

Sports and the American Empire



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by Mark Naison

Since the Second World War, sports have become a more visible and important part of American mass culture than ever before in our history. Through television coverage and heavy journalistic promotion, mass spectator sports have been made one of the major psychological reference points for American men, perhaps the single most important focus of emotion and energy in their leisure time. The corporations that finance this activity are capitalized at billions of dollars and are granted political privileges — gifts of land, stadiums constructed at public expense, immunity from anti-trust legislation — that are normally extended only to “public utilities”. This special status is reinforced by the American educational system, which sponsors an intensive program of spectator sports from grade school up and explicitly seeks to “train” athletes for professional ranks in its higher levels.

The support that organized sports has been given by government, business, and education is not coincidental. The sports industry has been self-consciously used as a safety valve for social discontent and a vehicle for the political and cultural unification of the American population. Since the Second World War, sports has been one of the major areas for the assimilation of new racial groups (Blacks and Latins) into the mainstream of American life and the incorporation of backward and developing sections (the South and Southwest) into the orbit of modern capitalist relations. Black players began to enter major-league sports in large numbers at the exact time (1947-1950) that a series of executive orders “integrated” the US Armed Forces, and the expansion of professional (major-league)

football, basketball, and baseball to the South directly followed the passage of Federal Civil Rights legislation.

In addition, athletic events have increasingly reflected the dynamics of an emergent American imperialism. As the American political economy "internationalized" in the post-war period, many of its most distinctive cultural values and patterns, from consumerism to military preparedness, have become an integral part of organized sports. Professional sports events have become "spectacles" whose political and cultural impact lies as much in the marching bands, the cheerleaders, the commercial endorsements and the introduction of politicians and visiting servicemen as in the competition on the field. The spectator is dazzled by an image of American civilization that is so overwhelming that it seems incomprehensible and futile to try to change it or exist outside its framework.

Nevertheless, the use of organized sports as an instrument of political control and repression has not been entirely successful. The enormous American sports industry has not only failed to defuse social discontent off the field, but has found itself increasingly torn by rebellion within its own ranks. The black revolt, the anti-war movement, and women's liberation have all had an impact on contemporary sports, an impact which seems to get progressively greater the more sports are "capitalized" and exposed in the media. In the last ten years, with more TV coverage than ever, sports events have been interrupted by strikes, boycotts, and racial conflict to an unprecedented degree.

In addition, sports, particularly on a local level, continue to serve as vehicles for creativity, self-expression, and cultural growth for oppressed people. In working-class and poor neighborhoods throughout America, both black and white, participation in sports (as distinct from viewing) serves as a highly affirmative experience which can define communities, express personalities, and help people endure the pains of daily life. In Harlem, for example, basketball is more than just physical exercise and competition, it is a sphere of life in which young men affirmatively experience their blackness, feel the full-flowering of their abilities, and experience pride in their origin and community.

There is a kind of pathos in this (described in Peter Axheim's excellent book The City Game)---that in communities where creative outlets are few, opportunities for mobility limited, and forms of living death legion, a sport should become the focal point of such emotion and energy. But it also represents a triumph of human ingenuity and creativity, an example of people's ability to use an "irrelevant" or even repressive institution as a tool of self-development and solidarity. (1)

In the following pages, I will try to shed some light on the "double-edged" character of contemporary American sports --- its emergence as a vehicle for the maintenance of corporate hegemony in America and the Empire, and its transformation into an instrument of political rebellion and the creation of new social relations. The essay will be divided into three sections --- the first dealing with sports as a mirror of America's relationship with the Third World and the American black community, the second dealing with the relationship of the sports industry to the changing position of women in American society, the third dealing with the effects of expanded media coverage and the corporate rationalization of sports on both athlete and spectator. In each section, we will observe a tension between the expanding use of athletic events to legitimize imperial goals and values, and the growing self-consciousness of groups directly or indirectly oppressed by the American sports industry.

Much of what follows will be highly speculative. It is not so much the product of original research as an effort to synthesize my own experiences as an athlete and a sports fan with my readings on the dynamics of American capitalism and the position of black people and women in American society. Its interpretive stance has been greatly influenced by the writings of CLR James, Selma James, and George Rawick, and by long and often painful discussions with Paul Buhle. These individuals have enabled me to develop a view of history which can accept my interest in sports as something other than a "political embarrassment" and which can see revolution as a process which continually turns the most repressive aspects of society and culture into instruments of their own destruction. Much of the

"inspiration" behind what follows is theirs; the faults are all mine.

