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# On the block: race, gender, and power in the NFL draft

Thomas Patrick Oates  
*University of Iowa*

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ON THE BLOCK:  
RACE, GENDER, AND POWER IN THE NFL DRAFT

by

Thomas Patrick Oates

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree  
in Mass Communications in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2004

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Judy Polumbaum

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation takes a feminist approach to gender and race construction in the National Football League (NFL) draft (an annual meeting where teams select contract rights to the best amateur players), which has recently spawned a proliferation of media coverage. The analysis considers the political/economic conditions and the journalistic practices that have helped shape the mediated NFL draft, together with a critical analysis of the draft texts produced by, and related to, ESPN between 2000 and 2002. The texts considered include ESPN's televised coverage of the draft, the content contained on ESPN.com's special NFL draft section and ESPN analyst Mel Kiper, Jr.'s annual subscription draft guide.

I read the draft as an attempt to position discursively the (mostly black) draft prospects as commodities. The draft represents an emerging strategy that positions audiences as "virtual owners" of athletes. This formulation has emerged alongside widespread beliefs about Black athletic dominance and anxieties over the "disappearance" of white athletes.

In this dissertation, I analyze several dimensions of this discourse, including the commodification of prospects, the creation of docile bodies, and its erotic undercurrents.

Abstract Approved: \_\_\_\_\_  
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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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PH.D. THESIS

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For Rebecca  
Who survived it.

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## INTRODUCTION

### BLACK ATHLETIC “DOMINANCE” AND THE CRISIS FOR WHITE MASCULINITY

Each spring, the National Football League (NFL) holds its Annual Selection Meeting. The draft, as it is more commonly known, culminates a four month-process of assessment and analysis, as NFL teams claim the draft rights to unsigned players. Teams are offered opportunities to draft players in the reverse order of the teams’ finish in the league standings the year before. Barring trades, the last place team picks first, the team with the league’s best record picks last. The draft is the culmination of a long process where prospects are subjected to intense analysis. Prospects perform for scouts, coaches, general managers, and owners in numerous workouts, physicals, and interviews. Statistics on bodily dimensions and ability are gathered, and prospects are converted into commodities that are finally available for sale in the draft.

At first glance, the draft seems a rather unpromising topic for producing a media spectacle. The draft process is missing most of the traditional elements of mediated athletics. There is no live display of athletic ability. There are no clear winners or losers. The first round of the 2002 draft took five hours to complete. For years, it was conducted in a hotel lobby and passed without much public notice. No networks even considered covering it and except for a few die-hards, few sports fans looked forward to it.

Twenty-five years later, that has all changed. The draft is held in Madison Square Garden’s theatre before thousands of screaming fans who attend the draft in full costume. It is widely covered by the sporting press. The 2002 NFL draft was covered by over 30 subscription-funded websites, at least five published guides, and dominated sports page

headlines across the United States. ESPN carries the full seventeen hours of the draft live, and extensively documents each pick on its web site. The draft regularly coincides with the National Basketball Association (NBA) and National Hockey League (NHL) playoffs, as well as with televised weekend baseball games. Yet ESPN estimates that more than 25 million people watched at least part of the 2002 draft (nearly twice the number that tune into the average televised NFL game). The 1999 draft drew a significantly larger television audience than Wayne Gretzky's much-hyped final professional hockey game (Freeman 2002). And interest in the draft seems to be growing. In 2002, ratings for the draft grew by seven percent over 2001's effort, even while the ratings for that year's Superbowl remained stagnant. These numbers, and the growing number of publications devoted to the draft suggest that a great number of American sports fans have more than a passing interest in the draft.

The mediated draft presents each draftee and many potential picks in meticulous detail. The guides and the televised draft seek to assign value to each prospect. They characterize some prospects as bargains and others as risky, and try to forecast the draft based on an analysis of the "needs" of each team. In other words, the media coverage of the draft converts players into commodities in very deliberate ways.

This dissertation explores the discourses that have helped to make the draft so popular. It argues that the draft's remarkable popularity is in part attributable to the stories it constructs around race and gender. In an age when Blacks are perceived as athletically dominant, especially in macho team sports like football and basketball, the draft serves to reassert the white male power structure by positioning increasingly non-white athletic bodies as commodities, and fans as virtual owners of these bodies. As

commodities, draftees are ideally positioned to be judged, controlled, directed and admired. While it is not the only site for the deployment of this new strategy, the NFL draft presents an excellent example for the analysis of its features. But before that analysis can proceed, the political and cultural conditions that provoked it must be established.

### **The NFL and the Culture of Conservatism**

Sports in general and football in particular are important for the exercise of power in contemporary society. To illustrate this stance, consider the following example: On September 4, 2003, the NFL held the second annual “NFL Kickoff Live” from the National Mall in Washington, DC. From this most public of spaces, the league presented what it called “a new tradition: producing a football and music festival to kick off the season and to celebrate the resilient and indomitable spirit of America” (“NFL kickoff live 2003 presented on September 4 by Pepsi” 2003). The event, which immediately preceded the season-opening game between the Washington Redskins and New York Jets, was televised live on ABC during primetime. Pop and rock groups performed a concert, President George W. Bush delivered a brief statement and Aretha Franklin sang the national anthem. As part of what the NFL marketed as a “USO-type extravaganza,” the NFL and the US Department of Defense worked together to bring more than 25,000 troops to the Mall to watch the events live. Speaking before the event, NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue announced “we are looking forward to this season’s opening game in the nation’s capital, which presents a unique opportunity to salute the military and public servants” (“NFL kickoff live 2003 presented on September 4 by

Pepsi” 2003). But while the event was certainly that, it was also an opportunity for the nation’s right-wing power structure to pay tribute to football and to the NFL as a pedagogical resource of nationalist and authoritarian values.

In his nationally televised address near the end of the festivities, Bush argued that football displays the values of “sacrifice,” “teamwork,” and “determination.” Such values, he argued, “keep America strong.” In football, Bush found an appealing and relevant fortitude: “It’s the spirit that motivates players and coaches to do their best, and give their all,” he said. “And it’s the spirit that guides the brave men and women of our nation’s armed forces fighting in the name of peace and freedom around the world.” For Bush and for many other right-wing thinkers, football, and the NFL, is an appropriate and timely pedagogical text – one that offers careful readers clues to the proper response to the challenges posed by the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> world.

Three days later, Bush addressed the nation to announce that an additional \$87 billion dollars were needed to pursue “military and intelligence operations in Iraq, Afganistan, and elsewhere” (“President Addresses Nation” 2003), and it was at once clear why Bush had found so important a metaphor in the NFL. While Bush expected “sacrifice” and “teamwork” from all Americans, but the realities of his social and economic policies guaranteed that the most profound sacrifices would be borne by its most economically disenfranchised groups, both at home, and in the Middle East. The poor living in the United States would suffer from the curtailments in public programs assured by the Bush priorities. Meanwhile, lower income groups are over-represented in the American forces fighting and dying in Iraq and elsewhere as the war on terror rages.

Bush's selection of football as a metaphor was a politically savvy move designed to use football's status as a hero factory and a repository of deeply cherished masculinist, authoritarian symbols to legitimate the white male authoritarian social structure that his policies pursue. Invoking football was a strategy he hoped would ensure that his message would be positively received, or at least, that it would be uncontroversial. That this tactic could pass without comment reveals the social currency that football enjoys in the contemporary political scene. It also indicates the extent to which ceremonies of class, gender, and race which help to compose the structure of commodified football have been made invisible.

The contemporary success of the NFL occurred during a period of a conservative cultural expansion. The scope of this success can not simply be gauged by partisan politics, as the Left also make use of conservative values. In the decades since the end of World War II, large amounts of wealth have been created, but it is wealth that has been inequitable. By 1999, the richest one percent of Americans had more after-tax wealth than the bottom third. According to a 2003 survey conducted by the Federal Reserve, that wealth gap was still growing. This widening stratification has been accompanied by a reassertion of traditionally powerful identities in the cultural sphere. A number of social critics (Omi & Winant 1986, Jeffords 1989 and 1995, Grossberg 1992, Kellner 1995, Lemm 1996, Berlant 1997) have noted an increasing boldness in the assertion of male and white privilege.

One feature of this more general expansion has been the emergence of a crisis for white, heteronormative masculinity (Robinson 2000, Wellman 1997). While male power is not really facing the threat of revolution, it has experienced some minor challenges

from the women's movements which have questioned patriarchy, and from non-whites and others who have challenged the centrality and invisibility of whiteness. Popular discourses frequently position white men as victims, and dark men and women as the controllers of public discourse. That such claims do not stand up to scrutiny does not limit their resonance with many white men, especially career-vulnerable white men, fearful of losing their jobs as industrial work continues its slow migration to the Pacific Rim and to other low wage zones. These anxieties have manifested themselves in a number of cultural forms – English-only legislation and concerns over illegal immigration, the demonization of socially disadvantaged recipients of social programs like welfare and affirmative action, and debates over the academic canon. The crisis is also articulated in popular culture in films like *Falling Down*, radio shows like Rush Limbaugh's, and television programs like *The Man Show*. Kusz (2001) has identified what he calls "White male backlash politics" in sports media.

As Grossberg (1992) asserts, this transformation has occurred with popular culture at its center:

Rather than attempting to win the minds of the nation, there is a struggle over its heart and body. This project works at the intersection of politics, everyday life and popular culture. The question is how people's affect – the attention, volition, mood, passion – is organized, disciplined, mobilized and ultimately put into the service of specific political agendas. Here the struggle for hegemony foregrounds popular culture and languages; it attempts to transform popularly mattering maps and the nature and sites of authority in contemporary life. It operates on the very ground on which affect and politics are linked together, rather than on the terrain of ideology and common sense. In this contest, *culture leads politics* (255).

This study proposes that white masculinity is best studied by focusing on the forms of popular culture (such as the NFL draft) where it asserts itself.

## **The New Paradigm:**

### **Black Athletic Superiority**

For decades, deeply held beliefs about masculinity and race have been asserted through the lens of sports. Not long ago, ideas about white athletic superiority circulated openly. In the midst of the industrial revolution, white physical superiority was equated with the technological West. “In physical strength, they are much inferior to men drawn from a country where machinery and civilization have produced changes in the manners and habits of the people to an extent unknown among other civilized races,” wrote a mid-nineteenth century scholar (cited in Hoberman 1997, 115). During the 1904 World’s Fair, Dr. W.J. McGee, the exhibit supervisor staged an attempt to confirm white athletic superiority scientifically. He organized an athletic contest among non-whites from all over the world (who happened to be part of the exhibition) with the goal of compiling the first “interracial athletic records.” The results “demonstrated what anthropologists have long known, that the white man leads the races of the world, both physically and mentally...in all-round development, no primitive people can rank in the same class with the Missouri boy” (“A Novel Athletic Contest” 1904). While complex and often contradictory, the concept of white male athletic superiority that when Jack Johnson, a black boxer, defeated Jim Jefferies, a white man who came out of retirement, Jefferies said, “for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a negro,” riots consisting mostly of white mob violence against Blacks broke out in several states (Bederman 1995, p. 2). To ensure the myth of White racial superiority, not to mention the myth of “race” itself, Blacks were barred from the highest levels of most team sports for many years. From 1937 to 1946, Blacks were barred from the NFL.



Today, Blacks are overrepresented in the NFL and many other elite sports leagues. In fact, Blacks represent almost 70% of NFL players. Magazines, newspapers, and television marketers no longer shun black athletes. In the post-Jordan age, Black athletes, even those with non-mainstream lifestyles, have emerged as bankable and highly visible personas in contemporary celebrity capitalism.

In the face of such realities, the concept of White athletic superiority, so widespread a century ago, today seems utterly ridiculous. In fact, the dominant ideology of the present age has inverted itself in this regard. The present age understands the idea that Blacks dominate sports as an obvious fact, one that many people willingly go on the record to assert. “The black players are superior. No doubt,” professional basketball player Rony Seikaly recently asserted in print. “It’s amazing, [blacks’] athletic ability. They’re built, they’re buffed. We work out to get a body like that, and they just come out naturally buffed” Florida State football coach Bobby Bowden added that “An athlete is an athlete, but, dang it, there just seem to be more black athletes than white” (Price 1997, 34).

The “natural” athletic advantage that Blacks enjoy is apparently so obvious that racialized theories have emerged to explain it. *Runner’s World* (1992) had already published a 1992 article titled “White Men Can’t Run,” an obvious reference to the title of a contemporary popular film called “White Men Can’t Jump.” The article advanced scientific evidence that it said explained the dominance of black runners. Roger Bannister, a white man who was the first person to break the 4 minute mile, said in 1995 “It’s perfectly obvious when you see an all-black sprint final that there must be something rather special about their anatomy or physiology that produces these

outstanding successes” (cited in Hoberman 1997, 143). *Sports Illustrated* ran a 1997 story that asked “Is it in the Genes?” seven months after Malcolm Gladwell (1997) had asked the same question in *The New Yorker*. Tom Brokaw hosted a 1989 NBC News documentary, *Black athletes: Fact and fiction*. Jon Entine (2001), the show’s co-author, furthered the ideas about racially-based athletic superiority in his 2001 book *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We’re Afraid to Talk About It*. The book, which claimed “There is extensive and persuasive evidence that elite black athletes have a phenotypic advantage – a distinctive skeletal system and musculature, metabolic structures, and other characteristics,” gained considerable attention. *The New York Times Book Review* described it as “a careful and reasoned case” (Holt 2000), *Sports Illustrated* said it was “Balanced, well-reasoned, and above all calm examination of the issue” (Price 2000) and *The Washington Post* praised it as “An informed exploration of a fascinating phenomenon” (Ruffins 2000) Though it is generally discredited by most respected scientists (see Gould 1981), this racist logic is not “Taboo” as Entine’s book title claimed. It has quite clearly become a part of mainstream thought.

There are, of course, many problems with the theories Entine and other lay out to explain physiological advantages. For one thing, “race,” the central concept of Entine’s work, is understood by most scientists as “biologically meaningless,” as the *New England Journal of Medicine* put it (cited in Kristof 2003). Historians who have studied race have mostly concluded that it is a “public fiction” useful for the advancement of exclusionary political goals, but for those reasons, too amorphous a concept to stand up to critical scrutiny (Jacobsen 1998). But discredited though they may be, these new studies arguing for Black athletic superiority nevertheless reveal the remarkable endurance of the myths

of race. More relevant for the purposes of this study, the prevalence of this thinking demonstrates that this concept of Black athletic superiority that is so widely accepted and unquestioned as fact that “science” is ushered in to explain it.

### **Athletic White Masculinity in Crisis**

In 1997, *Sports Illustrated* ran a cover story to explore the psychic ramifications of Black dominance in elite popular sports. “Whatever Happened to the White Athlete?” the cover asked, over the image of a team photo of an all-white basketball team from the 1950s or 60s. With a palpable sense of alarm, the article announced that “Whites have in some respects become sports' second-class citizens” in the face of the presumed athletic domination of Blacks.

This new development had led to the development of an athletic inferiority complex for Whites: “white athletes are frequently the ones now tagged by the stereotypes of skin color. The twist: Whites themselves are doing much of the tagging.” As evidence of the widespread belief in white athletic inferiority, *Sports Illustrated* offered the results of an unscientific survey that suggested “cracks” in “the self confidence among young white males”: 34% of Whites surveyed agreed with the statement “African-American players have become so dominant in sports like football and basketball that many white athletes feel they cannot compete at the same level.”

The disappearance to white athletes was a bit of a mystery to the authors. While the usual theories about genetic racial superiority were tentatively advanced, environment was another suspect. At any rate, they concluded, “The white athlete is getting out. The white athlete – and here we speak of the young men in team sports who ruled the

American athletic scene for much of the century – doesn't want to play anymore" (32). This rare acknowledgement of the exclusion of women from the category of "athlete" in discussions about black athletic superiority signals an important feature of this discourse – whatever crisis is at hand is a crisis for white masculinity. Indeed, women are largely invisible in debates about race and athletic superiority.

Black men, emasculated in so many other spheres, have promoted this vision of a racial hierarchy that, for once, places them at the top. After years of derision in athletics which included claims of physical weakness, a lack of coordination, and an inability to handle pressure, the contemporary assumption of Black athletic superiority may even look like progress. Assertions of superiority and the denigration of white athletic ability in the important masculine proving ground of sports circulate widely. "I'd think blacks would want to keep the stereotype that we're better than white," said former NBA star Isiah Thomas. "it's an advantage" (Price 1997).

The contention that white men and boys are somehow victimized by black athletic superiority is widespread and deeply felt. Rick Reilly recently wrote angrily about the humiliation and psychic wounds these assumptions (and especially their assertion by elite Black athletes) prompted: "Look how white I am. Am I lame or what? Can't jump. Can't dance. Can't run. Can't dress. Can't hang. It's O.K. I know I'm a pathetic White Guy. I'm at peace with it. In fact I laugh about it all the time. I have to. Black athletes today love to make fun of us White Guys." After boxer Mike Tyson called a white reporter a "little white bitch," the sense of emasculation was shared by many sports fans, as Joan Ryan (2002) of the *San Francisco Chronicle* documented: "you can hear the pain when white

guys call the sports talk shows,” she wrote. “Feeling wounded about such episodes as Mike Tyson’s press conference last month.”

Another manifestation of this tension is found in negative appraisals of the current state of the contemporary NFL. A particular culture of nostalgia frequently circulates that implicitly denigrates the current Black-dominated game. In their appraisal of the contemporary NFL, authors and commentators representing the white mainstream frequently invoke the phrase “old school” as a compliment. Implicit in the praise is the frequently articulated view that sports have somehow become too profit- and celebrity-oriented. The Black-dominated game is often blamed for having “ruined” the “purity” of football, as in a recent *Wisconsin State Journal* article where interviews with white NFL stars of the 1960s related that they “don’t question the superior size, strength and athleticism of Generation X. They question the inferior heart and soul” (Harry & Elling 2001). Later in the same article, Jerry Kramer, an NFL star of the 1960s, appraised contemporary NFL athletes by noting that they were “well-conditioned, fast, strong, intense, focused, and sensational athletes.” “But so many of them make me laugh,” he added disapprovingly. “They’re like ‘Whee! Look at me! I got a first down! I scored a touchdown!’ Last time I checked, that’s what we were getting paid to do” (Harry & Elling 2001).

Of course, blaming athletes for the increased commercialization of sports is rather preposterous, given that whites remain firmly in control of the most profitable team sports, whatever the demographics on the field. Blacks, who provide the bulk of the workforce for the NFL, they are largely excluded from the ranks of management and ownership. Blacks hold only 28 percent of the assistant coaching positions. Further up

the hierarchy, the personnel profile is even less diverse. In the NFL's history, only 8 of 363 head coaches (2.2%) have been black. Until 2001, when the New York Jets hired Herman Edwards, a black man, forty-two consecutive head coaching vacancies had been filled by whites. Whites currently hold 30 of the 32 head coaching positions in the NFL. Every majority owner of an NFL franchise is white (Saraceno, 2002). As Hoberman (1997) points out, "the spectacle of white failure in the world of sport, while real enough in the stadium, has not been accompanied by any significant change to the traditional imbalance of power between white Euroamerica and those of African descent," even at the level of sports management (118).

But then, there is a more profound tension at work here. This crisis of the disappearance of white athletes is part of a response to larger, more amorphous unease in white masculinity. Hoberman notes "Given the continuing subordinate status of black people, we must ask why black athletic victories matter to white people at all." He goes on to argue that "current white responses to white athletic decline are of psychological importance because they are indicators of anxiety about social and economic status in relation to black progress" (118).

This argument is extended in this dissertation, locating cultural sites where this crisis of white athletic masculinity is confronted in strategic (though not necessarily intentional) ways. It identifies an emerging way of presenting athletes, not as heroes, but as property, as tools to be inspected and directed. The project focuses on the NFL draft between 2000 and 2002 as a supreme example of this emerging development. It carefully traces how the draft enacts a number of rituals that objectify draftees, and explores the draft within the context of a particular cultural and historical context, and attempts to

outline the professional conditions of journalistic work that influenced the production of the mediated draft.

The dissertation proceeds as follows: Chapter 2 lays out the theoretical and methodological tools that will be deployed in this study. Chapter 3 traces the emergence of the draft as a media product, focusing on the political/economic and historical conditions that led to its current success and exploring the work routines by which information for the draft is gathered and presented. The next two chapters outline how players are transformed into commodities by the language of the draft. Chapter 4 explores how detailed assessments of bodies and athletic techniques become goods, and Chapter 5 describes how players are assessed according to the standard of the directable, useful, and docile body. Chapter 6 is an exploration of the ways in which prospects are disempowered as eroticized objects of the gaze. Chapter 7 presents some conclusions and identifies future areas of research.

## CHAPTER 1

### CONTEXTUALIZING POWER

The body is “an emblem of society.” No longer a sidebar to the study of society and culture, the body must line up front and center, with sports a key site for analysis and intervention, of social and cultural contestation.

-Toby Miller (2001, 15).

This study views culture as a complex terrain defined by continual struggles over power. Its analysis of the NFL draft “engages society as a concrete, historically produced, fractured totality made up of different types of social relations, practices, and experiences.” Spheres of cultural practice (such as commodified professional football) may exist relatively autonomously. “Yet the meaning of any concrete practice – its conjunctural identity – are always overdetermined by the network of relations with which it is articulated” (Andrews 2002, 114). In other words, no useful analysis of the draft can consider it apart from the larger social forces with which it interacts.

Any attempt to analyze meaning making, the process at the heart of culture, must account for a larger cultural, political, and historical context. As Grossberg (1997) argues, “context is everything and everything is context for cultural studies; cultural studies is perhaps best seen as a contextual theory of contexts as the lived milieu of power” (7-8).

This project focuses on ideological messages emerging from draft discourses. This is not to claim that ideology is all there is to the draft, or, for that matter, to any other cultural practice. As Grossberg (1997) reminds us, “popular culture is always more



than ideological; it provides sites of relaxation, privacy, pleasure, enjoyment, feeling good, fun, passion and emotion” (79).

It would be problematic to call this chapter a discussion of “theory,” because this study rejects the concept of ahistorical, decontextualized knowledge that the term theory often implies. In recent years, a number of writers (Morley & Robbins 1995, Gabriel 1998) have offered a rethinking of localities, not as places, but rather as “web-like, net-like connections where identities emerge out of both material and symbolic resources” (Gabriel 1998, 31). This study engages these theoretical literatures as histories, rooted in specific temporal, cultural, political, and economic locations. The pages that follow attempt to map those sites.

A concern for context sets the stage for this dissertation. This chapter traces the important literatures that frame this study. Accordingly, the literatures reviewed below examine recent meanings made of sport in western societies, and the cultural, political, and economic forces surrounding sports to establish context and the relevant “network of relations.”

This chapter is organized in two stages. The first reviews scholarship that theorizes the three themes that are central to this study; the second reveals the questions this study hopes to answer, and formulates a method for answering those questions.

### **Stage 1 – Theoretical Foundation**

This section reviews three important areas of scholarship: first, findings about hegemonic white masculinity; next, the case for the body as a site for the operation of

power; finally, the literature that theorizes media texts both as a product of work routines and political/economic circumstances and as ideological discourses are reviewed.

### **Theorizing White, Hegemonic Masculinity**

Gender, race and sexuality are important identities by which bodies are categorized. This categorization is by no means arbitrary. Assignations are deployed in concert in discrete ways and in particular contexts to achieve various (and sometimes competing) political goals. The arguments discussed below frame gender relations as relations of power. As detailed below, hegemonic masculinity has been used to assert the dominance of white men over those of other “races” as well as over women, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups. Careful consideration of these arguments and their suitability for this study will locate this project in the particular terrain of spectacular, commodified sport.

If we conceive of gender, race, and sexuality as “the set of effects, produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment deriving from a complex political technology,” (Foucault 1978, 127), then we can imagine them as “a historic, ideological process” (Bederman 1995, 7) in which people position themselves and are positioned as classifiable in certain ways, possessing certain traits, and able to claim certain privileges. This study is concerned with a number of racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities, but will focus on one particular manifestation of masculinity.

R. W. Connell (1995), in his anthropological and historical research on the category of masculinity, supports the notion of masculinity as complex and dynamic. He asserts that modern masculinity has only existed for a very short time – only about 200

years. In his view, masculinity is implicated in and constitutive of the material and ideological relations of capitalism. He also suggests recognizing masculinities, rather than a single phenomenon. His emphasis on the polyvalent nature of masculinity complicates it as an ideal and highlights the role of power *within* masculinity.

Connell (1995) argues that an idealized form of masculinity which he calls “hegemonic masculinity” dominates the cultural landscape. He defines hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77). In Western culture, he says, this configuration often takes the form of a white supremacist, powerful, aggressive, sexist and heterosexist ideal that exists most comfortably at the level of myth. Hegemonic masculinity is always in danger of over-describing certain male practices, making them appear static and universal. For this reason, Connell argues, it must be understood as “a historically mobile relation” rather than a consistent set of codes (76).

