ONE GAME AT A TIME
WHY SPORTS MATTER

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AUTHOR OF COMMON GROUND IN A LIQUID CITY
ONE GAME AT A TIME

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One Game at a Time: Why Sports Matter
By Matt Hern

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A lot of people are going to be relieved I finally got this book written. I have been cornering friends and family (and lots people who don’t fit into either category) and hitting them with this stuff for a long time now. I’ve test-run, reconsidered, and revised this argument over many years: sometimes lucidly, sometimes less so, sometimes soberly, sometimes drunkenly, sometimes passionately, sometimes irrationally, and often at tiresome length. So to all of you who have endured and engaged me, thanks so much for your tolerance and generosity.

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Much love and respect for the mighty Caffé Roma Sports Bar where much of this book was written.

My deepest gratitude, as always, is owed to my families: my island family, especially Adele, Gan and Sean, and to all my East Van family, most especially Selena, Sadie, and Daisy (and Diana, Ashley, Keith, et al.) for listening so often and so patiently, for sitting through endless recaps of games, watching inane internet clips, abiding my distractions, and nursing me through my (many) injuries. They have asked about the sports I love, cheered when I cheer, sympathized when I have been beaten, allowed me to bask in my victories, acknowledged my heartbreaks, and watched so many games with me. They have cared because I care, which is as loving as I could ever ask.

And of course, more than anyone, this book is for my father, Riley Hern. His inexhaustible love for tennis, the Canucks, and for sporting events of all kinds has been matched by his lifelong patience and kindness towards all children as they learned to play under his watch. He was in my head always as I wrote this and I can only hope that a little bit of his sweet and generous heart shines through.
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.

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.

It’s pretty common to condescend to sports as territory really only fit for hormone-addled teens, Neanderthals, and developmentally-delayed retrogrades. Sort of strangely, this attitude shows up in a whole variety of guises, constantly embedded, reiterated, and repercussed by sports fans, casual observers, and antagonists alike, and amounts to an assumptive abandonment of the sporting world as worthy of serious engagement.

Sophisticated “thinking” people of all ideological persuasions have seemingly always held condescending attitudes towards sports—and that’s for lots of obvious reasons, and subtler ones that dovetail with a generalized disdain (from the left as much as the right) for working-class, everyday culture. Aside from the occasional Plimpton-esque (or Mailer/Oates/Remnick-esque) quasi-anthropological foray, intellectuals (and I’m using that term as loosely as imaginable) overwhelmingly dismiss the sporting world.

No less than Noam Chomsky articulated a cheap (but super common) line when he suggested that if people paid as much attention to politics as they do to sports we’d have a much better world.¹ It’s the frequent default stance of leftists, progressives, and liberals everywhere, even those who love sports: this tired old position that sports are the contemporary opiate of the masses. But Noam never would have said that about music, dance, theater, painting, or poetry, and that contradiction is what I’m after here. I want us to consider sports as seriously as we take other “high” art forms, to understand sports as sitting squarely within a spectrum of creative expression, and just as worthy of our serious attention, engagement, reflection, love, and respect. Sports and art are not the same thing, but those delineations are arbitrary ones, and they largely exist to stabilize class pretensions and social positions. I suggest we eviscerate
those definitions entirely. 2

Chomsky’s generalized position is echoed by all kinds of people—whether they spend much time thinking about sports or not—who tend to defer to this analytical refuge; it’s an easy and clichéd place to wander off to. And to be sure, sports consistently give us every reason to revile them. Whether it’s the a-hole football players from your high school, the idiot jock homophobe culture, the sexual assaults so endemic to athletics, the crazed militarism at pro events, or the fucking Washington Redskins, it ain’t like sports aren’t doing their honest best to drive good people away. In the face of all the mouth-breathing scorn jock culture heaps on others, it’s hardly surprising that thoughtful people of every predilection aren’t terribly impressed with the possibilities of the sports world, and refuse to return the respect that sports has denied them.

The presumption of the essential triviality of sports is visible (in a weirdly self-flagellating twitch) even among sports-nerds. Many of us are simultaneously obsessed and chagrined—as if sports aren’t worthy of our legitimate attention. It’s something we hide like the porn history on our computers, something that stains whatever fantasies we might have of being serious adults. Even on rabid sports talk radio, whenever a tragedy occurs commentators trot out an inevitably reflexive cliché: “Makes you think about what really matters….” As if sports don’t really matter—when they clearly, absolutely do.

