



Sport

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Activities that one can retrospectively label as 'sport' have probably been part of human beings' repertoire for millennia, but sports as we know them today are the product of a modernity that arose from the late eighteenth century at the juncture of civil society, industrial capitalism, muscular Christianity, and the colonial expansion of North Atlantic states. Today, it is deeply intertwined with neoliberal capital, media technology, and neocolonial relations between the Global South and the Global North, as well as structures of inequality within nation-states in the Global North. Despite its neglect as an anthropological subject, sport under all its guises, from its effect on individual bodies to its spectacular manifestations in the rituals of mega-events, is a perfect object for an anthropological analysis inspired by ritual theory, exchange theory, feminist anthropology, and ethnographic approaches to globalization.

Sport in anthropology

All humans have probably engaged in sport-like activities since time immemorial, and today's sports events and massive [infrastructures](#) are simply the latest permutation of a relationship amongst sport, spectacle, and political power that harks back to antiquity in the Greek Olympic Games, Roman gladiator games and chariot races, and Mesoamerican ball court [games](#). Throughout the world and across the centuries, humans have engaged in rule-governed activities that exhibit certain features, the relative importance of which varies considerably across societies and contexts. These features include skill, physical exertion, sociality, pleasure, chance, theatricality, and competition. The task of surveying sport cross-culturally is hampered by the problem that the term 'sport' describes a category of activities that only coalesced in the West in the nineteenth century and was then carried around the globe by Western [colonialism](#) and imperialism and later globalization (Guttman 1994). Many languages did not have a term with an equivalent semantic value until they borrowed it from a European language (Besnier, Brownell & Carter 2017: 3).

Today, the category is highly contested because being defined as a sport makes an activity eligible for official recognition by powerful international sports organizations; these organizations, in turn, defend the borders of their membership by constantly revising their definition of sport. The two international sports organizations with the broadest multi-sport representation and greatest global influence, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the General Association of International Sport Federations (SportAccord), emphasise that sport should be characterised first and foremost by competition, reflecting contemporary

popular understandings in the West. For heuristic purposes, we follow this dominant usage here, while acknowledging that thinking of competition as central to sport may impose a Western view on activities that their local practitioners may understand differently.

Understanding competition as central to sport implies that sport is typically enacted in public events underpinned by complex social organization, with the events being the most visible part of the total phenomenon. Behind the scenes, however, there may be a great deal of sport-like non-competitive physical activity, such as athletes' daily practice routines. In other contexts, such as the fitness practices that have become widespread throughout the world since the 1980s, competition may not be central to most practitioners, although these practices can potentially be codified into sports such as competitive aerobics. Moreover, even the concept of competition is not straightforward, since in some societies competitions are 'fixed' to conform to their social organizations. For example, ritualised footraces, archery, and wrestling reinforced the authority of kings among the ancient Egyptians, Sumerians, and Hittites (Scanlon 2012). In the 1950s, the Gahuku-Gama of the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea played a sport loosely based on rugby to settle disputes, and the game ended in a draw when elders, watching from the sidelines, deemed the dispute solved (Read 1965: 190). In Afghanistan in the 1970s, *khans* (leaders) hosted *buzkashi*, a horseback game in which riders compete to seize the carcass of a dead goat and carry it to a goal; the scores were decided by debate, and often the most powerful khan won the debate (Azoy 2011). In games of cricket in the Trobriand Islands in the 1970s, the home team always won (Leach 1976).

Late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century archaeologists had embraced sports as a hallmark feature of 'Western civilization' because of the prominent place that Greek games in ancient Olympia and Roman gladiator games in the Coliseum occupied in the archaeological record. But the attempt to arrive at a definition of sport is an anachronism influenced by the fact that the global reach of activities labelled as 'sport' today means that what counts or doesn't count as such is laden with social, cultural, political, and economic repercussions that did not exist in previous epochs. Rather than seeking to establish an all-encompassing definition, anthropological approaches are attentive to the questions of when a particular activity qualifies or not as a sport, for whom, and to what end.