There is no shortage of examples of this ideal in our current historical period. Most consumers of mass media would recognize the familiar formulation of physical strength, toughness, and courage that dominate storytelling about men. Brannon (1976) identifies four major components of this configuration in the United States. They are: (1) the avoidance of all behaviors or qualities coded feminine, (2) the attainment of material, social, or cultural status, (3) independence, strength, and confidence, and (4) a tendency toward violent, aggressive, daredevil behavior. Hegemonic masculinity as currently practiced serves to equate whiteness, heterosexuality, athleticism, and (of course) males with power. Most mortal men find it a difficult norm to attain, since the violence

mandated by the hegemonic masculine ideal is frowned upon (and, in many cases, may lead to an assault conviction). Yet the disparities within the current gender order demand violence, or at least the threat of violence, especially in the face of recent challenges to that order in the field of politics. As a result, the performance of hegemonic masculinity is often sublimated, appearing most often in posturing, film, and sports.

This study is situated in the specific culture of mediated, commodified American sports. Traditional sporting practices and representations have facilitated male domination of culture generally. Key insights into constructions of masculinities in the specific arena of sport arise from a large literature on gender and sports. Studies that focus on how practices of organized sport and representations of sporting figures and incidents reinforce and maintain gendered power are especially useful here.

Sports have been recognized by many scholars as a prime site for vivid assertions of gender difference and gender-based hierarchies that privilege men. This element of the cultural work of contemporary organized sport can be traced to origins in the nineteenth century, for the roots of contemporary sporting culture are also the roots of the gender hierarchy that continues to mark the arena of sport, having arisen quite consciously in response to industrialization and what Mrozek (1985) identified as an attending “crisis” of white masculinity.

Industry transformed life in western nations like the United States and Britain in a number of important ways. Industrial capitalism demanded a new kind of citizen – highly disciplined, healthy, and familiar with bureaucratic rules, the labor movement had established the ideal (if not the reality) of increased leisure time, and the owning class was concerned to establish activities to fill that time with activities that would help shape

the ideal worker (Reiss 1989; Gelber 1983; Burstyn 1999). The move toward urbanization and industrialization had also brought with it diminishing access to pastoral landscapes that provided the setting for manly work and recreation. This led to concerns over the “feminizing” effects of this new social reality (Carnes 1989). Organized sport was believed to address all of these needs. It provided a disciplined and bureaucratic activity that could serve as a kind of pedagogy for industrial capitalism, and also, it provided a means of fostering manliness in this new environment (Mrozek 1985).

Modern sport emerged in part out of a desire to keep masculinity a pure category, unadulterated by the specter of “feminization.” While the ways this distinction (and other important distinctions, such as race and class) has been maintained in sport are complex, dynamic and varied, sport has consistently and conveniently served to naturalize gender distinctions. A number of studies detail the ways everyday contemporary sport historically has served to maintain the gender order and in current times continues to accomplish this. Dunning (1975; 1990; 1994) has traced how organized sport and evolving conceptions of masculinity intersect in Great Britain in a number of different eras, from the role of soccer competition in the nineteenth century to the soccer hooliganism of the late twentieth century. Curry (1991), Disch & Kane (1996), and Messner (1994) have interpreted the male athletic locker room as a space for intense displays of male dominance, misogynist expression, and even rape culture. The exclusivity of the male locker room is reflected in the broader culture of sports. Sports typically constituted a “male preserve,” where women’s participation is actively discouraged through strategies, ranging from simply barring women participants to demeaning and marginalizing their participation.

Sport has attained a prominent position in present-day public life. Feminist scholars, noting this, have generated a significant body of literature on ideological representations of gender in the contemporary sports media. Many of these studies explore how femininity is constructed in popular texts about sport. For example, Fabos (2001), and Feder-Kane (1995) discuss the feminine “apologetic” in media discourse about female skaters, a narrative strategy that explains female participation in sport by emphasizing the athlete’s so-called “feminine” traits and heterosexuality. Such a strategy is necessary, Feder-Kane argues, because, “Femininity and athleticism are mutually exclusive concepts in American culture” (207). Thus, “Successful women athletes risk being labeled ‘mannish’ with generally unspoken implications of lesbianism close to the surface” (208). That such explanations are not demanded of men reinforces sport’s prevailing privilege as a male preserve.

In addition to keeping women at the margins of sporting spectacle, mediated sport helps maintain sexual and gender categories in public life more broadly. Sex-testing at the Olympic games is one example of the need to publicly assert the importance and relevance of sexual difference through sport (Butler 1998). Because sexual distinctions are so openly addressed in sport, one might imagine that sexual reassignment would destabilize traditional notions of sex and gender. However, as Birrell & Cole (1990) demonstrate in their analysis of media discourse surrounding Renee Richards’ career on the women’s tennis circuit, even in the face of the extreme challenge presented by Richard’s sexual reassignment, strict distinction along the lines of sex and gender can endure. In this case, media clearly asserted that it would be unfair for Richards to play with “real” women because his/her previous identity as a man provided an inherent

advantage. Birrell & Cole's work also demonstrates one of the uses of strict gender distinctions: the maintenance of a hierarchy with regard to physical ability, with males by definition superior.

Football is a vitally important vehicle for maintenance of gender distinctions and gender-based hierarchy. Sabo & Panepinto (1990) view this sport as a complex ritual that emphasizes men's "superiority to women and respect for, and compliance with male authority," as well as "reinforcing sex inequality" (115). Football helps to accomplish this by serving as "social theater with an all-male, intergenerational cast" (117). The exclusion of women is a key feature of this social practice: "If women are present, they are usually in subservient positions vis-à-vis men" (117). One result of this exclusion is the tendency to celebrate "masculine" traits while denigrating "feminine" ones. The football ritual, like others of its kind, seeks to establish a sex-based hierarchy with men at the top. This is accomplished in two ways: "first, by linking maleness to highly valued and visible skills, and second, by linking maleness with the positively sanctioned use of aggression/force/violence" (121).

But manifestations of hegemonic masculinity do more than police the boundaries of gender and assert the dominance of men. Racial, class and sexual hierarchies also are articulated. Bederman (1995), for instance, who traces how discourses of "manliness" were deployed by various public figures at the turn of the century, finds that these same individuals simultaneously argued for white supremacy. She documents how Theodore Roosevelt promoted a vision of social policy that connected white supremacist imperialism with manliness. Roosevelt's writings and speeches suggest that the nation, imagined as white and male, might counter the feminizing effects of industrial

civilization by meeting the challenge of the “white man’s burden” through racist imperialist practices. At the same time, white tutelage could instill the proper sense of “manliness” in its subjects.

A century later, racial hierarchies may have become less explicit, but discourses of the racialized body continue to circulate, and mass media have become an important site for their dissemination. Notes Hall (2000): “The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about Race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed and elaborated” (273). While the specific formulations have changed, race and gender continue to be key themes in dominant conceptions of power. Jeffords (1994), for instance, examines how a certain vision of masculinity in American popular culture in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century helped to construct a masculine national identity, one that Ronald Reagan embodied in his domestic and international politics. During this period, white masculinity has also defined itself, in part through the racialized other. Robyn Wiegman (1995) documents how the interracial “buddy films” of the 1980s - 90s, while appearing to promote a progressive sense of inclusiveness (if not in terms of gender, at least of race), in fact repeatedly privilege white males through “the discourse of sexual difference, where the white male occupies the traditionally masculine position of rugged self-assertion while the African-American male assumes the emotional feminine sphere” (117-8).

When not being feminized, black male bodies are presented as hypersexual, primal, physically powerful, and potentially dangerous (hooks 1990, Segal 1991). This trope surfaces in both familiar and novel ways within contemporary politics. The infamous Willie Horton advertisements deployed by George Bush’s election campaign of



1988 are one obvious example of invoking the myth of the black male predator. bell hooks (1990) argues that “Images of black men as rapists, as dangerous menaces to society, have been in circulation for some time” (61). This pattern of representations has real political consequences; hooks asserts that, “The role it plays in the maintenance of racist domination is to convince the public that black men are a dangerous threat who must be controlled by any means necessary, including annihilation” (hooks 1990, 61).

It is important to note that those individuals who represent various aspects of hegemonic masculinity rarely benefit directly from it. Often, representatives of traditionally disempowered groups are recruited to serve as symbols that issue warnings to women and homosexuals. Nowhere is this clearer than in the arena of contemporary sports, where hyper masculinity is celebrated through the display of mostly working class bodies that are disproportionately non-white.

The particular sub-culture of football has been classified by Messner (1990) and others as a “combat sport” – a game in which high levels of aggression, violence and injury exist not as accidents or violations, but as intended, even desired, aspects of the game. Athletes who pursue careers in combat sports can expect significantly reduced health or even life expectancy. They tend to be drawn largely from disadvantaged backgrounds (Edwards 1984). Messner (1990) found that “...young athletes from lower class backgrounds, especially poor black males, were far more likely than their middle class counterparts to become committed to careers in violent sports” (p. 82). As a result of the violence inflicted on the bodies of combat sport participants, careers do not last long – an average of four years (Carucci, 2002).

Nevertheless, the limited opportunities for young black men, the abundance of channels for identifying and developing athletic talent in these areas, the lure of a possible escape from life in the ghetto, are all reflected in disparities of the labor force of professional football. Messner (1990) sees an ideological purpose for this structure. The participants in combat sports “are, in a very real sense, contemporary gladiators who are sacrificed in order that the elite may have a clear sense of where they stand in the pecking order of inter-male dominance” (214).

In spite of the disempowerment that football’s structure offers, these players can even become popular heroes, though this position must be carefully negotiated and is often tenuous. In their study of OJ Simpson’s celebrity, for example, Leola Johnson and David Roediger (2000) argue that Simpson’s phenomenal crossover success (long prior to his arrest) was due to the fact that he was able to appeal to a mainstream white audience by distancing himself from African-American political movements and advertising his “middle class” values and lifestyle, while displaying a set of physical skills (even in a car rental commercial) that marked him as a “real man.” Simpson “sacrificed his body” on the field and was described as “the perfect gentleman” off the field, in spite of well-circulated rumors of infidelity and domestic abuse. He was manly, yet unthreatening to the white male audience for whom he seemed eager and happy to perform. Hence, male audiences could identify with him for his lifestyle and non-confrontational manner, while at the same time admiring his feats of “masculine” skill. Simpson, it seemed, had become “colorless,” no longer bound by the restrictions of his race. Yet, no sooner had Simpson’s White Bronco hit the 405 than his colorlessness was

completely revoked and Simpson was cast in the role of the dangerous thug in need of containment.

This example demonstrates how race, class, gender and sexuality work as a network rather than as discrete elements. The case of the NFL draft is equally complex in that these axes of power are inextricably connected in the draft. In this project, it is argued that the draft encourages fan identification with ownership and management, reveling in the ownership of black bodies that are positioned as the epitome of aggressive masculinity. It also makes the case that these constructions are created under specific conditions which shape their presentation.

Critical studies of spectacular sports, meaning sports produced as entertainment and covered by the media, have attempted to make sense of the dynamics of race and masculinity through approaches ranging from literary criticism to political economy. Andrews' (2000) excavation of Michael Jordan's blackness suggests that Jordan's ability to embody the Reaganite ideal of muscular, middle-class white masculinity off the basketball court, while demonstrating his physical dominance on the court, was key to his success as a marketable figure. Trujillo (1991) argues that Nolan Ryan's immense popularity is in part due to his easy affiliation with the Reaganite dream of a white, rugged, masculine, working class hero familiar from hundreds of depictions in Hollywood westerns.

The demands of hegemonic masculinity are damaging to the men who embody it. Connell notes a prominent narcissistic element in hegemonic masculinity, one that defines the hegemonic male body in unstable and insatiable terms, and which requires of its adherents a necessarily strict regime of self-surveillance. This obsessive narcissism,

self-regard, and self-criticism is a prominent feature of Klein's (1993) study of male bodybuilders. As one of Klein's informants asserts: "No way a picture [of yourself] can look good to you. No way at all! You'll always be tearing yourself down in the back of your mind. It'll kill you to see some part of yourself" (212). As Klein notes "In needing overblown self-images to compensate for the way they feel about themselves, bodybuilders differ from the general population only in degree, not in kind" (212). Evidence bears out this assertion, and increasingly so for men. Four in every ten eating disorders are reported by men. In 1997, nearly three times as many men over fifty reported dissatisfaction with their appearance as in 1972. A national survey reported that steroid use among high school sophomore boys more than doubled between 1992 and 2000. "Everybody wants to be big now," a boy quoted in the *New York Times* (Egan 2002) article that broke the story. "The majority now are guys that don't do it for sports. They do it for girls. For the look," capitalized on by elite sports that celebrate masculine development. Many observers have suggested that this commodification of the masculine body complicates the concept of hegemonic masculinity. After all, the disciplined body that submits to the gaze has traditionally been female, and the act one that has disempowered the object of the gaze (Berger 1972, Mulvey 1975).

Although hegemonic masculinity is perhaps the most prominent framework for theorizing masculinity within sporting practices and representations, Miller suggests that it fails to explain practices that are seemingly out of step with the hegemonic vision: for example, men taking orders, men expressing affection for one another, men seeking and valuing cooperation with other men, in other words, much of the behavior that marks organized sports. The problem with hegemonic masculinity, in Miller's (2001) view, "is

that it explains everything and nothing in a circular motion” (50). Hegemonic masculinity, while a useful concept, is not sufficient for an analysis of contemporary football. We must also consider the game, especially football-as-entertainment, as a disciplinary practice that renders bodies analyzable and directs them in certain ways. The next section of the chapter offers some ways of theorizing sports this way.

### **Theorizing the Body, Knowledge, and Discipline**

In scholarship of the last few decades, the body has emerged as a site for cultural criticism and inquiry. The corporeal, once imagined as merely a vessel for human consciousness, has been repositioned as a crucial locus for subjective cultural and political experience. The body has been imagined as text, as sign, as cultural construction, as performance, but it is important to bear in mind that elite football exercises power on the body directly, not merely through representation. While this dissertation will focus on mediated representations of the draft, those representations relate actual ceremonies of power that act upon the bodies of draft prospects. The representations that this study describes, in other words, rely on actual bodily presence and performance.

The readings discussed below are touchstones for scholarly debate about the body and its meaning. Scholarly attempts to theorize how power acts on the body as well as scholarship on the cultural uses of the spectacular body are particularly germane to my topic. Players selected in the draft enter a rigorous disciplinary culture in which the actions of the athletic body are dictated by power in direct ways. The mediated draft

transforms the body into a spectacle in which professional football's culture of discipline as well as bodies themselves are represented and made meaningful.

One of the first prominent thinkers to categorically refute the "nature" of embodiment, and instead reframe the body as a cultural product and the subject of power, was Michel Foucault. His open hostility towards totalizing explanations such as the strict economic Marxism practiced by his former teacher Althusser and the structuralism of Levi-Strauss helped open inquiry to new and exciting questions about how power is exercised in Western societies. Foucault's work continues to be the subject of intense debate. His methods, conclusions, politics, even the originality of his thought have been called into question. In any event, however, his theorizing of the body is an essential starting point for this study.

Inquiries into the intersection of power and discourse are the foundation of Foucault's intellectual project. While his earlier works identified the body as a site of power, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) and *The History of Sexuality: Volume I* (1978) take the argument to a new level, as he explores in explicit terms the body's relation to power. Although Foucault was hardly the first to analyze this relationship, his secure position at the center of paradigm debates in the academy at the time (especially in relation to feminist writers engaged in similar critiques) has made his work especially influential.

Foucault called *Discipline and Punish* "a chapter in the history of 'punitive reason'" (cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, p. 144). The full title of that work is *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, but Foucault's interests are not as modest as his heading suggests. Beyond reforms in prison architecture, Foucault is interested to

explain the emergence of a whole set of techniques for extending power in the modern age. The important shift he identifies is not limited to the prison, but includes schools, hospitals, the military, and other institutions. It is, in his words, a “political technology of the body in which might be read a common history of power relations and object relations” (1977, 24).

Foucault interprets this as the move from public torture of the body, which he graphically details in his now-famous opening pages of the work, and towards attempts to “rehabilitate” or discipline the soul. The move from public torture does not mean the enactment of power on the body is abandoned. To the contrary, Foucault argues that bodies are made “docile” through what he terms a “micro-physics of power,” an insidious coercion that disciplines the basic elements of bodily activity:

What was then being formed was a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behavior. The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it. A “political anatomy”, which was also a “mechanics of power”, was being born; it defined how one may have a hold over others’ bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, the efficiency that one determines. Thus, discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, “docile” bodies (1977, 138).

One important shift chronicled here is the move from imagining power over deviant bodies as repression (torture) to discovering the possibilities for productive power over everyday bodily performance (discipline). This discipline is achieved in four major ways: (1) by distributing bodies in space according to certain rules; (2) by controlling the activities of the body; (3) by organizing stages of training (i.e., developing a pedagogy of strictly enforced discipline); and (4) by coordinating bodily activities. This technology seeks to position the body as an object of analysis and potential manipulation.

Disciplinary techniques colonize existing forms of knowledge and redirects them, creating networks that make it possible “to bring the effects of power to the most minute and distant elements” (216). The body, rather than being stamped into submission or simply repressed, is shaped, directed, “subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136).

Discipline is accomplished in part by making the body an object of study and analysis. Body parts are analyzed and directed separately in disciplinary technology. Arms, hands, shoulders and legs become the target of knowledge, with the hope that attendance to the body’s minutiae will facilitate control over the whole. The body is trained, gestures are codified and supervised as the body is transformed into “useful bodies.” Discipline aims to create “an increased aptitude and an increased domination” (p. 138).

This technique crosses a number of institutions, leaving an especially visible mark on the landscape of physical recreation. By the late nineteenth century, British and American educators had turned attention to the body as an intensive site of training. Games became codified, athletic training came under increasing supervision, and the sporting body came under the moral-scientific gaze (Elias 1986, Hargreaves 1986). From loosely organized pastimes, sports developed regulations that sought to regulate bodily activity and enforce those regulations through organization and self-monitoring by the athletes themselves.

In contemporary times, commodified, elite sports continue to serve as disciplinary technologies. The organization of elite athletics is such that: “time and space are miniaturized in the cause of maximal output from minimal input. The labour process is divided, scrutinized, and regulated according to individual bodies and practices. Labour



is split into small units, at the same moment as large industries and zones of knowledge determine its condition of existence” (cited in Miller & McHoul 1998, 71). These processes are especially evident in the complexities of professional football, a game marked by extensive regulations (its rulebook has more than one hundred entries) and a very extensive division of labor (a typical professional coaching staff consists of fifteen people, each attending to a particular facet of the game).

Just who is doing the disciplining is never explained, although Foucault does occasionally hint at capitalism and, in a later interview, the state (1980, 55-62). Foucault calls “discipline” an “invention” of bourgeois society, but refuses to identify a material basis for the phenomenon. For all the strengths of Foucault’s analysis, critics have charged that his insistent focus on the micro-physics of power leave the role of larger societal structures underexplained. Furthermore, critics say, power seems to exist as something apart from human agency – Foucault offers a wealth of examples of how power acts on individuals and institutions, but never suggests how it is enacted by individuals. Instead, it seems to have been conjured by forces beyond human control (Best & Kellener 1991).

In response to this critique, Foucault likely would argue that this is exactly his point – that power is *not* tied to certain “dominant” institutions, but rather is available to everyone (albeit under the proper conditions, and by no means equally). Furthermore, power does not exist in relationship of overt coercion. It is only possible where agency is also a possibility: “power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free” (quoted in Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, p. 221). Foucault goes on to distinguish between relationships of constraint (such as slavery), and power relations, which

necessarily involve free agents who have the option of acting in a number of ways. In other words, power is only possible where agency is present as a possibility. Foucault's vision of power does not exclude Marxist or feminist critiques; it simply insists that they address in more complicated ways how power really functions.

The introductory volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978) - which Foucault envisioned as a six-volume work but never completed - carries Foucault's analysis further, revealing much more about the operation of power in relation to bodies (if comparatively little about sexual practices). Foucault views sexuality as the whole matrix of morals, discourses, techniques of power, etc., designed to shape and control carnal behavior (the French title, *The Will to Know*, is somewhat more revealing). In a section building on the thesis of *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes that modern sexual activity came under the discipline of, "infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls, extremely meticulous orderings of space, indeterminate medical or psychological examinations, to an entire micro-power concerned with the body." He adds, "Sex was a means of access both to life of the body and the life of the species. It was employed as a standard for the disciplines and as a basis for regulation" (145-6).

For Foucault (1977), the body in the modern age has become the subject of knowledge, and hence of power, since the two can never be disentangled. Furthermore, no body exists outside of history or culture, because the body is always "directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold on it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs" (p. 25).

Feminist scholars anticipated Foucault's interest in connecting the body with power (see Morris 1988), and in spite of the near invisibility of women in Foucault's

analyses, a number of thinkers have adopted his insights to push feminist cultural studies in new directions. Unlike Foucault, however, most of these theorists do not hesitate to specify the seat of power (with regard to gender at least) as patriarchy. Bartky (1988), for example, identifies in women an internalized male gaze. She writes, “Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other” (72).

Susan Bordo’s *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993) follows and adapts Foucault’s insights on the body. She opens the work with a qualification: “Neither Foucault, nor any other poststructuralist discovered the idea...that the definition and shaping of the body” is central to the workings of power. “*That* was discovered by feminism” (17). Bordo’s comment accentuates the important and often overlooked contributions of feminist scholars to corporeal theory. For Bordo, Foucault’s essential contribution is to point out that the body is not merely *shaped* by cultural forces. Rather, the body is *produced* by culture. She writes, “the body that we experience and conceptualize is always *mediated* by constructs, associations, images of culture” (35). Furthermore, bodies are disciplined through “the practices and bodily habits of everyday life” (16). In the analysis that follows, Bordo argues for imagining the female body as a site (not merely a symbol) for the exercise of social power and protest.

A number of scholars have explored how the female body becomes a site for the exercise of power in medicine. Triechler (1990), for example, demonstrates that medical textbooks organize childbirth around the doctor, the fetus, and female reproductive organs, while ignoring the woman’s subjectivity. This disempowerment may extend to the whole realm of science as traditionally conceived. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Sally Shuttleworth (1990) argue: “whereas nature, the body that scientific

knowledge takes as its object, is traditionally constructed as feminine, the subject of science, i.e. the scientist, has usually been seen as masculine...In other words, hierarchies involving both gender and power...are intimately associated with the ideology and practice of science” (6).

The body also may function as a site of power through bodily exhibition. Uses of the spectacular body as a model or as an ideal was seen in Fascist Germany, the most infamous (but hardly the sole) example of a nationalistic cult of the body. The Aryan ideal found expression in sculpture, photography, film, and print. Physical education was especially important in German schools of the era, and the physical form of the Nazi soldier became an obsession for some military administrators (Major Hans Suren, for example, demanded that his troops train in the nude). The apotheosis of this nationalist cult of the body was the 1936 Olympics, where fascist fantasies of racial purity and superiority dominated the presentation (Dutton 1995). The late film-maker Leni Reifenstal's *Olympiad* defined many of these techniques, including the first use of slow-motion filming of athletes.

While bodily exhibition can celebrate what a culture considers sacred corporealities, it can also signify the profane. Studies of freakery, or the entrepreneurial display of extraordinary bodies as a popular amusement, have become more common since Leslie Fiedler's pioneering study *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (1978). Susan Stewart (1993) argues that what is commonly referred to as a “freak of nature” is better understood as a “freak of culture” because the “freak,” like the “normal” is culturally defined (pp. 109-110). The display of the freakish body helps define the cultural limits of what can be considered “normal.” Stewart writes of the freak: “his or

her anomalous status is articulated by the process of the spectacle as it distances the viewer, and thereby ‘normalizes’ the viewer as much as it marks the freak as an aberration” (p. 109).

The public viewing of exotic people has often served as a tactic for maintaining racial hierarchies. The public fiction of race has been the occasion for many scientific and entrepreneurial displays of difference. As one observer put it, often “we tend to think of race as being indisputable, real” (Jacobson 1998, p. 1). In fact, however, “races are invented categories – designations coined for the sake of grouping and separating people along the lines of presumed difference” (Jacobson 1998, p. 4). The designation of difference has been a motivation for countless occasions where dark men have been subjected to the scientific and consuming gaze. Into the nineteenth century, slave auctions not only serve as a means of acquiring a labor force; but as rituals of power, subjecting one group of people to the inspection of another (Johnson 2000). The display of the exotic body has also served as a justification of colonialism. The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, for instance, featured the display of hundreds of South Asian people as evidence for a racial hierarchy and, by extension, as justification for American imperialist practices in the region (Rydell 1984; Vaughan 1996). It was in this same era that public museums of natural history were established in large numbers, displaying the findings of race science as truth and its dark subjects as focal points for public study (Bennett 1995).

