

Spring, 2014
Office Hours, T and Th, 12:00-2:00
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Professor Michael Rockland

SPORTS IN AMERICAN CULTURE

"A stranger to American society might well suppose that more attention is paid to sport than to almost any other activity" [James Coleman]

"Sports is the only thing this country holds sacred" [Oscar Robertson]

"It has often been observed that the secret to American culture lies in understanding baseball" [Christopher Lehmann-Haupt]

"Quit playing like girls" [said by my son's Little League Coach] Note: There were two girls on the team and they were among the best players.

"What is really chilling is that there are a lot of smart people interested in sports. That just gives you no hope for the human race." [Fran Lebowitz]

"I am not a role model. I do not get paid to be a role model. Just because I dunk baskets doesn't mean I can raise kids. And even if I can raise my own, I don't think I should be responsible for raising yours." [Charles Barkley]

"Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing." [Vince Lombardi]

[REST OF THIS PAGE IS A PAIR OF CALVIN AND HOBBS
COMIC STRIPS THAT INTERROGATE
ISSUES IN ATHLETIC COMPETITION]

WHAT THIS COURSE IS ABOUT

This course is not about sports; it is about American society. It is not about playing ball; it is about American ideas and values. We will want to discuss whence comes this near obsession with sports in American society, what does it tell us about Americans, and whether sports is a positive or a negative aspect of our society.

LEARNING GOALS

As with all American Studies courses, we are interested in your learning to read critically, speak articulately, and write effectively (see materials on the term project). These skills are essential to success in any profession.

1. We expect to look beyond the reporting of sports in the media to examine its place in America's political, social, and economic life.
2. We will want to examine the place in American sports of issues in race, class, gender and sexual orientation.
3. We will want to examine whether sports in America is a democratizing presence or, instead, part of the "Winner Take All" psychology of a celebrity-oriented culture. In short, is big-time sports healthy for a society (or for a university)?
4. We will want to consider whether big-time sports, whether on the professional or the university level, contributes to American physical and mental health through the example of great athletes or, instead, is a contributing factor to the current epidemic of obesity and diabetes.
5. We will especially want to examine whether sports at Rutgers, as presently constituted, is a positive addition to university life or detracts from it.

In short, throughout the course we will court controversy whenever possible.

BOOKS

Our textbooks are available at the main university bookstore on Somerset Street downtown. I have asked the bookstore to seek out used copies to save you some money. Also, all of these books are available used from used web book sources such as Amazon, Abe Books, and Alibris Books and that may save you further money. Get books at once and be certain to have them in class with you on the days they are discussed.

William Dowling, *Confessions of a Spoilsport: My Life and Hard Times Fighting Corruption at an Old Eastern University*[Rutgers] ISBN 978-0-271-03293-1

Michael Mandelbaum, *The Meaning of Sport* ISBN 1-58648-330-7

Joe Queenan, *True Believers: The Tragic Inner Life of Sports Fans* isbn 0-312-42321-7

All readings listed in the syllabus are to be read for that day, that is, in advance of our class meeting. If I feel at any point that some of you are not doing the readings, I may give you an unannounced pop quiz. I would prefer not to do this but will if I have to.

In addition to the readings, we will see a number of interesting films in class. We also have lined up a wonderful group of guests from the world of sports

YOU WILL BE GRADED ON:

1.Attendance will be taken throughout the course. You will be expected to be in class, and on time, every day. No matter what the reason, absences, except for emergencies or critical personal matters such as job interviews, will definitely affect your final grade. But I would urge you not to miss *any* class simply because it will adversely affect your performance on both exams, especially on the objective portions. And even if you have to miss one class, make certain it is not when we are having a guest. We have outstanding guests coming. They are volunteering their time, so I want to extend them every courtesy, and part of that courtesy will be not only universal attendance that day but, just as important, in the questions, however controversial, you will ask them. All absences, and their reasons, are to be reported to me personally or to my e-mail address and, as well, by accessing the following university site: <http://sims.rutgers.edu>

2, Class participation: We have the luxury of a reasonably sized class, and I would like us to take this opportunity to engage in regular and energetic debate. Don't think of this class as one where you arrive each day and listen to "the word." Sports is something you probably know as much about as I do and about which you probably feel strongly. I will want to hear from you regularly in class, and the more controversy you and I excite, the better. Being an athlete will not give you a leg up in this class. It is your analysis of the meaning of sports in American society rather than your familiarity with sports themselves that matters. Please note that one of our books, by Rutgers Professor of English, William Dowling, is immensely critical of the sports program at Rutgers University. Whether you agree with Dowling or not, I will expect you to question our guests about his accusations. Dowling's accusations concern sports at Rutgers a few years ago. However, I am assured he feels the same way now .I might add that, while I have invited Professor Dowling to class to defend his book and his ideas, he will not be coming.