A heated debate amongst [historians](#) has centred on whether the keeping of records is found in any other historical or cultural contexts, or whether it defined modern sport (Guttmann 2004). Indeed, the use of the English term 'sport' to denote an athletic activity governed by rules of competition first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary in the 1860s, almost simultaneously with the concept of the sports record (Mandell 1976). But the definition of 'record' has also proven to be problematic: there are multiple examples of individuals being ranked by their number of victories in such diverse cultural contexts as the ancient pan-Hellenic Games and weightlifting in nineteenth-century Edo Japan. In societies without standardised measurements or timekeeping, it was difficult or impossible to measure sports records in ways we take for granted today. Efforts at record-keeping and quantification for purposes of comparison

may not be modern, but what is decidedly modern is the keeping of local, national, world, and other such records that reflect the [bureaucratic](#) structure of modern society since the nineteenth century.

Until recently, sport was a much more common topic of enquiry in history and sociology than in anthropology. In 1985, Kendall Blanchard and Alyce Cheska made the first attempt to define an anthropological approach to sport in *The anthropology of sport: an introduction*. They took a multiple subfield approach and ran through a list of archaeological, biological, and cultural theories and concepts that could be applied to sports. The cultural approach was functionalist, i.e. seeking to explain the existence of a feature in terms of the need it is supposed to meet, and did not have the benefit of the feminist, postmodern, and critical cultural studies that were then getting underway in the discipline, so the ideas presented in the book were quickly considered outdated. A pioneer sport [ethnographer](#) was Alan Klein, who documented baseball in the Dominican Republic (1991, 2014) and the U.S.-Mexico border (1997) as well as bodybuilding in Los Angeles (1993). By the twenty-first century, the number of ethnographically informed works on sport had increased significantly (for example, Carter 2011; Dyck 2012; Joo 2012; Kelly 2018; Laviolette 2011; Starn 2011; Thangaraj 2015).

One reason for the increase was that, more than ever before, sport plays an important role in people's everyday lives as well as in economics and politics. Another was that sport operates on multiple scales, from intimate aspects of people's lives to mega-events that bring together the entire world, such as the Olympic Games and the FIFA World Cup. Sport is therefore a particularly attractive field to ask how people's local lives are intertwined with global processes, a question that stands at the centre of anthropology in the twenty-first century. It is also a productive lens through which anthropologists have studied other important questions about the nature of contemporary society and culture, such as the role of nationalism, changing norms of gender and sexuality, and the growing role that particular forms of capitalism play in our everyday activities.

The emergence of modern sport

In nineteenth-century Europe, many forms of sport-like activities preceded the emergence of modern sport. They had unwritten, locally specific rules and particular versions bore only a loose resemblance to others. In the 1840s, standardised ballgames emerged, primarily in elite British public schools, but for several decades their rules were unstable and they coexisted with the localised [games](#) of the working classes (Kitching 2015). By the 1880s, national sport associations had codified the rules of most sports as we know them today and two institutions - clubs and schools - quickly began carrying them around the world along with [colonialism](#) and imperialism. School sports became part and parcel of industrial capitalism as schools in Britain and Switzerland used them to attract the sons of the British old rank-based and new [money](#)-based elites. Club sports followed as the now-grown sons established them wherever they settled as they expanded their global industrial footprint (Lanfranchi & Taylor 2001).

Local sports were incorporated into local, national, regional, and international systems that imitated the layers of the political structures emerging at the same time. Modern sports took shape alongside the rise of the nation-state, incorporating rites of nationalism such as flag raising, anthem singing, and parades, as is still evident at many sporting events. National athletic unions that oversaw multiple sports appeared in the last third of the nineteenth century. Although the events they organised were new, they were legitimated by grounding them in a romanticised past, a process that Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) call the ‘invention of tradition’. This was the case of the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896, which was fuelled by the idealization of classical Greece that had accompanied the rise of modern democracy.

