

## AMAN125: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON SPORT AND SOCIETY

9:30 – 10:50, Tuesdays and Thursdays

Instructor: Joshua D. Rubin (PGill 161)

Office hours: Fridays 1-4PM and by appointment



In this course, we will consider sports through a critical anthropological lens. With the aid of a broad range of academic and non-academic source material, we will examine some of the major themes and concerns that sports put on display. To facilitate our analyses of these materials, this course is organized into three sections. The first encourages us to reflect upon the *conditions* in which sports are played. We will ask questions such as: Why do we play the sports we do? Why are the sports we play organized the way they are? Why do sports exist at all? The second section explores what we learn from sporting *participation* and how exactly we learn what we do. How do we write about the experience of “being in” a sport? What can sporting performance tell us about the persuasive political power of sports? The third section looks closely at sporting *spectators*. Why do so many people devote so

much energy to activities performed by others? What kinds of interpretations to spectators produce about athletes, and from where do those interpretations come?

At the conclusion of the third section, you will undertake a research project with a group of your classmates. Our class has been commissioned by Student Affairs and the Athletics Department to explore the explicit and implicit values that shape how sports are understood at Bates. Approaching this topic with the critical resources you have acquired in our course, you will conduct ethnographic research with players and coaches on campus and, at the end of the semester, share your findings with the players, coaches, and administrators in a scheduled poster session and a written report.

**There are no required books for this course. All readings are available on Lyceum.**

Assigned readings are to be completed for the class under which they are listed. If for some reason you find that you are unable to access a particular reading, please contact me immediately and I will address the problem.

### Assignments and grading:

**Assignment 1:** Interview and 3-4 page synopsis - 30 points

**Assignment 2:** Response to the first assignment, with personal perspective - 20 points

**Assignment 3:** Introduction to observational research and 3-5 page reflection - 40 points

**Assignment 4:** Group poster - 20 points (15 points group score, 5 points individual)

**Assignment 5:** 8-10 page final group report - 40 points

**Assignment 6:** Comprehensive take-home final exam - 50 points

**Participation and reading questions:**

Because the final quarter of our course will be devoted in large part to working on a group project, your active participation in our class will constitute a larger percentage of your final grade in our class than it might for most 100-level classes.

On days when we discuss assigned readings, I will expect the following:

- 1) That you will attend class and bring the reading with you.
- 2) That you will come to class having done the reading, with thoughts and questions of your own about the argument of that reading and its ramifications for your own sporting experience.
- 3) That you will listen actively and attentively when I and your classmates speak.
- 4) That you will act respectfully (and respond generously) when an experience that differs from yours, or a perspective that differs from your own, is articulated.

On days when we work in small groups, I will expect the following:

- 1) That you will devote your full attention to thinking with your group mates.
- 2) That you will pay attention to your classmates when they speak and value what they have to say.
- 3) That you will share your own perspectives and ideas.
- 4) That you will think self-reflexively about how much you are participating. If you haven't participated much, make a conscious effort to participate more. If you have participated quite extensively, step back and help others to join in.

Your participation in our courses will be scored out of a possible 30 points. Factored into this participation score will be your performance on several reading question assignments. These reading questions will stand in for reading quizzes and they will be announced in advance. You are expected to submit your answers to the posted questions at the beginning of the class. No late submissions will be accepted.

If I notice that you are checking your phone, or using a permitted computer for business not related to our course, I will call on you immediately to verify your engagement in our discussion and speak to you after class. If this happens repeatedly, your in-class participation score will be reduced to a 0. If you have more than three unexcused absences in the semester, your in-class participation score will be reduced to 0.

All assignments are due on the dates indicated on the syllabus. Late work will be marked down 5% per day and unexcused assignments that are more than one week late will be graded as a 0. Exceptions will be made for Dean's Excuses.

Your final course grade will be calculated as a percentage of accumulated points (A = 94-100; A- = 90-93; B+ = 87-89; B = 84-86; B- = 80-83; etc.).

**Grading rubric:**

All of your (individual) assignments for this class will be graded according to the following rubric:

20% of your grade = Meeting the explicit expectations of the assignment.