These studies suggest the body’s use as spectacle and object of knowledge is an important recent development in modern deployments of power. Looking practices can serve to uphold hierarchies by submitting representative bodies to the view of the

powerful. Sports are, in the contemporary moment, perhaps the most important vehicle for the consumption of the public body as a vehicle of knowledge and pleasure. Today, bodily exposition of dark-skinned subjects has a regular outlet in many professional sports. In the most popular team sports especially, dark men perform before audiences and are frequently stripped and examined to some degree. They are offered up for public view and assessed in ways that homophobic taboos would prohibit in other spheres. Of course, these bodies are also the object of increasingly public scrutiny that seeks to know it, predict it, control it. This ownership fantasy is an important and undertheorized aspect of contemporary sport, and the NFL draft provides the ideal opportunity for its investigation.

### **Theorizing Sports Media as Product and as Ideology**

Media studies have long been concerned with the institutional context of mass communication. As a large body of research suggests, mediated narratives are constructed in very particular ways, shaped by routines and other professional practices. Ideological frames shape and limit the kinds of discourses that may circulate in any culture, but the particular culture of journalism further delineates the kinds of stories that can be told. Much of the work in this area has focused on news. As Gans (1980) and Tuchman (1978) have noted, the very patterns which make news collecting feasible and efficient also serve to shape what kinds of stories make the news and how those stories get told. Tuchman, for instance, notes that the process of “news net” is strategically deployed to capture the thoughts, words, and actions of established power brokers at the expense of smaller fish. Gans argues a similar point, adding that news’ own corporate

interests obscure the connection between government and private enterprise. Other scholars have explored the sociology of news work in more detail and have found that professionalism (Soloski 1997), cultural norms (Bantz 1997), work routines (Fishman 1997) and economic considerations (Altschull 1997) constrain news in important ways.

Journalism, however, is not limited to hard news coverage. Newspapers have discovered a large market for entertainment and sports news, and so sports journalism has emerged as a definable form. Studies of the sporting press have borne out (and in some cases amplified) many of these observations. In addition to the historically cozy relationship between sports organizations and the journalists who cover and promote them, producers of sports news are perhaps even more reliant on official sources than their colleagues covering “hard news.” In sports, as in any centralized industry, sources of information are in short supply. In his study of metropolitan Canadian sports journalists, Lowes (1999) found that reporters must maintain good relationships with players, coaches and management or risk being “cut off,” physically intimidated, or (in rare cases) banned from the team altogether. The sports journalist must also rely heavily on “publicity as news,” ceding a good deal of control over the story to the sports organization that is ostensibly “covered” (49). Access has a gendered dimension as well. Female journalists have faced special barriers to access, as Lisa Olsen’s harassment in the New England Patriots’ locker room demonstrates (see Dirsh & Kane 1996).

Sports writers also differ from their peers in “hard news” in that they are much more explicit about their narrative strategies, recognizing that part of their job is to construct the story. Gruneau (1989), in his study of CBC sports production, cites a director who reveals that his guiding principle in structuring a mediated sports event is

“to pose a question or problem to be resolved in the program and then ‘don’t give away the story until it’s time’” (148). Gruneau states that “television sports production is acknowledged to be a self-conscious exercise in story-telling” (144).

But while media studies have traced the ways in which texts are produced, the texts themselves have also been analyzed from a number of perspectives. Studies of sports media have much to draw on from communication research that interprets news as “a story about reality” (Bird & Dardenne 1989, 68). Whether viewed as myth (Barthes 1957; Bird & Dardenne 1989; Fiske 1987), folklore (D. A. Bird 1976; S. Bird 1992; Hobbs 1978; Oring 1990) or simply fiction (Chaney 1977; Epstein 1975), a large body of work has viewed news as meaning-making.

There are a number of reasons to study media texts. Kellner (1995) argues that a careful analysis of texts can make known “the contours and trends within the broader socio-political context, ...can illuminate the social environment in which they arise and are circulated, and can thus provide insight into what is going on in contemporary societies and cultures” (5). This project finds culture in “everyday discursive practices, with these practices both embodying and constructing a culture’s ideology” and hence views popular texts as “legitimate data for critical analysis because they are places where struggles take place over which meanings and ideologies will predominate” (Foss 1996, 293-4).

This project will focus on media texts about sport in the context of their production, but it is important to remember that “there is no ‘typical’ sports text as such, but rather a jumble of genres and subjects that can be said to fit under the rubric of sport because they have some connection (often tenuous) with its mythologies, organizations



and personnel” and that “each media sports text creates and adheres to its own rules of sub-genre and textual relations, representing the sports world and situating it within the wider world with which, often reluctantly, it must deal” (Rowe 1999, 97-8).

The relationship between sport and mass media can be traced back to the origins of profit-oriented spectator sport in the United States. As sporting entrepreneurs discovered the profit-producing potential of sporting spectacles, journalists almost simultaneously identified these spectacles as a reliable and easily covered source of news (Stevens 1987). The relationship between media and spectacular sport quickly grew intimate, with many journalists officially or unofficially invested financially in the teams they covered (Stevens 1987; Sperber 1993). By the 1920s, sport was well-established as a profitable, easily covered and ideologically safe news staple (McChesney 1989). This close sports-media association continues today. It is not unusual for media outlets to be financially linked to teams they cover. Indeed, a number of professional teams are owned by media companies.

Sports have been a television staple for decades. Of course television companies do not simply show up at sporting events with cameras to record the events. Sports programming is carefully orchestrated to maximize profit. Sporting events are frequently altered in fundamental ways to accommodate television and the free promotion they bring. ABC's *Wide World of Sports*, for instance, was developed to fill gaps in sports coverage, as Roone Arledge explains: “It got started because of a void. College football season culminated in the bowl games on New Year's Day. By the time major league baseball opened in April, the weekend sports momentum we'd built with our [college football] coverage would have dissipated” (Arledge 2003, 41). Another ABC innovation,

Monday Night Football was established to capitalize on the lucrative popularity of the league. The NFL agreed to the arrangement, and continues to schedule one Monday evening game each week to accommodate ABC's interest.

The institutional nature of the association has led Sut Jhally (1984) to term it the "sports/media complex." The term demonstrates the intimate and symbiotic relationship between the two entities, both in reception and production. Jhally provides two justifications for this framework:

(1) most people do the vast amount of their sports spectating via the media (largely through television), so that the cultural experience of sports is hugely mediated; and (2) from a financial point of view, professional, and increasingly college, sports are dependant upon media money for their very survival and their present organizational structure (1989, 77-8).

This way of viewing sport does not mean all mediated sport should be understood solely as the reflection of media interests. It does, however, compel scholars to account for the realities of political economy in the construction of mediated sport.

Gruneau (1989) and Lowes (1999) demonstrate how this intimate relationship shapes and is shaped by the production of sports news. Sports news essentially serves as carefully managed free advertising for private (or, in the case of state university sports teams, public) corporations. However, as Gruneau (1989) emphasizes, "while there are fundamental economic and ideological pressures and limits in operation, they do not determine what we see on the screen. Yet, neither can we argue that the production is constructed freely, without any determining limits or pressures at all" (151). In other words, the institutional context of sports media has an important (which is not to say exclusive) influence on the resulting texts.

## Stage 2 – The Study

This study emerges from an interest in the construction of gender in mediated sport. Studies of gender representations in sports media and a growing body of work on sports production have yet to be linked in an extended analysis. This project attempts to do so by examining gender representation in the context of its production.

The NFL Draft provides an ideal venue to pursue research on the production of masculinity for a number of reasons, including its importance as an event on the sports/media calendar, drawing intense and widespread media coverage, and the fact that it features the male body as the object of overt speculation, evaluation and exchange in ways that no other event does. Furthermore, it is unexplored territory: the Draft has not been the object of scholarly scrutiny before.

Behind my study are some broad strategic questions:

- What are the cultural meanings of spectacles of the body?
- How are masculinities deployed as power in American culture?
- What is the relationship between race and gender in contemporary culture?

The study endeavors to shed light on these large questions through scrutiny of a specific context. The study pursues the following specific research questions:

- How are athletic black masculinities constructed by ESPN in their presentations of the NFL Draft?
- In what ways are these masculinities deployed? What model of power relations do they suggest?

- How is power exercised on the bodies of NFL prospects considered in draft discourses?

### **Approaches to the Media**

#### **as a Product and as Ideological Texts**

The inquiry moves between the contexts of production and the resulting texts. The intention in studying production is not to determine the producers' intent per se; rather, concern with production attempts to establish as completely and as clearly as possible the ways these texts were produced. It would be incomplete to locate context merely as political economy writ large (although indeed, political economy is important). Rather, this project aims to consider the micro-politics of media production, meaning the practices and routines and technical and entertainment considerations that privilege the telling of certain stories at the expense of others. The benefit of such a study is that it situates the Draft at the level of careful local analysis. That locality exists in an intersection of a number of institutions.

Rowe (1999), reconsidering Jhally's conception of the sport/media complex, suggests another formulation, which he calls the "media sports cultural complex." He frames this as an attempt to reconcile "the primacy of symbols in contemporary sport and the two-way relationship between the sports media and the great cultural formation of which it is a part" (4). He outlines a research strategy in which "the links between the conditions under which media sports texts are made and the meanings and ideologies they generate are proposed as the twin foci of a cogent and instructive understanding of the relationships between sport, culture and the media" (5).

Such an approach not only requires attention to the intimate, symbiotic relationship between sports and mass media that has a profound influence on the kinds of texts that are produced; it also insists on the importance of considering the texts themselves in the context of their production. Sport/media texts, after all, do not simply materialize in mediated form – they are actively shaped by the particular infrastructure of sports journalism.

Before explaining the methods used in this study, it is worth reiterating the truism that method and theory, while separated here for the sake of clarity, are in fact tightly interrelated. As Gee (1999, 5) notes, “any method always goes with a *theory*...There can be no sensible method to study a domain unless one also has a theory of what the domain is.” The preceding pages have established a theoretical understanding of the appropriate topics for this study: the ideological uses of sports discourses, and the dynamics of the media/sport complex that serves to produce those discourses. Discussion thus far has explained the relation between sports-related discourses and the larger social context that shapes (and is shaped by) them. It has theorized the relationship between sports and mass media that produces the discourses this study will consider. What remains is to describe a means of practically undertaking a study of such concerns.

The growing body of literature on mediated sport exhibits three main themes that rarely overlap. The oldest and largest subcategory of this scholarship focuses on mediated sports texts themselves. Many scholars have attempted to demonstrate how power operates within and through these representations (Birrell and McDonald 2000, Disch and Kane 1996, Fabos 2001). A second category of literature considers the institutional aspects of sport. The routines, economic considerations and other concerns

that shape sports journalism have all been topics of study (Lowe 2000, Gruneau 1989). A third group of scholarly works consider the role of the audience in making meanings of media/sport texts (Rothenbuhler 1988, Wenner 1994). While many of these works have served to advance the study of sport and mass media, scholarship that considers two or more of these approaches in a single study are rare.

Yet it is clear that while media texts are bounded by discursive constraints and by ideology, they are further shaped by the work routines, economic considerations, and other elements of the journalistic institutions which create the texts. The discourses of the NFL draft cannot be properly understood without accounting for the structures and dynamics that produced it. Grossberg (1997, p.255) points out that “An event or practice...does not exist apart from the forces of the context that constitute what it is.” These forces include ideologies of the time that give shape to meaning, but they also include the particular journalistic routines, practices, and constraints shaping the discourse.

This project proceeds from the assumption that research into the mediated experience of sporting texts should incorporate not just a critical interpretation of the dominant meanings found within media products themselves, but also an understanding of the political, economic factors, and work routines that help shape those meanings.

The possibilities for this kind of work are summarized by Toby Miller (2001):

The left can draw on sports as an ethical, intertextual center – as dominant discourse has done. To assist the process, we need to do work that analyses business, the body, television, and the nation, encompassing the principal discursive formations of this phenomenon. I think of these as concerned with sports *qua* entertainment, education, physical symbol, and science in experienced, governed, and commercial forms. This requires a combination of political economy, textual analysis, and ethnography across the sports media, amateur and professional organizations, international agencies, and corporations, tracking the

commodification and governmentalization of bodies. Such work could make for some reciprocity between sports and mainstream sociocultural theory (132-3).

As Miller notes, power does not act only through the texts that are produced but through the very production of texts. Put another way, texts are shaped by the culture that generates them, defining discursive limits, reproducing power, creating ideal types, conforming to paradigmatic considerations, etc; but mediated texts are also shaped by the more specific culture of journalism and the peculiarities of the local situation. Work routines, professionalism, and budgetary considerations all shape what kinds of texts may be produced around any given incident (Gans 1979; Tuchman 1978). Considering production decisions that shape the texts allows for an added level of particularity that can locate incidents more precisely and still within cultural and historical context. Yet the vast majority of critical readings of sporting incidents fail to consider in any substantial way the productive decisions that helped create those texts. This project attempts to bridge this gap in the reading sport literature.

Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins (1993) provide a model for this approach in their book *Reading National Geographic*. Lutz and Collins considered images published in *National Geographic* magazine from the perspective of production, a consideration of the texts themselves, and a study of how readers consume these images. While my study does not consider the third perspective, audience reception, the first two stages of Lutz and Collins' study provide useful direction for the study of texts in the context of their production.

Lutz and Collins approach the images in *National Geographic* as this study will consider the texts of ESPN, that is, "as an artifact that can be analyzed with some

reference to, but not reducible to – its makers’ institutional context, constraints, intentions, and unconscious motives” (88). They explore the institutional context in which the artifacts they analyze are produced as well as the roles played by editors, photographers, and others in the creation of those artifacts (48). They recognize both the “creative license” that is routinely granted to producers of texts while noting that “certain precepts of institutional culture” confine the range of possible texts (85). Bringing this sensitivity to their textual reading creates a nuanced, informed analysis, helping to generate relevant questions and mitigating against limiting overgeneralizations. I hope to do the same.

In keeping its focus on the institutional and textual context, this study does not view the role of the audience as irrelevant, nor does it suggest that the production and consumption of texts can or should be thought of as independent and unrelated processes. Audiences are always active participants in the creation of meaning, and neither producers’ visions nor texts themselves ought to be the final or decisive consideration. This work should not be viewed as an argument for the primacy of one process over another. However, as Kellner (1995) argues, “focusing on texts and audiences to the exclusion of analysis of social relations and institutions in which texts are produced and consumed truncates cultural studies” (37). Furthermore, Rowe (1999) points out that the temporary and admittedly artificial separation of the production of texts from their consumption can improve “understanding of how media sports texts are produced and what they might mean,” and that through such inquiry “it is possible to learn more about societies in which ‘grounded’ and ‘mediated’ experience intermesh in ever more insidious and seemingly seamless ways” (34).



This project considers NFL draft texts and their production in interaction. Interviews with producers, editors, writers and reporters (conducted by the researcher and also drawn from popular and scholarly sources) provide a window on production decisions and constraints, so the critical reading of the Draft representations is set against the backdrop of actual circumstances of media.

Questions about production decisions are addressed by data collected in published interviews with ESPN's draft producers and through interviews conducted by the researcher. The Entertainment and Sports Programming Network (ESPN), through a synergistic effort including the network's magazine, television and internet versions, will be a major focus. I spoke with ESPN's producers, editors, and reporters of the draft coverage. In addition, I spoke with editors, writers and reporters from *Pro Football Weekly* and *Mel Kiper Jr.'s Draft Report*. Nine interviews were conducted between December 2001 and September 2003. Initial sources were located via internet and print directories and other sources were gathered at the recommendation of the initial sources.

Between March, 2001 and September, 2003, I conducted directed, open-ended interviews with these sources in person, over the telephone, and via electronic mail. The goal of these interviews was to answer questions about the production process. The interviews started with an explanation that I was interested in how the draft was produced. I explained I was particularly interested in their role in the process. I told them that I planned to use their comments to illustrate particular points. I asked them to start with a general overview of their role in the production. I usually had a list of questions to ask, but frequently departed from prepared questions when the interviewees elaborated on topics. No attempt was made to change subjects or otherwise restrict the

conversation when I had a sense that the interviewee had more to say on a topic. I also considered a number of other published interviews from various industry magazines and newspapers. In addition, I observed journalists at work at the 2002 NFL Draft, held April 20 and 21 in Madison Square Garden, New York City. Observation of television journalists centered on the on-site production decisions, the set-up of the production, the segment-to-segment coordination decisions, and the organization of the audience as spectacle.

In the course of conducting these interviews, it became apparent that access to ESPN personnel would be difficult. Except for the days I was able to spend at the draft, distance required that interviews be conducted via email or the telephone. The demands of the sports media circuit in terms of time and travel made contact difficult as well. In place of in-person interviews with important figures in the draft production who could not or would not talk with me, newspaper interviews already in print were used when the responses matched concerns I had identified for this study.

### **The Texts of the Draft**

The past decade or so has seen an explosion of interest in the draft, and an industry of prognostication and evaluation of potential draftees has emerged. Scores of subscription services are available via the Internet and in more traditional published forms. This study uses the texts produced by or closely related to ESPN. The draft is largely the product of ESPN's close relationship with the NFL, and this body of texts allows for an analysis of their cooperation. Texts produced by or for ESPN include the live telecast of the draft (seventeen hours of live coverage in each of the past three years),

coverage in *ESPN: The Magazine*, and ESPN's Internet manifestation [www.espn.com](http://www.espn.com). Also included is *Mel Kiper Jr.'s Draft Report* published and authored by ESPN head draft analyst Mel Kiper Jr., and *Pro Football Weekly's Draft Preview* (much of which appears on [www.espn.com](http://www.espn.com)). Together, these texts reach tens of millions of audience members.

The study considers the 2000, 2001, and 2002 NFL drafts, years representing the apex to date of mediated coverage of the draft. Although niche market publications like *Mel Kiper, Jr.'s Draft Report* have been around for years, recently media corporations have stepped up their efforts to sell the draft to a mainstream audience. ESPN did not have all the elements of its current media blitz in place until *ESPN: The Magazine* was launched in March of 1998.

These texts are appropriate for a number of reasons. Firstly, the collection allows for an analysis of how a spectacle is produced across a range of media technologies and formats. ESPN's audience is identifiable as upper-middle-class, middle-aged, and male. While this is not an audience study, the production of the Draft spectacle can be explained at least in part by target recipients, as media professionals produce fare for what they expect their audiences to be.

My critical reading will consider products across three types of media outlets, partly in order to examine their inter-textual relationship. Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott (1987), in their outstanding analysis of fictional spy James Bond texts *Bond and Beyond*, suggest the various novels, films, fanzines, etc. constitute an interpretive field essential to understanding any of the individual texts themselves. One may not

understand texts in isolation from one another, but only *within* the inter-textual universe.

They state:

We have thus, in approaching the various individual “texts of Bond,” stressed the degree these have always been variably produced – not as ‘the same text’ but as different “texts-to-be-read” – as a result of their insertion within different regimes of inter-textuality. Further, we have suggested that it is not possible to abstract any of the individual texts of Bond from the mobile and changing systems of inter-textual relationships through which their reading has been organized in order to constitute space in which such texts might be stabilized as possible objects of knowledge “in themselves”(206).

My project doesn’t even cover the full range of media coverage of the Draft, but it does incorporate a range of texts across a range of media.

To identify important themes, and to set directives for more extensive research, this project began with a pilot study intended to uncover significant patterns and categories in draft discourses. Because players are almost always discussed together either with the other players who play the position they play or with other prospects drafted in the same round, it was suspected that these would be important categories. Accordingly, the pilot study focused on five players, who play a variety of positions and were selected in different rounds during the 2002 draft.

This study confirmed that the most important way prospects were classified was by their position. Prospects are compared with their colleagues who play the same positions. Additionally, players received a varying amount of attention depending on the draft pick with which they were taken (or in the case of draft guides, the draft pick in with which they were expected to be taken), with higher selections receiving more coverage. The NFL Draft has seven rounds, each consisting of 32 picks. Predictably, the coverage is front loaded, with players taken in the early rounds receiving the most attention. The fact that the last player taken in the draft is unofficially dubbed “Mr.

Irrelevant” should signal that the final stages of the draft do not receive the same level of attention as the earlier ones. The pilot study also detected a number of patterns in draft coverage, which provided the starting point for the more complex analysis.

Accordingly, my dissertation analyzes each round in decreasing detail. It considers each player chosen in the first round of the 2000, 2001, and 2002 NFL Draft, every second player taken in the second round, every third player taken in the third round, and so on. The rest were also reviewed, with an eye for particularly evocative examples of, or deviations from, the patterns that had been detected. This method accounts for both the coverage of the draft as it unfolded on live television and the publications that preceded each draft. It allows for a consideration of the players most likely to receive the most serious and complete analysis. Prospects were analyzed position by position, in order to identify patterns within positions. Color-coded highlighting identified common themes. After completing that analysis, themes across positions were explored.

I engage a method of critical readings suggested by Kellner (1995), who prescribes a close reading of popular culture because “the representation of popular cultural texts constitute the political image through which individuals view the world and interpret political processes, events and personalities” (60). This approach views ideology as “part of a system of domination which serves to further oppression by legitimating forces and institutions that repress and oppress people,” (61) while recognizing that “there is no one unified and stable ideology,” thus requiring the mobilization of political groups (58). It views cultural criticism to be an intrinsically political act, no different than any other attempt to create and distribute knowledge.

The kind of reading proceeds from a recognition that contemporary power arrangements project particular racial, gender, class, and sexual-identities as central norms in relation to which all other identities must be understood. In the contemporary United States, white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male could be considered the “default settings,” with everything else viewed as a departure from the norm. Any analysis of power must confront and contest the invisibility of whiteness and class relations, claims to the universality of male experiences, and assertions about the unnaturalness of homosexual desire.

More directly, I perform a critical analysis of the hypertext, televised and print texts, employing the “reading sport” approach advocated by Birrell and McDonald (1999). Such an approach views power relations as central to the construction of texts and considers different axes of power as intersecting. Breaking down resistance to this kind of analysis is crucial for locating the text within its context. Birrell and McDonald advocate:

focusing on a particular incident or celebrity as the site for exploring the complex, interrelated and fluid character of power relations as they are constituted along the axes of ability, class, gender, and nationality. Each cultural incident offers a unique site for understanding specific articulations of power. The importance of using particular sites is precisely their particularity. Because power operates differently in different places and times, we should avoid the reductive tendencies of arguments over primacy: We cannot settle once and for all which relation of power is always and everywhere most important. What we can say is that at this historical moment, in this particular place, these discourses on race, sexuality, age, ability, and nationality are produced around this particular incident” (284).

Birrell and McDonald (2000) argue for an understanding of incidents or celebrities as texts, that is, as sites for the production of meanings. They understand the researcher as a producer of meanings as well, and advocate the production of counter-narratives that challenge mainstream interpretations.

Reading sport is “a critical, analytical strategy,” they say, that seeks to “connect seemingly discrete incidents and events that are generated within the world of sport to the larger social world” (283). They use an integrated understanding of power: “public discourse is limited by models that treat ageism, sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism as independent forces aligned against one another rather than as potent interacting forces in our culture” (284).

The remainder of this project proceeds in two stages. The first establishes the contemporary draft as the invention of economic necessity, the creation of particular conditions and the product of particular kinds of journalistic work that continue to shape the form of the texts that are produced. The second stage, which constitutes the last three full chapters, demonstrates how the media discourses around the draft serve to position prospects and the audiences in particular ways, and to construct and maintain specific power relationships.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“ONE STEP ABOVE READING THE YELLOW PAGES:” TRANSFORMING THE DRAFT INTO A MEDIA SPECTACLE**

The NFL draft is one of the most unusual major events in the sports/media pantheon. There is a complete absence of live athletic action. There are significant barriers to press access. The overwhelming majority of drafted players are not even present. The teams have a set amount of time in which to make their selection, which a league official (usually NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue) announces from a podium. If a player is among the first five or ten players selected overall, he may be on site, and so can walk to the stage to shake the official's hand; otherwise, the athletes are very unlikely to even be there. Nevertheless, in less than 25 years, the draft has evolved from a mid-week sideshow to a media extravaganza.

This chapter explores the political/economic conditions and the journalistic practices that have helped shape the mediated NFL draft. It first considers the historical and economic forces that helped create the necessary conditions for the draft to emerge as a major media event. The focus then shifts to the contemporary mediated draft and how the event is shaped into a story by the journalists and commentators who cover it.

When the first NFL draft was held in a Philadelphia hotel in 1936, the event was low key. That inaugural draft did not even receive a mention in the *New York Times* until a short summary appeared on page four of the sports section days later. For decades following that first draft, the event was deemed worthy of only the most casual media attention. But since the early 1980s, the NFL draft has grown to a major event on the sporting calendar.