3. Midterm Exam on Thursday, March 6 This will be an objective, multiple choice exam on the work up to that date.

4. Final Examination Date not yet announced. It will be based on all readings, films, lectures, class discussion, and comments by guests. There will be an objective (multiple choice) part of the exam (on the second half of the semester) as well as essays on the entire course. Please note that you may bring any of the books or any notes you'd like to the final exam for the essay portion, though they must be set aside for the objective part.

5. Term Project: This is perhaps the most important factor in my arriving at a final grade. It is due, without fail, no exceptions, in class (you may not send it via e-mail) on Tuesday, April 22 or before. The projects will be returned to you at the final. The term project is to be a personal essay rather than a research paper. If you have never played a sport--even if you hate sports--write about that. Since our course is about the changing perceptions of sports in America, about what sports *mean*, I want you to write about some event or experience or series of experiences in your own life, positive or negative, that influenced your perception of sports and, by extension, American life. You should extrapolate from your experience to say something of significance about sports in America and, finally, about American society and culture. In other words, this paper is not, ultimately, about you; it's about our country. Wherever relevant, refer to our readings, films, guests, and class discussions in your paper so as to demonstrate the possible connection between your experience and what we have learned together in our course. But be truthful. No one will see these papers but me.

We will set aside ample time during the course to discuss the term paper and to help you generate ideas. These essays should ultimately be beautifully written and be enjoyable to read; for them to be such, you must concentrate on telling a story well. I recommend 3 drafts minimum. Indeed, given the personal nature of the project, there is no need for you to delay getting started on the project. You might even make an attempt at a first draft immediately.

All papers should be typed and printed on regulation size paper. They should be stapled (no paper clips and no plastic covers, please). Your project should be given a provocative title that suggests what you are about to argue. Please proofread your papers carefully. I do not take kindly to papers full of obvious misspellings and typos, and they will seriously detract from your grade. Make sure your papers are paginated, even if you have to put in page numbers by hand. Illustrations may enhance some of your projects.

I'm always asked, "What about length? I hate to answer this question because then students tend to think the suggested length is mandatory. Remember: quality is much more important than quantity. But, if you insist, I'd say the recommended length is 10-12 pages. It can certainly be longer than 12 but should not be shorter than 8.

Following is your syllabus. Readings should be done for the day for which they are listed. They will be the basis of discussion that day. You must always have with you in class the book we are considering that day.

SYLLABUS

Tuesday, January 21 INTRODUCTION::THE CULTURAL AND POLITICAL
DIMENSIONS OF SPORT

KEY QUESTIONS TO BE DISCUSSED THIS DAY

Why is soccer the #1 sport in the world and in virtually

every country except the United States?

Why does baseball seem to represent a very different sensibility than football and basketball? Why is it still referred to as “the national pastime?”

Why is the United States the only country in the world where collegiate athletic teams seriously compete? Is this a good thing or a bad?

Do sports, especially football, encourage violence in society at large or quite the reverse? The “Drive Discharge” versus “Cultural Construct” theories.

Thurs, Jan. 23 Baseball I

Guest: Joe Litterio, Acting Head Baseball Coach

Tues, Jan 28 Baseball II

Film in class: “American Game, Japanese Rules”

Thurs. Jan. 28 Baseball III

Lecture on baseball as a pre-industrial era sport

Tues, Feb. 4 Baseball IV: Baseball and the “Religion” of Sports

Read: Mandelbaum, Introduction and pp. 1-118

Thurs. Feb 6 Baseball as Dream

Film, “Field of Dreams”

(Discussion)

Tues, Feb. 11, Baseball as Nightmare

Film: “Eight Men Out”

(Discussion)

Thurs. Feb. 13 Football I

Read: Mandelbaum, “Football: The Spectacle of Violence” pp. 119-198

Feb. 18 and 20. We will have Rutgers Athletic Director, Julie Hermann on one of these dates. For the other date you are to read William Dowling’s book, *Confessions of a Spoilsport: My Life and Hard Times Fighting Corruption at an Old Eastern University*. Read Introduction and pp. 1-96. I hope to be able to inform you in plenty of time when Director Hermann will be coming. It may be a last minute thing, so be sure to have read the pages in Dowling by February 18 just in case.

