REL 267: Religion and Sports

E.H. Jarow  
Blodgett Hall 206  
x5516  
jarow@vassar.edu

Jonathon Kahn  
Blodgett Hall 203  
X5521  
jokahn@vassar.edu

Description
What is at stake in a sporting event? For many, the connections between sports and religion are evident and powerful. Essayist David Foster Wallace once described watching Roger Federer play tennis as a "religious experience." Religion scholar David Chidester speaks of the "church of baseball.” Phil Jackson, the winningest basketball coach in history, refers to the "spiritual lessons" in "sacred hoops.” To others, however, this connection is at best tenuous and at worse degrading to religion. These critics ask, How can something as worldly and meaningless as a game be considered sacred? Another set of critics see the contemporary spectacle of sports as part of the capitalist strategy to render individuals passive and accepting of the corporate status quo. This class explores the contested connections between sports and religion and challenges us to reconsider our notions of what these phenomena may be.

Students will consider how the Olympics or the Super Bowl function as both religious and political entities. We will take up the question of how being a fan is akin to being a religious adherent and examine a variety of social, political, and psychological intersections of sports and religion. Muhammed Ali's conversion to Islam or Tim Tebow's prayerful pose on the football field are examples of this. Through this course, we confront the ways in which sports has the power to establish, reinforce, and also challenge religious and political awareness and identities.

Required Texts
Phil Jackson, Sacred Hoops (Hyperion)  
W. Timothy, Gallwey, The Inner Game of Tennis (Random House)  
Michael Novak, The Joy of Sports (Madison)

Course Requirements
- participation: 15%
  - Come to class with and having read the assigned material. We encourage you to mark up your texts with your own notes.
  - Come to class with questions about the day's reading.
  - Engage both critically and respectfully with others.

- 2 short (4-5 page) papers: 40%
  - See syllabus for due dates.
  - Topics to be assigned.
- final paper (8 pages): 45%
  • Due date and topics TBA.

**Students with Special Needs**
"Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please schedule an appointment with the instructor early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course which have been approved by the Director of Disability and Support Services as indicated in your accommodation letter."

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**September 1 - September 7**

9/3: Class Introduction

- **John Oliver on FIFA, soccer, and religion:**
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DlJEt2KU33I
- **Susan Sarandon and the "Church of Baseball":**
  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECnlL4RY8PQ

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**September 8 - September 14**

Week I: "It's only a Game": The Significance of Play (9/8-10)

- Johan Huizinga, "Nature and Significance of Play" (1-27), "The Play-Element in Contemporary Civilization" (195-199)
- Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight"
- Paul Weiss, "The Urge to Win," in *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry*

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**September 15 - September 21**

Week II: Sports as Religion (9/15-17)

- Roberto Cipriani, "Sports as (Spi)rituality)," Eqionox Publishing, 2012

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**September 22 - September 28**
Week III. Rise of Sports in American Culture (9/22-24)

- Siltanen, "Yes, A Super Bowl Ad is Really Worth Four million Dollars," Forbes, January 2014

September 29 - October 5

Week IV Sports and Social Cohesion: Communal Effervescence (9/29-10/1)

- Lonnie D. Kliever, "God and Games in Modern Culture," in *From Season to Season: Sports as American Religion*, ed Price.
- Grimes, Modes of Ritual Sensibility” in *Beginnings in Ritual Studies* (Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1995)
- Campbell, "The Importance of Rites” in *Myths to Live By* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971)

October 6 - October 12

Week V Embodiments of the Heroic & The Mythos of Sports (10/6-8)

- Myth and Psych: The Evolution of Consciousness, David Kalsched & Alan Jones
- Jung et al. the Hero Myth, in *Man and his Symbols*
- Barthes, "The World of Wrestling”
- Remillard, "Steelers Nation”
- Charles Wilson, "The Death of Bear Bryant: Myth and Ritual in the Modern South,” in *Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis*

October 13 - October 19

Week VI The Anti-Hero: Ali and the Nation of Islam (10/13-10/15)

Monday

- Maureen Smith, "*Muhammad Speaks* and Muhammad Ali: intersections of the Nation of Islam and sport in the 1960s,” in *With God on Their Side*, ed Magdalinski

Wednesday

• Othello Harris, "Muhammed Ali and the Revolt of the Black Athlete," in *Ali: The People’s Champ*
• Michael Oriard, "Muhammad Ali: The Hero in the Age of Mass Media"
• Gordon Parks, "The Redemption of the Champion," in *Ali Reader*

Optional

• The Case of Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf:
  o Film; 50min "By the Dawn's Early Light: Chris Jackson's Journey to Islam," in our library.

FALL PAPER DUE

Friday October 17 @5pm in Moodle Dropbox


October 20 - October 26

FALL BREAK


October 27 - November 2

Week VII: With God on My Side: Evangelical Christianity and Sports (10/27-29)

Monday

• Baker, "Making a Pitch for Jesus," in *Playing with God*
• Hoffman, "Prayers Out of Bounds"
• Tim Tebow Focus on Family Commerical
• Tim Tebow interview:
• Outside the Lines on Tim Tebow:
November 3 - November 9
Week VII Gender, Sports, and Religion (11/3-5)

Monday

- Goldenberg, Natalie, "From Hopscotch to Hockey Sticks"
- Novak, "Of Women and Sports"

Weds

- Hoffman, "Notes toward a Well-Played Game"
- Randels and Beal, "What makes a man?: religion, sport and negotiating masculine identity in the Promise Keepers," in With God on Their Side
- http://cms.intervarsity.org/studentsoul/item/jeremy-lin

November 10 - November 16
Week IX Self and Team Cultivation: The Pursuit of Excellence (11/10-11/12)

- Phil Jackson, Sacred Hoops

November 17 - November 23
Week X Spectacles of Sport: Capitalism, and Religion (11/17-19)

Monday

Kellner, "Media Culture and the Triumph of Spectacle,"

**Weds**

Kellner, "The Sports Spectacle, Michael Jordan, and Nike: Unholy Alliance"

David Andrews, "Disneyization, Debord, and the Integrated NBA Spectacle” Social Semiotics, Vol. 16, No. 1, April 2006

"Reading Football: How the Popular Press Created the American Spectacle" (UNC Press)

**November 24 - November 30**

Week XI Olympics (11/24)


**11/26: Paper Due @ 5pm / Class Canceled**

**December 1 - December 7**

Week XII Sport and Self Cultivation (12/1 12/3)


**December 8 - December 14**

Week XIII Final Critique (12/8)

- Novak: "In Sports We (Should Not) Trust: Some Burkean Reforms"
- Ingrid Kummels, "Anthropological Perspectives on Sport and Culture"
- Scott Kretchmar, "Why Dichotomies Make it Difficult to See Games as Gifts of God"