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## *The Athlete as Trickster*

This study invokes hegemony theory to analyze the role and uses of sport as a means to resist dominant group pressures and the adaptation of sporting practices to subordinate groups' needs. The study draws upon literary and anthropological works that support the role of the trickster as a resistive, even manipulative figure, who fulfills both instructive and psychological needs for particular subordinate groups.

The analysis questions whether or not athletes have fulfilled a similar function among non-dominant populations. If so, what are the characteristics of trickster? In what ways have athletes served as tricksters, and what is the meaning of such a role for their representative groups? Can such roles provide a viable means of reducing cultural tension to acceptable levels?

The examination uses oral histories of participants' accounts and secondary sources to assess athletes' practices, and more importantly, their motives in sport. It pays particular attention to subtle, symbolic, and surreptitious interactions between subordinate group athletes and their dominant group opponents or audiences. The baseball, football, basketball, and boxing practices of three groups largely identified with cultural transmission via oral storytelling and the trickster figure (i.e., Native Americans, African Americans, and Irish Americans) are presented as evidence of fulfillment of the role of the trickster.

The study argues that some athletes have served as tricksters. In so doing they have provided subordinate groups with a psychological escape from oppression. Such figures may fulfill the role of the organic intellectual, one of the subordinate group who

instructs or educates others in the means to adapt to the dominant culture. Tricksters often manage to beat their opponents at their own game through guile or trickery, providing a temporary but satisfying role reversal. Others provide comic relief or coping strategies to manage anger, frustration, and stress.

This analysis is of significance because it provides us with a greater understanding of the complex, subtle, and varied ways in which sport functions as a means of resistance and cultural adaptation, thus muting the effects of oppression and subordinate status.