alcohol. There was a small Frigidaire in the basement that held ice and served as cooler for the beer. A right cushy little set-up all round.

Meantime, because stud could be played by two players as well as eight, Bo spent mornings teaching me the game. I started from scratch, not knowing a door from a river, but Bo schooled me well. I learned not to try to bluff a bluffer, for example, and that you should immediately fold medium pairs in raised pots unless you have a bigger kicker than the pair the raiser is representing. Every day brought some new fundamental to aid a winning hand, and because I've always had a head for recall, that boosted my learning, and my game, from the get-go. "I never seen the like," Bo said. "You got game."

Davie B got a change in meds. He was more like I first remembered him, when I'd entrusted him with storing my belongings. He'd never stopped doing the poetry readings on Friday nights, but now he was pulled together enough to take a part in the Shakespeare in the Park series, an amateur production, but of particularly high standard. Davie B played Fernando in *The Tempest*. He had a marvelous voice for stage—a grassy clearing surrounded by evergreens in this case—and never lacked for self-confidence. He was a bit of a ham, but the role lent itself to that. Once or twice I think he went off verse—*The harmony of their*

*tongues hath oft lapped wondrously round my shaft?*—but with such perfect timing and verve you could scarcely tell.

Afterwards, when the area'd been cleared, Davie B and I and the recently released Freni sat around sharing a bottle of Boone's Farm. Davie B was still in costume. For lack of appropriate footwear, they had given him leather ankle cuffs that hid the tops of his scruffy shoes, which on close inspection revealed two very worn and knotted shoestrings. He suddenly flipped his feet in the air, showing holes in his soles, and began walking on his hands to further entertain us. Freni started clapping, in patty-cake fashion like a little kid, fingers splayed. She had such a suave, elegant, rich-girl look that her behavior always took you by surprise. She even looked pulled together in an old T of Davie B's and my Levi 501's with the knees ripped out.

Everything struck me as funny and right that day. The conifers loomed glorious on the sloped hillside, infusing the air with their lusty scent; while the newly leafed deciduous greenery, especially the silvery cottonwoods, seemed to shine with an internal light. I marveled at how huge ferns sprang from the forest floor, how the thick iridescent moss cushioned the soil. I will forever remember this moment, I thought. And just as darkness began to slide in, on the rump of a gentle crosswind, there was a spell when all the colors, all the outlines, were further illuminated; when the flying squirrels began their slow looping through the trees. Bliss, I thought. This is bliss. And as accompanies these moments, I suddenly felt a swell of great sadness. Because I knew I would never know it again.

\* \* \*

How it started, I don't know, but there'd been a tension in the air all evening that Saturday. Two truckers from Chicago—friends of a friend of Hank's—happened to be in the city and sat in, one built like the 18-wheeler he drove, the other more Wally Cox. They were rich (as in fat bankrolls), white, the big one somewhat arrogant. It was the first of the month, pockets were flush, and Bo's group hadn't had a big game for a while, so Bo jacked the stakes all the way to \$30/60 with a \$5 ante. At those stakes the typical pot size was more than the (legal) monthly salary for most of the men. Alongside the truckers, there were Junior, Hank, Preston and who I'd come to know as Duong and Trung. Sammy could sure have used that game but was temporarily in county for falling behind with his child support. Even his woman tried to bail him out when she heard about the big table, but it was too late to reach a judge, so Bo made up the eighth and dealt as usual. It was a night full of high heat and as it drew on, the men removed suit jackets and loosened collars, and some even took off their shirts. Junior pulled his feet out of his shoes and rolled up his pant legs.

It was six hours into the game. Money had moved round the table all night, and several players had quit. The table wound down to the big Chicagoan,

Hank, Junior and Trung. A huge pot had mounted that swelled to over a grand. It had started with everyone in, with a string of raises. Then came fifth street.

"*Du ma,*" Trung grouched as he announced his fold and bounced his skinny frame up from the table.

Hank didn't fare much better. "I ain't takin' a chance agin them pairs," he said, eyeing the Chicagoan's aces. And he mucked, too. "Take him, man," he said to Junior as he got up, giving him a pat on the back and heading to the fridge.

The Chicagoan and Junior went at it, raising back and forth. The room grew quiet now as all the other players, who had been milling around the basement, pulled in close to the table to witness the showdown. The pong of stale smoke and stubbed-out butts, boozy man-sweat, and Bo and Preston's powerful hair pomade soaked the air.

Bo had just dealt the river when Junior suddenly slid off his chair and lay sprawled on the floor, sweat streaming in his eyes, one hand on his chest, the other gripping his stogy. "You OK there?" the men asked, not overly concerned. "Li'l flare up, it'll pass." "You *sure?*" the Chicagoans asked, both of them popping bennies like peanuts, washing them down with Jim Beam. They were staring down at Junior with scrunched-up faces, eyeing him more like he was a pile of alien poo than a distressed man of some age. Junior ignored them. "Say, Bo," he said, can you show me my river?" In stud, the river, the last card dealt, comes face down, like the first two, so Junior needed to be shown. "Sure," Bo said. He excused himself from his dealer's seat and walked round the table to Junior's hand, carefully picked up the river and showed it to him there on the floor. "OK," said Junior, now mopping his brow and blowing air out of his pursed lips as he stared at the ceiling flat on his back. He took a big draw on his smoke and waited for the Chicagoan, who was in first position, to make his bet.

I could tell that the Chicagoan wasn't happy with his river card but confident nonetheless. He bet \$60.

Junior was trying to sit up from the floor. He took another long pull on his stogy, prolonging the moment. "*Call,*" he finally said.

The Chicagoan appeared agitated, perhaps twigging too late what could be lying in wait in Junior's hole cards or perhaps genuinely dubious. "The *shit's* this anyway?" he burst out. "Ain't there some rule you gotta be sittin' the table?"

"He's still with us," Bo said. "We seen him this way before, he got to get his blood flowin' horizontal is all."

"Fuck that," said the Chicagoan. He jerked to his feet, nearly knocking over the table. "This here's one big collusion! You hand deliverin' the river, *fuck* that!"

Bo rose to his full height. "No cheatin' at my table, never has been, never will." I knew that wasn't exactly right as some cheating went with the game



back then. But not tonight. Bo knew when to run a tight ship and he ran the big games tight. "Now sit back down."

"Screw you!" the Chicagoan said and threw his bourbon in Bo's face with his left hand while his right flew to his ankle.

I knew it was my time to act so I pulled the .38 from the holster where my hand had been resting all evening and came up behind him without any forethought. "Hands on the table, man, we don't want any trouble." He was so buzzed he reached back to swat me like an insect, but I had a good grip on the .38 and popped one off at the ceiling. It made a hell of a crack and shut everyone up good as plaster dust drifted down from above. We were all just beginning to catch our breath when a corner chunk of the ceiling fell down and caused us all to jump again, though we pretended we didn't. Only Junior wasn't the least rattled. He had shakily taken his seat at the table where the cards remained intact, wiping some drool from his face.

Just then Bo's burly nephews burst through the door, having been loudly alerted by the shot. First they looked to me, confused as to where to throw their brawn, before turning their gaze to Bo whose very highly raised eyebrows and tip of the head served to sink the pennies. They flanked the Chicagoan who stood weighing his action and when the odds came up the wrong way round, he raised his hands in the air palms out and said, "Alright, alright! Show your stuff, old man. Jesus H."

"I think you forfeited that right," Bo said, wiping the thrown booze off his face, "but we're playin' this to the end."

Everyone again pulled in close to the table.

Junior was showing a two of spades, a six and ten of clubs, and a Queen of hearts when he coolly flipped over two more two's, giving him three of a kind. The Chicagoan held aces up with Kings as the second pair; it had been a hand well worth betting, but couldn't take Junior's trips.

"Let's go," the other Chicagoan said nervously, trying to pull his friend from the room while gnawing the inside of his mouth. His dark, round eyes looked to me like two bored-out barrels with his mate in the bloodshot crosshairs, the most he could muster to try and nudge him out the door.

"Nice grift you got goin' on here, mutherfuckers," the big man sneered as he spun to leave. "With Annie Oakley here to back y'all up." Junior was pulling the cash his way and you could tell the trucker, who'd spun back around, was on the verge of disrupting the action once again, his Marlboro Man frame twitching this way and that as though he were ready to pounce. Hank took a step toward him and I readied myself for whatever might come.

"I don't think you heard me the first time," Bo said. "No cheating here." Then he turned to his nephews and threw a nod. "Better bang that point home to the man," he said, as the boys grabbed him by the arms and proceeded to march him up the stairs and out to the alley round back, followed by his weasel-y trucker friend who had already proved too meek for concern despite

being amped to the gills. "Watch his right ankle," I told the boys. They looked at me blankly for a second, but then caught the drift.

"You sure you don't need a doctor, Junior?" Bo said after they'd left, because Junior was definitely looking ash-gray, a particularly worrying color in a black man. His wiry, straight-haired afro, which had thinned out over the years, was kind of mashed in the back and stuck out at all angles on the sides, while his rolled up pant legs showed his knotty, bone-skinny legs. "You look a sight there."

"Hell, Bo, I'm on a roll here. Anybody for a little blackjack?" Trung, who'd been lurking in a corner, jumped up at that idea. Junior ripped the cellophane from a new deck, tossed the jokers aside, shuffled a few times and cut. His fists were as gnarled as swamp roots, but he was competent enough. Then Trung proceeded to clean him out in fifteen minutes flat, taking off with his mate right after the kill.

"That was pitiful to behold," Preston said, shaking his head. "Don't make me no nevermind," Junior said. "I whupim at stud. Ever time." Bo, Preston and Hank each slipped Junior a twenty as he was tapped out, and that brought the evening to an end, though Junior tried in vain, even as he was being ushered out the door, to use the sixty to get some other action going. It's an unspoken rule that money given after a tap-out is not for play, but Junior was tenacious. "Put up a bet, man'd eat a diseased yak," Preston said, and they all joined in the head shaking. "Good at stud, though," Hank said. "Give 'im that."

"You done real good there," Bo said later the next day. "Knew I could count on you."

"It all came kind of natural," I said, "but I got the shakes afterwards."

"It gets easier," Bo said.

"Thing is, Bo, damn. I'll stay around for a while, but I been thinking, even before last night, mind, that I should be heading on somewhere."

"Well, I can't say I didn't know that was comin'," he said.

\* \* \*

From those long, languid days, time took off like a Kansas twister, throwing me fast into the end of one millennium and into the next. It was not to be until many years later that I returned to that green city with the big, wide river pushing through the middle. I had moved far away, and, in one of life's many vagaries, had made a name for myself. I had been invited to the city to give a lecture and the woman sent to meet me assumed that I did not know the area, so I chose to leave her with that impression. But having the next afternoon free, I went to McDonald's downtown, ordered a coffee, and took the old booth. I wanted to see one of my buddies from those days and I wanted it with such force that I could hardly sit still. I went to the counter for a refill

and the kid taking orders, with a pierced lip and blue-tipped hair, looked at me in a strange way. "We don't do refills," he said. "Oh, sorry," I said. "You used to. I'll just order another one then." I waited awhile longer, but without the offer of refills I couldn't see it being much of a hang-out anymore.

After that I rented a car and drove to Bo's, but the house was boarded up with ragweed and dock overtaking the yard. I ventured next door where a skinny woman wearing a do-rag was sitting on a stoop working her thumbs on an iPhone and asked if she knew the man who used to live in the vacant house. "You mean Mr. Chavis?" she said without looking up. I realized I did not even know Bo's last name. "First name was Bo," I said. "Big guy, smoked a cigar." "Don't sound like Chavis," she said. I got back into the car and drove up and down Jefferson where his girls used to strut their stuff, but no sign of a lady for hire anywhere.

My plane was due to leave the next morning, but that evening I was treated to dinner by the committee that had commissioned me. They took me to a posh Thai restaurant not far from the park ringed by Victorian houses that I remembered all too well. The city now had a vintage trolley car that ran through the neighborhood, which was full of trendy cafes and boutiques, far more upscale than it had been.

The six of us were walking the half block to the restaurant when one of the men said, "Watch out, everybody, there's a nut case up ahead." He started to usher us across the street, but I looked straight ahead and when I saw what I saw, I held the course and walked straight up to him. He was making strange guttural sounds and boxing the air, his blond cowlicked hair now showing signs of white. "It's OK, Nils," I said, as I gently put my hands on his upper arms to calm him as I had always done before. "It's OK, everything's OK." There was recognition, perhaps not of me but the memory of me. He had a haunted look about him, distant and anxious, but he stopped fighting, gave what I think was a slight nod, and walked on. I turned back to the group, but they had already crossed the street and were staring at me. Then they crossed back over. One of the women started to say something, but did not know what to say and so forced a little cough. There were a few seconds of silence and then the same man, feeling the need to reassert himself, spoke up: "You should be more careful," he said, not in a note of scolding or concern but of finality, as though his deep, booming voice settled the matter. I didn't say a word and we proceeded to the restaurant where everyone, myself included, drank way too much. I had at least seen Nils. And that was something.

Who he was, I'll never know. But that never worried me because in truth there is so much we don't know about one another, so much that is ours alone, packed away, hidden deep in little gullies. Perhaps one of the women at the dinner, the lovely slim one, say, went home that night, ate a tub of cheesecake ice cream then made herself throw up. Perhaps one of the men sought a cottage on his way home. There are long personal histories which drive our actions,

which take us to these places. Me, I returned to the hotel, after turning down an offer from a handsome gentleman to “extend the evening.” My fingers were itching as I flipped open my laptop. I used to seek out underground games, which I always preferred to casino play, but now my schedule is too hectic. Although hold ‘em is currently the game of choice, I tend to stick with stud. It’s my nod to Bo. I have savings from the past that run into six digits, distributed in various safety deposit boxes. My principal venue these days is online poker. Which is fine. It’s not as rousing as live play, but I win far more than not, so that’s OK. I do it more for a lark now, to chill out. Because that’s the way you roll when you hit a certain age. Because my handle carries me and nobody knows and because I like that. Just as I like to keep my past to myself, not out of any embarrassment, but because it’s mine and mine alone, from a time when no one knew who I was or where I was, except for that small, select circle who never judged, never questioned. Much like the game tables that comprised so much of my life.

I have often thought back to that river-city interlude, rudely thrust upon me but soon accommodated to, when I was so light of burden and knew what it meant to fasten to other people and slow ride with them day after day—the full impact of which came rushing back to me then, blindsiding me there, alone, in the still night of the hotel room. Maybe I’ll stick around another couple of days, I thought, and was momentarily excited about who I might find. I could take a trip to the plasma center, why not? I had no partner to return to, no children to check in with, no fixed schedule for the next few days. But then I thought, no, there’s no coming back to the round after you fold ‘em. That precious hand of my youth would remain where it was, in a cherished corner of my heart, guarded by a dazzling dray of flying squirrels, my own little pocket of bliss.

I racked up a small win, clicked off, and packed my bag.

\* \* \*

And now that I’m entering the final stretch of my life, I find myself—like my daddy, in the end, who began talking only about his years in the war—thinking of my old, long-lost buddies, who I figured were most likely gone by now. I wish I had looked harder for them. I did exhaust the internet looking for their names when that opened up, but they were hardly the types to be hunkered over a laptop in Starbucks.

And then one day out of the blue, a postcard with a glossy photo of Annie Oakley arrived, via the university department where I had worked, who forwarded it to my agent, who forwarded it to me. It was from Henri, and all it said was: “I always loved you, you know. I still do.” No return address. It was with Henri only that I had shared my poker room experience. I loved him too, if not in a romantic way, then in that other, better way.

It was that postcard that assured me my mind had not created that time and the people who filled it, because, frankly, I'd had my doubts.

## Two Sexagenarian Hockey Players Laugh at Themselves for the Way it Used to Be

for girls it was most likely  
monthlies and  
the mortification of seepage  
or an embarrassment  
of sanguinary evidence  
staining a skirt hem  
during the moon-moody  
irritability of menstruation

but for us boys  
for Toad and the breeze  
and me  
it was  
the unwanted erection  
that poke-pocket tumescence  
thumbing the trousers at school  
like the hand of a stranger  
looking for change

and *please stand*  
*while you're reading*

or some *come to my desk* teacher  
who did not comprehend  
the hesitant lad  
walking crooked and awkward  
and holding his notebook  
as though it were  
an X ray apron  
shielding his groin  
against stray radiation

oh, what we remember  
and what we forget  
so often defines us

even as an old man  
wishes  
he were sixteen  
for an hour  
though when he was sixteen  
he wished for an hour  
he wasn't there at all

*John B. Lee*

## Locker-Room Talk

*"... just grab 'em by the pussy ..."*  
*Donald Trump*

in variations of dishabille  
like half-peeled beasts  
we sit  
on dressing-room benches  
after the game  
some in socks and skivvies  
umbilicus bellied  
sagging over empty shoes  
in laughing conversation  
full-grown men  
engaging in preparation  
for heading home  
and what is it we have to say  
for we're elders  
and this is the masculine palaver  
of a generation  
born during or just after the end  
of the last great war

not once in all my years  
have I heard  
a single disrespectful word  
concerning wives or girlfriends  
daughters or sisters  
no, although  
talk of hockey does occur  
from time to time  
it's mostly health comes up



cancer treatment  
 chemotherapeutic fatigue  
 arthritic knees, gout in the toe  
 chiropractic interventions and  
 the benefits of acupuncture for chronic pain  
 arterial stents  
 and orthoscopic scars  
 one guy  
 talks about the time  
 a surgeon cracked his chest  
 removed his heart  
 and set it beating on his breast  
 like a captured bird

and though we sometimes  
 debate the meaning of events  
 or the impact  
 upon our lives  
 of winter weather  
 and a week we spent  
 in Portugal or Cuba

when someone mentions  
 Plato's suggestion  
 that *love is watery*  
 our thoughts turn then  
 to how the heavens are seeded with stars  
 and the plough-exhausted earth  
 and how tomorrow might come  
 in lake swell  
 with high waves lashing the harbour  
 but the moonlight  
 is beautiful  
 and we are all alive

*John B. Lee*



# *Rollerball*: A Neo-Marxist Pedagogy of Sport

Jeffrey O. Segrave

**B**ased on William Harrison's short story "Roller Ball Murder," which first appeared in *Esquire* in 1973, the film *Rollerball*, released two years later in 1975 and directed by Norman Jewison, postulates a dystopian futuristic world which has been refashioned politically under the hegemony of an oligarchy of conglomerate cartels. Total material tranquility obtains: there are no wars, no poverty, no unrest—and no God. There are also no books; knowledge is stored in supercomputers to which no one has access. There is no personal free will either. Rather, Jewison's is a totally managed society and the monopolistic mega-corporations rationalize, advertise, and exercise their power by sponsoring an endless cycle of a sport called rollerball, a violent game whose brutal mechanics operate to entertain and numb the population to the political oppression under which they exist. The rollerball arena becomes the site for playing out the values and ideologies of a totalitarian regime and for encouraging participation in a system that denies individuality and freedom. Rollerball serves as what the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci calls an "armed apparatus of coercion" (263).

Critics of the film were split in their reviews. Gene Siskel of the *Chicago Tribune* panned it as a "movie in love with itself ... vapid, pretentious and arrogant." Jonathan Rosenblum called it a "glib fable ... a simplified version of *A Clockwork Orange* without any intimation of wit or satire." *Los Angeles Times* critic Charles Champlin, on the other hand, judged it to be a "fresh, unusual and stimulating movie," and *Variety's* Arthur Murphy wrote that the film "packs an emotional and intellectual wallop" (23). But notwithstanding the divergent views of the pundits, *Rollerball* is a rare example of a filmic text that offers a trenchant Neo-Marxist critique of sport.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, it forces us, like all good science fiction,

to contemplate our own social world, and, especially in this case, our current cultural obsession with violent sports. It also serves as a valuable pedagogical tool to sensitize students to critical sport theory. *Rollerball* may not be a new film but it is a compelling one, largely overlooked for its theoretical and pedagogical salience and value.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to examine the film *Rollerball* as an example of a Neo-Marxist critique of sport.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, I wish to argue that the film is a full-scale indictment of the dehumanization and alienation of both athlete and spectator as well as a not-so-thinly veiled portrait of a sport that seeks to colonize the individual's world of hopes and dreams. The film also demonstrates how sport can be manipulated to stabilize an oppressive political system by distracting the oppressed population in a classic *panem et circenses* manner and by offering a bloody entertainment spectacle as a politically engineered emotional safety valve. From a theoretical perspective, I adopt a Neo-Marxist perspective grounded in the works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Herbert Marcuse, Theodore Adorno and the Marxist sport sociologist Jean-Marie Brohm. Ultimately, I suggest that Jewison's musings are what the literary scholar David Vanderwerken calls "merely logical projections and intensifications of contemporary states in the sportsworld" (39). As a result, *Rollerball* is a compelling way to introduce students to critical sociological theory and engage them in conversations about the consequences of our contemporary preoccupation with violent sports.

### **The Film**

The world of Jewison's *Rollerball* is one with which we are all only too familiar. It is over-determined and over-organized, rich in material wealth and impoverished in spirit. As in George Orwell's *1984* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, power is concentrated in the hands of a power-elite, in this case, the chief executive officers of six monopolistic mega-corporations that run entire business sectors: energy, transportation, communication, housing, food, and luxury. Nations are gone and decisions are made on a global scale. History, memory, family, and tradition have all been expunged from daily life; even marriages are arranged by the shadowy executives.<sup>4</sup> Following some vaguely referenced "corporate wars," peace and tranquility obtain, but at a terrible price—the quest for knowledge, individual agency, and privacy in thought or action is deemed heretical. "Corporate society takes care of everything. All it asks of anyone, all it's ever asked of anyone, ever," Mr. Bartholomew, chairman of the Energy Corporation, eerily intones, "is not to interfere with management decisions." The sport of rollerball, Bartholomew reminds the mega-star of the game, Houston's Jonathan E, was specifically "created to demonstrate the futility of individual effort."

Even as Jonathan persists in his desire to understand the sinister society of which he is a part—most especially as he seeks to understand how corporate

decisions are made—the executives devise a way to remove him from the game, to eliminate the game’s most recognized and celebrated player whose popularity undermines the complacency of a politically duped population and whose thirst for knowledge and agency threatens the status quo: “It’s not a game a man is supposed to grow strong in,” Bartholomew threatens. On the one hand, Mr. Bartholomew offers Jonathan a lavish retirement package and announces that Jonathan will be featured in a “multivision” broadcast about his distinguished career. But, on the other hand, the executives surreptitiously alter the rules, always in favor of more carnage and bloodshed, in the hopes that Jonathan will decide to quit, or, at best, be killed: “He must lose,” Mr. Bartholomew insists. In the final game against New York, all semblance of a game—“This wasn’t meant to be a game!” thunders head coach, Rusty—is dismantled in the face of the new rules—no penalties, no substitutions, and no time limit. If sport is what historian Philip Goodhue calls “war without weapons,” then rollerball is war; and the final game between Houston and New York devolves into nothing short of a *mano a mano* battle to the death. Jonathan is the lone survivor of the bloodbath; vindication for the triumph of the individual. “Jonathan! Jonathan! Jonathan!” the crowd roars in a crescendo of blind adulation.

### The Game

As a sport, rollerball is a complex admixture of roller derby, motorcycle racing, handball, and, as film critic Chris Sullion rightly notes, “kicking fuck out of people.” The ultimate purpose of the game is to injure, maim, or kill. The scepter of death routinely hovers over the arena.

The game is played by two teams of 12 players—nine roller skaters and three motorcyclists—in three 20-minute periods. Each period is triggered by a steel ball being shot into a circular arena at over 300 miles per hour. One of the players must capture the ball in a heavily padded glove and attempt to score by jamming the ball into the defending team’s goal at one side of the stadium. The defending team tries to protect its goal or steal the ball. The ball must be held in view at all times. Skaters are permitted to hold onto their own team’s motorbikes and be towed in order to gain greater momentum. Motorcyclists can block the opposing team’s skaters. Skaters can also use force against each other, although not against motorcyclists. Motorcyclists cannot use force at all. Injured or killed players are removed from the arena on stretchers by medics.

Although the established rules offer only the slimmest protection against violence and brutality, as the film wears on, even these rules are relaxed as rollerball assumes an increasingly grotesque form of lethal play. Best described, to borrow Brohm’s words, as “virtually a hospital” (16), as the rules change, the game is perhaps even more appropriately construed as virtually a morgue. As an elaborate and formalized series of rules and actions that integrate the human and mechanical into a parody of what Jewison calls the “sickness and insanity

of contact sports and their allure" (qtd. in Sloan), it is perhaps not surprising that the uniforms of rollerballers resemble the outfits of gladiators—padded uniforms, helmets, and spiked *caestus*-style gloves.

### The Athletes

Rollerball athletes are subjected to a heartless and ruthless regime of sport. The game demands a total disregard for human well-being; violence and brutality are the tools of the rollerballer's trade. Rollerballers "bash in faces," as Bartholomew puts it. All the values of a patriarchal, narcissistic society are played out in rollerball: physical domination, muscle worship, masculine virility, fascistic male chauvinism, sexism, and sexual athleticism (Brohm 15). Jonathan E, the game's ultimate celebrity and symbol, is routinely lionized for being "mean." The Houston team is equally notorious for its "brute speed" and violent style of play: the "Houston fist in the face technique," Jonathan's teammate Moonpie celebrates. In one scene more suited to a Jackie Chan or Bruce Lee movie, the Houston athletes are instructed in preparation for their game against Tokyo—a team steeped in karate and hapkido techniques—in the deadly art of "death blows"; "Drive the jawbone into that mess of nerves" under the ears, Moonpie tells his teammates.

Appropriated by the corporate-political system, the rollerballer's body, as sociologist Geneviève Rail puts it, "becomes a means of production that can be sacrificed for the product." When the athletic body is injured or damaged, "efforts are geared to quickly repair it and return it to its production function" (149). After a particularly vicious assault in the rollerball arena, Jonathan E's teammate Moonpie is reduced to a totally vegetative state; simply another replaceable cog in an industrial machine. Athletes are material commodities, interchangeable gears in a deadly corporate project. As in contemporary, high performance sport, the body, as Brohm writes, is "experienced as an object, an instrument, a technical means to an end, a reified factor of output and productivity, in short, a machine with the job of producing maximum work and energy" (15).

In *Rollerball*, athletes may be well-paid and well-rewarded by the corporations—money, luxuries, women—but they forfeit ownership of their bodies. Jonathan is awash in comforts and conveniences—a beautiful ranch, with all the mod cons, not to mention a helio-pad—but he is as alienated as Orwell's Winston Smith or Huxley's Indian John. He is, as Vanderwerken puts it, "as alienated as Melville's Ishmael" (42). In the twilight of his career, separated from his wife, Ella, who leaves him for a nameless and faceless executive, and the target of myriad opponents seeking to dethrone, if not kill, him, power, fame and material possessions are no longer enough for Jonathan. Alienated from himself and his fellow athletes, he seeks to regain authentic self-realization, to reclaim his very "species being," as Marx describes it (Tucker 129-130). While the rollerball arena is for rollerball athletes what the Circus

Maximus was for the chariot racers, what Ammianus Marcellinus described as their “temple, home, community center and the fulfillment of all their hopes” (qtd. in Harris 221-222), for Jonathan it becomes a “prison of measured time” (Brohm). Jonathan thirsts for agency, meaning, and humanity in the face of a soulless, mind-numbing corporate nightmare.

### The Spectators

Like the athletes, the spectators in *Rollerball*, too, are complicit in the political morality of the game. In the same way that the members of the Houston team relish the game—“I love this game,” Jonathan yells—so the audience thrills at the savagery, drawn into a social spectacle that rationalizes the established order by camouflaging the very socio-political hierarchy by which they are manipulated and oppressed. Rollerball fans become “cheering machines,” and audiences undifferentiated masses mesmerized by a meaningless drama that contributes to “a process of emotional fascistification” (Brohm 187). The rollerball spectator is indoctrinated in the same way that Augustine’s young disciple Alypius was overcome by gladiatorial combat: “For so soon as he saw blood, he therewith drunk down savageness; not turned away, but fixed his eye, drinking in frenzy, unawares, and was delighted with that guilty fight, and intoxicated with the bloody pastime. Nor was he now the man he came [in as], but one of the throng [he joined]” (Augustine 106-107).

The violence bred of rollerball bleeds into everyday acts of mindless destruction and wanton vandalism. In a Fellini-like moment during the film, the guests conclude a fancy dinner party by going onto the lawn and playing with a hand-sized atomic ray gun that incinerates whole trees in an instant. Like Jewison’s rollerball athletes, the inhabitants of the world of *Rollerball* also participate in deformed forms of play and amusement.

### The Ideology

Like most contemporary sport, rollerball is an event, a staging, a constructed spectacle comprised of a complex amalgam of ideological, political, and ludic elements. Beyond the heady sensationalism of a bloody theater—what Horace calls the “vain delights” of spectacles (qtd. in Beacham 119)—the organization, production, and presentation of rollerball articulates social, political, and cultural meanings and provides substance and setting for enacting salient values and expectations. In the same way that the great games of the ancient Mediterranean became spectacular celebrations of the divine pantheon, so rollerball becomes a public demonstration of the power and importance of the governing oligarchy, the all-powerful corporation executives. In the end, rollerball operates as consummate propaganda. With all the sundry elements coordinated into a richly expressive *mise-en-scène*, messages and images are reiterated as emergent political and ideological concepts that reflect and

publicize the regime of the corporate overlords—sport as the aestheticization of politics (Beacham 115-119).

Ever present when Jonathan and the Houston team play at home, Mr. Bartholomew, like Roman Emperors before him, embodies the power, privilege, and prestige of the ruling elite. Played around the globe on multi-vision TV to an audience of two-three billion, rollerball, in fact, becomes a way of inserting the executives into the narrative of power and dominance (Wiedemann 175-176). Rollerball also becomes the primary mechanism for the expression and the manipulation of popular opinion. As entertainment, and a source of pleasure, it secures public support for the operations of the state; as a vicious and sensationalistic sport, it serves as an escape, as a way to distract from reality, to lull a global audience into an addled political stupor. In the same way that Adorno attacked jazz and popular music for distracting people and strengthening the prevailing social order, so also elite level sport depoliticizes and diverts people from any form of political activity that might challenge the status quo.<sup>5</sup> Rollerball, in Adorno's terms, becomes a "symptom of the retrogression of consciousness" (7). Condemned to a life of inhumanity, rollerball athletes serve as ideological shock troops in the mass entertainment and stupefaction of a global audience.

