

**BASEBALL, CRICKET, GRIDIRON AND RUGBY: OPPOSITES  
ATTRACT IN TEACHING AMERICAN SPORTS CULTURE  
ABROAD**

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How do you get New Zealand students excited and engaged in learning about U.S. sport when most do not know anything about the rules or history of U.S. sport, especially the cultural history surrounding baseball, football and basketball? One general pedagogical rule I have learned here is not to make the U.S.A. (and sport) the only focus of a course. Thus, teaching American Sports Culture in New Zealand is not only about educating students on yet another American institution fraught with racism, sexism and homophobia, but also about educating students about American culture and history, the proclivities and peculiarities of American sports and fans, and how these all relate to situating one's own culture and sport as an institution in society – particularly New Zealand sport and society.

The University of Canterbury in Christchurch is an ideal setting for teaching sports culture of any type as the region, basically, is sports mad. Thus, this American studies stage 2/3 course (including both second and third year students) focuses on African American cultural issues in sport, gay and lesbian 'outing' dilemmas, the battles women engage in for monetary rights and the access/respect issues of differently-abled athletes. Within this focus, I work to achieve a delicate balance between sports students don't know (USA-based) with the sports stars and teams in New Zealand and Australia they do know intimately.

One of the beautiful aspects of teaching American Sports Culture (AMST 244/344) in New Zealand is that, from the start, I know I am far and away the expert on the topic from the moment I step into the classroom. My youth was spent consuming sport everyday on TV, radio and in newspapers but my Ph.D. years and time in New Zealand have been spent meticulously observing, researching and writing on the non-verbal cultural histories embedded in U.S. basketball, baseball and football (or "gridiron" as they call it here).<sup>1</sup> That is not saying much in a culture where the rugby scrum is king, but I at least feel reassured that my expensive graduate education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison was well worth those massive student loans. My hip-hop culture class, in stark contrast, is peppered with students who have vast knowledge about American rappers and groups I have only vague – or no – knowledge of.<sup>2</sup> This subject knowledge-gap in the past could have made 'teacher' quite nervous about being able to deliver the

product. Happily, I have found that students armed with a general knowledge and interest in the subject matter under discussion -- parent/coach sideline aggression in youth sport, doping in the Olympics, the commercialization of stadia -- can make for a much more interactive class.

So how does one begin all this in-class interaction? I always found that the first few weeks of class were tough-going. With little knowledge about the substance of baseball or football, students did not know where to start with a line of inquiry. Couple this with the universal problem of getting young students to engage in dialogue early in the semester and you can begin to see the problem 'Mr. Interactive Lecturer' had to contend with. The teaching problem/question for me in this class became, ironically, 'How could I increase student in-class efficacy and thereby increase their classroom participation on the discussion of American sport?' I decided, as a classroom rhetorical device, to 'flip the script' and engage a sporting topic I knew little about. I reasoned that by periodically showing my students that *not knowing* is perfectly fine and that *asking questions* is the road to knowledge I could set an example for them to follow. They might thus help *me* understand an antipodean sporting subject, and by so doing, feel less inhibited about asking inane questions. Of course, all this required me to watch the one thing American sports fans dread watching even more than soccer, and that is cricket. Gasp! Eight hours of viewing in one day? And yes, my U.S. prejudice for a "win" or "result" came to the fore when finding that my five days of watching might end in a 'draw' or tied match. Prejudice aside, I began to learn about cricket.

The logic worked as I began consciously to level the in-class playing field with rambling commentary on Commonwealth/Antipodean sporting codes with cross-cultural comparisons as discussion points during lectures. The students would much more likely participate and not feel 'uncomfortable' about asking questions on obscure things such as end zone dancing in professional football and why the 'World' Series only involves teams from the USA (short answer from Major League Baseball: "we *ARE* the world"). The goal became to integrate American sports culture into a framework of sport and society that my students were already familiar with. As the quintessential teacher – Yoda – might have said, 'learn cricket, rugby and netball you must.' So I did. In the rest of this essay, I will show how lecturer participant-observation in local sporting codes greatly aids teaching this esoteric American Studies topic down under.

