



Ball Don't Lie:

Connecting Adolescents, Sports, and Literature

Linking Sports and Literacy (Alan Brown)

A few months ago, a group of middle and high school media specialists invited me to help them consider approaches for engaging reluctant male readers. I thought long and hard about my own experiences, both as a reluctant male reader and as a teacher of reluctant readers. To begin to respond to such a query, I suggested, meant that we must first ponder several equally important questions:

- What are students doing instead of reading?
- In what literary practices are they already engaged outside of school?
- How can educators connect current extracurricular interests with ongoing curricular activities?
- How can books further develop this connection?
- How can reading push students toward new ideas, understandings, and ways of being in the world?

Over the course of our discussion, we began to realize what I sus-

pect many of us, somewhere deep down, already knew: in the 21st century, *reluctant* readers can no longer be expected to stroll purposefully into school and/or classroom libraries of their own free will. There are simply too many other places for them to stroll. In a digital, global world containing countless competitors to the act of reading, we must answer the call to present students with texts that offer innovative twists on the activities of their everyday lives.

For the infinite number of boys and girls who spend an exorbitant amount of time playing and/or watching sports, promoting reading can be a perplexing conundrum. I often hear teenagers acknowledging how they despise sitting still for the time it takes to read a book; or they view reading as a feminine activity for nonathletes; or they have never laid eyes on a male (or female), sports-loving English teacher or media specialist; or they have never seen an athletics coach pick up a real book. Their words are disheartening on many levels, and there are no easy answers for promoting reading with this group of reluctant and/or struggling readers. How-

ever, with the essential questions listed above as a pedagogical framework, educators and media specialists can begin to paint a portrait of sports-loving adolescents before turning to the books needed to engage their innate curiosities. What follows is a brief glimpse of this portrait.

It was the summer of 1991. Two ten-year-old boys—Dustin and Alan—found themselves sequestered in Dustin's basement collaborating on a writing project with an enthusiasm unlike any they had ever known in school. Together, these boys formed an inexperienced, albeit dynamic, duo of novice researchers, writers, editors, artists, and publishers. Their work schedule was grueling, yet the boys found their project nothing short of exhilarating. Spread across the room, the tools of literacy surrounded them: paper, pencils, newspapers, magazines, books, and baseball cards. Yes, baseball cards.

The boys' intention was to produce a magazine centered on the game of baseball (imagine a cross between *Sports Illustrated for Kids* and *Beckett Baseball Card Monthly*). Ideas were bandied about as they

poured over statistics on the back of cards, checked box scores in the local newspaper, borrowed ideas from the articles of their ‘competitors,’ and flipped through the occasional biography of a sports legend (e.g., Babe Ruth, Jackie Robinson) in search of historical relevance. Handwritten editorials and featured news stories—fiction and nonfiction alike—were the primary sources of content, although photographs and advertisements were cut from magazines or drawn by hand to provide aesthetic appeal. The boys’ motivation came from a sense of accomplishment that increased gradually one article at a time and lasted long past the close of the business day—when one of their mothers would call for supper.

Dustin, my next-door neighbor of many years, and I never received fame or fortune from our publication. In fact, our unfinished masterpiece never saw the light of day, and our fascination eventually gave way to some other adolescent curiosity. Nevertheless, sports were instrumental in fostering our interest in reading and writing. Twenty years later, Dustin is a screen writer (motto: have Mac . . . will travel) whose interests lie in fiction and creative writing. I, on the other hand, am a former high school English teacher and basketball coach now working as a teacher educator in the field of English education.

As a kid, Dustin used reading (e.g., comics, sports) as an escape from the daily realities of childhood, while I focused a very limited interest in reading on various forms of sports-related media (e.g., newspaper and magazines articles). Although sports were regularly a topic of conversation among



our classmates in the academic classroom, these discussions were almost always internally motivated and rarely connected to any official academic conversation. Over the years, the relatively few teachers who spoke of sports were generally athletic coaches, many of whom were often more concerned about athletics than the content they were charged with teaching. In other words, my extracurricular interest in sports and the curriculum of my academic courses rarely came together in any meaningful fashion.

I was not introduced to young adult literature (YAL) until my junior year of college. While times have changed and YAL now has a more prominent place in libraries and English classrooms, there remains much to be learned about how to engage reluctant readers in various literacy practices. Looking back, I realize that one of the most influential curiosities of my adolescent life was never considered as a way to increase my interest in reading. While sports are all too often considered an extracurricular, physical activity that pulls students away from more curricular, academic responsibilities, this extracurricular interest is precisely

the connection that many students need to help foster a love of reading.

