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The most important of the unimportant things

In recent years there has been increasing worry that concussive blows to the head experienced during sport may result in long term neurological damage: a high profile article in *JAMA*, for instance, found evidence of a neuropathology known as Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE), which in advanced cases has Alzheimer-like symptoms, in the brains of 110 out of 111 ex-National Football League (NFL) players (Mez et al., 2017). Just as worryingly, a study in the *NEJM* hinted that sub-concussive blows – from heading a soccer ball, for instance – might also substantially increase rates of dementia (Mackay et al., 2019). These are findings rocking a number of sports and, this summer, I should have been following the exploits of an amateur American football team, part of a three-year project, and examining communities’ responses to, and understanding of, these matters of concussion and a neurodegenerative disease in sport. There’s not a lot of sport being played at the moment, though, and “American Football” in the UK (what Americans and some others know as “football”) is no exception: in mid-May the season was summarily cancelled by the sport’s governing body. See you all in 2021.

My circumstances may be peculiar, but I am not alone in saying that my experience of ‘lockdown’ is being shaped not only by the emergence of this new virus but also, and quite radically, by the absence of sport. The rhythm of the week, the day even, is disrupted by the absence of what Pope John Paul II – allegedly a supporter of Fulham – apparently called the most important of all the unimportant things.

I’ve tried to fill the Sundays I should be spending observing sport by reading about them instead: *Against Football* (Almond, 2014); *Dixieland Delight* (Travis, 2007); *End Zone* (DeLillo, 1972), *Junior Seau* (Trotter, 2015); *One Game at a Time* (Hern, 2013); *The Blind Side* (Lewis, 2007); *The Fight* (Mailer, 2000/1975). These books all reviewed at least moderately well in the popular press and, in some cases at least, have a whiff of ethnography about them. (Indeed, part of my motivation for reading *The Blind Side* was that in *Tales of the Field* (2011, p. 181), anthropologist John van Maanen asserts surprisingly forcefully that Michael Lewis does *not* write ethnography.) And while the reading might not replace fieldwork, it’s certainly been interesting.

First, reading these books has reminded me about the many raced, classed, and gendered problems with sport which, in a macro-sociological sense, are not always foregrounded during fieldwork. These books are all by men, about men, and more or less explicitly for men. They all originate from North America. They are largely, although not exclusively, by white men from the coasts and

about men of colour from the interior and the south. Some – not all – features passages that are overtly misogynistic and homophobic.

The books also remind me of the importance of sport, that sport cannot simply be subtracted, stopped, or deemed irrelevant, without significant effect on a wide array of identities, communities, and meanings. In *Beyond a Boundary*, discussing the place of famed Victorian cricketer W.G. Grace within social history, CLR James says:

‘I can no longer accept the system of values which could not find in these [history] books a place for W.G. Grace... Between those who, writing about social life in Britain, can leave him out, and myself, there yawns a gulf deep and wide.’ (James, 2005, p. 208)

In other words, to write the social history of Britain without explicitly accounting for the emergence of a new type of sporting superstar – ‘the best-known Englishman of his time’ (*ibid*) – and, indeed, a new type of sport, is to spectacularly miss something about the society being chronicled.

James’s argument applies readily to our present moment: sport, and its absence, may be an unimportant thing in the grand scheme of the self-evidently important thing that is COVID-19 but it needs to be figured into the mix. As a propaganda tool; an interlocking series of multi-billion industries; a labour-relations issue; or simply a way to get out of (or tolerate being in) the house, sport is an intractable part of our present situation and to ignore that would be to miss something crucial.

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