### **Course Structure**

American Sports Culture is taught in a twelve-week semester divided into two six-week terms. In the first term, I focus on African American sports culture. In the second term, I cover a variety of topics, including differently-

abled athletes, women and lesbian athletes, gay athletes, Native American protests on racist sports team names, and religion and sport. I highlight various individuals as exemplars, including Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Chris Evert, Billie Jean King, Martina Navratilova, Greg Louganis, Terrell Owens, Venus Williams, Serena Williams and Tiger Woods. I draw upon a variety of resources utilized, including film, popular press articles, academic and popular books and journal articles. By the end of this course students 1) understand the struggle for racial diversity and cultural diversity in U.S. sport, 2) understand the struggle for women's equality in U.S. sport, 3) understand the struggles of other marginalized groups in U.S. sport, and 4) understand key controversial issues in U.S. sporting culture.

These are lofty goals for a 12-week course, to say nothing of the broad array of topics I cover. But with two 2-hour sessions per week, I am able to cover much ground. The first two-hour block is taken up with either film or video clips on a given topic. For instance, I screen 'He Got Game' by Spike Lee, which provides many talking points for students about the significance of sports stars in black urban areas. We easily discuss class, race and the exploitation of young athletes with abundant examples to drawn from the life of Jesus Shuttlesworth, the film's protagonist. I make use of a tool many lecturers routinely employ: get students to discuss the film or video clip in small groups first. In this way, they have already exercised their mouth muscles and feel less inhibited about shouting out "sexism!" or 'homophobia!' or 'the continued exploitation of black male athletes by the media, shoe companies and corporate league powers!' when I ask about the main themes of a film.

The interactive nature of my classes demands that I have something to 'feed off' of in terms of the material I choose for the day. I could go the easy route and present my notes oblivious to what the students thought or knew or cared about, later looking up at them verbally to note "this will all be on the test." But I did not come to New Zealand for one-way communication; I retain my student-status covertly and overtly. I constantly take notes on my experiences down-under for future research purposes, in addition to overtly informing students in class that I endeavour to learn sport (or hip-hop culture or racial politics) from their perspective.

To further elaborate on the structure of the course and its content, here is the syllabus for the *first six weeks* for both AMST 244 and AMST 344 students. Though the students, for the sake of repetition, are all together in one class, the assessment for each stage of learning is markedly different and will be discussed in the following section.

## **TERM ONE: The Significance and Controversy of Sport in the African American Community**

### **Week 1: African/Americans & The Sports Dream**

- Introduction to the course & video screening: 'He Got Game' by Spike Lee
  - Optional screening: 'Coach Carter'
  - 'The Role of Sport in the Black Community', Othello Harris
  - 'Betting Against the Odds: An Overview of Black Sports Participation', Gary A. Sailes
- Term one readings from *African Americans in Sport*, 1998, Gary Sailes, Ed., Transaction Publishers: Piscataway, New Jersey

### **Week 2/3: Globalizing Tiger Woods & Re-Branding Race**

- 'The Dominant Images of Black Men in America: The Representations of O.J. Simpson', Billy Hawkins
- 'Race Logic and "Being like Mike": Representations of Athletes in Advertising, 1985-1994', Mikaela Dufur
- 'Gladiators, Gazelles, and Groupies: Basketball Love and Loathing', by Julianne Malveaux, in *Basketball Jones: America above the Rim*. Edited by Todd Boyd and Kenneth L. Shropshire, 2000, pp. 51-58. (*Optional, on reserve*)
- 'Black Sports Images in Transition: The Impact of Tiger's Roar', by Christopher P. Uchacz
- 'Looking Back at the Balcony (Tiger Woods)', in *Who's Afraid of a Large Black Man?*, Charles Barkley, 2006, pp. 1-15. (reading pack)
- **Screening:** Tiger Woods, ESPN Classic feature; *Tiger's Oprah Interview*

