Point of View

By Elliott J. Gorn and Michael Oriard

Taking Sports Seriously

THE WEST INDIAN SCHOLAR C. L. R. James's 1963 work, *Beyond a Boundary*, is a remarkable book of history and memory. It is about the game of cricket. More, it is about the West Indies, poverty, being black, and colonialism. Cricket is James's microscope, and through it he magnifies whole areas of life and thought. He presents cricket as both sport and metaphor, the property of colonizers and colonized, in which struggles over culture, power, hegemony, and resistance are played out. Many scholars consider *Beyond a Boundary* to be the most profound and moving book ever written about sports.

So we were greatly interested when we received a brochure for a conference at New York University last month entitled "Beyond the Boundary." The conference was held in conjunction with the Whitney Museum of American Art, whose show "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art" had included some images of blacks engaged in sports. A conference on black masculinity, borrowing its title from James's book, looked promising for scholars in American studies who, like us, have tried to take the study of athletics seriously. Yet as we looked at the program more closely, we found that it did not include a single session or paper concerning sports.

Of course, scholars can choose to discuss whatever they want to. But how is it possible to understand American culture, particularly African-American culture, and ignore the role played by sports?

We see all around us team logos, images of athletes, and expensive clothing endorsed by famous athletes. Michael Jordan's is perhaps the most recognized face in the world, just as Muhammad Ali's was a generation ago. Nor is there a lack of experts who might participate in scholarly discussions of sports. Harry Edwards, a professor of sociology at Berkeley, opened up the academic study of blacks in sports 25 years ago. His chief concern was the exploitation of black athletes by the sports establishment. He has been succeeded by other distinguished writers—including Gerald Early, a literary scholar at Washington University, and Jeffrey Sammons, a historian at New York University—who have broadened the inquiry into many other aspects of the relationship between race and sports.

Despite the obvious importance of sports in American life, only a small number of American academics have made a specialty of analyzing the relationship between athletics and culture, and their work remains ghettoized. Historians, sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and even philosophers and literary scholars have established subspecialties on sports, but their work hovers at the margins of their disciplines.

Moreover, the booming field of cultural studies seems oblivious to the work done on athletics. This is ironic, because cultural studies—the interdisciplinary analysis of history, cultural expression, and power—is exactly where the study of sports is most needed. Where is there a cultural activity more freighted with constructions of masculinity than football, more deeply inscribed with race than boxing, more tied in the public mind to the hopes and hopelessness of inner-city youths than basketball? Gender, race, and power are central theoretical and methodological concerns of cultural studies.

Despite the continuing discussion in American studies of "the body" (of how human beings conceive of themselves physically), athletes' bodies remain curiously off-limits. Yet power and eroticism meet most conspicuously in the athletic body—Florence Griffith-Joyner's, Greg Louganis's, or Michael Jordan's.

Is "the body" as conceived in cultural studies a rhetorical construction, while the bodies of athletes are too palpably real? Are we, as intellectuals, just uncomfortable with physicality, because our own bailiwick is the life of the mind? Could it be that professors are

FLORENCE GRIFFITH-JOYNER — LOIS ADAMSKI PEEK, SPORTS PHOTO MASTERS, INC.

creatures of words while the language of athletics is fundamentally non-verbal? Or are we simply playing out the long standing faculty antagonism to the distorted priorities of universities with multimillion-dollar athletics programs?

Furthermore, although critical scholarship about television's place in American life is an important part of cultural studies, amazingly little of that scholarship is concerned with televised sports. Yet the mass media have always depended on athletics to reach large audiences, from the invention of the sports pages in the first large-circulation metropolitan newspapers in the 1880's and 1890's, to the first World Series radio broadcasts in the early 1920's, to the baseball and football games and boxing matches telecast at the beginning of the television age. Today, international broadcasts via satellite, cable superstations, and pay-per-view television all thrive on sporting events. Sports have been the cash cow of the increasingly pervasive (some would say invasive) entertainment media.

