

The Erotic Gaze and Sports: An Ethnographic Consideration

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MY CONTRIBUTION TO THE DISCUSSION about the erotic gaze and sports is to add actual spectators and fans, that is, I'm bringing gazers into the conversation. Two books have catalogued the many intersections of sexual desire and athletics. Thomas Scanlon's *Eros and Greek Athletics* (2002) recreates the sporting culture of ancient Greece where men met boy lovers in gymnasia, where athletic festivals served, in part, as matchmaking events for marriages, and where male and female prostitutes as well as statues of the god Eros appeared in sporting arenas.¹ Allen Guttmann spans the centuries in *The Erotic in Sports* (1996) from foot races between skirt-hoisting prostitutes in fifteenth-century Europe, to late twentieth-century paintings of naked and near-naked wrestlers and boxers, to a sex scene between two female track athletes in a 1980s American movie.² Scanlon draws his evidence from painted vases, stadium graffiti, poetry and other writings. Guttmann also brings in films, novels, paintings, photographs and media accounts. Understandably, there are very few spectators and fans in these books. As Guttmann has noted, "Reliable information about sports spectators of the past is in very short supply."³ Indeed, much of the erotic gaze of past spectators has been lost.

One response to this is to read a gaze onto silent, faceless past spectators. This is what Thierry Terret does in his examination of erotic French postcards from the 1920s that picture women scantily clad in sporting outfits.⁴ These postcards, he writes, "were exchanged in secret" and "provided entertainment and even an outlet."⁵ The viewers of these

erotic postcards remain unseen, lurking behind sentences constructed in passive voice. Terret contends that these viewers looked at the postcards to assert their male supremacy, to reaffirm that women were not men's equals. Terret's is one reading; certainly there could be others drawn from these same postcards. Yet, any exercise of this type means filling in the blanks left by unrecorded spectators.

As a sports anthropologist, I want to consider contemporary spectators and fans: What can we learn about the erotic gaze from the fans themselves?⁶ Since 1997, I have been studying fans at women's professional sporting events. I have been a participant observer at seventy-five women's basketball, softball, soccer and football games in eleven different cities across the United States. I have also conducted unstructured interviews with dozens of fans and have surveyed 552 women's sports fans. My research focuses on how spectators and fans talk about and think about female athletes who get paid to play team sports. One of the things I have collected from these sports fans is adjectives. On my survey, I prompted respondents to list three adjectives to describe male professional athletes and three adjectives to describe female professional athletes. I now have thousands of words that sports fans have offered to describe both male and female athletes. These words offer a glimpse into how sports fans look at athletes, including whether or not and how often they look with an erotic gaze.⁷

Describing Athletes

To begin with, I want to share the top ten words offered for male athletes and for female athletes. Male athletes were most commonly characterized as "overpaid" "egotomaniacs" who are "arrogant," "greedy," "cocky," "self-centered" as well as "strong," "athletic," "talented" and "fast." Female athletes were most commonly depicted as "dedicated," "determined," "hard-working" people who are "strong," "athletic," "talented," "skilled," "smart" and "competitive" yet "underpaid."⁸ It is interesting to note the similarities and differences between these two portrayals. Male and female athletes alike are described as "strong," "athletic" and "talented" yet it is males who are more often described as being "fast," "quick," "big" and "huge." However, the largest area of perceived difference is in the attitudes males and females bring to the playing field: "greedy," "cocky," "arrogant" and "self-centered" versus "dedicated," "determined" and "hard working."