Nationalism existed in an uneasy relationship with [ethnicity](#). Folk sports that were standardised and incorporated into the emerging national structures – such as the national school system, the club or [professional](#) sport system – held a higher status and were carried abroad along with colonial and imperial projects. Non-Western sports and the sports of ethnic minorities in the West were at a disadvantage. In 1964 judo was the first sport of non-Western origin to enter the Olympic Games (it did not become an official sport until 1972): often hailed as a ‘traditional oriental’ sport, it was actually invented in the 1880s by combining principles of Western physical education with Japanese martial arts (Niehaus 2006). The Chinese martial art of *wushu* was not accepted onto the program for the Beijing 2008 Olympics despite the heavy pressure that the Chinese government exerted on the IOC (Brownell 2012a). For many ethnic sports, the price of exclusion from the international sport system is a concomitant exclusion from their national sport system, resulting in lack of funding, exclusion from school physical education, and the declining interest of younger generations. A few ethnically marked sports such as judo, wushu and Thai kickboxing (Muay Thai) have managed to thrive and spread internationally; others, such as traditional wrestling in Senegal and India, or *kabaddi* in India, have maintained a national fan base on account of their intense identification with national and ethnic identities (Hann 2018; Alter 1992, 2000). Generally, however, Western cultural imperialism has replaced local sports with sports of Western origin throughout the world.

The disseminators of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British and North American sports were fervent adherents of muscular Christianity, a form of Protestantism that idealised athleticism, virility, and discipline. They also firmly believed in their own superiority as white men, and used sport to justify [masculinism](#), nationalism, and colonialism (Mangan 1981). In the US sphere of influence, particularly East Asia, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), offered sports to young men (and to a lesser extent women) to convert them to Christianity (Gems 2006). Arguably, their more lasting contribution to world [history](#) was not the diffusion of Christianity but the diffusion of British and North American sports, particularly rugby, football, and cricket (spread by the British), and baseball and basketball (spread by North Americans).

Well into the twentieth century, sport was deeply entangled with European colonialism and American imperialism. The racist ideology that undergirded colonialism and slavery extended into sport and

generated the enduring stereotype of the 'natural athlete' who possesses physical prowess adapted to his 'savage' existence, although this stereotype had its opponents among those who believed in the physical superiority of the 'civilized' white man (Brownell 2008). Anthropologists have long rejected that [race](#) is a biological category and demonstrated that race is a subjective interpretation of people's superficial appearance, and these interpretations shape the reality of individuals being judged. Individuals may be naturally predisposed to certain forms of physical activity, but to say that entire groups are is nonsensical, because sports skills are the product of individual life histories shaped by social opportunities (Marks 2008: 395).

In schools, the military, and the police, colonisers taught sports to the colonised so as to instil in them what they considered civilised [values](#). Later, however, sport became a conduit for decolonization as the colonised appropriated sport toward their own ends. In some cases, the desire of colonised people to beat the coloniser at their own game led to a national passion for a sport. In the Caribbean, cricket games became the stage for anti-colonial [resistance](#) against their British masters, as famously documented by Afro-Trinidadian intellectual C.L.R. James (2013). In other cases, the colonised adapted sports to their own social and cultural contexts. Such was the case with cricket in the Trobriand Islands off the coast of Papua New Guinea, made famous in *Trobriand Cricket* (Leach 1976), a documentary that has delighted many anthropology undergraduates worldwide over the decades with its scenes of several dozen players dancing in military formation to songs larded with sexual innuendos.