### **Week 4 Are Black Athletes Genetically Better?**

- 'Race and Athletic Performance: A Psychological Review', David W. Hunter
- 'The Athletic Dominance of African Americans – Is There a Genetic Basis'? Vinay Harpalani
- 'The African American Athlete: Social Myths and Stereotypes', Gary Sailes

### **Week 5/ 6: Express Yourself! Sport and Individual Celebration**

- 'An Examination of Basketball Performance Orientations among African American Males', Gary A. Sailes
- 'Black Bodies, White Control', V. L. Andrews (reading pack)
- 'African American Player Codes on Celebration, Taunting and Sportsmanlike Conduct', V. L. Andrews

- ‘Cool Pose: Black Masculinity and Sports’, Richard Majors
- Screenings: ‘Muhammad Ali’ (TV One); ‘A Tradition of Excellence’ (NCAA)
- Assignment #1 due (2 screening essays), (10%)
- Assignment #2 due, essay/test, due (40%)

The primary purpose of term one is to interrogate the role of sport in the black community; a secondary goal is to critically analyse the historical stereotypes of African Americans in the U.S. and in global media culture. These two goals work hand-in-hand and the two themes are interwoven throughout each lecture. When asked about their own stereotypes of Black Americans, students in New Zealand respond in much the same way as my U.S. students at Wisconsin did in the 1990s: ‘athletic’ is always near the top of everyone’s list, along with ‘rhythmic’ (regarding dancing and singing) and ‘badass’ (regarding toughness, crime and gang activity). Deconstructing these myths and embedding sport in the larger context of African American culture is exciting for me as I get to see their faces and attitudes slowly change after screenings and story-telling. ‘He Got Game’ and ‘Coach Carter’ both speak extensively about how sport is both loved for its mythology as a “way out of the ghetto” and loathed for its de-emphasis of high school and University education.

The readings by Sailes (1997) and Harris (1997) highlight this sporting dilemma in the black community, and essays by Mikaela (1997), Hawkins (1998) and Uchacz (1998) all speak to the stereotypical imagery of African American males in U.S. society and those same images as recreated in sporting commentary and magazines.

We have a brief interlude to discuss an even more deeply-held belief – that of black genetic physical superiority in sport and society. Students discuss and debate this positive stereotype while learning that it is a double-edged sword. While most students have never reflected on the negative implications of a positive stereotype, they grapple with the implicit assumption that African Americans are not as well-suited as whites who, by implication, are more genetically suited towards *non*-physical skills such as front-office management, head coaching and key “thinking” positions on the field. Students quickly see the parallels with Maori, Samoan and Aboriginal athletes and stereotypes about athleticism as juxtaposed against white New Zealanders and Australians. Though the distinctions are not as harsh as in the U.S., there is still some degree of looking to Pacific Islander and Polynesian athletes as ‘more physical than mental’ on the field of play. This parallel is what stimulates the cross-cultural in class discussion.

The final section of term one is where I discuss (in far more detail than my students care to hear about) the non-verbal expressivity of African Americans in sport and society. My contention is that Muhammad Ali represented the ‘big bang’ as it were for black expression in sport. We discuss Ali’s brash physical and verbal expressivity in the context of the turbulent 1960s and how ‘expression rules’ since 1984 in professional and NCAA football have attempted to regulate physical celebratory behaviour. The celebratory behaviour – dancing or signalling to the crowd after making an otherwise brilliant play that requires some form of individuality – is considered ‘excessive’ by league and NCAA standards. We do not highlight the ‘right and wrong’ of celebration, rather, I make a case for an African American sub-culture that is influenced by everything from religiosity to preachers to slavery to hip-hop culture.

My broader pedagogical purpose is to show students the cultural relativity of terms such as ‘sportsmanlike’ and phrases such as ‘appropriate conduct’. Each country will look at sporting behaviour very differently among its various regions, and often within the same city. Students are then prompted to discuss the various high schools around Christchurch and how each has a differing ‘ethos’ about how sport is to be played. We refer to chapters in the reader by Sailes and Andrews which highlight differences in the meanings blacks and whites give to the playing of sport.