Across the ideological, class, cultural, and sporting spectrum, there seems to be a consensus that sports are, at best, distractingly vapid. This retreat by folks who love sports, and folks who revile them, and everyone in-between, has turned the sports world into easy prey for hyper-consumptive, violent, militaristic, sexist, and homophobic politics—and, ultimately, handed over the immense power of sports to some of the worst elements of our society. It’s a retreat that has concretized a self-fulfilling prophecy and self-regulating narrative that tells us just how fucked sports really are. When the sporting world reinforces its own triviality, whether purposefully or not, it gives permission for its own consistently idiotic behavior, because, well, it just “doesn’t matter” much. Hardly. My argument here is precisely the opposite: we should all—whether we watch, obsess, cheer, play, or not at all—take sports seriously, as worthy of real respect, because if we don’t, we will continue to allow them to be dominated by some of the most regrettable politics imaginable.

Sports Illustrated estimates that 62% of American males and 47% of females regularly play competitive sports. Even more than playing, though, we like to watch: in the U.S., twenty-one of the forty-five most-watched TV shows in history are Super Bowls; in India, the most watched program of all time is the 2011 Cricket World Cup Final; in China, it is the opening ceremony of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games which (not coincidentally) remains the most watched global broadcast in history. In Germany, ten of the top eleven most watched broadcasts of all time are soccer games; in Canada, the most watched television broadcast in history is the men’s gold-medal hockey game of 2010 Winter Olympics with 16.6 million viewers watching the entire game, roughly one-half of the country’s population. These kinds of stats are repeated across the globe, whether we’re talking TV or live events, numbers that will surprise approximately no one. Now, I don’t want to equate television audiences with inherent
value, but it sure as hell means something.

Big sporting events dominate cities, incite riots, and fill entire newspaper sections with relentless coverage of minutiae and gossip. Sports are the default topic of conversation at parties and bars the world over. Sports keep many families together, gives buddies something to talk about, and provide narrative shape for many of our days. Teams and players inspire devotion vastly beyond reason. There is something very deep here that even the ungodly amounts of garish marketing, ultra-nationalist tendencies, hyper-corporatism, and dislikable athletes with their tricked-out Hummers can’t extinguish: so many of us love sports, both participating and spectating, for lots of very good and very valuable reasons.

I am obviously not defending the entire breadth of the sporting world as it exists now (!): what I am doing is arguing for what sports could be. To my mind it’s not a great leap to think of a time when sports are a force for good in our culture and we condescend to those possibilities at our peril. That’s what this book is after: I’m arguing that sports can, should, and do really matter.

That said, even for me, sometimes it seems totally fucking absurd to be making this argument. Sitting here watching a tepid mid-season Canucks game surrounded by a-holes in Affliction gear shouting grotesquely sexist/anti-queer shit at the ice while getting hammered on $8.50 plastic cups of Coors Light is hardly the place to feel comfortable about the transformative potential of sports.

Between periods I stroll around the concourse, dodging the Red Bull kiosks, the Pepsi girls, and the Stella stalls. I’m looking to milk a little extra value for the $127.50 mid-bowl tickets I’ve lucked into when a pal left town unexpectedly. It’s a roiling river of people, and 87% of them are geared right up in team apparel.

Daunted, I duck into one of the metastasized merch stores inside the arena and scope out the $299 authentic jerseys, $45 pennants, $50 branded garden gnomes (!), $115 baseball hat display cases (!!), $79 ticket frames and the hundreds of other Canucks-themed ephemera. I buy a pair of shot glasses for my mom’s birthday. I’m not sure she’s ever gunned a shot in her life, but it seems the right thing to do. I see a vintage Brendan Morrison signed and framed player card propped up by the counter so I snap that too. Mom’s worth that for sure. She’ll love it. The clerk wraps it for me expertly in Canucks-colored paper and slides it all into a lovely, tastefully-branded little Canucks-themed bag. Very nice.

Post-game, we slip into the sports bar at the corner, watch the highlights of the game we’ve just come from, and I then review the situation on espn.com before bed. There’s scarcely been a moment over the last six hours when I haven’t been a zombie-bug wandering in a manically-consumptive formicarium.

