

Reviews

Examining Identity in Sports Media. Edited by Heather Hundley and Andrew Billings. SAGE Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2010, 279 p. (cloth, \$69.95) ISBN: 9781412954594; (paper, \$39.95) ISBN: 9781412954600.

Because sport can shape society as much as society shapes sport, identity has been studied in a variety of disciplines and contexts. Nowhere, however, is the negotiation for identity more apparent, and overlooked, than in the media. Some scholars argue that sport and the sports media highlight and amplify identity divisions while others tout its global appeal as a vehicle for social change. *Examining Identity in Sports Media*, edited by Heather Hundley and Andrew Billings, combines a range of quantitative, qualitative and rhetorical methodologies from both psychological and sociological perspectives, and is a smartly compiled and well-organized attempt to bridge the understanding of identity in these various disciplines and contexts.

Both sport and the media are arenas where issues of identity, such as ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation, are formed and perpetuated. *Examining Identity in Sports Media* was compiled under the assumption that individuals who follow their favorite national or international team in the media are at the same time using that media coverage to negotiate their cultural niche – either consciously or subconsciously. The book contributes to an area that many sports fans and scholars often take for granted – how the sports media and the games they cover influence social identity construction.

The book's chapters are organized according to the identity variables of gender, sexual orientation, nationalism, race and disability. These variables are admirably presented and addressed as both singular, amalgamable variables and complex processes exemplified by particular cases. In the opening chapter, Marie Hardin and Erin Whiteside generalize the case of former Penn State basketball coach Rene Portland to a broader moral and cultural context. Kim Bissell then analyzes the psychological effects of sports media on adolescent girls, Lindsey Mean looks at identity construction through the websites of the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and World Cup, and Lawrence Wenner examines the intersection of gender, sport, media and beer. Next, Bryan Denham, Andrea Duke and Michael Butterworth shift from gender to the negotiation of nationalism with their studies of newspaper coverage of doping allegations surrounding Lance Armstrong and theatrical text in the 2004 movie *Miracle*. Mary McDonald shifts to an examination of race by studying the concept of Whiteness, and Benjamin Goss, Andrew Tyler and Andrew Billings then move to an analysis of professional basketball players on the covers of *Sports Illustrated*. The variable of disability is introduced by James Cherney and Kurt Lindemann with an analysis of the 2005 documentary *Murderball*, and in the final chapters, Jennings Bryant, R. Glenn Cummins and-

Kelby Halone focus not on specific identity variables, but on the people who use them to self-identify.

Despite the development and popularity of women's professional leagues and a six-fold increase in the percentage of girls playing team sports, the opening chapters of *Examining Identity in Sports Media* illustrate how females and homosexuals have become increasingly marginalized in the hegemonically masculine and heterosexual sports media. Although gay athletes and issues are covered more sympathetically in today's sports media, Hardin and Whiteside argue that silence governed by a "don't ask, don't tell" policy still perpetuates homophobia and heterosexism. Critics have argued that much of the sports media relies on social and cultural layering that, by ignoring homosexuality, normalizes heterosexuality and renders female athletes powerless. Although Lance Armstrong was portrayed as a hero as much for overcoming testicular cancer as winning the Tour de France seven times, Denham and Duke posit in their article that the same hegemonic masculinity dictates that female athletes, and especially lesbian female athletes, threaten the natural male-female dichotomy.

Likewise, Mean contends that soccer's regulating organization, the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), is a global force in shaping a vastly white, heterosexual and masculine culture. As a result, homosexuality, femininity and racial minorities are necessarily othered, providing the ends of gender and sexual orientation dichotomies which cannot exist without opposing poles. The editors argue that, at least explicitly, their book is free of such good-bad and right-wrong dichotomies, yet fail to acknowledge how pointing out the existence of one end of a dichotomy can spur more discussion—and lead to more books like *Examining Identity in Sports Media*—than a prolonged repression of both. Also, in describing the aim of their book, Hundley and Billings characterize the power of the media to affect identity construction as a subtle shading, while many of the individual articles assume a much more powerful shaping.

Nevertheless, Kim Bissel's chapter, "Exploring the Influence of Mediated Beauty," is a particularly useful prescription for educating girls about problematic media portrayals of beauty. Despite recent evidence that sports result in lifelong improvements to educational, work and health prospects for women, statistics linked to some forms of media exposure show alarming numbers of young—and increasingly younger—girls with eating disorders and appearance anxiety. Just as the sports media perpetuate hegemonic masculinity by ignoring homophobia, the media can propagate an attractiveness ideal through constant and consistent repetition, ultimately requiring girls to become—and buy—what society demands. In a society whose most well-known sports magazine publishes an annual swimsuit edition, Bissel asks if adolescent sports participation is at all influential in shaping the way girls think about beauty. She posits that because higher levels of media consumption were linked with lower self-esteem and young athletes reported having little time to consume media, participation in sports can be a displacement activity for watching television, reducing the likelihood of eating disorders and appearance anxiety. But, while playing sports themselves can overcome the negative effects of sports media exposure, media coverage of athletes who young girls try to

emulate on the field can also foment a cycle of perpetual silence similar, and perhaps contradictory to that argued by Hardin and Whiteside.

By textually analyzing how female athletes are covered through a hegemonic lens, Hardin and Whiteside argue that in the case of Rene Portland, the sports media validated silence about hegemonic sexual politics in sports by shying away from covering issues of homophobia. But, with shrinking budgets and space, the fact that journalists rarely cover meaningful issues beyond the field or court is not new, and neither should the seeming reluctance of journalists to cover homophobia. This is just as much a problem of journalism as homophobia. Nevertheless, as media spectacles surrounding sporting events become more pervasive – this year's Super Bowl eclipsed the final episode of MASH as the most-watched television program in U.S. history – they are inherently linked with the ways in which people self-identify. *Examining Identity in Sports Media* is an illustrative source for students and educators to learn the processes through which these links develop. Its twelve chapters effectively show how destructive a profit-driven media's failure, or unwillingness, to recognize its power to either shade or shape identity can potentially be. Ultimately, this collection of work fosters a much-needed dialogue that, if nothing else, makes the issue of identity construction lastingly salient in an alarmingly silent sports media.

David Deluliis
College of Communications
Penn State University