Rollerball also serves a politically powerful cathartic role; it operates as an emotional safety valve that assuages potentially dangerous aggression created by the oppression and boredom of a totally scripted and catered society. In the world of 1984, which is continuously at war and sexually repressed, the daily Two Minute Hate neutralizes frustration, disillusionment, and disappointment. In *Brave New World*, a world always at peace and sexually liberated, promiscuity, the feelies, the scent machine, synthetic music, and soma serve the same purpose (Vanderwerken 40). In the world of *Rollerball*, one without war and sexually stylized and licentious, sport drains the social pus. The crowds at rollerball games vent their spleens with screams, chants, and invective, beating on the steel fence that keeps them from violating the sanctity of the playing arena and beating on each other in paroxysms of excitement and partisanship. From a psycho-sexual perspective, rollerball drains away, in the form of ludic sublimation, surplus repressed sexual energy which cannot be utilized in the prevailing politico-economic system: "The aggression derived from sexual repression can thus be released through athletic achievements and competition ..." (Boehme et al.). Discontent and disaffection are directed not at the ruling elite but at the opposing rollerball team. Drained of all resentment and hostility by the spectacle of brutality and bloodshed, the spectators are disabused of any interest in political action. They are manipulated by pacification. They become indifferent, infantilized, even cretinized (Guttman 150). "By the spectacles," the Roman rhetorician Fronto writes in his *Preamble to History*, "the whole population is conciliated" (qtd. in Futrell 36).



## The Pedagogy

As sociologist Jay Coakley notes, most sport sociologists assume that society is accurately conceptualized in terms of a systems approach. Society is viewed as an organized system of interrelated parts and held together because its members generally endorse the same basic values and because the major social institutions that constitute a functioning society, such as education, the family, the economy, government, and sport, fit together in mutually supportive and constructive ways, each contributing to the smooth operation and general well-being of society as a whole (22). This functionalist approach posits that “sport contributes to personal growth and the preservation of the social order at all levels of interaction” (25). Conflict theory, on the other hand, views society as “an ever-changing set of relationships characterized by inherent differences of interest and disagreement” (26). Social order results from the fact that some groups “use their resources to coerce and subtly manipulate others to accept their view of the world as the correct view” (27). Whereas functionalism emphasizes the unity of society and all that its members share, conflict theorists stress the divisions within society and the struggles that arise out of the pursuit of different material interests. If interdependence and integration characterize the systems approach, conflict and suppression characterize conflict theory. The quest for equilibrium is at the core of functionalism; the struggle for power and influence lies at the core of conflict theories (Wallace and Wolf 62-63).

Because conflict theory invariably does not fit with popular conceptions about the way society is structured and how it operates, and especially the way that sport is viewed more as an inspiration than an opiate, there are few sport films that proffer a critical analysis of sport, especially a neo-Marxist one. “Of the classic sports films,” sportswriter Jack McCallum writes, “precious few ... are truly dark ruminations on American society.” Rather, the sports film typically abides by what McCallum calls “the Rudy Imperative”; they “are fractured fairy tales with soft, gooey centers.” Sports films are typically constructed out of the dialogic exchanges conditioned by the established structure and culture and focus on the traditional mythologies of sport that emphasize the well-known themes of physical prowess, success, heteronormativity, and nationalism (Rowe 357). Or, as *New York Times* sportswriter Richard Sandomir puts it, they are “imbued with the impulse to inspire, or at least to make the movie goer feel good.” This is precisely why *Rollerball* can serve an invaluable pedagogical service; it posits the opposite. It suggests that sport in general, and violent sport in particular, can operate as a powerful social mechanism that generates and intensifies alienation and can be used by the state, and by the economically and politically powerful and privileged, not only in fascist or totalitarian military-police regimes, but even in contemporary capitalist systems, as a tool for coercion, manipulation, and social control.

Both Marx and Engels and Erich Fromm argue that alienation is the central issue in discussing the impact of capitalism on personality, because individuals are denied such basic needs as creativity and identity. In *Rollerball*, they are also denied knowledge. While the entertainment industry produces synthetic excitement, it offers no relief from alienation and no deep common values and meanings (Mills xvii). Paul Hoch argues that sport, in fact, perpetuates social troubles by providing “people a temporary high ... which takes their minds off problems for a while but does nothing to deal with them.” Sport becomes a “distorted frame of reference or identification which encourages people to look for salvation in patently false channels” (16). Similarly, sociologist Peter Berger argues that individuals who reify their social world live an alienated and meaningless life; the “actor becomes *only* that which is acted upon” (86). In increasingly centralized political structures which enact the gradual erosion of traditional beliefs and histories, society is rendered even more vulnerable to fascist or totalitarian success.<sup>6</sup> *Rollerball* is a sober warning about the alienating and dehumanizing properties of mass spectator sport.

The way rollerball is portrayed in *Rollerball*, in fact, points to the way in which all sport can lead to what Marxists call the development of “false consciousness” (Engels 451). People follow and support social practices which are not necessarily in their best interests, but are a form of ideology whose main purpose is to legitimize the position of those in power. To Marx, religion was the best example of an “opium of the masses” (3); rollerball suggests that sport is perhaps our most effective contemporary narcotic. Or, as Hoch more poignantly puts it, the most effective contemporary opiates are “sport spectacles, whiskey and repressively sublimated sex” (65).

Ultimately, *Rollerball* illustrates how power is encoded and exercised in covert ways, infused into everyday practices and forms. As a cathartic experience, rollerball aids in the production of what Michel Foucault calls “docile bodies” (135), bodies that are “manipulated, shaped, trained” (136), inapt bodies from which “the machine required can be constructed” (135). As a mass entertainment spectacle, rollerball demonstrates how power can be displayed and exercised by a governing elite in concealed ways. In this sense, *Rollerball* is illustrative of the sociologist C. Wright Mills’s claim that in modern society,

those who hold power have often come to exercise it in hidden ways: they have moved and are moving from authority to manipulation ... The rational systems hide their power so that no one sees their sources of authority or understands their calculations. For the bureaucracy ... the world is an object to be manipulated (110-111).

In short, *Rollerball* depicts how modern sport stabilizes the established order by diverting the attention and energy of the popular imagination away

from political action. *Rollerball* operates as a cautionary tale that speaks to the numbing effect that sport can exercise on an unwitting population: political infantilization through entertainment. In contemporary society, as Guttman puts it, the “protest against political and economic injustice is drowned out by the spectators’ mindless screams of ecstasy and rage as they identify with the gridiron gladiators and the stock-car drivers” (148).

### Conclusion

*Rollerball* is certainly not one of the best sports films ever made; that honor would likely fall to a film like *Raging Bull* or *Chariots of Fire*. Nor is it one of the most popular. *Rollerball* has never appeared in any ranking of the most popular sports movies. In fact, of all the films that I show in my Sports Cinema senior seminar, every year, without fail, *Rollerball* is listed as everyone’s least favorite, which is why, when I introduce the film, I now enjoin my students to “Sit back and enjoy the film you’re all going to hate.”

But just because students do not enjoy *Rollerball* does not mean that it is not a worthwhile pedagogical text. Students may not like it, but they do appreciate it, and they do recognize the deadly serious message that the film conveys, a message that resonates with them as they recognize the dominant role that sport plays in both their own lives and the lives of Americans in general. Ultimately, they also find that the film makes clear what a Neo-Marxist critique of sport looks like and why, as a theoretical perspective, Neo-Marxism offers them a valuable lens through which to examine and consider the dimensions and consequences of our contemporary obsession with sport, especially violent sports. Students also develop a critical awareness of some of the structural and cultural issues associated with modern sport, including the development of commercialism, the growth of nationalism and militarism, and the perpetuation of racism, sexism, and heteronormativity.

Most students tend to see sport from the functionalist perspective. They see sport as a positive force in society, and they are most comfortable articulating the way in which sport contributes to rather than perverts the system needs of a society: the needs for pattern maintenance and tension management, social integration, goal attainment, and adaptation.<sup>7</sup> Sport is typically viewed in terms of the positive socialization functions it serves in everyday social life. But, as sociologist Alvin Gouldner points out:

Clearly, the trouble with functionalism is that it is committed to the present society, with all its dilemmas, contradictions, tensions, and indeed, with all its immorality. The trouble with functionalism is, in a way, that it is not really committed to social order in general, but only to preserving its own social order. It is committed to making things work despite wars, inequities, scarcity, and degrading work, rather than finding a way out. (342)

What the film *Rollerball* teaches students is that sport can operate as what Herbert Marcuse calls “a new form of control” (34), as a political economy of licit brutality and manipulation which enables, to the advantage of a ruling political and economic elite, a fantastic diversion from the structured inequalities of society. Like the futuristic rollerball, contemporary sport is “an ideological state apparatus” (Althusser 86), a system of compulsive, repetitive and ritualized ceremonies dominated by proto-fascist and national-militaristic rites that emerges as a technique of escapism and distraction. In short, modern sport operates as a form of “repressive satisfaction” (Marcuse 36) that further disempowers the already disempowered. For most students, that is a new, even if disquieting, but certainly a most useful and necessary way to think about modern, high-performance sport.

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## Notes

1. There are other films that offer a Neo-Marxist and Marxist critique of sport, a few of which follow the primary theme in *Rollerball* of killing for entertainment, pacification and manipulation, including *The Hunger Games* series (2012-2015) and *Death Race 2000* (1975).
2. The only scholar who has undertaken a serious analysis of *Rollerball* is Vanderwerken. But, even then, Vanderwerken concentrates on Harrison's short story, not Jewison's film. Mason also cites *Rollerball* as a text that focuses on violence and spectator interest as standard devices in sport science-fiction (130-132).
3. I specifically employ a Neo-Marxist rather than a Marxist perspective because Marxism embraces a somewhat benign view of sports, as the enthusiastic endorsement of sport by successive Communist governments in Europe suggests. For Neo-Marxists, on the other hand, sport is viewed as a capitalistically distorted and corrupted form of play. For a fuller discussion, see Guttman (147-150).
4. Somewhat ironically, Jonathan's former coach, Cletus, now an executive, notes in the film that the NFL and the World Cup are only faint and distant memories.
5. Similar sentiments were expressed in the Roman era. Pylades, for example, told the Emperor Augustus that he should be pleased that the populace spent their free time supporting actors rather than his political opponents (*Macrobius Saturnalia*, 2, 7. 19) and the historian Sallust advised Julius Caesar that he would be well advised to keep the population occupied so that they do not interfere in politics (*Ad Caesarem*, 1, 17). Fronto similarly reported that Trajan well understood the advantages of winning popular support by offering games rather than distributing largesse or grain on the grounds that games kept the people out of trouble by giving them something to do with their free time (*Principia Historiae*, 3, 6. 19).
6. See Gerth and Mills (460-472).
7. See Coakley (22-23).

## Achilles

Huddled in a ring, we break to our formations  
equal in gear and stature, readied in line  
and waiting for the call to do our separate work.

He is unknown from the beginning,  
comfortable in place behind the lines—  
his inevitable charge surprises no one.

He wraps himself around the ball as if it were  
Patroclus, alive again and frail; we wrap  
ourselves around him, charging in a line.

It's been written: his grace in battle unmatched,  
his skill and poise, the way he moved—  
I watched him carry the ball up and down

the field, vaulting like a dancer' felt him in practice  
whipping his body into mine, shoulders crunched  
in my chest like a weapon some god made ...

and his weapon sang under stadium lights, built  
to steal the breath from the ones who met him there,  
cascading to the end like the sea poured out

on our enemies. We cheered him,  
but he was deaf to everything except the urging  
of Patroclus, whom he could not save,

held in his hands, where even rushing to the end  
of the field was no safety for his love, nor rest  
for the goddess-born, held on our shoulders.

*Joshua Kulseth*





# The Female Lawrentian Wrestle in Young Adult Wrestling Novels

Trevor Hill

In her 1979 essay "Women and the Laurentian Wrestle," M. Ann Hall highlighted the lack of female representation in combat sports in the Western world, asking whether it is ever likely that women will be able to have their own example of the "Lawrentian Wrestle," referencing the masculine nude wrestling scene in D.H. Lawrence's 1920 novel *Women in Love*. Hall describes it thus: "Lawrentian wrestle ... represents a suitable and acceptable means whereby boys and men settle their differences, have fun or merely experience the sheer joy of physical contact in demonstrating their strength and superiority, one over the other" (39).

Hall claimed that, in 1979, the idea of a Lawrentian wrestle had "no relevance for women" as social norms dictated such interaction between females to be unacceptable, unnatural and/or sexually suggestive. For this reason, the social acceptability of female participation combat sports was limited (in sports such as Judo) or otherwise non-existent in sports such as boxing and many forms of wrestling. The essay finishes with a rallying call:

It is of the utmost importance to the future of women's sports that the "Lawrentian wrestle" becomes relevant for girls and women. Females can no longer be denied the opportunities to subdue another (either male or female) through physical force and learn, perhaps to their astonishment, that aggressive, physical grappling, can be healthy, natural and fun. (Hall 41)

The twenty-first century has seen a huge rise in female combat sports, both in Olympic disciplines, such as Taekwondo, boxing and wrestling, and the

emergence of such female stars of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) as Ronda Rousey (a former Judo Olympian). A particular increase has been noted in the number of teenage girls participating in such sports (see Vertonghen et al.). It might then seem that Hall's dream of a female Lawrentian wrestle has been realized, but in 1979, Hall would wait over two decades to see it. However, as researchers like Sijord and Kristiansen have pointed out, even in the first decade of the twenty-first century, female wrestlers still faced a struggle against sexualization and "exoticization" (or even "eroticization") in some areas of the media and society.

Despite a long history of male combat sports in events like the Olympic Games, the inclusion of female events is more recent. Judo was admitted in 1968, but the first female event was not admitted until 1988. Women's boxing, likewise, was banned by the Amateur Boxing Association (ABA) in UK for 116 years, the ban being lifted only in 1996, while internationally, it was excluded from the Olympics until 2009.<sup>1</sup> Wrestling has a similar story, having been a founding sport of the modern Olympics in 1896, yet allowing female events only in 2004. In the United States, the passing of the federal civil rights law Title XI in 1972 opened the door for greater female participation in athletics in educational establishments, but many felt it was at the expense of "male" sports, and numerous schools closed their wrestling programs. In recent years, however, female wrestling, particularly among schoolgirls, has become one of the fastest growing sports in the country, arguably due to the inclusion of the sport in the Olympic Games.<sup>2</sup> It would seem, then, that we may finally talk of a female Lawrentian wrestle in combat sports, but is this also reflected in literature dealing with the subject? In particular, can we yet talk of the Lawrentian wrestle in YA literature about female scholastic wrestling?

Superficial investigation by this author suggests a rise in the number of Young Adult (YA) novels dealing with females in combat sports such as MMA and kickboxing: the website Goodreads, for instance, lists over twenty titles written in the last fifteen years which feature female protagonists (presumably there are more), although only two feature girls in scholastic wrestling. This article examines four works of YA literature and analyzes the different portrayals of young female athletes, asking whether we can finally talk about a "Lawrentian wrestle" in depictions of female scholastic wrestling.

Four works have been selected for analysis: *There's a Girl in my Hammerlock* (hereafter called *There's a Girl*) by Jerry Spinelli (1991); *Perfected by Girls* by Alfred C. Martino (2012); *Pinned* by Sharon G. Flake (2012);<sup>3</sup> and "The Other Pin," a short story in *Athletic Shorts* by Chris Crutcher (1989). My analysis will also utilize several interviews with the relevant authors about their ideas and intentions which were carried out especially for this article.<sup>4</sup> Before undertaking this analysis, it is necessary to introduce some information about wrestling for those readers less familiar with the sport.

## Wrestling as a sport

Wrestling is one of the oldest combat sports in the world, dating back several millennia. It is found in various forms throughout the world, from the ritualized traditional styles of Japanese Sumo to the more rustic styles, such as the Cumberland & Westmorland style in England. The most internationally practiced forms include Judo and the so-called "Olympic" styles of Freestyle and Greco-Roman.

Competitive sport wrestling differs much from the theatrical spectacles of Professional Wrestling, best known through organizations like WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) which is generally "worked," meaning the outcome is usually pre-arranged. Roland Barthes shows how Professional Wrestling often utilizes theatrical roles for its shows (17); in popular English terminology, these include the "blue eye" (hero) and the "heel" (villain).<sup>5</sup> In the case of females, as highlighted by Malhotra and Jaggi, this may result in a fetishized image of women (76). This is apparent when comparing the wrestling influences of Maisie Potter from *There's a Girl* and Mel Radford from *Perfected by Girls*. Maisie, who has no sport wrestling background at all, follows Professional Wrestling, whose female stars are stereotypes of "femininity," such as the heroic Washerwoman (with her bucket "mop of doom") or the heels Ma Barker (named after a real-life female bank robber) and The Floozy. In contrast, Mel, the serious sport wrestler, has a poster on her wall of Tricia Saunders, a pioneer of women's Olympic wrestling. (It is important to consider that these novels are twenty-five years apart, either side of the Olympic inclusion.) Furthermore, Professional Wrestling often uses exaggerated techniques or choreographed moves which do not belong in sport wrestling, as illustrated to comic effect in *There's a Girl* when Maisie floors another wrestler using a flying drop-kick, an illegal move in sport wrestling (Spinelli 69). The style of wrestling featured in the chosen works is scholastic wrestling, practiced in school wrestling clubs throughout the U.S., the background of which it is also necessary to outline.

## Scholastic wrestling in the U.S.

The United States has a long tradition of wrestling, including Native styles and those brought by European settlers, and it has produced a number of world famous competitors in the pre-Olympic era.<sup>6</sup> In 1905, several states introduced organized wrestling in the school system, which eventually developed its own codified rule set. This became known as Collegiate style and was adopted in 1928 by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA).<sup>7</sup> A modified version of the Collegiate system, known as "folkstyle," developed in high school and middle school, and now has a series of state, regional and national competitions. Currently, 49 of the 50 states in the U.S. sanction wrestling within schools, the first female teams being formed in 1993 and the first female championships being held in 1997.<sup>8</sup> These two dates are particularly important with regard to the works examined in this article. Prior to the creation of a

girls' league, female wrestlers were more likely to train and wrestle with boys, something all of the chosen texts depict.

### Scholastic and Collegiate Wrestling in Literature

Scholastic and Collegiate wrestling are almost entirely a North American phenomenon, due to their long history in U.S. education (there is no comparable system in UK), and are probably best known to many readers through works of writers like John Irving, a former wrestler and coach, whose novels often feature wrestlers, such as the eponymous hero of *The World According to Garp*. These works, however, are aimed more at an adult market. Where literature of scholastic wrestling is most visible is in the YA market, with numerous titles being written predominantly about young male competitors.<sup>9</sup>

One of the earliest and most influential YA novels concerning school wrestling was *Vision Quest* (1979) by Terry Davis, which follows the pre-match preparation of Loudon Swain for the final match of his school career. The book was blurbed by John Irving and in 1985 was made into a film starring Matthew Modine. *Vision Quest* explores a number of areas related to masculinity and wrestling and is particularly descriptive of the hard training, weight-cutting and extremely boisterous horseplay among the young (male) wrestlers. David M. La Mar's 1991 review of wrestling novels for English teachers, "Grappling with the Shortage of Young-Adult Wrestling Fiction," suggests using wrestling novels as a way of getting students who wrestled interested in reading and literature. He goes on to review four YA novels written between 1989 and 1990: *Vision Quest* by Terry Davis; *Wrestling with Honor* by David Klass; *Rusty Fertlanger*, *Lady's Man* by Christi Killien; and *Takedown* by Matt Christopher. All the books have male protagonists and all are written by male authors except one, *Rusty Fertlanger*. This novel has Rusty wrestling a girl, reinforcing that even at that period, several authors found this an interesting subject. The trope has appeared in several books, including the four books analyzed in this article.<sup>10</sup>

### The Novels and the Writers

The works selected for this article represent different periods in the history of female scholastic wrestling. Crutcher and Spinelli's works were both written in the years before the first all-female team was organized, whereas Martino and Flake's novels were written some years after the inclusion of women's wrestling in the Olympics. **As such, they can be seen to illustrate different opinions and actualities about the sport (particularly Martino).**

**Of the four writers, Martino probably has the most personal experience with wrestling, having competed as a high school wrestler and coached both boys and girls for a number of years.** Spinelli and Crutcher admit to having had "a few classes" of wrestling but mostly work from being fans of the sport and knowing wrestlers (in Spinelli's case, his son). Crutcher, a competitive swimmer, comments, "We were blood brothers with the wrestlers. Spectators

at swim meets were mostly wrestlers and spectators at wrestling matches were mostly swimmers. We had the same work ethic" (Crutcher, "re"). He is also a close friend of Terry Davis and edited *Vision Quest*. Sharon G. Flake admits to having had no previous relationship with wrestling before *Pinned*, but she says she carried out a lot of research by watching videos and attending training sessions of a local club (having the coach check her writing). In each case, the reason for including a female wrestler character was different.

Spinelli's novel focuses on thirteen-year-old Maisie Potter, who joins her school wrestling team, the Ravens, after failing to make the cheerleading squad, but also to get close to Eric DeLong, a boy she is interested in. While attempting to be accepted by the team she faces resistance from other (male) wrestlers and the school authorities, as well as her schoolmates and adults in her town. Spinelli, who has written a number of YA novels featuring both male and female protagonists, became interested in writing about a schoolgirl wrestler after seeing a photograph in a newspaper of one such athlete at a weigh-in wearing a swimsuit (an event he also uses in his novel); however, he admits he has never actually seen a girl competing in a match and they were still something of a novelty when he wrote *There's a Girl*.

Chris Crutcher is also an established writer of YA fiction, much of which is based on sport and explores often controversial topics. "The Other Pin" appears in his collection of short stories *Athletic Shorts*, which, as the title suggests, has sport as a dominant motif and examines aspects of self-image and sexuality. "The Other Pin" is a stand-alone story which follows and is coupled with "The Pin." "The Pin" portrays an almost titanic wrestling match between a father and son (Johnny Rivers); as such, it examines aspects of masculinity, inter-generational conflict and the struggle of Alpha males. "The Other Pin" focuses on Johnny's friend Petey Shropshire and his upcoming match with a female wrestler, Chris Byers. Chris is a secondary character but the catalyst of the plot. The story differs from the other works in that it is written in the third person from Petey's side, whereas the three novels are written in the first person voice of the female protagonist (Sharon Flake's *Pinned* also has sections by a male narrator). The focus on the male wrestler is rooted in the story's inception.

Crutcher wrote the piece as a form of memorial to a young man he had met while working as a therapist with troubled teens:

He was on his high school wrestling team. That was cool, he said, but he had to wrestle a girl. Lose and he'd be a laughingstock, win, and he'd have "beaten a girl." There were no, or very few, girls' wrestling teams back then, so it was what it was. We kidded around about how to handle it, and somewhere in our kidding, talked about what turned out to be the ending of "The Other Pin." Didn't happen in real life. ("re")

Following the young man's death in a road accident, Crutcher decided to "immortalize his sense of humor" in a short story. It is important to note, however, that Crutcher is now critical of the ending, where Chris and Petey perform a routine more suited to Professional Wrestling, parodying gender roles, admitting it is sexist and deserved more criticism than it received at the time. He attributes the sexism to his upbringing in a "macho lumber town in Idaho" where "the misogyny was rampant" ("re").

The protagonist of Alfred C. Martino's *Perfected by Girls* is fifteen-year-old Melinda "Mel" Radford, an accomplished wrestler and member of the school team, which is captained by her older brother, Cole. Martino became interested in writing about female wrestlers following his earlier novel, *Pinned*, about two male high school wrestlers. Martino dismisses any idea he was attempting to redress the lack of coverage of female wrestlers:

When I was in the process of finishing my debut novel "Pinned" (published in 2005), I started thinking about writing a novel about a girl wrestler because I thought it would be interesting to examine how she would deal with female issues during the season, practice with boys, how others would look at her, etc. I began interviewing the few girls, at the high school and college level, who I could find and contact. ("From")

Martino's research was enlightening and influenced the dynamic of the novel. He says,

It was really more about how to write a female protagonist than a female versus male wrestler. What I learned in my interviews, which surprised me to a certain extent, was that girls who were involved in the sport loved it every bit as boy wrestlers did. They spoke "like wrestlers." So, as I was writing the novel, it became more about how does a teenage girl think and feel and act away from wrestling, and how does she deal with wrestling off the mat. (Martino, "From")

As well as the "female issues" which he mentions, Martino deals with themes similar to Spinelli's, concerning the attitudes of the school administration and some male wrestlers and coaches with whom Mel comes into conflict.

Sharon G. Flake's *Pinned* approaches the subject from a different angle, in that writing about a wrestler was not her initial or primary motivation. Flake's works (*Pinned* was her eighth book), deal with aspects of young adult life--relationships, romance, self-image, bullying, school, etc.--usually with African American protagonists. *Pinned* is about the lives and relationship of two African American teenagers, Autumn and Adonis, and is narrated in first person by both characters. Autumn is a successful wrestler (and the only female wrestler in her school), whereas Adonis, having no legs, is a wheelchair user

but also the manager of the wrestling team, a fiercely competitive academic student, and the object of Autumn's unwanted affection. Whereas the legless Adonis is extremely successful academically, he lacks certain social skills. He dislikes Autumn for her outgoing nature and what he sees as a lackadaisical approach to her studies, while admiring her skill and dedication to wrestling. In contrast, Autumn is gregarious and a superb cook but lacking in academic skills. Her parents threaten to stop her wrestling if her schoolwork doesn't improve. Both characters have weaknesses which hold them back, leading to the *Pinned* of the title.

Flake's use of wrestling differs from the approach of the male authors in that whereas they started with the aim of writing about a wrestler, Flake wished to show characters wrestling with life problems such as academia, morality, social interaction, etc. However, while this motif of "wrestling" is central to the text, the sport was not her primary choice:

I am not a sports person. But I had this character with a big problem, a reading deficit. I needed her to be strong in another way. My editor suggested knitting. I don't knit either and have no interest in it. Why wrestling? I'm not sure why it came to mind except that you have to have skill in it, be physically strong or become strong along the way, that mentally it strengthens you and that people in the sport have keen minds. I wanted readers to see my protagonist as intelligent in many ways, not only academic[ally]. And I wanted my readers to think about what it means to be smart ... who is smart and who isn't and to see this kid is wrestling not just on the mat but in the classroom as well and that she is capable of winning on many fronts. (Flake, "re")

A further reason Flake decided upon wrestling as Autumn's sport was to avoid specific racial and cultural stereotypes. She says,

I am always thinking about how African American youth are portrayed. So, I try to take them out of boxes, not to stereotype them ... That's why Autumn also wrestles. For a moment, I thought "Hey, why not make her a basketball player?" But in the States we hear so much about basketball players struggling academically that I felt I would only be reinforcing what people thought they knew about these teens. (Flake, "re")

Each writer, as may be seen, had a different motivation in the creation of their wrestler character as well as varying experiences of female athletes and, indeed, being female. The next section of this article will examine the representation of the female wrestlers as young women, physically and emotionally.

## Representation of Female Wrestlers

A common theme within the studied works is the recurring friction from social attitudes toward female wrestlers. Each of the young wrestlers experiences some degree of negativity toward their participation in the sport. More often than not, it focuses on perceived masculinity on their part, such as Maisie being voted runner up in the “hunkiest boy” competition (Spinelli 158) or some suggestion of sexual gratification (straight or lesbian). The masculine nature of the majority of wrestling would seem to suggest any female taking part might have an “unfeminine” aspect to her character, reinforcing Hall’s comments about social attitudes to female combat sports.

In contrast to this stereotype, the young women in the studied texts are all described as being very feminine and physically attractive in a more traditionally accepted way. In *Perfected by Girls*, Mel Radford is frequently complimented on her figure by her friend Jade and her boyfriend, Stewart. Mel dresses in fashionable and sexy clothes and takes great care with her off-mat appearance, using make-up and pedicures to combat the ravages of training (Martino 11-14). As well as being a skilled wrestler, Autumn is a talented cook, although she does not fit into the stereotype of the large Black woman in the kitchen. Indeed, it is made clear that the hard training of wrestling has made her toned and muscular. Adonis, while disapproving of her character, finds he has a fascination with Autumn’s legs, something accentuated by his own lack of legs. Maisie Potter, is, as a novice wrestler, understandably the least successful wrestler, winning only by forfeit. She is not, however, un-athletic, being a former successful player on the school basketball team and a hopeful for the cheerleader squad. That Eric DeLong tries to date her after breaking up with the beautiful Liz Lampley would also suggest that Maisie is, despite her “hunkiest boy” nomination, rather attractive. She is, however, aggressive and quick to get physical, as shown early in the novel when she confronts Liz (Spinelli 13). An aggressive streak is something shared by all the girls to some extent, both on and off the mat. Likewise, they are all intelligent and to some degree witty, if not downright “sassy,” as shown by Maisie’s narration and Mel’s banter with her family and friends. Both Autumn and Maisie spend time playing or watching TV, often professional wrestling, with younger siblings, and Autumn spends a lot of time cooking for others and planning her catering business with her best friend. Each girl has a romantic interest in a boy and, apart from wrestling, they are all portrayed as otherwise “ordinary” teenage girls with the kinds of interests associated with their gender and age group.

Of the four girls, Chris Byers, from “The Other Pin,” is the one we know least about, other than her family situation; she has older brothers and a younger sister with whom she hangs out at the local mall, where Petey and Johnny first encounter them. Crutcher’s description of her as “cloned from Johnny’s Advanced Math Fantasies—necessary daydreams that got him through algebra and geometry .... tall and dark, with nearly jet black hair and eyes so green he



could mow them" (60) makes it clear that she is "a fox" (as Johnny describes her a page later). The girl's subsequent revelation, having floored Johnny with a punch after his lewd remarks about the upcoming match, that she is Chris Byers demonstrates Crutcher's manipulation of stereotypes for comic purposes. He says,

It was a deliberate attempt at going against the stereotype of girl jocks in general. Again this was back in the eighties and when Title IX passed here in the states, male coaches and high school administrators were more often than not angered that they had to share facilities and workout time with girls. I was a close friend of a very successful girls' basketball and volleyball coach, and she told me story after story about her players getting hassled and called butch or "lesbos" etc. (Crutcher, "re")

Chris is also known as a competent wrestler who, forfeits aside, has actually won some bouts by wrestling, unlike Maisie, all of whose "wins" come from forfeits.

Sharon G. Flake's portrayal of Autumn in *Pinned* is made rather complex by Autumn's socio-economic status and certain aspects of African American culture. Autumn's family situation (her parents have literacy problems and therefore lower-level jobs) differentiates her from characters such as Mel and Maisie, who both come from a higher economic and academic level of society. Therefore, the life choices available to the family units differ significantly: the threat to Mel's wrestling comes from her rich grandmother, who disapproves of wrestling and wants to integrate her into the family firm, while Autumn's parents feel forced to threaten their daughter with a ban in an effort to improve her grades.

As noted previously, the depictions of the four characters show them as otherwise "normal" girls who, for various reasons, are engaged in competitive wrestling, something generally shown to be unusual in their respective schools as well as much of the wider society. Considering Hall's comment about the necessity of the female Laurentian wrestle and the importance of females realizing the enjoyment of combat sports, it is useful to examine why the girls in the selected works take up and take part in the sport and how it is accepted (or not) by those around them.

