

# THE MYTHS OF AMERICAN SPORT:

## Twentieth-Century U.S. History Through Mythologies of Sport

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**PROFESSOR:** Dr. Cat M. Ariail

### **CLASS AND CONTACT INFO:**

Date/Time: T/TR 3:30-5:00

Email: [cat.m.ariail@gmail.com](mailto:cat.m.ariail@gmail.com)

Office Hours: MW 10:00-11:30 or by appointment

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

This course uses the myths of American sport as lens to study twentieth-century U.S. history. In *(Re)Presenting Wilma Rudolph*, sport studies scholars Rita Liberti and Maureen M. Smith argue that the mythologization of Rudolph “offer[s] us far more insight about ourselves, as well as the moment and origin of creation [of the myths about Rudolph] than [about] the Olympic champion.”<sup>1</sup> This statement captures the intent of this course. Along with Rudolph, we will examine some of the most beloved and beleaguered athletes, teams, and sport developments from across the twentieth-century. We will question why the athlete, team, or event resonated in their historical moment and has continued to resonate in historical memory. To engage in these inquiries, we will situate the athletes, teams, and sporting developments in context with the political, social, and/or cultural conditions of the historical moment in which they emerged. We also will focus on what the athlete, team, or development reveals about American attitudes toward race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and class in their moment and beyond. Through this process, we also will consider the possibilities and limitations of using the history of American sport to study the history of America.

Students also should be prepared to read a book a week, in addition to often viewing an accompanying film. Tuesday’s class will most often feature a lecture combined with group work or other activities. Thursday’s class will primarily be devoted to discussion of that week’s book and film.

### **COURSE OUTCOMES:**

- Students will be able to analyze sport as a text that reveals the operation of ideologies of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, age, ability, and class.
- Students will be able to demonstrate critical thinking by questioning assumptions about the past.
- Students will be able to conduct historical research and develop critical arguments based on their research.
- Students will be able to craft a clear and creative historical argument.
- Students will be able to think historically about contemporary problems by making connections between course information and present-day issues.

## GRADING:

Participation (in-class and online): 15%  
 Discussion Post and Presentation: 15%  
 Film Review: 25%  
 Final Paper Proposal: 10%  
 Final Paper Presentation: 10%  
 Final Paper: 25%

## COURSE MATERIALS:

Students are responsible for purchasing, renting, or borrowing the following texts:

- *The Rise and Fall of Olympic Amateurism*, Matthew Llewellyn and John Gleaves
- *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*, Randy Roberts
- *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal*, Daniel A. Nathan
- *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport*, Susan K. Cahn
- *Democratic Sports: Men's and Women's College Sports during the Great Depression*, Brad Austin
- *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line*, Adrian Burgos, Jr.
- *(Re)Presenting Wilma Rudolph*, Rita Liberti and Maureen M. Smith
- *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, Gerald Early
- *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*, Susan Ware
- *Ball Don't Lie!: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball*, Yago Colás
- *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman*, Jon Krakauer

All other readings, as well as links to films, will be posted on Blackboard and denoted with \*\*.

## CLASS SCHEDULE:

*Students should have completed that week's reading and viewing assignments by the beginning of class on Thursday.*

### Week One:

#### **Introduction**

- "Taking Sports Seriously," Elliot J. Gorn and Michael Oriard, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*\*\*
- "Cultural Studies and Sport History," Daniel A. Nathan, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*\*\*

### Week Two:

#### **Amateurism**

- Matthew Llewellyn and John Gleaves, *The Rise and Fall of Olympic Amateurism*

Week Three:

**Jack Johnson**

- Randy Roberts, *Papa Jack: Jack Johnson and the Era of White Hopes*,
- *Unforgiveable Blackness: The Rise and Fall of Jack Johnson* (2004)\*\*

Week Four:

**The Black Sox**

- *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal*, Daniel A. Nathan
- "Inning Three: Faith of Fifty Million People," *Baseball* (1994)\*\*

Week Five:

**Muscle Molls and Frail Females**

- Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport*

Week Six (10/2 & 10/4):

**The Making of College Sports**

- Brad Austin, *Democratic Sports: Men's and Women's College Sports during the Great Depression*

**Thursday is the final date for students to submit their Final Paper Proposal.  
Proposals should be submitted to the professor by email by 5 PM.**

Week Seven:

**The Integration of Baseball**

- Adrian Burgos, Jr., *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line*
- *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950)\*\*

Week Eight:

**Wilma Rudolph**

- Rita Liberti and Maureen M. Smith, *(Re)Presenting Wilma Rudolph*
- *Wilma* (1977)\*\*

Week Nine:

**Muhammad Ali**

- Gerald Early, *The Muhammad Ali Reader*
- *When We Were Kings* (1996)\*\*

Week Ten:

**The Battle of the Sexes**

- Susan Ware, *Game, Set, Match: Billie Jean King and the Revolution in Women's Sports*
- "The Match Maker," *Outside the Lines* (2013)\*\*

**Thursday is the final date for students to submit their Film Reviews.  
Reviews should be submitted to the professor by email by 5 PM.**

Week Eleven:

**Mythologies of Basketball**

- Yago Colás, *Ball Don't Lie!: Myth, Genealogy, and Invention in the Cultures of Basketball*
- *A Courtship of Rivals: Magic and Bird* (2010)\*\*

Week Twelve:

**9/11 and American Manhood**

- *Where Men Win Glory: The Odyssey of Pat Tillman*, Jon Krakauer

**FINAL PAPER IS DUE\_\_\_\_\_.**

**A copy should be submitted to the professor's office.  
A copy also should be emailed to the professor.**

**ASSIGNMENTS:**

*Participation (15%):*

Students are expected to attend all classes, actively engaging in and contributing to activities and discussions. Students should also comment at least once a week on the class blog. Students should post their comment before class on Thursday. A student who misses class remains responsible for commenting on the blog.

