

deigned to think about jokes and profiles some oddball joke collectors. Still, especially because we have so little in the way of history and philosophy of jokes, and since jokes deserve explanation as the shortest and most popular of the short stories that we circulate in our everyday encounters, for people interested in play, this book isn't a bad place to start. One of Holt's offhand remarks—that jokes serve no obvious evolutionary end—points the way toward explaining jokes without deflating them. In fact, we are beginning to learn of the important part that jokes, and play itself, has served in our biosocial evolution. Edward de Bono has explored the brain as a pattern-making and pattern-recognizing machine that allows us to laugh at jokes. Marvin Minsky helps us understand why understanding the “paradoxical nonsense” at the heart of jokes can help protect us. Robert Provine has investigated contagious laughter. And Jaak Panksepp has taken us back to the very beginning of mammalian laughter with his studies of laughing rats. *Bada-bing*. We are on the brink of learning why we can laugh.

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—Scott G. Eberle, *Strong National Museum of Play, Rochester, NY*

### **Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport**

*Michael A. Messner*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. Photographs, tables, bibliography, index. 227 pp. \$28.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780791471722

In *Out of Play*, Michael Messner tells a fascinating story about the gender dynamics at play in late twentieth-century organized

sports. His collected essays, all previously published articles spanning the years 1988 to 2006, address the serious ramifications of play in the arena of highly competitive sports. Written in clear compelling prose, Messner's eleven chapters range in subject from children's soccer leagues to high-school athletics and professional sport. The brilliance of Messner's volume lies in its ability to combine analysis of materially based institutional structures and media-based representations that together project the gender ideologies that at any given moment help constitute the world of sports. Moreover, Messner's macroanalysis is paired with sensitive interpretations of the many meanings of sport for individuals, whether as young athletes, seasoned professionals, or armchair spectators.

The book's four sections encompass the topical and theoretical range of Messner's last two decades of work. Part 1, “Sport as a Gender Construction Site,” argues that sport has long been a realm that excludes or marginalizes women while creating dominant codes of masculinity that radiate beyond the athletic world. Given the salience of gender in sport, masculinity and femininity are never stable categories, so that sport remains a site in which gender ideologies are always contested. “Barbie Girls versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender” illustrates how this process of gender construction starts from the very first time children step on the playing field. Messner tells a story of observing opening-day ceremonies for a youth soccer league with separate boys' and girls' leagues. In the day's parade, a team of four- and five-year-olds called the Barbie Girls was situated next to a team of four- and five-year-old boys named the Sea Monsters, and havoc followed. The girls started singing a Barbie song, prompting the boys to chant

“No Barbie, no Barbie” and later dash in to invade the girls’ space, only to be chased off by the girls until adults intervened to restore order. Messner’s point is that preschoolers are already performing and negotiating gender but in open-ended fashion. By their early teens, girls dropped the use of sweetness names like Beanie Babes or Barbie Girls for power names similar to the Sea Monsters. However, parents froze this initial dynamic interaction, reading the Barbie Girls incident as a case of “boys will be boys,” thus turning a volatile moment into an example of reified, natural gender differences.

In part 2, “Masculinities: Class, Race, Sexualities,” Messner examines how even as sport functions as an area of male bonding across class and race, both the shared values and practices of sport often serve to differentiate men into high-status and low-status groups. In “Masculinities and Athletic Careers,” Messner demonstrates how high-school and college athletic careers often divide along lines of class and race. Interviewing men who had all competed successfully at the high-school or college level, he finds that predominantly white and wealthier athletes often correctly perceived the improbability of a professional career in athletics, opting for college degrees and alternate professions that enabled off-field successes. Poorer men, including a high percentage of men of color, continued to pursue sport as their perceived best option. Although statistics show that only a tiny percentage of school-aged athletes go on to professional sports careers, these young men saw a different picture. African Americans formed only 8 percent of college students at four-year institutions but comprised 49 percent of all college basketball players and a similarly disproportionate percentage

of football players (p. 58). While sports remained the area of greatest masculine achievement and respect for lower-status men, privileged white athletes who opted out of sports used their youthful athletic experience to highlight their masculinity and to bond with other men. At the same time, their more rational career choices created a sense of superiority; the successful men basked in a shared masculinity while seeing themselves as a step above the more “primitive” bruisers who unwisely attempted to tough it out, often to the point of a career-ending injury.

Part 3, “Bodies and Violence,” posits a triangulated relationship between male violence against women, against other men, and against the self. “When Bodies Are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport” argues that violent sport brings men together in a culture of male intimacy built upon both violent and affectionate touch. Yet when “legal” athletic violence caused career-ending or life-threatening injuries, the perpetrators found themselves labeled as a rogue or criminal element, marked off from honorable men whose everyday violence remained valorized. In two succeeding articles on male athletes’ sexual violence against women, Messner (and co-authors Mark Stevens and William Solomon) explore how violence against men, alienation from one’s own body-turned-weapon, and the publicly valued status of male athlete might grant men a sense of permission to treat women with violence. Here Messner connects scholarship to activism, discussing programmatic ways of addressing sexual violence among male athletes.

The book’s final section, “Gendered Imagery,” builds on recent scholarship in sociology, media studies, and cultural theory. This section argues that television

consistently projects a formula of what it is to be a “real man,” creating pedagogy of dominant masculinity. “The Televised Sports Manhood Formula,” written with Michele Dunbar and Darnell Hunt, teaches boys and men to accept, even glorify, “a set of bodily and relational practices that resist and oppose a view of women as fully human and place boys’ and men’s long-term health and prospects in jeopardy” (p. 156). Importantly, the instruction in masculinity is not limited to observation of elite athletics but is mediated by television network choices on how to cover sports journalistically and by the advertisements that accompany these broadcasts. Messner sees in this convergence a “master discourse produced at the nexus of the institutions of sport, mass media, and corporations” that produce and sell products—and ideologies—to boys and men (p. 152).

While no single argument can be culled from a set of collected essays, several major themes run through this illuminating book. Messner makes a convincing case that despite the sea change in women’s sports since the early 1970s, it is quite possible for women to participate in massive numbers without seriously eroding sport’s place as a privileged site of masculine prowess and normative standards of masculinity. “This Revolution Is Not Being Televised,” coauthored with Margaret Carlisle Duncan and Nicole Willms, presents disturbing evidence of this trend. In a longitudinal study of network sports news from 1989 to 2004, Messner found that network news coverage of women’s sports has remained appallingly low, growing from only 4 percent of air time in 1989 to a still paltry 5 percent in 2004 (p. 157).

A second message is that just as individual sporting events have winners and

losers, the world of sport—never disconnected from other powerful institutions and cultural centers—helps create social winners and losers. While women have both won and lost in these high-stake games, men too are differentiated into winners—those who benefit from a privileged athletic brand of masculinity while escaping its long-term damages—and losers, men who either reject dominant masculinities or embrace athletic manhood but end up sacrificing their bodies and long-term career options for temporary status as masculine jock icons.

Finally, despite continuities, the very liveliness of sport as a realm of cultural contestation makes it an arena open to advocacy for positive social change. Messner writes as a committed feminist. His goal in *Out of Play* is to illuminate the gender dynamics in play at any given moment. He asks how they contribute to or challenge inequities between men and women or among different groups of men, always with an eye to developing research studies and activist interventions that will reshape the world of play as one step toward creating a more just society.

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—Susan Cahn, *State University of New York, Buffalo, NY*

### **Sports in Ancient Times**

*Nigel B. Crowther*

Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007. Timelines, illustrations, further readings, index. 180 pp. \$49.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780275987398

Anyone who has read Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* knows the central role of