Most decent people instinctively act with revulsion in the face of this insane, corporatized, spectacular shit-show. And totally justifiably. The micro and macro-economic logics of the pro sports world are crazed and infuriating. Triple-figure tickets, billion-dollar franchises, $3 million Super Bowl ads, $13 million a year for middling pitchers, a quarter billion for A-Rod (twice!), stadium deals in the high hundreds of millions, that freaking $300 jersey, the commodification of players … there is almost nothing about the economics of the professional sporting world that makes any sense, or bears any rational relationship to the everyday lives of everyday
people.

Capitalism has grotesquely distorted the sporting world, but what hasn’t it maimed? What cultural quarter hasn’t been reduced to corporate shilling? Think of dance centers named after banks, cigarette companies sponsoring operas, theater awards given out by mining companies, folk singers sponsored by Starbucks, and artists of every stripe controlled and traded as commodities. Professional sports have been wholly jacked by corporatist economics and neoliberal ideologies like everything else, just maybe a little more vibrantly and effusively—in part because sports are so powerful: where else are you going to find 100,000 people every Saturday afternoon?

Similarly, sports are often derided as offering another kind of economic opiate: holding out an impossible carrot to marginalized kids and communities that will ostensibly drag them out of poverty. And that’s correct: really, only a tiny percentage of kids ever make it pro and 99.9% of us end up having to pursue some other ways to make rent. If we’re talking about sports as a potential income generator, it’s a real long shot (although no more so than music or acting or dancing), and there are certainly plenty of occupational hazards. But that’s true of most any job, whether it’s nursing, roofing, driving, doing construction, social working, farming, or firefighting. And many (most?) jobs have other kinds of hazards: physical, psychological, and/or emotional. Is it worse to get your melon dinged up and lose a few neurons than it is to sit in a dehumanizing, alienating, dignity-sapping workplace that costs you hope and imagination and vitality? There are costs and compromises to any occupation, professional or otherwise.

Regardless, I think it is very problematic (and maybe a little paternalistic) to critique sports as simply a poor career choice. People engage in creative pursuits, whether it’s boxing, painting, basketball, singing, judo, dancing, or writing, not to get rich but because we love being creative: the act of individual and collaborative creativity is good in and of itself. A small subset of us get highly skilled at those pursuits, and then a much smaller subset still actively pursues a pro career in hoops, movies, the music business, fighting, or whatever. For most of my youth, I played ball seventeen hours a day and dreamed that I was Downtown Freddie Brown or Dennis Johnson, but was I planning for an NBA career? Well, I guess highly abstractly but not really. Ball wasn’t a career move: it was pleasure, and it wasn’t a failure or wasted effort when I fell far short.

I don’t want to reduce creative expression to instrumentality and assess its value based on potential career earnings. Lives should not be managed like stock portfolios. The problem isn’t that boxing or basketball or musical theater or hiphop or the trombone are not sure-fire routes out of economic marginalization. It’s that long-shot lottery-winning dreams are necessary because, for so many folks, there is so little else to realistically hope for. To blame sports for not being able to fix the failures of capitalism is chasing the wrong squirrel up the wrong tree.

"FOOTBALL IS THE OPEN-AIR KINGDOM OF HUMAN LOYALTY"

Not long ago I was speaking at the Baltimore Book Festival, giving a talk about ecological urbanism. It’s a terrific and popular event, and our tent was full of people despite the fact that it was approximately 150 degrees outside and the tent smothered whatever little breeze might have been blowing. I was sitting on a panel, and when my turn came ’round, I did what I pretty much always do: I made a joke about sports.
It’s a kind of a platitudinous speaker’s cliché to drop an informal aside before launching into your shtick, but nevertheless I consistently do it, ostensibly to lighten things up a bit, to suggest to the audience that maybe I’m not a humorless twit, and maybe to relax me a little. I also tend to be talking to academic and/or activist audiences and I like to think it throws them off their game a bit. Maybe not so much, but you know.

I started this Baltimore talk by offhandedly chatting about the Ravens. I could feel the sweat rolling down my back like a faucet and I was towelling off every fifteen seconds. I had just come from a bar where I watched a wild Patriots-Bills game and was hoping to catch the Ravens later that afternoon, so it seemed like the right thing to do. Right away, an older African-American guy sitting in the front row scowled expansively and said loudly “Don’t talk about sports!” I looked at him and said, “Why not? It was a great game.” That wasn’t the response he was hoping for apparently because he immediately stormed out.

