Blake, Jason

[Taras, David; Waddell, Christopher, eds. How Canadians Communicate V: Sports]

The Central European journal of Canadian studies. 2016, vol. 10-11, iss. [1], pp. 156-159

ISBN 978-80-210-8690-6
ISSN 1213-7715 (print); ISSN 2336-4556 (online)

Stable URL (handle): https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138484
Access Date: 29. 11. 2024
Version: 20220831

How Canadians Communicate V: Sports

David Taras and Christopher Waddell, eds.

Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2016, 395 pp. ISBN 9781771990073 (Paperback)

Jason Blake
University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

We Talk More than Hockey

"Sport starts the conversation" (137). That's how André Richelieu begins his chapter "The Changing World of Sports in Québec" in *Sport*, the fifth volume in Athabasca University's How Canadians Communicate series. Richelieu's statement is at once hyperbole and truth – hyperbole because sport begins the conversation only for *some* segments of the Canadian population. Those who don't care about sports are supposedly free to ignore the banter in our hockey-crazy country. Similarly, nobody forces us to go out and play. But for all this voluntariness, as Richard Gruneau points out in his chapter, "women continue to be underrepresented in Canadian adult sport in comparison to men, as are Aboriginal adults and individuals who don't speak English as a first language" (227). In other words, the richer you are, the more likely you are to be active. Peter Zuurbier's chapter on "Hockey as Commodity," meanwhile, argues that less moneyed fans are excluded from one of Canada's two national sports (250). Hardly a perfect model for a country whose myths include hockey tales and stories of equality and inclusion.

And yet, Richelieu's terse claim that "sport starts the conversation" is true because sport talk is unavoidable in Canada and "How 'bout those Leafs?" and "See the game?" are common conversation starters. This phatic sports yapping is of course not unique to Canada, and neither is it always fatuous or a waste of time. As the chapters in *Sports* clearly show, conversations about sport quickly spill into bigger questions.

For example, should Canadian taxpayers fork out big bucks so we can watch hockey on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation? Given that international competitions like the Olympics are "often interpreted in ideological terms," with some states "represented as 'friends' and others as 'enemies,'" how should we think about televised sporting nationalism? (Hiller, 158) And how do we talk about or with athletes long excluded from the media landscape, especially from the televised games? David Legg,

in "Debating Disability: Paralympic Athletes and the Media," examines the rise of other athletes, but cautiously notes that they often "merely serve as symbols for the generic underdog – and, while they may restore our faith in the human potential, they arguably do little to alter underlying social attitudes" (178). In other words, just because the Paralympic Games are shown on television does not necessarily mean that these athletes are not portrayed as being "damaged," "less than whole" and, most disturbingly, "less than fully human" (Legg, 175). Media exposure promotes familiarity, but it doesn't always undo stereotyped and entrenched perceptions of what an athlete is supposed to look like.

In his introduction, alliteratively titled "Power Plays: Communicating and Control in Canadian Sports," David Taras summarizes an eerie development in sports: "athletes are becoming physically larger, sometimes to the point of freakishness" (9). Taras also reasons the need for this volume on understanding mediated sport and how we communicate it. At a time when "active participation in sports is plummeting [...], sports culture is more and more about our experiences as fans – an experience that is largely shaped and defined by the media" (3). In other words, we sit, kibitz and bicker, but we don't *just do it*. The way sport is packaged in the media means that sport is often *done to us*; after we tune in, we are force fed narratives about what's going on.

Few academic volumes cover as many sports from as many angles as *Sports* does. Yes, there is the usual whack of hockey among the book's 20 chapters, but there is also Duane Bratt's examination of Canadian vs. American college sports, former Olympian luger Regan Lauscher's and Jeremy Berry's examinations of Nodar Kumaritashvili's death at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, Aritha van Herk's virtuosic overview of chuckwagon racing, Glenn Ruhl's musings on "Early Professional Wrestling in Canada," Bart Beaty's look at ultimate fighting or mixed martial arts, and philosopher Angela J. Schneider's addressing of the moral quandaries of doping in the Tour de France. And that's only half of this book's stories.

The danger of such a blend is lack of focus. Taras neatly circumvents this danger in his lucid introduction, explaining "why sports matter" in terms of active participation, fandom and, "[m]ost fundamentally, the ways in which people communicate about sports and participate in the sports spectacle are being transformed" (4). He also deftly outlines the "bewildering kaleidoscope of all-sports channels, league and team channels and websites, blogs, apps, national radio shows, YouTube videos, fantasy leagues, video games, and countless magazines, to say nothing of Facebook sites and tweets by coaches, players, and reporters" (4). Again, sport culture in Canada is less about activity and more about swallowing – but also creating homemade – mediated versions of events.