SPORTS, DECOLONIZATION, AND THE DYNAMICS OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM: A CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING THE POSITION OF THE BLACK ATHLETE IN AMERICAN SPORTS

The rise of the black athlete has been one of the more dramatic occurrences in post-war professional sports. Since 1947, black football, basketball, and baseball players, once limited to segregated teams, have moved quickly into the major leagues in their respective sports. By the late 1960s, they had become a dominant force, comprising over half the professional basketball players, over one-quarter of baseball and football players, and the majority of "all-stars" in all three sports. (2)

The meaning of this phenomenon has been the subject of much journalistic speculation and barroom debate. The "superiority" of the black athlete has been attributed to everything from extra muscles in the legs, to a unique bone structure, to a "constitutional ability to remain calm under pressure". (3) However such biological theories and images represent a fundamental misreading of the character of contemporary professional sports. Team sports are activities which are governed by the dynamics of modern industrial life and require highly specialized behavior. Professional athletes need far more than natural ability to succeed—they must practice their skills steadily, use strategic thinking, and co-operate with teammates and comrades (fellow workers) in a manner which is quite comparable to industrial work situations. The rise of the black athlete thus tells us a lot more about the rapid movement of black people into urban society and their creative assimilation of industrial values than it does about inherited racial differences. Blacks now compose almost 40% of the work force in the American automobile industry and over half the transit work force in Chicago, New York, and Detroit; yet no one talks about the "natural propensity" of black people for assembly-line work, or their "constitutional attraction" to fast-moving vehicles.

The significance of sports in the political modernization of agrarian (and colonial) people has been brilliantly analyzed by CLR James in his history of cricket in the West Indies, Beyond A Boundary. As James shows, cricket was one of the primary vehicles through which English culture was transmitted to the West Indies and, in turn, West Indian identity was forged in a distinctive way. West Indians learned English values and the norms of industrial and commercial life as much on the cricket field as in the school and the work place, and their success in developing great players and great teams marked their coming of age as a people. When West Indian teams demonstrated their ability to beat the best of the English teams using styles and techniques all their own, it symbolized their mastery of modern social organization, their ability to produce dominant personalities, and the viability of their traditional cultures. Cricket, a sport which had been imported to legitimize English culture and English rule, was thus transformed into a proving ground for West Indian self-government.

With some modifications, the same analysis can help us understand the role that soccer has played in defining "national identity" in South American countries. That game has been taken to unparalleled heights of skill by South American teams who have incorporated the rhythms of dance into their play. The South American soccer leagues bring together, in a creative context, seemingly conflicting elements in their national culture, fusing modern mass society and commercialism (embodied in the huge stadiums, the crowds, and the publicity surrounding the games) with traditional folkways and rivalries. The mixture is an explosive one — full of riots, violent assaults, and stampeding crowds — but it is an accurate mirror of the tensions of contemporary life that these societies experience. In countries like Brazil, soccer has become an affirmative embodiment of the national experience, where the personality forms, values, and tensions of modern civilization are played off against the distinctive local cultures that people must remain in touch with if they are to keep their sense of balance in times of rapid social change.

A more dramatic example of this process can be found in the growing popularity of "American" sports (baseball and basketball) in post-war Japan and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean (Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico). In Japan, baseball came into the country with the American military occupation and became that country's most popular spectator sport. A similar experience took place somewhat earlier in the Caribbean, where baseball was popularized by the increasing number of American corporate and military personnel who entered those countries after the Spanish American War. (4) The sport became a vehicle of adjustment to American imperialism, its popularity an index of America's success in transmitting adulation of its culture and values. Nevertheless, the process which began as imitation soon assumed other proportions. As athletes were produced capable of competing with or beating the Americans (as happened with Caribbean baseball players in the '50s and '60s) and as these "stars" embodied qualities distinctive to the country, the sport became an instrument of national pride and independence. It is no accident that one of Fidel Castro's favorite ways of demonstrating his closeness to the people was to travel around the country playing baseball with workers and peasants, or that Cuba's victory over American volleyball and basketball (!!!) teams in the Pan-American games was viewed as a symbolic triumph for the revolution.

The experience of black Americans in professional sports has followed a similar dynamic of assimilation and resistance. The integration of black athletes into the major leagues had been fought for for years by the black press and the organized Left (the Daily Worker and the Harlem People's Voice had been particularly active in the fight), but its implementation took the form of a calculated edict from the top designed to reinforce the legitimacy of American institutions. (5) Branch Rickey's "pioneering act", carefully cleared with Truman Administration leaders, New York City politicians, and local community leaders (6), was one of a variety of coincident decisions (the Executive Order desegregating the Armed Forces and the Truman Civil Rights act were others) designed to adjust American

society to the requirements of the post-war world and to help bring a strategically located black population (increasingly urban and industrial) into the mainstream of American society. With the US economy increasingly dependent on the penetration and control of the emerging nations, racial segregation had become a political embarrassment which could be exploited by the Soviet bloc or anti-colonial revolutionaries to mobilize resistance to US aims. The more far-sighted American leaders saw the need to create at least a facade of racial equality and harmony in key American institutions, and were willing to use sports to get that message across to both the American public and the large international audience.

From the perspective of the black community, integration in sports (as in other areas of life) represented both an opportunity to get a larger share of the rewards of industrial society and an end to irksome racial prohibitions. The black community had its own professional sports leagues ever since it urbanized (after World War I), but they were poorly financed, poorly organized, and unable to provide their players with anywhere near the income of their counterparts in "the majors". (7) When Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, it thus symbolized to black Americans the opening of a whole new era, filled with opportunities and dangers. (8) They were excited by the chance their best athletes would be getting to "prove themselves" on the ball field and get into the big money, but were concerned about the insults, humiliations, and internal tensions they would have to endure as they confronted white society.