What led to the draft's remarkable popularity? How did the draft come to draw large audiences? What journalistic routines and larger political economic conditions might help account for what we see in the draft? What influences the decisions of the decisions of producers, editors, and writers who create the mediated draft? The goals of this chapter are to answer these questions so that we might better understand the draft as a product of certain definable practices.

### **Origins of the Televised Draft**

The triumph of the draft-as-entertainment is at least partly due to the efforts of the once obscure 24-hour sports network ESPN. Cable networks like ESPN had been a possibility, at least in theory, since the beginning of television broadcasting. Cable, originally developed to transmit signals to remote areas where conventional broadcast was difficult, had a number of advantages: it delivered a clearer picture than broadcast and it could deliver far more channels. For decades, cable was severely limited by the FCC, which protected the broadcast industry. As cable continued to develop it could not be contained. By the 1970s, regulations began to relax, and the end of that decade saw a proliferation of cable channels and franchises organized to distribute them. The cable acts of 1984, 1992, and the Telecommunications Act of 1996 further deregulated the cable industry. Subsequent escalations in cable rates put cable out of the reach of poorer Americans (a consequence that hardly troubled an industry that is, after all, in the business of drawing and maintaining audiences with disposable incomes), but affluent audiences continued to grow; and by the summer of 1997, basic cable channels had achieved larger cumulative prime-time audiences than the three largest networks

together. Cable's share of the TV-viewing audience had more than doubled from 1980 to 2000 (Campbell 2002).

As cable exploded during this period, the three networks began to see the wisdom in investing in cable channels. These partnerships increased the visibility of ESPN. In 1984, with ESPN's stock on the rise, ABC purchased the network for \$200 million. The purchase increased ESPN's programming options. For example, ABC owned the American television rights to the British Open, but planned to televise only the last two of the four round tournament. ESPN was able to use ABC's technical crews to televise the first two rounds.

Part of what attracted ABC's interest in ESPN was the highly desirable audience demographic it offered. The introduction of cable did not simply present new competition to the three networks – it utterly transformed the logic by which most television stations imagined their audiences. The growing popularity of cable and the proliferation of channels that followed fragmented the mass audience the big three used to share. For marketers, the promise in this development lay in the fragmented audience supplying distinct consumer demographics who could be targeted even more effectively than the larger, undifferentiated mass audience. This “narrowcasting” has carved out many sub-groups through content designed to appeal to them.

Of these various audiences, one for big-time sports is easily the most appealing - ESPN's audience is mostly male and remarkably well-off. Journalist Mark Jurkowitz (1998) says the “average” ESPN television viewer is 40.7 years old with an income just over \$45,000, “making him two years younger and a few grand wealthier than the average cable consumer.” In short, the all-sports network that so many had once scoffed

at or ignored exploded as a major player in the newly profitable arena of cable television precisely by virtue of its ability to attract a very desirable market – the middle-aged male demographic with upward mobility (though it is not specified in the marketing literature, those demographics make it highly likely that the audience is also largely white). The appeal to this audience has proven remarkably profitable.

In 1992, ESPN finished the year with more than \$200 million in reported profits, out-earning the parent company, ABC (which has since been purchased by Disney). In 1995, ESPN launched its internet site, ESPN Sportzone (later renamed ESPN.com), and in 1998, the first issue of the bi-monthly sports magazine *ESPN: The Magazine* appeared. The flagship channel, ESPN, is available in more than 80 million homes, and its advertising and subscriber revenue exceeded \$1 billion annually. By the turn of the century, ESPN had spawned four additional networks (ESPN2, ESPNNEWS, ESPN Classic, ESPN International) as well as a nationwide radio network with more than 600 affiliates (Freeman 2002).

When ESPN was launched in 1979, such accomplishments were unimaginable. The idea of round-the-clock sports coverage seemed curious at best. Bill Pennington, a reporter who attended an early press conference on the ESPN concept, recalls “I remember being one of the people laughing...I thought, ‘This is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard’” (Freeman 2000, 58). Compounding the problem was the fact that the fledgling operation had little to offer in the way of popular American sports. In its early days, it aired such events as slow pitch softball, hurling, volleyball, and Australian Rules Football. Compared with such unglamorous fare, any opportunities for affiliation with one of the United States’ major sports leagues seemed extremely attractive.

ESPN was especially eager for any opportunity to broadcast the NFL, but lacked the financial means necessary to challenge the networks' stranglehold on game broadcast rights. Indeed, the network could barely afford the rebroadcast rights to *college* football games. Chet Simmons and Scotty Connell, founding partners of ESPN, pursued their yearning for an angle on "big time sports" the NFL represented.

In spite of baseball's claim to be the U.S.'s "national pastime," professional football has been the nation's most popular sport since the mid-1960s. According to a 2003 Harris poll, twenty-nine percent of US sports fans call the NFL their favorite – more than twice the proportion reporting baseball as their preference. NFL television contracts are the most expensive in professional sports.

Importantly, Simmons and Connell were willing to think creatively about broadcast opportunities. "Chet and Scotty wanted to forge some sort of relationship with the NFL and get a foot in the door to someday, air games," ESPN talent George Grande said (Yasinkas 2003). Anchor Chris Berman remembers the promise of the draft: "It was our only hands-on involvement with the crown jewel of American sports." He adds that turning an occasion "people thought was one step above reading the Yellow Pages into a TV event people liked" was a steep challenge unlikely of success (Lindquist 1999). The draft may have been comparatively small potatoes, but ESPN was glad to get it, says Jay Rothman: "In the early days, anything with the NFL on it was a desired property. That was the perfect vehicle for us to make a statement and start to build our identity with the NFL. It was our way of tapping into that big NFL mountain" (Harmon 2001).

Since the draft was an event no one wanted, ESPN would not have to outbid anyone for the rights. When the network first approached the league on the possibility of

televising the draft, however, NFL officials were not easily convinced. Indeed, at a 1979 meeting, the owners voted 28-0 against allowing the proposal. After all, the idea of an obscure cable channel taking what was then a mid-week event that barely merited a mention in the next day's newspaper must have seemed hardly worth the trouble.

The crucial turn in this story came when ESPN hired as president Chester Simmons, a well-established and respected figure in televised sports. Simmons, who helped launch ABC's legendary "Wide World of Sports," and had later served as president of NBC Sports, had the ear of important sports entrepreneurs like then-NFL Commissioner Pete Roselle. When Simmons explained that the network planned to carry the entire draft live, Roselle still reportedly asked, "Why would you want to do that?" Eventually though, Simmons was able to convince Roselle that it was a sound idea. Roselle, who was widely trusted by the owners, persuaded the owners to go along (Freeman 2002, 79-102).

The first draft to be televised was a tentative operation. Just before the first broadcast, ESPN's leadership told anchors Bob Ley and George Grande to abandon the project should it prove untenable. Simmons warned Ley before the draft: "Nobody's ever done this...if it's not working, sign off" (Williams 2002). But more than eight hours later, the anchors were still on the air, completing their live televised broadcast. "When it was over, we were like punch-drunk fighters for a couple of days," Grande recalled. "I don't think it was until a couple of days later that we realized what we had pulled off." "We did something nobody else had ever done," Ley remembered "I don't know how we did it." "I've seen tapes of pieces of that first telecast. Bit by bit it evolved. We had no live shots that first year – we were lucky we had people on the phone" (Williams 2002).

ESPN deemed that first try successful enough to warrant a bigger investment. In 1984, ESPN added commentary by Mel Kiper Jr., a football fan from Baltimore who had managed to transform his hobby of writing scouting reports on NFL prospects into a viable business. An authority from a local NFL team had reviewed Kiper's reports and suggested there might be a market for his information among the growing number of draft fans. Kiper's presence at the anchor desk transformed the shape of the draft broadcast, since his background as the author of scouting reports prepared him to bring meticulous analysis to even the most obscure prospects.

The draft telecast continue to grow. By 1984, the draft telecast was watched in 178,000 homes and the network expanded its coverage. "We started off with one truck and no remotes, to multiple trucks and remotes everywhere," says Rothman. "It started out only being the first round and then we did updates on rounds 2 and 3. Then it turned into three rounds with updates. And then it was, 'Hey, let's just cover the whole thing'" (Harmon 2001).

### **Staging the Draft for Television**

But if the televised draft was invented out of economic necessity, it currently thrives in a very different context. In 1987, ESPN achieved its goal of broadcasting live NFL games. But the network did not drop or even de-emphasize its annual draft coverage. To the contrary, its coverage became even more elaborate and extensive. In a sense, the draft promotes ESPN's image as a resource for the hard-core sports fan. As Chris Berman proudly told the *San Francisco Chronicle* of the organization's extensive

draft coverage, “We’re thorough. Nobody is as thorough as ESPN. You can quote me on that” (Kroner 1999).

The remarkable success of ESPN, and specifically its draft coverage is vivid evidence of the potency of sports symbolism in contemporary American culture. The growing market for sports media texts like the NFL draft and for ESPN is, in part, the product of larger market shifts in post-industrial western societies. This shift, which Lash & Urry (1994) term “the culturalization of economics” places a premium on the circulation of symbols, especially those that can be mobilized in the service of other capitalist interests. Lash & Urry (1994) note that culture industries are significant growth areas in highly developed western economies, and sports have emerged as an ideal vehicle under this paradigm. Media sport texts can capitalize on the intense sense of identification that so many people feel for sports and the athletes who play them to create numerous marketing possibilities for a range of products. Furthermore, since sports provides provocative indicators of gender, race and class, they present a rich array of possibilities for highly emotional appeals.

As David Rowe (1999) has observed, media sports texts are also “particularly valuable for their flexibility and interconnectedness” (70-1). Sports, of course, are often sold as live events, but can also be repackaged for sale in an array of formats. These ramifications are seen in ESPN and other 24-hour sports channels through preview shows, nightly highlight shows such as ESPN’s wildly popular “SportCenter,” and award shows or historical retrospectives, all of which rely on recycled footage.

In addition to promoting interest in ESPN’s live programming and the broadcast of live sporting events in general, these myriad programs also serve to promote the

leagues that stage the events, games, and other activities. This symbiotic relationship is one that Sut Jhally (1984) presciently identified in the mid-1980s as the “media/sport complex,” a symbiotic, mutually beneficial arrangement that dominates contemporary sport in capitalist societies. ESPN’s expanding draft coverage and highlight shows such as “NFL Tonight” and “Sportcenter” helped extend the league’s profile and visibility and created larger markets for the NFL and other professional sports leagues. As NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue has put it, “ESPN helped raise the NFL’s national profile and prompted other media organizations to match it” (Freeman 2000, 6).

The NFL draft is an especially vivid site for the close cooperation between sports and media corporations. After ESPN proved that the draft could be a profitable television venture, the NFL moved the draft from the middle of the week to the weekend in order to maximize visibility of the event. The NFL’s website was managed by ESPN’s internet division for a time, a relationship which means that ESPN enjoys unusual access to players, coaches, and other potential interviewees on draft day. ESPN sells a video game officially licensed by the league that features virtual embodiments of league players and teams. The game is promoted during the draft telecast. In recent years, draft telecasts have promoted both the NFL and ESPN to a growing audience.

ESPN has consistent and clear ideas about its audiences. Though rarely emphasized explicitly, race and class play an important role in audience composition. Sports and especially for professional football, not only “delivers the male” to advertisers, but more importantly, delivers the right kind of male. While the NFL is popular among Blacks and Latinos, it also delivers the coveted demographic of wealthy and middle class white males.



At a closer level of analysis, the audience for the draft reveals three distinct audience elements; highly involved fans, more moderate fans, and casual viewers. Draft discourses are produced to appeal as broadly as possible across these groups. For very interested viewers, the draft telecast is the culmination of a long process of analysis, whereas the casual fan might come across the draft while channel surfing on Saturday afternoon. As a former producer for ESPN explains in an interview with this author:

One part of the audience is definitely the hardcore draft fan, what we call a 'draftnic' ... Another group is made up of pretty serious fans of a particular team. This fan will schedule his draft-watching schedule around his team's picks. Finally, there is the casual NFL fan, who will tune in periodically" (Gaudelli, 2001).

In the case of the draft, there is even a special term for the most enthusiastic fan: the draftnic. The 'draftnic' is a fan who follows the draft process closely. Draftnics interviewed at the 2002 NFL draft were frequently fans of particular teams, but their interest in the draft extends beyond their team's pick. They are fascinated by the draft process, they follow the changing status of prospects, sometimes for several years. Draftnics often track each team's picks, debating the values attributed to prospects by their draft position. There is evidence that this group of fans is growing, perhaps nurtured by the extensive coverage ESPN provides. That later round draft coverage on ESPN2 was up 20% in 2002 from the year before reveals how the recent visibility of the draft is encouraging this new kind of fan. But draftnics are not merely the product of draft discourses. They played a significant role in the early days of the draft and continue to play a prominent role in its production. The growth of this audience has influenced the telecast, as follows: ESPN producer Jay Rothman said, "Our theory, when we started this,

was for day two [of the two-day draft telecast] to hammer on issues. We used it as a forum to blow out stories and, oh by the way, the draft.” This approach was not popular with some outspoken viewers: “I was hammered by letters from fans who wanted to see the draft on day two. ‘Hey, don't give me 15 minutes of Tommy Frazier, the Nebraska quarterback, and why he didn't go. We want Mel to tell us about our picks. We want to know who we got’” (Lindquist 1998).

Until his death in 2002, ESPN.com's prospect-by-prospect analysis was primarily authored by a man who must surely rank as one of the earliest and most prolific draftnics. Joel Buchsbaum began following the draft when it was “about 100 people in a hotel ballroom,” in the mid-70s, when he started printing scouting reports and selling them out of his home. “It started as a hobby,” he said. “I tried it as a profession in 1975-76. It was perfect because I love sports intensely, but I'm a very poor athlete. I started sending out articles to anyone I could think of” (Buchsbaum 2002ab). After two years with *The Football News*, Buchsbaum agreed to a position with *Pro Football Weekly*, authoring its annual draft preview. *Pro Football Weekly's* annual draft guide last year found more than 30,000 readers, and its presence on the ESPN web site reached millions more.

Draftnics, moderate fans, and casual viewers, as imagined by the producers, account for many of the features of draft discourse. So-called “draftnics” must be provided with the necessary details on each prospect. Hence, the analysis of each prospect, and the frequent analysis of each player's relative draft position. Fans of particular teams are provided with evaluations of individual team needs, as well as post-draft analysis of how well each team met those needs. Finally, the whole presentation must be made accessible to the more casual fan who might tune in periodically.

One effective way ESPN has found to appeal to a wide range of viewers is by profiling a prospect in a special, pre-produced package. These profiles, titled “In the Crosshairs,” detail elements of the prospect’s personal lives, often linking their off-the-field activities with their athletic productivity. In selecting which players to profile, producers consider three criteria: how compelling a story the prospect’s personal life makes, the player’s perceived personal charisma, and, importantly, where the player is expected to be drafted. Players selected for profiles must be drafted early on the first day. To illustrate this point, one ESPN producer used the example of LaVarr Arrington, the second player selected in the 2000 draft: “Here was a guy who met all three criteria. He was the second overall pick. His dad was a Vietnam vet who had lost his legs, and Lavarr says he runs for his father. That’s an example of a really emotional, personal story. He was able to bring so much to the table, so we just couldn’t pass on him” (Guadelli 2001).

The advantage of such pieces is that they can appeal to the various elements of ESPN’s draft day audience simultaneously. These segments do not require an intimate familiarity with the player – indeed, a virtually unknown player could conceivably offer compelling personal stories (although only sure things make the cut). At the same time, these stories can still be of interest to draftnics, as the information they convey lies outside the very narrow assessments of productivity that mark so much of draft discourses.

The pre-produced work serves a second important function – it helps to assuage the difficulty of covering a live event for seventeen hours. This produces some unique challenges for experienced sports producers:

The biggest difference between televising the draft and televising any other sporting event – any other sporting event in the world – is that when you televise a football game, for example, you're there to cover an event. But with the NFL draft, television *is* the event. There's the announcement of who's just been drafted and there won't be another one for 15 minutes, so television must fill the gaps. Television must become the event (Gaudelli 2001).

Jay Rothman agrees, as he told the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "When you're doing a football game you're dealing in a finite world. With the draft, though, as soon as you move forward, something can bite you" (Kroner 2001). Meeting this challenge means, in part, that producers must "develop a game plan on how to cover a player," according to Gaudelli. By selecting some players for special attention, he suggests, producers can fill some of the frequent gaps between announcements of the next bit of "news." Because of the long gaps between what passes as action (the announcement of the next pick), draft coverage is necessarily analysis-heavy. "The closest comparison in terms of television coverage is probably a political convention," Gaudelli suggests. To keep talking heads from dominating the broadcast requires that preparation for the draft begin months in advance of the broadcast.

Part of the challenge of the televised draft is that it offers precious little in the way of scripted television. As Chris Berman relates (Quindt 2002), "Only the first five minutes are scripted; everything after that is flying by the seat of the pants" and compares it to "announcing a game that goes into 10 overtimes" (Goodman 1999).

Countering the liveness of the draft offers some challenges to Berman and the other producers of ESPN's draft coverage, Berman told the Associated Press: "I dread it in some ways because it's the hardest thing I do in the course of the year. I'm not talking about the 10 hours on Saturday, I'm talking about getting up to speed" (Goodman 1999).

Berman reports that he begins studying information for the draft telecast two weeks in advance. He contacts coaches, team and league officials. He collects this material as if he were preparing for an exam: "It's like a course in your major that you've got to ace, and it's the final, and you've done very little of the work until then. It's a scary couple of weeks" (Lindquist 1999).

Because the draft is short on conventional elements of athletic spectacle, the production must collect and organize hundreds of highlights of potential prospects that lays the basis for the (sometimes forced) drama. The monumental effort required to produce the visual element of the draft telecast led one observer to remark, "Never being at a loss for words or visuals is testament to this Cecil B. DeMille of productions – 1,000 preproduced graphics, 250-plus highlight reels...The ESPN scout's motto: Be prepared" (Quindt 2002). Gathering the necessary information is far too time-consuming for the ESPN on camera talent, so the network employs a small number of researchers who work full time from January to April preparing materials for the draft and providing anchors and commentators with relevant information. Much of this collected data also appears on ESPN's Internet draft guide.

Jay Rothman dreads the preparation period that he calls "three months of hell:"

In terms of man-hours, it's definitely unhealthy. It really is every waking moment just trying to cover yourself regarding 300-plus players, 31 NFL teams, following up with free agency, being on top of all the issues, all the story lines and all the needs besides thousands of graphics, highlights on 200 players, and breakdown packages of 40 or 50 players. We sit down and hammer this thing from every angle and every perspective. It is tons of man-hours and something you don't want to be involved in. Needless to say, there is great relief Sunday when we sign off" (Lindquist 1999).

Compounding the challenge, the draft's living room audience is fickle: "This show has a great amount of tune-in and tune-out," said Rothman (Lindquist 1998). To

combat channel surfing, the telecast incorporates a number of techniques to hold the audience's attention. Borrowing the tactics of 24-hour news networks, ESPN frequently floods the screen with information. A scroll runs at the bottom of the screen announcing the picks that have been made and the teams yet to select. A vertical sidebar encourages viewers to visit the network's website and offer their opinion on who should be the next selection. As each pick is announced, a series of highlights of the appropriate player run while the announcers give their initial appraisal.

ESPN also coordinates and plays up the audience that attends the draft live in the Theatre of Madison Square Garden. "We want to make sure that the Giants and Jets [both located in New York] fans are all together," explains Gaudelli. "One of the great shots is always of the Jets fans because they never like any of their team's picks. So we always want to catch their reaction." Gaudelli interprets the appeal of such shots: "It's a kind of unsophisticated survey of the fans' reaction to their teams' pick – it's a quick referendum and it adds an element of levity to the broadcast." Camera coordinator Stephen Batanovics attempts to manipulate the crowd and the lighting so that "it sucks you in. It's like a stadium." The fans themselves seem eager to perform this labor – large groups cheered, waved, and displayed signs for the cameras on demand during the broadcast.

As a means of meeting Gaudelli's dictate to "be up to date with as much information as possible on the players and teams drafting them...to be breaking news and making news rather than just reporting what comes down through official channels," ESPN has experimented with a variety of strategies for breaking the news of draft picks and impending trades. The network tried stationing reporters on-site with a number of

teams, but found this approach inefficient. “We sent [ESPN reporter] Mark Malone to Kansas City, and they’d traded away their picks,” said Rothman (Quindt 2002). To avoid this “underutilization of talent,” the network began to invest more heavily in videoconferencing, a technology which allows ESPN to connect with a large number of sources without the expense of locating reporters around the country. Ultimately, videoconferencing allows ESPN to scale down the number of personnel. In the mid 1990s, when the draft was remote-heavy, the network would employ 15-16 announcers, but now that number is down to 8-10, supported by a crew of 80-100 production people which is about the same for an NFL game. Videoconferencing also allows ESPN to alter the pace of the broadcast, as interviews with coaches, general managers and other team officials provide a break from the analysis and reporting on team moves that characterize the bulk of the draft coverage.

But when talking heads cannot be avoided, the conversation is structured to hold audience attention. ESPN’s telecast incorporates live commentary from two remote locations – ESPN’s studio headquarters in Bristol, Connecticut and ESPN’s Times Square theme restaurant *ESPNZone*. Both forums feature essentially roundtable debates where ESPN commentators argue over draft-day decisions in a seemingly spontaneous manner. Producer Ed Placey even cites the now-defunct political talk show “Politically Incorrect” as a model. “We’re putting more emphasis on debate, so we’ll have our talent talking more to each other rather than talking to the camera so much” (Rogers 2001).

ESPN’s coverage of the draft does not begin and end with the television broadcast – it is enveloped in a panoply of associated coverage over other media. The magazine’s special preview issue and the network’s Internet site each include an extensive draft

guide. This section, updated each spring, features stories by ESPN television reporters John Clayton and Mel Kiper, Jr. The draft page also includes an index of more than 300 prospects, exploring in detail their size, strength, agility, college productivity, and speculations on professional productivity.

While the television broadcast occasionally used story ideas from the magazine (as in 1999, when the televised broadcast borrowed an angle suggested by the magazine's draft preview), most of the planning is done independently. Nevertheless, the cooperation among so many entities further enhanced the draft's status as a major event. As Mel Kiper told the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*; "The expansion of the draft is a direct result of the expansion of ESPN. Remember, back in 1984, there was no ESPN2, no ESPN Radio, no ESPN.com, no 'ESPN The Magazine'" (Harmon 2001). Indeed, every ESPN property is mobilized on draft weekend to direct the attention of sports audiences toward the draft. Even ESPN Classic, the network's property that broadcasts archived "classic" programming picks content that can be connected to the draft in some way (such as classic games starring former number one picks).

### **Covering the Combine: Stats Galore**

Sports news has always been different from other forms of news, marked by distinct forms, positioned as journalism's "sandbox," developed in isolation from other forms of news. One of the most distinctive of the curiosities of sports news is the prevalence of statistical information. In addition to the numbers that inundate many summaries of sporting events, the typical sports page includes literally pages of statistical



summaries of team and individual performance. Enumeration is so central to sports news that every major network that covers sports on a regular basis has one or more full-time statisticians and several agencies collect and disseminate sports statistics.

But prevalent as numbers may be in sports news, perhaps nowhere else do they play such a central role as in the coverage of the draft. In spite of some rather serious obstacles to access, draft discourses are replete with statistical information. Statistics from college careers are easily gathered and are a constant feature of draft discourses. But the more valued numerical information is collected in private workouts and at the combines, which are a prelude to the hysteria of the draft.

The draft itself may take “only” seventeen hours to complete, but the process of assessing talent and collecting statistics takes several months. From January to April each year, hundreds of potential draftees are subjected to a very invasive process that seeks to glean the necessary information about their bodies, their technique, their background, their intelligence, and even their psyche. This process produces the numbers that are spun in draft discourses.

Much of this inspection is done at Senior Days (hosted by various top college football programs), and individual tryouts will provide much of the information that teams will use in making their selection. But so complex and time-consuming is the collection of this information that a more systematic and ambitious event is required. All professional teams participate in a week-long process in which prospects are assembly-lined through a number of stations, opening themselves to inspection for hours at a time. Each February, the top 350 or so prospects will make their way to Indianapolis for the

National Invitation Camp. The Combines, as they are more commonly referred to, are where the most extensive examination of potential draftees takes place.

It takes four full days for trainers, doctors, scouts, and coaches from the NFL's 32 teams to inspect the bodies of the nearly 400 prospects. The process is startling for its invasiveness, comprehensiveness, and studied dehumanization. The potential draftees are assigned a numbered, gray uniform, and have the same number written on their hand. Players are not referred to by name, but are summoned by their number. Notes Combine veteran Tim Green (1996), "you don't just feel like a number, you become one" (7).