### **Reasons and Resistance**

A recurrent theme throughout all the works is the struggle which schoolgirl wrestlers have in being allowed to wrestle and being taken seriously as athletes. Much of the opposition is due to a belief that wrestling is not a "girl's sport." Instead, it is conceived of and portrayed by many as a supreme expression of masculinity. To analyze the potential effects of a female attempting to enter this world, it is useful to consider the works of Cornwall and Lindisfarne

on hierarchies of masculinity. In their 1994 work, *Dislocating Masculinity*, Cornwall and Lindisfarne explore the idea that what they refer to as the “arena” of masculinities is inhabited by a variety of character types who compete for power and status through the subjection of others, especially through a process known as “feminization,” whereby they attempt to dominate and reduce the others in status. The lower the status, the nearer to a state of feminization (Cornwall & Lindisfarne 11-47). This concept is easily applied to wrestling and suggests that the reluctance of male wrestlers to face a female may be, in part, the fear of being feminized by the lowest of the hierarchy--a female! Likewise, it will be suggested that the resistance of school authorities illustrates attempts to keep females “feminized” in their position.

Of the four female wrestlers, Autumn, of *Pinned*, is the only one who faces no resistance from the school authorities. Indeed, when Autumn’s parents threaten to ban her from wrestling as an incentive to study harder, it is her wrestling coach who offers to help her with her academic studies. Considering Flake’s use of wrestling to show how Autumn is skilled in a particular field but struggles in another, adding barriers to Autumn’s entry into wrestling might have risked complicating the narrative, whereas Flake’s technique of reversing the situation provides an interesting contrast to the other girls: Autumn’s risk of exclusion from the sport is not related to her sex *and* it is a problem which she has some control over, if she can convince herself to accept the help offered. There is a hint of foreshadowing in Autumn’s opening lines: “Here’s what I like about wrestling. You work hard and discipline yourself, and you can be somebody in this sport. And it don’t matter if you big or small. Fat or skinny. Rocking killer grades or not” (Flake 1). Autumn at no point has to justify her sport. From the outset of the novel she appears to enjoy her wrestling without the shadow of exclusion hanging over her. As such, she fulfills Hall’s ideal to some extent.

In Crutcher’s “The Other Pin,” Petey Shropshire asks Chris Byers about her wrestling career:

“Yeah, but why did you get into it? I mean, why wrestling? They have other girls’ sports.”

“I liked it.”

“Yeah, but how would you know that in the first place? I mean, something had to get you to wrestle the first time.” (Crutcher 72)

While Chris’s answer is simple and would doubtless please M. Ann Hall, Petey feels there must be some other reason for a girl to take part in a male sport like wrestling (clumsily mentioning mud or Jell-o wrestling). This conundrum has him visualizing a young Chris “looking into the mirror in junior high and thinking earrings would look better in cauliflower ears” (72), suggesting that for many people, a female entering into a male pastime involves some form of sacrifice of femininity by adopting something which might be a badge of honor

among males (in this case, exchanging pretty ears for a wrestler's cauliflower ears). Chris has older brothers who were champion wrestlers and was a skillful wrestler herself in junior high, even being recruited onto the school team by the coach (undoubtedly male). However, her parents were later forced to go to court when her high school refused to let a girl wrestle. Chris's story illustrates several things: the influence of siblings (who play with her using wrestling), the support of the parents and the resistance of the school despite the time period being after the implementation of Title IX. Her situation is mirrored, yet also contrasted, by Mel's experience.

In comparison to Chris, Mel is in a better situation in that her high school lets her wrestle without a need for legal action; however, it is apparent that her entry into the wrestling team is reliant not only on males in general, but also her male family connections. Mel's older brother, Cole, is the school's team captain, although he seems somewhat ambivalent about her presence on the team. Following a newspaper article where her coach voices his disapproval of mixed-sex wrestling, she comments, "I'd always wondered if the only reason I was given permission to wrestle was because my brother was one of the best wrestlers on the team. I guess I'd been right all along" (Martino 147). This is echoed by her father, following Mel's being heavily misquoted in a bogus interview: "If you weren't Cole's sister, do you think you'd be treated fairly by everyone on the team?" (190). The principal later openly admits that it was only the presence of Cole on the team which convinced them that she wouldn't be "too much of a distraction" (199). In addition, Mrs. Radford's objection to Mel's cutting weight to be the first girl to compete at varsity level, thus making the new coach look good, suggests that for all her insight and cockiness, Mel is not totally aware of the powers blocking her or utilizing her for their own purpose.

An even more sinister point is that following a private interview with the principal, Mel had to write an essay about why she wanted to wrestle, something no male student had had to do, something she kept secret from everybody, including her parents, except Jade. The essay appears symbolic of the experience of many other female wrestlers in the chosen texts (and reality) whose entry into a male dominion is reliant on the approval of male authority and subject to requirements not applied to their male counterparts. Mel's isolation as a female wrestler demonstrates the importance of her contact with other female wrestlers at an all-female training clinic soon after her controversial "interview" is published.

Although Mel, like Chris Byers, has the support of her parents, she questions how strong the parental support is. It is not until she sees her friend-to-be Odessa wrestle at a tournament that she really begins to appreciate the possibility of a female seriously being a wrestler: "At that time it never occurred to me that a girl could wrestle for real. I mean, I'd always kind of wondered about it, but I was never taken seriously by my mom and dad. I think they

figured I was just trying to be rebellious, which was strange since I'd grown up around wrestling mats, watching all of Cole's matches" (59). Her contact with other female wrestlers becomes a source of strength and reassurance as she and Odessa, also a lone female wrestler, find solidarity in each other, something later strengthened by Mel's attendance at the female wrestling clinic.

Of all the girls, Maisie's entry into the sport is the most detailed and, in some ways, the most complex. Her initial motivation is to be near her romantic interest, Eric DeLong, and her knowledge of wrestling is limited to Professional Wrestling on TV. While not having to write an essay, she does have to convince not only her principal and coach but also her parents that she is serious about taking up wrestling (Spinelli 28-30). Even her first appearance at the try-outs ignites the anger of her brother and later the disdain of some friends and schoolmates, as well as many of the wrestlers, for whom the wrestling room is not the place for a female.

It is clear within three of the novels that the girls are forced at various levels to justify their participation in a sport which is readily open to boys. Their desire to take part in wrestling, something some of them have grown up around, is often considered dubious and resisted by the predominantly male administrative figures. This brings to mind Hall's comment that females are regularly *denied* the experience and "joy" of physical pastimes such as combat sports. It also illustrates that even if they are not denied the right to participate, they are allowed to only at the pleasure of a male-dominated establishment (both the school authorities and the wrestling fraternity). That the girls have to wrestle with prejudice to embrace the sport signals some of the difficulties they will have once they start practicing and how their sex/gender is questioned and, to some extent, manipulated.

### **Female Wrestlers as Sexual Suspects<sup>11</sup>**

Following her first tournament, Maisie Potter begins to realize that the extent of opposition to her new pastime is much greater than the cold-shouldering she has received at school from her (former) friends and basketball teammates. It has also taken a much darker tone, one which is reflected in the experience of the other girl-wrestlers: the questioning of her sexuality.

Prior to the tournament, Maisie has felt opinion swing against her, not least from her best friend, Holly, who is fiercely critical of Maisie's joining the wrestling team to get close to Eric (Spinelli 42). However, the article in the local morning newspaper following the tournament reveals deeper opposition in some interviews with those in attendance. While some commenters are supportive, such as the female teacher who wishes she had had such courage at Maisie's age, others are more negative: "'She ought to go out for some girl stuff. She don't belong here' ... 'She's weird'" and, hinting at future attacks, "'I hope she's not looking for too many dates. Guys'd be afraid she'd squash 'em'" (142). Subsequent letters to the editor illustrate a perceived notion that a

female's wish to wrestle is based on some "deviant" aspect of sexuality: "Are my tax dollars really going to girl wrestlers? What next? Are they going to fill the gym with mud and have the boys and girls mud wrestle at once? ... Are they running a school up there or a brothel?" (144). Another letter attacks Maisie directly, stating, "'Obviously the girl is oversexed'" (144). Subsequently, the jokes around Maisie at school become more sexually loaded, culminating in her humiliation at the school prom when she is voted runner up in "The Hunkiest Boy at the Dance" (158) and her own school supporters chanting "Potter, Potter, She's our man!"

In *Perfected by Girls*, Mel Radford sums up her frustration after having to endure yet another "lesbian" jibe in class:

Ha, ha, ha ... the lone girl on the wrestling team is a lesbian. How cliché. Like I haven't heard that a thousand times. Girl wrestles because she wants to be a guy, or she wants to roll around with guys on a mat. Either she's a self-hating chick who really wishes she had testicles, or she's a slut who wants guys' hands all over her body. (Martino 132)

The sexual defamation of female wrestlers is shown to run contrary to the widespread treatment of male wrestlers. The males do not appear to suffer taunts of homoeroticism within the community. In addition, whereas the girls are accused of sexual motives, it is notable that it is some of the males around them who engage in sexual harassment or assault, often without any negative consequences for themselves. Indeed, for young men like Johnny Rivers ("The Pin" and "The Other Pin"), such banter seems to enhance their masculine charm. Even Mel describes her brother Cole as "a guy slut" and says, "being co-captain of the varsity wrestling team ... is a golden ticket for hooking up" (137). The irony is not lost on Mel.

As well as the oft-cited mud wrestling, wrestling is occasionally used as a metaphor for sexual activity, but only when a girl is involved. Petey Shropshire's initial meeting with Chris Byers has Johnny Rivers lewdly describing the forthcoming match in terms of sexual contact (Crutcher 65), while Stewart, Mel's boyfriend, suggests she show him some wrestling moves in the bedroom (Martino 143). If such comments from peers seem inappropriate, the father of Mel's friend Jade "has this creepy way of asking about my favorite wrestling moves, when I know he doesn't care at all. I'm sure he just wants to hear me say, 'hi-crotch' or 'chest to chest'" (40).

A more serious form of sexual harassment is that of physical contact. While female wrestlers are accused of desiring male contact, it is the boys who are "'accidentally' copping a feel" (16). Throughout the novel, Mel talks about opponents and training partners attempting to touch her sexually during clinches, and one of the moments of camaraderie during the women's wrestling clinic she attends occurs when Mel's friend Odessa recounts the time

she wrestled a boy who got “a boner” (224). Odessa’s humor hides the fact that, in her early days of middle school wrestling, she was sexually assaulted by a teammate several times during training, but the coach did nothing (132).

The sexual taunts and jokes against female wrestlers reinforce the masculine domination of the sport, highlighting the sex of the wrestlers and diminishing their status as serious athletes. Male wrestlers are not shown to receive such treatment, and even such incidents as those in *Vision Quest* where one character puts another’s gum-shield down his own jockstrap (Davis 88) are seen as acceptable banter and horseplay. In the case of female wrestlers, it becomes an act of exclusion and (attempted) dominance. However, the resistance of wrestlers and coaches, while potentially exclusionary, is more often performed under the guise of training and competition, and while based on the girls’ sex, is not always of a “sexual” nature, although no less demoralizing.

### **Wrestlers Pushing Back**

As previously shown, the resistance to girls’ wrestling comes not just from the school authorities but also from fellow students and their parents. To compound this problem, some of the greatest opposition comes from within the sport itself. Rather than welcoming females to the sport, many coaches and wrestlers are shown to actively resent and resist females’ inclusion. The methods of resistance come from within the sport and training, as if to attempt to demonstrate that the sport itself is rejecting females. However, it is also possible to find approaches which allow the girls to be accepted, as we shall see below.

The attitude toward female wrestlers varies among both coaches and teammates. Coaches range from being encouraging to ambivalent and obstructive, as seen by coaches forfeiting matches. Whereas some wrestlers accept their female counterparts, others do not and change their training tactics accordingly. In *Perfected by Girls*, one boy specifically uses hard techniques against Mel in training because of his belief that girls shouldn’t be wrestling (Martino 18). In contrast, Maisie’s teammates deliberately let her win, thus undermining her training. In competition, too, the wrestlers’ sex might be used against them, as Adonis observes in *Pinned* when Autumn is taunted by a rival about her menstruation and breast size (Flake 80-1).

The attitude toward female wrestlers, especially in mixed competition, appears to have its roots in male insecurity. Wrestling being considered a “male” sport, women are a threat to masculine status. Mel suggests that people think she learned a lot of technique from her brother: “Maybe they don’t want to admit a girl can have more wrestling smarts than them” (Martino 8). Perhaps the underlying reason is best summed up by Adonis, who says, “A girl in this sport can accomplish a lot. But that does not mean every guy likes it. Most guys do not want to lose to a girl. With us it becomes a mental thing: how to win

against a girl and not be embarrassed. With girls, it's physical. We are much stronger than they are" (Flake 82).

This feeling of a no-win situation against a girl wrestler is the heart of Petey Shropshire's dilemma in "The Other Pin": win, and you beat "a girl"; lose, and you lost to a girl. "It's humiliating ... You don't win against Chris Byers" (Crutcher 56). Here we can see an example of the fear of feminization of a male by the ultimate example of femininity--a girl. There is, however, a technique which allows the male wrestler to avoid this humiliation (although not an option in Petey's case): avoidance, refusal to wrestle a girl--to forfeit the match.

While Autumn's relationship with her school is the least problematic, she still experiences opposition from male counterparts: "This guy on my team quit 'cause he couldn't get with wrestling no girl, he said 'Even at practice.' He not the first boy to quit on me. Won't be the last, either" (Flake 7). **The other characters also have such experiences. Mel's mother comments after a similar occurrence, "These boys shouldn't be allowed to avoid you" (Martino 165).** The boycott of female wrestlers also extends to competitions, where coaches and wrestlers alike occasionally refuse to participate in mixed matches. While it occurs in the other texts, it is the effect on Maisie which is most apparent and happens from her very first match. Maisie's coach has a particular ritual which he performs with each wrestler before their bout:

He takes your face in his hands, and it's just you and him, and he goes, "You can do it" or "Ready to have fun?" Something like that. And then he stands behind you, real close [and wraps his arms around the wrestler] and then you're off your feet because he's lifting you, lifting you and bouncing you in the air .... It's one final exercise to stretch your bones, shake you loose, get you ready. But it's more. It's you and your coach. It's our coach lifting you up. (Spinelli 138)

However, before Maisie undergoes this ritual, her coach returns with the news that her opponent has forfeited the match. Although Maisie wins her bout by default, she returns from the mat, deprived of her moment with her coach and her initiation as a competitive wrestler, only to witness her teammate undergoing the ritual. This event is all the more poignant when one considers that Coach Cappelli's previous attitude to Maisie has been mixed. Despite being initially reluctant to accept her, he attempts to break down sexist barriers in his own gym by confronting the matter of sex.

### **Unsexing the Wrestler**

During the meeting where Maisie and her parents meet her principal and the school's wrestling coach, Coach Cappelli makes his disapproval of her joining the club clear but also shows his willingness to put aside his biases: "When it

comes down to the final cut day, I won't care if she's a boy, a girl or a banana. If it can wrestle and keep its grades up, it's on my team" (Spinelli 30). And while the coach is of such a mind, he finds attitudes toward Maisie in the training hall are not only misogynistic, some are based on embarrassment caused by making contact with certain parts of the female anatomy.

As Coach Cappelli comments, "you can't go very far in wrestling without sooner or later jamming your arm between somebody's legs" (90), although a number of the boys are reluctant to jam their arms between the legs of a female wrestler. To overcome the resistance, Coach Cappelli resorts to standing Maisie up before the team and declaring, "this is *not* a girl. This is *not* a female. This is a *wrestler*. Period. There are no boys on my team. There are no girls on my team. There are wrestlers. That's all" (91). He then proceeds with a desensitizing exercise whereby he has the whole Ravens team shouting "crotch" individually and in unison: "As far as I'm concerned- as far as *you're* concerned- there is no difference between a crotch and an elbow, except where they're located" (92).

The coach's technique attempts to gain acceptance of the female wrestler by negating, or neutralizing, her sex. While it could be argued that in neutralizing her sex, the coach also removes the chance to wrestle "as a woman," Hall's complaint concerning the Lawrentian wrestle suggested females were being "... denied the opportunities to subdue another (either male or female) through physical force" (41). Coach Cappelli's tactic may be seen as removing the concepts of sex and gender from the sporting arena, therefore not only allowing a female to wrestle but also contesting the notion of females wrestling with males as being some form of sexual deviancy. In spite of his efforts, however, it is left to Maisie to further the process when the coach's attempt fails. She does this through "The Nutcracker."

Having realized that the male wrestlers are deliberately losing to her in training, Maisie demands the right to undergo something called "the Nutcracker," where one wrestler (the Nut) takes on ten others one at a time for up to thirty seconds or a pin, this being potentially longer than a proper wrestling bout (Spinelli 107). There is no weight division and Maisie finishes the Nutcracker bloodied and unconscious. In spite of this, the event has some surprising effects on the male wrestlers.

The work of Cornwall and Lindisfarne on the matter of male hierarchies is a useful concept with which to approach the role of the Nutcracker. If the wrestling room is considered as a place of hierarchy, the adult coach, a proven wrestler and fount of knowledge, is the supreme male. As Coach Cappelli frequently asserts, his word is law and his is the final decision, so, as such, the young wrestlers are lower in the hierarchy. The established wrestlers, especially team captains, are next in line, going down to novices and, at the bottom, the novice female. Wrestling the female is considered beneath some males and a joke to others. However, Maisie's insistence on undergoing the Nutcracker is shown to subvert the hierarchy.



Maisie's demand arises in response to her discovery that most other wrestlers undermine her by pretending to lose. As such, she is lower than a male novice, in that her status as a wrestler, despite the coach's insistence, is negated. When Coach Cappelli initially refuses her demand for the Nutcracker, Maisie threatens to quit, pushing him into agreeing (Spinelli 107). She has successfully challenged the power of the supreme male figure in the room, and now she will face the young wrestlers in a trial of domination.

The first thing which becomes obvious is that Kruko, the captain, and Beans Agway, who were formerly unwilling or reluctant to wrestle Maisie and whose behavior caused the incident, now volunteer to face her in the Nutcracker. The second change is that they do not hold back on her because of her sex; if anything, they go in harder, as a retaliation for what she has done to the club by joining. The Nutcracker has, in its way, achieved Coach Cappelli's aim in unsexing Maisie as it creates a context whereby any reluctance to touch or wrestle a female is removed. Maisie is hopelessly outclassed but completes the Nutcracker, although she has to be revived with smelling salts. Upon her regaining consciousness, things have changed:

There was clapping. I wondered why.  
 "Way to go, Nut," somebody said.  
 I felt pats on the back ... Somebody grabbed my hand and  
 shook it. I turned. I couldn't believe it. "Beans?"  
 "You OK, Raven?" he said.  
 "Yeah."  
 "Good."  
 He tapped me on the butt, *like I was a guy* [my emphasis].  
 (Spinelli 111)

The masculine handshake and the tap on the buttocks by Agway symbolize that despite her "feminization," or perhaps because of it, Maisie's status as a Raven is now confirmed. The buttock tap, in particular, symbolizes acceptance as a male through an action which might be considered sexual in other circumstances (a boy slapping a girl's buttocks). The Nutcracker has subverted her feminization and either neutralized her femininity or transformed her into a (symbolic) male. As such, within the Ravens, her status as one of the boys is never questioned again.

These events illustrate how it is possible for females to take part in wrestling and experience the pleasures of the sport if they are prepared to, in some way, neutralize their female status and be accepted either as honorary males or as non-gendered wrestlers. However, one might ask, to what extent this status extends beyond the Ravens' hall. In Maisie's final summing up of the events of the novel, she comments, "According to the Hunkiest Boy poll, I had lost my sex" (198). But this could equally apply to her acceptance as a Raven by her teammates.

Of the four works, the greatest level female participation takes place in Martino's *Perfected by Girls*. Arguably, the reasons for this include the author's own experience coaching female wrestlers, but also the period in which it was written being a time of greater female participation in the sport. The wrestling clinic Mel attends is organized by U.S. Girls Wrestling Association,<sup>12</sup> with professional, female trainers. Mel quickly finds that rather than being a girl who trains with guys, she is now among "girls who wrestle *like* guys" (Martino 214), and her sex is no longer an issue. She trains hard with hard wrestlers, enjoying the experience. Hard technique is not a result of a boy disliking girls; it is a wrestler wrestling hard against another. Mel's descriptions of training no longer have references to how the boys train against her, just the experience of wrestling against another female. During the breaks they talk as both girls and wrestlers about shared problems, experiences and joys. The experience is summed up by Mel:

[I]t's hard for lots of people to understand how girls could be, or even want to be, involved in a guys' sport like wrestling ... These girls understand ... right now, we're just hanging out together, worn-out but loving it, knowing we've spent the morning and afternoon making ourselves better wrestlers. (227)

It would seem that the clinic shows M. Ann Hall's dream being achieved.

The chosen texts each demonstrate the struggles of teenage girls in the sport of wrestling and illustrate Hall's point of women being denied access to combat sports. Each work, however, also demonstrates the determination and resilience of the young women to attain their goal. Notably in the earlier works, the conclusion is a little ambiguous; Maisie is undecided as to whether she will continue to wrestle, understanding that the applause she receives at her final tournament is not for her achievements as a wrestler, but for an act of heroism in saving a child from a snow-plough. Her status as a wrestler is still undecided. Chris Byers gives her final showing in a parodical performance critiquing sexual politics in wrestling, before quitting to become Petey's girlfriend (Petey sacrifices his chance to go varsity). Autumn finally realizes her wrestling discipline will ultimately help her to attain other goals, regardless of her sex, while Mel is hailed as a champion, but is also applauded for being the first female varsity wrestler in her school. While this is a great achievement, it still demonstrates that her sex is a distinguishing feature of her status--a girl who wrestles boys. Martino has given a glimpse of the changing world of and developments within the sport but, as of yet, the novels do not show girls wrestling in a female competition. Therefore, we may still ask whether there is a complete female Lawrentian wrestle in the YA literature of scholastic wrestling.

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## Notes

1. <https://www.gbboxing.org.uk/womens-boxing/> (accessed 10/03/21)
2. See: <https://www.teamusa.org/USA-Wrestling/Features/2019/August/26/NFHS-stats-show-high-school-wrestling-growing-in-all-categories> and <https://www.teamusa.org/USA-Wrestling/Features/2019/May/09/The-Impact-of-Girls-Wrestling> and <https://www.wsj.com/articles/high-school-wrestling-was-fading-then-came-the-girls-1157797653> (Accessed 10/03/21)
3. Martino has also written a novel called *Pinned* about two male wrestlers. It is sometimes confusing that a number of authors use identical titles based on wrestling terminology, such as “takedown” and “pinned.”
4. Each of the writers agreed to answer specially prepared lists of questions and continued to communicate with me by email. Unless otherwise stated, the views of the authors have been gained through personal communication.
5. Barthes uses French terms, such as *salaud* or “bastard” for the heel, and  *salope* (bitch) for the blue-eye. The French terms have more negative, sexual, connotations.
6. Wilson gives a detailed history of this early history.
7. <https://www.britannica.com/sports/wrestling/Modern-wrestling> (Accessed 10/03/21)
8. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholastic\\_wrestling#History](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scholastic_wrestling#History) (Accessed 10/03/21)
9. Barnes and Noble listing for “wrestling: teen fiction” lists 13 titles, 11 of which have male protagonists and ten of which were written between 2004-18. [https://www.barnesandnoble.com/b/books/sports-teen-fiction/wrestling-teen-fiction/\\_/N-29Z8q8Z1a34](https://www.barnesandnoble.com/b/books/sports-teen-fiction/wrestling-teen-fiction/_/N-29Z8q8Z1a34). (Accessed 13/03/20)
10. At the time of writing I became aware of two further YA novels which deal with girls wrestling on the boys’ team: *Takedown* by Laura Shovan (2018) and *Reversal* by Eric Linne (2013).
11. Readers may note that I have borrowed this term from John Irving’s novel *The World According to Garp*, whose protagonist is a wrestling coach.
12. An organization representing female juvenile wrestling (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/160516173994149/>) (Accessed 28/02/21)

## Take Me OUT to the Ball Game

*Summer 2020*

The stands now emptied of *them*,  
there's nothing really here:

no bellows, no pantomimed blows,  
even jeers and middle fingers a missed memory.

But worse: only the weight of breath  
rounding the bases, dust not thick enough

to hide absence. Only exaggerated taunts  
of uniformed rivals, half-hearted, really,

fizzling into sighs. Spitting, high-fives,  
celebratory tackles—all foul

of what's acceptable, the dugout  
a den of masks and dread.

Each hot, dry night, the heave  
of the team pushes through innings

where hip-hips once slipped into  
overwhelming hoorahs, Sweet Carolines

no longer curling lips into *bah-bah-bah!*  
To be tagged Out would be better than this

erasure of Safe, would be touch, would be  
before, would be being again outside

the single silent gaze of the camera.

*Marjorie Maddox*



# The Last of the Naturals

Greg Mellen

**O**n the island of Hispaniola, many legends were told. They spoke of the vudú, the old days and of béisbol. In this land, where the palm trees chafed, coconuts crackled and millenia were sketched on the line of sky and sea, a young man rose and forces aligned to erase what he represented. But memory is resilient. It whispers still in the incantations of the elders in the shade of the plaza. It is there he endures—for what he had been, not what he became.

Beto Danial Estrella was the last of the great naturals in baseball. In an age when technology and business were all, there was Beto. Without muscle grafts, synthetic prostheses or bioengineered transfusions, he played with the gifts of nature and his creator, Mawu Lisa. His game conjured ghosts and rattled history.

In San Pedro de Macoris, there was nothing more noble than to be called a pelotero by the old-timers. It was a term nearly lost, like sunlight through tissue.

\* \* \*

Juan Lopez hit a looper toward an empty spot between third base and left field. A sure hit until Beto streaked over from shortstop and speared the ball like a mackerel in his tattered glove.

“Dios en cielo,” the spectators cried. “Un pelotero excepcional.”

Beto came from the hydroponics plantations on an outpost of the First Quadrant, where palms gave way to fields of sugarcane thick as dreadlocks. Nuzzled by the ocean was San Pedro De Macoris, the Land of Shortstops.

Most chalked up the reputation to the tales of elders. Gathered for the talking times, they recited names and tales of past glory: of Ricardo Adolfo

Jacobo y Carty, the Bell cousins, Juan and Jorge. But the truest sons of Saint Peter, the essence of the game, were the shortstops. They were as water—liquid and motion. The litany of shortstops was recited, like saints at Mass: Tony Fernandez, Rafael Ramirez and dozens more. Greatest of them all, Clemente Luna, his light cut short in a hydro crash.

The Great Wealth had bypassed the city. Those who stayed spurned the benefits of corporature. Poverty was rampant, education minimal. By 18, young men had to declare for labor. For the uneducated men of the island with few skills, opportunities were limited. There was work in the near-planet mines, or menial crew on spaceships, or at the vacation annex. Once young men entered the workforce, *béisbol*, the game they loved, was no más.

For Beto, time had come to decide. Most young men, like Beto's father, left the island and never returned.

The ocean curled up beyond the outfield. For opposing teams, there was no more feared sight than Beto strolling to the plate late in a game.

"Por favor, Beto," the players pleaded, "not into the ocean. We have no more pelotas."

A smile, a splash. The world spun, a blue jewel in the soft breath of Mawu Lisa.

\* \* \*

That was how the vacationing sub-director of Global.com discovered Beto after nearly being plunked by a moonball. Visitors took day trips to the city to see the Old Ways. They drank in cantinas, bought trinkets, mused at the elders and watched the youth at play.

The executive returned the ratty ball and lingered. He was fascinated by Beto: his game smooth as a microchip, arm accurate as a laser and laughter that was high and unfettered.

Puzzled too. Beto was superb without being specialized.

"Name's Joe Schott," the sub-director said. "I love the way you play."

He shook the young man's hand. The muscles were lean, not the product of pharmal drips.

"What's your enhancement?"

"Señor?" Beto asked.

Then Schott understood.

In front of him stood a genuine, once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon, something out of a children's book—a Natural.

"Son, with the right procedure, you could be an all-timer," Schott said. "How would you like to try out for La Liga?"

"*Béisbol*, like on the televisión?" Beto asked.

Schott shook his head and tried to imagine baseball in two dimensions.

"Si. Like television," he said. "I watch you play. Mucho bueno. Maybe you play baseball in the Big Land. Comprende?"



"Beto es magnifico," the bystanders yelled.

\* \* \*

The day before his trip, Beto went to Dr. Vinius. A family doctor, spiritual advisor and practitioner of the ancient ways, he was keeper of the Fon magic. Some said he was hundreds of years old. The doctor was tiny, stooped yet supple, ribbon of white hair ringing a skull crinkled like a Brazil nut. His eyes glowed with wisdom and compassion. He was the most trusted man in San Pedro de Macoris.

Dr. Vinius lit candles, blessed Beto and made a palm-sized ceremonial figurine of driftwood and string.

"Papa Legba, meet this boy," Dr. Vinius intoned as he knelt before his altar and tossed coconut shavings onto a small flame. "Grant him favor with the loa. This boy is chosen, a true son of St. Peter. Let him pass the crossroads. Let him not be deceived by Carrefour and the petro loa."

Dr. Vinius turned to the young man.

"You leave now on a wondrous journey," he said. "You will see strange and beautiful things. But there is bad mojo. Be faithful and you will be on the good road."

Dr. Vinius held up the figurine.

"Papa Legba and St. Peter will guide you if you keep this close," he said, presenting the doll. "You follow a great line of peloteros. You are Macorisano."

\* \* \*

When Beto arrived at The Complex in the Big Land, where all major league games were played, he stood next to Scott Merrill, a baseball lifer and manager of the Global.com team.

"Welcome to the Bigs, kid," he said with a grin as he swiped a coder.

The massive doors slid open and time stopped.

The grass-tex field stretched away. Scattered about, players made long arcing throws and loped across the outfield. Every now and then, the unmistakable crack of a well-hit ball. Despite alloy bats and polymer spheroids, science had replicated the sound of wood on leather.

What was baseball without tradition?

Merrill smiled. It was his favorite ritual. No matter how lunar cool a young man acted, nothing topped this moment.

"There will always be magic in baseball," he said.

\* \* \*

The locker room was like nothing Beto had seen, part laboratory, part biomechanics shop.

"Meet Slingshot Jones," Merrill said, introducing a pitcher fiddling with his right elbow.

"Pleasure," Jones said. "What's your gimmick?"

"Kid ain't got one yet," Merrill said. "Corporate's thinking it over."

"The heck he doing here?" Slingshot asked.

"Upstairs loves this kid," Merrill said. "A corporate bigshot says he's special."

Merrill leaned in.

"Don't worry about Slingshot. That elbow contraption is so old, guys say it predates the slingshot."

The pitcher ignored the jab.

"Techie, this modulation is off," Jones said.

