

CHAPTER 1:

GETTING OUR HEADS IN THE GAME

SPORTS AS A FIELD OF RADICAL POSSIBILITIES

I want to make an argument in favor of sports.

Playing sports for sure, but also watching, following, cheering, fanning, obsessing, dorking out, believing, caring, really caring. I want you to *care* about sports, whether or not you pay any attention to them or even have much interest. I want you to think about the sporting world as a legitimate site for struggle and politics—and not in that cutesy grad-school, high theory/low-culture, check-out-my-lowbrow-street-cred, critical-ethnology vein. I mean in the most everyday, obvious way as a legitimate site for struggle and politics.

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It's essentially impossible to avoid sports. High-performance or quotidian, on TVs in bars or at home, in stadiums, parks, and schools, on t-shirts, in ads, gossip columns, and endless banter, sports are everywhere, and they're usually neon-flashing-and-hollering right up in our faces. And, of course, there is a full range of responses: lots of people eat that shit right up and identify proudly and profoundly with their local pro team; many people just love to play and build their lives around it; others resent and loathe sports in any guise; and many, maybe most, folks feel varying levels of ambivalence towards the formalized play that is sports and shifting degrees of simultaneous attraction and antipathy towards the overhyped, hyper-corporatized professional gong-show spectacles that cast their shadow over all our games.

It doesn't take much psychoanalytical posturing to understand that those adult relationships with sports are in large part governed by our experiences as kids. For many people, sports were irreplaceably vibrant parts of growing up—primary sources of pride, exuberance, and community. For others, sports were childhood sites of shame and exclusion, humiliation, and violence. Lots of us probably experienced variants of both situations, and for many, the experience was just OK, not particularly compelling one way or another, just something to be negotiated as painlessly as possible.

Across the globe, sports dominate many, perhaps even most, childhoods. So many kids find that their sense of self-worth, community standing, and possibility is tied to fraught intersections with the world of sports that run the full gamut from totally fucked to beautiful. Our adult experience and analyses naturally reflect (and construct) this ongoing relationship, which means that writing and talking about sports is always (if often obliquely and/or obtusely) talking about childhood.

Yet I want to shoot a simultaneously broad and specific challenge across this whole spectrum of experience, and our

relationship to sports. If you love sports but can't see a legit connection to progressive or radical politics, I want to make a case here. If you hate sports and think they're barbaric, let me try to convince you—not why you should *like* them, but why you should respect the sports world. If you are tolerantly befuddled, bemused, ambivalent, or have a passable (dis)interest, I submit that the particular characteristics and contours of the sporting world open up radical possibilities that are not readily available elsewhere, and that should be embraced.

I am convinced that sports offers us an arena where we can resist neoliberal logics and bodily encounter liberatory ideals. The trick, however, is to take that (direct and/or vicarious) experience and tie it to larger social and political thinking, so that the specific kinds of trust, mutual aid, and generosity that abound in sports become not just isolated personal connections, but a force for the common good. I'm talking about sports specifically here, in part because that's what occupies most of my head, but really it's an argument about difference, or better put, neighborliness and friendship.

Capitalism has exacted conquest across every social and cultural sphere of our lives—maybe nowhere more so than sports—but this is not fate and the sporting world is worth fighting for, for specific reasons and more generalized political ones, too. Far too few of us (regardless of our existing relationships with sports) really take up that offer properly, but it's just sitting there. In a cynical and catastrophic era when so many possibilities seem so dim, that's a powerful project the Left has disdained for far too long. It's high time to take it up.

GIVING IT 110%

It's pretty common to condescend to sports as territory really only fit for hormone-addled teens, Neanderthals, and