The welcome begins with a thorough physical. Players take a vision test, urinate in the presence of a doctor to provide a sample for drug testing, and are quizzed about their injury histories. In addition to measuring and health assessments, scouts and coaches also use the Combine as an opportunity to calculate prospective productivity on the football field. This potential is gauged not through play, but via the more abstract measures of speed, leaping ability, strength, and agility. One reason the Combines are held in Indianapolis each year is that the domed stadium allows for a controlled environment suitable for the quasi-scientific nature of the enterprise. To collect this data, each player at the Combine is asked to perform each of the following: a 40-yard sprint, a vertical and broad jump, a strength test which consists of bench-pressing 225 pounds as many consecutive times as possible, and an agility test that consists of darting between cones.

The medical examination at the combines is evidence of this relentless desire to render the athletic body analyzable. Prospects are asked about past injuries by a team of doctors. The obsessive nature of this confessional is startling. Former draftee Mike

Elkins said “I was sorry I’d told them about my pinky, which I broke when I was 10.

They X-rayed it yesterday, and today they asked me about it over and over. Who cares?”

(Lieber 1989, p. 43). Similarly, Tim Green (1996) recalls:

They [league doctors and trainers] ask you questions about old injuries you had in college. You try to lie and say there weren’t any. You don’t want to be perceived as damaged goods. They’ve got you though. In the corner is a computer-literate trainer from one of the teams who is banging away and extracting you complete medical history, electronically preserved somewhere in your past. Some of the things he pulls up you forgot about yourself, a broken finger, a bruised thigh. You had no idea they could get this information, so you come clean and admit that all your old injuries really exist (9).

Body parts are inspected closely during the combines. As Elkins tells it, “One time I was on my back, with doctors working on each leg and arm. Limbs were flying in all directions” (ibid). Green remembers being “loaded up with other players onto a bus instead of a cattle truck and transported to a local hospital that has the necessary gizmos to further scrutinize what you once thought was your own body” (6-7). Height, weight, and hand size are measured and body fat percentage estimated. Prospects are photographed from the front, back and side. Former number one pick Keyshawn Johnson reports that “I felt more like I was being prepped for a transplant than for pro football” (Johnson 1997).

Of course, there are a number of rather straightforward reasons for this inquiry, and some very good reasons for going along with it. The top picks each year can expect multi-million dollar contracts. Those doing the inspection predictably frame the invasiveness as simply a good business practice. As an NFL general manager explains: “It’s a livestock show, and it’s dehumanizing, but it’s necessary...If we’re going to pay a kid a lot of money to play football, we have a right to find out as much as we can. If we’re going to buy ‘em, we ought to see what we’re buying” (Lieber 1989, 38).

These numbers do not just circulate among football coaches, scouts, and general managers, however. They find their way into numerous draft guides, like the one linked to ESPN.com and the one published by Mel Kiper, Jr. Although the combines and most other workouts are closed to the public, they nevertheless generate intense media coverage. Through sources such as agents, scouts, and other insiders, much leaks into the sports media, and eventually into the draft guides and on-line services that cater to fan interest.

For Joel Buchsbaum, the primary author of ESPN's web guide to prospects, the collection of those numbers was a demanding job, requiring the right connections. Buchsbaum collected these numbers, and did most of his evaluation from the comfort of his own home. Satellite television and his telephone proved to be Buchsbaum's crucial tools. By staying in frequent touch with league insiders, Buchsbaum obtained his speed, strength, height, and weight measurements from agents, or other insiders. As Buchsbaum (2002b) explained in an interview with this author, "Basically, it's an evaluation process. You get as many people who are knowledgeable who will talk to you and make a determination from there."

The draft became a major media event, not through careful planning or a savvy evaluation of audiences, but because a fledgling network needed some association with a major league powerhouse. Over the years, the draft has developed in response to viewers' enthusiasms and predilections, as well as in conjunction with the expanding capabilities of the network. Although the broadcast is sometimes spontaneous, it requires months of careful preparation. The draft requires an important commitment by ESPN. The telecast is supplemented by an extensive online site and an annual commitment from

its magazine. That the network has invested these resources for years, suggests how important the draft has become to ESPN's identity.

The discourses of the draft emerge from a traditional emphasis in sports journalism on the importance of numbers and statistics as story-telling devices. In the draft, the obsession with statistics reaches unusual heights. Although the statistics from individual workouts and at the combine are difficult to attain, they are a constant feature of draft coverage, even for the most inconsequential prospect. The next chapters will explore how the collection of these data figures in the stories that are told about the draft.

**CHAPTER 3**  
**BODY SHOP:**  
**COMMODYING CORPOREALITY IN THE NFL DRAFT**

Popular media sources consistently assert that commodified, mediated sport creates popular heroes, even role models, of sports stars. A number of critics (e.g. Whannell 2002, Dyson 1998) have explored the ways sports media encourage identification with the athletes. But the media coverage of the draft departs dramatically from that model. Draft discourses treat players, not as heroes but as commodities. The open assessment of bodily capital, the discussions of team needs, and the celebration of the draft as a capitalist orgy all encourage the audience to identify not with the players, but with management. Fans are positioned to consider prospects, not as heroes, but as property.

This chapter demonstrates how draft discourses serve to construct the people whose talents are under consideration as specific types of commodities. The prospects are given particular values according to remarkably well-developed and precise standards. The chapter opens with an overview of the classification systems by which value is assigned to prospects at each position, based on their body type. A consideration of attempts to evaluate relative value-potential on the basis of the refinement of each prospect's technique (in the best case, his "instinct") follows. The chapter ends with four extended examples demonstrating how the corporeal and technical facets of a player's value cohere in the assessment of each player's commodified value and become goods that circulate in the draft marketplace.

### **The Pleasures of Virtual Ownership**

The mediated draft positions prospects as commodities to be bought, sold, and traded. This is done through assessment of each prospect's relative value according to strictly maintained standards of body size and athletic training, which are discussed in this chapter. It is also accomplished via the insistence on an attitude of self-denial on the part of the prospects, as well as a process that ultimately reduces each prospect to a number. But these techniques do not preclude the public admission that the draft is a commodifying discourse. In fact, this purpose is frequently and openly celebrated in draft discourses.

The positioning of the prospects as commodities to be purchased and as open to power's inspection may be seen, for instance, in both the *Pro Football Weekly Draft Preview* and *Mel Kiper, Jr.'s Draft Report*. Each includes a section with a detailed analysis of team needs, and each team offers a position-by-position assessment in segments of 15 pages or more. Beyond providing material of interest to fans of individual teams, these sections present the bodies of draftees for assessment by the public. In doing so, the mediated draft constructs prospects in terms that as commodities and as an appropriate object for power's gaze.

Draft discourses also promote the pleasures of the draft as a kind of orgy of consumption and capitalism. As *The Sporting News'* Brian Baldinger (2002) reports, what is exciting about the draft is watching "all the teams gather around the tree on draft morning and unwrap their presents." *Christian Science Monitor* reporters Hartill and

Bandrapalli (2000) call the draft “a fascinating process” where the skills of “a Wall Street investor like Peter Lynch” are at a premium.

*ESPN: The Magazine's* April 2000 issue makes the relationship between the draft and the commodity market plain through analogies. “[T]hese times love the NFL Draft,” writes Luke Cyphers (2000) for *ESPN: The Magazine*. “Makes sense. These times love investing and speculating in markets – and sports of course – and what is the Draft but a microcosm of all that?...Risk it all on one play(er) or trade down and hedge by drafting volume...Folks at E\*Trade have nothing on the Draft Day traders in the league front office” (81). Other articles in this issue pick up on the theme. Mel Kiper, Jr. (2000) previews the Draft in a section titled “Mel’s Market,” which announces, “It’s Draft time, when every team gets to juice its portfolio with some new high flyers. This year’s broad market trend leans to wideouts. But it’s a volatile ride to that first public offering on Draft Day” (90). A section highlighting some “relatively obscure” prospects, titled “NFL Draft 2000: Futures” (Feldman, 2000), is introduced with: “Every year, the NFL scouting system pokes, prods, and dissects the Draft crop – transforming a few relatively obscure collegians into hot commodities. On Draft Day, watch out for these IPOs” (94).

ESPN’s televised draft likewise depicts the draft as a place of commodity exchange. The screen is filled with information. A scroll along the bottom, resembling those that relay the latest stock prices on financial news networks, reveals the picks that have been made and those that are still to come. A box, situated vertically on the left of the screen, presents “Mel [Kiper]’s Best Available” – the highest rated prospects still undrafted. During the first round, a fan poll also appears on the left. By logging onto ESPN.com, fans can register their “vote” to indicate whom they would take with the next



pick were the decision up to them. The model for these graphics comes from financial news, says Jay Rothman: “It will be impossible to read everything on-screen, but this is selective viewing much like CNBC is with stocks” (Lindquist 2000).

### **Assessing bodies**

In addition to ESPN’s televised coverage, the draft provides fodder for a special page on ESPN.com for several months leading up to the draft. Beginning with the Senior Bowl each year in January, the four months that constitute the draft season are covered extensively by ESPN and scores of subscription services, both online and like Mel Kiper, Jr.’s, in print. During this period, players are analyzed, assessed, and debated for months in these forums (and on ESPN’s *SportCenter*) until the draft, where the drama climaxes.

The draft process produces a wealth of information for teams (and later, for the media that transform the draft into sports news and entertainment). The drills which measure speed and strength are carefully noted, and measurement of the body’s dimensions receives special attention. Clearly, not everyone is qualified to play on an NFL roster. No matter how quick, strong, or disciplined a prospect might be, before he can earn serious consideration he must first literally measure up to unofficial, but nonetheless widely agreed upon and rather stringent, body types. The practices and discourses of the NFL draft combine a fondness for disciplinary techniques discussed more fully in the next chapter with a carefully maintained market for bodies in which the largest, strongest, swiftest, and most durable are valued more than others.

Because different positions vary widely in perceived physical requirements, prospects are evaluated according to the criteria of their position. In *Mel Kiper’s Draft*

*Preview, Pro Football Weekly's Draft Guide*, whose content is linked to ESPN.com's web site, prospects are dealt with in separate sections devoted to each position. Every conceivable position is accounted for. The number of players considered runs from two (long snappers, whose sole job is to snap the ball to the punter) to 103 (wide receivers), but almost all consider at least fifty college prospects. In each case, the player's height and weight is displayed beside his name, comprising the prospect's key vital statistics.

For each player's role, prospects are measured against ideal body types. These ideals are constructed as the bodies most likely to produce success at that particular position. A large but preferably nimble body is demanded for most of the interior positions, while players can weigh 150 pounds less and be a good deal faster on the exterior of the field. Different body parts are scrutinized depending on the position the prospect might play.

Body type is crucial at every position, but especially for offensive and defensive linemen, tight ends, and linebackers, who do most of the blocking (on offense) and tackling (on defense). As attention moves from these players to those evaluated for "skill" positions (quarterback, running back, defensive back), there is a noticeable shift in focus away from the body toward the prospect's cognitive skills. For quarterbacks, the focus is usually (though not always) on cognitive skills, mental toughness, and "leadership qualities."

Offensive linemen, on the other hand, are judged primarily by physical dimensions. Perhaps no position demonstrates better the strict corporeal standards demanded of football players in the draft. These players, whose job it is to clear room for ball carriers and prevent defensive players from tackling them, have grown to enormous

proportions over the past few decades. So large is the desired lineman today that minimum standards of height and weight have become absurd. “You just don’t see under 6-foot, 3-inch tackles with 31-inch-long arms in the NFL anymore,” notes *Pro Football Weekly* (Buchsbaum 2002a, 88). Despite weighing in at 296 pounds, Jeff Hatch “looks thin.” More specifically, he “does not have the big, Art-Shell type butt and huge thighs and lower body that you look for in an offensive lineman” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 77). At 6-2, 291 pounds, Virginia Tech’s Matt Lehr “Lacks size.” And “while he is strong, he just can’t be as strong as some 6-5, 350 pound guard can be. 6-5 Steve Schiller “lacks size and speed,” and therefore, he is assessed as a “fine college player with very limited athletic ability for an NFL lineman” (Buchsbaum 2001, 70). In describing Jackson State’s Rashard Anderson, Mel Kiper (2000, 75) notes that, “From a physical standpoint, Anderson has exactly what defensive coordinators are looking for each and every year,” explaining that he “can still make a play when it appears he’s been beaten due to his size/wingspan.” Linemen must have a “very large wingspan” like Tennessee’s John Henderson, or a “bubble butt,” like Auburn’s Kendell Simmons (Buchsbaum 2002a, 88). “Maurice Williams “lacks the really big bones and features” and “is cut a little high” (Buchsbaum 2001, 81), but Toniau Fonoti is a “massive widebody with tree trunks for legs” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 75). Jeremy Shockey “lacks the big butt and legs scouts look for in a blocker” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 87). At nearly six and a half feet and 400 pounds, lineman Mike Williams has “awesome size” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 91).

Linebackers must balance size and speed, as they are required to stop runs up the middle. They must also occasionally help out against the pass. Dan Morgan of Miami achieves this balance. He “has added weight to his frame over the years, yet may be

faster now than he's ever been" (Kiper 2001, 60). Syracuse's Dwight Freeney has the physical tools to defend against the pass and the run and is a "Big hitter with a touch of nasty...[and] Has very good hands, which are very big, for catching the ball" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 117). About UCLA's Robert Thomas, Kiper (2002) is less optimistic. "The one thing missing from his resume is size...If blockers can get their hands on him, they can engulf him" (61).

Defensive backs must have exceptional speed to defend equally speedy wide receivers. They are also the last line of defense against the run, so they must also have a measure of size to tackle large running backs that reach their position. Syracuse cornerback Will Allen "is a solid 193 pounder who has posted 40 times in the 4.25 range" (Kiper 2001, 67). Miami's Edward Reed, who played safety in college, is "Not as big as scouts would like a safety to be or as fast as they would like at cornerback" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 148)

When assessing running backs, ball carriers who must sustain a number of violent hits without going down, scouts look for large legs and a solid center of gravity. Damien Anderson, a prospect from Northwestern University, "has big legs and thighs" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 20). TJ Duckett of Michigan State "has a massive lower body" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 22), while Virginia's Thomas Jones is positively assessed for his "compact frame." (Kiper 2000, 8). Miami's Clinton Porter has "excellent power in his lower body and hips" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 33). Meanwhile, Boston College's Cedric Washington is not a great prospect because he "has only average size and speed. Is not a very strong runner who can break tackles with his legs" (Buchsbaum 2001, 31). Naturally, running ability is a valued commodity for a running back. Auburn's Heath

Evans “has very good speed and run skills for a fullback” (Buchsbaum 2001, 22).

Wisconsin’s Michael Bennett was a highly rated prospect, in part because he was judged “One of the two or three fastest football players in America over longer distances” (Buchsbaum 2001, 19). Kansas State’s Josh Scobey has “excellent speed” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 35).

Wide receivers, who must often leap for passes thrown over their heads, are measured by different criteria. Chris Campbell, from Wisconsin, is a valued commodity because of his “very long arms,” although the same scout worries that he “may have gotten too big and muscular” (Buchsbaum 2001, 34). After reviewing Sylvester Morris’ frame, Mel Kiper, Jr. concludes that with “his height, long arms, and leaping ability, it was no contest in jump ball situations” (Kiper 2000, 22). Florida’s Jabar Gaffney is an “exceptional athlete,” but there are concerns because he “has very small hands for a wide receiver” (Buchsbaum 2002, 47). Colorado’s Daniel Graham, on the other hand, is highly rated because he “has long arms and big hands” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 62). Kickers and punters are assessed on the basis of leg strength rather than body type, except in rare cases.

A glaring exception to this consistent focus on the body and its ability comes with the evaluation of quarterbacks. While athleticism and arm strength are key elements of a quarterback’s value, so is “strong leadership and character” as well as intelligence. In the discussion of guards, however, there is no mention of intelligence or leadership. While these qualities can enhance a lineman’s credentials, they do not receive the same scrutiny that they would were he a quarterback prospect.

Purdue quarterback Drew Brees is described as “a tremendous competitor” who “has a real sense for the throwing lanes” (Kiper 2001, 2). Discussing Florida’s Jesse Palmer, Kiper’s (2001) guide praises “his confident approach as well as the professionalism he will bring to an NFL team” (3). Marshall’s Chad Pennington is assessed as “one of the smartest, most cerebral signal callers to come down the pike in recent years” (Kiper 2000, 2) ESPN’s telecast included a pre-produced segment. West Virginia’s Marc Bulger “just isn’t physically talented enough to carry a club on his shoulders,” and is “not the type who figures to impress the NFL brass during individual testing.” While such weaknesses might spell disaster for a prospect at another position, Bulger is still a candidate for a starting NFL quarterback because of his “leadership ability and intelligence” (Kiper 2000, 4). Josh McCown, of Sam Houston State, while a “big athletic quarterback with a very good size-speed ratio,” nevertheless saw his stock slip in part because he “would often seem to panic in crunch time,” although it was believed he could still be a success if he could demonstrate “heart, toughness, and mental toughness” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 15).

### **Basic Instinct: Coachability and Technique**

A player’s potential is statistically measured and evaluated against the physical and performative ideals of the player’s position. Consumers of draft discourse are repeatedly reminded that while the talent drafted is formidable, it is usually “raw.” In other words, the players must be introduced to the training and discipline of the NFL in order to transform their “raw talent” or “physical gifts” (vernacular articulations of bodily capital) into the more valued goods of effective football performance. Most of these

players, it is so often repeated, are “raw” talents, in need of training and supervision by the appropriate authorities. In order to maximize efficiency, players are assessed on the basis of their potential for future productivity. Chris Chambers, for example, is “very raw from a technique standpoint” (Buchsbaum 2001, 34). David Terrell is “still very raw around the edges” (Buchsbaum 2001, 50). The discussions about how “raw” a prospect is or is not centers on an analysis of his technique, negatively assessing comporment that does not meet the preferred standard, and praising those bodily movements that do. One might view these discourses as pedagogical, confirming a rather strict regulation of bodily movement, “the breakdown of gestures and movements,” as Foucault (1977, 151) puts it. This pedagogy aims to transform and improve bodies through a “meticulous control of the operations of the body” that produces an “efficiency of movements” (137).

In spite of an award-winning college career, quarterback Chris Weinke occasionally “doesn’t set his feet properly.” The first pick of the 2002 draft, David Carr “has a very low release point” when throwing, a problem that, it was widely agreed, would have to be rectified (Buchsbaum 2002a, 8). Nebraska lineman Tony Fonoti “does not always bend his knees and play with good leverage” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 75), while Devon Grant “is a sloppy openfield tackler” (Kiper 2000, 85).

Others are better prepared. Illinois quarterback Kurt Kittner “generally sets up well and has good throwing mechanics” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 14). Florida wide receiver Travis Taylor “is a very disciplined route runner” (Kiper 2000, 21). Defensive lineman Chris Samuels “adjusts easily to any secondary moves in pass protection, while displaying outstanding technique” (Kiper 2000, 39). Offensive lineman Levi Jones “can

move his feet and slide laterally. Has some natural hip roll and explosion” (Buchsbbaum 2002a, 78).

The search for “natural” ability in prospects is one that characterizes all draft texts. Players with “good instincts” are valued. Talk about “instinct” is so widespread in football discourses generally that they are likely to be familiar even to the most casual of fans. It is a curious word choice. Obviously, the various bodily responses these commentators are referring to (defensive finding and tackling the man with the ball, or ball carriers nimbly avoiding would-be tacklers) are not instincts in the literal sense. The claim that a player “has good instincts” can signify a number of things. It may suggest that a player has a well-developed spatial intelligence that allows him to make sense of the chaos developing before him. Defensive end Dwight Freeney, for example, displays “natural instincts to get after the QB” (Kiper, 2002, 51). Mel Kiper (2000) explains why this kind of intelligence is at a premium for prospects at certain positions, like middle linebackers: “A MLB, you have to react instinctively, that’s why players with less than impressive computer numbers tend to operate at such a high level in the NFL. He who hesitates is lost, that’s why speed and athletic ability are negated if you can’t react instantaneously to the direction of the play” (68).

Alternately, instinct may indicate the thoroughness with which the player has internalized years of training, understanding and reacting to situations quickly. Miami’s Dan Morgan provides a sterling example: “Some children are trained all their life for the Olympics, golf, or tennis: Morgan was trained to be a football player because that is what he wanted” (Buchsbbaum 2001, 115). Predictably, he is blessed with “good instincts.” In both cases refined intelligences are framed as pre-cognitive.



But the corporealization of cognitive characteristics and refined skills is not limited to discussions of “instinct.” Players are hailed for their “exceptional vision” (Kiper, 2001, 8; Buchsbaum 2002a, 25), which is in fact a compliment on their ability to understand weaknesses in the opposition and exploit them. The claim that a wideout has “natural hands” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 35, 45, 55, 59; Kiper 2000, 75), might lead a scout to conclude that the prospect is “a natural receiver” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 67) or a defensive back with “natural coverage ability” (Kiper 2000, 85). Meanwhile, measures of intelligence remain traditional – draft discourses are littered with references to a prospect’s grade point average, other academic accomplishments, or a “well-spoken” manner.

### **A Man in Full:**

#### **Body Type and Technique in Assessment**

Four examples which follow illustrate how these criteria of body type, together with the attitudes and bodily techniques that will be discussed more fully in the following chapter come together in analyses of prospects. The examples selected are an offensive lineman, a defensive lineman, a quarterback and a defensive back, positions presenting a variety of technical and physical requirements. Each of the prospects described here was the first player taken at each of their positions between the years of 2000-2002. Three of these players are black, quarterback David Carr is white.

#### **Offensive Linemen: Leonard Davis**

Leonard Davis was the second pick in the 2001 NFL draft, which makes him the offensive lineman selected with the highest overall pick between 2000 and 2002. Davis played college football for the University of Texas – Austin.

Offensive linemen must clear space for ball carriers, or keep defensive players from reaching the quarterback on pass plays. Not surprisingly, enormous size is valued at this position, and Davis has it. “If he can get in front of people, it’s going to take people so long to go around him. He’s a massive man, and to me that’s the big attraction,” said ESPN commentator Joe Theismann during the draft telecast. Buchsbaum, writing for *Pro Football Weekly* and the ESPN.com website, notes Davis’ “Rare size,” as an asset. He adds that Davis “Is not fat, but is one of the largest human beings you will ever see when he weighs in the 365-370-pound range because his weight is well distributed” (63).

To better capture Davis’s size, the draft analysis compared Davis to inanimate objects. Kiper’s guide (2001) describes Davis as a “Huge bookend,” (34) while *Pro Football Weekly* notes hyperbolically that “he is about as wide as a barn, with a huge wingspan [36 inch arms], which makes getting around him almost as tough as circumventing the globe” (Buchsbaum 2001, 63-64).

What impressed observers was not just Davis’ size, but his agility. Kiper noted that Davis made a name for himself in high school “starring in basketball and track. He averaged 10 points and 10 rebounds per game, while also finishing fourth in the shot put and discus during the 1A State Meet his senior year” (Kiper 2001, 35). The multi-sport talents were taken as evidence that he possessed “Unusual athletic ability for a man his size. Will surprise you with his quickness and straight-ahead speed. Light on his feet for a 370 pound man. Looks almost like a dancing bear at times. Tremendous strength and

power” (Buchsbaum, 2001, 64). Kiper’s guide also notes that he “did 33 [repetitions on a 225 bench press], and had a 28” vertical jump” (Kiper 2001, 35). The final analysis approves of Davis because, “He moves well for a mammoth bookend, showing excellent agility and quickness (ibid).”

But size and athleticism, important as they are, constitute only part of the assessment. Davis’s technique is also analyzed. The reason is revealed by television anchor Chris Berman’s question: “Does he play like 370? Or does he play like 320.” In other words, what use does Davis make of his physical gifts? On this criterion, Davis gets mixed reviews. He “Has a good, strong hand punch. Has pretty quick feet for a man his size and can bend his knees” (Buchsbaum 2001, 64). He has begun “to demonstrate the overall awareness that is critical to a pro-style pass blocker,” and “when it comes to moving defenders off the line of scrimmage, he has the ability to dominate. He can sustain as well as keep his feet and balance, often taking two or three defenders out of the action” (ibid). Unfortunately, in the eyes of one guide, he “Can be lazy,” and “Will look for the easy way out when he tires and just leans on people instead of bending his knees and moving his feet and trying to finish his blocks.” He also “Is off balance because of sloppy footwork at times.” (Buchsbaum 2001, 64). Nor has he internalized the bodily discipline desired of professional football players. In other words, he “Is not an overly instinctive player on the offensive side of the ball yet” (ibid).

### **Defensive Ends: Courtney Brown**

Courtney Brown, who played his college football at Penn State, was the first player selected in the 2000 NFL draft. He was the highest selected defensive lineman in the three drafts between 2000 and 2002.

