



BOOK IN REVIEW: A TEACHING GUIDE

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From Rec Leagues to Elite Clubs:

How the Game Changes

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When I was in junior high, I was 5'9" and 115 lbs. I literally stood out when all I wanted was to fit in. My limbs craved movement, so I tried every school sport. First season, I was a foot taller than every other girl who tried out for cheer-leading (and had no rhythm), so I was cut. I had no stamina for running, but cross country was a no-cut sport, so I showed up and accepted the pity applause when I was last—over and over. Second season, I tried basketball, thinking it was a natural fit for a tall girl, but it wasn't good for a girl with a temper. In the final season of the school year, my basketball coach suggested I try volleyball: no physical contact. I had visions from gym class of a serve trailing off, bopping me in the back of the head. However, I still hadn't found my calling and desperately wanted to be good at something. I tried out and made the team.

It wasn't long before I discovered what happens once the serve actually goes over the net, when a teammate actually knows how to set the ball, and when a tall, lanky, awkward girl with a temper knows how to hit a ball really hard with just the right snap of the wrist to win cheers from her team for doing her part. I loved playing volleyball.

Mid-season, my coach came to me with a flyer about tryouts for a club team. The team was known for grooming players for college scholarships. Practice

was at night, and there'd be weekend tournaments. To me, this meant that once the school season ended, I could still play the sport I loved.

I made the club team. At my first practice, the coach introduced us to our training gear. Long sleeve shirts that read PRESSURE on the back. Short, short shorts. Brand new kicks not to be worn outside the gym. Gardening gloves—fingers cut out—to protect our palms, and maxi pads to protect our hip bones as we learned the proper form for diving. A diet contract promising no sugar, and a log to chart our weekly weigh-ins.

Practice was no game. When a teammate missed her serve, we ran suicides. And after countless missed serves, the coaches just brought in garbage cans for us to vomit in through the pressure. Every finger jammed from blocking drills was taped for the next drill, and bags of ice awaited our knees after jump training. I was learning how to be an elite athlete, not just play volleyball.

Writing with a "Body" of Experts

As an adolescent athlete, the joy and belonging that brought me to my sport led to opportunities, but it also changed my relationship with the sport, and I did not have a place or method for processing this change—at least in a way that celebrated my expertise and invited a critical eye to my experiences.

The students in our middle and secondary classrooms have had real, valid experiences at the recreational levels in their sports or activities, and as they enter into the elite levels within and outside of

school, they see and feel how values and ideologies of the governing organizations intersect with the joy, art, and freedom that play once afforded their hearts, minds, and bodies.

The books I chose to include for this issue uncover the art, intricacy, and deep knowledge and understanding of the movement and philosophy of sport. *The Art of Holding on and Letting Go* (2016) by Kristin Bartley Lenz, *Grand Theft Horse* (2018) by G. Neri and Corban Wilkin, and *Takedown* (2018) by Laura Shovan offer readers insight into the world of mountain climbing, horse racing, and wrestling, respectively. The characters find their passion as young people, encountering obstacles as teens that interfere with their commitment to the sport they love. The rules and policies of sports at the elite level come with risks, discrimination, and regulations, disrupting the joy and blurring the physical art and pleasure that brought these characters to their sport in the first place.

Sharing these books—among many others included in this issue—during class time values youth experiences in spaces beyond the classroom: from the gyms, fieldhouses, and playgrounds of our schools to the mountains, stables, and virtual spaces where our students hone their craft and compete. And if we are to value not only the work of YA authors, but also the assets and expertise of the students with whom we share the classroom, we must prioritize time and space for them to be members of the sports literature community. Young adult literature can, perhaps should, include literature written by young adults, after all.

Within the book discussion section below, I include prompts for students to revisit the origins of their passions and to consider people, places, organizations, and rules that impact/have impacted their relationship with their sport. I encourage *you* to pause in these italicized spaces to do some journaling about your own experiences. Consider sharing your expertise (beyond English) with us on ALAN's Facebook page.

***The Art of Holding on and Letting Go* by Kristin Bartley Lenz**

Competitive mountain climber and homeschooler Cara Jenkins is competing in Ecuador when one climb changes everything for her and her family. As Cara is competing on one mountain, her parents and

uncle are attempting to summit another, but in an accident, her uncle is lost, and Cara's father won't leave Ecuador without finding him. As a result, Cara is sent to live with her grandparents in Detroit, where she will attend a traditional school for the first time. Cara feels that this is even scarier than hanging from cliffs. Determined to give up climbing in her grief, Cara restarts her life with familiar friends: Henry David Thoreau and Mary Oliver. In time, new friends lead Cara to a rock-climbing gym nearby; her body knows better than her mind what she needs to accept her new home.