Beto gawked as the technician peeled back what looked like skin around the pitcher's elbow and started adjusting the mechanism.

"Madre mia," Beto exclaimed, crossing himself.

"What's with the kid?" Slingshot asked.

"Don't think he's ever seen the gizmos we got," Scoot said. "They found him playing with a leather glove and wooden bat."

Slingshot grunted and spat a stream of brown juice.

"Let me show you around," Merrill said. "Baseball's a bit different here."

The coach explained how medicine, engineering and science had changed the game.

"Started the first time a guy came back from elbow replacement surgery with 20 miles added to his fastball. Soon, everyone was getting surgeries, needed or not," he said. "That opened the door for pharma to come back. All sorts of crazy stuff, made steroids look like baby aspirin. You couldn't just be naturally gifted, you needed the newest supplement or gizmo."

Merrill pointed to a player with quivering needles in his shoulder, electricity arcing from the tips.

"That guy's stimulating artificial muscle fibers. Hits the plasma out of a ball. Slingshot's got Teflex in his elbow, ancient stuff, but he can put enough torque on the ball to make it dart like a minidrone. He's crafty. And he's an asshole, which in baseball always helps."

Depending on the application, a player could become incredibly fast or immensely powerful.

"The CEO's worried players would become more android than human," Merrill said. "Not that they cared about humanity. It's all marketing. Tradition and values sell—real or packaged. So they stepped in and regulated enhancements. Held the line at nanotech. Mumbo jumbo, you ask me. Which brings us to you."

Beto understood almost none of what the manager said but nodded uneasily.

"Ah well. They'll take care of you soon enough," Merrill said with a sigh. "Would've liked to see what you could do. Let's get you dressed and play some ball."

"Play ball." Beto's eyes brightened. That was something he understood.

\* \* \*

It didn't take long for a sportswriter to spot Beto.

"Who's the shortstop?" he asked.

"Island boy corporate found," Merrill said.

"Something different about him."

"Kid's a natural. Not so much as a neoprene suture. Pure as lunar sands. Corporate's trying to decide what to do with him."

"Recording," the journalist said, activating the holographic recorder behind his eye.

"That was off the record," Merrill said.

"Too late," the journalist said, sliding away.

Soon, Beto's image was streaking to holographs across the globe and beyond. That night he was on the Evening News.

"And now," the newsreader said, "a report about an amazing young athlete."

"Just when you thought the click of machinery was everything, witness Beto Danial Estrella, aspirant of the Global.com premier baseball team," the reporter began, "discovered by a sub-director on holiday in the First Quadrant."

There were closeups of Beto, the smile and the high laughter.

"Pure as lunar sands," that's what manager Scott Merrill says. Nature boy, they call him. Beto Estrella is the resurrection of something lost, a natural athlete. He comes from a place called San Pedro De Macoris, known in lore as the Land of Shortstops.

"Executives for Global.com will soon decide on an elective enhancement for the youngster. It seems technology takes a backseat to nothing, not even so natural a beauty as one Beto Estrella. Back to you."

"Thank you, Jake," the reader said. "My grandfather told me stories about great ballplayers before bioscience changed everything. Keep us posted."

\* \* \*

It was a branding marketer who came up with the idea to let Beto play without enhancement.

"The possibilities are endless," said April Carson, newly promoted and eager to make her mark. "We advertise Global.com as the company that remembers the good old days. Retro back-to-basics stuff. Flood all our platforms. The guy's a sizzle box."

"Wait a second, I'm trying to build a winner on the field," said Bob McCarver, the team's general manager. "This kid has the potential to be a star with the right enhancement. He could help us turn the corner."

"You don't get it, Global.com has a once-in-a-lifetime marketing coup," Carson said. "Favorables are huge on him. Virtual thalamus and precuneus

stimulation models are off the charts. In other words, fans love him. But they love him as he is—au natural.”

“Ridiculous. Nobody makes it in this league without enhancement,” McCarver said.

“Has anyone asked the kid what he wants?” asked a junior executive, who was quickly ignored.

And so it was decided. For the time being, Beto would play without enhancement.

\* \* \*

Slingshot Jones fired a curve at Beto’s head. The youngster dove away as the ball broke down and into the strike zone.

“Welcome to the bigs, kid,” the pitcher said. He drilled Beto in the ribs with his next pitch to emphasize his point.

Beto despaired. Fastballs were a blur, spinners baffling. Every play stretched his limits. His natural skill kept him in the lineup, but his Player Value Rating metric and Lineal Talent Quotient were abysmal. Beto kept track of an ancient statistic called batting average. At .220, it was in the bottom quartile of the league.

What Beto had was the full backing of the team’s marketing machine and, despite his struggles, unmatched popularity metrics.

Fans wanted to see what this “natural” looked like.

They split into two camps: those who loved what he represented and wanted to give him every chance, and others, who insisted he was overrated and overmatched, a failed novelty.

As the debate raged, Global.com marketers went into hyperdrive. Engagements and merchandising sales broke records. Crossover discussions, both cultural and scientific, spiked. Virtual jerseys and trademarked avatars streaked across the solar system. Every kid with a 3-D printer made a hat or bobble-head with Beto’s image.

\* \* \*

At The Complex, Beto learned the wild crowds were only holographs. Games were played to a handful of techs, program directors and corporate types. The cheers of “Nature Boy” were digitized tracks for fans on their devices. Homilies about Beto and Island life were scripted.

Sometimes it was silent as a meditation pod. No breezes or clouds, just recycled air and simulated sunshine.

Beto looked at the blank screens that encircled the field and ached for home and all it meant. Meals with Mama, the cheers of the children, the caress of a sea breeze and a local girl. He missed Dr. Vinius applying ointment to his shoulders, speaking that mysterious dialect and spinning tales of vudú. The elders with their stories of Clemente Luna.

One day, when Beto was at a low ebb, Slingshot Jones slid in next to him  
"Kid, I know you're hurting right now. Worse, you're hurting the team. You need a nudge. I know, I've been there," he said.

Slingshot slipped a packet of red gels to Beto.

"What is this?" Beto asked.

"Electric Apple," Slingshot said. "It's not approved, but it will help you see better. Like the jaguar, yes?"

"Beto only use Dr. Vinius medicine."

"All I care about is winning, and you're in the way. You have to hit or it's back to the island for you. You hit, es bueno. No hit, no béisbol para ti. Comprende?"

Beto hid the gels in his pod.

Two days later, Beto went hitless in a game and failed to throw out a flashboy on a routine ground ball. After the loss, the manager told him he would get only one more chance or be benched.

"Suits say you gotta play, but I need you to produce," Merrill said.

The next day, Beto removed a gel.

"What do I do, Papa Legba?" he asked.

There was no answer, just the low hum of the humidifier and air system.

Beto swallowed.

\* \* \*

The first pitch seemed to come soft and plump as a sea grape. As Beto swung, the vibrations sung through his body. The ball launched off in a high, deep arc, easily clearing the fence in right field.

As he circled the bases, Beto thought, "Back home that would have been an ocean ball."

He finished with five hits, including his first two home runs. In the locker room, his teammates whooped. Beto smiled uneasily, returning handshakes. His laughter was high, but it was forced.

After the team and crew had cleared from The Complex, Beto sat alone in the infield, flexing the scrap figurine Dr. Vinius had given him. He felt like a fraud as he drifted asleep.

When Beto stirred, he was in a sugarcane field, dwarfed by stalks on all sides. He glimpsed an old man with a cane and straw hat.

"Papa Legba," he called.

Beto tried to pursue the old man. He hacked at the cane but could not get closer. He came to a clearing and stood in front of a tall man in a top hat: Papa Carrefour, the trickster who controlled the crossroads to the dark loa.

Carrefour did not speak, but held up a broken mirror. Beto saw a shattered image of himself in a mechanized body. Then Beto jerked like a marionette from an ancient puppet show. He heard clicks and whirs in his elbows and knees but could not stop the hideous dance.

Beto awoke with a cry.

"Papa Legba, help me," he wept, picking up the figurine. "Tell me what to do."

A soothing voice replied, "Remember Dr. Vinius' advice. Have faith. Stay on the good road and nothing can hurt you. You are Macorisano."

\* \* \*

After his nightmare, Beto flushed the gels in an air lock and dedicated himself to Legba's advice. Before games Beto knelt with his figurine and prayed to St. Peter and Mawu Lisa, then hit the field with the doll in his back pocket. To the surprise of his teammates, he continued to improve.

Sometimes, in baseball, a player goes into a stretch where everything falls into place. Hits find open spaces, focus sharpens, the game slows. It's called "the zone." Scientists, who could re-create almost anything in a player, remained baffled. No matter how they poked and prodded and manipulated cerebral matter, it eluded them.

As Beto had found his stride, Global.com went on a hot streak and won ten straight.

A week later, Beto started a game-winning rally with a double and ended the day with a leaping snag of a line drive that would have won the game for Neuro.net.

Usually, while producers showed holographic celebrations, players wandered into the clubhouse. Not this time. Beto's teammates swarmed the field to celebrate. Beto had won them over with his enthusiasm and with his play. There were no greater fans.

The final sign that Beto was one of the boys was when they gave him a nickname: Nate, short for Nature Boy. The players realized the hype about purity and innocence had a kernel of truth. And damned if the kid couldn't play.

\* \* \*

An emergency meeting of the Baseball CEOs was convened by Mr. Stein, owner of Biofuels United, the first-place team in the Second Quadrant.

"Gentlemen," he said. "I have called us together to address a growing problem. I am referring to the shortstop for Global.com."

"What's the problem?" asked Tex Puckett, owner and president of Global.com. "You mad we found him and not you?"

"I couldn't care less about his abilities as a ballplayer. I'm talking business," Mr. Stein said.

"So am I," Puckett replied. "The fans love him. Viewership, outer planetary ad sales and merchandising are through the ionosphere. The whole league is profiting."

"While I salute your good fortune and the short-term boost for the league, you miss the larger picture," Stein said. "We all know baseball is built on falsehoods dating back to Abner Doubleday. But baseball has always been about business. And this young man threatens our control of the game."

"Tell me how is some slap-hitting coconut boy going to take down corporate baseball?" Puckett asked.

"Don't you find it odd that a third-place team like yours is so popular?" Stein asked. "Have you scanned your social metrics? Your player has ignited something in fans. They talk about all that has been forfeited to corporations. It's nonsense and it's seditious. The more he plays, the more fans cry out for naturals. We can control players with enhancement clauses, but nothing binds Mr. Estrella. The next natural may be a little more business savvy. Already there is serious talk of a rival league for naturals. Then we have a problem. Your player has hit a sentimental chord. And there is no place for sentiment in business."

"You want to kill my meal ticket?" Puckett said.

"Please, we are not savages, Mr. Puckett. We just need to bring Mr. Estrella into the fold and get him enhanced," Stein said. "For your sacrifice, you will be rewarded with the best player in the game. Then we can put all this Natural nonsense to bed and get back to business."

After all, it was for the good of the game.

\* \* \*

When Merrill entered the locker room, Rocco Bennetti, the team's right fielder and star power up, had Beto in a headlock.

"Don't damage the merchandise," Merrill yelled. "Looks like his ticket to the Hall has been etched. We just got word. They're gonna power you up, Beto. Right graft with the new drips, you'll be another Jonathan Seven."

"Por favor?" Beto asked. "What is power up?"

"Make Beto mucho macho," Scoot said and flexed.

"No! Only one person touch Beto—Dr. Vinius."

"This ain't a debate," Merrill said. "Corporate says you get cut, you get cut." Merrill scowled. When the kid didn't flinch, he shrugged.

"Fine. Pack up. You can be on the beach with your buddies sippin' El Presidentes by nightfall. Off-planet mines always need workers."

"With the marketing behind this kid, we both know you can't send him home," Slingshot said.

"Until he gets treated, he don't play," Merrill said. "That's a directive."

"He don't play, I don't play," said Junior Hanson, the flashboy centerfielder.

"Me neither," Rocco said.

News of the player revolt took the solar system by surprise. It was the first labor uprising in modern sports history.

Beto became a bonafide folk hero. Fans demanded he play. Management caved and Beto was better than ever. Beto-mania took over.

"We ain't gonna let the suits mess with you, Nate," Junior said one night. "At first, I was jealous. All this Natural BS. Then I realized it was them I was mad at. They were giving you the chance I lost. Before they got to me, I loved to run. It was free and easy and I was the fastest kid in the quant. But they said, 'You ain't fast enough for the league.' I took the plants. But you're free. We got your back. Comprende?"

"Loa bless me, I make you proud," Beto said, wiping a tear.

\* \* \*

"I'll fire every one of them," Puckett screamed at a hastily called conference.

Though his profits were spiking, Puckett was damned if some uneducated island boy and a bunch of half-robots were going to dictate terms. Not in this universe.

"I suggest a more prudent course of action," Stein said. "If he doesn't want the surgery, we can make it ... necessary."

\* \* \*

It was the seventh inning of a game between Global.com and Lunar Vision.

Luke Lariat ripped a clean single to right field but dug for second. Beto was waiting, straddling second base. Lariat didn't so much slide as launch a flying kick to the shortstop's knee.

"Ay, Madre," Beto cried out as he collapsed and clutched the ruin of his knee.

In the ensuing melee, Lariat landed several vicious kicks to Beto's shoulder before Rocco landed a punch that fractured Lariat's skull and ended his career.

\* \* \*

"If you don't let me operate, you'll never play again. You might not walk or throw a ball either," Dr. Pauly told Beto as he lay in a hospital bed.

"Dr. Vinius, only doctor Beto can trust," Beto said, gripping the figurine. "You are left-hand vudú."

That night Beto was transported to the island.

Dr. Vinius removed the immobilizer and poked around.

"You give Dr. Vinius powerful lotta work," the doctor said, forcing a chuckle.

"Look what they did to me, Dr. Vinius. I prayed to Papa Legba, like you said. Why did this happen?"

Tears appeared in the doctor's eyes.

"I can't tell you why, my son. The loa are a mystery. Evil is powerful. Faith is all we have," the doctor said.

"What good is faith? Look," Beto cried.



"You can't talk like that or Papa Carrefour will take you. Let Dr. Vinius work his magic," the old man said.

He gave Beto a sedative and created a pattern of cornmeal as he called on Ogou Balanjo, the loa of healing.

But it was for show.

Dr. Vinius was also a man of science. No loa he could summon could fix the damage. That would require the latest technology.

Beto felt himself fading. He wanted to tell the doctor something important, but his voice was mud.

"Doctor. Whatever, don't let them. Clemente Luna ...."

What was it he wanted to say? He would be faithful. But if ... It was ... It .... As Beto groped for words, his hand relaxed and the figurine dropped.

\* \* \*

"Don't worry," Dr. Pauly said, as corporate doctors took positions and cleared away the candles and cornmeal.

One picked up the figurine and handed it to Dr. Vinius.

"You're doing the right thing," Dr. Pauly said.

Dr. Vinius stared at the pay-chip in his hand that represented ten lifetimes of earnings.

He wondered what Beto had tried to say. Then, his anger flared.

"You people. You mess him up plenty good. Even Dr. Vinius cannot fix. Why must you hurt a child?"

"It wasn't me," Dr. Pauly said. "It was a ballplayer. Muy loco. I'm here to help. We can fix him. One day, he'll thank you."

"I've got good news," Schott, the sub-director, said. "Corporate thinks your town has muy bueno ballplayers. They want to set up a hospital so we can help them get the best enhancements. Maybe have a wing named after you. Would you like that?"

"This can be the real Land of Shortstops once again. Not just a fairy tale. We could use a man like you. Someone the people can trust."

\* \* \*

Beto stood at the edge of the ocean. Salt water spritzed off the small breakers, a breeze fresh as linen brushed his face. The pain was gone. Something liquid coursed through his veins. He felt his muscles growing, capillaries expanding, hungry for what flowed through his body. But it was unnatural, like a slick on the ocean, oily and black.

Beto shook himself and tried to warm up, but the cold ran deep. He clapped his arms together across his chest until bruises appeared. He was freezing.

The breeze freshened and from the blue-on-blue horizon, a storm squall rose. In the clouds, Papa Carrefour danced as hordes of evil loa gathered. They were coming fast.

\* \* \*

Dr. Vinius slipped alone through a side door to the veranda, stroking the doll and unable to stop the tears. He flicked away the pay chip and turned to watch the wrinkled sea and the lace of foam along the beach.

He wanted to believe he had acted in the boy's best interest. How else could a boy survive in a world of left-hand sorcery? What was the loss of innocence for a chance at immortality? His was an act of salvation, he told himself. Why, then, did it feel like betrayal? He sagged, old and defeated. The doctor looked up into the crystalline sky, his mind begging for a sign or message from Papa Legba and the loa. All was silent.

Then, he heard it. Carried up the hillside by the ancient and eternal tradewinds, faint yet unmistakable—the crack of wood and the laughter of children playing ball.

## When I Was a Tennis Pro

I loved George Bush.  
 There, I said it.  
 Not the son, never  
 the son.  
 41, who fell  
 from the sky  
 into the anything  
 but pacific Pacific.  
 Ellen Degeneres  
 shouldn't be  
 generous,  
 and nor should I,  
 who would gun  
 down flies,  
 those black, slow-  
 moving bombers  
 of Southern Maine,  
 with merely  
 a racket.  
 As Woody Guthrie  
 would say,  
 "These strings  
 kill fascists."  
 ("Whack it!" I'd  
 yell, "before  
 it takes out  
 your carrier arm.")  
 My charges?  
 Old women as big  
 as barges—  
 cramped in  
 their panties.  
 The courts,  
 like the Panama  
 Canal, would have  
 to be widened—

or shrunk.  
"Skunk! Skunk!"  
My badgers  
couldn't move,  
but boy  
were they ready  
with expensive  
perfume.  
"What can I spray?"  
Fact is: the Vice  
was nice.  
The Vice was Yale.  
A genteel eel,  
a prudent rudent,  
a rat rarely unkind  
or ungracious,  
he was, I admit, a bit  
of a racist—well,  
more than a bit,  
though Willie  
Horton hadn't yet  
happened (or  
maybe I should  
say, hadn't yet  
crappened?).  
The man's very  
initials would  
suggest both path  
and prize.  
George did—God  
less him--what  
Ronald said:  
he served  
only second serves;  
never seemed  
too able,  
too powerful,  
too much

in command.  
There, at hand,  
at club, he was,  
flanked by  
creepy perverts  
(the secret service),  
all trench coats  
and guns.  
He'd come to bat  
the ball around  
with friends,  
fellow Oil Men,  
big spends  
who, like dentists,  
loved to drill.  
Call them Money  
Mouths; call them  
Honey Pumpers.  
Their spirits were  
crude; their  
manners, refined.  
The assigner of courts  
was 18-year-old I.  
The perverts  
insisted that  
Vice be moved  
from Court 1  
to Court 6,  
a place more  
protected,  
where pines  
collected.  
The view there  
of the water  
was worse;  
the view there  
of the water  
un-hearsed.

A sniper would  
have a much  
harder time.  
But my badgers  
refused: my badgers  
who couldn't, now  
wouldn't, move.  
They'd played on  
Court 6 for  
half a century.  
Mondays at 10:00  
were theirs.  
The court was  
reserved—like  
property, conserved.  
No sentry would  
boot them.  
Vice was elastic;  
Vice was fantastic.  
"Let death come  
by lob or  
lobsterman,"  
he joked.  
"Court 1 is fine.  
Court 5, Court 3—  
wherever you  
wish." And then  
he winked at me,  
foreseeing my pain  
and diminished  
pockets had I  
forced the barges  
to flee.  
A country-club  
prophet, he  
instantly got it,  
and fed me  
some kindness

from a Sterling  
spoon.  
I wept while  
watching his funeral.  
Even in death  
he seemed  
smooth—buffed  
like a banister  
(to where?).  
His children  
loved him;  
his grandkids cried,  
“Poppy!”  
O Lord was I  
sloppy with  
my thinking  
and feels.

*Ralph James Savarese*





# Captains' Practice

Colin Fleming

I look at myself as older than I am, hardened, because I sit with a gas station coffee between my legs in an empty rink parking lot, cassette of the Stones' *Get Yer Ya-Ya's Out* playing. I understand in "Stray Cat Blues" that he's talking about the size of a woman's vagina. I get things like that. Hardened gas station coffee man in the car, first year he can drive, bag of gear in the back with shin pads that smell like rotting swamp reeds.

"Gotta leave you something," I imagine my dad saying if he had a choice and been told the day he was going to die, so he could tidy up affairs. Box of tapes that doesn't look like much. "You can have them, if you like," my mom said when we went through his stuff in the garage. Doors' *Absolutely Live*, *Having a Rave Up with the Yardbirds*, Cream's *Wheels of Fire*. I don't play them loud in the car at the rink. I just have them on enough so that I can hear everything.

There's one street lamp for the whole parking lot as I sit before school on a Monday morning in the ass end of January when the Christmas wreaths that are still up start to look rusted. I think of the pebbles in the snow like pimples on cheeks, pit marks after they've been scratched away. We have captains' practice on the last Monday of every month of hockey season, no coaches. Show to run for three seniors. The dude who works the Zamboni arrives, opens the rink. Throw on my gear in the locker room downstairs as the other guys come in generally smelling like post-nasal drip. Teeth don't get brushed when it's four in the morning and you're sixteen. We get worse at the drills as we go along. Half-assed attempts at three-on-twos and breakout plays. There's this tip drill where I stand in front of the goalie and Chase Scala fires the puck from the point up around my neck but there's not a damn thing I can do about it because he's been on the team for four years and I'm a sophomore.

The seniors call it pecking order, and the way they say “get used to it” to the couple of freshmen who made the team makes it sound like you’re getting used to something that will last a lot longer than you playing hockey does.

Twenty minutes in, sticks and gloves are thrown into one corner of the rink. Logan Leonard is kind of the main captain of the three who are supposed to have the same rank, but they don’t, because even I am old enough to know that nothing really works that way. My mom tutors him at our house for money because he is as smart as an orange pylon but he has a full ride to North Dakota next year if he graduates, which could go either way.

“Not all your mom does for him,” my linemate Jimmy Mac says sometimes when we’re tying our skates. He moves his hips back and forth on the locker room bench and if someone says, “what the fuck are you doing?” he replies, “What, was I subconsciously thrusting again?” which is the best joke he has ever come up with or maybe will ever come up with so he says it a lot.

And I know what I am supposed to do. I’m supposed to say, that’s horseshit, dude, and you know it. The less likely someone is to know something that you need them to know, that you need yourself to know, the more you say those words. “You know it.” But I can’t sit there, tying my skates, and say, sure, right, yeah, what of it, him and my mom, do you know what my mom has been through, you ankle-bending fuck who can’t put a puck in the ocean? He’s saying nothing, he’s laughing, the laugh becoming about someone else’s fresh remark, but I’m playing out the rest of a conversation that hasn’t happened, having this kid say things he hasn’t said. “Can’t put the puck in the ocean like Logan puts his dick in your—” and I want to kill this guy for something that didn’t even come out of his mouth. For something that is true. For something I hate him for because it is true.

There’s another time I think I’m older than I am. After my younger sister says to me, “But I saw—” I say no, you didn’t. Are you crazy? It was something else. “But I heard—” Stop it. You heard shit. Wasn’t what you thought it was. I know the only reason she doesn’t ask me what it was then is because she also knows, but I don’t hate her. I love her, I want her to be well, I want my mom to be well, all of us to be well. Untouched, together, and I don’t want anyone touching any of us except when I’m at the rink, when I’m driving someone through the boards.

I think like that in the parking lot on days of practice before school and the snow that is falling always seems to be the kind that fastens itself to glass like a tentacle. Each flake. The mouth of the starfish. That’s the word everyone uses for “asshole.” “Kate’s starfish was staring right back up at me, and I loved it,” Jimmy Mac will say at lunch. About the same girl I sit next to in geometry with practical shoes and one of those long mouths that makes someone’s lips look extra rubber-y. I get angrier about Logan. I make my own bad joke in my head about tutoring, tutoring in the ways of love, in the ways of loss, my mom doing something she thinks she needs because of what she doesn’t have and maybe

she'd tell me when you're broken you can't choose like you want to choose, you don't choose well, but you have to choose something. And I'm not glad, but I try to get to something closer to glad, when I think about how Logan and his own mom are so poor that you can actually drive past their house and some days one or both of them will be in the garage, with a trash barrel filled with wood and burning like they don't even have heat inside. But then I can feel like I don't want anyone ever to be touched, just all of us off with each other, the people who mean the most to us, and we stay separate save when we absolutely have to. And I'm ashamed of myself.

At the end of captains' practice, when the drills are so hopeless that they're not worth trying any more, we play football on the ice, everyone throwing aside their gloves and sticks. Logan is always the quarterback on his team, and I am the rusher on the other, the kid with the best chance of getting to him because I'm the fastest. He throws a Hail Mary at the end, because his team is down, all of his weight behind the pass, and he falls over, as if he's shot-put his own ghost out of himself.

The ball hovers around the ceiling of the rink, where everyone looks but me. His hand is flat on the ice, thumb sticking way out. I'd look at his thumb in the locker room as he taped his stick. Think how long and thin it was. Like a finger. I want to skate over it. Take it right off. Take off pieces of his body, starting here. But I just pull up short. Spray snow from my blades like a shower that comes in a single wave into his face. I see the flakes on his cheeks even though it's rink-ice snow, mouths and tentacles.

The Zamboni doors open and the guy who runs the rink pulls out to resurface the ice. Someone fires the puck off the side of the machine, but good-naturedly, as if saying, "thanks for letting us use your rink, mister." There's a fresh sheet of ice on the windshield when I get back outside, still in the bottom half of my gear, minus my skates. I'll go home and shower before school. I shower fast, like I don't want the water to touch me, would prefer to be ice instead, clear, without the cuts and shavings, resurfaced.

## Bronze Medallion

I was told that my sister was a swimmer.

She received her bronze medallion when she was twelve, as the youngest swimmer in her class, and she would become a lifeguard.

My mother proudly explained that the final test involved an adult man trying to drown her in the pool her survival was her success.

As a young girl, I often thought of my big sister in this moment:

I saw her riot of blond hair, suspended in the pool, as her long legs kicked for self-preservation.

I saw the circle of adults, torn at watching a child being killed and feeling envious of her prowess in the water.

I saw my parents on the pool deck, never understanding the water child they had birthed.

Was this her reward for being a natural swimmer?

For being taller and stronger than most children?

Why did water have to be her element, when it was so much more dangerous?

I have always hated her attacker for trying to drown her but she, mermaid-like, could never be held down.

In my mind, she kicked him with her glistening legs, laughing as she swam away like a beautiful sea nymph.

I will always resent my parents for not protecting their aquatic creature.

In my mind, she kept swimming away and returned to her ocean home.

At twelve, brunette and barely able to tread water, I brought her bronze medallion to school, her athletic accomplishments becoming my own.

I held her medal like a talisman and repeated the phrase “bronze medallion” like an incantation, hoping it would conjure her presence.

Although I knew my sister, I would never know her in the water.

By then, her life in the water was transformed into mythology.

By then, she had escaped the pool and could never return.

Nobody would ever understand her or know that her true home was the water.

But nobody could try and drown her again.

*Brittany Reid*



# Untangling the Differences Between Live and Filmed Sport, or Why Are Sport Movies Bad?

Ryan Murtha & Tolga Ozyurtcu

2019 should have been a banner year for sport movies. The genre's most prominent release that cycle, *Ford v. Ferrari* (titled *Le Mans '66* in some places), became something of a critical darling, with media critics uniformly giving it sterling reviews. The film managed to win two Academy Awards, which, for a movie about sports, is a rare feat. Yet, despite the quality of the film, it did not gain the cultural purchase that many of its contemporaries did. *Parasite*, *Joker*, and *1917* all surpassed *Ford v. Ferrari* in cultural impact, and scores of others blew it away at the box office. In fact, despite a pair of A-list headliners, the movie did not even manage to crack the list of the top 500 highest grossing films of all time. Tellingly, this list includes only two sport movies: *The Blind Side* (2009), and *Rocky IV* (1985). And while both certainly had their own impact, few would cite them as premier sport movies, or even as particularly memorable ones.

Cultural historian David Rowe suggests that "fictional sports films can be expected to be popular because sports themselves are popular" ("If You Film It" 353). But, despite the widespread appeal of sport in modern society, sport movies have rarely found the commercial success expected of a film with a large target audience. Aside from *Rocky* (1976), no sport film has ever been the highest grossing movie in a given year. Even films like *Ford v. Ferrari* that receive acclaim from critics and industry members fail to see that goodwill translate to the box office (see, for more examples, *I, Tonya* (2017) or *Raging Bull* (1980)). Too many data points exist to dismiss this trend as spurious; too

many high-end actors and directors have tried their hands at the genre and seen modest returns. Robert Redford, for one, assembled a team of A-listers including Will Smith, Charlize Theron, and Matt Damon for his golf dramedy *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), only to see it bomb. Another example can be found a few years later, when Viggo Mortensen, at the peak of his fame following the release of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, teamed up with Oscar winner Joe Johnson to film the horse racing epic *Hidalgo* (2004), another film that was largely panned.

What is it about sport movies that makes audiences not want to watch? The difference between popular live sport and its less popular Hollywood counterpart lies in the playing of sport itself. There is something that people love about sports that does not come through on the silver screen; something important is lost in translation. Or maybe it is multiple somethings. Though the subject matter remains the same, who we watch with and how we interpret the events onscreen are different. Viewers are robbed of the community aspect of sports, and of knowing that the outcome of the event is not yet determined. The event is siloed, divorced from the storyline of a larger season or career. What many fans watch for—whether to cheer on the home team or to witness surprising moments of athletic excellence—has little chance of occurring. These differences rob the sporting action of its usual authenticity and make the sports movie an entirely different beast—one that can feel empty in comparison and may fail to attract the many fans of live sports.

Sport films have been around since the earliest days of motion pictures. In fact, as historian Glen Jones notes, “Film-pioneer Edward Muybridge, in his quest to settle a bet by filming a galloping horse, directed the first film about horse racing in 1872!” (118). Two decades later, Thomas Edison used his kinetoscope at the Black Maria Studio in New Jersey to film famous strongman Eugene Sandow going through a posing routine. Edison followed that up the next year by filming two men boxing in his studio. In 1896, British filmmaker Robert Raul filmed what may have been the first live sporting event, the Classic Derby. In 1897, the Lumiere brothers released *Football*, footage of a soccer game in London. Many of these films were shown to audiences at expositions around the world, captivating them. The kinetic actions of the body proved to be a perfect text for this nascent technology. But, as filming became more normalized, and the tools more advanced, sport quickly was displaced as the primary subject of this artform. But again, why?

That question, unfortunately, has yet to be sufficiently answered. Film as a general medium has of course received its fair share of attention from academics. But sport films, in particular, are often shunted to the side, ignored. Sociologists Emma Poulton and Martin Roderick explain that “Despite its regularity as a central theme in motion pictures, constructions and representations of sport and athletes have been marginalized in terms of serious analysis within the longstanding academic study of film and documentary” (107). We have not



even come so far as to decide if sport movies exist as their own genre, or if they are simply parts of separate genres (comedy, drama, biopic, etc.) with similar subject matter.