A defensive end defends against the run, but his most important job is to disrupt the opponent's passing game by getting to the quarterback quickly. Hence, speed over short distances is important. As defensive ends (or DE's) must line up against offensive tackles, some as large as Leonard Davis, they must also be rather large. "You see the size," remarked television anchor Chris Berman as a graphic appeared on the screen. "Almost 6-5, 270 pounds." Later in the telecast, Mel Kiper Jr. noted his "outstanding wingspan," and "good size" as factors that will make him "an outstanding pro." He even added that one of Brown's additional perks is that his frame appeared able to carry more weight. "I think he can get bigger," Kiper said approvingly. But Brown's speed got most of the attention. In a pre-produced segment, ESPN reporter Tom Jackson (one of only two Black reporters for ESPN) emphasized Brown's "quickness at the point of attack" with numerous video examples. Kiper later suggested that Brown's impressive workouts made the difference. A graphic appeared detailing Brown's forty dash time, his vertical jump measured in inches, and his strength measured by how many consecutive times he could bench press 225 pounds. In the graphic, Brown was compared to the eventual second pick, linebacker Lavar Arrington, and the eventual fourth pick, wide receiver Peter Warrick. Brown's 40, it was noted, was faster even than Warrick's.

Brown's technique was assessed as very good, but still in need of work. "He holds up well against the double team when stopping the run, although overall, he could use some technique work when getting after the QB," Kiper's draft guide states (50). He added in the telecast, "The big thing that young defensive ends have to learn is [that] they've got to find complementary moves. He can't just be an outside rusher. He's

going to have to rely on power and strength, and he'll have to come up with some kind of a move that takes him inside" (50).

### **Defensive Backs: Quentin Jammer**

Quentin Jammer, who played college football at the University of Texas-Austin, was the fifth player selected in the 2002 NFL draft. He was the highest selected defensive back in the 2000, 2001 and 2002 drafts.

A defensive back acts as a second line of defense against the run, but more importantly, he defends receivers, attempting to break up or intercept passes. This makes speed, especially over short distances, a crucial criterion. Like all football players, they should be larger than average, but their position does not require the same bulk as offensive or defensive linemen. Listed at 5-11 ½ and 205 pounds in Kiper's guide, Jammer is said to possess "ideal size" (Kiper 2002, 69) He is, according to *Pro Football Weekly*, "very well-built and plays bigger than his size" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 142) Crucially, however, he is not so large that his speed is curtailed. Like Leonard Davis, Jammer was also a high school track star, a fact that draws the attention of analysts. *Pro Football Weekly* notes that "According to the data, he reportedly ran a 10.3 in the 100 meters, a 21.5 in the 200 meters, and long-jumped over 23 feet" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 142).

In terms of technique, Jammer is fairly well-developed. While it was noted that Jammer "is not that fluid turning and has a tendency to stay in the backpedal a little too long" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 142). *Pro Football Weekly* recognized a "great job of using his hands and arms to pin the receiver at the line of scrimmage and has the explosive

hand punch needed to really shock the receiver. As a run defender, Jammer does a very nice job of playing off blocks and is a good, strong tackler” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 142). During the ESPN telecast, Kiper noted that, while he could have made himself eligible for the NFL as a junior, Jammer stayed at Texas to “address the skills and the techniques that are necessary to move on to the National Football League and succeed.” By doing so, he improved his draft position by making himself more valuable to professional teams. In Kiper’s draft guide, Jammer’s technique is praised: “he positions himself well to make a play, and when the opportunity presents itself, he has excellent ball skills to break up the pass or come away with the interception” (Kiper 2002, 69).

For all his technical refinement, however, *Pro Football Weekly* was unsettled to find that Jammer “had a few concentration lapses in ’01 and seemed to lose focus when teams did not test him” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 142). It warned that Jammer might be overvalued, and said he needs to “avoid concentration lapses to realize his potential and to become a true shut-down corner worthy of a first round pick” (ibid).

### **Quarterbacks: Michael Vick and David Carr**

The quarterback position used to be the most highly valued in the NFL pantheon, but such thinking has been challenged in recent years. A number of coaches and commentators have asserted their belief that a team can win the championship with a mediocre quarterback. Nevertheless, a promising quarterback remains a sought-after commodity.

Quarterbacks Michael Vick and David Carr were both selected with the first overall pick of their respective drafts. Vick (first in the 2001 draft) played at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, while Carr (the first pick of the 2002 draft) starred for Fresno State.

Vick is black, while Carr is white, but one must be careful not to draw broad conclusions about the role of race in these assessments. While a broader analysis would demonstrate some patterns based on race, the more important category in draft discourses is position. What we can learn from these examples are the criteria by which quarterbacks are judged.

The quarterback announces the plays to the team (though they are usually selected by the coaching staff), and handles the ball on nearly every offensive play, passing or simply handing it to his teammates. Occasionally, the quarterback will keep the ball and attempt to run it upfield himself. In the tightly scripted game of football, the quarterback makes an unusual number of decisions himself. He must read and anticipate defensive formations (and, if necessary, change the play) and, in passing plays, he must recognize which of his receivers is in the best position to catch the ball. Because of these responsibilities, the quarterback is often referred to as the “field general.” Perhaps because of the leadership symbolized by the position, the overwhelming majority of quarterbacks have been white. It was not until Doug Williams took the Washington Redskins to the 1988 World Championship that a black quarterback had started for a Super Bowl champion. In recent years, as some teams have sought “more athletic” quarterbacks, an increasing number of black quarterbacks have emerged, although they are still a minority. The quarterback position, more than most, is fraught with a history of racial segregation.

Neither Carr nor Vick won the first string job immediately in college. Both were carefully coached on the offensive system. But these learning processes were given very different meanings. *Mel Kiper Jr.’s 2002 Draft Guide* notes with approval that Carr

“actually spent a year gaining a complete understanding of the sophisticated Bulldog offense” (Kiper 2002, 2). This was time well spent, as “The knowledge and confidence gained that season propelled Carr into a position where he could direct the FSU offense at a very high level” (ibid). Carr was valued in Mel Kiper’s televised commentary for his “maturity level.”

Vick also spent a year learning the offense, but that year was, in the eyes of some analysts, not as positive an experience as it was for Carr. In an interview with ESPN’s Chris Fowler, Vick was characterized as “puzzled by the complexity of the Hokies offense.” After noting that Vick had almost switched positions out of frustration, Fowler asked Vick if he thought he would have difficulties learning an NFL offensive scheme. The fact that Virginia Tech had altered their offense is cited as further evidence of Vick’s inability to learn a pro offense. “You get the sense that he knows there’s a learning curve,” Joe Theissmann suggested during the telecast. “He knows he doesn’t know everything.”

Vick possesses several other attributes “He is a leader,” Mel Kiper, Jr. noted on the telecast. “He is a guy who can rally the troops. He will have the work ethic, the diligence, the attention to detail you need.” *Pro Football Weekly* called him a “Natural leader who other players seem to gravitate to. Great competitor. Wants to be the best and wants to win” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 15). Indeed, after learning the Virginia Tech offense, Vick took his team to their first-ever national championship game.

Quarterbacks must look downfield, pick out receivers and deliver passes over linemen who frequently exceed six and a half feet in height. Therefore, quarterbacks



must be rather tall themselves. Large hands with which to firmly grip the ball and arm strength to throw it long distances are also valued.

At 6-3 ¼, Carr's height is evidently assessed as sufficient. In fact, aside from the obligatory numerical listing that appears at the beginning of each profile, Carr's height is not discussed. Vick's stature, however, generates some concern. Kiper's guide notes that Vick "checks in at just 6-0 tall." This troubles Kiper (2001). "I'm not only talking about passes being batted down, but actually seeing the options open up down the field" (2). *Pro Football Weekly* also notes that Vick is "On the short side. Is just barely six feet tall. May have trouble seeing from the pocket;" and adds that he "Has small (eight inch) hands, which could lead to problems holding on to the ball and gripping it in rainy or very cold weather" (Buchsbaum 2001, 15).

Both quarterbacks received rave reviews for their arm strength. Carr's upper body strength impressed a number of analysts. "He's got a gun on his shoulder," said ESPN television's Ron Jaworski. "Look at arm strength," added Mel Kiper during the telecast. "He can whip the ball anywhere on the field." *Pro Football Weekly* praised his "very strong and generally very accurate arm" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 8). *Mel Kiper, Jr.'s 2002 Draft Report* added that "He has a LB type build, able to bench press nearly 400 pounds," and admired his "sturdy frame and velocity/accuracy" (Kiper 2002, 2). Vick also impressed. *Pro Football Weekly* described an "Arm is so strong he can throw with great velocity and great distance despite the fact that he does not step into his throws" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 15). He "Can make the amazing pass or throw at any time. Will literally flick the ball with his wrist and throw a BB 15 yards or a perfectly arched pass 59 yards down the field" (ibid).

Quarterbacks must be able to escape defenders, but rarely race all over the field with the ball. Exceptional speed, therefore, can be an asset, but it is not a requirement for the position. Carr's speed was judged as adequate: the admission that "he won't beat you with his legs" in spite of his "respectable speed" did not cost him the status of one pick (Kiper 2002, 2). Vick, however, was assessed as possessing remarkable skills in this area. Indeed, his college career was marked by his unusual speed, and the threat he posed as a ball carrier. "You can't teach the raw skills he brings to an offense," reported *Mel Kiper, Jr.'s 2001 Draft Report*, citing as evidence that "Vick runs under 4.30, bench presses 325 pounds, and has nearly a 40" vertical jump" (Kiper 2002, 2). On the telecast, Kiper added the impressive assessment of Vick as the "best athlete probably to play the quarterback position at any level. He's that gifted." As evidence of this, Kiper cited Vick's impressive speed in the forty-yard dash. Commentator Joe Theissmann agreed: "The gifts that he has physically are not things you just go out and learn."

The techniques of both players, however, raised some concerns. It was noted that Vick displays "good touch on deep throws where he gives the wide-out the opportunity to run under the ball" and "has exceptional football instincts and vision," and is a "Great improviser," (Kiper 2001, 2; Buchsbaum 2001, 15). Nevertheless, he "Has underdeveloped throwing mechanics and some bad habits. Does not always hold the ball up like he should. A lot of times, he throws without stepping into the throw, relying solely on pure arm strength" (Buchsbaum 2001, 15). Kiper, noting that he completed a rather low percentage of his passes in college, concluded that Vick "definitely has to work on being more patient in the pocket, allowing 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> options to break open late within the progression. He also needs to develop more accuracy throwing the football,

while improving his touch on shorter aerals” (Kiper 2002, 2) During the telecast, Kiper indicated that “He needs to tweak his mechanics,” while Ron Jaworski was less optimistic: “He’s lightyears away from being a polished NFL quarterback.” Such concerns were not universally shared, however. During the telecast of the draft, ESPN’s Joe Theissmann hosted a segment in which he praised Vick’s technique over taped footage from one of Vick’s private workouts. Theissmann draws attention to Vick’s footwork and passing technique, while praising Vick’s ability to anticipate his teammates’ routes and to deliver passes accordingly. Concluded Theissmann, “Those are the things that sold me on this young man as a quarterback.”

David Carr’s technique also creates concern. Although he “Generally throws a nice, tight spiral,” he delivers the ball “Semi-sidearm, [using an] unusual, three-quarter throwing motion” (Buchsbaum 2002a). This creates possible problems, as Kiper’s guide explains: “The concern would be passes being batted down” by tall linemen. ESPN’s telecast included a pre-produced segment that compared Carr’s mechanics to those of established professionals. While it was clear that Carr’s mechanics differed noticeably from the quarterbacks with whom he was compared, there was debate about what conclusions should be drawn. As ESPN reporter Suzy Kolber put it, “Since he’s come into the spotlight, that’s been the big debate: should you change a quarterback’s mechanics?” While a number of commentators thought the answer to that question was clearly yes, commentator Chris Mortensen argued that “You don’t mess with that delivery if you’ve had success.”

**“Players Don’t Win Championships,  
Organizations Win Championships”**

As the preceding examples demonstrate, very particular sets of measurements, athletic abilities, and techniques are required at each position. For very highly rated prospects, one or more criteria may be overlooked to some degree if other factors are judged exceptional. But lower rated prospects who do not fit these carefully crafted and strictly policed boundaries often find themselves labeled “tweeners” – players whose body type or skills do not fit the demands at any one position, and as such, find their value diminish. Such unfortunate prospects abound in draft discourses. Oklahoma’s Josh Norman, for instance, “Does not really fit any position perfectly.” He is “Not quick enough for wide receiver or skillful enough to be running back,” and “Does not block well enough for a tight end or fullback” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 65). In college, safety prospect Leo Barnes “was able to establish himself as one of the top big-play defenders in...the entire country,” but “the fact that he doesn’t have the eye-catching straight-line speed” could leave him undrafted (Kiper 2001, 80). Wide receiver Larry Foster “proved early on at LSU that he has the skills necessary to play at the next level,” yet “his lack of ideal height and average 40 speed could push him down further than his productivity/natural pass receiving skills tend to indicate” (Kiper 2000, 23). Georgia Southern’s Adrian Peterson “Lacks size as a fullback and is not your traditional halfback or running back” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 37).

Another set of conditions that can diminish a prospect’s value is a persistent injury, or the suspicion of a persistent injury. Past injuries that were serious enough to cause a player to miss even a single college game are almost always mentioned in the

short analyses provided by the draft guides. *Pro Football Weekly* (2002, 99) mentioned Dwight Freeney's "tendon injury in his right hand that kept him out of one game" two years before the draft. *Mel Kiper Jr.'s 2000 Draft Report* mentioned that several months ago, Plaxico Burress had "a jammed thumb suffered near the end of fall practice" (21).

In sum, what this chapter's discussion suggests is a striking reversal of what is usually assumed in sports broadcasts: the NFL draft, rather than building up heroes, positions them as property to be assessed. Through a relentless process of commodification, the language of the draft encourages fan identification with the mostly-white ownership and management of NFL teams. It is the management perspective, not that of the players, that viewers are asked to assume. While players are valuable commodities, draft discourses position team authorities as the dominant agents. By mobilizing discourses that discipline prospects, and judge them largely on their potential for fitting into an already existing hierarchy, the draft reiterates the view that organizations, not individual personalities, are what matter ultimately.

This kind of perspective is not unique to the draft, or even to the NFL. Jerry Krause, the one-time general manager of the Chicago Bulls (of the NBA – a league marked by a racial hierarchy similar to the NFL's) articulated this logic upon learning of Michael Jordan's retirement. "Players don't win championships," he reportedly said, "organizations win championships." Whether this claim is true or not (and post-Jordan failure of the Bulls suggests the latter), it is a frequently invoked, if rarely explicitly stated perspective in the discourse of commodified sport.

Black men are overrepresented in many of the most popular American sports. This fact is often celebrated uncritically in the popular press as evidence of widespread

racial progress. *Sports Illustrated* congratulated the mainstream for its tolerance of the “fact” of Black domination of sports: “50 years after Jackie Robinson broke major league baseball's color barrier, white Americans have come to embrace black sports heroes in ways unimaginable in 1947. That a white majority calmly accepts minority status in one of its most cherished social institutions is itself a measure of progress, and the appeal of a Michael Jordan across racial lines is unquestioned” (Price 1997, 34). Sports are seen as so racially progressive that in 1998, Bill Clinton could state, “I think it's obvious that athletics is leading America toward a more harmonious united society” (Graczyk 1998). But if we turn our attention to meaning-making around the draft, Clinton’s optimism seems misplaced. Contemporary sports can and do promote racial harmony, but often, the politics of sports representation are extremely problematic.

A good deal of scholarship has indicated how blacks and white are positioned differently by sport media. While this is undoubtedly the case, it is not the goal of this chapter, or of this dissertation to identify such distinctions. In the draft, whites as well as blacks are positioned as commodities. The draft does not bracket out white prospects from this intense and deliberate objectification. Nevertheless, the draft, like the NFL, is largely a black spectacle. That the demographics of the league’s labor force is so out of step with those of the larger society should signal to us that it is not merely the corporeal that is central to the league’s profitability, but also its ability to market otherness. Johnson & Roediger (1997, 230) support this claim, arguing that, “sport has functioned as a spectacle in which the male body and the white mind are at once exulted, and in which white men feel especially empowered to judge, bet on, and to vicariously identify with

African Americans.” In the draft, fans are empowered to speculate on and evaluate black bodies, to imagine what it would mean to own them.

Obviously, the NFL does not function in a social, political, or cultural vacuum. In spite of the repeated popular insistence that sports and politics do not or should not mix, the reality is that sports have always been mobilized in struggles for power. Indeed, as most sport scholars maintain, the very structure of contemporary sport is suffused with the problem of power. The past several decades have seen challenges to the entrenched white, male power structure in all spheres of life, even on the highly-visible playing fields of elite sports. The power structure around sports – the ownership, management, and media remains a patriarchal, white-controlled institution. The immense and still-growing popularity of the draft can be read as a symbolic, highly organized response to challenges to white, male authority. The next chapter explores some tactics of that response in more detail.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE RAW AND THE COACHED: CREATING DOCILE BODIES IN THE NFL DRAFT**

The previous chapter has detailed the ways players are converted into commodities by draft discourses. This chapter explores and explains disciplinary technologies at work in the mediated draft, viewing them as strategies which complete the transformation of each prospect into a commodity. Disciplinarians make virtues of conformity, utility, and self-denial, and evaluate prospects on their willingness to hand their bodies over to team authorities, who will direct them as they see fit. They obsess over the smallest discrepancies in measurement, and assign a numeric value to each prospect.

This argument is presented in three sections. The first describes how prospects are assessed in terms that insist on the need for players to exhibit “coachability” – the willingness to submit to the authoritarian culture that defines contemporary football. This is followed by an analysis of terms that position prospects as inanimate objects (most often as weapons capable of wreaking havoc if properly deployed), or as soldiers, willing to sacrifice their bodily welfare when the authorities demand it. A final step, returning in greater detail to a topic already mentioned, considers the more subtle disciplinary tactic of enumeration, quibbles over statistics and the assignment of final grades used to rank prospects against one another are framed as techniques that serve to discipline draftees, converting them into docile bodies that may be mobilized by team coaches and owners. Complicating these findings are manifestations of player resistance. The last part of the chapter explores such incidents and the techniques used to confront that resistance.



The overall argument here is that the NFL draft is replete with what Foucault refers to as “meticulous rituals of power” and “manifests the subjugation of those who are perceived as objects and the objectification of those who are subjugated” (1977, 185). For Foucault, a central element of this ritual is the production of intelligible and useful bodies. These technologies deploy three basic strategies to create useful, manipulable bodies, those that are, in Foucault’s words, “the target for new mechanisms of power” and are “offered up to new forms of knowledge” (155).

### **Baggage Check: Assessing Coachability**

According to Foucault, the processes that create docile bodies had diverse origins, and “on almost every occasion, they were adopted in response to particular needs” (138). In this particular case, the need is to create a workforce that, insofar as possible as possible, will execute without question or deviation the will of the coaching staffs and other team administrators. This concern is usually expressed as a desire for players who are “coachable.” For example, California’s Andre Carter is described as “extremely coachable” (Buchsbaum 2001, 86). Tennessee’s John Henderson is praised for his “good character,” and is “coachable” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 102). Drew Brees, “is a coach’s dream because he doesn’t have a wild and crazy side” (Buchsbaum 2001, 7). David Carr is “mature and confident without being cocky” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 8). Commenting on ESPN’s telecast, anchor Chris Berman gushed, “About the human being, David Carr, there can be no debate. What a person to build a franchise around!” Later, Berman found ways to call Carr’s wife and son by name, suggesting that his traditional nuclear family contributed to his value as a prospect. Kiper’s draft guide agreed: “Another key factor in

the high pro grade for Carr is the maturity level and leadership qualities he brings to a football team. He's a family man who will enter the NFL with the solid, veteran approach of a 30 year old signal caller." Joey Harrington is a "team leader" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 12). Marc Colombo is a "good worker" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 73). In addition to providing teams with physical information on prospects, the combines serve as a proving ground for a prospect's coachability. Agreeing to participate in drills at the combines communicates a tacit agreement to submit to the league's power structure. As personal trainer Loren Seagrave notes that participating "sends a subtle message that says 'Look, I'm a team player. I'm willing to do this. If you draft me, you're not going to have problems with me. I'm not going to be a prima donna, I'm going to get up with the rest of the guys and be a real team player' "(Stewart 2002). Shaun Alexander (2000) validates the hierarchial structure of these workouts: "The scouts, backfield coaches and personnel guys want me to work on catching the ball and turning upfield. They want to see me finish runs. They talk, I listen" (88).

Negative evaluations are inevitably used to describe prospects whose behavior might disrupt the goals of team authorities. These players lack "coachability." They do not display the desirable qualities of docility that is so valued in prospects. Antonio Bryant is praised because he "has supreme confidence in his ability and will not be intimidated" but in the same analysis, he is denigrated because he "has a very high opinion of himself," "may have some issues or baggage," and is warned that he "has a lot of growing up to do" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 42), Jabar Gaffney "is no boy scout," and is "still immature and likes to call attention to himself with his antics." Unfortunately, he also "does not like to do the dirty work" either (Buchsbaum 2002a, 47). Iowa's Kalil Hill

“was always a star and comes across as a pampered and spoiled player at times” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 49). Jerramy Stevens is “immature” and “likes the glamour part of the game and does not like doing the dirty work” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 67). Albert Haynesworth is “immature and needs to be pushed at times” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 101).

“Coachable” football prospects are desired in the draft because they demonstrate a respect for authority and a willingness to be shaped, directed, and deployed in certain ways. Unsurprisingly, their effective deployment is continually compared with destructive, violent forces.

### **Weapons of Mas(culine) Destruction**

Player techniques are often assessed using a narrow stable of descriptors, which construct an aggressive, violent masculinity as the ideal. Terms that describe men’s bodies as weapons and their movement as warfare are key to their rhetorical positioning. Some terms refer to the damage a player has trained his body to produce. Thus, Stockar McDaniel is a “destructive run blocker,” according to ESPN’s televised coverage or a “mammoth tower of strength” and “able to simply manhandle” the opposition with his “devastating performance” (Kiper 2000, 39). Brian Urlacher “hits like a ton of bricks.” Leonard Davis “can be a super destroyer when he is focused and playing well” (Buchsbaum 2001, 64).

Another possibility is the most obvious: the direct comparison of men’s bodies to weapons or the effects of weapons. According to television commentators for ESPN’s telecast, Stockar McDaniel “can explode, just drive defenders of the line of scrimmage,” while Rob Morris “can explode off the ball.” Sebastian Janikowski, referred to by Chris

Berman as “the Polish Powderkeg,” got this assessment from Kiper on the broadcast: “What a weapon he can be.” Such talk not only celebrates the violent masculine ritual of football, it also further suggests the imagining of players as tools to be directed.

The spectacle’s affinity for military metaphors is laid bare in the most prominent terms. Players are “drafted” for “service.” Players are positively appraised as “the kind of man you’d want to go to war with.” LaDainian Tomlinson is positively assessed as “a true warrior” (Buchsbaum 2001, 29). Southern Mississippi’s Cedric Scott “does not look like a real warrior out there” (Buchsbaum 2001, 100). Wisconsin’s Wendell Bryant “must improve his mental toughness and become more of a warrior to realize his potential” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 95). LaVar Arrington, the second overall pick in the 2000 Draft, was featured in a brief television segment highlighting his connection to his father, who was himself a successful athlete in his youth, and who had later lost his legs serving in the Vietnam War. “I run for my father,” Arrington stated during the segment, thus making explicit the usually unspoken connection between duty and sacrifice, as well as highlighting the close association of football with military service.

The military metaphor is useful for a number of reasons, but one important way it is deployed is as a kind of shorthand to discuss the desire for controlled, directed, useful aggression. The values of discipline and humility are balanced against the necessary “mean streak” or “killer instinct” presumed essential for success in the league. On ESPN’s telecast, Texas lineman Mike Williams was asked by Chris Fowler if he has the necessary “mean streak.” Williams’ response indicates that he understands the virtue of being perceived as appropriately sadistic: “I have that mean streak. I turn it on out on the field and I just want to dominate every defensive player that I go up against.”

It was generally agreed that for Courtney Brown to achieve real success in the NFL, he would have to develop the now familiar “mean streak.” Kiper’s guide argued that “At the pro level, he may need to take a page out of Arrington’s book and develop more of a mean streak with the pads on,” even suggesting that his success or failure as a professional player could hinge on his ability to “turn up the intensity when he’s locked in hand-to-hand combat” (Kiper 2000, 50) During the telecast of the draft, Kiper re-iterated his point, asserting that “He needs to develop a little bit more of a mean streak at the pro level. If he turns up his intensity, gains that mean streak...he has the ability to be a heck of a defensive end in the NFL.” Reporting that Brown would indeed be the first prospect taken overall, reporter Suzy Kolber re-iterated the point: “there are some questions about whether he’s nasty enough for the NFL.”