In the gym, climbing is not about becoming the mountain but about navigating new terrain, figuring out how to live, to forgive, to love. Cara is reintroduced to her sport in this new space without the gaze of her parents, but with the history, stories, and people who led her to that wall.

Lenz's debut novel brings the reader into the mind of an expert climber to illuminate the art and language of climbing that only an insider would know:

I climbed on and entered my zone. Calm breaths, feeling every movement, pull, push, reach, grasp, clip the bolts one by one. Slow and steady, inch by inch, like a spider spinning a web. I was almost at the top of the wall, about to go horizontal, upside down. My core muscles tightened. The next hold looked like a big old jug but it was out of my reach. Nothing for my next footstep. I took a deep breath, smeared my foot on the wall, and sprung up to the jug. Yes, bomber! Feet up like on monkey bars, wiggle across, upside down. Clip to the anchor.
"Take."

Jake lowered me to the ground. (p.135)

In this excerpt, Cara owns her climb with the phrase "my zone." She is known in her sport for her speed in mountain-climbing competitions, but Cara takes this climb slowly. It is not for a medal; it is for her. Climbing in this new space also means Jake, not a coach or a parent, is at the base of the wall.

Lenz celebrates the independence and interdependence of climbing as she teaches readers how life

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intersects, interferes, and illuminates our humanity through sport.

Informational Writing Prompt A: What is a lesson or rule about your sport or game that only an insider—someone with a lot of knowledge and experience—would know that might help a novice (or at least save the novice from pain or embarrassment)? Extend this to include what steps a novice can take to prevent or understand this better.

I posed this question to my literacy colleagues over the summer. Here are a few of their responses:

- “In roller derby, keep your skin covered with tights or leggings; otherwise, when you fall and slide, you’ll get rink rash, which is super painful.” (Katie Burrows, middle school teacher)

- “When you’re diving in challenging conditions, you have to ward off feelings of impending doom because those feelings lead to panic, which leads to a race to the surface, which leads to blowing up your lungs.” (Lisa Doan, children’s book author)
- “I am such a salty sweater that after a long run, my legs feel like I’ve rolled in sand! It’s the salt left over after my sweat evaporates. One of my pups figured this out and started running to greet me after coming in from a run, so he could lick my legs.” (Maria Carpine Losee, national teaching consultant)

In each response, the jargon of the sport demonstrates expert knowledge—“rink rash” (Burrows) and “blowing up your lungs” (Doan)—about how the body both controls and is impacted by movement. In the asking and writing about my colleagues’ expertise, I witnessed a new dimension of their lives. Imagine what is lost in a classroom that does not invite the assets and expertise of its members.

Grand Theft Horse by G. Neri and Corban Wilkin

In this graphic biography, G. Neri retells the life of his cousin Gail Ruffu, a pioneer who challenged the horse-racing world. Gail was a rookie trainer whose humane methods were considered both unconventional and counter-intuitive by the owners, who expected to race their horses hard and to reap a quick payout on their investment. When Gail became co-owner of Urgent Envoy, she had the opportunity to prove the value of her methods (see Fig. 1).

Gail believed in caring about the horse. Her job as a trainer was to uncover what would make *that* horse a success and “let him discover his own balance and power” (p. 43). The physical and the psychological are equally important in the training regimen, and readers come to understand that Gail’s philosophy emerged from her childhood experiences with her first horse, Spice (see Fig. 2). Neri and Wilkin capture how Gail, just 14 years old, learned a profound lesson—not from an older coach or trainer, but from her horse: “Always blame the rider” (p. 72).

As a biography, *Grand Theft Horse* shows deep knowledge and understanding about how involvement in sport can start young and has the potential to deepen or distort in encounters with organizations that regulate and commodify the players. When Gail’s co-owners try to force her to race Urgent Envoy too