What these top ten words show is that fans primarily view athletes in terms of their athletic abilities and their attitudes (and to a lesser extent the amount of money they make). Physical attractiveness is not central in describing these athletes. That said, there were some adjectives offered, although far fewer, that confirm that some fans do indeed look at athletes with a sexual eye. Male athletes were called "attractive," "beautiful," "buff," "cute," "good looking," "sexy" and "studly."⁹ Female athletes were described as "appealing," "attractive," "babes," "beautiful," "cute," "honeys," "hot," "lookers," "sexy" and "ugly."¹⁰

I want to make three points based on these adjectives. First, an erotic gaze is not prominent among these women's sports fans. Only 1 in 20 chose to describe athletes in terms of their physical attractiveness. Additionally, the most common appearance word—"beautiful"—turned up eight times for female athletes well behind the tenth most common word—"competitive"—that was listed thirty-four times. Relatedly, even fans who see

athletes as attractive do not focus exclusively on appearance. There was one woman who wrote in "cute, cute, cute!" to describe female athletes, but no one else opted to have all three of their adjectives refer to physical appearance. In all other cases, the fans listed only one adjective about the athletes' appearance with the other adjectives describing their athleticism, personality or pay level. For instance, one fan chose the words "personable," "accommodating" and "beautiful" while another described female athletes as "strong," "underpaid" and "sexy." This pattern of listing only one appearance word was also the case with male athletes.

We can take from this that there are indeed some spectators and fans who see athletes as sexually attractive. This supports Guttman's contention that eros can be *one* element of the enjoyment of watching sports. At the same time, those who argue that seeing female athletes "that way" objectifies and demeans female athletes may be heartened to know that such a small number of fans described female athletes in those terms¹¹ and that those who do see the erotic in athletes' bodies also recognize their skills and talents as athletes.

The adjectives also reveal that women offered more appearance words than did men. All nine of the people who commented on male athletes' looks were women. Of the people who commented on female athletes' appearance, two-thirds were women. This suggests that we should be considering the female gaze, the male gaze, the straight gaze and the gay gaze when exploring the erotic element of sports spectating.

Since everyone I surveyed identified themselves as a fan of women's sports, I wanted to see how their answers compared with those of the general public, people who do not necessarily identify themselves as women's sports fans or as sports fans at all. I surveyed a very small sample of people at Union Station, a combination mall and train station in Washington, D.C.¹² I also asked these people to list three adjectives to describe male athletes and three adjectives to describe female athletes. Even though it is a small sample, I found an interesting difference between how these folks view athletes and how women's sports fans view athletes.

This group of people I'm calling "the general public" offered far more words about the athletes' bodies than did women's sports fans. They described athletes as "fast," "strong," "limber" and "dexterous" and also offered words about their looks: "pretty," "attractive," "nicely built." While 1 in 20 of the sports fans offered words about the athletes' sexual attractiveness, nearly 1 in 5 of the general public respondents did. This may point to a pattern where non-fans notice and comment on athletes' physical appearance considerably more often than sports fans do.

Methodological Considerations

The three findings I just presented suggest some potential points to be explored as we seek to further understand the erotic gaze from the spectators' point of view. Admittedly, analyzing these adjectives is a somewhat indirect way of ascertaining sports fans' level of erotic gaze. It is also an indirect approach to analyze media representations of athletes. This can tell us something about the erotic gaze of sports photographers, writers and editors and something about the culture they exist in, but it does not necessarily give us an accurate picture of how spectators and fans look at athletes. While it is easy to find examples of the "humorous sexualization"¹³ of female athletes in media accounts, sports

sociologist Toni Bruce has shown that viewers of televised women's sports do not automatically accept or adopt messages being sent to them by the announcers and advertisers.¹⁴ How then can we actually study the erotic gaze and sports?

To be more direct in researching this topic means openly asking people about their erotic gaze when watching athletes. As a research strategy, this can be somewhat tricky. During my dissertation research, I regularly visited Internet fan forums, reading what fans were writing and posting my own open-ended questions. I always identified myself as a Brandeis graduate student writing a dissertation on women's sports fans. When I posted a question, I usually got many immediate, enthusiastic responses from fans willing to tell me about their favorite players, their sports viewing habits and their own sporting histories. But when I asked the question "Is there a sensual or erotic element for you when watching women play basketball?" I was met with hostility and suspicion. One person suggested that I was a "lecherous old man" posting the question to "get some kicks." The bulletin board buzzed with questions and accusations. Why is she asking this question? Can she be trusted? Of all the questions I asked over the course of several months, this one clearly hit a nerve.