I didn’t mind too much: I get people walking out on my talks here and there and figure that if you don’t piss some people off you’re being far too bland. I just carried on my way but as I was talking I could see the man at the back of the audience, listening in, but also waving his arms around and talking to people loudly and passionately. So I was prepared when the mic opened for questions and he barrelled in and proceeded to rip me a new one. He talked at some length about how disrespectful I was to be glib about something as meaningless as sports, that I was being wasteful of everyone’s time when there were so many important issues to talk about and that talking about sports was just callow. He also mentioned that he really wanted to punch me “right in the face.”

A fellow member of the panel was clearly freaked out and tried to diffuse the situation, and the audience visibly tensed up, but I kind of liked it. I mean I’m never thrilled about being so aggressively taken to task in public (or in private really!), but I was genuinely interested, even excited by his point, and took his threat as metaphorical, not actual. I badly wanted to take the argument up, but it didn’t seem like the right place to get into it, so I just said that I respected his opinion, was sorry that he was upset, but that I held to the value of sports and didn’t think it was disrespectful in any way. Then we moved on.

Afterward I was talking with some members of the audience and I could see the guy waiting a row or two back, so I stuck out my hand and asked how he was doing. He was very gracious and apologized, complimented me on my talk, and said he appreciated my approach and analyses. I was friendly in return, thanked him for his apology, and offered my support and solidarity in the face of the outrageous bullshit his neighborhood is facing. It was clear though that we still had a difference of opinion that we didn’t really address.

Baltimore is a majority-black city facing some very serious economic, social, and political challenges. The effects of deindustrialization, the mortgage crisis, suburban flight, crime, poverty, and corruption are readily evident at even half a glance. So it’s highly understandable that a resident might get irritated with some random cocky white dude showing up and dropping blithe banter in the midst of some important and serious conversations. But in many ways this argument is exactly what I’m after: I’m convinced that sports really are worth talking about. Not just for their convivial, small-
talky instrumentality. That’s all good in itself, but sports can and should be part of those serious conversations too. Next time I’m in Baltimore, that’s what I want to talk about for sure.

I also think watching and following sports is a worthy activity. It’s common to suggest that playing sports is defensible but spectating is opitical, passive, mind-numbing, and likely brain—if not soul—damaging. I dispute this from beginning to end. It would be crazy-talk to suggest that playing music is alright, but listening to it is a waste of time. Or that acting is good, but going to the theater is passive and consumptive. Or that you are creatively actualized if you make films, but somehow less-than if you watch them. We all know that music, movies, theater, dance, poetry, and all the rest are vibrant and legitimate sites of conversation and contestation for observers and critics as much as creators. Why not sports?

It is really important to understand sports comprehensively (and not as arbitrarily separate) as playing and watching; fanning and participating; pro, high performance, amateur, and everyday. There are obviously critical distinctions between each of those activities (and kinds of activities): they are not the same and carry all kinds of different weights, impacts, reverberations, and effects. But to understand sports we have to encounter them as a nexus of relationships that bind performers to text to audience to critic to community.

The argument that names professional sports as bad, but playing in the park as good, is lazy and obscuring. We have to take it all on, and understand playing and watching, participating and spectating, performer and audience as bound up together, in part because observing skilled, graceful, creative, and powerful bodies in performance is an abidingly great pleasure.

We wouldn’t make that claim about music or theater or any other creative activity—no one would argue that the kid playing guitar in her basement is good, but when she gets paid to play onstage it is debased and corrosive. We absolutely, unequivocally have to talk about the contours of high-performance economics, the nature of spectacle, the outrageous exploitations embedded in the sporting world, the total bullshit inequities, the way arena logics are maiming cities: all of that is exactly what I think taking sports seriously requires. But we cannot have those conversations if we do not take all of it seriously, and with serious respect.

I’m not suggesting that sports and other forms of creative expression that we claim as “art” are directly equivalent. In the same way that activists and theorists have blown the doors off high and low arts distinctions, I want to expand our definitions of creative expression. These distinctions and the bourgeois judgements that follow in their wake become murky quickly: where’s the line between rhythmic gymnastics (ostensibly sport) and ballroom dancing (art) for example? Or the sport of figure skating and art of ballet? There are minor differences that become greater with other examples (say football and sculpture), but I do think it’s useful to place all of it on a continuum of creative expression, with varying and shifting relationships to competition, and imbue all of it with relevance and potentiality.