Term two has a different, but no less complex set of challenges. Here is the syllabus for the second six-weeks of the course:

## **TERM TWO: The Challenges of Marginalized Sporting Groups**

### **Week 7: Differently-Abled Sports Issues**

- ‘The Sociology of Ability and Disability in Physical Activity’, Margaret Carlisle Duncan, *SSJ*, 2001, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 1-4.
- ‘Disability, Sport, and the Body in China’, *SSJ*, 2001, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 51-68.
- ‘Reconceptualizing Inclusion: The Politics of University Sports and Recreation Programs for Students with Mobility Impairments’, David Promis, Nirmala Erelles, and Jerry Matthews, *SSJ*, 2001, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 37-50.
- ‘An Ideal Misconstrued: Newspaper Coverage of the Atlanta Paralympic Games in France and Germany’, Otto J. Schantz & Keith Gilbert (opt.) *SSJ*, 2001, vol. 18, no. 1, p. 69-94.
- Screening: ESPN/60 Minutes documentaries on wheelchair athletes: *Murderball*

### **Week 8: Gay Masculinity**

- Rodman, Dennis, 'Man on Man: Painted Fingernails and the Status Quo', in *Bad as I Wanna Be*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Pub. Group, Inc. New York, 1996.
- Freeman, Paul and Ian Roberts, *Finding Out*. Random House. Australia, 1997.
- 'Sport, Sexuality, and the Gender Order: Amateur Rugby Union, Gay Men, and Social Exclusion', Michael Price and Andrews Parker, *SSJ*, 2003, vol. 20, n. 2, pp. 108-126.
- Screening: *The Greg Louganis Story* [ESPN Documentary]

### **Week 9/10: Women, Sports Equality & The Lesbian Threat**

- 'Reading between the Lines: A Discursive Analysis of the Billie Jean King vs. Bobby Riggs "Battle of the Sexes"'. Nancy E. Spencer (*SSJ*, 2000, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 386-402.
- 'Never Let the Bastards See You Cry', Toni Bruce, *SSJ*, 2000, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 69-74.
- 'Dis', Eleanor M. Miller, *SSJ*, 2000, vol. 17, no. 1, pp. 75-80.
- 'A Quality Assessment of the Significance of Body Perception to Women's Physical Activity Experiences: Revisiting Discussions of Physicalities', Lisa McDermott, *SSJ*, 2000, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 331-363.
- Screening: *When Billy Met Bobby* [ABC Television Re-enactment] Part 1 & 2

### **Week 11: Nationalism and Cultural Issues in U.S. Sport**

- 'The Christian-Athlete: An Interactionist-Developmental Analysis', Christopher L. Stevenson, *SSJ*, 1991, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 362-379.
- Hand-out on "Indian/Native American" issues in U.S. Sport
- ESPN News Story: *Native Team Names; Christian Athletes*

**Week 12:** Assignment #3 due (2 screening essays) (10%); #4 due, essay/test, (40%)

The topics covered in term two -- differently-abled athletes, gay athletes, lesbian athletes, Christian athletes and Native Americans (re sporting team names) -- tend to be uncomfortable subject matter for students. Not many able-bodied individuals willingly discuss the issue of the differently-abled in small talk, let alone classrooms. By the end of the discussion, however, it becomes a topic students don't want to leave behind; indeed, this week makes the biggest impact in terms of changing social attitudes, I believe. The screenings of documentaries featuring wheel-chair-bound individuals discussing how they became 'disabled' though a drunk-driving (or other) accident or were otherwise born 'not normal', and the ways in which their 'disability' affect their performance of the everyday tasks we take for granted, have a powerful impact. As the students begin to identify with

these on-screen everyday folks, the documentary's subjects transform into fierce athletes in wheelchairs slamming into one another and competing with every fibre of their being. They drink beer and flirt when they win, cry when they lose. Students are truly shaken by these life dramas and come away with new ways of viewing those who are physically different from themselves. Two tangential topics we have taken up recently are the dilemma of those with prosthetic legs or arms competing with technological advantages against those who struggle on without enhancements and the use of steroids and human growth hormones by athletes to improve on the body's ability to perform.

