Sports and American Identity

**Room and time:** Seminar Room (Attemssgasse 25, Top Floor, SR 34.D2), Wednesday, 15:15-16:45  
**Course number:** 512.313

**Lecturer:** Univ.-Prof. Dr. Stefan L. Brandt  
**Office hours:** Thur, 4-6 p.m. (Room DG-0036)  
**Email:** stefan.brandt@uni-graz.at

**Description:** The cultural history of America can easily be told through the lens of sports. From its beginnings, America has fashioned itself as a competitive country in which everybody can climb the social ladder if they only try hard enough. The American Dream, that ideology of upward mobility (allegedly regardless of a person’s origins and background), finds its analogy in sports such as baseball, football, and basketball. To this day, sports heroes are often constructed by the media as role models for girls and boys. The fascination of athletes such as Muhammad Ali and Lance Armstrong is not unlike that of action stars and other film heroes. This course will investigate the cultural background of this obsession, beginning with the fitness craze in 19th-century America and the cult of bare-knuckle prize-fighting around the turn of the century. Subsequent sessions will deal with the representation of baseball as an ‘all-American sport,’ ethnic masculinity and the construction of a black counter-imagination, the revolt of the white athlete in the 1990s, and the development of the ›body machine‹ in professional body-building. We will specifically explore the question why some American sports seem qualified as vehicles of cultural (and national) self-formation and why some athletes are constructed by the media as role models and others are not.

**Teaching and Learning Method:** This is an interactive course. Participation in group discussions as well as contributions to the discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by ‘experts’ who organize the session by means of questions, discussion forum on the Moodle course site will be part of the final grade. Each meeting will be held by ‘experts’ who organize the session by means of questions, games, video clips, and group work. The most relevant facts will be conveyed in a short information block. The experts will upload their questions for the discussion forum 6 days in advance!

**Materials:** All texts will be made available on Moodle. Please watch films in the Media Archive!

**Aims:** The seminar sheds light on the historical background and cultural representation of American sports. Students will be familiarized with the significance of sports in the U.S. national imaginary.

**Assessment:** A) regular attendance (no more than 2 absences!) and active in-class participation, as well as nine (!) substantial entries in the discussion forum (1/3); B.) presentation as part of an expert session plus 3-page handout and online questions (1/3); C.) research proposal (2 pages) and final paper (10 pages) (1/3). You need to pass each section to pass the course.

**Deadline for Final Papers** (including declaration of honesty): Friday, July 14, 2017. **There is no (!) extension of this deadline.** Please indicate on a post-it attached to your final paper if you would like to get detailed feedback!

**Syllabus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Main text (reading required)</th>
<th>Companion text (optional)</th>
<th>Keywords</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>08 March</td>
<td>Introduction – Sports and American Identity</td>
<td>Basic texts:</td>
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<td>15 March</td>
<td>Bodybuilding as Nation-Building: From the Muscular Christianity Movement to Arnold Schwarzenegger</td>
<td>Main text (reading required):</td>
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<td>Companion text (optional):</td>
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<td>Keywords: Bodybuilding; Fitness Cult; Muscular Christianity; Physical Exercise; Pumping Iron (film); Schwarzenegger.</td>
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<td>22 March</td>
<td>Boxing and Social Class in American Literature</td>
<td>Main text (reading required):</td>
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<td>Ernest Hemingway, “The Battler” (1925). [Moodle]</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Keywords: Bare-Knuckle Fights; Bloody Sports; Boxing; Darwinisim; Poverty; Social Class; SportsLit; Survival.</td>
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<td>29 March</td>
<td>From Rags to Riches – The Prizefighter as American Hero</td>
<td>Main example (viewing required):</td>
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<td>Rocky (film, dir. George Butler, 1976). [Watch in the Media Archive!]</td>
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<td>Companion texts (optional):</td>
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<td>Keywords: American Dream; Class Struggle; Jack Dempsey; Muhammad Ali/The Greatest; Upward Mobility.</td>
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Research Proposal

Bring 2 library books to TODAY!

Deadline!

05 April

Baseball - The All-American Sport
Main example (reading required):
Additional texts (optional):
  Field of Dreams (film, dir. Phil Alden Robinson, 1989).
Keywords: Babe Ruth; Baseball Cards; Jackie Robinson; Leagues; Patriotism; Pitching; Racial Integration; Team Sport.

26 April

Sports and the Civil Rights Movement I - Protest, Rebellion & the Politics of Ethnic Equality
Main example (viewing required):
Additional texts (optional):
Keywords: Basketball; Black Power; Colin Kaepernick; Michael Jordan; Nike Commercials; T. Smith & J. Carlos.

03 May

Independent Study Unit - Research Proposal

Stay at home and create a 2-page research proposal for a potential final paper to be handed in on May 17.

10 May

Sports and the Civil Rights Movement II
Guest Lecture: Patrick B. Miller (Northeastern Illinois University), “Reading Sport History into Civil Rights Studies”

17 May

White Sports? Cycling, Golf, and Tennis as Scandalous Sports
Main example (reading required):
Additional texts (optional):
Keywords: Cycling; Golf; Black Power; L. Armstrong; Steroids; Tennis; Tiger Woods; Whiteness/Race.

24 May

Women and Professional Sports
Main example (reading required):
Additional texts (optional):
Keywords: Femininity; Gender Roles; Mildred Didrikson; Pat and Mike (1952 film); Women’s Soccer.

31 May

American Football - Masculinity and the National Paradox
Main example (reading required):
  Companion texts (optional):
Keywords: American Exceptionalism; Fantasy Sports; Full-Contact Sport; Gridiron; Masculinity; NFL; Scoring; Super Bowl.

07 June

American Football in Europe - Going Transnational
Guest Lecture: Richard King (Washington State University), “Traveling Football: Representing the NFL in Austria”

14 June

Skateboarding as an Urban Protest Movement
Main example (viewing required):
  Dogtown Boys (film, dir. Catherine Hardwicke, 2005). [Media Archive]
  Companion text (optional):
Keywords: Action Sports; Dogtown; Freestyle; S. Peralta; Tricks; Urbanity; X-Games.

21 June

Sports under the Colors of the Rainbow – Queerness, Gender-Coding, and the Gay Games
Main text (reading required):
  Companion texts (optional):
Keywords: Coming Out; Gay Games; Greg Louganis; Martina Navratilova; Queerness.

28 June

Rolling on the Floor with Laughter - American Sports as a Parody
Main example (viewing required):
  Companion text (optional):
Keywords: Caricature; Horse Feathers (Marx Brothers film); Naked Gun (film series); Parody; spoofs.

Don’t forget to check out books from our Department Library and use them!