Two subjects regarding sport films have been sufficiently covered. First, we have many analyses of how purportedly "historical" sport movies portray said history (hint: not accurately). Industry observer Frank Sanello explains that changes to the historical record are often made due to "commercial imperatives," in an effort to appeal to "the lowest common denominator" (xi-xii). The utility of such stories is often debated by critics and historians, as they ponder if saving the spirit of the story is possible if all the details are wrong. In her analysis of the subject, historian Jaime Schultz finds that sport movies are often revisionist, especially when it comes to race relations ("The Truth" 29-45). In *Glory Road* (2006), for example, she says filmmakers play up the progressive credentials of the white protagonist while massaging historical events in a way that downplays the agency of black athletes (Schultz, "*Glory Road*" 209-211). Historians Lindsay Parks Pieper and Andrew Linden find a similar phenomenon at play in *Race* (2016), which suggests racism is a relic of the past.

Secondly, academics have explored the ways that sport films reflect society, and how films will often reinforce the myth of sport as a panacea able to deliver us to some progressive, universalist future a la *Remember the Titans* (2000). Many films about race and sport end up really being parables about how, through sporting excellence, black athletes can transcend their race and gain acceptance from white America (Farred 240). Similarly, Caudwell argues films about women athletes, like *Girlfight* (2000) or *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), can often be read as ultimately othering women by positioning maleness and masculinity as the default (227).

Yet works that focus on the actual practice of sport in said sport movies are few and far between. To understand the deficiencies of cinematic sport, it is best to begin with what makes live sport special. As anyone who has watched it can tell you, sport can be boring and ugly at times. But those times are interrupted by transcendent moments. As Rowe claims, sport has an "extraordinary affective and connotative power, making many people feel deeply moved" (*Sport* 193). It is also, quite often, an event experienced with others, evoking Victor Turner's phenomenon of *communitas*, "a 'moment in and out of time,' and in and out of secular social structure, which reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond" not fragmented by the traditional dividers of society (Turner 96). In a society averse to people's showing emotion, sports have been designated one of the few spaces where it is acceptable to do so, especially for men.

Philosopher Andrew Fisher expands on the idea that much of the appeal of watching sport comes from doing it in conjunction with others. He posits "shared time," which is simply the belief that many other people are watching

an event at the same time we are, even when we cannot see them (185). As he explains, “We are significantly less interested in watching sport if not in shared time” (185). This holds even if we are alone as we watch: “What matters is not who you are watching the matches with, but who you believe is watching the matches when you are” (187). While Fisher’s argument is not really based on empirical evidence, a thought experiment is enough to prove his point: if you were to miss an episode of your favorite network drama, it would be a simple, normal thing to go watch it online the next day. But if you miss a sporting event, only the most fanatical would do this same thing. Most of us would simply look up the final score (but notice, you would never think of just looking up a synopsis of your favorite show). Additionally, Fisher points out that it is normal enough for people to go to certain lengths to be able to watch a sporting event as it happens, while rearranging your schedule for a movie or recorded television show would seem strange today, given the prevalence of on-demand streaming. He believes this all goes back to emotion, to that idea of *communitas*. What makes shared time significant, why we want to watch at the same time as others, is to be able to react emotionally at the same time they do. As he writes, “I believe that others experience euphoria at Beckham’s last-minute goal, so I am licensed to experience euphoria at Beckham’s last-minute goal” (190). Our experiences are heightened by having them happen in concert with others.

Notice this is not the case for sports in sport films. Assuming you most often watch movies at home, you’re under no illusion that there is some unseen community watching along with you. If you do see a movie in theaters, you are watching with a few dozen other people at most. The shared time phenomenon is gone. Thus, what is one of the largest appeals of sport does not carry over.<sup>1</sup>

But this is not the only reason for the failures of sport films, chief among which is the lack of authenticity in the practice of on-screen sport. Humans crave authenticity and can tell when it isn’t present (Hicks et al. 3). If we go back to the early examples of sport film, we see that, whether the subject was the British soccer team or Eugene Sandow or a horse, they were always authentically performing some feat. Today, that is rarely the case. Sports sequences are often over-edited, removing any illusion that they are being authentically performed. As communications expert Sebastian Byrne writes, filmmakers often have to “compensate for the actor’s lack of sporting prowess by creating movement and rhythm through the mobile camera and rapid editing, in order to enhance their performance;” rather than the viewers being able to clearly see the body in motion, the body must be disguised (1569). Sayre suggests that this is why “many fictional sports sequences are reduced to montage” (182). Directors are often, per filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard, “looking for the glory of the event,” with little interest in capturing the physical reality from which that glory comes (74). But what makes good cinema doesn’t always make good sports-viewing. This problem is compounded by the fact that the

audience for most of these films is sports fans, the people who would be the most discerning viewers of such things. As Byrne writes, sports in movies “[o]ften fail to be believable in the eyes of the skilled viewer, because of an inability to capture a sense of realism in its imitation of real-life sport” (1566). Those familiar with a sport can often see technical failures of actors “in terms of how they execute strokes or movements, or [in] the ways in which their body operates in relation to other bodies” (Byrne 1565). The objective of a sports film is never really the sport itself. It is always secondary, a tool in service to some larger goings-on (hence the debates about the existence of a sports film genre or not). On-field scenes in sport movies are often used as plot points that further the narrative. But having to fit certain specific actions or dialogue into the on-field movements of players can detract “from a realist representation of sport” (Byrne 1567).<sup>2</sup> Thus, if viewers reject what is likely the cinematic and narrative high point of the film, it is unlikely that the rest will be salvageable; or, as Jones puts it, “our acceptance of the plausibility of a film’s protagonists, perhaps the whole film, becomes splintered” (124).

Filmmakers look to create transcendent sport moments, but in addition to being hamstrung by a lack of true athletes on the field, filmmakers seem to not understand that those transcendent moments only exist when contrasted with the mundaneness that typifies sport the rest of the time. This makes the cinematic transcendent moment a false, inferior one to the one found in live sports. It is a simulacrum of that real sports moment. As Plato claims in *The Sophist*, there is, in all art, “a certain degree of deception.” For something to appear natural to the view, it must actually be unnatural. Thus, he argues, “What we call an image is in reality really unreal.” The “reality” of sports is copied in the movies, becoming a vacuous, empty reflection of the real thing.

This idea is expanded on by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard. He imagined a future where our only knowledge of the past would be mediated through different lenses—where we would be stuck interpreting interpretations to try to uncover what is real. In this future, the only record of modern sport may be through these postmodern sport films. Baudrillard argues that we will become (or already are) so overly dependent on models and symbols that the symbol, to us, becomes the real thing—the hyperreal—and that the old real is lost. As he writes, “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory” (1). Thus, the perception of modern sport will be based on its portrayal in the postmodern media. Of course, the tension that we are struggling with here is that the difference between the “real” and the copy is as of yet too noticeable in the medium of film, which is the opposite of what he argues will happen. But then again, maybe taking issue with there being noticeable differences is proving his point.

Especially in our world of constant sports coverage, there is a wealth of opportunity to consume live sport. This abundance of coverage is what

distinguishes cinematic sport from other “physical” acts that are taped, namely singing, dancing, and martial arts. With live sport from around the world available at the click of a button, sports fans never need to resort to watching a sport film in order to get their fix. This is less so the case with musicals or kung fu exhibitions. As a result of their relative scarcity, any of those types of movies are much more likely to wow an audience, and to be appreciated for its aesthetic achievement, than is cinematic sport. In the case of all three, we know that editing acts as a filter, removing any imperfections. But musical numbers and fight choreography do not depend on a contrasting mundanity to achieve their aesthetic peaks, as sport does. Additionally, while we have access to live sport almost on demand, it is much less likely that we would be able to access live music, dancing, or fighting quite so easily. And when filmed, musicals and martial arts films are much more likely to use actual practitioners of their arts than sport films seem to be. This makes these actions much more authentic on the screen. As Brown, Jennings, and Leledaki write on the matter of martial arts movies, “Gesture, martial muscularity, body posture, use of specific techniques in social space and time, combative and ceremonial styles, precise qualities of movement, types of (il)legitimate emotional content, constitute deeply engrained skills and dispositions embedded in the real body” (178). A prime example of these “deeply engrained skills” can be seen in the recent Indonesian action film *The Night Comes for Us* (2018). In comparison to movies that use stunt doubles and other tricks, fight scenes here contain few cuts, and each motion can be seen clearly. Editing and cinematography are not used to cover up actors’ limitations, because the actors are all able to perform the movements required of their characters. The performances are endowed with a legitimacy and authority that sports films consistently lack.

The recent documentary *Free Solo* (2018) is the exception that proves the rule. The film was a minor phenomenon, launching into the top 20-grossing documentaries of all time, and winning an Academy Award. *Free Solo* follows climber Alex Honnold in his attempt to summit El Capitan without the use of pins or ropes. But unlike most sport films, nothing inauthentic exists in *Free Solo*. Even Baudrillard would have to be impressed with the filmmakers’ commitment to reality, as they debate on screen what to do in the not-unlikely event that Honnold falls to his death. The athletic performance by Honnold is as real as it gets, and viewers who can stomach the vertigo-inducing visuals are rewarded with that sought-after transcendent moment. As film critic Richard Lawson writes, “I left the theater invigorated and rattled, in awe of this charismatic man’s accomplishment but scared that it will inspire others to attempt the same.” Lawson’s reaction much more closely approximates that of a viewer at a live sporting event than it does a viewer of a sport film, and that is no coincidence. *Free Solo*’s cultural impact showed that there was space, even desire, for sport films, but that filmmakers have been going about it totally wrong.

2005's *Coach Carter* is a worthy contrast to *Free Solo*. Here, the sport is still accurately performed. Each player knew how to play basketball before filming. As Jones notes, "They show a number of highly developed techniques and skills, [and] have good athleticism" (10). But these action sequences were all choreographed, practiced, and likely spliced together from multiple takes. And while this film does better than most in making the sports scenes believable, maintaining the "expectation of verisimilitude," the beauty of the sport comes from its being done in real time, in reaction to the moves of the opponents. That, again, is all lost in translation, and is something no amount of practice or athleticism could bring back.

Philosopher Stephen Mumford, in his influential *Watching Sport*, argues that sport fans fall along a spectrum where one end is the domain of the partisan and the other that of the purist. A partisan, he explains, "is a fan of one particular team" (9). Their interest in the game is mostly emotional, watched primarily in the hopes of seeing a victory for the home team. How said victory is achieved is usually of little concern. A purist, on the other hand, is much more process-oriented, and cares little about which side ends up with the lead at the end. Mumford defines a purist as "a fan of a sport, and may love deeply the sport concerned, but has no allegiance to any particular team" (10). Where the partisan hopes for victory, the purist simply hopes to witness physical brilliance. Where the partisan would be pleased to see the opposing team underperform, the purist wants to bear witness to the fulfilled athletic potential of all participants. One could say that the purist is invested in philosopher Robert Simon's concept of the "mutual quest of excellence" (24-5). This concept decentralizes competition in pursuit of "an instant of complete coherence" (Simon 28).

Of these two groups, I argue that it is more likely for a purist to watch a sport film than a partisan. If a fan follows sports simply to see the success of their home team, it seems that they would have less interest in the historical or dramatic stories told by filmmakers. (Additionally, the impracticality of creating a film marketed solely to a specific fanbase should be noted.) Partisanship, writes sociologist Gary Crawford, largely allows "fans to apply their own individual interpretations and readings to the team/club they support" (26). Franchises are for the most part amorphous and malleable enough to fit neatly into any personal narrative or ideology. But in film, that agency is stripped away as the will of the filmmaker becomes canon. This leaves your average sport film as undesirable to the typical partisan. But sport films are almost designed to be inhospitable to the purist's way of viewing events as well. It is a rare movie that viewers can watch without getting drawn into supporting a specific side, given the viewpoints and narrative beats with which we are presented. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, the sports themselves become empty husks, devoid of aesthetic value and impossible to invest in emotionally. What the purist goes to a live event to see has little chance of appearing in a typical sports film. As

sociologist Murray Pomerance writes, when watching a sport film, it is typical to

observe with dispassion when we see fictional running backs smeared by tackles onscreen, batters hit by pitches, or hoop dreamers slammed to the floor, needing to feel no genuine anxiety for their physical health since these are, after all, not athletes pushing themselves to the limit but unionized actors who spent the morning break gobbling croissants and brie from the catering table. (313)

With this lack of investment in the on-screen happenings, and with little hope of witnessing a transcendent aesthetic experience, there seems little reason that a purist would want to sit through a sport film either. Thus, despite sports being immensely popular in the United States and around the world, films are currently constructed in such a way that there is no natural constituency for them.

Returning to Byrne, the objective of most sport films “is to draw the viewer more towards the design of the drama, and the interiority of the character, than to the design of the sport being dramatized” (1569). And viewers are discerning enough consumers to notice the differences. Pomerance explains that “Fictional players of onscreen games are not read by viewers as being truly in the throes of their travails, they are normally taken to be mere actors merely simulating athletic exertion for the lens” (313). Thus, as long as sport films continue to place the importance of the filmed sport only in service to the larger narrative, sport films will continue to fail in their attempts to create transcendent moments on the screen. As *Free Solo* showed, the task is not impossible in itself, but it requires filmmakers to center the bodily action rather than the story or the characters.

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## Notes

1. This also makes one question why we watch sport in the first place. Are we really that invested in what is happening on the field? Or is that a lie that we tell ourselves to facilitate communal life?
2. Filmmaker and tennis fan Jean-Luc Godard argues that the fault lies not with cinematic sport, but with live televised sport, which he refers to as "the reign of the always identical." He bemoans the fact that live sport is uniformly shot from a high angle in one continuous take. Being so far from the players themselves, he believes it fails to highlight how special their bodies and their actions really are. As he writes, "A shot by Venus Williams has nothing in common with one by Godard," but on the typical broadcast, the differences are likely invisible to the at-home viewer (Godard 73).



## Drives

Studies show that germs cover every surface in the gym: mirrors, balance balls, mats, barbells, benches, walls, and the window in the space between the man running on the treadmill and the woman doing Body Pump. He watches her pretty face and buns of steel, as sweat rolls down his chin then splatters on the display, stops to blur the flashing lights: the laps, the minute countdown. After, the woman showers as those life-filled rivers flow down her body and the blue-gray tile. Her sweat destined for the drain. Between suds, a sliver of hope for horny viruses that lust for hosts and await her touch. It's then they cling to her, to hitch a ride on fingertips up to her mouth and eyes, the way inside.

*T.R. Poulson*

## Brushes

You know the power  
of those damn air brushes  
which add shades of dark and light  
to give women, thin as straw,  
boobs and cleavage,  
and erase dark curves  
beneath eyes, blue as tinted ponds.  
You know those cover shots  
make girls and boys  
who ride horses  
and swing that multi-pronged fork  
to sift through aspen shavings  
feel ugly.

Imagine our surprise  
to hear American Pharoah  
would grace the pages of *Vogue*.  
He deserved it, after slicing  
his way to the winner's circle  
in the Rebel, the Triple Crown,  
mud on his belly, rain on his crest,  
sweat on his neck.

You can believe the rest  
of it. A bath and a brush  
after a breeze, saddle marks smoothed,  
bay coat shining, hooves polished,  
short tail untangled, conditioned,  
intangibles still there:  
the spring in his neck, the rippled  
muscles, evidence the blood  
of Eclipse and War Admiral flows  
in him. It doesn't stop there.

A new blanket of roses awaits  
and then those electronic air brushes  
to add tones of brown and black,  
gloss and shading  
to make him into a statue  
of glass, a pretty thing  
without sweat or slobber or shit,  
all of it erased  
as if he never won anything at all.

*T.R. Poulson*



# A League of Her Own

Brittany Tenpenny

I found her.

Or I guess, in this case, she found me.

I knew it was her the moment I tore open the envelope and the tiny Polaroid fell into my wrinkled, dirt-stained hand. I knew it in the same way people can sense rain seconds before a single drop of water falls from the sky.

I knew it the moment I looked into her eyes. They were mine.

Her left was a radiant emerald green that faded to brown near the edge, her right a warm ocean blue. Almond shaped. A little too close to the nose. They radiated a warmth I could almost feel. We shared other features—high cheekbones, full lips, and a slender nose that curved slightly at the tip—but the eyes ... the eyes said it all.

My heart stumbled against my ribs. The accompanying letter put a name to the face. Susan Davis, the Rockford Peaches' ace pitcher.

My mother.

I read the sentence bearing her name over and over, memorizing every sharp line and curve of the tight, crooked script. My daughter Debbie's stern voice called to me from somewhere nearby and I blinked slowly, breaking out of my haze.

I stood in the center of Debbie's meticulously clean and organized kitchen, my black work boots caked with soil from the garden. Grass stains covered my overalls and the pungent smell of fertilizer poisoned the air. If I didn't leave right now, I'd incur Debbie's wrath.

But I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe. I dragged my eyes back to the photograph.

My mother ...

For most of my life, I had believed my eyes were some sort of curse. Sister Betty, headmistress of St. John's Orphanage in Chicago, with her pompous air and piercing gaze, never missed an opportunity to remind me of my deformity.

"You've got the devil in your eyes!" she'd bark while dragging me into my room after yet another failed interview with a potential family. "They're gonna get you in trouble."

And they did. Whenever I got on Sister Betty's bad side—and boy, did she have many—she'd blame my wretched behavior on my eyes.

Once, when she started lecturing me about my "sin," I interrupted her rant to remind her that, according to her Bible Study lessons, all humans were created in God's image. So, if I was bad, then God must be bad as well. My sarcasm was rewarded with several bruises and an empty stomach.

I never imagined that another person alive—another woman—shared the same imperfection.

Maybe I wasn't so bad after all.

The assertive click of Debbie's heels snapped my attention back to the present. I hastily slipped the photograph and letter into the pocket of my overalls—careful not to bend them—and straightened up just as Debbie entered the kitchen. She stopped abruptly, fixing me with one of her narrow gazes. Her brown, beady eyes—my husband Ray's eyes—scrutinized me from head to toe, her thin lips tightening into a straight line.

Debbie was one of those women who never looked out of sorts. Even after a long day in the courtroom, her black blazer and pencil skirt were crisp and unblemished by snags or wrinkles. Her blond hair—another trait of my husband's—remained tight and stiff in a bun atop her head. The only part of her that showed wear was the ever-present line in her forehead that seemed to deepen whenever I was around.

Debbie's eyes flickered back to mine and she sucked in a breath. "In the garden again?"

"Of course," I said, as naturally as I could. My fingers twitched and I lightly trailed them over my pocket. "I was creating a new compost pile. *Home and Garden* said—"

"How many times do I have to tell you," Debbie replied in an authoritative voice, "to take off your boots before coming inside?"

I glanced down at the flakes of dirt peppering Debbie's ceramic tiles. "Oh ... I didn't realize—"

Debbie sighed. "Just slip them off. Oliver!"

A young boy with shaggy hair and a mischievous smile bounded into the room.

"Go upstairs and get Nana some new clothes."

"Aw, but mom—my friends and I were getting ready to—"

"Do it."

Oliver rolled his eyes and sprinted out of the room. Debbie turned back to me. "Off. Now."

"Deb, it's just a little dirt."

Debbie huffed impatiently. "Do you know how much this floor cost? It's not even a month old—"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" I stepped out of the offending footwear. "You're worse than your father."

Ray had always been stringent when it came to cleanliness. I thrived in the grime.

Debbie snatched up the boots, held them out before her, and walked carefully to the back porch where she began beating off the dirt. As a child, she'd always follow me around, sweeping up the trails of mud I'd track into the house. Sometimes, she'd refuse to hug me because of how I smelled. Debbie's need for order grew more prominent when Ray died and I played along, mostly because she reminded me so much of him.

When Debbie became a teenager, my failure to keep a clean house became a point of contention between us. She was the only girl in the neighborhood with a mother who didn't take pride in a sparkling kitchen, who didn't fret over every speck of dust that coated the fireplace mantel, and who didn't panic if the colors ran together in the laundry. She didn't understand why her mother was so odd.

I had tried to conform. Lucielle Smith, my adoptive mother, did her best to fix me. She'd drill lessons into my head on etiquette and cooking and cleaning, but none of it stuck. I spent my teenage years playing baseball with a bunch of girls at a sandlot near the woods, ruining my school uniform with grass and dirt, and not giving it a second thought. Lucielle would scold me for my carelessness and then make me stand and watch as she walked through the steps on how to lift stains from a blouse.

I always tried to behave. I'd walk cautiously through the school hallways in my freshly laundered uniform, avoiding anything and anyone that would lead me astray. Sometimes, I'd make it a whole day without an incident. But then, I'd step outside and smell the earthly perfume of the trees and the grass and I'd find my way to the ballfield where cleanliness and propriety were frowned upon. When I dug my saddle shoes into the ground beside first base and felt the white cowhide caress my fingers, everything Lucielle taught me melted away and it was just me and the earth and baseball. Just the way I liked it.

I wondered if Susan ever felt bad about failing her mother.

Debbie returned with renewed vigor. "Now the overalls."

"Deb—"

"We're having dinner in half an hour with a very important guest. And I won't have you tracking mud all over the house."

Without waiting for my consent, Debbie began helping me out of my overalls. Her nose crinkled as a new wave of fertilizer struck the air, but she

continued working at one strap and I the other. The overalls hit the ground with a soft smack, leaving me in nothing but a tattered T-shirt and Ray's old athletic shorts. Shivering, I hugged myself.

"What's this?" Debbie said, eyeing the letter that had slipped out of the denim pocket.

"I don't know ..."

Debbie huffed and went to pick up the letter. Heart lurching, I tried to snatch it away before she could touch it. Too late. She lifted a brow and glanced between me and the letter.

I rubbed my bare arms. "It's for me."

Debbie read the letter in the meticulous way that only a lawyer could. Her eyes narrowed after only a few lines. "When did this arrive?"

I shrugged. "With the rest of the mail, I guess."

Glaring at the letter, Debbie folded it neatly and tucked it into the pocket of her blazer.

"What are you—?"

"Utter nonsense," she muttered, depositing my overalls into one of the fresh trash bags she kept in the kitchen cabinet for occasions just like this. "People trying to play tricks on an old woman—"

"It's not a trick. Look at the picture."

Holding her breath, Debbie reached into the trash bag and unearthed the photograph. Her eyes immediately widened and she gave me a strange look, as if seeing me for the first time.

Witnessing Susan's photograph jammed tightly in Debbie's hand felt wrong. I wanted her back. I waited seventy-eight years to see her. I didn't want to share her with anyone.

But, instead of returning the photo to my possession, Debbie placed it in the pocket of her blazer alongside the letter.

"Deborah Marie, you give that back to me right now!"

She ignored my plea and turned to Oliver who appeared with a new set of clothes. She took them from him without smiling and shoved them into my arms. "Get changed and wash up—"

"No. Not until you give me the letter."

"I'm going to look into this. Now hurry up. He'll be here soon."

I held the clothes flush against me. "Who?"

Debbie headed for the stairs, ribbons of light from the waning sun tattooing the carpet. She looked over her shoulder at me and tightened her lips. "You'll see."

\* \* \*

"Holy fucking Hell!"

"Mother!"



Debbie glowered at me from the other end of the table, nostrils flaring. Leon, her willowy husband, shot me a disapproving look and the man next to him examined me through his square, rimless glasses with a mild expression of interest, as though I was an intriguing science experiment. Fucking Doctor Morrow. Only Oliver was unbothered by my outburst, playfully jabbing his fork into the heart of his baked potato.

Heat flushed throughout my body and I began muttering a Hail Mary, but stopped. I wasn't sorry. I had no reason to be sorry. I straightened up and fixed Debbie with a glare.

"You're shipping me off. I think I'm entitled to be angry."

"Please." Debbie sat rigid at the head of the table. "Don't be so dramatic."

"Dramatic? My daughter is moving to St. Louis and leaving me behind in some nursing home—"

"It's actually ... uh ... not a nursing home." I drew my attention to Doctor Morrow. He was a man of slight stature and was so unremarkable that he easily blended into his surroundings, like an oversized chameleon. I envied him. I also hated him.

*Father who art in Heaven, please forgive me.*

"Pardon?" I said.

"Green Hills is a retirement community," Dr. Morrow replied, adjusting his glasses, "not a nursing home. We pride ourselves on—"

"It's for your own good," Debbie said. She was in full court mode now, clinically laying out the facts of the case for the judge and jury. "You've never lived anywhere but Chicago. And you hate St. Louis."

"I hate the Cardinals. I never said I hate St. Louis—"

"I'm about to take on the biggest case of my career. I don't have time to chase after you. Trust me, this arrangement is the best thing for both of us."

Deep down, I knew Debbie was right. This was a natural step in life. Many people my age moved into retirement communities to live out their final days. I couldn't expect to burden Debbie any more than I already had.

But, damn, did that hurt. I swept my gaze around the table, going from Debbie to Leon to Oliver. My family. My everything. And they wanted nothing to do with me.

When I lived at St. John's, the sisters would take us on a yearly field trip to read to the elderly residents of a nearby nursing home. I'd sit at their bedside and recite passages from one of the tattered chapter books we received for Christmas, but I knew they weren't listening. I'd watch their eyes glaze over. Their lives had been reduced to memories playing torturously on repeat in their heads as they lay in bed waiting to escape the four bare and bleak walls of their cell.

I swallowed hard. At Green Hills, I too would be shut away from everything I knew—away from my garden and the sunshine, from the snort in Oliver's laugh and my favorite seat behind home plate at Wrigley Field. My only

connection to the outside world would be Debbie's obligatory phone calls once or twice a year. I had spent my childhood in a cage. I refused to die in one.

Taking a few deep breaths to steady my hammering heart, I turned to Debbie. I thought about the first time I had ever held her. How small and breakable she felt in my arms. How my hands burned when I couldn't touch her. She was whole and beautiful and perfect, secure in the knowledge that she had a mother who loved her. That she belonged to someone.

I will forever belong to no one.

"Deborah," I said, surprised by the strength in my voice. "I've always been so proud of you. Always. You're strong and smart and a hell of a lawyer. But right now, I couldn't be more disappointed in you."

Debbie didn't say anything as I rose unsteadily from the table. It's hard to make a dramatic exit when your aching hip only lets you walk a few feet at a time. But I plodded forward and bit my lips through the pain. When I reached the stairs, I clung to the railing and heaved my body onto the first step. Then the second. Third.

Muffled voices rumbled from the dining room as I continued to ascend. My body quivered with pain, but I reached the upstairs hallway in spite of it. I leaned against the wall, desperate to catch my breath. I waited, listened, hoped.

But no one came looking for me.

\* \* \*

Susan's photograph was exactly where I knew it would be. Debbie might be a grown woman with a family and career of her own, but she was still my daughter and I knew how she operated.

I didn't exhale until I was safely inside my room at the end of the hall. I shut the door and leaned against it for support, closing my eyes. Tears rarely provoked sympathy from Sister Betty and Lucielle, and neither had encouraged open displays of emotion.

But I couldn't help it. I cried. I thought about Debbie and Leon and Oliver having dinner downstairs, joyfully talking about their new life in St. Louis. I saw myself fading into the basement of their memory, a dusty artifact they'd bring out once in a while when they felt nostalgic. The thought of disappearing forever sent me crumbling to the ground, head buried in my hands.

I remembered how Sister Betty had often talked about death. It was a natural part of life, she'd said, a celebration. We should be happy when it came because it meant that we'd be with God in Heaven. I used to spend my nights at St. John's praying for death because I'd finally have a family.

That same hopeless feeling washed over me. I wanted God to take me right then and there, not when I was alone in a bed at Green Hills. Not when I could barely remember my name. Now, in my bedroom, with the window open to the garden and my mother's letter in my hand.

My mother ... Susan ...

I opened my eyes and glanced down at the envelope. The tip of the letter peeked out from the corner and I tugged it free from its paper cage. My wet eyes took in the untidy writing as I unfolded it.

Over the course of two pages—front and back—Susan walked me through her life. She told me all about her career on the Rockford Peaches, the records she had broken and the championships she had won. She wrote about the years after the league had folded, during which she had struggled to find purpose but eventually settled down with a factory worker and had a son named Clyde.

And she wrote about me. Susan had been seventeen when she gave birth to me in the darkness of her mother's bedroom in early 1942. She made no mention of my father, but spoke instead of how it had felt to hold me for the first time, how her eyes had lit up when she saw mine.

The decision to give me up was not an easy one, but Susan knew that neither of us would have much of a life if she kept me. Teenage mothers were the Hester Prynne of Susan's day. So, she turned me over to the nuns at St. John's, struggling to convince herself that this was the best option.

Susan kept tabs on me through the years. When I was adopted by Lucielle, Susan wrote to her, asking for updates, desperate for any bit of information she could find.

Some days, Susan wished that she'd see me in the stands at a Rockford game, just to know that I was real. That I happened. That a piece of her lived on.

She never wrote to me before, because she didn't know what to say. And the older I got, the harder it became for her to reveal the truth.

But now ... now that time was moving against us both, Susan wanted to see me, wanted to hear my voice just once. The letter concluded with a phone number.

The tension in my body melted away as I read Susan's words repeatedly. All this time, she was there, watching me. I hadn't been without a mother. She was just out of my reach.

And now, I had a brother too. I wasn't alone.

Pulling myself to my feet, I shuffled across the room to where my cell phone sat charging on my nightstand. My frail fingers stumbled over the screen and they shook as I carefully punched in the number. My pulse raced and I sucked in a breath as I brought the phone to my ear.

My heart beat in rhythm with the dial tone, steady yet frantic. I sank onto my bed and clenched the sheets with my free hand, Susan's letter resting on my lap. What if she didn't answer and I was forced to leave a voicemail? Or worse ... what if she did answer but decided, after exchanging a few words with me, that she was mistaken and that it was better if we never met? What if—?

"Hello?"

I jumped at the sound of the deep, male voice on the other end of the line. I listened to his soft breathing and the muffled shouts of children in the background.

Biting my lip, I glanced down at the letter and checked the number Susan wrote with the one currently displayed on my phone. They matched. I brought the phone back up to my ear just as the man spoke again.

"Hell—"

"I'm sorry ... is Susan Davis there? I was given her number—"

"Look," the man replied curtly, "I told you people to stop calling here, all right? Susan's—"

"No, no, wait! I'm ..." I paused, the words dissolving on my tongue. It felt wrong to have this conversation with a complete stranger. After all, up until the letter arrived, I was Susan's best kept secret. I didn't want to break her trust before we had the chance to meet. Swallowing hard, I continued.

"Susan sent me a letter. She asked me to call her."

The man inhaled sharply and hissed at the children to be quiet. Their voices died and suddenly it was just the two of us connected by a long stretch of silence. Then, the man cleared his throat. "Kaydence ...?"