The "case" of Jackie Robinson put all these competing pressures and emotions on the line. When Robinson was chosen to integrate professional baseball — then far and away the most popular American spectator sport — he was faced with incredible mental pressures that almost thrust the question of his physical ability into the background. To succeed, Robinson had to maintain his concentration, his self-discipline, and his enthusiasm for the game in the face of threats, insults, ostracism, and condescension, and to live with the knowledge that the hopes of millions of black people were invested in his performance while millions of

whites were hoping he would fail. Robinson was selected for this task not because he was clearly the best black ball player (Sam Jethroe and Larry Doby had equivalent reputations, and Satchel Paige was a household word) (9), but because he was deemed best equipped to stand the pressure and function as a symbol of the black community. (10) College-educated, articulate by white standards, possessed of great personal dignity, Robinson survived his ordeal well enough to win "Rookie of the Year" honors and make the All-Star Game. To many black people, he became the definitive symbol of their arrival into the mainstream of American life.

But if Robinson's experience represented a vindication of black hopes for a new era in race relations, it also reflected the rather restricted boundaries within which the system intended "racial integration" to occur. To liberal whites, Robinson was the archetypical "acceptable" Negro, a person who fit all the standards of white society and would not rock the boat. In the press, the radio, and the bulletins of the USIA and the Voice of America, he was presented as an example of America's racial progress and of black people's loyalty to the American political system. When Paul Robeson made his famous speech saying that black people would not fight on the US side in a war with the Soviet Union, Robinson was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee to assert that black people identified completely with America and would repudiate Robeson. (11) Under such conditions, whites could easily see racial integration in sports as an opportunity for self-congratulation.

However, the ability of whites to control the context of racial integration in sports was to prove considerably more limited in succeeding years. In the late 1950s two black athletes, Bill Russell in basketball and Jim Brown in football, emerged as dominant figures in their sports in a manner which gave whites little grounds for self-congratulation. Both of these men were intelligent, independent, and fiercely proud; they refused the gratuitous displays of gratitude that sports journalists demanded and made no secret of their distaste for racial discrimination in any form. (12) Their superiority in their respective sports was so great,

their reputations so awesome, that they could define the terms on which they interacted with whites to a far greater degree than most Americans, black or white, were used to. Both men were living contradictions to prevailing racial stereotypes and images. Although both were great athletes, the distinctive elements in their superiority were concentration, self-discipline, and an unwavering drive to succeed (classic elements for success in American sports and American capitalist society). Aloof from their teammates, in tune with hidden and internalized sources of energy, they went to incredible lengths to psyche themselves up before games — Russell to the point of having to throw up from nervous tension before every contest. The unwavering dignity and professionalism of these two black men enforced respect even from people who opposed their political positions and their avoidance of journalistic rituals. They helped create a new image of black self-consciousness in America, fully within the framework of American capitalist values and male supremacy but transcendent of the historic racial dynamic which required whites to take the initiative in defining race relations.

An even further step in defining black self-consciousness was taken by Muhammad Ali (born Cassius Clay), a black prizefighter from Louisville, Kentucky. Clay began his career as an exuberant, highly talented youth, who alternately delighted and annoyed the American fighting public with his mocking predictions of his opponents' downfall, his poetry, and his complete absence of false modesty ("I'm the greatest.") Although he flaunted the unwritten norms of the sports world by his refusal to act humble, he hardly seemed a very threatening figure — indeed his bragging was regarded benignly by some whites as a reaffirmation of racial stereotypes ("What do you expect from a nigger?") and as comforting signs of undiscipline.

It was an incredible shock when Cassius Clay, that laughing, jiving kid, beat the most fearsome heavyweight of his time, Sonny Liston, and then announced that his victory was due to the influence of the Nation of Islam. Changing his name to Muhammad Ali, Clay swore off drinking, smoking, and sexual excess and proclaimed his belief in black independence and racial separation. After a year of fighting

under his new banner, Ali was drafted and refused to enter the armed forces. The reaction of the sports establishment in America, who had spent millions of dollars promoting Ali as a "fresh new face on the boxing scene", was swift and brutal. Ali lost his license to fight in most of the US, was charged with draft evasion, and was almost universally condemned in the press as "ungrateful and unpatriotic".

Through all this, Ali was the decisive psychological victor. He served notice on white America that it could not unopposedly use racial integration on a symbolic level to legitimize its domination of non-white peoples. In his public statements, Ali argued that black people had a tie of solidarity with non-white people around the world, including the Vietnamese, which transcended any loyalty to the US Government. In his speeches, his political actions, and his approach to sports, he embodied the spirit of decolonization — the commitment of oppressed peoples to transform the mechanisms of Western capitalist rule into instruments of popular liberation. He was viewed by young blacks as a symbol of black manhood — a man who combined the survival skills of the ghetto (rapping, psychological warfare, physical strength, the "hustle") with an uncommon self-discipline and willingness to sacrifice wealth for principle. He represented, much like Malcolm X, a new image of being, a portent of higher human possibilities.