With this in mind, consider the story of Trey (pseudonym), a student I taught in English 9 and coached on the junior varsity (JV) basketball team many years ago. Trey was a thoughtful and kind young man who was the oldest of many siblings in a single-parent home. His love of basketball was second only to his love of family, and he would do anything to make sure his brothers and sisters had proper care. Trey was by far the smallest player on our team, and he was also one of the few white players. In the classroom, he was a reluctant reader with a lack of self-confidence; on the court, he was a point guard with a below average jump shot. Yet, in both arenas—the English classroom and the basketball court—Trey had a strong work ethic and an unquenchable desire to improve. As a basketball player, he had a remarkable gift for passing and ball-handling. For those of you who know the game, Trey’s court vision was compared by some to former NBA standout Jason Williams. In retrospect, perhaps a more apt comparison would be to Sticky, the protagonist in Matt de la Peña’s (2005) YA novel *Ball Don’t Lie*, an ALA-YALSA Best Book for Young Adults.

Sticky is a high school sophomore who grew up playing ball in the streets of Los Angeles while being shuffled back and forth between foster parents. In his search for a place of belonging, he finds a home on court one of Lincoln Rec amidst hustlers, drug dealers, and the homeless. In a world that tells him he is worthless, Sticky finds

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his own self-worth on the basketball court with a ball in his hand. And even though Sticky is a young white male, he discovers family among a group of older and more experienced black males at Lincoln Rec. Over the course of the novel, Sticky battles Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) as well as the pressures of school, basketball, and relationships, and he begins to recognize one universal truth: in the games of life and basketball, you will win some, and you will lose some. And while we may regularly lie to ourselves or others, there is one thing all ball players know for sure: the ball never lies.

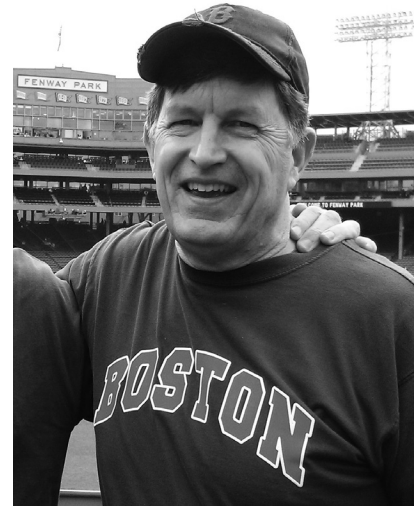
I came across *Ball Don't Lie* two years after teaching Trey, and by then, he had transferred to another school, and we had lost touch. Nevertheless, I believe Trey would have liked Sticky, and I suspect Sticky would have liked Trey as well. As teachers, if our goal is to provide books that appeal to students' extra-curricular interests and out-of-school literacies, we must first connect them to

books about characters with whom they can relate—protagonists who are confronted with situations both familiar and unfamiliar and who act in expected and unexpected ways. Reluctant readers like Trey, and like me, may ultimately depend on sports as an entry point into reading.

I now know that the kid I used to be would have enjoyed getting to know Jerry from Robert Cormier's (1974) *The Chocolate War*, Felton from Geoff Herbach's (2011) *Stupid Fast*, Junior from Sherman Alexie's (2007) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, T. J. from Chris Crutcher's (2001) *Whale Talk*, Slam from Walter Dean Myers's (1996) *Slam!*, and Nick from Carl Deuker's (2000) *Night Hoops*. Unfortunately, the use of sports as an entry point into literacy is often underutilized and, as Chris Crowe can attest, making connections between students and protagonists in YA sports novels is another underutilized opportunity in many English classrooms and school media centers across the country. We hope teachers and media specialists will keep this in mind when their next sports enthusiast walks in the door without a book in hand.

Sports Literature for Young Adults (Chris Crowe)

Years ago when I interviewed for a job as a high school English teacher and football coach, the principal told me that in order to be considered, I would first need the approval of the English department chair. To get her approval, I would have to convince her that I was an English teacher first and a coach



second. He did not need to explain that coaches (and athletes and sports in general) generally seem out of place in secondary English departments, perhaps owing to the fact that in their intense dedication to literature and language, many English teachers do not have room for extracurricular stuff, especially when that stuff is sports-related.

Sports literature sometimes faces similar barriers when trying to enter the secondary English curriculum. Some teachers dismiss it simply because it is not canonical; others may consider it a poorly written subgenre unworthy of literary study; still others may simply be ignorant of its existence. Finally, a few English teachers, still smarting from unpleasant encounters with PE classes, coaches, rabid fans, or bully athletes may reject sports literature because they loathe sports and anything connected to it.

And there's the shame.

Of course, I know that English classes cannot cover everything and that teachers have to make decisions based on curricular require-

ments, the availability of texts, and other considerations, but given the pervasive presence of sports in modern culture and the growing number of students involved in sports, teachers who dodge sports literature are missing a chance to engage their students in books that offer relevance, interest, and, dare I say it, literary quality.

English teachers and their students should know that while not every sports novel hits it out of the park, there are plenty that do. The key is to remember that fine YA sports novels are about people and the complications that entangle them, not about games. In his novel *The Huge Season*, Wright Morris has two characters discussing this very point:

“What’s your novel about?” I said and glanced at the yellow sheets on the desk. A small pile of typed sheets were in the case for his typewriter. A big photograph of Lawrence, smashing one away, was under the jelly glass full of sharpened pencils. “It wouldn’t be about a tennis player?” I said.