Sport under capitalism and socialism

In the [colonial](#) metropolises, sport replicated the class hierarchies on which industrial capitalism was based. In Britain, public-school-educated elites were anxious to distinguish their sporting activities from the rough-and-tumble and morally suspect working-class ballgames. By the 1870s, the government had regulated the punishing industrial work schedules and [workers](#) could finally enjoy some free time, and blue-collar boys and men enthusiastically took up the newly codified sports, particularly football, encouraged by factory owners who saw an opportunity to distract them away from social unrest and improve their work ethics (Munting 2003). As football became popular among workers, public schools gradually abandoned it in favour of rugby.

Elites used arguments based on [moral](#) imperatives to justify the role of sport in maintaining the social divide: the amateur ideal maintained that athletes should be motivated by fair play and honour and not by material interests and was alleged (incorrectly) to have been inherited from ancient Greece (Young 1984). Amateur rules excluded members of the working classes, whose participation in sport often depended on skipping work. Late nineteenth-century Britain saw the eruption of conflict over 'broken time', namely compensation for time away from work to engage in sport. The IOC, which has regulated the Olympic Games from their revival in 1896, forbade Olympic athletes from openly receiving payment for competing

until the late 1980s (Llewellyn & Gleaves 2016). Continental European and North American IOC members sometimes chafed at the rigidity of British members on this point.

In the twentieth century, as elite-level sport became increasingly commodified, social classes became polarised in a different way. In many [professional](#) sports, athletes now were largely of working-class or [ethnic](#) and [racial](#) minority (and later migrant) background, while team owners, managers, and other technocrats were overwhelmingly members of the elite classes. The class structure of sport thus reproduced that of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, with athletes selling their labour for wages and capitalists owning the labourers, controlling contracts and setting wages. Only recently have court challenges and collective bargaining granted professional athletes greater control over their labour power. In the United States, most elite-level athletes have benefited from athletic scholarships to universities, where they are unremunerated despite generating huge revenues for the institutions (Gilbert 2016).

Even at the non-professional level, sport is deeply entangled in social-class politics. We owe the most systematic analysis of these dynamics to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who observed that members of the same social strata tend to gravitate towards the same kinds of sport and have little enthusiasm for (and sometimes despise) the sporting activities associated with other social classes, a process that he labelled 'distinction'. Football in Britain and France, for example, appeals largely to the lower-middle and working classes, while elites prefer golf, tennis, and skiing. In some cases, these distinctions can be attributed to the resources required (e.g., for most people, skiing assumes the ability to travel, take time off work, and purchase expensive equipment), but in other cases material explanations are insufficient. Sport 'choices' thus have the effect of inscribing persons into a particular position in hierarchies of social class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and age.

In reaction to the class, gender, and ethnic distinctions that were already so deeply ingrained in 'bourgeois' sport in the early twentieth century, the Soviet Union, after its founding in 1917, attempted to develop an alternative socialist model of sport. Sport in the USSR was originally financed by industries and, after the 1950s, increasingly by the state, as the country began seeking sporting victories to demonstrate the superiority of socialism. State-supported athletes were derogatorily called 'state shamateurs' in the capitalist West for violating amateur rules, while socialist countries maintained that they were remunerated as soldiers, workers, or students. The West acquiesced in this fiction because international sports fields were one of the few meeting places where [citizens](#) of the communist and capitalist worlds could come together.

Socialist nations further demonstrated their commitment to equality in sport by organising sporting events that showcased ethnic minorities. The USSR organised the first Central Asian Games in 1920, which inspired China's National Games of Minority Nationalities, held quadrennially from 1953 to the present, featuring sports associated with the 55 officially recognised non-Han nationalities. The relationship

between sport and ethnic identity was a legacy of the continental European traditions of folklore and ethnology that predominated in Russia and China: traditional sports counted amongst the local customs (along with dances, rituals, and other practices) that scholars used to classify people into ethnic groups. However, these events clearly serve the assimilationist goals of the state (Liebold 2010).