Ali, like most heroes fortunate enough to avoid assassination, has been cut down to more human proportions in succeeding years. After the initial shock wore off, the American sports establishment, like the American ruling class in general (13), moved to co-opt black nationalism into the mainstream of American culture and to remove its "revolutionary" implications. As soon as Ali was cleared of his draft charge, athletic commissions throughout the country renewed his license and sports reporters literally fell over one another trying to interview him and mark his return as "one of the boys". Ali, weary of his ordeal and perhaps somewhat disillusioned by factional struggles in the Nation of Islam, returned to his earlier position as the "darling" of the American press, appearing on talk shows, giving play-by-plays of sports events, even helping to

"roast" Sammy Davis Jr. at the Friars' Club (a humorous ritual honoring entertainers). He never lost his primary sense of commitment to black people, maintaining an intensive schedule of speaking engagements and boxing exhibitions in the black community. But the cutting edge of his rebellion was gone, limited by the inability of the movement to which he was tied to forge a stable political or economic base for black independence in America. He had helped pave the way for the "coming of black men" (14) as a force in American society, and had helped legitimize black nationalism as a political and cultural stance (when Lew Alcindor changed his name to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, sports announcers accepted the change without discussion or protest), but could not stop the absorption of black people into the sports industry or their acceptance of many of its values.

The political pacification of Muhammad Ali dramatizes some of the most painful dilemmas facing the black movement in America. Although black people have experienced a form of oppression which is similar to that of their brethren in the Third World, they find it impossible to liberate themselves through a movement of national independence. The dispersion of the black population through the country and its employment in the center of the American industrial infrastructure (heavy industry, government employment, the armed forces) means that the black movement can escape the domination of Capital and its attendant social relationships only if Capital itself is destroyed. The black revolt in sports, like the black movement as a whole, inevitably becomes a "reform" movement when it does not connect its nationalist aims to a large struggle to transform American society.

There is perhaps no better example of the political limitations of the black revolt in sports (and much of the black movement generally) than the image of male supremacy it projects. While the new forms of "social personality" forged by black athletes represent a transcendence of historic patterns of racial control in America, they present no challenge to the domination of men over women on which the very fabric of American capitalism is woven. The Nation of Islam, the organization from which Ali drew

strength, inspiration, and political support for his rebellion, has explicitly defined the subordination of black women as a precondition for the liberation of black men. The image of "black manhood" embodied by Jim Brown in his football career, his acting, and his personal life seems to be an Afro-American amalgam of Errol Flynn and James Bond — an image in which women are alternately seen as status symbols, sexual partners, and targets for aggression.

The racial transformation of commercial sports in America, while often disquieting to both the sports establishment and the American public, has thus far been contained within the framework of capitalist and male-supremacist relations. While black people have been able to use athletics as an arena for self-development, self-expression, and the creative affirmation of black "nationality," they have been unable to transcend the attendant value system which makes domination, competition, and personal profit the highest social ideals.

It remains to be seen whether a similar neutralization can be accomplished with movements for women's liberation. The growing power of women in post-war American life has not been reflected in commercial sports. The massive participation of women in the labor market and the accompanying, though grudging, democratization of family life that this has produced (15) have no analogies in the sports world, where the hiring of a few female jockeys and the more vigorous promotion of women's tennis are the only noticeable "reforms". Indeed, the expansion of commercial athletics has been so dramatically impervious to women's influence as to raise questions whether sports, like the "new sexuality", is being used to culturally sustain male-supremacist behavior when its objective social basis is diminishing. In any case, the relationship between sports and women's struggle is an important subject to examine, and I will try to suggest a framework which may make some of the contradictions comprehensible.

SPORTS, WOMEN, AND THE IDEOLOGY OF DOMINATION

In exposing the relationship between the "sports industries" and emerging women's struggle, I would like to draw attention to three coincident trends in the post-war political economy.

First, the growing importance of women in the labor market and the effect of this on male-female relationships in the family, the workplace, the educational system, and the bedroom. As Selma James points out, the entry of women into the labor market during the Second World War "created in women a new awareness of themselves...expanded their conception of their capacities, and cracked...open the economic basis of the subordination of women." (16) When the pattern persisted after the war (by 1966, one third of married women were working), it created a crisis of "roles" in both working-class and middle-class families. With the economic basis for male "authoritarianism" in the family (the single paycheck) weakening male-female relationships entered a period of struggle, sometimes hostile and politicized (among the middle class), sometimes veiled behind a mutual concern for survival (among the working-class and poor). As James described it: "Men, particularly young men who have been trained to exercise domination, but have had little opportunity to do so, find themselves lost in their relations with these new women." (17) Their diminishing power over their wives and children evokes feelings of frustration that must be exorcised through social activity or rendered insignificant by more satisfying experiences in other spheres of life.

Second, and equally significant for our purposes, has been the increasing bureaucratization and "Taylorization" of factory and office work and the bargaining away of worker control of the quality and pace of production by the labor movement. Between 1940 and 1956, the once-militant CIO unions, with the lure of "high wages", assumed the role of disciplining workers to managerial imperatives of "efficiency" and became what amounted to a middle layer of the managerial bureaucracy. Workers who once had unions and/or shop committees responsive to their needs found

themselves faced with another hierarchy of relentless impersonality that did nothing to stop the speed-ups and changes in production methods that took away what little pride workers had in their job and product. In addition, the growing service sector of the economy brought with it an increasing "proletarianization" of white-collar work which was reflected in the rise of civil service unions, but not in a more satisfying work experience. For the majority of working Americans, craftsmanship, creativity, and feelings of community became experiences sought in their leisure hours rather than through their work.