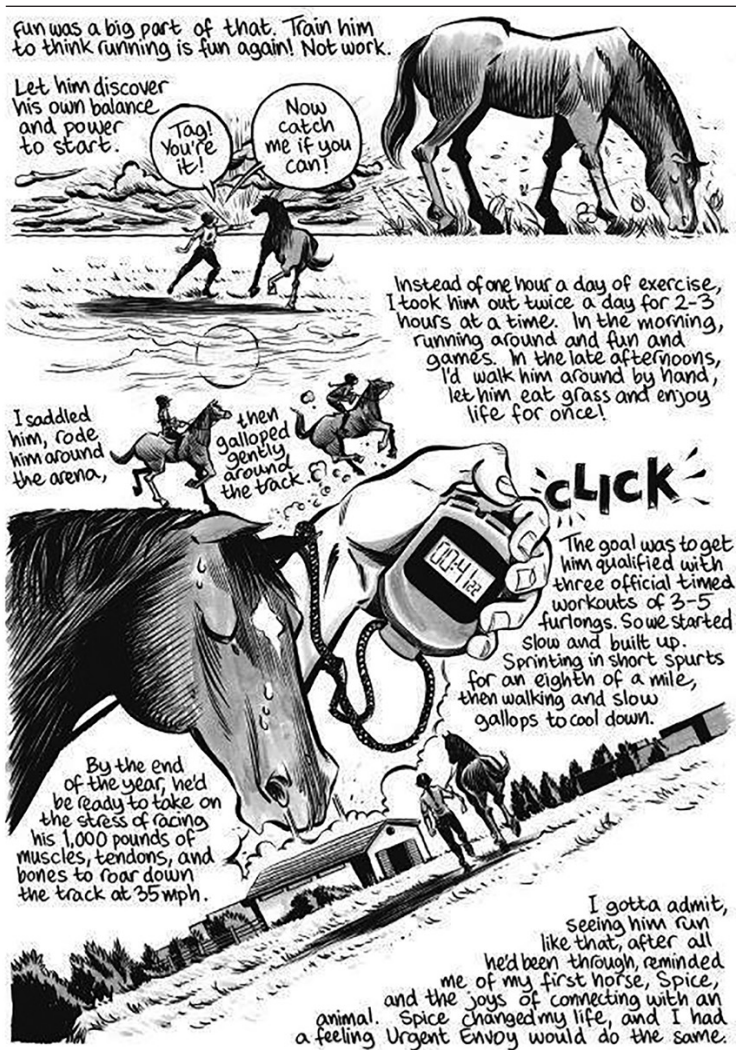


Figure 1. Gail Ruffu’s training method



Figure 2. Gail Ruffu's first horse

early, she gives in, which results in an injury to the horse. Gail refuses to drug Urgent Envoy to get him racing again, so she “rescues” her own horse, sneaking him out of his stable and hiding him from the other owners and their private investigators.

The racing powers blacklist her, revoke her license, and label her a criminal, but she stands up to the organization all the way to the Supreme Court for the racehorses she loves.

Argument Writing Prompt B: What is a rule, policy, or issue in your sport or game that is a problem or controversy, something that causes players, coaches, parents, or broadcasters to argue or debate passionately? Explain the problem. Consider the causes and if it is due to misunderstanding, a difference of values, conflicts of interests, etc. Then, offer some solutions.

Takedown by Laura Shovan

Mykala and Lev are wrestlers. Mykala (Mickey) is the only daughter of a wrestling family, and as her brothers compete for the Eagles, their high school team, she, still in middle school, is ready to follow in their footsteps on a traveling team. When the Eagles won't let her wrestle because she is a girl, Mickey joins the rival team, the Gladiators, where she meets Lev, who wrestles in her weight class and becomes her partner. Mickey and Lev don't get along at first, but they soon realize that they can help one another meet their goals. For Lev, it is winning state, but Mickey has other reasons for wrestling:

Wrestling is my family's thing. When my parents divorced, Dad put all his attention on wrestling. He's the one who takes my brothers to their weekend tournaments and signs them up for summer camps with famous wrestlers. Mom said the only way I'd get to spend time with him was if I went along to watch my brothers compete. Ever since then, I've wanted to be a wrestler like Evan and Cody, like my dad was in high school. It's in my DNA. (p. 17)

For Mickey, wrestling is so much more than an activity or hobby. Tournaments and trophies mean car rides and donuts with her dad.

Narrative Writing Prompt C: Tell the story of how you were first introduced to your sport or game. Take us into the moment with the setting. Move into dialogue. Recapture or reimagine what was said and how you responded. End with your first impressions of the sport or game and how you felt about it. Consider what has changed since.

Donald M. Murray (2008) writes: “We write not to say what we know, but to learn, to discover, to know. Writing is thinking, exploring, finding out” (p. 37). As published authors, Lenz, Neri, and Shovan know this. And if you responded to the writing prompts above, you have likely discovered or *uncovered* something new about your relationship with your sport.

Sports literature can open the door for students to share their expertise in sports and other passion activities because sports stories value the time people spend beyond classroom walls developing their minds *and* bodies.

Sports and Games: A Blog Series

In my junior high English language arts classes, students write a blog series digging into the fissures of their passions. We use Kidblog, a platform that allows writers to choose their audience, embed media, and customize. Students write to share aspects of their identity, trouble certain beliefs or perceptions about their sport, and celebrate their commitment to being part of that community.