*Discussion Leader (15%):*

Each student will serve as a discussion leader/co-leader for one class period this semester. After completing the week's reading and/or viewing assignments, the student will compose a 500-750-word critical response in which they discuss and analyze some aspect of that week's sport myth, such as something they found interesting, curious, troubling, or provocative. They will post their response on the class blog by 8 PM on the Monday before that week's class sessions. The blog post provided by the discussion leader/co-leader will serve as a starting point for that Thursday's discussion.

The discussion leader/co-leader also is responsible for responding to at least three comments on their post before 8 PM on the Friday of the week in which they served as a discussion leader/co-

leader. It is intended that the blog not only encourage a richer in-class discussion, but also provide a venue through which to continue to probe the ideas raised during class.

**Film Review (25%):**

In a review of ESPN's *SportsCentury* series, sport media scholar Travis Vogan, asserted that the documentaries "build a historical framework that situates ESPN as the principle authority on sport's past."<sup>2</sup> Since debuting in 2009, ESPN's *30 for 30* documentaries have sought to serve a similar role. However, should ESPN's *30 for 30* documentaries be trusted authorities of sport history? Or, do they contribute to the mythologization of their athletic subjects? In an effort to answer these questions, each student is responsible for reviewing a *30 for 30* documentary of their choice. Students can find a list of *30 for 30* documentaries at:

<http://www.espn.com/30for30/>.

In their review, the student should not only focus on the factual accuracy of the documentary but also critique the documentary's use of historical context and reliance on ideological tropes. In addition to those asked above, questions to consider include: How is the athlete or team situated in their historical moment? Do the narrative choices and emphases reflect the historical moment of the athlete/team or that of the documentarian? How does the documentary address and navigate issues of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or class?

Students can write a traditional, approximately 750-word review. Alternatively, students are encouraged to present their review through multimedia formats, such as a 5-7-minute podcast or video review. Students can complete the review at any point during the semester. The final date to submit the review is the Thursday of Week Ten by 5 PM. At the end of Week Ten, the professor will post all student reviews to the class blog. Students are responsible for commenting on the reviews of at least 10 of their classmates. Students will not receive their grade until they have fulfilled this comment requirement.

**Final Paper Project:**

For the final project, each student will engage in a critical examination of an American sport myth of their choice. Using primary and secondary sources, the student will examine why the story of an athlete, team, or sporting development has gained traction and resonance for Americans, both in the respective historical moment and beyond. A student can also choose to explore why a particular athlete, team, or development has failed to gain mythic status.

**Final Paper Proposal (10%):**

Students should compose a 500-750-word proposal in which they introduce and explain the sport myth they have chosen to examine. Students should also provide a prospective bibliography, listing at least 8 primary sources and 3 secondary sources. The Final Paper Proposal is due by email to the professor by 5 PM on Thursday of Week Six.

**Final Paper (25%):**

The final paper should be 6,000-8,000 words with Chicago Style citations. The paper should include at least 14 primary sources and at least 6 secondary sources. The student should begin by explaining the athlete, team, event, or development they have selected. They then should situate their subject their historical moment to explain why their subject attained (or did not attain) mythic status and, in turn, what their mythologization (or lack thereof) reveals about American political, social, and/or cultural processes and attitudes at that moment. The student should then discuss the persistence of the myth beyond its historical moment. The student should examine the influence changes in American politics, society, and/or culture have had on the sporting myth, considering if and how they myth has changed and/or how and why it has (or has not) maintained relevance and resonance. The paper will be evaluated for strength of assertions, clarity of writing style, and correctness of Chicago Style citations.

The Final Paper is due \_\_\_\_\_. Students are responsible for both submitting a copy to the professor's office and emailing a copy to the professor.

**LATE WORK POLICY:**

No late work will be accepted unless the student has administration-approved documentation that explains the emergency or extenuating circumstances.

**EMAIL POLICY:**

Feel free to email the instructor with any questions, comments, or concerns about assignments or other class matters. All emails will be answered within 24 hours. However, per FERPA, matters related to grades cannot be discussed over email.

**ADDRESS:**

Please the inform the professor of your preferred name, pronoun, and/or other form of address.

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<sup>1</sup> Rita Liberti and Maureen M. Smith, *(Re)Presenting Wilma Rudolph* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Travis Vogan, "Institutionalizing and Industrializing Sport History in the Contemporary Sports Television Documentary, *Journal of Sport History* 41, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 202.