Who and what has defined “sport” and “art” is helpful in understanding the trajectory, and that’s a conversation I am going to return to later in a little more depth, but let me just note that those are not absolute categories, and the definitions are
wholly constructed. As Louis Menand writes, talking about the 2012 Summer Games:

Twenty-six sports will be played … with medals awarded in three hundred and two events. The majority of those medals will be given in sports that originated, in their modern form, in Britain: archery, athletics (track and field), boxing, badminton, field hockey, football (soccer), rowing, sailing, swimming, water polo, table tennis, and tennis. Britain is also the birthplace of curling, cross-country, cricket, croquet, golf, squash, and rugby—which is scheduled to become an Olympic sport in 2016. No other country comes close. Three Olympic sports originated in the United States: basketball, volleyball, and the triathlon, which was invented in 1974. Two originated in Germany: handball and gymnastics.\footnote{\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{8}}}

It’s not too much of a stretch to think of modern sports (Olympic and otherwise) as the (spectacularly) monetized performance and promulgation of empire.

This is essentially true of most contemporary sports. Certain competitions seem to be timeless: who can run the fastest, lift the heaviest thing, walk the furthest along a log, etc. But what turns games into sports is standardization so that people can compete against one another using common measurements. Throwing a stick as far as you can is a game, but it’s the sport of javelin when the field and stick are standardized. The invention, regulation, and bureaucratization of specific games as sport, however, has not happened willy-nilly or outside political and cultural contexts: the definitions, regulation, discipline, dissemination, and uses of sport have often been bent to racialist and heteronormative, masculine ends. Asking why sports are so militaristically designed, or why speed and strength are valued so much as opposed to say, rhythm and balance, is something like asking why colonialists have felt compelled to impose their wills and worldviews on the rest of the globe.

Similarly, art has always claimed to civilize, and certain forms of creativity rarely make the cut, getting relegated to “folk” or “primitive” art, or “craft” status, or just derided. Much of the art world’s historically aspirational flaunt is a Cartesian prejudice for mind over body, and soul over mind. That’s why “art” claims to elevate us, to lift us out of our corporal and sensual lives, with all the deeply problematic metaphysical assumptions and epistemologies that infers. Sports can turn those elitist presumptions back on themselves and insist that materialist collisions, bodies-on-bodies interactions, are where everyday politics is played out, understood, and contested. It is a primary site for apprehending who we are, how we get along with other people who may be very different from ourselves, and what ethical grounds we ascribe to.

I also think we can ask more of sports than just straight rabble-rousing. There is a constituency of political fans who view sports instrumentally, pointing to specific incidents, athletes or events as progressive flashpoints—like the Los Suns, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Billie Jean King, or Muhammad Ali getting stripped of his title. Those, and so many others like them, are super-important for sure—galvanizing moments, and icons to rally around and incite the imagination. But only seeing the specific seems an inadequate rendition of politics to me. Sports matter in-and-of-themselves, not just because of how they might be leveraged.

We should be singing the praises, trumpeting, and defending any and every athlete who stands up, whether it’s Jackie Robinson, John Carlos, Brittney Griner, or the kid who comes out to her high school field hockey team: that shit takes real bravery and a
consistency of courage. Because sports are so volatile and so powerful, every impact reverberates something fierce. Think of the battles that ensue when a young woman just wants to play on a boy’s football team, let alone the shit storm Ali caused. It's said, and I think maybe it’s true, that the money shot for queer rights will be when a revered currently-playing athlete in a major sport comes out. Jason Collins probably isn’t high-profile enough to fit that bill, but maybe. Magic Johnson might well have been the tipping point that finally undermined HIV/AIDS prejudices.

But leave that aside for a minute. Politics is more than iconic events or star-struck moments. You can’t participate in or spectate sports without constantly articulating values, running into difference, talking about what matters and why, and being forced to figure out who you have responsibility for and why. Our core political ideals are always being performed in the gym, rink, ring, field, or track and then tested materially and bodily.

Grappling with a neoliberal era necessarily means confronting what matters. Late capitalism relentlessly reduces everything to commodity. Everyone is market fodder and everywhere is a potential profit center: nothing really matters so much that it cannot be bought and sold. Resisting neoliberalism requires us to imagine, carve out, and create non-market spaces where social and cultural relationships are animated by incommensurability. I submit that sports can be joyful, powerful, and sweet, but a whole lot more than that too.

