

New Playing Fields: Evolving Approaches to Teaching Sport Literature

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Although stories about sport were written as early as the Olympian Odes of Ancient Greece, the genre and academic study of sport literature is still in its relative nascence. But although sport literature courses have only been taught at postsecondary institutions for the last forty years, their remarkable popularity and potential for interdisciplinary study have made them a fixture at many academic institutions. As a sport literature instructor, I have honed my own best practices for teaching sport literature, developed in response to the unique challenges and opportunities associated with this area of study. This commentary discusses the evolving field of sport literature, in terms of teaching and learning practices. By illuminating key areas of consideration, including definitions, objects of study, and teacher-student expectations, I outline how sport literature can provide students and instructors with a more open, progressive, and mutable model that carries forward into their work. Ultimately then, this commentary explores the unique potential of teaching sport literature and finding new and positive approaches for teachers across disciplines.

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In the growing field of sport literature, authors attempt to capture and convey the kinetic, lively, and performative character of sport. Written from the perspective of participants or spectators, these texts can reveal the complex role that sports often play in our lives. Although sport stories have been written since antiquity, the late twentieth century saw an increased number of exemplary works within this genre and the formalization of sport literature into an academic discipline. Consequently, universities, colleges, and other learning institutions have been eager to offer new courses in sport literature. In my experience developing and teaching sport literature classes for high school, postsecondary, or senior-aged students, I have become keenly aware of the specific challenges and opportunities associated with this emerging field of study.

This commentary therefore investigates the growing field of sport literature, from the perspective of teaching and learning practices. To that end, I will explore three defining features associated with teaching sport literature. First, I introduce the problem of definitions, regarding the terms "sport," "literature," and "sport literature." Second, I identify strategies for selecting objects of study, given the dynamic nature of sport literature's evolving canon. Third and finally, I will interrogate issues surrounding teacher-student expectations, which are especially apparent in sport literature courses. Through my critical field notes, I will reveal possible futures for sport literature by offering a self-reflexive assessment of my own teaching praxis.

Defining Sport, Literature, and Sport Literature

In teaching sport literature, my own starting point is a class discussion of definitions. Oftentimes, postsecondary courses begin with establishing meanings of key terms to ensure collective understanding. For example, in teaching a course about Romanticism or the Gothic, it is necessary to first clarify what these terms mean in context, so students can understand how course texts fit within these genres. Definitions can prove exceptionally fruitful for the instruction of sport literature, despite the seemingly straightforward nature of this genre. I therefore like to begin by probing students as to what they think "sport literature" means, which often produces fascinating answers. For example, in teaching a course to eleventh-grade students, their first thought when I mentioned the genre was quidditch: the fictional sport played in the *Harry Potter* series. This first impression was very illuminating, for both them and me, as they seemed relieved and surprised when I latched onto the idea and further explored its potential. As discoveries such as this help reveal, understanding limits or expectations for sport literature can be achieved by discussing what we mean when we use the seemingly common terms "sport," "literature," and "sport literature." One of the reasons this can be such a useful starting point is that "sport literature" is a hybrid genre that draws from two highly contested concepts: sport and literature.

Despite the term's seeming simplicity, sport is contingent, deeply political, and which activities or practices are labelled as "sports" has greatly changed over time. Getting students to discuss their own understandings of sport, through defining features or examples, reveals the instincts or emotions associated with this designation. To facilitate this work, I introduce possible definitions, more as a method of testing their own assumptions than dictating their understanding. For example, I put forward two options from the *Oxford English Dictionary* for their consideration: "An activity providing diversion, entertainment, or fun; a pastime" or, "Participation in activities involving physical exertion and skill...esp. competitive activities regulated by set rules or customs; such activities collectively." Alternatively, I bring up the definition from the Revised European Sports Charter (2001), to demonstrate how definitions have been used as the basis of funding or participation models: "'Sport' means all forms of physical activity which, through casual or organised participation, aim at expressing or improving physical fitness and mental well-being, forming social relationships or obtaining results in competition at all levels." Through this conversation, the goal is for students to consider the mutability of sport as a concept, but also that the term is imbued with sociocultural significance.

One of the key areas that distinguishes sport literature from other sport studies courses is that literature, like sport, has evolved in remarkable ways over the last fifty years. Accordingly, although students might not have the same ingrained, emotional reactions to what defines "literature" as what defines "sport," it is similarly necessary to determine possible examples or attributes. Again, through class discussion, I ask students to consider their expectations when encountering a work of "literature." Just as they often defined "sport" through negative terms, such as not "leisure," "activities," or "games," they often identified works of literature through examples that confirmed, or exerted pressure on, their expectations. To that end, the works of William Shakespeare might *feel* like literature, whereas *Archie Comics* might not. As with our conversation regarding the meaning of sport, working towards a definition of literature allowed students to discover that these terms have ingrained connotations that we may have passively accepted over time. At this stage, given my course's housing within the English department, I take the opportunity to provide a cursory discussion of the Postmodern turn and shifting expectations for literature since the late twentieth century. By explaining how literature was once "a closed pleasure ground, jealously guarded as the preserve of a privileged elite," I argue to them that we can appreciate that it has become "remarkably fluid and open," enabling for the academic study of new texts. (xix). This work is especially essential for a generic exploration of sport literature, as it is this turn that initiated the explosion of the so-called literary canon, allowing for an efflorescence of new works about sport to be accepted as objects worthy of critical study.