10% of your grade = Intellectual adventurousness (willingness to try writing about a new topic or approaching a familiar topic from an unexpected direction).

20% of your grade = Matters of style and readability.

50% of your grade = The quality of your argumentation.

**Additional policies:**

- 1) All assignments are due on the dates indicated on the syllabus. Late work will be marked down 5% per day and unexcused assignments that are more than one week late will be

- graded as a 0. Exceptions will be made for Dean's Excuses.
- 2) To make submitting, organizing, and returning your assignments easier for all of us, please EMAIL them to me – formatted as Microsoft Word documents if possible – as files **named Lastname.Firstname-Assignment Title** on the date they are due. If you do not have ready access to a computer or would prefer to receive handwritten comments, you may also print out your assignments and turn them in to me before the deadline.
  - 3) I do not permit the use of electronic devices during our class sessions (including laptops, netbooks, tablets, phones, etc.) unless by special arrangement with me. All such devices must be turned off and put away. I'm sorry if this presents an inconvenience for you, but I will explain my reasoning in class.
  - 4) Sporting events, practices, and tournaments are not considered legitimate excuses for late assignments. If you anticipate that a sporting event will make it especially difficult for you to complete a project as assigned, you are expected to contact me at least **two weeks in advance of the deadline so we can devise an alternative assignment for you**. Sports are fascinating social and cultural performances; there will be no shortage of possibilities.
  - 5) I take very seriously the notion that each student faces his or her own unique learning challenges. If you feel that our classroom environment has not been conducive to your needs, please do contact me. I am happy to adapt.
  - 6) Our classroom cannot be a place of exploration and learning if it is not also a place of *safety*. If our conversations ever trouble you, or if you feel that you have been excluded or disrespected, I *strongly* encourage you to tell me. I will do everything in my power to restore your confidence in our class environment. I also recommend that you let me know if you would prefer to listen rather than speak during our whole group discussions. Silence can mean many things, and I will look for you to find other ways to demonstrate your active engagement with the course.

### **Academic integrity:**

Bates College defines plagiarism as claiming another's words and/or ideas as your own. Both plagiarism and failing to cite source materials are serious classroom concerns and they will be treated as such. At the same time, it has been my experience that instances of plagiarism are rarely premeditated acts of deception. More commonly, they stem from misunderstandings and time-related panic. If this is the case, then it is as much my job as yours to make sure plagiarism does not occur in our class. To that end, I have designed this course specifically to alleviate the finals-week time crunch. Each assignment described in the syllabus is designed to help you both think critically about sports and set you up to succeed in your final research project.

It is also my responsibility to communicate to you my citation guidelines. They are as follows: I will expect you to provide references whenever you quote or paraphrase the work of another person. When in doubt, cite! This includes quotations from books, articles, magazines, films, lectures, and interviews.

### **You can use this example as a template for your in-text citations:**

**In *Beyond a Boundary*, C.L.R. James writes, "..."** (James 2013, 30-1).

### **If you are citing an interview, please do so as shown:**

**As Y explained during my interview with her, "..."** (Interview, [insert date here]).

Our class citation style is Chicago, Author-Date. If you are unfamiliar with this style, you can take your cue from the citations in the following pages of this syllabus.

If you have any additional questions or concerns about citation guidelines, assignments, or any other aspect of the course, feel free to speak to me or visit the Bates writing center. You may also consult the Bates Academic Integrity Policy.

## Course Schedule:

### INTRODUCTION

*Most of us know what sports ARE. What do sports DO?*

**THURSDAY, September 5**      Introductions

**Assignment 1: Conduct a 20-minute interview with a friend (or family member) who dislikes—or has no interest in—sports.** This interview can be conducted over the phone or in person. Either way, listen, ask questions, and take detailed notes. *Do not argue with them or try to explain to them why they should care more about sports!* Some questions you might consider asking them include: When did you decide you didn't like sports? Was there a moment that brought you to that opinion or have you never liked them? When you think of sports, what sports do you have in mind? Do you dislike all sports equally? Why don't you like them? Do you ever find yourself in situations in which you feel like you're supposed to like sports? If so, what do you do in those situations? Submit a 3-4 page (double-spaced) synopsis of your interview.