1 Noam continued: “I suppose that’s also one of the basic functions it [sports] serves in the society in general it occupies the population, and keeps them from trying to get involved with things that really matter.” He said a lot more about sports here: http://terasima.gooside.com/article1sports2spectator.html
3 Yup, these are real prices.
4 A quote from Antonio Gramsci.
5 It’s probably worth noting that part of the reason he was upset was because the previous speakers had been discussing the foreclosure crisis and displacement in Baltimore as a result of a new biotech facility. That is some horrible shit that matters unequivocally and stirs up some deep feelings. I totally understand and support his pissed-offness.
6 There’s a layer here that I want to acknowledge, but not fully delve into because it heads off in a whole bunch of directions. It needs to be said that “spectating” is a broad category. Different types of spectating (in various places and through different media) have different ways of generating meaning and pleasure. Stopping by a neighborhood softball game, going to a huge stadium and watching sports spectacles on TV are very different activities. Sports are primarily spectated via television and thus viewers are engaged with and subjected to massive corporate-media-industry manipulations, with all the requisite complications. I am not suggesting that watching sports on TV is “bad” per se, but that spectating is a very broad category of activity that needs to be parsed. I will hit this more later.
7 I’m being a little cute and nodding at a certain thread here by using the word text. I’m suggesting that the specific constraints of specific sports allow for certain kinds of expressive relationships: I might have used the word form, but I think it is important to place this argument in the context of critical evaluations of texts.
That’s a performance theory nerd-note, but one that needs to be said.

Louis Menand, “Glory Days,” New Yorker, August 6th, 2012. Thanks are due here as well to Olympic historian Bill Mallon who helped me clarify some issues and aided me in my research.
CHAPTER TWO:

A PUNCHER'S CHANCE

AUTHENTICITY,
IM/MATERIALITY, AND PHYSICALITY

It’s Friday night. I’m standing ringside, a plastic cup of Michelob in hand. It’s a low-end casino and I’m watching live Mixed Martial Arts. Two sweat-slicked fighters are grappling ten feet away. Remnants of smoke-machine-distributed atmosphere drift through the air. There’s a posse of G-string-and-silicon ring-girls with model postures and tolerant expressions to my left. The front rows are full of lethal-looking Russian dudes with bored platinum dates, thuggy steroid users, playas, playa wannabes, and a ton of young men straight outta Jersey Shore outtakes. It’s been a good evening of fights but there haven’t been any really devastating knockouts yet. A couple of guys have gotten dropped hard but nothing huge. I’m a little disappointed.

But honestly, who do I think I am? I’m bald, go to the gym, and have tattoos, so I fit in here, at least at first glance. But I don’t own any Affliction gear, I only make gangsta hand symbols when I’m goofing around for photos, and I haven’t thrown a real punch at anyone in twenty years. I have my tough-guy affectations, but I’m a middle-aged father, I subscribe to the New Yorker, I drink tea, I garden. I’m out of my league here and kind of thrilled about it.

It’s not just testosterone that’s gotten me down here though: I’m intrigued by the explosion of interest in Mixed Martial Arts fighting. MMA carries a lugnut kind of visage, and that’s part of it for sure, but it’s really just an amalgam of other disciplines, infused with the admirable qualities of judo, jiu jitsu, boxing, wrestling, kickboxing, samba, and lots else. I can’t see any reason to think of MMA as significantly different than any other fighting styles, aside from its current commercialization. That’s part of why I am here tonight—though maybe it’s because I want a taste of something real. Not “real” in the phenomenological sense: I’m talking about the right-here-right-now-in-my-face sensuality sense.

It’s worth saying that I like to fight and I admire fighters of all kinds, but my goal here isn’t to defend fighting per se. Instead, my defense of fighting in this context is intended to serve as a route to my larger argument about the value, power, and potentiality of sports, and, even more than that, the exigency of neighborly friendship. But talking about fighting provokes people, so it’s a convenient way to put the argument to a stiff test right off the hop.

What I’m articulating here is an aesthetic desire for sure, but it’s also, and maybe
moreso, a political one. I am convinced that sports offer a particular and irreplaceable arena for radical social transformation. All sports—fighting maybe more immediately than most—open up specific and enigmatic possibilities for engaging with pillars of liberatory politics: difference, equity, and solidarity. And, in part, it’s the encounter with materiality that I am after here.

