

Professor Daniel A. Nathan
AM 234, American Sports/American Culture
TLC 303, TTH 9:40-11:00
Office: TLC 330 (580-5023)
Office Hours: TTH 11:05-12:00 & by appt.
E-mail: dnathan@skidmore.edu

“These days, sports may be what Americans talk about best. With the most knowledge. The most passion. The most humor. The most distance. The most capacity for a cheerful change of mind. When we meet someone for the first time, it’s no accident that sport becomes the subject so often and so quickly. Yes it’s an easy, superficial topic—if we want it to be. But talking about sports has also become one of our best ways of probing people, sounding their depth, listening for resonances, judging their values.”

—Thomas Boswell, sports columnist

“Through sport we might know ourselves.”

—David Guterson, writer

Course Description & Objectives

This course examines the history of American sports and some aspects of the contemporary athletic landscape as a way to consider cultural values. Sports fans beware: this is *not* a course in sports trivia, nor is it intended to glamorize the games we watch and play. Rather, we will attempt to situate American sports historically and culturally, paying close attention to issues of commercialization, race/ethnicity, gender, and class, among other subjects, such as globalization and fandom. Employing an interdisciplinary approach that makes use of primary documents, history, journalism, economics, anthropology, sociology, and film, we will examine recurrent cultural values expressed via American sports and iconic athletes. This course is not intended as a comprehensive survey of American sports. Even a cursory glance at the reading schedule reveals significant omissions. Students are encouraged to view those omissions as opportunities for their own research and study.

The course will heavily stress class discussion, centering upon considerations of the assigned readings (texts should be brought to class) and moving outward to broader questions of interpretation and cultural meaning. Discussions are collective endeavors that demand everyone’s preparation, attendance, and participation. Learning to participate in a discussion involves social and intellectual skills that are an essential part of one’s education. These include: listening to others and learning to absorb and synthesize their remarks; learning to respond constructively and analytically to others’ ideas; learning to develop and articulate positions of one’s own; responding to criticism; and learning to modify or discard an argument as one comes to see another, more satisfactory one. Students are expected to come to class eager to share their ideas about the topics under consideration and to question our readings and one another.

At the end of the course, I expect that we will have learned some critical skills, that we will have noted connections between the past and the present, and that we will have gained a better understanding of how and why American sports have performed various cultural roles and functions at different points in our history.

Books

D. Stanley Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society: An Anthology*

Mark Fainaru-Wada and Lance Williams, *Game of Shadows: Barry Bonds, BALCO, and the Steroids Scandal That Rocked Professional Sports*

Elliott J. Gorn and Warren Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sports*

Warren St. John, *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer: A Journey Into the Heart of Fan Mania*
Susan Ware, *Title IX: A Brief History with Documents*

Films

Steve James, *Hoop Dreams*

Christine Herbes-Sommers, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, "The Difference Between Us"

John Avildsen, *Rocky*

Kenyon King, *Playing Unfair: The Media Image of the Female Athlete*

Requirements

Course requirements include two papers (the first will be 3-5 pages and the second will be 6-8 pages), active class participation and in-class writing assignments, and two presentations, one solo and one in a group. You must complete all assignments in order to pass this course. The break down of grades is as follows:

In-class Writing Assignments & Quizzes	10%	
Individual Presentation	15%	
Class Participation	15%	
Group Project	15%	(December 19, 9:00 AM-12:00 PM)
First Paper	20%	(due October 9)
Second Paper	25%	(due December 4)

Attendance & Participation

Because the success of the course depends upon your participation, attendance is mandatory. Four or more absences will adversely affect your final grade: six or more absences and you fail the course.

Active participation requires that you attend class regularly (and on time), that you come to class prepared (i.e., having carefully read and thought about the assigned material), and that you share your perspectives, ideas, and questions.

Special Needs

Anyone who has a disability which may require some modification of seating, testing, or other class requirements should see me after class or during my office hours so that we can make appropriate arrangements.

Reading Schedule

- 9/6: Introductions, goals, policies, reading schedule
Gorn and Oriard, "Taking Sports Seriously"
Crepeau, "Sport and Society"
- 9/11: Macionis, *Sociology* excerpt
Erchak, "Culture"
Halberstam, "Sports can distract, but they don't heal"
Feinstein, "Sports Have Their Place During Time of Tragedy"
- 9/13: Guttman, *From Ritual to Record* excerpts
- 9/18: Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight"
Gmelch, "Baseball Magic"
- 9/20: Breen, "Horses and Gentlemen"
Gorn, "The Manassa Mauler and the Fighting Marine"
- 9/25: James, *Hoop Dreams* (film)
Berkow, "Hope, and hope denied"
Ebert, "Hoop Dreams"
- 9/27: Vanderwerken, "Hoop Dreams: A Basketball Bildungsroman"
hooks, "Neo-Colonial Fantasies of Conquest"
Wise, "Looking Back at Broken Dreams: Film's Key Players Have Moved On"
- 10/2: Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, ix-35
- 10/4: Birrell and McDonald, "Reading Sport, Articulating Power Lines"
Gorn and Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sport*, xi-46
- 10/9: No Class
- 10/11: Gorn and Goldstein, *A Brief History of American Sport*, 47-221, 251-254
Jay, *More Than Just A Game* excerpts
- 10/16: Herbes-Sommers, *Race: The Power of an Illusion*, "The Difference Between Us" episode (film)
Coakley, "Race and Ethnicity: Are They Important in Sports?"
- 10/18: Gates, "Delusions of Grandeur"
Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, 257-274
- 10/23: Coakley, "Gender and Sports: Does Equity Require Ideological Changes?"
- 10/25: King, *Playing Unfair: The Media Image of the Female Athlete* (film)
Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, 285-329
- 10/30: Coakley, "Sports and the Media: Could They Survive Without Each Other?"
Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, 75- 110
- 11/1: Avildsen, *Rocky* (film)
Canby, "'Rocky,' Pure 30's Make-Believe"
Leab, "The Blue Collar Ethnic in Bicentennial America: *Rocky* (1976)"
- 11/6: Brand, "The Role and Value of Intercollegiate Athletics in Universities"
Eitzen, *Sport in Contemporary Society*, 199-222
- 11/8: Ware, *Title IX: A Brief History with Documents*, vii-viii, 1-27, 35-76, 124-168
- 11/13: St. John, *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer*, 1-115

11/15: St. John, *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer*, 116-167

11/20: St. John, *Rammer Jammer Yellow Hammer*, 168-272

11/22: No Class—Thanksgiving

- 11/27: Fainaru-Wada and Williams, *Game of Shadows*, ix-224
 11/29: Fainaru-Wada and Williams, *Game of Shadows*, 225-286
 Will, "Barry Bonds's Enhancement "
- 12/4: TBD
 12/6: TBD
- 12/11: Lipsyte, "The Emasculation of Sports"
 The Swiss Foundation for World Affairs, "More Than Just A Game: The Role of Sports in
 International Relations"
 Concluding comments, course evaluations
- 12/19: Final Exam session, 9:00 AM -12:00 PM, 303 TLC

Screening Schedule

- | | | |
|--------|--|---------|
| 9/24: | <i>Hoop Dreams</i> | 301 TLC |
| 10/15: | <i>Race: The Power of an Illusion</i> | 301 TLC |
| 10/24: | <i>Playing Unfair: The Media Image of the Female Athlete</i> | 301 TLC |
| 10/31: | <i>Rocky</i> | 301 TLC |

Films will be shown at 7 PM. Note: You are *not* required to attend these screening sessions, but you are required to have watched the films in question before we discuss them in class.