(If it happens that you don't know anyone who doesn't like sports, contact me and I will locate an interview subject for you.)

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### THE STAGE

*Why do certain sports happen to be popular in certain parts of the world and not in others? Why do people find themselves playing the sports they do? Who is included and who is excluded from sporting participation in different places and times?*

- TUESDAY, September 10**      Levy, Ariel. 2009. "Either/Or: Sports, sex, and the case of Caster Semenya." *The New Yorker*, 46-59.
- THURSDAY, September 12**      Ralph, Michael. 2007. "Prototype: In Search of the Perfect Senegalese Basketball Physique." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 24 (2):238-263.
- TUESDAY, September 17**      Butterworth, Michael, and Karsten Senkbeil. 2017. "Cross-cultural comparisons of religion as "character": Football and soccer in the United States and Germany." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 52 (2):129-145.
- THURSDAY, September 19**      James, C L R. 2013. "Against the Current." In *Beyond a Boundary*, 21-38. Durham: Duke University Press.  
Note: Introduction included but **optional, for those seeking more background information.**

**ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE ON SUNDAY BY 8PM.**

**TUESDAY, September 24**

Trimbur, Lucia. 2013. "The Changing Politics of Gender." In *Come Out Swinging: The Changing World of Boxing in Gleason's Gym*, 89-116. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**Assignment 2: Write a 2-4 page (double-spaced) response to your first assignment.** In your first assignment, you deliberately sought out a person with views on sports that differed from your own. This is your opportunity to reflect on the reasons *why* your views on sports might have been so different. What were the elements of your respective experiences that made yours positive and theirs negative (or vice versa)? Can you readily identify with the other person's experience? Why or why not?

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### **THE PERFORMANCE**

*What happens DURING sporting events? Can sporting performances change the staging of the sport? What does it feel like to take part in a sporting event or practice session?*

**THURSDAY, September 26**

Dinerstein, Joel. 2005. "Backfield in Motion: The Transformation of the NFL by Black Culture." In *In the Game: Race, Identity, and Sports in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Amy Bass, 169-191. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

**TUESDAY, October 1**

Gelberg, J. Nadine. 1995. "The Lethal Weapon: How the Plastic Football Helmet Transformed the Game of Football, 1939-1994." *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society* 15 (5-6):302-309.

**THURSDAY, October 3**

King, Anthony, and Mark de Rond. 2011. "Boat race: rhythm and the possibility of collective performance." *The British Journal of Sociology* 62 (4):565-585.

### **ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE ON SUNDAY BY 8PM**

**TUESDAY, October 8**

Sparkes, Andrew C., James Brighton, and Kay Inckle. 2017. "'It's a part of me': An ethnographic exploration of becoming a disabled sporting cyborg following spinal cord injury." *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health* 10 (2): 151-166.

**Assignment 3:** Go to a sporting event or practice of a team, either mixed gender or one that differs from your own gender identification, that plays a sport you neither actively follow nor watch attentively. Stay for an hour (or longer!) and take handwritten notes about what you see. What do you look for when you try to identify the social norms of an unfamiliar sport? In what ways are their practices or games different from the ones you know better? How do the players interact with each other and with their coaches? By what means do the coaches seek to motivate and educate their players? What might explain the ways that this particular Bates team and sport differs from the teams and sports you know better? Did you notice any unexpected similarities?

**Submit a 3-5 page account of your observations and the conclusions you drew from them.**

**THURSDAY, October 10**

Malcom, Nancy L. 2006. "'Shaking It Off" and "Toughing It Out": Socialization to Pain and Injury in Girls' Softball." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35 (5):495-525.

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**THE AUDIENCE(S)**

*How do we, as social scientists, study spectatorship? What kinds of stories do fans tell with sports? What kinds of stories might sports invite us to tell?*

**TUESDAY, October 15**

Mazer, Sharon. 2005. "'Real" Wrestling / "Real" Life." In *Steel Chair to the Head: The Pleasure and Pain of Professional Wrestling*, edited by Nicholas Sammond, 67-87. Durham: Duke University Press.