Having alerted students to the difficulties in adequately defining sport and literature as concepts, they are then prepared to grapple with the inherent complexities, and seeming contradictions, of sport literature, as

both a literary genre and a field of study. We then return to their initial instincts regarding what defines sport literature, to determine if they now feel sport literature is defined by a work's author, reader, subject, form, or quality. These first thoughts can be instructive, for both students as instructors, as we begin our formal course work and encounter exemplary works. But importantly, despite the importance of beginning the course with a discussion of definitions, I explain to students at this point that I will not provide a definition of sport literature for them to learn, memorize, and regurgitate at various points throughout the semester. Instead, I advocate for a functional understanding of the genre, and outline a constellation of key themes or ideas, to give them a more fluid framework for approaching potential texts. My aim in doing so is to encourage them to maintain an open, receptive, and responsive attitude towards each work they read, allowing their own critical conceptions to change with each textual encounter. This practical approach to reading sport and literature is intended to better reflect each concept's inherent mutability and promote a more flexible, analysis-based understanding of sport literature

Questions of Canonization and New Objects of Study

In terms of the challenges and opportunities associated with teaching sport literature, another primary area to consider is the process of selecting objects of study. In choosing course texts for literature courses, instructors are faced with the difficulties of selecting which works they will bring to the forefront and, because of those same choices, which works will be omitted. For courses based on historical periods, the established literary canon can be both a useful point of departure, as well as an oppressive influence on text selection. For example, in teaching Romantic Literature, it is difficult to leave out the works of William Wordsworth or Lord Byron, although doing so comes at the cost of overlooking other, lesser-known authors. This collective repetition, returning to the same established texts, canonizes these works and reaffirms their implied supremacy within the genre. In teaching sport literature, the wealth of possible course texts becomes quickly apparent, especially if the generic requirements are kept intentionally broad and flexible. But despite the wealth of works that have been written about sport, from Pindar's *Olympian Odes* (476 BCE) to "The Hockey Sweater" (1979), the impulse towards canonization is still apparent, as are the implicit pressures on instructors to collect and teach the most "significant" works.

Another point of pressure when selecting objects of study is homogeneity across sport literature itself. Although the genre is growing at a remarkable rate, with more works now being created than ever before, sport literature was largely defined by a specific viewpoint for many years, resulting in a history that is predominantly white, affluent, and male-centric. Furthermore, specific literary forms, or even sports, have also dominated the genre at various times, creating a wealth of narratives that retrace similar plot points. As Angie Abdou observes

in her introduction to *Writing the Body in Motion: A Critical Anthology of Canadian Sport Literature* (2018), these trends tend to be geographical in nature and can present a difficult challenge to both instructors and editors working in sport literature (4). For example, Abdou elaborated that, in Canada, “works of literature about sports other than hockey have largely been ignored,” and so she and co-editor Jamie Dopp made a conscious effort “redress this imbalance” in their collection (4). Writing in 1990, David L. Vanderwerken similarly observed that, in the United States “creative writing on baseball must outstrip that on other sports by about 10 to 1” (77). While this ratio has likely changed in subsequent years, it is reflective of the persisting imbalances within the corpus of sport literature.

For this reason, it is necessary to be self-conscious about the decisions we are making as instructors, since our unexamined choices can lead to the formation of a de facto sport literary canon. Without carefully considering which texts we pull forward, and which texts we then leave behind, we are in danger of replicating the mistakes of other genres by too often retreading the same ground without continuing expansion and extension. As teachers of sport literature, we must therefore be conscious of the remarkable wealth of texts that are available to us, from forgotten classics to new stories. Although we might be compelled to return to the same texts, the fact that sport literature is young enough that we have not yet codified, calcified, and canonized which works must be taught or read means that we are still free to explore the genre’s breadth. Rather than perceiving our lack of a formal canon as a shortcoming, we should instead see it as an asset. As teachers of sport literature, we therefore have more opportunities to bring new or emerging voices to the forefront, drawing greater attention to texts such as DeLappe’s *The Wolves* (2016), Abdou’s *The Bone Cage* (2007), Wagamese’s *Indian Horse* (2012), or Montilla’s “A Perfect Game” (2015). Furthermore, leaning into sport literature’s openness as a genre, we pull from drama, poetry, novels, or film, or even stretch beyond fiction to include examples of sport journalism, memoir, biography, or other forms of non-fiction storytelling. By acknowledging that although sport literature itself is not new, its inclusion in the academy is still recent, we can start to perceive our lack of an entrenched literary canon as a virtue that allows us to bolster a wider variety of stories and perspectives.