A third significant phenomenon is the emergence of the US as a full-blown imperial power, with a political and military "line of defense" on every continent. The entire society was mobilized behind the banner of anti-communism to higher levels of effort—as workers, as soldiers, as managers, as consumers. Never in American history had there been so co-ordinated an effort to discipline the American people to a common cause, in this instance the cause of world domination. Education, music, sports, in fact all aspects of culture became infused with the dynamics of the need to protect the empire.

The psychology of domination thus became an increasingly important theme in American life, but, as we have seen, at a time when the historic domination of men over women was diminishing and the control by workers over the productive process was shrinking. The result was that the American male, told constantly that he was a hero and a "world runner", was not confirmed in this sense of himself by his day-to-day experience. Whatever frustrations resulted from this contradiction had to be expressed outside the workplace, where a struggle for greater control of production might reduce "efficiency" or challenge some corporate priorities. One legitimate outlet became consumerism—which made the accumulation of property, appliances, and hobbies a focal point of energy and emotion, but through which more violent, aggressive feelings could not be fully released. The most socially destructive feelings, when they were not actually being lived (with wives, children, work companions, friends, racial and political opponents) found their outlet in two areas—commercial-

ized sex and commercialized sports, both of which reached new levels of development in the post-war period.

The use of sports and sexuality as outlets for violent and guilt-provoking feelings is nothing new; they have served that function throughout the history of industrial society and probably much before. Violent games and rituals like rugby, hurling, boxing, wrestling, and cock-fighting have been part of the daily life of European and American working men for centuries, as have prostitution and pornography in their various forms.

What is new in post-war America is the scale on which they are organized, their expression in nationwide media (some of which, like television, are new inventions), and their penetration by corporate values and relations. In the last twenty years, for example, the imagery of sexual domination and exploitation has become a major theme in the culture, dominating the consumer market, the film industry, popular music, and the agencies defining values for courtship, marriage, and the family (such as popular magazines and medical books). Women, once seen as the repositories of morality and civilized culture, have been projected as sexual beings whose new freedom offers men unimagined possibilities for sexual consumption. The advertising industry and magazines like *Playboy* offer a new and more hedonistic image of male domination to replace the declining authoritarianism in the family. With the help of filmmakers, psychiatrists, and progressive clergymen, they suggest that every woman should now provide what men once sought in prostitutes — a seductive, but fundamentally passive sexuality that would affirm men's feelings of competence. Female sexuality is projected as a legitimate "catch-all" for male anxieties, a narcotic that eases the pain of daily existence. In both reality and projective fantasy men are encouraged to find in sex and the experience of control (over women, over themselves) what is lacking in their economic and social life.

The success of this "sexualization" of daily experience is questionable. Despite the incredible propaganda campaign, women have resisted sexual objectification, and most men find it difficult to get their wives and lovers to play

the roles defined in Playboy. Nevertheless, what is unattainable in relationships is made available in fantasy. The growing culture of pornography in America — topless dancers, X-rated movies, sex novels and magazines — represent efforts to provide a vicarious experience that meets male needs for sexual dominance. In daily life, women have thus won a kind of quiet victory. By their own self-activity, they have forced the most repressive aspects of the “new sexuality” out of the household, out of sexual encounters, and into compensatory fantasies, art, and masturbation.

The growth of commercial athletics in the post-war period mirrors many of the same developments and the same struggles. The increasing coverage of sports in the national media, like the increasing use of sexual images and incentives, aims at the re-inforcement of ideals of male dominance that are being undercut in daily life. The major commercial sports — baseball, football, basketball, ice hockey, and auto racing — allow women to participate only as cheerleaders, spectators, and advertising images, a situation which hardly mirrors the increasing participation of women in the job market and their growing influence in the family. Moreover, these games are not so much played as they are observed. Unlike tennis, golf, volleyball, table tennis, and softball, games which a whole family can participate in and enjoy democratically, these five all-male sports have expanded nationwide, catalyzed the construction of new stadiums, and acquired enormous television, radio, and newspaper coverage without increasing significantly in the degree to which they are played. The American male spends a far greater portion of his time with sports than he did 40 years ago, but the greatest proportion of that time is spent in front of a television set observing games that he will hardly ever play.

THE CORPORATE RATIONALIZATION OF SPORTS: REPRESSION AND RESISTANCE

The political and psychological implications of the massive promotion of spectator sports are worth investigating in some detail. The major commercial sports, as we have

suggested before, are all-male games which have a fairly high incidence of violence; they provide the spectators, when emotionally involved, with an opportunity to purge themselves of aggressive feelings. What is most distinctive about the way these sports are now presented is their penetration by corporate forms of organization and their suffusion with military and technological imagery. The man watching a football game on television not only sees huge men smashing each other in a way that he would like to do (possibly to his boss, his wife, or his kids) but the reduplication of military and corporate thinking. Elaborate offensive and defensive "maneuvers", discussions of "field generalship", and analyses of "what it takes to win" not only reinforce images of strong men running things, but legitimize the strategies by which America seeks to maintain its empire. From what was once a rather simple idolization of will power, competition, and physical strength, spectator sports in America have begun to glorify strategic thinking and technological rationality as contemporary masculine values. The violence, the brutality, and the vicarious identification are still central elements, but they have been appropriated for more sophisticated ends.