The sound of my name falling from his lips sent a shiver down my spine. I never cared much for the name Kaydence. It was reserved for women with elegance and grace, the kind of women who made walking in high heels look natural. I always preferred Kady or Kay.

Only Sister Betty and Lucielle called me Kaydence, weaponizing it when I angered or disappointed them. Never once did I hear my name uttered with such familial warmth. Until now.

I knew it was Clyde on the other side of the line. There was so much I wanted to say, decades of words squirreled away. But when I opened my mouth to respond, my voice eluded me. So I shut my eyes, took some deep breaths, and tried again. This time, I managed to produce a whisper.

"Clyde?"

"Yeah ... I'm sorry about before. Been getting a lot of strange calls lately."

"That's alright."

Listening to Clyde speak was like visiting a friend after a long absence. I luxuriated in his voice, committing it to memory. How had I gone this long without hearing it?

"I've been waiting for you to call ever since Mo—Susan—sent the letter."

I pressed the phone hard against my temple. "Is she there? Can I talk to her—?"

"Now's ... not a great time."

"Oh ..."

Seconds of silence passed and my throat tightened. Had Susan changed her mind? Had she decided that she didn't want to see me after all?

I couldn't bear the thought. Not now. Not when she was so close. "I understand if she's shy—"

"It's not that," Clyde replied. "It's just ... Christ ... this is just so ..."

Odd. Surreal. Unbelievable. "I know."

"She does wanna see you. And I ... I wanna see you, too."

I sucked in a breath, my pulse pounding in my ears. "I'd like that."

"There's a memorial on Friday in Rockford for the Peaches. Susan's being honored. She'd like it if you—"

"Yes. Of course."

Clyde could give me directions to Susan's private villa on Mars and I wouldn't hesitate to make the trip. I'd cross any distance to see her eyes in person.

I wondered, as Clyde continued speaking, if he had Susan's eyes too.

"You're in Chicago, right? I'll pick you up. Is that okay?"

It was more than okay with me, but I knew Debbie would be harder to convince.

"That's perfect."

Clyde and I spent a few minutes hammering out the remaining details before falling into silence.

I didn't want to let him go, fearing that when I hung up, I'd awaken to discover that this was all a dream. "I'll see you on Friday, Clyde."

"See you then ... Kaydence."

\* \* \*

"You're not going."

Debbie stood on the threshold of the front door, blocking my view of Clyde's car on the street. She fixed me with her sharp eyes, a sneer tugging at her lips.

I sighed heavily, my overnight bag in one hand and Susan's letter in the other. "Debbie, I've gotta go."

"No," she replied firmly. "I promised Dr. Morrow that we'd visit Green Hills this weekend. He's expecting you."

"That's not my fault." I tightened my grip on the letter. "Now move."

Debbie shook her head and I rolled my eyes. We had sparred over this matter ever since I told Debbie about the phone call. She worked on her appeal, attacking the issue from every angle and presenting evidence to sway my opinion. I'd be disappointed, she had said. Susan and Clyde probably wanted something from me—from us—and I was a fool to indulge them.

Maybe Debbie was right. Maybe I was a fool, and this would all end in heartbreak. But I had to discover that for myself.

Clyde honked a few times and I stepped forward, but Debbie blocked my path, her voice breaking as she spoke. "Why can't you just let this go?"

I gazed at my daughter, not seeing the ruthless lawyer, but the tiny little girl from my memories who was always more frightened than she let on.

Setting down my bag, I approached Debbie. Her whole body stiffened, but as I gently took her hands into mine, running my bent fingers against her smooth ones, she relaxed.

"Debbie ... I want this." I linked my fingers with hers. "I ... I've never known what a mother's touch feels like. Please ... let me find out."

Debbie looked at me with wet, dull eyes. A rare chink in her armor. I squeezed her hand, pressed a kiss against her skin, and released her. Debbie remained rooted to the spot, jaw flexing. I sucked in a breath, ready for round two. But, with a reluctant sigh, Debbie stepped aside. I grabbed my bag and walked out onto the front lawn.

Clyde emerged from his blue Honda, dressed in a finely tailored gray suit with a red baseball tie and aviators. The slim, silver strands in his ebony hair flickered in the early morning sunlight and his high cheekbones added a boyish glow to his narrow face.

He pulled off his sunglasses and my breath hitched. Clyde didn't have mismatched eyes, but his were no less noticeable; two bright blue flames burned behind his irises.

Those eyes swept over my face and I watched as they lit up with recognition. Satisfied, Clyde extended his hand, a smile crossing his face. "Pleasure to meet you, Kaydence."

There was a youthful vigor about him, a spark that outshined the few wrinkles above his brow. I took note of his gold wedding band as I grasped his hand. "Likewise."

Clyde nodded and we fell silent. I didn't know what to say. Hallmark didn't make cards for moments like this.

Clyde broke the ice by reaching for my bag. My grip tightened briefly, but it relented and let him take it.

At around eleven am, Clyde made the turn down 15th Ave and Beyer Stadium came into view. I sat up and rolled down the window.

The grass was emerald and vibrant, its fragrance so thick, I could taste it. Mint. I dragged my gaze beyond the iron fence to the ticket booth which, according to Clyde, was the only piece from the original stadium still in existence. Black bars stretched across the arched windows and a new sign commemorating the Peaches sat atop the booth.

I imagined Susan passing beneath the booth nearly every day for eleven years, her worn cleats digging into the blinding white dirt of the pitching mound. The wind tugging at the edge of her peach skirt.

She was so close.

I unbuckled my seatbelt before Clyde rolled the Honda into a spot close to the booth. The lot was surprisingly empty.

I turned to Clyde, but his gaze was trained on the steering wheel, fingers white with tension.

"Are we early?"

Clyde swallowed. "There's no memorial."

"What? But you said—?"

"She's not here, Kaydence." Clyde finally looked at me. His eyes were vibrant, but they lost much of their fire. "She's gone."

My stomach sank and a coldness smacked against my core. He didn't mean it. I misunderstood ...

"But she wanted to see me. She wrote the letter."

"She did ... but she passed away not long after."

I shook my head and shut my eyes, trying to calm my erratic breathing. This was a cruel joke. Susan had wanted to meet me, to see me. My fingers tingled with the need to hold her hand, but they'd be forever ignorant of her touch.

My eyes were watery when they finally opened, and I turned to Clyde. "Why?" I said, voice a soft wheeze. "Why did you take me here?"

Clyde fixed his eyes on the field. "Mom loved it here," he replied wistfully. "She'd come here sometimes and just sit on the mound. She said it made her feel seventeen again. I thought you wouldn't come if you knew the truth. And she wanted you to see this."

I followed his gaze to the field, but it had lost much of its luster in my eyes.

"There's a statue of mom they put up a few years ago. It's on the pathway behind the field. I'll be there if you want to see her."

Clyde took my hands in his, swiped his thumb across my knuckles, and climbed out of the car.

I didn't follow. Susan was dead. Gone. Buried. I wanted to hate her for giving me up, for robbing me of a mother. For choosing Clyde and this place over me. I looked down at the letter clamped in my right hand.

*Rip it ... do it!*

But I couldn't.

All I had left of Susan were those two pieces of paper and the memories she shared with me.

And Clyde. She gave me Clyde.

I tucked the letter in my pocket and got out of the car, making my way past the ticket booth. Despite its new, glossy look, I could feel the stadium's history enveloping my every step. If I closed my eyes, I could almost hear the crack of the bats and the crunch of the cleats on the grass. The roar of voices long gone. Susan's voice.

Clyde stood at the end of the cement pathway, staring up at a bronze statue. Mom's statue. The smooth and shiny stone did little justice to her eyes. The plaque below it listed her accomplishments. MVP. Pitcher of the Year. Most Strikeouts, 1944.

I looked up at Clyde and reached for his hand, squeezing it gently. He ripped his gaze from the stone and settled his bright eyes on me.

Looking at him was like looking at Susan. Heat rushed through my veins and my chest felt lighter. But this time, the feeling didn't go away. Standing

hand and hand with Clyde, my brother, before Susan's statue, on the field she loved, just felt right.

I turned back to the monument and smiled softly. There we were. Mother. Son. Daughter. Three sets of high cheekbones. Two crooked noses. One pair of full red lips.

And six luminous eyes.

My mother's eyes.

My brother's eyes.

My eyes.





## The Effects of Alcohol on the Game

It may have been prohibited,  
but back when the hockey arena  
at college was unheated

in the worst of winters  
where it was known to drop to  
30 below, how else was one to

keep warm during a game. We'd  
sneak in pints of peppermint schnapps  
and cheap peach brandy and pass them

around. It wasn't long before we  
seemed warm enough, and it helped  
loosen our tongues to shout the cruel

*sieve, sieve*, at the opposing goalie  
after he failed to stop the puck when  
one of our players shot. Often it

rattled him, and the score would mount  
and we'd celebrate with a swig and shout  
*sieve, sieve* longer and louder, and by

the end of the game our wool winter hats  
would be stuffed in pockets of our  
opened coats with bottles that were empty.

*Matthew J. Spireng*

## Catching the Big One

You don't know how far out  
the fish are. Could be  
by the rock protruding

near the middle a bit upstream,  
or where only a perfect cast  
could reach the overhanging branches

of the far bank but not  
hang up there, drop beneath them  
in shallow, shaded water,

draw a big one from  
hiding that, hungry, darts  
and bites on sharpened steel.

Then there's the frenzied  
battle, keeping the line taut  
and steering the fish away from

whatever it would hide in, bringing it  
across the water like a heavy package  
being delivered just for you.

*Matthew J. Spireng*



# Coach of the Year

Mark Brazaitis

**M**y father and I fled Cleveland to escape heartbreak. His fiancée had dumped him for someone she met in a local park. The man had declared himself a cousin of the Flying Wallendas and, to prove it, had tightrope-walked across the back of the bench she was sitting on. She told my father that the man was “exciting,” which implied that my father was boring, which he was. He worked in computers, and although he’d explained to me exactly what his job entailed at least half a dozen times, I still had no idea. We moved an hour-and-a-half south, to Sherman, where he found a job in IT at Ohio Eastern University.

My father’s dejection over his runaway fiancée wasn’t the main reason for our flight from the Big Plum, or however Cleveland was attempting to market itself at the time. My mother was. Or, rather, his fiancée’s exit was a devastating reminder of my mother’s. If the former was a kitchen fire, the latter was a five-alarm inferno. It was either flee from the memories or be incinerated.

In stature, my mother had been my father’s opposite. Whereas my father was short and bottom-heavy—my mother used to call him, affectionately, “my Weeble,”—my mother was as tall and long-limbed as a construction crane. What she lacked in conventional beauty, she made up for in sheer presence. I looked like her in all respects. Even my hair, which I grew to my shoulders, was like hers: curly and full-bodied and as autumnal as an October oak. My father, in contrast, had no hair.

The two of us loved my mother like there was no tomorrow, which, for her, there wasn’t. She was felled by the most ordinary of giant killers: cancer. I was twelve years old. My father wept, on and off, for years—or until he began

dating the woman who would become his fiancée, who felt insulted by his tears, then inspired more of them.

It was early summer when we moved, and although, as an employment-eligible seventeen-year-old, I made lackluster efforts at finding a job, I mostly played basketball at the Boys & Girls Club, an un-air-conditioned box in downtown Sherman. This is where I met Sam or, rather, where Sam discovered me.

Sam, short for Samantha, was the boys' basketball coach at St. Lucy's, a Catholic high school in town known for its robotics program, its spring musicals, and its indifference to sports. Sam, who'd coached the Blind Saints for three years, hadn't exactly turned the tide on the latter, but the basketball team, once a guaranteed "W" for its opponents, had crawled into respectability with a total of nine victories during Sam's tenure.

Sam wasn't content with respectability, however. Her ambition was to win the Eastern Ohio Catholic High School championship and its coach-of-the-year award. In harmony with this goal, and perhaps even superseding it, she wanted to beat St. Mark's, from nearby Sheridan, which was coached by her ex-boyfriend, Chris. She was formerly his assistant coach, and their breakup had been tumultuous, culminating in a never-completed game of H-O-R-S-E in which Chris made a basket off of Sam's head and Sam scored in a catch-and-shoot off of Chris's waist—or somewhere below it.

I would learn all of this gradually. When she stepped into the Boys & Girls Club, I was struck first by her beauty—half Eastern European and half Puerto Rican, she had lustrous black hair, eyebrows as sleek and arched as scimitars, and a dazzling smile—and second by her unabashed distaste for bad basketball. "My God, man," she said to me as a player on the opposing team swept past me to corral a rebound, "have you never heard of boxing out?"

I did, in fact, know how to box out; I knew a lot about basketball as, at my mother's insistence, I'd begun playing the game at age four. But I'd never devoted the time or attention to it my mother wished. I dreamed not of March Madness or NBA All-Stardom but of becoming either a poet-rock star or a rock star-poet, depending on what art I held in higher esteem on a given day.

What doubtless caught Sam's eye in addition to my careless attention to basketball fundamentals was my height. During the previous eighteen months, I had grown an astounding and uncomfortable nine inches. Some nights, as I lay in bed, I could actually feel myself grow, as if I were both Procrustes, the mythical torturer who stretched his unwitting guests to the dimensions of his iron bed, and his victim.

After my team lost its pickup game, Sam waved me over to the sideline. "Are you from around here?" she asked.

"As of two weeks ago," I said.

"You go to high school?"

"Senior year coming up."

"Where?"

I told her I was headed to Sherman High, the largest of the three public schools in town.

"I have a better idea," she said.

Her idea was to have me enroll at St. Lucy's. But St. Lucy's didn't offer athletic scholarships, and the tuition, I calculated, was at least triple what my father could afford without begging at the door of a bank. This, I was sad to realize, would mark the end of my recruitment. Even in such a short time, I could tell that Sam was an excellent coach. Moreover, thanks to her honey lip balm and spearmint gum, she smelled like my mother.

At dinner with my father the same night, I was about to mention my encounter with Sam, but he had bigger news: He'd met a woman! And she'd asked him on a date!

She'd needed a bathroom and had stopped in Chase Hall, where my father's office was located. Seeing "IT Specialist" on his door, she remembered a problem she was having with her laptop, which she had with her. Although unaffiliated with Ohio Eastern University, she nevertheless decided to take a chance on an expert's kindness.

Said my father, grinning, "She'd split her screen and couldn't un-split it. I fixed it in a minute flat. The rest of the time, we discussed everything from Java the programming language to Java the coffee." The two of them, he believed, were "compatible" and had "interfaced well." He said he "couldn't have programmed" a better encounter.

Only later, before we headed off to bed, did I ask him the woman's name. He was dressed in ancient pajamas my mother had given him: brown bottoms with attached feet in the shape of paws and a yellow top with "Papa Bear" written in honey bees across the front. The elastic waist was so slack he'd had to secure it with a safety pin. He smiled like his date-to-be had already kissed him.

"Samantha," he said. "But she goes by Sam."

Unlike on most days, when he pattered around his office until six or seven, my father, on the day of his date, left work at exactly five. Fifteen minutes later, he was standing in front of our bathroom mirror, patting his head as if he still had hair, a bald man's version of phantom-limb syndrome. He cranked his leather belt as tight as he could, which nearly induced the peanuts he'd recently snacked on to come flying out of his mouth. "I guess I'm overweight," he concluded.

"Dad, you aren't overweight," I said from the doorway. "You've always looked the way you do. I've seen your baby pictures."

"I wish I looked a little more lifeguard and a little less flotation device," he said. He turned to me with a wistful smile. "I wish I looked like you."

I stepped in front of the mirror. My hair was shoulder-length, greasy, and uncombed. My body, with its immense torso and long, thin limbs, looked like Play-Doh as manipulated by an untalented kindergartner. I had several constellations on my face, with pimples substituting for stars. If I was our household's ideal of beauty, we needed an addition to our household.

"Look who's the lucky one tonight," I said. "You're going on a date and I'm going into my bedroom to write morbid poetry and resist the temptation to watch Internet porn."

"Fair enough," he said. His face wrinkled. "But I thought I'd porn-proofed your laptop."

"You did. The best I can do is a virtual tour of the Uffizi Gallery so I can stare at the Venus of Urbino."

He looked at me quizzically.

"Don't worry," I said, "she's covering her crotch."

"She better keep it covered," he said.

Concerned about six-o'clock shadow, my father shaved a second time within the hour, sprinkled cologne on his neck, and said, "I'm as ready as I'll ever be." Nevertheless, he straightened his polo shirt—its horizontal stripes, like Saturn's rings, I was sad to see, emphasized his roundness—and touched up his invisible hair. He grinned into the mirror, but the mirror failed to grin back. He bowed his head. "I put the odds at success at no better than 8 to 1," he said.

"I'll always bet on you, Dad."

"I'm glad you don't have a gambling addiction," he said.

At our front door, he turned to me. "I think she's a referee. She was wearing a whistle."

I was about to correct him, but I knew I couldn't do so without risking a subsequent conversation about Sam's true intentions in cozying up to my father. "Keep out of foul trouble," I said.

\* \* \*

My father's date, at the Book and Brew, Sherman's local pub and intellectual meeting ground, was supposed to be coffee only. But he and Sam liked each other well enough to extend their date into dinner and even to an after-dinner glass of iced tea. If he didn't come home ecstatic, it was only because ecstasy was three bars above his emotional register.

Although there had been no goodnight kiss—"She teaches at a Catholic institution and believes in old-style Catholic dating rituals," my father explained—they had arranged another date for the following evening.

"Congratulations," I said.

He slapped me on the shoulder—or tried to. He wasn't much good at male-bonding rituals and he missed my shoulder and caught my left ear. "How was the Venus de Milo?" he asked.



"Venus of Urbino," I corrected. "Beautiful—for a five-hundred-year-old woman."

Before he trotted off to bed, wearing another pair of pajamas my mother had given him, the message on the shirt declaring "I Love You from A to Zzzzzz," he gave me a bemused smile. "Sam said she met you the other day at the Boys & Girls Club." When I said nothing, he asked, "Why didn't you tell me?"

*I didn't want you to know it's me she's after, not you.* "I didn't know if it was the same Sam."

"Anyway," he said, "I think we ought to consider enrolling you in St. Lucy's."

"Thanks, Dad, but it's way too expensive."

He extolled the virtues of the school, reciting a regular info-session list of its highlights. Clearly, Sam had sold him hard. "Sam thinks you could—what was the phrase she used?—earn a spot in her team's revolution."

I thought she might have said "rotation," but maybe not. Sam did want to upend the Catholic League basketball hierarchy.

Before drifting off into his bedroom and, doubtless, into dreams of Sam, he said, "We'll think seriously about it."

We didn't think about it, seriously or otherwise, for long. After his second date with Sam the following day, a Sunday brunch at the Book and Brew, he returned home with an application to the school.

"How great can this place be," I said, "if they don't even accept on-line applications?"

"Oh, they do," he said, "but Sam was gracious enough to offer to hand-deliver yours."

Sam came to our house later the same evening to pick up the completed application. Standing in our hallway, the three of us tossed out conversation topics (the merits of the high pick-and-roll, Clapton versus Hendrix, the five most common encryption algorithms), and although two of us occasionally hit on a subject of mutual interest, collectively we had nothing in common. Or so it seemed until my father asked Sam if she'd like to join us for a few hands of Rummy. "My favorite card game," she declared.

My mother had loved Rummy, and, like Sam, played it with the life-or-death enthusiasm of a Gladiator in the Coliseum. We called it quits only as midnight struck. My father and I escorted Sam to our door, where, with my completed application to St. Lucy's and deposit in her hand, she bestowed a brilliant smile on both of us.

\* \* \*

Sam was right to collect my application as quickly as she did because the next day at the Boys & Girls Club, her ex-boyfriend showed up. At the

beginning of the summer, I'd stopped measuring myself, fearing that every time I did I was only encouraging my body to set a record. At my last tally, I stood an inch-and-a-half shy of seven feet.

Coach Chris was eight inches shorter than I, which made him, relative to most men, tall. He had honey-colored skin and wore his black hair in a crewcut, a style that highlighted his high, strong forehead. His appearance suggested any number of ethnic and racial collaborations, a state of affairs he evidently used to his advantage when recruiting players. No matter what their race or ethnicity, he declared himself one of them.

Coach Chris had one advantage over Sam in drawing talented players to his team: He could offer scholarships. Five minutes into our conversation, he offered me one.

St. Mark's, as I discovered an hour later during a Google search, ranked in a virtual tie with St. Lucy's in academics and far surpassed it in athletics. But when I told my father about Coach Chris's offer, he dismissed it, albeit not without a sigh. "We've made a commitment to St. Lucy's," he said, although we both understood to whom we'd committed ourselves.

Every Saturday night, the three of us drank iced tea, ate microwave popcorn, and played Rummy. Between hands, Sam told stories from her childhood. She'd been raised by her father, whom she suspected of working for the CIA because he brought her to live in dozens of far-flung places around the globe. Her schooling had been sporadic. "The truth is," she confessed to us, "I don't even have a high school diploma." But she didn't need one, she'd decided. "A championship," she said, "is all the résumé I need."

Given her team, though, her résumé was in danger of remaining slight. Our starting forwards could have been sumo wrestlers; our shooting guard could shoot all right, but only with a Winchester Model 70 from a blind on his family's forty-two acres above Sky Lake; and our point guard, the president of St. Lucy's chess club, might have been able to execute a Ruy Lopez opening, but a competent bounce pass often eluded him—or, rather, eluded his teammates.

Under a lesser coach's leadership, we would have been doomed to disaster. But Sam had a plan for success, the chief component of which was me. Every day, she required me to stay after practice for what she called "Big Man's Camp." Although not officially a man, I was certainly big—bigger, as I would discover, by six inches and thirty pounds, than any of our opponents—and she worked with me so I could master the tools of the trade, including a sky hook, the teaching of which she augmented with YouTube videos of Kareem Abdul Jabbar.

Alas, we started the season with losses to St. Luke's and St. Peter's. I was the only one of our players who consistently scored, but I wasn't, in Sam's critical eye, sufficiently "attentive and aggressive." As in pickup games at the Boys & Girls Club, I tended to drift beyond the three-point line, and, during the St. Peter's game, inspired by the crimson cheeks of a young woman in the

fourth row, I grabbed a pen off the scorer's table and scribbled a line of poetry on my forearm. In punishment, Sam, at our next practice, required me to shoot ten free throws for every poet she could name. For as long as I shot foul shots, she might as well have had a PhD in English. We won our next three games.

In the meantime, whenever my father spoke of Sam, his face assumed the appearance of a radiant Easter egg augmented with a crooked smile, wide eyes, and a blissful aura of innocence. Clearly, he had fallen in love with her. Or perhaps he had fallen in love with the family unit that Sam, every Saturday at our card table, had restored.

He could have aided his cause by being more romantic. On several occasions, I hinted that I might be able to ghostwrite a poem or even a song for him, but he declined, saying the frequent computer help he provided Sam expressed the 1,000 gigabytes of his devotion.

That she didn't see him much outside of Saturdays or that she politely demurred on his invitation to spend Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Eve with us—her father, she said, was possessive of her holiday time—or that, when she kissed him, it was a chaste peck on the cheek, didn't appear to discourage him.

My father's new passion didn't entirely overshadow his old passion, however. Three times during our Christmas dinner, he began sentences with "Your mother" before catching himself and muttering something about how he needed to reprogram his mind to the present.

\* \* \*

Our team's record was an even 5-5 when we faced St. Mark's for what would prove to be the first of two encounters. Even before the tipoff, I recognized something off-putting between Sam and Chris—off-putting, that is, if one entertained notions of one's father sustaining a romantic relationship with St. Lucy's coach. As they shook hands in front of the scorer's table, each seemingly trying to out-squeeze the other, I saw in their eyes something I would eventually recognize as a paradoxical mix of hatred, passion, devotion, respect, love, and a desire to eat each other's hearts, with or without seasoning. I had a premonition of my own future addictive, tumultuous relationship. In college, I would become the lead guitarist of a band I would name—with understated poetry, I thought—Tall. I would fall in love with our rhythm guitarist, a four-foot, 11-inch Russian named Petra. Within our romance would burn a fierce competitiveness, which would spark jealousy, resentment, a begrudging respect, and a strange compulsion to hide each other's guitar picks.

Because I had seen in Sam's eyes what I'd never seen in them when she looked at my father, my heart wasn't in our game against St. Mark's. Neither was my jump shot or my sky hook. Besides, St. Mark's center, although shorter and less robust than I, was agile and aggressive. He scored twenty-eight points, grabbed eighteen rebounds, and notched six assists. We lost by twelve points.

After the game, my father thought I was disconsolate because of the result. What saddened me, however, was what I'd seen in Sam at the final buzzer: resignation. Despite having recruited the tallest kid in town, despite stroking the kid's (and his father's) ego by bestowing on them weekly visits, she wasn't, it was evident, going to topple St. Mark's and humble its coach. She wasn't going to win the Eastern Ohio Catholic High School championship. She wasn't going to be named Coach of the Year.

I was certain her next Saturday visit to our apartment would be her last. And I knew what would follow: months and months of my father's weeping. Only two-fifths of his tears would be shed for Sam, of course, with the other three-fifths falling for my mother, but I wouldn't be able to bear them regardless.

I therefore made a vow.

When Sam showed up, in funeral black, at our apartment on Saturday, I said, "Coach Sam, I'll make you a promise."

I was seventy-five percent sure she was headed into the kitchen, where my father had laid out the cards on the table, to tell him, "I'm sorry—this is the end." My statement slowed her to a stop, however. She blinked three times. After the third blink, her eyes shone with interest or at least indulgence. "Go on," she said.

"I promise we won't lose another game."

I doubted she believed me. But it was obvious she wanted to believe me, and, thus deluded, she stayed to play Rummy.

After she left our place at midnight, blitzed on the dream we'd all conjured of the rest of the season, complete with her at the podium of the Society of Eastern Ohio Sports Journalists' Annual Banquet to accept its coach-of-the-year award (sponsored by West Canton Porcelain & Plumbing), my father turned to me, his face flush with beatific self-deception, and announced, "I'm going to ask her to marry me."

I didn't have the courage to tell him he was a fool. I merely urged him—successfully, thankfully—to put off his proposal until the end of the season.

\* \* \*

Inspired to sustain my father's joy or at least to postpone his tears, I propelled our team to victory after victory. My secret? I at last accepted the fact that I was significantly taller than everyone else on the court and that basketball, fairly or not, favored giants. I sky-hooked, I dunked, I rebounded, I blocked shots. I played like a player possessed, which, in a sense, I was—by the need to keep Sam from throwing in the towel, or whatever the right basketball metaphor would be, on the two of us.

We won all of our remaining regular-season games. Seeded seventh (out of eight teams) in the Eastern Ohio Catholic High School Championship

Tournament, we knocked off our first two opponents to reach the championship game, where, naturally, we were to square off against St. Mark's. Here was where our magical ride to greatness would certainly end. St. Mark's didn't have only one excellent player. Its starting five was outstanding, and several of its bench players could have started, and even starred, on other teams, especially ours. The outcome would break Sam's heart, and she, in turn, would break my father's heart, and my father, having no one's heart to break, would think of my mother and break his own heart again and again and again.

Winning the championship, I calculated, might be worse than losing it. In the aftermath of our intoxicating victory, Sam might give my father a kiss—on the lips, even—and thus inspire him to propose marriage on the spot. When Sam shattered his hope like a fiberglass backboard after a thunderous dunk, my father would be in more pieces than a hundred Humpty Dumpties.

But what, I wondered, if the game never ended?

\* \* \*

The Eastern Ohio Catholic High School Championship Tournament final was held in the East Akron Civic Center in front of 347 people. In scoring the first basket, I gave our fans, who represented perhaps one-fourth of the crowd, quick bragging rights. But St. Mark's answered. Indeed, our opponents countered every sky hook and turnaround jump shot and slam dunk I made.

Occasionally as I trotted up or down the court, I glanced at our bench to catch Sam stealing her own glances at Coach Chris. Translated, her glances read: *I'm going to beat your ass on the court and, afterwards, I'm going to flat-out beat your ass, your actual ass, maybe with my clipboard, maybe with the soles of my Air Jordans, maybe with my triumphant right hand.*

My father, sitting at center court five rows above the scorer's table, frequently tried to catch Sam's eye. Translated, his gaze said: *Look at our son—yes, our son, he'll be yours, too, officially, once we tie the knot ... and, by the way, what do you think of "Computer World," by Kraftwerk, as our wedding song?* But Sam's eyes, as far as I could tell, never made time for his.

Deep into the final quarter, neither team had staked itself to more than a four-point lead. With ten seconds left and the score tied, my opposite number at center slapped my hand as I missed a layup, thereby fouling out of the game. I made the two free throws. All we had to do to win the championship was to stop St. Mark's one last time.

As the game clock descended toward zero, St. Mark's point guard blew past our chess champion and into the lane, where, with a second left, he found himself standing in front of a redwood tree, aka yours truly. To block his shot, all I had to do was lift either of my hands. Hell, I might have blocked it if I had lifted one of my eyebrows. I did neither. Instead, I ducked. The ball flew over my head, skimming a wild, antenna-like strand of my hair, and settled into the basket. The buzzer blared. Tied again, we were going to overtime.

How to describe the expression on Sam's face? It was as if in opening a box she'd thought held a diamond ring, she had found a severed finger. Before the jump ball to start the extra period, she pulled me aside and demanded to know why I had all but scored St. Mark's last basket myself.

"My father," I said, nodding to the stands. He caught my gesture and waved down at us, grinning his Easter egg grin and swaying like a Weeble might if it had been keeping time to the 4/4 beat of the St. Mark's band. He was adorable, emphatically, even if only I and my dead mother recognized it. "He wants to marry you," I said, "but I know you and Coach Chris have never fallen out of love—and hate—with each other."

In the soft guilt in her eyes, and presently in words, Sam acknowledged everything: how she'd used my father—how she'd used us both—in pursuit of her ambitions. "But along the way," she said, "I fell in love with both of you—not the way a would-be stepmother would but the way a long-lost sister and aunt, after connecting with a brother and a nephew she'd never known, would."

It would have been a remarkably introspective statement at any time, but it was especially so at this high-stakes moment, with trumpets from the St. Mark's band blowing "Don't Stop Believin'" in our ears. Even so, I remained desperate to forestall my father's misery.

The horn sounded to start the overtime, and I raced to center court for the jump.

Over the course of five overtimes, an Eastern Ohio Catholic High School Championship Tournament record, I bounced the ball off our rim, grabbed the rebound, and shot—and missed—again and again and again. Sometimes, for variety's sake, I grabbed my rebound, dribbled to the top of the key, then dribbled back under the basket, only to shoot and collect my own rebound again.

The crowd was at first encouraging, doubtless thinking I was simply too exhausted to make a shot, however easy. But when it became apparent that my incompetence was intentional, even St. Lucy's fans hurled invective at me. Only my father, resolutely blissful in his seat, seemed unfazed. Perhaps he didn't even know the score. Ever encouraging, he must have yelled "Good try, son" three dozen times.