LaVar Arrington and Plaxico Burress were perceived as having the opposite problem. According to analysts, these players displayed too much “raw” emotion, too little control. A number of commentators noted that Arrington “has to play more disciplined,” although some of the presentation sends mixed messages. Many of the highlights shown of him while announcers are praising his aggressiveness are, in fact, penalties. Mel Kiper (2000), celebrates Arrington’s “mean streak” with an anecdote about him continuing to attack a punter long after the play had ended. However, Kiper is quick to add, that may have been an isolated incident, “normally, you see a controlled aggression” (67). Plaxico Burress’ respect for authority is cast in doubt by reports that he had failed to appear for a meeting with the Eagles. Television analysts Kirk Herbstreit and Chris Fowler discussed “questions about his attitude,” but seemed satisfied that his

new coach, “knows how to push the right buttons.” That is, the coach is psychologically savvy enough to handle the possible problem.

It is not surprising that elite football should seek a discursive affiliation with military culture. The two institutions intersect in a number of ways. Like the NFL, military culture has highly developed disciplinary cultures. Indeed, Foucault identifies the military as one of the institutions where disciplinary technologies were first developed. Both institutions have significant over-representation from disenfranchised groups.

A prominent feature shared by football and the military culture it so often evokes is the importance of sacrifice and suffering. Looking past the top prospects to those hoping to be a late-round pick, one finds one of the darkest features of the NFL draft. Draft discourses on these late-round prospects include evaluations of how willing prospects are to risk their livelihoods by playing with injuries if it would benefit the team. Evaluations that a player has shown a consistent willingness to do so are almost always presented as positively affecting the player’s value. Dan Morgan is “very, very tough. Will play hurt. Should have missed several games with his broken thumb and turf toe, but he never did” (Buchsbaum 2001, 115).

The culture of elite football abounds with examples of the consequences of such attitudes. A 1990 Ball State study reported that, of 870 retired players, two-thirds reported some kind of debilitation due to football-related injuries. Former NFL lineman Curt Marsh told *Sports Illustrated* how exploitative is the relationship between the NFL and its players:

When I came to my first NFL camp, it was like I was a tall, cold can of beer. They popped the top, and all that energy and desire and ability poured out... When

I was empty, when I had no more to give, they just crumpled me up and threw me on the garbage heap. Then they grabbed another new can and popped him open, and he flowed out until he was empty (Nack 2001, 60).

Marsh's medical biography is a testament to the results of such exploitation. He is an amputee, having lost his leg below the knee after thirteen operations failed to repair the damage he had suffered in his playing days. Data suggests that, as players become bigger and faster, NFL injuries are becoming more frequent and more serious.

Perhaps because of the unusual amount of pain the average player endures, explicit allusions to battle and to other elements of martial life are abundant in elite football. Discourses of professional and major college sport are strictly regimented, with a low tolerance for challenges to authority. Jay Coakley (1986) has suggested that the regimented lifestyle of corporatized sport, which he analogizes with prison rather than with military culture, systematically disempowers and controls athletes even while the pay structure rewards them handsomely. The system also, he explains, places a premium on violence: "If an athlete fails to perform, he can be seen to lack loyalty and commitment... Violent acts become the mechanism through which players' moral worth is demonstrated" (180). Varda Burstyn (2000) echoes this sentiment: "Athletes...have to prove they are not weak or soft. Injuries are 'badges of courage.' ...Violence and domination among athletes are seen as evidence of manhood, the opposite of femininity, just as they are among soldiers" (180).

## **Going Nowhere Fast:**

### **The 40-yard Dash and Other**

### **Ceremonies of Objectification**

An important feature of disciplinary societies is what Foucault (1996) calls “the problem of total visibility of bodies, of individuals and things, under a system of centralized surveillance” (226). Pre-modern strategies sought to make power visible through ornate ceremonies displaying the body of the monarch, while relegating the subjects of power to near invisibility. Disciplinary tactics seek instead to make power invisible, while maximizing the visibility of each subjects. This is achieved through a new set of rituals. Examinations, as these rituals are often called, become mechanisms of control, as they expose the body to power’s view and normalizing judgment. These examinations seek to operate at the smallest scale, targeting individuals. They operate by “carefully separating the individuals under observation” (226). Where these subjects had once been dismissed as insignificant, they now find themselves the focus of intense study, with the goal of transforming power from a resource held by a privileged few and enforced through fear and reprisal to a more sophisticated, mechanistic model in which power becomes capillary, constitutive of societies, rather than imposed on them. As Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982) note, “in this ritual, the modern form of power and the modern form of knowledge – that of individuals in both cases – is brought together in a single technique” (158).

The draft takes measurement very seriously. At the combines and at individual workouts, scouts are seemingly obsessed with precision. For example, each team is likely to have players they are interested in drafting try out individually for the team’s



scouts and coaches. These workouts are valued in part because individual teams can have control over the conditions and measurement, a luxury that eludes them at the Combines. As one scout notes: “You'd be surprised at how often you'll find that the forty-yard dash a player runs is actually thirty-nine or thirty-seven yards. That's why, when we go to a workout, we pull out the measuring tape to make sure that it truly is forty yards, wherever they're running” (Carucci, 2000).

Draft discourses are characterized by an almost obsessive attention to the smallest of details. Consider the editor's note that opens *Pro Football Weekly's 2001 Draft Preview*: “On all positions, 40-yard dash times are curved to take conditions into account. For instance, a 4.4 40 on a very fast rubber track would be recorded as a 4.52, while a 4.6 on slow grass would be logged as a 4.5” (Buchsbaum 2001, 6). Prospects weights are never rounded off, and heights are often listed to the fourth and eighth of an inch. The *New York Times* (2003) recently ran a story that debates whether prospect Terrell Suggs runs the forty yards in 4.79 seconds or 4.90 seconds. ESPN's John Clayton (2003), meanwhile, wondered what impact Suggs' inability to shave a tenth of a second off of his time would have on his draft status. ESPN's televised coverage of the 2002 draft included an argument between Chris Berman, Mel Kiper and Jimmy Johnson on whether Donte Stallworth ran the 40 in 4.23 seconds, 4.25 seconds or 4.26 seconds. According to Gregg Easterbrook (2003), “one pundit on another network announced that OT Mike Williams is faster than OT Bryant McKinnie, because Williams runs the 40 in 5.28 while McKinnie takes 5.3. The New York Times ran an article with an extended section debating whether Dwight Freeney runs the 40 in 4.38 seconds or 4.45 seconds, and called this a big difference.”

As Easterbrook (2003) points out, the difference between these statistics is likely to have a minimal effect, if any, on the actual performances on the field. He notes that “a defensive end who runs a 4.7 will traverse the seven yards to the quarterback *eight inches* sooner than a 4.87 player.” Even over the course of forty yards, a tenth of a second time differential means that the winner would cross the line a little more than a foot ahead of the loser. These differences, the author notes, are very unlikely to change the outcome of a play in any significant way for everyone except maybe the wide receivers, especially given all the variables that inevitably intervene in the course of a single football maneuver. And all this assumes that measurements taken by hand are accurate to the hundredth of a second, a doubtful proposition to say the least. So what then, accounts for this strange ritual attendance to these minutiae?

This intense attention to details, even those seemingly insignificant, is an attitude Foucault identifies as central to the creation of disciplinary society. Foucault (1977) argues that “for the true believer, no detail is unimportant, but not so much for the meaning that it conceals within it as for the hold it provides for the power that wishes to seize it” (140). For these adherents, “a meticulous observation of detail” emerged in the eighteenth century as part of “a whole set of techniques, a whole corpus of methods and knowledge, descriptions, plans and data” that aims to create “a relation of strict subjugation” (141, 138).

### **OK, Computers: Grades and Ranking**

The intense period of scrutiny that provides the widespread public analysis of prospects may climax over the course of a few months in the early spring, but the scouting process has begun much earlier. Indeed, it is a process that never stops. Scouts

are predictably active during the college football season, viewing tape and watching players in person. With the close of each year's draft, eyes turn toward the next "crop" of prospects, as NFL.com's Vic Carucci (2000) reveals: "It starts with each player personnel department assembling an alphabetical master list of seniors-to-be -- players are tracked from the time they are freshmen -- that typically is completed in late May or early June." Over the next seven months or so, teams and the media will pare down a field of more than a thousand prospects to around a few hundred. Performance statistics, assessments of speed, strength, agility, and other physical traits are noted and used in the judgment of players.

The collection of these statistical measures of bodily dimensions, physical performance, intelligence, and statistical production creates an unwieldy mountain of information on the 350 or so serious prospects. To make the fruits of their collection manageable, teams distill this data into a single numerical ranking that designates that player's potential. This service is in such high demand that two organizations, BLESTO in Pittsburgh and National Football Scouting in Tulsa, do nothing else but provide subscribing teams with numerical assessments of each prospect. Teams go about this process differently, but many teams grade a player's overall potential on a nine-point scale. Come draft day, these numbers will be used to rank players against one another (Scranton, 2001).

Strategies by which people become "prospects" include the assessment of supposedly "objective" and dispassionate value, which is then used to rank the athletes against one another. *Pro Football Weekly's* draft guide offers a systematic analysis of each prospect, released about a month before each draft. The section titled "Notes"

highlights the players' accomplishments such as college productivity, athletic versatility, or durability. The final section of the guide is titled "Player Printout." This section, as the authors explain, assigns each player a grade on a nine-point scale. These grades take into account "workouts up to and including the Indianapolis Scouting Combine," with the caveat that... "Late workouts and other information can change grades, sometimes dramatically" (178). Each numerical ranking suggests a prediction of the player's potential. For instance, a grade of 8.00 to 9.00 indicates the authors' belief that the prospect is a "Franchise player," while a grade of 5.10-5.49 suggests the authors' belief that the player "Has a better than average chance to make an NFL roster" (178). Using these grades, players are ranked against others in their position, then ranked against all other prospects regardless of position (up to #158).

Like *NFL Weekly's 2002 Draft Preview*, *Mel Kiper Jr.'s 2002 Draft Report* also provides individual sketches on a large number of prospects. Scouting reports are presented by position, and within each position, players are ranked. The top-ranked quarterback's summary appears first, followed by the second ranked quarterback, and so on. Each of these sketches highlights in boldface type the prospect's name, height and weight, and time the athlete took to run the 40-yard dash, all of which informs the player's overall grade, as designated by Kiper. The contents of the grades and the values they connote are dependant on such factors as potential for weight gain, speed, or statistical productivity. Near the end of the guide, a position-by-position ranking is provided, supplying the name, height, weight, college, 40-yard dash time, and player grade for all players receiving a grade of 6.0 or higher. Players are then ranked against one another regardless of position. A ranking by position of players who will

be eligible for the Draft in 2003 follows, looking at rising juniors and sophomores.

Foucault (1977) argues that where the proper structures are in place, “disciplinary power manifests its potency, essentially, by arranging objects. The examination is, as it were, the ceremony of its objectification” (187). Part of this ceremony involves exposing subjects to power’s view, then ranking them against one another. Hence, disciplinary power “measures in quantitative terms and hierarchizes in terms of value the abilities, the level, the ‘nature’ of individuals. It introduces, through this ‘value giving’ measure, the constraint of conformity that must be achieved” (183). Disciplinary power is characterized by very particular arrangements of time and space, so that “the work force may be analyzed in individual units” so as to “compare workers with one another, to classify them according to skill and speed” (145).

These characteristics of disciplinary power are clearly evident in the NFL draft. Great care is taken to arrange conditions that allow for the careful examination of individual prospects. The purpose of these exercises is to compare each player to other prospects and to those already in the league. Players have their dimensions, skills, and speed quantified and distilled into a single grade, which is then used to rank them against others and to suggest their potential for productivity.

### **The Problem of Player Resistance**

This study is informed by Foucault’s ideas about power, which are frequently critiqued as being a totalizing description. But this represents a misunderstanding of his thought. Foucault actually saw power as always producing resistance and never quite containing it. And so it is with the draft, where, even within an authoritarian culture,

subversive practices nevertheless exist. This relentless objectification of draft discourses is remarkable, although it is not water-tight.

In spite of relentless efforts to make the bodies of prospects transparent, player resistance to the process makes it a challenge. The combine and other workouts provide opportunities for prospects to manage to some degree the kinds of access that coaches, scouts, and other team representatives have to witness their abilities, to present themselves in the most favorable possible light, and hence to control their market value to a small degree.

In addition to concealing injuries, some players will fake injuries to get out of performing the one or more of the drills meant to gauge their athletic ability. As former NFL team physician Rob Huizenga (1994) recalls of his experience at the Combines:

In my whole life in medicine, all through medical school, through residency, in my private practice, I had never conceived this twist on the doctor-patient encounter. This was a whole new branch of medicine. Detective medicine. The players would categorically deny everything. It was my job to see if I could find medical diseases that might affect their ability to play football for the Raiders...We didn't really worry about psychiatric problems, because, well, our crazy players had just won the Super Bowl (77).

There are other acts of resistance. Each year, a number of players decline some or all of the drills at the Combine, showing up instead for the physical and the interviews. Players who decline the workouts are looking to display their abilities by performing the exact same feats under more familiar circumstances – at their university's athletic facilities. When a few tenths of a second in one's forty-yard dash time can cost a prospect hundreds of thousands of dollars, it is understandable that prospects might choose to perform in a more comfortable environment. To facilitate this, most colleges and universities with competitive division one football teams host a "Pro Day." The schools are inundated with visitors (sometimes as many as 75 scouts and coaches). When

all are assembled, the team's participating prospects are measured before essentially replicating the drills they would have performed at the Combines. Pro Day serves the interests of scouts as well as those of the players, as it allows scouts exposure to those athletes not invited to the Combines.

Nevertheless, there is uneasiness about player resistance to the working out at the Combine. As Baltimore General Manager Ozzie Newsome told ESPN.com's John Clayton (2003), players skipping workouts is an "age-old problem." Newsome's colleague, Charley Casserly explains how the league's power structure encourages players to participate in the drills: "We try to get the message out to players that that if you run at Indy you are doing it before all of the decision-makers about your future. It's the only time you are going to have a coach, general manager, position coaches and scouts together watching everyone work." For his part, Clayton thinks, "the process of drafting a player is becoming too scientific." But Clayton is not here referring to the ways in which measurements are meticulously recorded by the league's power structure, as he explains: "Trainers use the latest in technology and nutrition to get a player ready for a one-hour workout he might perform once or twice in the winter," thus making the workouts less revealing to the power structure than they might otherwise be. Clayton's comments are a reminder that draft discourses most often adopt the view of the white power structure, while positioning the prospects as properties.

The NFL/media complex's interest in having prospects all work out together in Indianapolis is revealing. Clearly, it is more convenient for the league's power structure to have the prospects audition at the same time in one location. Having all viable prospects perform the same feats under identical conditions, and perform them within a

compressed period of a few days makes comparison easier. Such an arrangement provides one of the desired requisites for the creation of docile bodies, an “enclosure, the specifications of a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself” (Foucault, 1977, 141).

### **Mobilizing and Containing Male Aggression**

The previous chapter demonstrated how body parts and athletic comportment became goods that can be assigned value, bought, sold, and traded. This chapter has shown how the assessment of attitude and a preoccupation with measurement serves to disempower prospects, to render them as objects to be measured, directed, and even assigned a numerical value. From the point of view presented in the discourses of the draft, prospects can demonstrate no more pleasing attitude than that of assiduous self-denial.

Football, the most popular team sport in the United States, is a game played by much larger than average men exhibiting very high levels of aggression. Injury is routine, creating an average career of less than four years and the well-circulated joke that NFL stands for “Not For Long”. Professional football sells aggressive hyper-masculinity, as the titles of NFL Films’ video offerings “Crunch Course,” “NFL Rocks,” “Tough Guys,” “100 Toughest Players,” and “NFL: Feel the Power” implies. As Curry (1991), Messner (1990), and Burstyn (1999) have suggested, the hypermasculine, aggressive, rituals that characterize professional football serve as an assertion of heteronormative male power in general, and issue symbolic warnings to women, homosexuals, and others who would seek to challenge this authority in the sphere of recognized politics. The assessment of bodily capital for very large and powerful men,



frequently couched in terms that emphasize the potential for inflicting physical harm is another important way that the hegemonic power of patriarchy is asserted.

The draft is another important venue for the marketing of this violent male ritual. This is not a politically innocent enterprise. The draft discourses invite the celebration of hyper-masculinity that takes the shape of aggressive, powerful, and mostly black bodies. The admiration of the destructive football player is a common feature of football commentary in general, but nowhere is it as studied and deliberate as in the language of the draft.

The valorizing of black male bodies may be politically expedient, but it is also fraught with historical complications. The spectre of muscular black bodies has long haunted the American imagination. As John Hoberman (1997) documents, a number of scientists and other social commentators have attempted to find a biological basis for the disproportionate number of African-American men convicted of criminal activity. By successfully eluding the complications of socioeconomics and culture, a literature emerged that linked muscular black physicality with criminal behavior. Patrick Buchanan's contention that violent crime is "a ghetto sickness, a malady afflicting the black underclass, not a suburban phenomenon" (Buchanan 1989, cited in Hoberman 1997), represents the legacy of this investigation. Images of threatening, physically imposing black men are not difficult to find. From Willie Horton to Mike Tyson to OJ Simpson, this familiar melodrama continues to circulate with remarkable durability, with commodified sport a key site for the circulation of images of muscular (and therefore threatening) black men.

Although the vast discrepancies between the demographics of professional football and of the larger culture usually pass without comment in public discourse, they are absolutely central to the understanding of the political uses of the NFL draft. The identification of dark men with a particularly physical and aggressive brand of masculinity in the popular imagination makes them useful assets in the politics of masculine hegemony, but it also poses a threat to those at the top of the gender hierarchy. Hence, the need for intensely de-individualizing, hierarchy-affirming discourse such as we see in the disciplinary technologies detailed in this chapter.

These technologies are prevalent throughout the institution of sport, but they become remarkably explicit and well-developed in the draft. It is important to note that the NFL is among the most vigilant of all major American sports organizations in terms of maintaining an authoritarian structure. Players in the NFL are routinely fined thousands of dollars for seemingly inconsequential violations such as leaving a shirt untucked, speaking with the opposition, or celebrating a successful play with an abbreviated dance. In the draft, prospects exhibiting behaviors that make discipline difficult, even such vague minor infractions as drawing attention to one's self or recognizing one's own stardom can seriously damage a prospect's value. The inherent contradiction in the call for self-denial as a prerequisite for participation in celebrity capitalism makes this arrangement extremely fragile. Military metaphors, imbued as they are with the unquestionable legitimacy of the nation, can lend a false air of legitimacy to the rather absurd demands for a strictly maintained and seriously regarded hierarchy.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE EROTICS OF THE NFL DRAFT

ESPN host Chris Berman calls this year's draft a "sexy" draft and insists it - as always - sells itself based on the drama that it is.

-Magenheimer 1999

Every January, dozens of the most promising seniors in college football parade into a ballroom in Mobile, Alabama, stripped to their shorts. Before the annual Senior Bowl, these players are individually weighed and measured on stage before NFL scouts and media representatives. As discussed in Chapter four, these measurements will be used to measure the prospects' bodily potential, to convert the bodies of draftees into commodities. But the repeated tours of the human form represent another power strategy - one that is grounded not just in economics, but also in desire.

This chapter considers the process of the media discourses NFL draft as an erotic problem, as a cultural site where the admiration of male bodies by men can circulate with remarkable openness. This openness not only satisfies desires that are in most other arenas strictly policed by taboos, it serves to affirm inter-male dominance based on a hierarchy of race by referencing a gender hierarchy. Draftees are positioned as the objects of the desiring gaze. This allows the white power structure to pursue long-submerged desires while offering these mostly Black men a role traditionally occupied by women.

This chapter is concerned with the intersection of desire, power, and looking practices. This chapter explores the various ways in which the practices and discourses

that surround the draft legitimate and mobilize a particular way of looking. The kind of looking that characterizes the draft is not always mobilized around images. This is not unique to the draft. Looking is often linguistic as well as visual. Virtual tours of the human form come via the printed word as well as by way of the camera or the canvas. While images are plentiful in mediated coverage of the draft, readers and viewers are more often encouraged to experience the bodies of draftees through the written and spoken descriptions of those bodies. As will be evident below, these linguistic devices are remarkably descriptive of the male athletic body and authorize a particular way of viewing potential draftees. This paper explores the discourses of the NFL draft, the larger historical forces that shape them, and how and why they sanction a particular institutionalized way of examining the public bodies of NFL prospects.

### **Race and Homoeroticism in American football**

At least since Ancient Greece, the athletic body has been celebrated as an erotic topic. The Greeks are, of course famous for figuring men, and especially athletes, in openly erotic ways. Even the comparative prudens of England and the United States in the mid-nineteenth century found occasions through sport to strip men and make them the object of open admiration by other men. In 1842, *The Spirit of the Times*, a United States sports publication issued this report of a boxing weigh-in:

If [Chris] Lilly's appearance was fine, [Tom] McCoy's was beautiful. His skin had a warmer glow than the former's; his form was more elegantly proportioned, and his air and style were more graceful and manlike. His swelling breast curved out like a cuirass: his shoulders were deep, with a bold, curved blade, and the muscular development of the arm large and finely brought out (quoted in Guttman 1996).

The homoerotic subtext of American football, while actively ignored or dismissed by the sporting media and the majority of fans, nevertheless receives an occasional wink in popular culture. In an episode of the popular sitcom *The Simpsons*, for instance, young Lisa Simpson comes across an indexed entry for “football, homoeroticism in” in her library’s card catalogue. Lisa breezes past the entry, but had she investigated it further, she likely would have found a fairly large literature on the topic.

In spite of intense manifestations of homophobia (or perhaps one explanation for them), football sanctions kinds of behavior between men that, in other spaces, would likely be coded as erotic. Football players routinely touch and caress the bodies of their teammates. The protective gear enlarges the appearance of shoulders, thighs, thus accentuating the already hyper-developed bodies of the players. Dundes (1978) observes that offensive linemen even “assume the position” before their backfield. Citing this and several other examples, Dundes concludes that, “it is highly likely that the ritual aspect of football, providing as it does a socially sanctioned framework for male bodily contact...is a form of homosexual behavior” (87). Of course, football and other sporting practices like it “all proceed under the assumption that no one involved is aware of the erotic potential of these phenomena, that everyone is heterosexual” (Pronger 1990, 9). Nevertheless, Pronger (1999) argues that the very structure of “territorial games” such as football invoke a violent rape aesthetic in which teams embody ritual phalluses that attempt to penetrate one another.

Football is riddled with references that liken the game to aggressive sex, as former player David Kopay has noted: “We were told to go out and ‘fuck those guys’; to take that ball and ‘stick it up their asses’ or ‘down their throats.’ The coaches would yell

‘knock their dicks off’” (Kopay & Young, 1977, 53-4, cited in Dundes, 1978). Allen Guttman (1996) notes a music video screened as part of ABC’s “Monday Night Football”, which followed the workout routines of two players, set to rap duo Salt ‘N Pepa’s “Whatta Man.” Nelson (1994) calls football “a male love affair with the male gender” (117), noting that, “for fifty-one weeks each year, readers of *Sports Illustrated* enthusiastically examine photographs of scantily clad, muscular men. Television watchers do the same: admire attractive images of male beauties” (ibid). Although these fans do not generally concede this erotic subtext, “voyeurism is voyeurism, acknowledged or not” (118).

But what is rarely acknowledged in these discussions are the peculiar racial demographics of many American sports, especially those of football and basketball, two of the most popular sports – both of which are dominated by Black men. Considering that the league relies largely on the circulation of public bodies and identities for profit, an understanding of the positionality of these subjects is essential.

Just as the organized violence found in football and other social practices serves a political purpose, so too does institutionalized desire for the Other. In the United States, that desire often coalesces around the bodies of black men. The positioning of black men as the target of desire is often a complex power move, one that reaffirms white supremacy by asserting the cultural power to look, judge, and admire (DuCille 1997, hooks 1992, Johnson & Roediger 1997). Sports are an important site for the assessment of the male body, where “the male body...is a legitimate object of the male gaze” (Morse 1983).

My approach here is informed by the contributions of black feminism and queer theory. The analysis understands race, gender, sexuality and class as inextricable from one another, and so it proceeds with the goal of understanding the dynamics of their interrelationship. In the pages that follow, I develop a framework for understanding the admiration of mostly black prospects that characterizes the draft. Ultimately, the argument suggests how this endorsed way of looking connects with the larger framework of commodified sport.

### **Strangelust, or How White Men Learned to**

#### **Stop Worrying and Love the Body**

Cultural critics have long studied public female bodies and the power relationships that attend them. Considering the public images of women, John Berger (1972 45, 47) famously argued that “Men act and women appear...Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” He provided a number of examples from the past 300 years of female nudes in Western art, suggesting that this device offered subjugation of the nude to “the owner of both the woman and the painting” (52), offering the female nude as the representative of a lifestyle that the viewer might possess. Berger did not see this as a phenomenon that had run its course, asserting of his own time that “the ideal spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him” (64). Feminist theorists have since developed the concept of the “male gaze,” which does not necessarily infer a male spectator, but rather a particular performance on the part of the model, which Paul Messaris (1997, 41) summarizes as

female models treating “the lens as a substitute for the eye of an imaginary male onlooker.”