This "modernization" of the sports world has had a decisive effect on the life of the professional athlete. As professional (and college) sports have become bigger and bigger business (with television rights, advertising contracts, and huge arenas) athletes have been increasingly subjected to industrial norms and disciplines. From grade school, through high school, up to college and professional ranks, the "production" of star athletes has been systematized along superficially rational lines. Sports programs in most American schools are tracking systems designed not to maintain physical fitness among their students, but to select out potential stars for training. On each level, players are disciplined, skills are refined, and the best are selected to move on to the next level. Those who succeed in sports are often discouraged from serious academic concerns. Arrangements are made to provide tutors, term papers, and "gentlemen's Cs" so that intellectual labors will not interfere with athletic proficiency. In the great

sports factories (Syracuse, Michigan, UCLA, and the like), many of the athletes in major sports do not actually attain their degrees.

By the time a player "makes it" to the pro ranks, the pressure on him escalates astronomically. Pro athletes are given training regimens which refine their special skills, but can handicap them for life. As Dave Meggysy points out in his excellent book Out of Their League, professional football players are forced to strain their bodies beyond physically tolerable limits in both training and games and are given amphetamines to increase their energy level and steroids to help them put on weight. The most famous football coach of modern times, Vince Lombardi, was reknowned for insisting that his players perform with sprains, viruses, and broken bones: One of his favorite players, Jerry Kramer, was nicknamed "the Zipper" because he continue to play after many serious operations. Even in sports like baseball and basketball, which have a lower level of violence than football, players continue to play with injuries that leave them nearly crippled (Mickey Mantle, Tony Oliva, Gus Johnson, Willis Reed), and many are only inured to existing with constant pain. The average professional "athlete" is probably less physically healthy than a normal person his age, and considers himself lucky to finish his career without permanent physical and mental damage.

However, the irony of this situation (not to say its brutality) is lost on the American sports fan. Every weekend, tens of millions of men sit before their television sets and in stadiums and arenas, rising with their victories, falling with their defeats, and emerging temporarily purged of their anger, their frustration, their feelings of impotence. Some of them, if they have the energy, go out to the playground and with each jump shot, base hit, or cross body block put flesh onto their fantasies. This strange, this sad, this painfully self-deceiving network of rituals is part of the basic fabric of American life — a safety valve for aggression and a crucible for social values organic to modern capitalism. It is a central stabilizing element in American culture: organized and financed by the corporate elite, but

supported by millions of men because it provides an outlet for overwhelming inner needs.

However, there is growing resistance within the sports world to many of its most repressive cultural and political patterns. Both inside and outside professional sports, the credibility of the sports establishments' values, images, and business practices is being questioned and challenged. This counter-struggle cannot as yet be called a "movement" — for it has been diffuse and self-contradictory, and has thus far failed to project an alternative vision of athletic activity and organization. But it has forced political conflict and economic struggle into commercial athletics in a way which has undercut sports' ability to reinforce corporate values and serve as an "escape" from the anxieties of daily life.

Within professional sports itself, the most important sign of resistance has been the growing strength and militancy of the players' associations, culminating in this spring's baseball strike. This movement can be seen as a direct response to the proletarianization of athletes in major sports. Although salaries have been increasing rapidly in the post-war period, players have been experiencing the introduction of "speed-up" and scientific management into their lives. In all major sports, the athlete's work life has become more difficult and dangerous because of the lengthening of the season and the imposition of new performance norms. Baseball, basketball, and football players all have a longer "regular season" than they did 15 years ago, and a longer exhibition schedule. In addition, training procedures have been scientifically refined to produce the maximum response from their bodies. Professional athletes are now given IQ and personality tests (the Dallas Cowboys won't let anybody play quarterback with less than 120 IQ), trained with machines, given special diets, and shorn up with drugs. This introduction of corporate discipline into what are fondly called "games" has increased the number of injuries, but it has also brought collective organization into a historically individualistic milieu. Players' organizations, uniting "stars" and journeyman players, have assumed a larger and larger bargaining role in major sports, threatening and

most recently using the strike as a weapon to force the owners' hand. Their most basic demand has been the development of pension plans which provide security for the injured and retired athlete—a demand which has great force in a field where the average playing span is 4 to 6 years, and where the player is often left physically and mentally unequipped for the job market.

The proletarianization of athletics has also generated more individual forms of resistance. A number of star athletes in major sports have begun to challenge the "reserve clause"—the rule which enables a team to purchase exclusive rights to a player and prevent him from playing for another club unless he is sold or traded. This regulation, with its analogues to slavery, was challenged in the courts by Curt Flood, formerly a star outfielder with the St. Louis Cardinals, and was recently (June 1972) upheld by the Supreme Court. But it has been challenged more effectively in practice by professional basketball players who have "jumped" from one basketball league to another in violation of their contracts in order to gain high salaries or more satisfactory living or playing conditions. Yet another "test" of this regulation has been made by the brilliant young pitcher Vida Blue, who sat out much of this season rather than play at the salary which his team's owner was offering.