At the end of each overtime, I debated whether to offer Sam a choice: to marry my father and win the championship or to dump him and surrender any claim to coach-of-the-year honors. But whenever I looked at her, she bestowed on me such a serene and sympathetic smile, I couldn't open my mouth. I wondered if even my mother would have been so angelically understanding under the circumstances.

With time expiring in the fifth overtime, and now exhausted to the point of delirium, I resigned myself to my father's helplessness before the heartless gods of unrequited love and slammed home an emphatic dunk. St.

Lucy's fans forgave me immediately, showering me with an ovation even the godliest of rock-and-roll gods would have appreciated. St. Mark's fans weren't so generous: they showered me with popcorn boxes and an illicit pair of beer cans. Sam bestowed on me a gift I wished, despite my earlier misgivings about such a gesture, she'd saved for my father: a sweat-stained and unexpectedly halitosis-tinged kiss on the lips.

Afterwards, she turned to her once and perhaps future boyfriend, pointed to herself emphatically, and, as far as I could tell, mouthed, "Coach of the year, baby." In response, he bowed, jutting out his buttocks as if to suggest what awaited it.

My father, standing and applauding, beamed obliviously. For him, life must have seemed perfect. The two people he loved most—the two living people, anyway—had triumphed. Riding a wave of euphoria, Sam would accept his marriage proposal and we would be a championship family forever.

She didn't, of course, and we weren't. But, as it turned out, I didn't need to be a desperate crusader on behalf of my father's emotional wellbeing. Yes, heartache, and an ocean of tears, came soon enough. But before long, albeit after an unsettling, though entirely Platonic, dalliance with an artificial intelligence he created and housed within our grandfather clock—he named her Lady Midnight, and she spoke in a blues-club voice—he found his soulmate in a woman he worked with. Her name was Michayla, but she called herself Mick. She didn't play Rummy, but she gave me and my father all we could handle in Blackjack and Texas Hold 'Em.

Of course I didn't know this yet. Standing in the East Akron Civic Center amid the thrill of victory, I was the world's saddest champion.

## Nine Lessons from My Baseball Cards

Our duty is to smile and honor our names.  
Names refer, however arbitrarily, to properties.  
Nothing inside explains the joy of unwrapping.  
We like to pretend that other people are real.  
Many better than us are still poor players.  
Many we might love we will never see in life.  
Damp reveals the stock as sheets pressed together.  
The season highlight is a cartoon; then come the numbers.  
Only the future can be changed.

*Robert N. Watson*



## The Bat Poem

*("What is the boy now, who has lost his ball."  
—John Berryman, "The Ball Poem")*

Kool-Aid colors of board-game squares and play money,  
And the perfect boyhood bat: the White Ash Junior!  
Tooled into its grain, the autograph of a minor  
Major leaguer. Oh, there were other bats: whippable  
Whiffle-bats and the lacquered, bulbous "Babe Ruth" model,  
Too heavy in the head and narrow-gripped for me  
To manage. But the White Ash I could heft and swing,  
Launching dad's old tennis-balls above the dogwood.  
I whistled the downward note of astonishment watching them rise.  
Did you, my little self, do that? The ball floats  
In the snapshot's foreground, tossed by the left hand, which has grabbed  
The nub of the bat. The body is (like the clock) wound back  
To spring. The dog romps up on her hind legs, head halfway  
Turned to track and chase again, and purely happy.

Home from college, to those strangely familiar rooms,  
I flailed the pale bat at a big red playground ball  
To the raucous laughter of classmates. The bat cracked, like the branch  
In Wordsworth's "Nutting," and was left in the trash, and only now  
I think to mourn. The fall classic. Has anyone  
Been lesser hearted to the boy than his decade-older  
Self? Where is he, who has lost what all boys lose?

*Robert N. Watson*



# Perfection and Hard Luck Harvey

Rick Campbell

**M**ay 26, 1959. Milwaukee County Stadium. A night game. Though I have yet to turn seven, I am awake and listening to the game on my transistor radio. For me, game time and bedtime are pretty much the same time because the game is being played in Central time and I am a few miles downriver from Pittsburgh. It's quite possible no one knows I am listening.

When it starts to get really late, I keep listening because Haddix is pitching a no hitter. We go through the 8<sup>th</sup> with the no hitter intact. Bob Prince explains the rarity of a perfect game. I come to understand that this is a really big deal. The problem, besides the fact that it's late at night, is that the Pirates have not managed to score a run and this perfect game is also a tie game and there's a real chance that on any Braves' swing everything could be lost. For thirteen innings, the Braves couldn't hit Haddix's pitches with a "bed slat."

Around midnight, my time, Haddix lost his perfect game, the no hitter, and the shut out. The Pirates, not Haddix, should get credit for losing the game by a score of 1-0. Many sports writers and fans say that this is still the greatest game ever pitched—12 perfect innings. It's certainly the greatest game a pitcher ever threw and lost. The Pirates had many chances to score a run before the fateful bottom of the 13<sup>th</sup>, but they never pushed one across. Lew Burdette, Nitro Lew, was running through rain drops, as Prince would say; he was in many jams, but he was good enough (and lucky too) to get out of all of them. Burdette gave up 12 hits, but he got the Pirates to hit into three double plays, including one by Bob Skinner in the top of the ninth with one out and runners on first and third. Skinner had come close in the seventh inning when his long drive to right was held up by the wind and caught at the fence. The Pirates were "snake bit."

Haddix certainly deserved to win and though he did eventually give up a hit and a run, it was not his fault that he lost. He just needed one run, that wasn't too much for him to expect to get in 12 innings. Burdette was tough, he threw a great spitball, but he wasn't God. Though the Harvey Haddix song from the Baseball Project hints that perfection and godhood might be a tangled web—

But humanity is flawed as the losers will attest.  
 We're drawn to tragic stories, the ones that suit us best.  
 But for 12 innings on that fateful day, old Harvey was a God.  
 A perfect game if nothing else because perfection's always  
 flawed.

Even if godhood is a stretch, there was certainly some epic bad luck here. In the bottom of the 13<sup>th</sup> Felix Mantilla, a .121 hitter, bounced a routine grounder to Don Hoak at third. He threw it in the dirt to first and Rocky Nelson couldn't pick it. First runner on base, perfect game gone. Haddix thought he'd struck Mantilla out on the previous pitch, but the plate umpire called it a ball. Bad luck or bad call? Eddie Mathews successfully bunts Mantilla to second, even though Mathews hardly ever bunted. Henry Aaron comes up and the Pirates walk him. Haddix still has a no hitter, but Joe Adcock is next; he hits a long high drive to right center and out of the park. Everything is gone now, but just to make sure that this epic game gets strange too, Aaron stops running when he sees Mantilla cross the plate and Adcock passes him during his home run trot. Adcock is called out and he gets credit for a double, not an HR. Aaron does not score either, so officially Haddix loses 1-0. The score didn't matter at all because Haddix lost everything he'd done in 12 perfect innings and the Bucs lost the game.

Haddix didn't rant or slam down his glove; he just hung his head as he walked off the field. There's a photo of him entering his dugout and he looks so small; the light is strange too. The photo is lit as if it's noon and not late on a dark, stormy night. When asked about how it felt to lose the perfect game, Haddix said he didn't care because his team lost the game. The next day's headlines said that Haddix had pitched a 12-inning perfect game and lost it in the 13<sup>th</sup>. But now there's no such thing as a lost 12-inning perfect game. For a game to be perfect it has to be so until the last out and the game is over. That ruling was made in 1991 by Fay Vincent and a committee with a long name. After Vincent's ruling, Haddix was no longer credited with a perfect game or a no hitter.

Maybe Haddix's bad luck began before he took the mound. The Pirates' two best hitters, Dick Groat and Roberto Clemente, both of whom would soon win batting titles, did not play in this game. Injuries had them on the bench. If these two had played, would the Pirates have managed a run? And Skinner's long drive that was caught at the fence was hit into a wind that stopped blowing when Adcock came to bat. Skinner's was almost "kiss it good

bye," but it turned into "a long can of corn." But that's how the game goes. The wind blows in, the wind blows out. One home run barely clears the fence and another flies a hundred more feet into the night. They both get scored the same way.

You have to assume Haddix was tired when he took the mound in the 13<sup>th</sup>. Would any manager today let his starter throw 13 innings? Probably not, even if a perfect game was at stake. There was no pitch count in 1959. No one worried much about wearing out a pitcher's arm. The Pirates had a great relief pitcher in Roy Face, but Murtaugh never considered bringing him in. But Haddix pitched the 13<sup>th</sup> and Adcock hit one over the fence.

Haddix could have asked to come out of the game. He could have said Skipper I'm tired, I don't give a shit about a perfect game, take me out and put Face in before we lose this game. He could have, but pitchers rarely ask to be taken out of games. Besides, Haddix was no big hulk with a 95 mile an hour fastball. He was a little man. His nickname was the Kitten. He threw in the low 80s, sometimes the 70s. He probably could have pitched more than 13 innings.

Maybe Murtaugh, maybe most managers before the age of pitch counts and specialization—closers, set up men—before a quality start was pitching just six good innings, had too much loyalty to Haddix, to what his pitcher was accomplishing. Maybe he left Haddix in the game because it was Haddix's perfect game, his to finish. Maybe Murtaugh wanted to manage a perfect game more than he wanted to win this one game in May.

But after the perfect game had been lost, why when a tough hitter like big Joe Adcock come to the plate, didn't Murtaugh say enough is enough and walk out and take the ball from the Kitten? Why not pat his butt, let the Braves fans acknowledge what Haddix had done, and bring in Roy Face? Face was arguably the best relief pitcher in baseball. He had a wicked forkball. He would finish this season, 1959, with a record of 18-1. If Murtaugh's primary mission, as evidenced by walking Aaron, was to win this game, then bringing Face in to pitch to Adcock with two on and one out in the bottom of the 13<sup>th</sup> was the smart tactical move to make. Face had a good chance of getting the slow-footed Adcock to hit a forkball into a double play, but Murtaugh let Haddix pitch to Adcock and the game was over.

This game, in hindsight, was full of coincidence. The first game Haddix won in the big leagues was against Lew Burdette. A few years earlier when Haddix was with the Cardinals, a year after he won 20 games, Joe Adcock crushed a line drive off his knee and nearly knocked him out of baseball. Haddix was never the same pitcher. His fastball slowed down. He had to rely on curves, sinkers, hitting the corners. He was still a good pitcher, but his chance at being great went away when Adcock hit him. Now Adcock crushed him again.

The betting line for this game certainly favored the Braves. They were a far better team than the Pirates and Burdette was a far more successful pitcher than Harvey Haddix. The middle of the Brave's line-up—Mathews, Aaron, Adcock,

and Crandal—was one of the toughest in baseball. The Braves had four batters hitting above .300 and two more above .290. The Kitten would have needed a lot of lives to beat the Braves and yet he almost did it. And though he lost, he shut them down without a base runner for 12 innings. And as every fan knows, there's no way to tell when an average or worse pitcher will shut down the best team in the league. Even the best team in the league usually loses 60 games a year. So maybe there were no odds that mattered in this game, or in baseball at all, and chance was not a factor in Haddix's fate.

What can't be doubted is that against this far better team, when Haddix was pitching one of the greatest games ever, his teammates hung him out to dry. Even without Groat and Clemente, the Pirates had 12 hits, but couldn't manage one run. They hit into three double plays and stranded runners in almost every inning. They couldn't manage, despite Prince's agonized requests, a bloop or a blast, a dying quail, or a bug on the rug. It happens.

It might be ironic that the iconic nature of a Perfect Game, one of the most rarely accomplished feats in baseball, is what probably cost Haddix and the Pirates a good chance to win the ball game. If not for the chance at throwing a perfect game, Haddix probably would not have been around to pitch to Adcock. He probably would have been lifted for a pinch hitter late in the game. The quest to achieve perfection made this game a tragedy because Haddix, who deserved to win the game, lost it because he and everyone on the Pirates wanted him to pitch a perfect game.

Don Hoak, the solid third baseman who made the error that lost the perfect game and eventually allowed the Braves' winning run to score, saw himself as the goat. It was his fault, he said. Nine times out of ten he makes that play. There was nothing hard about it—it wasn't smashed, he wasn't handcuffed by a bad hop. He just blew it. Maybe he panicked a little, knowing the perfect game was at stake, and rushed his throw. Maybe, but the nature of an "error" is that it's a bad play made on a ball that ordinarily results in an "easy" out. So only the context of this error, the perfect game, made it unusual.

Bad luck was certainly a primary factor in this game and Haddix was its victim. Haddix was known as Hard Luck Harvey after this game, and his being hit and nearly crippled by Adcock earlier in his career might point us toward believing that it was his destiny to lose perhaps the biggest of all, for him, games. The list of things that went wrong that night in Milwaukee is long. To those things already mentioned, we can add the umpire's not caring that Burdette threw spit balls when he needed to get out of a jam. Everyone knew that he did. Bob Friend, one of the other Pirate starters, told the Post Gazette that "He'd [Burdette] come with that great spitter at the right time."

After this night of monumental effort and tragic loss, Haddix could not sleep so he and a teammate went out for a drink when most of Milwaukee was asleep. No one in the bar recognized him and he didn't tell anyone who he was or what he had just done. In later interviews he said, "Not a day goes by that

somebody doesn't ask me about that game; I think I got more notoriety from it because I lost." The Braves players, Burdette included, said Haddix deserved to win, but deserving to win does not win baseball games.

Hard Luck Harvey? Perhaps. Yes, he'd had a tough life. When he was five and out hunting with his father, he was hit in the face with a load of buckshot. And there's the Adcock line drive and the fact that all during his career he smoked two packs a day and died of emphysema. But after all the evidence of hard luck is tallied, there's one more event to weigh. In the 1960 World Series, Harvey Haddix pitched some remarkable baseball for the Pirates against the mighty Yankees.

Haddix beat the Yankees in a crucial game five; he pitched 7 and a third innings and held the Yankees to six hits and two runs. These were the Yankees that had scored 18, 16, and 12 runs in their previous World Series victories. But the magical story of the 1960 World Series is about game seven. It's the ninth inning and the game is tied 9-9. Almost every baseball fan of a certain age, like me, or almost any Pirates fan of any age, knows that Bill Mazeroski hit a walk-off homerun in the bottom of the ninth and the Pirates, implausibly, beat the Yankees. It's one of most celebrated moments in World Series history. It's the most magical play in the history of Pittsburgh sports despite the Penguins' Stanley Cup victories and the Steelers' Super Bowls.

There's the famous image of Mazeroski rounding the bases, waving his hat, leaping on to home plate and into the arms of his teammates. Maz has a statue honoring him and this moment at PNC Park. Everyone knows this story, but hardly anyone knows who won the seventh game of the 1960 World Series.

Game Seven. The Pirates had just taken a two-run lead on the Yankees in the bottom of the 8<sup>th</sup> when backup catcher Hal Smith blasted a three-run homer. But Vernon Law, the Pirates' starter, was knocked around earlier in this game and Roy Face had already come and gone. Face had saved all three of the Pirates' victories. So Murtaugh turns to Harvey Haddix on two days' rest. It's the World Series; the usual strategies get thrown out the window.

If Haddix can protect this lead he will save the game. If Haddix does his job the Pirates win the World Series. Either Murtaugh had a lot of faith in Haddix, or he was just the best of his last options. But Haddix couldn't do it. The Yankees get two runs to tie the game and the Pirates must bat in the bottom of the ninth. Hard Luck Harvey seems to have come up short again.

Then Maz hits one over the ivy-covered wall in left as Yogi Berra stares in disbelief. Maz is the hero, but Hard Luck Harvey has lucked out and become the winning pitcher in game seven of the World Series. It's the biggest win of his career, the biggest win in Pittsburgh history, and Haddix did nothing to deserve it in his one fateful inning. Haddix had "blown a save" and Maz made him a winner. It's in the record books for all to see, even if very few people, Pirates fans included, know about it.

Maybe we believe in fate if things turn out the way we want them to. We might think Harvey Haddix deserved to win the greatest game ever pitched and he lost it. But if he had won it, as great as it would have been for him, it would have been just one victory in a long season for the Pirates and they still would have finished second. Then, after one of his worst efforts ever, after he was sure that he had blown the lead and maybe the World Series too, he's saved: Mazerowski transforms him from a goat to the winning pitcher. No one claims that Haddix was the hero of Game Seven, but he was the winning pitcher on the winning team. For a Hard Luck ball player, that's some pretty good luck.







# The Leitrim Champions

Gráinne Daly

**D**eep in the ochre arms of autumn 2020, Leitrim won the All-Ireland. They didn't make light work of it, and it took them two dates in Croke Park to see off a formidable Dublin side, but as they say, goals win games and two last-minute goals by veteran Tristan McNiffe sailed past the Dublin keeper to secure the Sam Maguire for the Connacht men. Not that they could 'glac the corn' with all the pandemic protocol still in place, but they were permitted to take selfies with it and there's talk of Sam Maguire snow-globes being made for the panel.

That evening, passionate devotions were observed around the lovely county: bonfires were lit from Kilclare to Kinlough with a spectacular tea-light installation at the grotto in Aughavas. Someone in Keshcarrigan spray-painted two of his bulls. Carr Town was near drank dry. Nothing short of taking straws to the Shannon is how one reveller put it. The same chap had travelled from Mohill on horseback to find notes on the in-doors stating that the place was on the verge of lockdown on account of perilously low levels of spirits and stout. He'd taken a sup in a few establishments along his journey so he managed to survive until he found one with a bit of flow left in its kegs. The same reveller had his first encounter with Chardonnay that night and has been hooked ever since. Chardonnay, the eldest daughter of an ostrich farmer from Ballinamore, had hoped to move to Galway to study seaweed cultivation but there hasn't been a word about it since she laid eyes on your man. It's as if bladder rack never existed. That night of the All-Ireland he'd bought her a madison and she responded with a smile that'd melt your heart, and so signs on didn't him and her spend the rest of the evening inside in the snug and not a jot of attention was paid to the telly above the bar that was beaming scenes to them of the winners' banquet above in a hotel in Dublin: Citywest or that one they used

to call the Burlington, hard to make out above the re-raw and the roars of a red head from Aghamore who had arrived in late with the club jersey tide in a turban around his head and a phone number lipsticked across his ginger chest. The more he called for a pint the more the barman said the kegs were empty until it became a case of keepy-uppies, neither man willing to concede that he hadn't the remotest clue what the other was saying until eventually the lounge girl cried that they were out of dry roasted and all hell broke loose at the far end of the bar.

When he asked her what had her on the madison, she told him she was saving herself. For what, he asked. The homecoming, she said, flicking her chestnut hair so that a few strands stuck to her lip gloss. It'll be mighty alright, he said, recognising a hint of coconut that hung in the air. You must use coconut shampoo, he said, I'd know the smell of coconuts anywhere. No, she said, apple. She adjusted the sides of her top wishing she still had her jersey on over it but after her Aunt Attracta had gone and spilled a malibu and coke on her at the final whistle, she had little choice but to roll the jersey in a ball and throw it in her handbag where it lay, drenched in rum and coke. Chardonnay Phelan's toe was tapping and she was on the verge of dancing when he turned and asked her if she'd like to go to a nightclub. Yes, she said, so they downed the last sup of the drinks and elbowed their way through the thick crowd to get to the side door. It was hard to tell where the pub stopped and the adjacent laneway started, such was the depth of green and gold that swelled inside and out, heat rising from the loins of the noisy mass that languished in the laneway; an early casualty slumped against the wall, an upturned foil tray leaking curry sauce on his Wranglers: half asleep and half smiling, every few seconds he would muster the energy to look up and say 'Ah Referee!'

They walked for a bit along the river and he remarked on how slow the water was flowing tonight and she said that it deserves to have a night off tonight of all nights and he laughed although maybe a bit louder and longer than he should have considering it wasn't all that funny. He tried to pull up for it by asking a sensible question about how the new church roof over in Ballinamore, which in turn only evoked a bellyful of laughter from Chardonnay. At one a piece they gave up the mad hysterics and made their way through the freshly littered streets in the direction of a pulsating night air. It wasn't that the nightclub was extra loud or anything, but there were three cars parked opposite the hotel, subwoofers that would vibrate any loose teeth within a five-mile radius. The cars, two Golfs and a '98 Seat Ibiza with three CDs hanging from the rear-view mirror, were lined up parallel to each other so that the street would have been blocked to traffic had there been any other than tipsy pedestrians. Corona's The Rhythm of the Night lambasted from one Golf, a lyricless remix of House of Pain's Jump from another. As they passed, the female driver of the Ibiza lifted her hand off the furry pink steering wheel and waved in Chardonnay's direction. Chardonnay said she didn't know her but he explained that she was

one of the Casserlys who used to own the quarry but now run a bookbinding company in town. Right, said Chardonnay, no clearer than before he'd spoken, a neighbour? No, he said, she's from out Dowra way, by which time he was waving at a passenger in one of the Golfs. The passenger wore a yellow beanie and had smudges of face-paint on both cheeks. She's his cousin, he continued pointing at the beanie lad, he is one of the Conlons related to Dara Toland who's a cousin of Tristan McNiffe.

They joined the queue outside the nightclub and he managed to get to the point, the Conlons are neighbours of ours, they live two fields over. Two bouncers at the top of the queue fired laser guns at people's foreheads, testing for high temperatures. Some genius at the back of the queue passed out a pint glass full of melting ice cubes and everyone took one to bring down the high spirits until they could be waved past the two Ukrainians on sentry with their thermometers. Chardonnay blessed herself with an ice cube, then lobbed it in her mouth, sucking suggestively for a bit longer than would've been possible given the thing was close to pure liquid when she gobbled it. The timing didn't seem to faze him though, he muttered something guttural that sounded like 'awwh' and bit his bottom lip not taking his eyes off her for a second. He shifted from foot to foot to relieve the new tightness in his jeans. She put her hand on his chest, leaned close to him and kissed the crest of his jersey. This is the best night of my life, she said, stroking the sponsor's name. Her finger circled around and around the crest, and with every new orbit she looked up into his eyes and no denying what was on her mind. All around them the bang of hot jerseys stank to high heaven but every face was smiling. A stray hen's party from Kilkenny stood in the centre of a bunch of lads from Elfin: farming men. The hen looked captivated by what one of them was saying—a lad who appeared to have a length of bailing twine whooshing up his jeans. It was there and then that Chardonnay popped the question, still groping the crest of the jersey, she looked into his eyes and went, do you think will you come with me to the homecoming tomorrow? Yes, he said, I will yes.

The next morning started the way mornings after do: pickled breath and a few sore muscles. Chardonnay had lost a shoe at some point during the night and could only find her phone but not the cover she usually kept on it. She leaned in to give him a kiss goodbye but the ripe smell of him quickly changed her mind. He was still snoring so she let herself out and headed towards Church Street to make a hair appointment for the afternoon. She wanted an easy-upstyle for the homecoming. Something low key but nice: nothing fussy. A door opened at the side of a shop to let a sheepish looking lad escape into the morning air. His top a ball in his hands, what seemed to be a school jumper from the convent turned inside out on him. The door behind him closed but not before the tiny oval face of a Chinese woman peered out from behind it and looked up and down the street. Chardonnay found a fiver sitting on a manhole near the butcher's. She picked it up and made a wish, never passing

up on the chance to make a wish whenever she came across a stray penny. Clearly her lucky day, didn't she find another deposit on the curb outside the Post Office: 50c. She kept the eyes peeled to see if the morning would offer up any further donations.

Back in bed, himself was trying to lift the head off the pillow. It took a mighty effort and needlessly so because as soon as the head was lifted it collapsed back down. He felt the bed moving and remembered they had slept on his uncle's boat. It seemed like a great idea at four in the morning when there were no taxis and no one in any fit state to drive to anywhere they needed to go. He knew where he'd find the spare key for the boat and so him and Chardonnay had spent their first night together under a candy-striped blanket beneath the deck. She hadn't complained at all about how damp the bed was, nor about the mandalas of mildew that bloomed on the ceiling above. He had done his best Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh impressions well into the night for her. She had done some Davy Fitz for him. He'd never heard anything as good, he'd said to her. I can do a mean John Maughan, she had told him, but not on the first night. Guess there'll have to be a second so, he'd replied, pulling her close, still smelling coconuts.

The town was black that night for the homecoming. People gathered in the thousands to see the Sam Maguire brought through the streets. The surge in activity caused a short in the grid and the place was plunged into darkness for a little over an hour, but it didn't quell the mood. Paraffin lamps were procured from the old schoolhouse and Monsignor Moran donated three dozen boxes of church candles to the cause. Main Street teemed with a boundary of white flames that illuminated the double yellow lines the length of the road. The team bus kept the full beams on until complaints started about the eyes being blinded off a few old dears who were let out of the nursing home for the evening. There was a mix up with the team bus: so when Molloy's luxury coach arrived, rather than the open-top they hoped for, the players decided to walk behind it; there was no way anyone would be able to see them through the tinted windows. Besides, it reminded some of the lads of the good old Corpus Christi processions: the candles and the big chalice and holy water being shook at them every few yards. God bless ye lads, the invocation from the Mammies. The young ones were eyeing up the fancy suits on the team. McIlhenney's had sponsored the suits and some crowd in Donegal had sent down shirts. They came with banners for the team bus but with the blacked-out windows, nobody could make out the sponsor's name. Tristan McNiffe wore the hair out loose and with the touch of dew in the evening air it frizzed into a wild Luke Kelly affair. The smile never left his face from the minute they were let off at the church to when they set foot on the float rigged up for them at the top of the town. One of the corner forwards tripped on the steps up to it and fell head first onto the Lord Mayor. The transition year woodwork class had put together the steps using old pallets. Muinteoir Glynn had cautioned

against dowelling rods over dovetail joints but his advice had gone unheeded. Then the goalkeeper got halfway up when down came the steps like a set of dominos, and with them the keeper in a spray of loose change that had been in his pocket. He laughed the laugh of a man who had just spent eighteen hours solid drinking: it was the laugh of a new All-Ireland champion, and on and on it went, even when he was hoisted up to the float by his teammates and a Fianna Fáil Councillor built like a tank.

Chardonnay stood beside her man, hands in her pockets to keep them warm. His arm had become linked with hers at some point between the cup ascending to the float and the incident with the goalie. He stood with the chest puffed out, the shoulders back. Once or twice he leaned in and landed a kiss on her fringe. He told her her hair smelled nice. Is that your apple shampoo? he asked. Hairspray, she said, some stuff the hairdresser used. It's nice, he said. My hair? she asked, lifting a hand to fix imaginary stray hairs. The smell, he said. Far too many seconds later he added, oh your hair is lovely too. She leaned in and kissed him. A gentle kiss, a brief fleeting peck of a thing made all the briefer because just as she was about to plant her lips on his, Monsignor Moran walked past hot on the heels of the Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise. He looked in Chardonnay's direction. Hi Father, she said only inches away from the kiss. Too late to turn back. Himself pulled away and looked around him. Where's your father, he asked. I meant the priest, she pointed in the direction of the cloaked men striding towards the float. Jaysus, he said smiling. Jaysus is right, she replied, leaning in to finish the job she had started.

The mic cracked into life above on the float when the county Chairman stood up to start proceedings. He reminded everyone they should socially distance. The keeper, sitting in the front row behind him, moved his chair a few metres to the side of his teammates and everybody laughed. He laughed himself. Too much maybe, because when he went to shuffle the chair back across to where it was it caught on a bolt in the floor and he nearly disposed of himself for the second time that evening. The Lord Mayor scowled but remembering where he was, he quickly tried to cover up the frown with his elbow. Not before the flash of the of Leitrim Observer cameraman copped it. The Bainisteoir was up next and being a man of few words said only, we did it. The crowd clapped rapturously. The captain stood up next. He thanked everyone from the mechanic out in Mohill to the groundskeeper in Croke Park. No one was left unthanked, even two of his exes got a mention. Chardonnay knew one of them. A Reilly from up the road. Nice girl. The drink never agreed with her though. Himself had heard the name before. Come to think of it, he said, I think she used to go out with a cousin of mine. What's your cousin's name, asked Chardonnay. Donie Keady. Go way, she said, her face turning beetroot. He's not related to you is he? First cousins. Why? he asked. Eh, I uesta know him, she said, a long time ago. He squeezed her arm and winked. And did you do your John Maughan for him? She dipped the chin towards her

chest, eyes to the ground for a few seconds. It was long before I had notions of John Maughan, she said. Fair enough, he said, and put his arms around her and hugged her right to the end of the captain's speech.

The Fenagh Brass and Reed Band started up Lovely Leitrim and the crowd burst into song. Chardonnay turned to look at him as he sang. He was pitch perfect.

*... I stood enchanted at the scene of grandeur and of light ...*

The voice of an angel, she whispered.

*... the next I left for Carrick Town before the dark of night ...*

The power came back on and the Sam Maguire glistened in the arms of the drunken goalie. Himself looked at Chardonnay and told her it was the best night of his life. Do you think will you come to the boat with me tonight? he asked. No, she said, come home and meet my parents. With tears in his eyes he took her hand and held her hand close to his chest. Ok, he said, ok so. And off they strolled, hand in hand, leaving behind the melting candles and blinded elders singing to the Sam Maguire. Leitrim won the All-Ireland and it was lovely.







# So Who's Your Favorite Ballplayer?

Jon Caroulis

**A**lan Turner, the Redbirds' marketing director, saw the thumbs up from the press box to start the ceremonies. He walked to home plate with a wireless microphone. Turner was a tall, athletic man who had a knack for promotion and a voice good enough to be on radio. Sporting a neat goatee, Turner lightly touched the top of his wireless microphone to make sure it was working.

"Tonight is a special night," began Turner, standing in front of home plate. Bill Johnson, the team's young media relations director, had written remarks for him, and Turner had memorized the speech.

This was the culmination of months of planning by Turner. Major and minor-league baseball were celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jackie Robinson first playing with the Brooklyn Dodgers, becoming the first black man to play in the majors in decades.

Turner mentioned how it was not really that long ago when Robinson played his first game for the Dodgers, and some people at the park probably remember that day, he said, "and tonight's ceremony celebrates America's great game and one of its greatest accomplishments."

Turner acknowledged several former Negro League players who played with and against Robinson, and one of them came onto the field to make a few remarks.

On the left-field wall, Robinson's number 42 was unveiled—the number would be retired, and no player, in either the minors or majors, would ever wear it again.

An hour before the events began, Turner entered the press box, where he manned a computer that controlled the stadium's scoreboard.

Dick DiMaggio, the beat writer for the local newspaper, came in the box right after Turner.

"Hey, DiMaggio, how many games is your streak?" came a voice from the other side of the box, separated by a glass door.

"You know, Bootsie," DiMaggio said, "that wasn't funny the 534<sup>th</sup> time you said it, and it's still not funny now," he said, but with a smile.