Tues. Feb. 25 Football II Dowling’s “Confessions of a Spoilsport” concluded

Read: Chapter 7-10 plus the Appendix

Thurs, Feb. 27 Sports, Politics and War

Film: “Olympis”

Tues. March 4 Discussion of the college athlete

Here are the extremes. We will debate them this day.

- 1) Students are in school to get an education. College athletics are a distraction and should be terminated at every school that takes itself seriously as an academic institution just as is the case in the rest of the world.

- 2) Athletic programs are just like any other extra-curricular activity and should be allowed, but scholarships should be terminated for sports as they are non-existent for other extra curricular activities. Is sports more important, for example than students participating in marching bands, dance teams, theatre, music, worthy charities, Model United Nations, etc.?

- 3) Some college sports require as much as forty hours a week of practice, lifting, class sessions, viewing films, strategy sessions etc. Even if athletes have a free ride in terms of tuition, room and board, books, fees, etc. athletes have no spending money and no time to get a job. Therefore, athletes should receive a small stipend to cover pocket money expenses. Should this stipend be for all college athletes or just those participating in the major ones?

- 4) College athletes are an exploited class of people. Head coaches of the major sports such as football and basketball may be the highest paid officials at their universities, often making more money than the president (and far more than professors) Why shouldn't college athletes in the major sports be paid at least a decent salary, for it is they who are playing the game, sometimes at considerable risk to themselves (concussions, torn up knees, etc). Of course, if they were paid a salary, would they now be university employees and, if so, what would happen to the concept of the "student-athlete?"

Thurs, March 6 **Midterm exam (no makeups. You must be in class this day)**

And continued discussion of the questions raised on March 4

Tues., March 11 Football III Guest Appearance of Kyle Flood, Head Coach, Rutgers
Football

Thurs. March 13 Football IV. Members of the football team as "class guests"

SPRING BREAK

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Tues. March 25 The Fan I
Film "The Fan"(Discussion)

Thurs. March 27 The Fan II
Read first half of Joe Queenan's *True Believers: The Tragic
Inner Life of Sports Fans* pp. 1-125

Tues, April 1 The Fan III: second half of Queenan's book, 126-236

Thurs. April 3 Basketball I
 Read: Mandelbaum, "Basketball, the Chemistry of Teamwork, pp. 199-271

Tues. April 8 Basketball II
 Film "Hoop Dreams"
 (Discussion)

Thurs, April 10 Basketball III
 Film "Hoop dreams" (Discussion)

Note: Coach Eddie Jordan of the Rutgers Men's Basketball Team has promised to come to class as a guest but is unable to give us a date until well into the course. So it may be around these days or at another time altogether. We will adjust our syllabus accordingly.

Tues. April 15 Basketball IV
 Coach Vivian Stringer of the Women's Basketball Team or an Associate Coach

Thurs. April 17 Gender, Sexual Orientation and Race in Sports I
 Films: "Not Just a Game," "Evening the Odds, Images of the Female Athlete

Tues. April 22 Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Race in Sports II
 Film: Ballet with Edward Vilella

Note: Term Papers are due without fail in class this day. Late Papers, whatever the excuse will be penalized, so get them in on time.

Thurs. April 24 Gender and Sports
 Guest this day, Christine Zoffinger, Coach of Rutgers Dance and Cheerleading

Tues, April 29 Sports and Character
 Do Sports build character or undermine it? A discussion of such figures as Lance Armstrong, Alex Rodriguez and the issues raised by cheating, the statement : "If you're not cheating you're not really trying to win" and Vince Lombardi's famous statement: "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing"

Thurs. May 1 Summing Things Up
 Read Mandelbaum Conclusion. 272-284 and Epilogue 285-301

Notes: 1) Laptops and cell phones are never to be used or glanced at during class time. If you do, your grade will automatically be affected. I will consider allowing use of lap tops by those with a learning difficulty, about which I must receive a note from the university office that handles these matters.

2) Plagiarism is perhaps the most serious of academic crimes. It is, simply put, nothing more than "theft." We will discuss this at length in class.