He wiped his face with the towel again. “Old man, a book can have Chicago in it, and not be about Chicago. It can have a tennis player in it without being about a tennis player.”

I didn’t get it. I probably looked it, for he went on,

“Take this book here, old man—” and held up one of the books he had swiped from some library. Along with the numbers I could see Hemingway’s name on the spine. “There’s a prizefighter in it, old man, but it’s not about a prizefighter.” (p. 179)

English teachers need to remember that good sports novels are really just novels, and as such, they provide opportunities for discussion of literary elements as well as discussion of important

social issues such as bullying, peer pressure, drug and alcohol abuse, bigotry, emotional illness, and nearly anything else that is relevant in modern society—and in the lives of our students. Given the opportunity, YA sports novels can accomplish nearly all the same academic purposes that other literary forms do; the thread of sports that runs through the narrative may, for many readers, be a value-added feature that makes the text more relevant, more interesting, and more likely to be read, especially by students who consider themselves reluctant readers.

I am not saying that our traditional literature offerings should be replaced by YA sports literature, but I am suggesting that teachers should consider adding

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sports literature into the rotation. To do so, teachers must be selective; there are many sports books to choose from, some more literary than others, some more socially relevant than others, some better written than others. (Perhaps those that are best suited for use in secondary English classes are the types of novels I’ve labeled *sportleroman*—coming-of-age stories of athletes. See my article in *School*

Library Journal (2005) for more on this.) And the sports content varies as well. While there are a handful of excellent books that deal with so-called minor sports like soccer, wrestling, field hockey, and swimming, most of the games at the heart of YA sports novels tend to be the same games that dominate the US sports marketplace: football, basketball, and baseball. And, for reasons I cannot explain, despite the huge increase in girls’ participation in interscholastic sports since the advent of Title IX, most YA sports novels feature male protagonists.

For teachers thinking about adding some YA sports literature to their literary lineups, the good news is that the YAL sports landscape is changing and improving. Veterans like Robert Lipsyte, Chris Crutcher, and Rich Wallace continue to publish excellent books, but they are now joined by a crew of talented younger authors like Matt de la Peña and Matthew Quick, as well as by some equally talented *female* authors like Sharon Flake, Donna Freitas, Lisa Luedeke, and Sarah Skilton. As the audience for these books grows, it will encourage publishers to continue to support authors who choose to tell their stories from an athlete’s perspective. This added encouragement will only help to make YA sports literature more accessible and more relevant to a wider range of teen readers than ever before.

Alan Brown is an assistant professor of English education at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. His research interests include aspects of secondary teacher education, ELA supervision, and

adolescent literacy, as well as various intersections of sport, education, and society. He can be reached at brownma@wfu.edu. For more information on his work with sports literacy, check out his blog at <http://sportsliteracy.wordpress.com/>.

Chris Crowe teaches courses in creative writing and English education in the English department at Brigham Young University. His lifelong interest in sports literature led to the publication of *More Than a Game: Sports*

Literature for Young Adults (*Scarecrow*, 2004). His next historical YA novel, *Death Coming up the Hill*, will be published by Harcourt in 2014. He can be reached at chris_crowe@byu.edu.

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Call for Manuscripts: Themed Issue of *English Journal*

Guest Editors Alan Brown (Wake Forest University) and Chris Crowe (Brigham Young University) are calling for articles for the theme **A Whole New Ballgame: Sports and Culture in the English Classroom** for the September 2014 issue of *English Journal*. Love sports or hate them, it's hard to deny their prominence in American society and their popularity with twenty-first-century adolescents. Interscholastic athletics in particular can play a significant role in the overall culture of a school and have a substantial impact on students' daily lives. Despite this influence, the topic of sports in society is often absent from the professional conversations of English teachers, an exclusion that could prove to be a missed opportunity. This issue will examine the possibilities for both utilizing and critiquing the culture of sports as a means of increasing student engagement and promoting student learning in the English classroom. Within this context, we seek manuscripts that explore the intersection of literacy, sport, culture, and society, and we encourage column submissions devoted to this same theme.

A number of important questions guide this issue: What connections or disconnections exist between the perceived physical nature of athletics and the mental nature of academics? What real-world associations have you made between sports and the English curriculum? How can sports-related texts (e.g., young adult literature, canonical literature, graphic novels, poetry, nonfiction, magazines, newspapers) be integrated into the academic culture of an English class? How have you promoted the teaching of 21st century skills through the use of sports-related media, film, and technology? What possibilities exist for interdisciplinary (e.g., historical, political, scientific, social) connections to sports across content areas? How have you engaged students in critical dialogue about our societal emphasis on sports? How can we extend the definition of sport to be more inclusive for students of diverse cultures, races, genders, ethnicities, and abilities? How can an examination of sports culture open the door to discussions of other cultures that exist in school and society?

With questions or comments about this themed issue of *English Journal*, please contact guest editors Alan Brown (brownma@wfu.edu) or Chris Crowe (chris_crowe@byu.edu). **Deadline: January 15, 2014.**