In multicultural capitalist countries, indigenous minorities started using sports events as an identity-affirming political strategy in the 1970s. Indigenous peoples of Canada and the United States organised the first Arctic Winter Games in 1970 and the North American Indigenous Games in 1990. These competitions include both indigenous and global sports (Paraschak & Morgan 1997).

The neoliberal restructuring of sport

In the late twentieth century, the expanding global economy wiped out the socialist experiment (except for China, North Korea, and Cuba) and the inexorable increase of commercialization and [professionalism](#) compelled international sport organizations to eliminate the amateur rules. In many parts of the world, [neoliberal](#) economic policies privatised television channels, which found in the most popular sports a readily available and at-first inexpensive content with which to fill airtime. Corporate advertisers soon flocked to the new media platform, fuelling the escalation of television broadcasting rights fees. With it came an exponential rise in the wealth of elite clubs, sport federations, and top-level athletes and the dramatically uneven distribution of this wealth, as only a few sports are regularly televised and very few athletes earn enormous salaries. Corporate sponsorship of teams and events attracted multinational sources of capital into sports. Meanwhile, satellite television became commercial in 1982, bringing images of sporting glory to viewers in the Global South.

The wealth that today revolves around the most popular sports, such as football, rugby union, and basketball, has mobilised the yearning of [ethnically](#) and [racially](#) marginalised young men in the destitute urban settings of the Global North. In the inner cities of North America or the underprivileged suburbs of Western Europe, a career in sport was a way out of poverty. Very few actually made it, but ethnic and racial minorities came to numerically dominate some professional sports, such as basketball and American football in the United States, although the corporate structure of the sports continued to be dominated by wealthy white men.

More than a century has passed since racist evolutionary theories were abandoned in anthropology, yet in popular culture the hyper-visibility of non-white athletes continues to provoke searches for biological factors that supposedly explain sports skills in terms of race. Sometimes the biological argument about an innate athletic gift is twisted to argue that people of European descent are still superior in the ways that count. For example, Pacific Island and Māori male rugby players are said to be extremely successful players thanks to their 'natural' talent, but they are widely branded as undisciplined, unreliable, and

unteachable (Hokowhitu 2004; Besnier 2015). Race-based arguments erase the fact that athletic prowess is the result of extraordinary personal efforts, and that young women and men of colour may be disproportionately represented in sports because other paths to mobility are closed to them.

Since the 1980s, clubs and teams of the most popular sports like football and basketball, now corporate entities, have been embroiled in a cutthroat competition for economic survival. They have recruited increasing numbers of players in the Global South. Concurrently, many economies in the former [colonial](#) world have collapsed as a result of the world's turn to neoliberal economic policies, and entire countries have become emigrating societies. In this context, many young men, who have been particularly affected by shrinking [labour](#) markets, dedicate themselves to sport with the dream of signing a contract with the top teams they watch on satellite television (Besnier *et al.* 2018).

The transnational mobility of athletes has reconfigured the relationship between national identity and [citizenship](#), as increasing numbers of athletes representing cities and nations are immigrants or [children](#) of immigrants. Some countries fast-track migrant athletes to citizenship, most blatantly oil-rich countries in the Persian Gulf, which have sometimes mounted teams consisting mostly of newly-minted citizens from the Global South while at the same time barring access to citizenship to low-level migrant workers who had toiled there for decades (Besnier, Brownell & Carter 2017: 219-22).

Sports have become a battleground of racial conflicts, in which some athletes have used their hyper-visibility to protest discrimination, as illustrated in the protests in the United States since 2017 by African-American football players who 'took a knee' during the national anthem to protest racial oppression. The decision of team owners in the National Football League to ban the practice as 'unpatriotic' served as a reminder that the world of professional and international sport is a system that [reproduces](#) racial and other hierarchies extant in society. Although athlete protests have stimulated public debate about race in the United States, there is little evidence that longstanding power structures have been reformed in response.