Students also feel challenged when we get to the topic of gender identity in sport. American basketball great Dennis Rodman and Australian Rugby League great Ian Roberts both critically comment on masculinity and what it means to be treated as 'gay' in team sport. Rodman's perspective is that of an African-American male heterosexual cross-dresser, while Roberts' view is that of a white male black-belt in karate. The two athletes are considered, at least in their respective sporting codes, as hyper-masculine: both were aggressive and feared for their tough play by others on the field or court. Rodman, after talking his way clear of a suicide attempt, decided to live his life as he wanted, which included dressing in traditionally feminine attire, driving both a pink pick-up truck and a pink motorcycle, painting his fingernails and also frequenting gay bars. Roberts, on the other hand, was known to fight frequently when challenged, get involved in abusive relationships (towards him, ironically), and refuse to pose with women for advertising promotions so as not to promote hypocrisy.

I ask the students – the men – to define masculinity and its relationship to outward appearance; that is, the way we dress, the vehicles we drive, and our association with women. Both Rodman and Roberts challenge our heterosexual definitions of masculinity and complexify the issue of what it is to be a 'man'. Male students typically squirm during this discussion. The women have less difficulty in this area – though some do feel challenged by a man who dresses and grooms better than themselves with feminine attire. In a similar sense, male students have no problems with the general notion of athletic women (or lesbian athletes), but women who are stronger than themselves (namely body-builders) challenge their notions of femininity.

Students of both sexes, I find, seem to have less difficulty accepting the concept of lesbian athletes in sport. The readings present first-person accounts of in-the-closet lesbians grappling with their own sexuality from a young age as well as the phenomenon of women in sport distancing themselves from lesbians (and the threat of appearing 'mannish') by over-feminizing their appearance or by sleeping with men to give the appearance



of heterosexuality (even lesbian athletes report this). A former member of the New Zealand national netball team, the Silver Ferns, and a member of the national women's rugby team, the Black Ferns, Louisa Wall, has been 'out' for a while and talks about the experience of dating who she wants to date. Ms. Wall (now a Member of Parliament) does not like the term lesbian, though she has had a female partner for several years now; she has also been involved, on her own accord, with men in the past. She proves such an eloquent spokesperson for same-sex dating and relationships (she jokes, handles tough questions, and discusses her strong bond with her parents) that students 'fall in love' with her personality, and by association, accept her lifestyle as she is happy 'in her own skin' as they say these days. Indeed, students end up wondering what all the fuss is about in and around women in sport. The fuss, I remind them, is not only over sex and sexuality, but equality.

The final week of the term is taken up with less controversial issues, although of no less interest to the students. We delve into the dilemma of Christian athletes who are conflicted about the brutality of their sport and 'winning at all costs' attitudes that prevail – attitudes that might conflict with the ethos of their religiosity. Most students remain mum, but some Christian athletes in class do speak up about their own conflicted feelings, which add a much-needed personal perspective. We flash back to Muhammad Ali using his newfound religiosity to promote racial equality and his anti-war sentiments as a way to ease into this topic of discussion. I also broaden the topic to include ways in which others non-traditional religious groups (Muslim, Mormons, Jews) have interjected their religiosity into sporting fixtures.