By blogging in a range of text structures—how-to (informational), problem-solution (argument), story (narrative)—students discover writing to teach others, engage critically, and reflect on their journey. Student bloggers have an opportunity to reveal expertise and disrupt stereotypes or misconceptions for their audience (peers, teachers, and parents).

The drafts students write in response to the prompts can be revised writing-workshop style. For each piece, teachers can model how to revise, using the features of the specific text structure (see Table 1). Pair students to use the table as a guide for feedback and revisions. When students are ready to publish, review the text features and discuss how images, charts, and illustrations can support the content in meaningful ways.

Last year, students wrote their blog series on sports they played *or* watched. A swimmer wrote these blog posts: a) Success with Starts: How to Perform a Start off the Block, b) Finding the Right Pace, and c) A Glimpse into the Life of a Swimmer. Of course, not every student plays or enjoys sports or games, but every student does have a passion, so welcome all expertise. One student wrote a blog series

Table 1. Text structures for a blog series

	Informational (How-to)	Argument (Problem-Solution)	Narrative
Title	Events Leading to X Steps to Learn X How to X	How do we solve X? How can we prevent X? What is the best way to X? What can be done about X?	Try developing a title <i>after</i> you write the story; consider using a phrase from the story.
Beginning	A personal story—a descriptive scene using sensory language (smell, taste, touch, sound, feeling).	A definition of the problem <i>or</i> a story of the cause or effect of the problem; focus on showing its impact.	Sensory setting (smell, sounds, temperature, place, time of day); action (start at the big moment, then go back to the beginning); or dialogue (launch right into a conversation from that day).
Middle	What did you learn? Why does it matter? What language or terms do readers need to know—define and explain. What steps can readers take to be more successful?	Explain the issue. Define terms or titles/functions of the different people/organizations involved. What is the problem? Why? For whom? Can it be solved, resolved, or just reduced? With what resources? What will be the evidence that the solution has been successful?	Show a sequence of scenes with dialogue, character interactions, and places; use colors, shapes, objects, textures.
Ending	What is the impact of this information on the participant, sport, or game? Use specific words, such as joy, teamwork, understanding, etc.	Discuss what will happen if we ignore this issue. Is there a time limit? What steps should readers take or consider? Is there an organization that is in control that readers can contact?	Generate a circular ending, or end as you began. Perhaps add a reflection of how your relationships to the people and sport/game have changed over time.
Signal Words	first, second, then, finally, before, meanwhile, later, during	consequently, therefore, as a result, because, may be due to, dilemma, factor, problematic, situation	when, before, after, meanwhile; figures of speech (simile, metaphor, personification)
Text Features	photographs of each step; a chart or infographic; a video	chart, timeline, diagram, subheadings, table, map, glossary of terms, works cited	photographs from the memory

on baking: a) How to Frost a Cake, b) Overbeating, and c) The Sweet Life of Adriano Zumbo. Another student wanted to write a blog series about his home country, Iraq. Even though he was a huge soccer fan, he wanted to use the blog to dispel myths about Iraq: a) How to Find and Eat at Good Restaurants in Iraq, b) The Impact of the Iraqi War against ISIS, and c) Do I Look Like a Terrorist?

To reveal the rich experiences of the class and develop a culture that values everyone's voice and expertise, be sure to dedicate time for reading the posts after publication and for commenting on one another's writing. Here are a few sentence stems that promote text-based responses:

- I can relate to the part " _____ " because _____.
- When you wrote " _____," I felt _____ because _____.
- Until I read " _____," I had not considered _____ because _____.
- I noticed you used (signal word, figurative language, lead, text feature) _____; it's effective because _____.
- A beautiful sentence/phrase you wrote is _____; what strikes me is _____.

Final Thoughts

We look to sports literature to value, invite, and share students' passions from beyond the classroom walls. From novice recreational leagues to elite sports clubs, students carry stories, and as their role in that sport or hobby shifts, they will have questions and opinions

about its policies and traditions. When teachers book-talk a book about sports or share stories about sports in the classroom, they value sports and what they do for us and our communities. And when teachers ask students to write about sports, they are inviting students to share their lives with one another; this shapes the culture of the classroom and also changes how students think about reading and writing.

By the time I was a senior in high school, I had several offers to play volleyball in college. My training had paid off. But I no longer loved the game; in fact, I resented it. I declined the scholarships and paid my own way through school, never wanting to step foot on a sports court again. These days, I prefer beach volleyball.

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