Sport, gender, and sex

In the West, most modern sports were a 'male preserve' at their inception and continued to be a last bastion of traditional [masculinity](#) (Dunning 1986). In the early modern Olympic Games, women competed in sports that did not challenge Western ideals of femininity, such as figure skating and archery, but it was not until 1928 that a few running events were added for women, and not until 1964 that the first team sport, volleyball, was added. In the United States, gender inequality was not addressed until the US Congress enacted in 1972 sweeping legislation known as 'Title IX', whose effect on sport was the requirement that women's sports in schools and universities be allocated the same funding as men's sports. In contrast, sport in China after the 1949 Revolution quickly became a path to upward mobility for peasant women and never was a male preserve (Brownell 1995).

Gender segregation is woven into the very fabric of modern sport. The common argument is that it ensures 'fair' competition, since men are thought to be stronger than women. However, there are sports in which women compete successfully with men, such as equestrian events, yet women were only allowed in an equestrian event at the 1952 Olympics. Men and women do not have to be separated by gender, as is evident in mixed-sex sports such as doubles in tennis or mixed-sex running relays. Women might also be competitive with men in some sports if they were divided by weight-class divisions rather than gender (Healy *et al.* 2014).

That the gender line is not just about fairness for female athletes is demonstrated by the fact that the world of sports has been a bastion of heterosexuality, characterised by strong homophobia, from the nineteenth century up to the present. It is ironic, because the Western all-male institutions meant to turn boys into men, such as public schools in Britain and the YMCA in the United States, tacitly encouraged surreptitious same-sex attractions that were forbidden in mainstream society (Gustav-Wrathall 1998). Still today, male professional sports and the international sports system display a homophobia that is in many ways more profound than that of mainstream society. Very few professional athletes have 'come out' of their own accord. This has prompted gay, lesbian, and transgender people to form their own associations and events, most prominently the Gay Games held every four years since 1982 (Symons 2010). Moreover, the clampdown on homosexuality has persisted even while rampant sexual abuse of both boys and girls has been endemic in sports and has been covered up by coaches and administrators, a reality that is only now undergoing widespread public examination. The most egregious example is the case of USA Gymnastics national team doctor Larry Nassar of Michigan State University, who was brought to justice in 2017-8 for assaulting hundreds of young female athletes over many years while the institutions turned a blind eye (Carr 2019). Taken as a whole, the history of sex, gender, and sexuality in modern sports reveals sport's role in defending the gendered structures underpinning industrial capitalist society of the past century and a half, including a fundamental division between male and female, and compulsory heterosexuality.

The ongoing controversies over sex testing reveal the centrality of the gender paradigm in international sports up to the present. Sex testing dates back to the Cold War, when the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and the IOC instituted a visual exam and later a chromosome test for women on account of the suspicion that the communist block was fielding men masquerading as women in order to win medals. Political tensions were expressed in a gender idiom: questioning the sex of socialist women neutralised the political challenge posed by the gender equality in sport under socialism at a time when Western women were oppressed by the postwar cult of domesticity (Besnier, Brownell & Carter 2017: 129-34).

Sex testing has never exposed a man competing as a woman, but it has identified, often in the worst possible way, a small number of athletes who are intersex; that is, who exhibit non-normative combinations of biological markers of sex (e.g., chromosomes, hormones, genitalia). Most are individuals with Complete

Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome, which heightens their testosterone level, although this has never been shown to confer an athletic advantage. Those who are targeted are frequently athletes from the Global South, the best-known case being Caster Semenya, a South African runner who had won world and Olympic championships. The historical realignment of suspicion from the Soviet block to the Global South suggests that global geopolitics plays a role in sex testing in sport despite its appearance as neutral [science](#) (Jordan-Young & Karkazis 2019).