Still, there were several fans who answered the question. Some said there was not an erotic element for them. One fan responded, "NO!!! I'm there to see basketball. Period!" Other fans said yes, there was an erotic element. As one self-identified lesbian fan commented, "Seeing women who are in great physical shape, who are passionate about the sport and working together as a unit has an erotic element. Some of the butch behavior of some of the players is a big turn-on for me." Another female fan wrote, "I wouldn't say sexual or erotic but watching a cute girl play basketball has never hurt anybody!" Interestingly, the issue of the erotic gaze raises mixed emotional responses from sports scholars and sports fans alike.

Face-to-face interviews may be one solution here to establish rapport before asking about erotic gazing. Brian Pronger, in interviewing gay male athletes, was able to collect candid comments about erotic locker room encounters such as this one: "I would be looking at them and enjoying their physiques and fantasizing about touching them. . . . Sometimes I would go to the gymnasium washroom and jerk off in the toilet."¹⁵ In interviewing fans, I found that some responded with sexual language and innuendo. When I asked one man why he attends women's softball games and not men's baseball games, he simply stated: "I prefer to watch women because I'm a man." Another man said this about watching women play basketball: "It didn't do it for me. It was such a turn off." While I had not specifically asked these spectators about eros, their language indicated physical attraction or a lack of physical attraction to the athletes being watched. More extended and focused interviews could explore this erotic element of sports spectating.

Conversely, anonymous surveys might also elicit frank responses about eros and sports. Two sports scholars have developed an instrument they call the "Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption" that measures nine motives for watching sports, such as wanting to escape, enjoying the drama and liking the social interaction.¹⁶ It also includes the "physical attractiveness of participants" as a possible motive for watching sports. Using this, we could measure the erotic gaze as it compares to other motives. One study that used this scale unfortunately did not gather any information about how sex appeal compares with

other possible motivations for watching sports.¹⁷ The researchers complied with a request from university officials to remove the questions about physical attractiveness before handing out the survey to undergraduates at a large Midwestern university. Still, the potential is there to quantify and compare the erotic gaze.

Of course, surveys and interviews require living fans, which can make historical research difficult.¹⁸ Being an anthropologist, or present-day historian, I can skirt this issue by studying contemporary spectators and fans. Their role seems critical. As Scanlon comments, "For any society, ancient or modern, it is difficult to assess whether, how, and to what extent public appreciation of bodily form in contests was associated with erotic attraction."¹⁹ To take on this task, we need to get the public, the spectators, involved.

We would not be alone in doing this. Scholars who study fans in other arenas of popular culture have also faced the issue of fans who create erotic attachments to the objects of their fandom. For example, film scholar Jackie Stacey studied female movie fans and identified nine types of connections these fans make with the movie stars they watch.²⁰ All nine of these connections seem quite personal, almost intimate, as she uses words like "devotion," "adoration" and "worship" to describe how movie viewers bond with movie stars. She discusses how any of these various attachments can involve an element of erotic desire. Stacey's research suggests that we may be able to more specifically delineate the types of personal or intimate connections fans draw with the athletes they watch and that there may be different types of erotic gazes.

Another group of scholars has been writing about "slash," a genre of fan writing that creates romantic and sexual relationships between same-sex characters in TV shows, comic books and movies.²¹ For instance, there is a small, mostly-female subgroup of Star Trek fans who write homoerotic romance stories involving Kirk and Spock. In fact, there is a fanzine devoted entirely to publishing stories about the first time that Kirk and Spock discovered and acted on their physical attraction for each other. This is, needless to say, not the storyline the show's writers and producers intended to convey. Yet, some fans adopt an erotic gaze while watching these two characters. Scholars have offered multiple explanations for why fans see erotic relationships that are not there in the storyline. They have also collected explanations from the fans themselves. They are not asking, is it good or bad, proper or inappropriate that fans are doing this? They are asking, how does this make sense? How can we understand this? These scholars are also grappling with the erotic gaze of spectators. What they can offer us are additional ways of thinking through the question of how we as sports scholars can approach this topic.



¹Thomas Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²Allen Guttman, *The Erotic in Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

³Allen Guttman, *Sports Spectators* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 1.