Teacher-Student Expectations in Sport Studies

The final area I want to address in this brief commentary is expectations for teachers and students of sport literature. In sport literature courses, as well as the broader field of sport studies, there are often implicit expectations regarding the sporting background of students and teachers. In many cases, instructors in sport studies bristle at the notion that their courses are explicitly designed to cater to student-athletes or those with

personal experience with sport. Perhaps believing that this would undercut the academic legitimacy of their field, proponents of this view are often quick to correct this perception by clarifying that sport studies are intended for any interested learner. For example, Donald J. Mrozek's "'It Ain't Nothin' Until I Call It': What Belongs in a Course in American Sport History?" (1990) offers instructive insight into how students of sport studies are expected to perform, as opposed to teachers within the field. Although his reflections specifically relate to sport history, and are now thirty years old, they help articulate persisting expectations for students and teachers within sport studies. Regarding students, he is quick to dispel the perceived value of personal sporting experience in helping them to succeed in sport-based courses:

Real 'sports fans' find it hard to believe that their love of statistics and knowledge of trivia will give them no advantage. So, too, some athletes confuse talent on the playing field with knowledge in the classroom...In general, then, those who suspect that their past personal familiarity with various sports (including their participation in them) will carry them through this course may be seriously disappointed and perform poorly. (21)

Mrozek here suggests that students who identify as "'sport fans'" are not likely to be positively served by this experience, since they are unable to rely on their "past personal familiarity with various sports." This interpretation is one that is often echoed by teachers of sport studies courses, with the implicit suggestion being that sport is a legitimate field of academic research that is as much for novices as it is for athletes, fans, trainers or coaches. However, although his argument works to open sport-based courses to a wider variety of student, Mrozek conversely argues that instructors' personal experience with sport can be a major asset for teaching:

Whatever a teacher may think, when it comes to the reception a student will give him, the personal experience of that teacher may be more eloquent and more persuasive than all the apparatus learned in graduate study and methods courses. (26)

In teaching any course, an instructor's career background can be an asset, especially in cases where the students' goal is professionalization within the instructor's specific field. However, Mrozek's statement here reiterates a persistent, and even pernicious, contradiction behind many sport studies courses: although students are not required to have personal experience with sport, instructors are often expected to have a sporting past to be taken seriously.

Furthermore, in many situations, the legitimacy or impressiveness of the instructor's own sporting pedigree can be viewed as reflective of their appropriateness to teach the course. Correspondingly, those without adequate athletic experience risk being perceived as fraudulent and "all the apparatus learned in graduate study and methods courses" is undercut by a perceived lack of practical experience, whether that is the reality or not. In one instance, while introducing my sport literature course to senior-aged learners, I was interrupted by a student who insisted that I explicate my credentials and athletic background, while they wrote them down for

posterity. I was prompted to list each of my degrees and former institutions and the student proceeded to take issue with my role as instructor, since my background was in English and my recreational soccer experience was viewed as insufficient to support my literary analysis. To be clear, as with any field, practical knowledge and lived experience can certainly be an asset in the instruction of sport literature and many excellent instructors draw from their sporting background. This commentary, and my choice to draw from personal teaching experience, relies on the premise that one's experience can be informative and influential, for both their own work and that of others. But as Mrozek implies through his admonishment of presumptuous student-athletes, sport studies can and should be open to everyone, and this must extend to instructors if we want it to authentically grant this same grace to students. Sport literature's hybridity is one of its greatest assets, combining the expansive worlds of both sport and literature. As I have explored throughout this commentary, sport literature is a wide, varied, and open field that is amenable to a concert of distinct and diverse voices. It is thus imperative that we continue to support the inherent duality of sport literature, as both a genre and a field, to foster an open and inclusive environment for both instructors and students.

Conclusion: Sport Literature's Past and Future

Writing in 2003, in "Reflections on Teaching Sports Literature in the Academy," Tracy J.R. Collins observed that "The role of sports in the academy is increasingly troubled...At the same time, the votary discourse, literature about sports, has acquired a sometimes doubtful status, and we can use assurance that it has integrity and high-cultural import" (281). While sport literature's reputation may have changed in the seventeen years since Collins made this argument, there is still room for sport literature to grow within the academy. This growth will perhaps take the form of further formalization or recognition, in a manner reflective of Collin's desire for greater legitimacy. However, as this growth continues, it is essential for us to note, as instructors of sport literature, that it need not be restrictive or prescriptive in nature. We are now presented with a unique opportunity to consciously choose whether we want sport literature, as both a genre and academic field, to replicate the former conditions of other areas of study. While sport literature has a storied past, its relative nascency provides us with the rare opportunity to craft a unique identity for our field, consciously eschewing canonization, fixed definitions, or dogmatic expectations regarding prospective students and instructors. By maintaining an ethos of openness and experimentation, the field of sport literature can better reflect the flexibility, liveliness, and dynamism of both "sport" and "literature."

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