A red thread of this volume is that new media present new opportunities. Sometimes, however, new media prove to be novelties serving up limitations. Veteran journalist

Roy MacGregor provides a tragicomic focus on sport culture's shift from story-telling to an "obsession with 'content,'" where "content" often means faux-insider gossip tweeted out in "140 characters or less" (35). The name of the professional writing game, increasingly, is to be fast and furious, to be first to break "small news" (33) about trade rumours and similar minutiae. One longs for the days of the soaker sports journalist and prose soaked up with one's morning coffee.

One also longs for a time when a single media conglomerate – to quote from Christopher Waddell's chapter on the concentration of sports ownership – was *not* "the employer of the interviewer, … of the […] commentator, and of the player currently under criticism, as well as the owner of the team […], of the station on which the [interview takes place]" (49). This concentration of capital, coupled with the pressure for journalists to have fast rather than extended conversations, means journalists are "in danger of becoming PR agents rather than objective keepers of the public trust" (Taras, 12). Imagine Ford or General Motors "owning" the reporters who were investigating automobile recalls and you can see why we should care. However trivial we may find sports, we cannot deny their central role in society and we cannot deny that objectivity is something we need. As professional sport continually bleeds into public life, it is not hard to imagine a media conglomerate whitewashing sexual misdemeanours or downplaying steroid scandals in order to protect their interests – or perhaps even convincing us tax dollars should go to help fund privately-owned stadiums.

Of course, one can always turn off the television, refuse to stream, and actually go out and play hockey or baseball, or at least go for a jog. In this regard, Richard Gruneau's chapter "Goodbye, Gordie Howe: Sport Participation and Class Inequality in the 'Pay for Play' Society'" offers a grim prognosis. Gruneau makes sense of the hard data on declining participation in sports and provides alarming insights into why managerial classes and their offspring are healthier (shades of past centuries, where the less wealthy were shorter…). "Goodbye, Gordie Howe" is not an adieu to the hockey great who died not long ago but a sobering realization: born poor, Gordie Howe (1928–2016) would not have gained access to the arena these days; his family would not have been able to cough up fees that "can easily exceed $3,000 a year" and "can run as high at $10,000" (225).

Ira Wagman's chapter "Of Home Teams and Visiting Players: Imports and Substitutions in Canadian Professional Sports" probes a Canadian irony. Canadians generally like their popular entertainment to be American (lists of the most-watched shows in Canada are always dominated by American shows), yet "we tend to emphasize the fact that a product like a TV show comes 'from elsewhere' rather than trying to understand the various forces that bring that product to different places" (118). The most insightful part of this chapter, for me, was Wagman's articulation

of our "ability to Canadianize" (119) non-Canadian sporting events, such as occurs whenever "the importer selectively 'lifts out' or interrupts what may appear to be a flow of TV content to return to Canada to repatriate the program as being a mix of imported and domestic content" (Wagman, 127). Wagman chooses his words well. "Canadianize" and "repatriate" hint at nationalism even as they point to local and global convergences. This fancy footwork brings to mind bicycles that perform Canadianness by slapping an "assembled in Canada" sticker on the seat tube, which of course means "produced offshore."

A short review of 20 chapters means ignoring chapters. This ignoring is not a critical statement. Indeed, many of the chapters I was slow to turn to surprised me. Derrick Newman's chapter on "Fantasy Leagues" comes to mind; he explains a world of invented teams, where gamblers assemble teams of professional players and win or lose depending on how well the real players perform in real games. In other words, if "your" quarterback throws five touchdown passes, you win big. However, as Newman informs us, this playing is more than an advanced stage of couch-potatodom: "Being able to manage an organization, even if it is in fantasyland, can replace the powerlessness that many people feel in their ordinary lives with a sense of power and achievement" (80). Media monsters such as Rogers and Bell may control how we receive our mediatized sports, but the ground-level fan activities do not go unheard. Fantasy fans are hungry for statistics, and Bell is happy to give the people what they want. I may complain about the empire, but I can participate in the conversation by tweet back.

Two final notes are in order. *Sports* includes two former Olympians among its contributors. This inclusion is laudable because academic study on sports has long ignored those sporting bodies most enveloped in the industry – often in articles that lambaste the mind-body split. The two Olympians are not *only* muscles in motion (still, I wonder how much Angela J. Schneider philosophized while rowing to her silver medal!). Lastly, and very inclusively: Athabasca University Press has made the book available as a free PDF, meaning that it is accessible to anyone with an internet connection.