⁴Thierry Terret, "Sports and Erotica: Erotic Postcards of Sportswomen during France's *Années Folles*," *Journal of Sport History* 29 (2002): 271-287. Despite the use of the word "sportswomen" in the title, the semi-nude women on these postcards are not athletes. He acknowledges that they were models, some of them likely prostitutes, in "athletic themed" costumes. A present-day analogy would be the annual swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Although it is a publication that covers college, professional and elite level sports, no one looks at the bikini-clad women and thinks that they are serious athletes.

⁵Ibid.,271.

⁶Another avenue that is being explored is the erotic gaze among athletes in works such as Brian Pronger's *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality, and the Meaning of Sex* (NewYork: St. Martin's Press, 1990). Perhaps another direction this gaze takes is from athlete to spectator, as some athletes scan the stands for potential sex partners.

⁷Kelly Nelson, principal investigator, "Women's Sports Fan Survey," 1997-1998, conducted for graduate work at Brandeis University, document and results in possession of author (N=279); idem, principal investigator, "Women's Sports Fan Survey," 2002, conducted at Arizona State University, document and results in possession of author (N=273). See also idem, "Gender and Sexuality at Play: Women Professional Athletes and the People Who Watch Them" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 2000).

⁸Adjectives for male athletes with number of occurrences: Overpaid (107); Strong (102); Ego (71); Arrogant (54); Greedy (45); Cocky (45); Athletic (44); Talented (41); Selfish (41); Fast (27). Adjectives for female athletes with number of occurrences: Dedicated (83); Strong (82); Athletic (66); Talented (57); Hard-working (57); Underpaid (47); Determined (43); Skilled/Skillful (35); Smart/Intelligent (35); Competitive (34).

⁹After a long discussion with three male colleagues, I removed the words "macho" and "manly" from this list after they convinced me that those words signal a certain gender enactment and do not necessarily indicate physical attractiveness.

¹⁰The person who called female athletes "ugly" was a twenty-eight-year-old gay woman who identified herself as a serious fan of women's football.

¹¹Ruth Conniff, "Prurient Interest Diminishes Female Athletes," in *Sports in America: Opposing Viewpoints*, ed. William Dudley (San Diego, Calif: Greenhaven Press, 1994), 198-204.

¹²Forty-one people completed this survey.

¹³Michael Messner, *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 93-106

¹⁴Toni Bruce, "Audience Frustration and Pleasure: Women Viewers Confront Televised Women's Basketball," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 22 (1998): 373-397.

¹⁵Pronger, *The Arena*, 200.

¹⁶Galen Trail and Jeffrey James, "The Motivation Scale for Sport Consumption: Assessment of the Scale's Psychometric Properties," *Journal of Sport Behavior* Special Issue 24 (2001): 108-127.

¹⁷Jeffrey James and Lynn Ridinger, "Female and Male Sports Fans: A Comparison of Sport Consumption Motives," *Journal of Sport Behavior* 25 (2002): 373-397.

¹⁸One possible avenue might be to look for evidence of an erotic element when rooting for a team in the tiny sub-genre of sports fan autobiographies such as Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Wait Till Next Year: A Memoir* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997); Spike Lee with Ralph Wiley, *Best Seat in the House: A Basketball Memoir* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1997); Wilfrid Sheed, *My Life as a Fan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993); Scott Simon, *Home and Away: Memoir of a Fan* (New York: Hyperion, 2000). One author, in recounting her girlhood fandom for the Rockford Peaches of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League writes, "I watched them with wonder and an excitement that was close to erotic." Susan Johnson, *When Women Played Hardball* (Seattle, Wash.: Seal Press, 1994), xii.

¹⁹Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics*, 210.

²⁰Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²¹Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); Mirna Cicioni, "Male Pair-Bonds and Female Desire in Fan Slash Writing," in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, eds. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 1998), 153-177; Shoshanna Green, Cynthia Jenkins and Henry Jenkins, "Normal Female Interest in Men Bonking: Selections from The Terra Nostra Underground and Strange Bedfellows," in *Theorizing Fandom*, eds. Harris and Alexander, 9-38.