Tom "Bootsie" Douglass was the PA announcer for the team. He was a big, jovial fellow with a full head of brown hair and round face, covered by glasses. He had lost a leg in Vietnam, but made it up the many steps to the press box without help.

"So your streak is at 534?" said Bootsie to DiMaggio. Turner thought it wonderful that a man with the same last name as Joe DiMaggio, one of the all-time greats, was a baseball writer.

Turner never told this to anyone, but one of the favorite parts of his job was the banter in the press box, both before, during and after the game. The razzing, the one-liners, it was non-stop. Turner thought it was a way to break the routine. For seventy nights each year these men would essentially perform the same tasks every night. And some of them had done it for years.

The final event for the commemoration began when two interns approached Turner from different sides of the field. One came with a replica of the 1947 Dodgers jersey with the number 42 on the back. It was a prize some lucky fan had won. Turner was smiling, the ceremony had gone off without a hitch. It was happening even quicker than he hoped, so the game wouldn't start too late.

The other intern came with two people, a young boy, about 11, and his mother. The boy was Timmy Lennox, and his mother, Mary. Timmy's name had been pulled from a giant box filled with hundreds of entries. Turner had called the Lennox home and informed Mrs. Lennox that Timmy had won the jersey. He told her where to come before the game, and how somewhere would escort them to the field to wait a few minutes until it was their turn to walk on the field. Turner looked down and recognized the pair: Timmy would wait outside the players entrance after games to collect autographs. Turner told the fans that Timmy's entry had been picked for the jersey. He handed it to him and the crowd politely applauded. Then Turner went off script.

"Timmy, you're a regular at the ballpark, I've seen you here many times," said Turner.

"He just loves baseball," said his mother. "He uses his allowance money to buy tickets."

"Ah, that's great," said Turner. "So, Timmy, who's your favorite ballplayer?" Turner expected him to say one of the current Redbirds, but Timmy leaned in close to Turner's mic and said, "John Rocker."

Turner froze. What did he say, he asked himself silently?

"Oh yes," said his mother bending over to speak into the microphone, "we think he got such a raw deal for speaking the truth."

Some in the crowd gasped, and Turner could hear them. A few people applauded.

"OK, well, ah, yeah. that's it for the ceremony, ah, let's play ball," and Turner, and he quickly escorted the Lennoxes off the field.

Turner motioned for another intern to come over to him.

"Can you operate this thing?" he asked.

"Sure," said the intern, a college junior.

And Turner left the press box, having no idea where he was going.

\* \* \*

When Turner arrived at the ballpark that morning there wasn't a cloud in the sky, and that made him very happy. He parked his car in his usual spot outside the stadium and appreciated there was no chance of rain that day or evening. He arrived an hour earlier than usual. It was a big day ... his big day.

That night the team was going to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in baseball. Celebrations were happening at every stadium—minor and major league—that day or night, but Turner wanted this night to be special, maybe even make the highlight reel at ESPN's Sports Center and "Baseball Tonight." which he had done the year before when he put a team on the field for an exhibition game wearing the names of those featured in Abbott & Costello's "Who's on First?" routine.

He knew it was a long shot, but he tried to get Robinson's widow, Rachel, to attend, but he couldn't get through to her—she was probably at the Los Angeles Dodgers' game.

Turner opened the door to the stadium's offices with his key. Not long ago the club had put in a brand-new addition to the stadium, a front that allowed for more ticket windows and a private entrance for the front office staff. Turner knew it was necessary, but he hated how the concrete and aluminum structure covered up a part of the original red brick facade of the ballpark. Built in 1950, the stadium made you feel nostalgic, even if you went there for the first time.

The first time he had gone to the stadium he was eleven. His grandfather, also a huge fan, drove them more than an hour from their hometown of Lower Danby. Turner marveled at the green of the grass infield. Later, he came to love the backdrop of rolling hills behind the outfield walls. He loved the smell of powdered sugar that was used to make Pennsylvania Dutch waffles at one concession stand.

While other boys and girls his age played the games and contests and badgered their parents for money to buy ice cream or pizza, Turner kept a scorecard.

He asked the players to sign their autographs in a scrapbook and was never turned down. Turner made it a goal to get every Redbirds player that year to

sign it; it was tough, as some players got promoted to a higher minor league level or were cut and sent home on short notice.

During the summers of his college years, he interned with the media department, doing interviews with the players, preparing game notes and helping out with the radio broadcasts (off-air)—if the announcer said, “I can’t remember the last time the Birds scored nine runs in the first inning,” Turner would look it up in the record books, write the answer on a piece of paper, quietly enter the booth and hand it to the announcer. He didn’t get to watch the games as closely as he would have liked, as his duties kept him busy, but he got to see baseball from another side. He got to see what the players were like (who were good guys and who weren’t), he talked to the managers and coaches about strategy and developing players for the majors, and the pranks the players played on each other in the locker room.

Eventually, Turner was hired on as an assistant PR person, and noticed he didn’t sleep much from April to September—or longer if the team made the playoffs. Two years ago it won its league’s championship, and Turner had a ring the team owner made for all the players and employees.

Later, the PR Director, Walter Francis, said he was going to leave at the end of the season. He had seen his championship, but the eighteen-hour days were getting to him—and his wife. He wanted a nine to five job and eventually found one, but told Turner he was ready for the job. “Try to find a girlfriend because once this job starts you won’t have time to socialize at all!” he advised Turner, who was still single.

In February, Turner had approached the team’s owner, Bob Steinberg, about a Robinson tribute on opening day. There would be the games and contests, but that would be the opening ceremonies. This was a big night, not just for baseball but for America, Turner told his boss.

“We’ll do the races and bat-spinning and bean-bag toss later,” he told Steinberg. There should be a solemn ceremony at the start of the game, before the “business” of baseball began, he told Steinberg. He didn’t want a team of jets soaring overhead, or fireworks exploding during the ceremony. He didn’t want to cheapen it, or demean the significance of this day.

All of baseball would be involved, Turner said, and Steinberg smiled and said, “Let’s do it.”

Turner knew all about Robinson’s accomplishments and the significance of that day, and more. In college, Turner had done a paper in a history class on Robinson making his minor-league debut in 1946 while playing for the Dodgers’ Triple AAA team, the Montreal Royals. It took place in Jersey City, NJ in April 1946, and Turner had driven to the town’s public library, which had a special collection about that game. Turner got an A on the paper.

On opening day in 1996, Turner had convinced Steinberg to commemorate Robinson’s minor league debut, and held a nice ceremony. But for the anniversary of Robinson’s major league debut, there’d be a bigger celebration.

As Turner turned on the lights in the stadium offices, he mentally went over again the details of the commemoration that night.

There was to be a Jackie Robinson figure given to the first 2,000 fans 14 and under. The programs for that night were done at the last minute, but Turner loved the cover photo, a picture of Robinson stealing home against the New York Yankees in the 1956 World Series.

A fan would get a replica Dodger's jersey with 4—Robinson's number—on the back.

At nine a.m. the rest of the front office staff began to arrive.

"Big day today," the team's General Manager, Dan Mahoney, said to him when they passed in the concourse. Mahoney was a slim fellow who never seemed to put on weight or age: his appearance was exactly the same as when Turner first saw him. He looked like he was 24 but was 14 years older with a wife and three boys.

"The biggest," Turner replied. "What's the pregame sale for this one?"

"About 7,500," Mahoney said. The stadium could accommodate about 8,000 fans comfortably. Mahoney smiled to himself: before he took over as GM (when Steinberg first bought the club), the team would have been lucky to have 7,500 fans come for ten games. But Steinberg and Mahoney were shrewd businessmen, and began marketing the team as a family outing, with all sorts of games for the kids to play during the game. They added a picnic area down the left-field line and sold it to groups. They built a two-deck bar/restaurant behind the left-field wall, and then added a giant scoreboard in left-center.

\* \* \*

At two p.m. there was a meeting, where they talked about the how the night was going to go.

Turner began by saying, "I don't want to make a speech—"

"But you will," cut in Joe Haverton, the grounds crew chief.

"Well, now I will," Turner shot back, and the others chuckled. "It's hard for us to imagine that fifty years ago the country, even the world, would have celebrated what Robinson set out to do. That we celebrate this day is a testament to him and the country as well."

"Are you going to run for political office?" Haverton asked, and the staff laughed again.

The players for both teams arrived around four-thirty. The visiting team, the Trenton Thunder, a New York Yankees farm club, went out onto the field first for batting practice. Turner liked that the schedule had the Thunder for this night: Robinson began his career in New Jersey, and the Yankees and Dodgers battled in some of the most memorable World Series in baseball history.

Turner went to the press box and made sure the releases that explained the significance of this day and what the team was doing were available to the

three reporters who would cover the game. He went into the tiny broadcast booth where Dave Stegler, the announcer, was preparing.

"Here's the figure we're giving away," Turner said, handing one to him.

Stegler looked at it for a moment. "This is pretty good," he said. "Better than most."

"We paid a little extra for it," Turner said.

\* \* \*

After Turner left press box, the National Anthem was played. Turner decided to see Steinberg, but he wasn't in his office. He went to Mahoney's office. He stood in the doorway as Mahoney was on the phone. The GM saw Turner and gave him a look that could scrape ice off a windshield.

He started to walk the concourse. It was the same scene as any other game. People waiting in line at the concession stands, children pestering parents to get them ice cream, soda and hot dogs, the parents running out of patience.

Other people were looking at team memorabilia on the stadium walls. Old men walking with canes and wearing baseball caps, lines snaking out of the bathrooms, the same sweet aroma of powdered sugar. And it was as white as a polar bear convention. He didn't see a single black person in the crowd.

Turner went back to the press box and walked up to DiMaggio.

"What are you going to write?" he asked him.

"I can't leave it out," he said.

Turner turned around to the two reporters from Trenton's two newspapers.

Each said it was a reportable event, that on a night when baseball honored the man who broke the color barrier, a contest winner said his favorite player was a racist homophobe and had been shunned and taunted (and injured) to the point he quit the game.

Turner knew it was pointless to argue. He knew that one of the worst things you could do was tell or ask a reporter not to print something.

"That mother should be shot for raising a Nazi," said Bootsie, who walked into the room. "Can you believe this?"

"Sure I can," said Haverton, who also entered the scene.

"Why?" said Turner.

"Didn't you hear people applaud Mrs. Lennox," said Haverton. "They actually cheered when she talked about Rocker getting a raw deal for, and I quote, 'Speaking the truth.'"

"But what Rocker said was reprehensible," said Turner.

"Would you want a black family moving into your neighborhood? I wouldn't want my kids going to school with wild teenagers," said the Trenton reporter.

"What if the wild teenagers were white?" said Bootsie.

"Are you saying I'm prejudiced?" asked the reporter.

"If you have to ask that, then you probably are," Bootsie replied.



Di Maggio said to Turner, "Hey, Alan, you might want to take a few vacation days. Once this gets out hordes of media are going to be calling."

"I'll draft a statement absolving the team of any knowledge the kid said what he did, and that we abhor any such comments by our fans," he said.

"You'll only upset the white fans who help pay our salaries," said Bootsie.

"What do you mean?" asked Turner.

"You heard the applause when the kid said Rocker."

"And ..." said Turner.

"You think that kid and his mother are the only ones who were upset that Rocker was drummed out of baseball? No, there are plenty of white people who refer to blacks as niggers when there are no blacks around, and—"

Turner thought back to his early childhood when his grandparents and parents used phrases like "niggers" and "spics" and others. He thought he was far away from that.

"Bootsie!" cried an intern. "The team's coming to bat. You have to announce—"

And Bootsie moved as quickly as his prosthetic would allow to get back to his microphone and his duties.

There was silence in the box as the men looked at one another.

"Don't worry, Alan," said the Trenton reporter. "A month from now, this will all be forgotten."

\* \* \*

The story made the wires the next day. In all, Turner learned that 1,300 newspapers across the country (and who knows how many internationally) carried the article and played up how at a ceremony to honor a black man a mother and son told the world their favorite baseball player was a man who called his teammates the N-word. Most of the stories contained the statement Turner had written.

He wondered if he'd get fired. This was his idea and the team was embarrassed by it. He went to Steinberg and offered to resign, but the owner said that wasn't necessary.

"No need to fall on your sword," Steinberg said. "I appreciate the gesture. Besides, it'll make it look worse."

Turner understood: Another story about the PR director who put a racist on the field while honoring Jackie Robinson would get picked up and the whole incident would be dredged up again.

"I'm so sorry this happened," Turner said Steinberg. "I can't believe what assholes they are."

A small, thin man whose hairline was receding, Steinberg could see how upset Turner was.

"My mother went to a fancy hotel in New York once," he said. "She was going to register when she saw a sign that said, 'Jews not permitted to stay

here." This was after World War II, and America was still discriminating. You think white people were happy Robinson was joining the Dodgers in '47?

"I know," replied Turner. "Hotels wouldn't let him stay in their rooms, fans yelled epithets."

"Let me ask you this," he said to Turner, "how many black fans do we draw?"

"I don't know, uh—"

"Not many," said Steinberg. "And it can't be because our tickets are expensive. We do a truckload of group sales, businesses, churches, community service groups, whatever. And you know what, they're all white for the most part. So much for integration, and why the Lennoxes said what they said."

Turner looked at his boss.

"My mother told me, there's a lot of hate out there, and it's still out there," said Steinberg.

He noticed that Turner looked even worse than when he came into his office. "They said integrating the game would kill baseball when Robinson played," said Steinberg. "And we're still here."

He paused for a moment, and asked Turner, "And how many black players do we have on the team?"

"Two," said Turner.

"Two," repeated Steinberg. "Last year the major league rosters on opening day were 12 percent black.

"Twelve percent. Here we are fifty years after the color barrier was broken, and blacks are not playing the game anymore."

Turner was impressed Steinberg knew this, but wondered why blacks weren't playing baseball in greater numbers. "Why do you think that is?" he asked.

"Who knows," said Steinberg. "Basketball is now primarily a black sport, so blacks gravitate toward that. In football, the skill positions are almost exclusively black, so some of the great black athletes aren't even trying out for baseball. And if blacks aren't playing the game, then I guess they also aren't watching the game," said the owner.

Turner appreciated what Steinberg was telling him, but he still felt awful. Lord knows what he would do if he saw the Lennoxes at the stadium. Confronting them about it would only make things worse.

"We have a game tonight," said Steinberg.

Turner left the office and headed towards the press box.

My God, he thought to himself, a crowd of 8,000 people and the contest winner is a junior Ku Klux Klansman.





## A Career: Division 1 Football ... a long time ago.

Bill Weatherford

**G**od, how good the pants felt, tight and satiny as they went around a player's thighs. All the pads had been slipped in first and those pants, like the rest of the game uniform, would be part of his body for the next four hours. Dean had done this many times, four college years of practices and games. This was the last time, though: He was twenty years old, a senior, and he would never do it again.

Donnie Kloblentz shared the cubicle they dressed in. He was a sophomore and had already played more ball than Dean had in his three varsity seasons. They played the same position, bunked in the same hotel rooms when they traveled and liked each other, because they understood. Not too many others had during his college years, and Dean had accepted this. It was OK.

It was a day game and the kicking group, as usual, had gone out early to warm up. Dean looked at his jersey, number "68." Finally, his last year, he had been given a real number instead of something just handed out for "picture day" before the season had begun. He was "44" as a sophomore, a halfback's number, and the only time it was worn by anyone that year. Like most of last year's freshman team, he had been "red shirted" and would only be a practice-week player all this season; if coaches needed a guard in a drill, he was a guard; fullback, he was a fullback and on and on: offense or "D." He was not to succeed: He was to lose every play at every drill or scrimmage ... or something was very, very wrong ... or it would be done again, until that was so.

As a junior, he got number "93," usually an end's number. The coaches weren't expecting him to make the traveling team and he would remain a practice "device" another year. He was "too small, slow, untalented and stupid

for major college football." They'd put him in a "space suit," a full-body pad you'd wear to slow you down so the offensive players could have "live targets" to practice plays against as they progressed to full speed. Maybe, if he didn't quit, they'd give him the most dreaded dishonor of all at the team banquet at the end of each year: "Most Inspirational Non-Letterman of the Year."

Something odd happened, though. About three games into the season, he was in his space suit during a Wednesday practice. Wednesdays were the heaviest practices and had the most live, full-speed hitting during any given week. He was playing defensive tackle, which actually, was his real, assigned position, and the first- and second-club teams were alternating plays against the "unworthies." Dean had blown up five or six plays in a row and had the centers, guards and tackles lining up on him in big trouble. Their offensive line coach had "climbed into their fillings" and gave them hell like Dean wasn't even there. Ashamed and frustrated, they ran again and the same thing happened—and a big mistake was made. They stopped the scrimmage and focused on more humiliation. Eight, maybe ten more times, they ran the same double-team play on him: first team, second team and again and again. He had a bad back and was exhausted to the point where he had to fall into his "four point" stance instead of lining up. Still, he couldn't be driven out. Finally, the head coach stopped the whole practice. Too much face had been lost all around. The whole offensive team was taken over to the defensive practice field, and everyone was "Death Marched." It was what it sounds like. The "space suited" didn't have to go. They got to watch and stood awkwardly around Dean while a trainer finally came over and told him to get up and go in.

Two days later, he was told he was on the traveling squad and never wore a space suit again. It had been odd how everyone else succeeded because they were good. Dean only succeeded when someone had screwed up. It was also strange how he could be so slow in a timed 40-yard sprint and run better than middle of the pack in conditioning.

Eventually, he worked his way to second club. He traveled every week but never played a down. Coaches never seemed to trust what they often saw. In practice drills and scrimmages, he better than held his own and could sometimes make the "talented" look very ... flawed. The bottom line, he was almost always "around the ball" and he just kept showing up ... so ... they voted him the "Most Inspirational Non-Letterman of the Year." More humiliation, but it was OK.

This last year he'd come to camp lighter than ever. Immediately he got sent down to third team again before practice even began. There wouldn't be much need for a 193-pound defensive tackle against Syracuse, Notre Dame or USC.

He practiced well, nonetheless, his body moving with the sense and techniques of the position, but with a quickness and knowledge that was hard to handle. He'd been third in the NCAA Heavyweight Judo Championships the spring before, but that didn't translate into anything to his position coach.

He did have his best day ever at the final double-days scrimmage, thus sending one aspiring, bigger sophomore to his red-shirt shame and moving himself, solidly, to second club.

So, he got a real lineman's number, proudly number "68," but that was as far out on a limb as the coaches would go. His picture never appeared in the program that year, printed up earlier in the fall as a guess from the Athletic Department Publicity Director. The sophomore he beat out had his shot there, though, and weekly could look at his own short hair and smile from the stands.

Anyway, Dean stuck; he traveled; he played 67 whole plays. He graded out at 86 percent in games, had three tackles, two pass-rush hurries that ended in interceptions and the misfortune of playing behind Sid Brighton. Big Sid was the team's biggest and most talented player. He was having a breakout season and would eventually become an All-American and five- or six-time NFL All-Pro.

Dean put on his shoulder pads and his jersey, then the hand pads, and, except for his helmet, he was set. He didn't wear forearm pads; he wasn't big or strong enough to use a "rip-up" when delivering the first blow to an opponent. He used a "head-butt" instead where his legs were his power, uncoiling the striking force through his neck and head. Often, offensive players weren't used to it and the change of pace threw them off.

Sometimes the coaches would use this change of pace to spell Sid: "The Mighty Mite for the Mighty Moose!" Dean didn't much like his nickname; he wouldn't have picked it himself. Still, it was a step up from nonexistence. And Sid didn't like his nickname much either.

Donnie went to get his hands taped. Dean hardly ever went to the trainers. For two years, he hadn't been important enough for their services. They'd treat him differently now, but there was really no reason to change. He'd get along; it was OK.

"12:25! Kickoff at 1:00!" He watched the other players mill around. The seniors were talking about how it was their last game. Dean didn't sit with them because, even though he was a "senior" too, very few were in his class. They were mostly fifth-year players, having been red shirts themselves at one point, been injured or had to make up grades. The four that actually were in Dean's class had been starters all three of their varsity years. In a world of stratification, he had been in limbo for too long to be close.

All weeklong there had been a countdown: "Only five practices left! Just three more 'heavy days'! Two more 'Spirit Days!'" Then the "Hay is in the Barn," the last time to get taped. It was true; this was the last time.

"Hats on, buckles up! Seniors, lead 'em out!" Someone remembered Dean was a senior and moved him up front with the rest. The coaches hadn't acknowledged or just chose not to on "Senior Day," the week before. That was when "graduating" players and their parents had been introduced individually

to the stands; he was still with the body of the rest of the team and his folks were left unmentioned. That wasn't OK.

They ran on the field and warmed up. He went with his position coach and felt quick and smart and alive. Today, he could run forever, the sun and earth making him strong. His mind was in the present: so keen, full and there.

Fifty-four players and eight coaches came into a circle. Last-minute changes were made, reminders given; this was the end of their season. Other things were said but he didn't listen very much. He hadn't believed them for a while, or it didn't really matter. They broke with a shout and he ran to his spot for the kickoff. He fell silent in the noise: clean and young and old. The ball towered out of the endzone, a touchback, so he returned to the bench and sat down, waiting for his next call.

At halftime he only had that first kickoff. They ran to their lockers, close, but behind. There were position meetings for adjustments, squad meetings for organization and a team meeting for the emotion to carry them back to the field.

The second half changed, and Dean's team went ahead early. They broke it open with yet another score at the end of the third quarter, and he got his call to go in.

His opposing guard was so used to 265 pounds of force and power that Dean was in his face and gone before he could react to the difference. The regular quarterback had an injured knee and they hadn't used him in the first half. Now they had to bring him in and put him in a shotgun backfield to try to protect his immobility. Dean got through the line; almost untouched and dropped him in a heap for a considerable loss.

The next play was a repeat. Dean hit him just as he threw the ball and it was intercepted further up the field. The offense went on an eight-minute drive to score and recovered a fumble of the ensuing kickoff. The clock ran out with his offense just running the ball and the clock to game's end. Dean never returned.

Later, the locker room was joyous and exuberant, the first Big Game victory in six years. Alumni were all over with reporters, stars and coaches. Bob Carrington, a team captain, had a smoking cigar stuck through his lineman's cage, puffing like he knew what he was doing.

Dean was taking off his uniform in his cubicle. It had a little dirt and one bit of grass stain, probably from his 66<sup>th</sup> varsity play. It was all over. He took a deep breath and went to take his shower while great noise kept coming down the hall. He had one year of eligibility left but this would be it. Law school only started each fall in those days so he needed to graduate with his class this spring. When the coaches found out, they would withhold his Varsity Letter. It was OK.



And what is the legacy in the years that would follow? The stomach still turns with the smell of newly cut grass; the neck and back hurt from the head butts; sometimes a daydream will surface, a fantasy of what was believed, deserved maybe, but never happened. Sometimes, there is a flitting list of insufficient victories inventoried again. But it's OK, because no one could ever imagine how much he still loves the game and everything he wasn't supposed to have done.

## Contributors' Notes

**Jill Adams** is an English language and literature teacher in Barcelona, Spain, where she also edits and publishes *The Barcelona Review*, an online literary review founded in 1997. To date she has had stories published in *The Rumpus*, *Gargoyle*, *The Del Sol Review*, *Rabble Lit* and *Word Riot*, among others. Sportswise, besides her love of seven-card stud, she is an avid runner and has run marathons in both Barcelona and Paris.

**Mark Brazaitis** is the author of eight books, including *The River of Lost Voices: Stories from Guatemala*, winner of the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award, and *The Incurables: Stories*, winner of the 2012 Richard Sullivan Prize and the 2013 Devil's Kitchen Reading Award in Prose.

**Rick Campbell** is a poet and essayist living on Alligator Point, Florida. His most recent collection of poems is *Provenance* (Blue Horse Press). He's published six other poetry books as well as poems and essays in journals including *The Georgia Review*, *Fourth River*, *Kestrel*, and *New Madrid*. He's won a Pushcart Prize and a NEA Fellowship in Poetry. He teaches in the Sierra Nevada College MFA Program.

**Jon Caroulis** has written about baseball and baseball history for more than 30 years. A native of Pennsylvania, he is a graduate of Temple University. He has been a newspaper reporter, a college public relations specialist and now writes full-time. This is his first published short-story. He is currently a columnist for the baseball website, *Ballnine.com*.

**Gráinne Daly** is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Universit College Dublin. Sport in creative Irish literature is her primary research interest. Winner of the UCD Maeve Binchy Travel Award 2019 and an Irish Research Council Scholarship 2020, her poetry, prose and non-fiction have been published in numerous publications.

**Colin Fleming's** fiction and nonfiction appear in *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and many other publications. He is the author of eight books, including *Meatheads Say the Realest Things: A Satirical (Short) Novel of the Last Bro*, *Buried on the Beaches: Cape Stories for Hooked Hearts and Driftwood Souls*, and a volume in the 33 1/3 series on Sam Cooke's *Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963*. Find him on the web at [colinfleminglit.com](http://colinfleminglit.com), where he maintains the Many Moments More blog about sports, music, film, art, literature, nature, and human endurance.

**Trevor Hill** holds degrees from the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Queen's Belfast. He has written articles on traditional wrestling in Britain and the Balkans, Punch and Judy puppetry as well as cultural articles for ESL journals. Originally from UK, he now lives in Poland and works at the Dept of English Literature, University of Warmia and Mazury.

In the past **Joshua Kulseth** has served as the editor for Clemson University's literary magazine *The Chronicle* as well as the president of Clemson's English Majors Organization. He placed as a semi-finalist in the Norman Mailer Collegiate Poetry Competition, and a finalist in the Cargoes Poetry Competition. Joshua graduated with a Masters in Fine Arts in poetry from Hunter College, and is currently a PhD candidate in poetry at Texas Tech University. He has been published in the *South Carolina's Best Emerging Poet's* anthology, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, *Pilgrim*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Rappahannock Review*, and *The Windhover*.

**John B. Lee** is Poet Laureate of the city of Brantford in perpetuity, Poet Laureate of Norfolk County for life, Poet Laureate of the Canada Cuba Literary Alliance (2020-2022) and he is in the running for the position of Poet Laureate of the Province of Ontario. His work has appeared in *Aethlon* on several occasions and he has published several books on the sport of hockey including his memoir *You Can Always Eat the Dogs: The Hockeyness of Ordinary Men*. He still plays hockey three times a week in an over-fifty league. He lives in a lake house overlooking Long Point Bay on the south coast of Lake Erie in the fishing town of Port Dover where he works full time as an author. His latest book *Darling May I Touch Your Pinkletink*, appeared in 2020 from Hidden Brook Press.

**Marjorie Maddox** is the great grandniece of Branch Rickey and Professor of English/Creative Writing at Lock Haven University. She was the winner of *America Magazine's* 2019 Foley Poetry Prize. She has published numerous collections of verse, four books for children and young adults, a story collection, and more than 600 stories, essays, and poems in journals and anthologies. Forthcoming in 2021 is her book *Begin with a Question* (Paraclete Press), as well as her ekphrastic collaboration with photographer Karen Elias, *Heart Speaks, Is Spoken For* (Shanti Arts). For more information, see [www.marjoriemaddox.com](http://www.marjoriemaddox.com).

After a 35-year career as an award-winning journalist, **Greg Mellen** was down-sized from newspapers. He now works as a freelance writer while trying his hand at in fiction, which was always his first love. This is his debut story with *Aethlon*.

**Ryan Murtha** is a PhD student in the Physical Culture & Sport Studies program at The University of Texas at Austin. He has published on the legal issues surrounding the intersection of sport and the first amendment, as well as on 20th century physical culture. Ryan's academic interests include the history of sports writing in the United States, the role of parks in modern cities, and Irish sport history. He currently serves on the executive council of the North American Society for Sport History as graduate student representative.

**Tolga Ozyurtcu, PhD**, is Associate Professor of Instruction in the Department of Kinesiology and Health Education at UT-Austin. Ozyurtcu's research interests include sport development, sporting subcultures, sport and cultural geography, and physical culture history. He has presented his research to the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH), for which he serves on the executive council, the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport, and the North American Society for Sport Management. He serves as co-editor-in-chief of *Iron Game History: The Journal of Physical Culture*, has written extensively on the geopolitics of sports for the website Stratfor, and maintains an online presence at sportsthink.net.

**T.R. Poulson**, a University of Nevada alum and proud Wolf Pack fan, lives in San Mateo, California. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in several journals, including *Rattle*, *Booth*, *Raintown Review*, *J Journal*, *Jabberwock Review*, *Delaware Review*, *Verdad*, and *New Verse News*. Shortly after writing her poem, "Brushes," in this issue, she traveled to Santa Anita Park, where she was lucky enough to meet American Pharoah, and his trainer, Bob Baffert, as they were preparing for his victory in the 2015 Breeders Cup Classic.

**Dr. Brittany Reid** teaches English at Thompson Rivers University. Her teaching and research cover a broad range of topics, including Sport Literature, Romanticism, Gothic Literature, Shakespeare, and Literary Monsters. She recently co-edited *Duelism: Confronting Sport Through Its Doubles* with Taylor McKee: an interdisciplinary collection that examines sport through its many doubles and dualities. Her upcoming poetry collection, *Sidelines*, is a poetic biomythography that considers how the sidelines are a liminal space that is always peripheral, yet still central to the world of sport.

**Ralph James Savarese** lives in Iowa City, IA. His creative work has appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *New England Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Southwest Review*.

**Jeffrey O. Segrave** is professor of health and human physiological sciences and the David H. Porter Endowed Chair at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York, USA. A frequent contributor to *Aethlon*, his main area of scholarly interest lies in the socio-cultural analysis of sport; hence, he embraces an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to study sport at the intersections of history, sociology, philosophy and literature. He teaches classes on sport in American culture, including a class on sport films.

**Matthew J. Spireng's** 2019 Sinclair Poetry Prize-winning book *Good Work* was published by Evening Street Press in 2020. An 11-time Pushcart Prize nominee, he is the author of five chapbooks and two other full-length poetry books, *What Focus Is* and *Out of Body*, winner of the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award. He says he's neither fished nor consumed peppermint schnapps in many years.

**Brittany Tenpenny** works as a Language Art Intervention Teacher in New Jersey. I previously had a piece published in *Spitball: The Literary Baseball Magazine* and I am currently working on my debut novel.

**Rob Watson** teaches Renaissance literature at UCLA, where he plays a lot of soccer and tennis. His poetry has been published in *The New Yorker*, *Oxford Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, and many other literary journals. His books have been about Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, the Renaissance roots (in poetry and painting) of modern environmentalism, the transhistorical fear of death, Japanese cinema, and the malfunctions of cultural evolution. More info at <https://english.ucla.edu/people-faculty/watson-robert-n/>.

**Bill Weatherford** is a California writer who often focuses on characters and stories from California's Central San Joaquin Valley. Primarily a screenplay and short story writer, he has just completed the rough of a novel for young adult audiences. He hopes to have "Wonder" completed by the fall of 2021.