It’s like the difference between walking and driving: sliding by in a vehicle you really don’t see shit. You can’t smell or hear anything, you move too fast, you miss all the subtleties by keeping at a comfortable distance. If you walk (and especially if you walk regularly), you feel places differently. There is something analogous about the physicality, the bodies-on-bodies immediacy and pleasure of sports: it’s the promise of an unmediated capacity to apprehend ethical decisions, the expression of difference, and the visceral encounters with solidarity that interest me.

I’ve always been a fight fan. I remember watching a little black and white TV with my dad, and loving Ali sparring with Howard Cosell during prime time. I can mentally replay Hearns-Hagler in omnicolor detail. The Hit Man almost decapitating Roberto Duran. The Hawk. Alexis Arguello. Lights Out Toney. In college I was legitimately (and probably justifiably) embarrassed by my admiration of Mike Tyson and my sparring sessions in the basement of the university athletic complex. Righteous friends and nice college kids took it as proof of my loutish tendencies, so I snuck off to the north end of town on fight nights to watch pay-per-view in biker bars, trained quietly, and kept that shit right to myself. I only ever fought a little and haven’t done it properly for almost two decades now, but remain enthused and attached.

And I’m not embarrassed about it anymore. I’m more confident in articulating why boxing is a good thing and why I watch. And I don’t really mind so much if good people think I’m a bit of a pig. To me boxing specifically, and fighting in general, is an increasingly precious route to cut through the artifice and banality of contemporary life.

In a twenty-first century where what’s real, what’s fake, and what the difference is seems tenuous at best, fighting is a simple, pure pleasure. In the face of a plague of reality TV, WMMDs, Facebook “friends,” “conversations” on Twitter, Second Life, and the average kid spending almost eight hours a day staring at screens, looking for “reality” and “truthfulness” is a disorienting mess. Pining for the authentic mostly just sounds nostalgic, trite, and/or painfully quaint. But there’s nothing fake about a sharp right cross in the mouth. There’s no irony, no subtext, no spin, no fabrication, no “reality” in quotes, no disclaimers, no reset function, no replaceable avatar to start over with. It just hurts. And if you’re watching, there’s no way to pretend it’s not happening. That kid’s nose really is pouring blood, his neurons really are scrambling.

But wait. That’s exactly the Fight Club story. Didn’t Pitt and Norton and Palahniuk do all this already? Isn’t the idea that fighting is particularly “authentic” just another lame Maileresque, patriarchal cliché? Really, what’s real about scrapping? And what’s so great about “real” or “authentic” anyways?

At first glance, I’d say it’s pain, the threat of pain, the inescapable physicality that sharpens a poignancy in fighting. It has always been the ostensible realness of boxing that attracted me—I don’t think boxing has anything to do with violence. Violence is coercive by definition; it’s done to someone against their will. You step into the ring
voluntarily. It’s painful, risky, dangerous, scary, often damaging, and probably not a great idea on balance, but it’s not violence. Capitalism generalizes intrinsic and extrinsic violence throughout our social and cultural relationships, and boxing is one more site for that expression. The act of fighting is scary, thrilling, and potentially damaging absolutely, but the same can be said for ballet, skateboarding, mountain climbing, scuba diving, riding a horse, mountain biking, and playing hockey. There is danger in varying degrees inerhed in nearly every activity, risks to be taken and compromises to be made. Everything has a cost. If you don’t like boxing, if it makes you squeamish, if you think that’s not a risk you’re comfortable with, I totally understand. But that’s an aesthetic choice.

Well-earned physical pain and suffering, whether it’s from grappling, walking all day, or digging dirt is sweet relief for those of us who sit on our asses too much, and that materiality promises an encounter with trust and solidarity. Maybe that’s why I’m standing ringside after a long, immobile day writing emails, finishing an article, and applying for a grant. I’m vertical, and there are real people, real sounds, and real action around me. There is a physical encounter here that’s soaking into the immateriality of my day. There is immediacy, instead of a-temporality. It’s right here in front of me, and I flinch as a young man gets his elbow dislocated.

A more just and equitable world is one where we are willing to encounter the consequences of our actions and make ethical individual and collective choices. Capitalism insists that it is reasonable for an old-growth watershed to be sacrificed or workers to be downsized or land to be colonized in the name of growth and efficiency. A better world requires us being able to resist that logic and claim that some things are incommensurable: they do not adhere to market logic.