Finally, students learn about a controversy they know nothing about: the team-naming concerns voiced – but little heard – by American Indians. Native Americans have been poked fun at, caricatured and generally treated as second-class citizens in their depiction by teams as mascots and on team logos such as the Atlanta Braves, the Cleveland Indians (baseball) and the Washington Redskins (gridiron). Again, media discussions aid the debate in class over the rights of racial/ethnic groups over the rights of teams to retain their traditions versus the 'freedoms' of speech and school traditions in the United States. The term 'political correctness' gets thrown around in class and in media discussions on the topic – a convenient "out" when discussing racial insensitivity. Students are then asked to look at their own ethnic groups and figure ways that those identities could be used against them. We do discuss that one sacred New Zealand ritual of both Maori and Pakeha males -- the haka -- and how it was seen as an ethnic 'war' ritual and not suitable for the Olympics. I note that some would also see it as 'excessive celebration', and some could mock it in order to disgrace Maori. The haka,

then, becomes a touchstone for many of the issues discussed in both term one (stereotypes, the meaning of sport to sub-communities) and the last two discussions in term two. Therein I learn various nationalistic feelings students hold about *their* sacred cultural symbols.

### **Course Assessment**

The second-year students have comprehensive tests at the end of each term. I focus their reading and lecture materials by giving them test questions along the way after each week's class and I take into consideration their in-class discussion as a way of bumping upward their final grade if they are on the borderline. The stage three students, on the other hand, get to complete a 12-page term paper, due at the end of the semester, but divided up into four components. Initially, the students complete an annotated bibliography (12 citations) on a topic generally around an area of interest in sport. Three weeks later, they submit a four-page outline which consists of a three-page "abstract" and a one-page detailed outline of at least three essay sections. In this way, I force them to choose a topic early-on. Their 'penultimate draft' is due two weeks before the end of the semester. I then go over these drafts with a fine-toothed comb, suggesting corrections as one would any journal article under review.

These revisions generally take students anywhere from four to eight hours to complete and are due within one week. This 'redraft' is the rare chance students get to conclude their work in as near-perfect a fashion as they ever will in undergrad education. Students, I hope, learn the art of thinking through a topic, gathering information, reflecting on the topic for an extended period of time, having tutorials on writing each section of the assignment, and in the end revising so that they learn the lesson of vision and revision in writing. Each section is graded with equal importance, 25% for each part of the essay.

### **Cricket Redux**

After watching well over 1,000 hours of cricket during the past eleven years, it would be hard for me now to live without the great game. I have attended one day internationals on the north island, test matches in Australia (the Boxing Day Test, no less, in 2004), and have watched every ball of no less than 50 eight-hour matches. It was necessary for me to move beyond a superficial knowledge of cricket to truly understand why so many people were passionate about the sport. I can say the same for rugby, as I have attended matches at all grades over the past eleven years, played rugby (only once, fearing for my safety and desiring to play in pads), and gone as far as attending six test matches during the 1999 world cup in England, Scotland and Wales.

I have collected massive amounts of antipodean sports data, so much so that when the All Blacks once again came up short in the 2007 World Cup against France, guess who the most powerful television station in New Zealand (TV One) called the next day for comment on the state of New Zealanders and their devotion to rugby and sport? Your local American sport sociologist. While I said nothing of any great consequence, I did speak from a position of knowing all of the recent All-Black and Black Caps (cricket) history. My point here is that it is fruitful for academic/student in-class interaction and future research that we, as scholars teaching topics such as American Sports Culture (or other popular culture topics) in Australia and New Zealand, remain students forever and therefore living examples to young scholars of the lifelong learning process.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For more on nonverbal culture in sport and African American culture, please see Andrews, V. L. & Majors, R. G., 'African American Nonverbal Culture', in Reginald Jones (ed.), *Black Psychology*, Cobb and Henry: Hampton, Virginia, 2004; Andrews, Vernon L., 'African American Player Codes on Celebration, Taunting and Sportsmanlike Conduct in College Football', *Journal of African American Men*. Volume 2: 2/3, 1997; and Andrews, Vernon L., 'Black Bodies – White Control: Race, Culture, Expression and The Contested Terrain of Sportsmanlike Conduct', *Journal of African American Men*. Volume 2:1, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Please see Andrews, Vernon L., 'American Studies 111: Hip-Hop Culture Coming Soon to a Classroom Near You?', in *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, July, 2006, pp. 103-114.

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