**NO CLASS - MID-SEMESTER BREAK**

**TUESDAY, October 22**

Alvarez, Natalie. 2016. "Foul Play: Soccer's "Infamous Thespians" and the Cultural Politics of Diving." *The Drama Review* 60 (1):10-24.

**THURSDAY, October 24**

Mock, Steven J. 2012. "'Whose Game They're Playing': Nation and Emotion in Canadian TV Advertising during the 2010 Winter Olympics." *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism* 12 (1):206-226.

**Note: YouTube videos of each commercial (with the exception of the Walmart one) are available on our class Lyceum page.**

**ASSIGNMENT #3 DUE ON SUNDAY BY 8PM**

**TUESDAY, October 29**

Haag, Pamela. 1996. "'The 50,000-Watt Sports Bar": Talk Radio and the Ethic of the Fan." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 95 (2):453-470.

**THURSDAY, October 31**

Foer, Franklin. 2004. "Soccer vs. McWorld." *Foreign Policy*, 32-40.

Bick, Paul B., and Sorina Chiper. 2007. "Swoosh identity: recontextualizations in Haiti and Romania." *Visual Communication* 6 (1):5-18.

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PROJECT FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS AND ATHLETICS DEPARTMENT

- TUESDAY, November 5**                      **GROUP WORK — *Interviewing.***
- THURSDAY, November 7**                      Dyck, Noel. 2011. "In Pursuit of the "Full Ride": American Athletic Scholarships and Mobility, Sport and Childhood in Canada." *Anthropologica* 53 (1):53-66.
- TUESDAY, November 12**                      **GROUP WORK — *Sources and research.***
- THURSDAY, November 14**                      Dworkin, Shari L. 2003. "A Woman's Place is in the ... Cardiovascular Room?? Gender Relations, the Body, and the Gym." In *Athletic Intruders: Ethnographic Research on Women, Culture, and Exercise*, edited by Anne Bolin and Jane Granskog, 131-158. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- TUESDAY, November 19**                      Carter, Thomas. 2008. "The Qualities of *Cubanidad: Calidad and Lucha* in Baseball" In *The Quality of Home Runs: The Passion, Politics and Language of Cuban Baseball*, 159-181. Durham: Duke University Press.
- THURSDAY, November 21**                      **GROUP WORK — *Preliminary findings and poster preparation.***
- NO CLASS - THANKSGIVING BREAK**
- TUESDAY, December 3**                      **SEMESTER RECAP (TAKE-HOME EXAM PREP) / *Finalizing poster and report.***
- THURSDAY, December 5**                      **POSTER SESSION!  
*Final reports also due.***

**Assignment 6:** Final comprehensive take-home exam due by **8PM** on the **Saturday** of exam week. Please send your answers to me via email!

## IT IS MAYBE TIME TO ADMIT THAT MICHAEL JORDAN DEFINITELY PUSHED OFF

By Hanif Abdurraqib

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that one time in the '98 NBA finals & in praise of one man's hand on the waist of another's & in praise of the ways we guide our ships to the shore of some brief & gilded mercy I touch my fingers to the hips of this vast & immovable grief & push once more & who is to say really how much weight was behind Jordan's palm on that night in Utah & on that same night one year earlier the paramedics pulled my drowning mother from the sheets where she slept & they said it must have felt like a whole hand was pushing down on her lungs & I spent the whole summer holding my breath in bed until the small black spots danced on the ceiling & I am sorry that there is no way to describe this that is not about agony or that is not about someone being torn from the perch of their comfort & on the same night a year before my mother died Jordan wept on the floor of the United Center locker room after winning another title because it was Father's Day & his father went to sleep on the side of a road in '93 & woke up a ghost & there is no moment worth falling to our knees & galloping towards like the one that sings our dead into the architecture & so yes for a moment in 1998 Michael Jordan made what space he could on the path between him & his father's small & breathing grace

& so yes, reader

there is an ocean between us the length of my arm & I have built nothing for you that can survive it

& from here I am close enough to be seen but not close enough to be cherished

& from here, reader, I can see every possible ending before we even touch.