In these highly-publicized cases, black athletes have taken the lead. Owners, fans, and journalists have attacked them for lack of loyalty to their teams and contempt for the traditions of the game, but such criticism has not stopped Flood, Blue, Earl Monroe (who refused to play in Baltimore), Charley Scott, Spencer Haywood, and others from forcing owners to bid against one another for their services. The growing commercialism of sports, as well as its dangers, have removed such "romanticism" as the leagues try to project from the minds of the players and have reduced motivations on all levels to the calculation of maximum financial advantage. Star players are increasingly using their bargaining power to force teams to give them a share of the club's profits and to help set them up in business with loans and investments. The black athletes have been most aggressive in this respect because they have learned from experience that they are least likely to

be "taken care of" by their sports or by private industry when their playing careers are over. Their actions, even when "selfishly" motivated, have helped to strip the aura of sanctity from the sports world and have shown an often unwilling public its true character. It is an excellent example of how capitalism can help dig its own grave through the extension of its own most cherished values.

The increasing "economic chaos" in commercial sports has been paralleled by the beginnings of a political and cultural critique of the sports establishment's values and goals. In the last ten years, several leading sports figures have taken "unpopular" political stances, and a few have begun to question the function that sports are made to serve in American society. Beginning with Muhammad Ali, black athletes have been increasingly outspoken about racism in sports and society and have refused to accept the traditional dictum that "politics" be kept out of the playing field or the sports interview. Black athletes in pro and college ranks give clenched-fist salutes when introduced; use the black handshake in center jumps and other rituals; have pressed steadily for representation of blacks in coaching, announcing, cheerleading, and sports administration; and have generally challenged the illusion that loyalty to the team and sport comes before race, politics, or personal interest. An increasing number of white athletes have also taken political or cultural stances, announcing their opposition to the war, their commitment to new life styles, and their doubts about the brutality or the political uses of athletics.

These actions, however, have not qualitatively changed the character of commercial sports. The sports industry, like the American Empire as a whole, manages to stumble through its opposition with its violence, its brutality, its grim will to prevail yet unchecked. As long as the social relations of contemporary capitalism generate a need for violent outlets and a vicarious experience of mastery in American men, the corporations will be glad to finance the sports industry and mold it in their own image. The rebellion in the sports world must be accompanied by a struggle to transform the most significant institutional centers of American life if it is to humanize this aspect of our culture.

Only as creative, co-operative activity begins to govern human relations in production, child-rearing, and sexuality; only as the imperatives of maintaining the Empire diminish, can we begin to divest sports of the responsibility for legitimizing violent and dominative behavior and make democratic participation, rather than "rooting", the focal point of athletic involvement.

Slowly, often undramatically, the basis for a new approach to sports is developing. The growing power of women in American society, while it has evoked a counter-reaction in many areas, has paved the way for more democratic relations in the family, the educational system, the job market, and politics. This has often increased the level of social tension, but it has also begun to help erode the psychological "stake" in authoritarian behavior. In those sectors of society where a conscious women's movement has been strongest and the brutality of daily life least overwhelming (declassé or white middle-class youth) women have taken the lead in developing new approaches to sports, exercise, and physical health. In youth communities, college campuses, or parks in urban areas where young people congregate, men and women can be seen playing previously male sports (soccer, softball, touch football, basketball) in a newly non-competitive way, inventing new sports (frisbee) and practicing calisthenics and self-defense (judo, karate, and the like). In addition, people in these groups have begun to challenge patterns of diet, musculature, and physical well-being projected by the consumer culture, and have sought a more comfortable relation with both nature and self which looks toward a reduction in the basic sources of violence and aggression.

These new patterns are not capable, in themselves, of providing a model for "athletic revolution." Among the industrial working class and the poor, there is justifiable suspicion that the vision of athletics projected by the "counter-culture" neglects the opportunities for achievement, self-expression, and communal solidarity that competitive sports can provide. In working-class communities throughout America, sports leagues which place a premium on good fellowship and skill continue to thrive, and it is hard to envision them "withering away" into a hippie para-

dise where everyone plays at the same level in the interest of co-operation. Nor is this necessarily reactionary. As sports critic Jack Scott points out, the disciplined pursuit of athletic excellence is intrinsically no more harmful than the development of scientific, literary, or artistic skill. (19) Rather, the problem has been the context in which such skills have been cultivated and the uses to which they have been put.

If this point is understood, we can help set the stage for a broad attack on the more alienating aspects of American sports and particularly its legitimation of the dominance of men over women. The ability of men to run faster, jump higher, or hit a ball further offers no more "natural" claim to power in advanced industrial society than the ability of women to have children, and the one-sided glorification of maleness that pervades American athletics is ripe to be subverted. Women have begun to press for equal opportunity to develop their athletic talents, and have won a few significant victories. In schools throughout the country, women have won the right to play on tennis, golf, and even basketball teams when they have the ability; have organized women's teams in football, basketball, and volleyball; and have begun to raise questions about male domination of athletic departments. In addition, women professionals in tennis and golf have achieved some concessions in their demand for parity with men in the distribution of prize money and have attracted far greater recognition for their performance in the press. These changes are hardly revolutionary, but they do give some indication of the opportunities for concerted action.