Sport as cultural performance

Sports take on the role of defending fundamental structures of power by putting those structures on public display in embodied form. Such public events are typically organised by elites, who try to control what is put on display so that their social status remains unchallenged. Contextualised in the classic anthropological theory of the [gift](#), sports events take on another dimension (Brownell & Besnier 2016). It is well-known that humans will go into deep [debt](#) to fund rituals and ceremonies. While this doesn't make sense according to market economy logics, it is unproblematic in the context of a gift economy in which elites increase their prestige and strengthen alliances by organising extravagant events.

For example, buzkashi in Afghanistan was deeply embedded in a gendered world of men and their competition for reputation through extravagant displays of generosity in grand gatherings during which buzkashi was played (Azoy 2011). Because the gatherings required considerable volunteer [labour](#), only a khan with a large network of kin and non-kin who owed him labour could pull off a buzkashi tournament. Similarly, summer Olympic Games would not be possible without the armies of volunteers who provide basic labour. More heads of state, CEOs of major corporations, billionaires, and celebrities attend Olympic Games than any other world event. There they lavishly entertain guests, display their influence, create relationships with new allies and partners, and seal deals with old ones. The dynamics of buzkashi festivals are found in the Olympics, but on a much grander scale, and critiques of the Olympics that only analyze them through market economic principles may be missing the point.

Sports events enthrall audiences because they are *cultural performances*, namely condensed moments when participants consciously represent and evaluate [values](#), roles, and societal institutions (Singer 1959; Turner 1982, 1988). The most widely-read example of such a cultural performance is Clifford Geertz's (1972) interpretation of cockfighting in Bali in the late 50s, as 'a story the Balinese tell themselves about themselves'. The metaphors he employed to illuminate the Balinese enthusiasm for cockfights are frequently applied to sports events: they are a mirror for society, an expression of a culture as a whole, and a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Three important theorists of cultural performances, Max and Mary Gluckman and Victor Turner, debated whether a sports event could qualify as a *secular ritual*, a ritual-like behaviour not clearly associated with

religious beliefs. They all concluded that sports do not qualify as rituals because they do not possess mystical or liminal qualities. However, subsequent scholars who conducted more research specifically on sports have found it enlightening to apply ritual theories to sports. In particular, they have emphasised that sports events may induce a sense of *communitas*, a sentiment of solidarity and shared humanity. Scholars have asserted that the World Cup and Olympics create an ‘upsurge of fellow feeling, an epidemic of communitas’ (Dayan & Katz 1992: 196) and ‘an enhanced consciousness of humankind’ (Giulianotti & Robertson 2004: 558; see also Roche 2000; Rothenbuhler 1988).

However, these scholars were based in sociology and media studies, while anthropologists were not part of this trend because, since the end of the 1980s, many have become critical of *communitas* as an overly optimistic concept that fails to recognise that not every participant and spectator is equally vested in the event. Who produces the performance and controls the symbols, whose agenda is served, and who is disadvantaged? Are common people being duped by the elites who organise big events? These questions would best be answered through [ethnographic](#) research, but to date there has been little ethnographic work on major sports events that has sought to understand the power [relations](#) between elite organisers, spectators, and athletes and their networks. Perhaps predictably, such work has tended to show that the on-the-ground reality is not a simple divide between exploiter and exploited, because major events involve a large number of social groups, the relationships between them are complex and under constant negotiation. Disadvantaged groups can benefit from the media spotlight by drawing public attention to their causes in a way that is not possible under normal circumstances (Klausen 1999; Brownell 2012b; Lindsay 2014).