In an age that (properly) embraces multiculturalism, athletics represent both our diversity and our common culture. It is almost a cliché to mention that sports are the *lingua franca* of men talking across divisions of class and race. Sports also reveal just how interdependent particular subcultures and the larger consumer culture can be. Think, for example, of the symbiotic ties between inner-city playground basketball and the National Basketball Association championships.

SPORTS keep bringing us back to the ever-shifting relationship between commercialized mass culture (the Olympics come immediately to mind) and subcultures of difference (the Gay Games, for example).

Sports also are clearly about gender, although, until recently, this often has been overlooked. Certainly athletics have shaped American masculinity. One hundred years ago, in an essay called "The American Boy," Theodore Roosevelt exhorted young men to follow the same principles in life as in football: "Hit the line hard; don't foul and don't shirk, but hit the line hard."

For women, organized sports became available as feminism grew and they gained access to higher education and other areas from which they had previously been excluded. Even as Roosevelt wrote his essay, women at Vassar, Smith, Mount Holyoke, and Wellesley Colleges were playing baseball—not softball; baseball. By the turn of the century, a particularly aggressive form of basketball had become a source of pride and passion at women's colleges and on countless playgrounds. We are just beginning to ask what such facts say about definitions of feminism and femininity.

The general banishment of sports from cultural studies is not merely an omission of an important expressive form; leaving out sports distorts our view of culture. Sports present unique challenges to theories about cultural power and personal freedom, which cultural-studies scholars discuss using such categories as "representation," "commodification," "hegemony," and "subversion." One of the challenges is that sports differ from movies, novels, music, and television shows, all of which scholars view as wholly "constructed." Sports, however, are essentially "unscripted." They are real contests, in which many people have participated, at least at an amateur level.

This makes sports different from the other forms of entertainment, which are packaged by their creators. Knowledgeable fans can understand the games on their own terms and ignore the silly prattle of the "color" commentators. Baseball officials cannot script a "Cinderella season" on demand. What sports "mean" to their vast audiences cannot be ordained by either owners or media pundits.

THE GREAT VIRTUE of cultural studies has been to take seriously the idea of "otherness," a concept that, in part, relates to how a group defines itself by the images that it creates of outsiders. But otherness is a slippery term. To many scholars—whose values are cosmopolitan, whose politics are progressive, and whose incomes are upper middle class—the "other" is not necessarily the same as for most Americans. Young, verbally dexterous, and entrepreneurial rappers—modern-day rebels against a narrow-minded and prissy culture—may be far less alien to hip young intellectuals than the gifted and disciplined athlete. "Otherness," for scholars, may reside even more in the polyester-clad fan who drinks with his buddies and roots for the home team, or in the middle-aged woman out bowling in her weekly league game. What, in the eyes of many in the academy, could be more unhip, uncool, "other" than American working-class pleasures?

Some scholars have suggested that, after Martin Luther King, Jr., Jackie Robinson may well have been the most influential black American of the past 50 years. Not everyone would agree with this proposition, but it is plausible, and it speaks volumes about American culture that the artistry, grace, fierce will, and embattled restraint of a baseball player could become a symbol of courage and strength to so many people. There is no getting around it: For African Americans, sports have been a fount of creativity, of art, of genius. Sports have also been a source of respect for black Americans among people of all races. Any list of the most culturally influential African Americans of the 20th century would have to include Robinson, as well as Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, Jack Johnson, Wilma Rudolph, and Muhammad Ali.

C. L. R. James was so convinced of the importance of sports that he declared cricket and soccer to be "the greatest cultural influences in 19th-century Britain." Although a bit hyperbolic, James's point is well taken. That athletics have remained so far beyond the boundary of most intellectual discourse is beyond belief. As James so brilliantly demonstrated, the study of sport can take us to the very heart of critical issues in the study of culture and society.

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