The greatest single obstacle to such democratization lies in the structure of the sports industry and the media with which it is allied. At no time has the potential for broad and non-dominative athletic participation been so obvious, yet at no time has the sports industry made such a concerted effort to get people to watch rather than play. (There is an average of six hours of sports on TV every Saturday and Sunday during most of the year.) The athletic "spectacle" has become the definitive mode of social manipulation for American capitalism, absorbing the viewer's ener-

gies in a hypnotic panoply of crowds, contests, and commercials. It can be transcended, but only by activity which strikes at the need for this kind of entertainment. A radical transformation of sports must be linked to a larger effort to bring people's control of production and communication and to develop satisfying proximate relations in the family, the community, and the workplace. The vicarious, abstract stimulation provided by the sports industry will lose much of its appeal when people are involved in struggle and creative activity.

FOOTNOTES

(1) The notion of an instrument of repression (or of socialization to an oppressive system) becoming a tool of liberation has been influenced by George Rawick's discussion of the role of the black church during slavery in his new book The Makings of the Black Community, From Sundown to Sunup (Greenwood Press, 1972).

(2) Harry Edwards: "The Sources of the Black Athlete's Superiority", The Black Scholar (November 1971), Page 34.

(3) Ibid., Pages 35-38.

(4) Professional baseball leagues had been organized in Cuba as early as 1910, only 10 years after the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. From that time on, interest in the game increased steadily, and white and black stars of American teams frequently traveled to play there when their seasons were over. Black players in particular cherished this opportunity, for the salaries they received were often higher than those the black teams were paying, and they were received in hotels and restaurants without the humiliation of Jim Crow. Even today the Caribbean leagues (now concentrated in the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and Puerto Rico) offer black players substantially greater opportunity to exercise leadership than the "majors" — for example, several black players are managers in the winter leagues, a situation that no major-league team has emulated as yet. See Robert W. Petersen: Only the Ball Was White (Englewood Cliffs, 1970) for a good description of the role of black Americans in Caribbean baseball.

(5) Both Petersen (Page 184) and Joseph Starobin: Amer-

ican Communism in Crisis, 1943-1956 (Cambridge, 1972, Pages 30-31) mention the role of the Daily Worker in pressing the major leagues to enroll black ballplayers. However Starobin greatly overstates his case when he claims that "This was the almost singlehanded work of the Daily Worker sports editor." Black newspapers such as the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender had been pressing this issue for years, as had a radical Harlem daily called the People's Voice which was tied to both Adam Clayton Powell and the CP.

(6) Petersen, Pages 183-205.

(7) As Petersen points out, the black leagues suffered a rapid decline in attendance and interest as soon as significant numbers of black players entered the majors. Only during the Second World War had the leagues attained anywhere near the stability and organization of the majors, and their salaries remained, with one or two exceptions, far below the "big-league" level. There was surprisingly little sentiment on behalf of the retention of the black teams, even in nationalistic communities such as Harlem and the South Side of Chicago. By 1958 there were no black professional baseball teams left on any scale except a Globetrotter-like group called the Indianapolis Clowns.

(8) At a dinner honoring Jackie Robinson, Bill Russell made a speech saying that at the time Robinson came into the majors he "was carrying black people on his shoulders".

(9) Petersen quotes a black player named Buck Leonard as saying: "We didn't think he was going to get there. We thought we had other ballplayers who were better players than he. We thought maybe they were going to get there, but we didn't think he would." (Petersen: Only the Ball Was White, Page 193)

(10) Ibid., Page 189.

(11) From "Communist Influence Among Negroes — Fact or Illusion", National Urban League Pamphlet, 1949. Robinson's statement of July 19, 1949 before the House Un-American Activities Committee was reprinted here in full. The statement was prepared for "Hearings Regarding Communist Infiltration of Minority Groups". During this, Robinson said: "I can't speak for 15,000,000 people any more

than any other one person can, but I know myself that I've got too much invested for my wife and child and myself in the future of this country, and I and other Americans of many races and faiths have too much invested in this country's welfare to throw it away because of a siren song sung in bass.... But that doesn't mean we're going to stop fighting race discrimination in this country until we've got it licked. It means that we're going to fight all the harder because our stake in the future is so big. We can win our fight without the communists, and we don't want their help."

(12) Bill Russell with William McSweeney: Go Up For Glory (New York, 1966). Russell asserted: "I had made up my mind that I would not become the bigot's stereotype of the Negro. I would not be the laughing boy, seeking their favors.... There were some who expected me to curry favor with them. I had news for them, baby. I didn't and I won't. I wrote some controversial articles, but I believed them at the time. I was talking human rights before it was popular." (Page 55)

(13) See Robert Allen: Black Awakening in Capitalist America (New York, 1969) for the best available analysis of the corporate response to black nationalism.

(14) See Vincent Harding's essay "Beyond Chaos: Black History and the Search for the New Land", Amistad I (New York, 1970), for an excellent example of how an extremely sophisticated spokesman for black nationalism sees the black liberation movement of the '60s as "the coming of black men".

(15) Selma James: "The American Family, Decay and Rebirth", Radical America (February 1971).

(16) Ibid., Page 13.

(17) Ibid., Page 15.

(18) Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy: Monopoly Capital (New York, 1966), Pages 232, 244.

(19) Jack Scott: "Sports Radical Ethic", Intellectual Digest (July 1972), Pages 49-50.