The competition in sports means that the results are unpredictable, and so athletes worldwide deploy a wide range of practices designed to deal with uncertainty and fate, some derived from local cultural contexts, others derived from global flows, blurring the distinction amongst religion, [magic](#), [morality](#), gender, and bodily technique. Their practices include local magical practices (Gmelch 1978), revivalist religions such as Pentecostalism, which is increasingly popular amongst athletes from the Global South (Rial 2012; Guinness 2018; Kovač 2018), as well as sports techniques and training, the ideology of [scientific](#) professionalism, and sport psychology. In the national sport of wrestling in Senegal, wrestlers employ the services of *marabouts*, magico-religious specialists who prescribe potions, amulets, and rituals that merge [Islamic](#) and local cosmologies; but they combine the services of the marabouts with the hard training of an individualistic self and commercial sponsorship in the [neoliberal](#) mode (Hann 2018). Even when they emigrate to other countries to play [professionally](#), indigenous New Zealand Māori rugby players call upon *mana*, the supernatural power that draws from their connection to kinship, spirits, and land (Calabrò 2014). Young men from upper-middle and upper-class families in exclusive rugby clubs in Buenos Aires participate in a Christian spiritual movement with the logo of a cross inside a rugby ball. Outside the door of some clubs stands a statuette brought back from the Our Lady of Rugby chapel in southwest France (Fuentes

2018).

Body enhancement and its limits

Sport has increasingly given us a glimpse into bodies of the future. The records for wheelchair athletes competing in track and road races are faster than those for runners on legs, but the clear separation between human and machine has enabled their segregation into their own divisions, such as the Paralympic Games. In 2015, the IAAF banned South African runner Oscar Pistorius, a lower-limb double amputee, from competing with the argument that the properties of the carbon-fiber prosthetic legs he wears gave him an unfair advantage, but he successfully sued and made it to the 400-metres semi-finals in the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. His case opened up entirely new [ethical](#) dilemmas, but since no other Paralympian has achieved his level of success, Pistorius must be credited with a great deal of talent, whatever advantage his prostheses might have given him.

However, new technologies may soon allow even average athletes to compete with top natural-limbed athletes. Gene doping, the non-therapeutic use of genetic enhancement to improve sports performance, does not yet exist, but genetic manipulation has produced ‘super-mice’ with superior strength and endurance. So far as we know this has not yet been tried on humans, but it was banned in 2003 as a preemptive strike by the World Anti-Doping Agency.

Clearly, the future holds novel technologies that will bring along increasingly complicated ethical dilemmas extending beyond the world of sports. Are we heading toward ‘[transhuman](#) athletes’ who have exceeded the bounds of normal human capabilities (Miah 2010)? All elite athletes exceed the bounds of normal capabilities—whether because they are taller or shorter than average, have large lung capacity, or any number of other physical traits. In the future, maybe it will become common practice for average humans to seek genetic and prosthetic enhancement in order to succeed in sports, careers, and life. Should this be prohibited? If defending class and gender lines occupied the greater part of the attention of administrators of international sport in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it may be that defending the line between what is ‘human’ and what is not will occupy them in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: sport and scale

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the wealth that revolved around sport, particularly the major international sports, had become so huge and its presence in popular culture so powerful that the longstanding tendency amongst academics, journalists, and many politicians to dismiss it as inconsequential began to change. Critics of sport mega-events, particularly the FIFA World Cup and Olympic Games, became increasingly vocal, countering rhetoric about the potential of sport to contribute to a better world by publicising violations of [human rights](#) common in the context of mega-events, such as

mass evictions for construction, the [silencing](#) of dissidents, the exploitation of migrant [workers](#), and the corruption by government officials and the leaders of sport organizations. 'Social responsibility' in sport became a keyword taken up by sport organizations in response to the critics.

Sport is somewhat unique in the repertoire of human activities in that it connects the intimacy of bodies, emotions, and personal projects to a global system of capital, world politics, and mega-spectacles. These connections operate on multiple fronts. For example, the collapse of economies in the Global South under pressure from [neoliberal](#) policies has destroyed labour markets, while the glamour of sport broadcast on satellite television fuel impossible dreams of sporting success among disenfranchised youth in these countries. Anthropologists are concerned to make sense of all the entanglements of the world in which we live, and sport distils them into clearer structures that can help us comprehend the complex whole.

Further reading

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