If we abandon or condescend to sports, we lose a valuable and fertile route to a world where people are more than industrial inputs: a world where people can trust and rely on each other. Sports are hardly the only way we can bodily encounter trust, but they are a specific and irreplaceable one, in no small part due to their physicality. Fighting, like all sports, requires trust, without which larger notions of solidarity and community are impossible. Why is it that after almost every bout combatants gratefully and effusively hug each other, check to make sure each other is alright, and give thanks that no one was really hurt?

The immediacy of these physical encounters forces us to face the consequences of our actions, putting our ethical choices into living color. Every time you agree to fight someone, you are placing a huge amount of trust and faith in them. There is the very real possibility that they can damage you, maybe badly. In any fight, you have to take care of the other, and pull up before anything ugly happens: you have to believe that when you tap they’re going to stop. Sometimes it doesn’t work. Sometimes that trust is misplaced. Overwhelmingly, though, that trust is validated. In team sports there is another layer of mutual aid involved, when you not only enter a series of agreements with your opponents, but with your teammates as well.

WITHIN STRIKING DISTANCE
The lived experience of giving and granting trust is a precondition for mutuality, or in a more abstracted, politicized rendition: solidarity. There are lots of other places to encounter this kind of mutuality, say doing work with others, but sports are one highly accessible and joyful route. Trust is necessarily bound up with the possibility of
suffering, and in an antiseptic and duplicitous era, that’s an attractive commodity to many—ergo the phenomenon of fake memoirs. James Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* is the flag-bearer for this genre—but there is a boatload of these clowns. Frey is a rich-kid frat boy who claimed a life of unbelievable drug and alcohol abuse, violence, Mafia relationships, and general chaos so extreme that it turned his “memoir” into a critically-lauded bestseller. Pretty much none of it was true and he got famously flogged for it.

But he is hardly alone. Over the course of multiple celebrated Oprah appearances, and in a book intended for publication in 2009 (but cancelled), Herman Rosenblat claimed that he met his wife through the fence at Buchenwald. He actually is a concentration camp survivor, but his love story and many details of his book are fantasy. In 2008, Margaret Seltzer, a rich, white suburban girl pawned off *Love and Consequences*, a memoir of growing up as a half-white and half-Native foster child, living a bad-ass life of drugs and violence as a Blood gang member. She even faked a thug accent in radio interviews, until she was exposed and the book pulled.

Then there’s the weirdness of JT LeRoy who has written a bunch of books, articles, and screenplays as a once-homeless, transgender, sex-working, oft-abused drug addict. But LeRoy is a middle-aged straight woman named Laura Albert who was eventually outed (and now sued) after a long investigation. Michael Gambino published *The Honored Society* in 2001, pretending to be a full-on Mafiosa who spent significant time in jail for murder, pimping, money laundering and all the rest. None of it was true. In 1997, Misha Defonseca wrote a massive European bestseller about being a Holocaust survivor, killing a German soldier, and living with a pack of wolves (!). It was B.S. In 1995, Binjamin Wilkomirksi wrote a similar Holocaust survival story that was hugely popular and won plenty of literary awards. Also total B.S.

There are tons of other examples of memoir-deception, both recent and historical, many of them prominent hoaxes. The thread that runs through these stories is the presumption of authenticity in describing a life of trauma and pain. These fake memoirs are all characterized by their “gritty realism” and their witness to “horrifying reality.” A huge proportion of fake memoirs are written by people pretending to be indigenous or Holocaust survivors.

Nasdijj, for example, wrote three acclaimed and awarded books, starting with 2000’s *The Blood Runs Like A River Through My Dreams*, about growing up Navajo, his brutal childhood and abusive parents, eventually adopting an FAS kid, then an HIV+ child. *Esquire* reviewed it as an “authentic, important book.... Unfailingly honest and very nearly perfect.” Except it was a total lie. He’s a white guy from Michigan named Tim Barrus.

All these books claimed authenticity on the basis of suffering. Misery lit is a boom sector of the flailing publishing world, and from Frank McCourt to Dave Pelzer to Augusten Burroughs, offering up personal grief has made for good business, so it’s hardly any wonder that a few folks with less-than-traumatic lives have given it their best shot, reality notwithstanding.

It’s not just books either. Memoir is a fluid genre, and much of the hiphop I listen to is predicated on streetness. I love 50 Cent, but how would I feel if all his bravado and macho bullshit was a total lie? *He got shot like I got shot but he ain’t fuckin’ breathing.* I presume that thug rappers are habitually full of shit about their heroics, but at least I