While most studies of the politics of looking and desire focused on women and other dominated groups, recent scholarship in this area has begun to recognize the increasing prevalence of men positioned as objects of the gaze. This shift has been mobilized by recent developments in capitalism, described by David Rowe (1999) as the “culturalization of economics” (70). It’s therefore no surprise that critics first had their attention drawn to advertising. Mort (1988) and Nixon (1996) explore “new man” imagery, which presented “a more sexualized representation of the male body in ways which drew on the codings traditionally associated with femininity in consumer culture and, in addition, resisted the assertion of a fixed or true sense of maleness in its styling of appearance” (Nixon, 1996, 3). Susan Bordo (1999) identifies the two most popular poses for men as “the rock” (the most familiar – a kind of tough guy image) and “the leaner” (the makeup and mousse pretty boy who assumes the passive “female” end of Berger’s equation). This trend has even appeared in the arena of sport, often among the most macho of social practices. Miller (2001) argues that while:

sports continue to be a space of heteronormative, masculinist, and white power, ...they are undergoing immense changes, with sex at the center. Objectification is a fact of sexual practice within capitalism. Excoriating evaluation of women’s bodies has long been the pivotal node of this process, with the implied spectator a straight male. Now, slowly, in many cases but rapidly in others, the process of body commodification through niche targeting has identified men’s bodies as objects of desire and gay men and straight women as consumers, while there are signs of targeting lesbian desire (11).

Miller documents this shift with examples from a number of sports, including American football, where recent marketing schemes have been launched to attract a larger female audience. This is no easy task, as much of professional football’s public image reflects a



violent, aggressive, homo and femiphobic aesthetic. But football, as Bordo (1999) notes, is also a profoundly ambivalent image industry, one that sends conflicting messages about masculinity:

Think of the instruction in raw aggression that football provides and how it encourages the player to think of his body as a fierce, unstoppable force of nature. Think of how this aggression is rewarded -- with scholarships, community adulation, romantic attention, special attendance deals cut with teachers, administrative leniency when 'boys will be boys.' Now imagine the young quarterback at a workshop on date rape, held by the counseling center of the same high school which is encouraging him to be an animal on the football field. At that workshop, he's told he must learn that he is not an animal, that his body is not an unstoppable force of nature, that it yield, in fact, to one little word. Now, which is this young man supposed to be ... an animal or a gentleman? (234).

I would argue that the ambivalence Bordo notes extends further still. The NFL draft positions men as objects of desire, but the implied viewer remains the traditional straight male. This taboo desire is covered by intense homo and femiphobic discourses and the discourses of capitalism, while serving to position prospects as the objects of the male gaze – a position traditionally occupied by women and one that marks the occupant as the target of power.

While the study of gender and the politics of looking have been quite important, other theorists have moved their attention to other power relationships as well. Gaines (1988, 24-25), for example, suggests that we consider race as well, “looking along materialist lines, considering, for instance, how some groups have historically had the license to ‘look’ openly while other groups have ‘looked’ illicitly.”

Cultural theorist Ann DuCille (1997) recognizes a profound ambivalence in the ways whites have interacted with blacks. This ambivalence has a long history that extends beyond and in some cases predates organized sport to slavery, law enforcement, and other disciplinary institutions where white men gaze upon and control the bodies of

blacks. She argues that black men's bodies are "feminized" through processes that position black men as the objects of desire for white men. White men's desire for black women, and the resulting exploitation, likewise has a long history, and is easy to identify. But, DuCille argues "their erotic desire for black men, is well covered up – so much so, in fact, that it often masquerades as both hyperheterosexuality and rabid racism" (306).

A spate of recent scholarship supports DuCille's thesis. As cited in Roach (1996) W. O. Blake's *History of Slavery* explains that slave auctions made the slave body into spectacle: "They were placed on a raised stone, or table, so that everyone might see and handle them, even if they did not wish to purchase them. Purchasers took care to have them stripped" (211). As Walter Johnson (1999) has recently argued in his history of the slave market, "As they went about their slave market business, slaveholders mapped their own forbidden desires onto the slave's bodies" (149). Johnson recounts the importance slave traders placed in making the slave body visible through nakedness. In his words, "Buyers and traders alike used the word 'stripped' as if they had done it themselves – literally unbuttoned their slaves' clothes and pulled them off: 'I stripped the boy and examined him several times'" (145). Of course, all this was done under the auspices of inspecting goods, as any good consumer might do. Nevertheless, Johnson argues that:

The careful stories buyers used to explain their actions were revealing denials of something everybody knew: that for white men, examining slaves, searching out hidden body parts, running hands over limbs, massaging abdomens and articulating pelvic joints, probing wounds and scars with fingers, was erotic (149).

The erotic black male body has persisted well beyond formal slavery. Robyn Wiegman (1995) notes this fiercely denied interracial homoerotic desire in the practice of lynching, specifically in the widespread practice of publicly castrating the lynched man. By thus phallicizing the black male body, this ritual castration

displays the anxieties and contradictions underlying the ‘logic’ and disciplinary practices of white supremacy: in reducing the black male to the body and further to the penis itself, white masculinity betrays a simultaneous desire for and disavowal of the black male’s phallic inscription (98).

Wiegman sees this focus on the black penis as significant (she even cites evidence that lynchers frequently divided the penis among themselves as keepsakes). Through it, “one encounters a sadistic enactment of the homoerotic at the very moment of its most extreme disavowal” (99).

As the public careers of Jack Johnson, Paul Robeson, and *National Geographic* magazine attest, white male desire for dark male bodies found frequent excuses to strip the body of the other and to expose it to public view. The genre of interracial pornography provides another, more contemporary variation on this preoccupation, all the more erotic for its proximity to the taboo. Jensen and Dines (1998) found that interracial pornography (which is produced for a white male audience) is characterized by continual references by white female models to “that big black cock,” while no such mention of “big white cocks” is to be found. The authors also discover that “the camera lingered on the black male body much more than it did on the white male body. That is, the black man was subject to the same scrutinization by the camera that women in pornography usually receive” (85). This unusual cinematic attention to the male form in this particular genre of pornography indicates a strategy that the draft also employs – the reduction of the black male body to the erotic/feminine position.

Photographer and First Amendment cause celebre Robert Mapplethorpe’s fascination with the black phallus provides the name for DuCille’s thesis. “Mapplethorpism” has some clear links to sport, as the black athletic body is transformed by camera and discourse into exotic terrain. Occasions for stripping and examining dark

bodies have been frequent in modern sport, usually in the name of scientific curiosity. As John Hoberman (1997) has extensively documented, sport has become the locus for all manner of “scientific” investigations of the black male form. Slow motion replay, while forgoing scientific pretenses, is nonetheless an innovation deployed ostensibly for the purposes of the popular analysis of athletic plays. In broadcasts of boxing, basketball, and football, the gaze of this technology lingers most often on black bodies in motion, often accompanied by narratives celebrating the grace, power and beauty of their movement. Before Roone Arledge popularized this technique in sporting broadcasts, it was most frequently associated with boxing, where, as Johnson & Roediger (1997) observe, “racially and ethnically typed bodies contested most nakedly and openly” (223). John Fiske (1989) argues that slow motion as a feature of sports broadcasts serves “to eroticize power, to extend the moment of climax.” Fiske characterizes slo-mo as “the erotic theatricalization of the athletic body” (219). Heavyweight boxing has another peculiar and suggestive ritual. Prior to each championship fight, the boxers are weighed in their underwear, usually before a large media presence. Weights are carefully recorded and announced as images of the spectacle circulate widely on television and in newspapers in spite of the fact that this custom has no obvious function – heavyweights can, as the name suggests, fight at any weight they wish.

In his remarkably personal account of his own sportsfandom, David Shields (1999) fantasizes about inhabiting the erotic body of his favorite basketball player, Seattle’s Gary Payton: “Making love to Laurie [his wife], I feel like I am – I imagine that I am – as tall, thin, and muscular as Gary Payton”(112). Later, when Laurie tells him she dreamt about Gary Payton, she attempts to break the weird tension by calling him “my

GP-wannabe.” Shields’ reaction is telling: [the statement] “has the surprising or perhaps not so surprising effect of making my whole body go cold” (174). Shields’ reaction reveals for us the intense discomfort that can be brought by revealing this desire to open view.

### **Drafting Rituals of Desire**

“It’s interesting to note,” DuCille observes, “how professional sports repeats the language, though not the economic conditions of slavery: owners, players – sometimes called properties – buying, selling, trading” (308). Although elite football players are subjected to close scrutiny throughout their college experience, the Senior Bowl marks the beginning of an especially intense period of heightened scrutiny. The college seniors invited to the all-star game (held in Mobile, Alabama -- a major slave port in the nineteenth century, by the way) will find themselves on display for nearly a week. The first major event of the week is the weigh-in, which hundreds of NFL scouts, general managers, and coaches, together with members of the media, cram into a hotel ballroom to observe. NFL personnel are given a sheet that lists each player’s arm and hand measurements, together with blanks for height and weight. The players are told to strip to their shorts and line up. As the audience looks on in studious silence, each player is introduced. After hearing his name called, the player takes the stage, poses for the audience for a few moments before his height and weight are measured and announced.

After being publicly scrutinized, many players are asked to fill out various questionnaires for teams or to conduct interviews with members of the media before dressing themselves and going to lunch. The strange ritual is one that some of the players

find unsettling. “It was weird man, like a meat market,” said running back Travis Stephens (Duffy 2002). David Carr, the eventual first pick, agrees:

I felt like a cow standing in line for the slaughter. It was kind of funny standing in line with the other guys waiting for our turn to be weighed and measured wearing just our shorts and socks. Then you look out at the hundreds of scouts and officials sitting there watching you and writing down the information (Carr 2002).

In a 1989 *Sports Illustrated* story on the “ritual dubbed the meat market,” quarterback

Mike Elkins confesses that “I felt like a prize bull at a county fair” (Lieber 1989, 38).

The author notes that “Derek Hill, a wide receiver from Arizona, is visibly

uncomfortable. Had he known he was going to be caught with his pants down, he might

not have worn those wild leopard-skin bikinis” (until recently, prospects were made to

wear only their underwear) (38). Perhaps Hill was simply attuned to the pageant-like

atmosphere. If his underwear was indeed meant as a statement, it would have been a rare

admission of the sexual subtext. Most of the references to the weigh-in as a “meat

market” seem to prefer the livestock connotations to other, more sexually charged uses of

the term (though clearly, there are elements of both practices at work here). Those doing

the inspection, meanwhile, predictably frame the invasiveness of the event as simply a

good business practice. As an NFL general manager explains: “It’s a livestock show, and

it’s dehumanizing, but it’s necessary...If we’re going to pay a kid a lot of money to play

football, we have a right to find out as much as we can. If we’re going to buy ‘em, we

ought to see what we’re buying” (38). Nevertheless, Shawn Alexander, a 2000 draftee,

saw fit to remark on the unsavory ancestry of the ritual:

We’re laughing about it now, but in a way it’s how they’d do it with slaves a long time ago. They’d put them up on a platform and have everybody look at them. We’re not slaves, but it just felt crazy standing up there like that (Alexander 2000, 90).

Admiration of black bodies is open and evident in the draft coverage. The examples provided below are all comments on African-American prospects. The analyses focus on cosmetic features of the athletes. None assess the usefulness of a player's corporeality. Large hands, which are useful for catching the ball, are not the focus here; nor are sturdy legs that make a player difficult to tackle; nor height, nor weight, nor upper body strength, all of which can be practical assets in a number of ways. Given the extensive testing each player goes through in the draft process (including recorded weightlifting accomplishments and an extensive scientific analysis of musculature), one might suspect that appearance would be wholly secondary to the analysis, but it is not. This suggests that there is more in play here than the professed goal of identifying potential productivity. Similar comments about white players are occasional, (Justin Smith is "a workout warrior who can play football" (Buchsbaum 2001, p. 102)) but are much rarer, in part because so many of the prospects are black, and partly because assessments of white prospects beyond their athletic abilities are much more likely to be described in terms of "work ethic," "intelligence," or "leadership" (or all three).

Some bodies are satisfying. Mel Kiper (2002) describes Tuskegee's Roosevelt Williams' body as "rock solid," and Michigan State running back T.J. Duckett as "a tremendous physical specimen. At 250 lbs., he carries just six percent body fat, leaving the rest of him solid as a rock" (71, 8). Boston College running back William Green has "great muscular definition" (Buchsbaum 2002a, 27), Wisconsin's Chris Chambers is "very muscular and powerful" (Buchsbaum 2001, 34), and his teammate Rodger Knight is "Very well put together" (Buchsbaum 2001, 114), while those same words are used to

describe Tennessee lineman Fred Weary (Kiper 2002, 45). Hakim Akbar, from Washington, “Looks the part. Muscular and powerfully built” (Buchsbaum 2001, 124). Tennessee’s Dominique Stevenson is “Well-built and muscular” (Buchsbaum 2001, 121). When Julian Peterson came to Michigan State, “he brought with him a chiseled frame” (Kiper 2000, 68). Florida’s Lito Sheppard owns a “well built and developed body” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 150), while Saleem Rasheed, a lineman from Alabama, “has a chiseled frame” (Kiper 2002, 65). Rutgers linebacker Wes Robertson has “a great body” and “Looks like he was weaned on a Cybex weight machine” (Buchsbaum 2001, 118). Anthony Herron, from Iowa is “Well-built and athletic looking” (Buchsbaum, 90). His teammate Jeremy Allen is quite a looker according to Joel Buchsbaum: “Great body. Passes the eyeball test the minute he walks into the room” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 20), even though it is admitted in the same analysis that Allen lacks functional strength on the field.

Other bodies disappoint in this phase of the pageant. Texas alum Mike Williams has “a coating of baby fat and...doesn’t have the muscular definition of a weightlifter” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 91). North Carolina’s Alge Crumpler “Lacks the tight, defined body teams expect him to have and looks almost a little flabby at times” (Buchsbaum 2001, 55). Arizona State’s Levi Jones “does not look like he has spent much time in the weight room (Buchsbaum 2002a, 79).” Mississippi State’s Kenric Fairchild “has a soft, flabby body and does not look like he has missed many meals or lived in the gym” (Buchsbaum 2002a, 74). Edell Shepard, a wide receiver prospect is negatively assessed as “pencil thin and narrow (Buchsbaum 2002a, 56).” Occasionally, writers will even refer to a prospect’s parentage as an indicator of their possible success. Minnesota’s Ron Mel Kiper observes that Jabar Gaffney (son of former New York Jet Derrick Gaffney) has



“good bloodlines going for him (Kiper 2002, 22),” and notes that Auburn WR Tim Carter, whose cousins include several professional athletes, “comes from good athletic bloodlines.” (Kiper, 24).

This open perusal of the male body by men is clearly in danger of violating deeply shared cultural taboos. But draft discourses on bodily inspection and assessment are carefully framed in the language of commodity exchange. The transformation of players into commodities serves other purposes as well, but one important, if unacknowledged element is to legitimate behavior that would otherwise be socially unacceptable.

None of the above should suggest that the draft discourses present men as the only objects of desire. Throughout the draft process, women intermittently appear to remind viewers that women, not men, are the legitimate objects of male desire (or at any rate, the only ones that can be publicly acknowledged as such). Although the draft is mostly an all-male event, women are offered bit parts in this ostensibly heteronormative, and plainly very sexist drama. For example, prospects invited to the Senior Bowl are greeted at the airport by women performing deferential and anachronistic gender roles. David Carr recorded the event for ESPN.com:

When we arrived at the airport on Sunday, we were met by a group of southern belles -- complete with hoop skirts and bonnets -- which was interesting. We walked into that scene and I wondered who all this was for. The girls bent over and bowed down which surprised me. Then I figured well, it must be for me (Carr 2002).

This strange ritual has parallels at the draft itself. Of the nearly 4,000 fans that pack The Theatre for draft day, one of the most prominent figures is Sondra Fortunato. Fortunato is a well-endowed professional model who was named “Ms. NFL Draft Day” in 2000,

and who according to *USA Today* (Lieber 2000) “pranced through the The Theatre at Madison Square Garden, shouting NFL draft cheers at the top of her lungs to 3,000-plus salivating draft nuts (p. 1A).” Fortunato was in attendance in 2002 as well, this time dressed as the Statue of Liberty and escorted by a New York City Firefighter in full dress. Her frequent on-camera interviews were greeted with hooting and cheering, peaking each time she leaned forward, exposing her cleavage to the camera. The explicit sexualization of women at the draft not only reminds viewers who may be legitimately acknowledged as the object of sexual desire, it also reminds viewers that disempowerment is part and parcel of being figured as the object of the male gaze.

In spite of these strange interruptions, however, the subtext of homoerotic desire still creeps into the draft coverage on a number of occasions. Christine Stewart (2002), writing for NFL.com, admits that “the combine is the NFL’s version of a beauty pageant.” “There are thirty-two teams you’re trying to appeal to,” says Warren Anderson, the director of a group that specializes in preparing athletes for the draft process. “All it takes is one to really love you” (Stewart 2002). Former draftee Alan Grant (2002), covering the combines for *ESPN: The Magazine*, offers this comparison:

Ever been part of a group of guys checking out women at your local bar? Heads are on a swivel and eyes bug out as you hear the words: “*Damn, did you see the body on that one?*” or “*That one’s young, but she’s got some real potential.*”

It was pretty much the same thing this week in Indy, across the street from the RCA Dome. The only difference is that the objects of desire aren’t young, nubile lasses sporting silicone-enhanced upper bodies -- they’re muscular college football players sporting sub-five second 40s.

Miami’s Najeh Davenport is describes as a “V-shaped back who looks like a stud”

(Buchsbaum 2002a 23). “Now the Patriots have a Woody,” ESPN anchor Chris Berman informed viewers after New England selected Boston College center Damien Woody in

2001 (a move that New York Times writer Michael Freeman (2002) tellingly described as “reckless.”) Keyshawn Johnson (1997) recounted this encounter with fans at the draft immediately after he was announced as the number one pick: “Welcome to New York,’ somebody was screaming as we made our way. ‘Hey Keyshawn, I want to have your baby,’ yelled another. I looked – it was a dude” (26).

While clearly a joke, it is a revealing one, in that it demonstrates the tension between the erotics of homosociality and the requisite homophobia that mark the environment of professional football. Johnson’s decision to include this incident, recalled with such precision, as one of the few draft day experiences he recorded in his autobiography may suggest that he recognized something more significant in the comment than mere amusement.

While the draft is an especially concentrated and intense period in which players are inspected, for draftees, it is only an introduction to a career-long experience of stripping for mostly white audiences in public and private. Every week, scores of NFL players are required to submit to random drug testing where they must strip nude before league-appointed doctors and urinate in their presence. The press is routinely allowed into team locker rooms while team players are changing and showering. The sexual subtext of this arrangement was made clear when *Boston Globe* reporter Lisa Olsen was allowed in as well, and was promptly subjected to overt sexual harassment. The press that cover the league frequently find excuses to focus on the bodies of players. The December 9, 2002 cover of *ESPN: The Magazine*, for instance, recently featured a shirtless close-up of San Francisco wide receiver Terrell Owens. Less than a year later, the magazine ran a story on Arizona Cardinals receiver David Boston which focused

exclusively on his well-developed body. The three pages of text are supplemented with three different photographs of the shirtless Boston.

### **Selling Power in the Sports Marketplace**

The commodification of bodies and the desire that it mobilizes satisfies more than deeply submerged erotic wants. The process of transforming human beings into something that can be bought, sold, possessed, can increase the desire for more conventional types of commodity accumulation. Roach (1996) argues that slave auctions served to do more than provide a forum for the purchase of laborers. Slave markets were usually located as part of more conventional bazaars. While this served to legitimate slaves as commodities, it served another purpose as well:

The less obvious but more enduring strategy was to use the traffic in bodies to promote the sale of other commodities as well. This technique gave slave spectacles utility as drawing cards even for customers who ‘did not wish to purchase’ slaves, but who might be induced to spend their money in any number of any other ways, their mimetic desire released by the eye-filling scenes of the public flesh market (211).

In a similar way, one might suggest that the contemporary flesh market of the NFL draft motivates desire for the products on display in the virtual marketplace of commercialized televised sport.

The discourses of the NFL draft mobilize economic and sexual relationships that, while they would be explosive if made explicit, serve in their usually unacknowledged mode to promote an ethic of unbridled consumerism. Part of what the draft accomplishes is to create a space where the bodies of dark men could be looked upon openly as commodities (with all the sexual pleasure and political power that accompanies that kind of looking). It appeals to its mostly white, male, and wealthy audience by asserting a

vision of hyper-masculinity and positions women as subordinate, and primarily as sexual objects. At the same time, it creates a sadly familiar white fantasy in which Black men are cast as primitives who are identified primarily with their bodies, while white men take their accustomed place at the top of the constructed hierarchy. Hypermasculinity is identified through the bodies of black men, while those same bodies are positioned as the object of the scrutiny, desire, and power of the white power structure, thereby placing them in a position of submission usually occupied by women. But the symbolic disempowerment extends to other non-whites as well. This process maintains a familiar dichotomy wherein the hyper-masculine involves only black and white bodies. There are tiny numbers of “brown” men in the draft. Asians, Latinos, Native Americans, and men of Middle Eastern descent are virtually invisible in this process. These groups, excluded from the process, are marginalized as “real men.”

In the preceding pages, I have not tried to argue that men who watch the draft are closeted, repressed homosexuals. Instead, I suggest that there exist desires that fall outside the boundaries acknowledged in polite society. Homoerotic desire is not exclusive of heterosexuals (nor, for that matter, is heterosexual desire exclusive of homosexuals). Indeed, transgressive desire is big business in the trade of signs that characterizes late capitalism. However, this fact does not necessarily indicate a progressive development. Institutionalized white desire for the dark-skinned Other may have a long history, but in recent times it has come to a special prominence. The popularity of the NFL draft may be explained in part, by this kind of pleasure. As bell hooks (1992) reminds us, these pleasures are not limited to the draft, nor are they innocent. They carry with them assertions of power that dictate who can be looked upon,

who can consume and who can be consumed in the process. She notes of the black male form that “It was this black body that was most ‘desired’ for its labor in slavery, and it is this body that is most represented in contemporary popular culture as the body to be watched, imitated, desired, possessed” (34). She adds that we acknowledge “ways the desire for pleasure, and that includes erotic longings, informs our politics, our understanding of difference” (39). In the NFL draft, this institutionalized desire works in concert with other technologies of power which position black men as subjects open to power’s inspection. As a ceremony of power, much of the draft may be viewed as a black male pageant, judged by the white male gaze.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

The discourses of the NFL draft represent a new strategy for the containment and control of an increasingly black labor force. By commodifying bodies and their abilities and subjecting those same bodies to disciplinary technologies and the desiring male gaze, the draft serves to maintain the authority of the white power structure at a time when the perceived dominance of black athletes and the corresponding popular denigration of white physical ability present a serious challenge to that authority. This is not done by describing blacks and whites in dramatically different terms. It happens through a reconstituted way of describing the players. This new discourse takes up the white players in the same way – commodifying them, converting them into docile bodies and feminizing them by submitting them to the gaze of the white power structure. The draft is, after all, largely a black phenomenon. The vast majority of NFL players and of elite draft prospects (87% of first round picks between 2000-2002) are black.

By figuring prospects as commodities and by encouraging identification with those who are shopping in this strange marketplace, the mediated draft serves to empower the white power structure, and by association, the white audience. At the same time, the draft allows for the celebration of an aggressive, violent kind of masculinity. Public ceremonies of male power are central to the assertion of hegemonic masculinity, and football has traditionally been an important resource for its enactment (Messner 1990, Sabo & Jansen 1992). These discourses serve to issue warnings to women, homosexuals, and others who would challenge hegemonic male authority. The new formulation that the draft represents preserves the promotion of male aggression, yet it simultaneously

contains the threat that black masculinity has traditionally posed through some very deliberate techniques.

I have argued that the discourses of the draft serve to symbolically contain and discipline prospects. The most predictable objection to this claim is to point out that many of the draftees enjoy rather obscene levels of wealth as compensation for their participation in this system. Certainly, it would be a misrepresentation to characterize players as slaves. As Todd Boyd reminds us, “Cotton pickers didn’t make \$35 million” (Tilove 1998). Indeed, were NFL players in effect slaves, then the Foucaultian understanding of power that guides this study would be entirely misplaced. Foucault explains that, “Where determining factors saturate the whole, there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship where the man is in chains. (In this case it is a physical relationship of constraint)” (quoted in Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, 221). Seen from this point of view, power is only possible where the option to act otherwise is a reality. We might then understand that enormous sums of money may complicate, but do not invalidate, the claims of this dissertation.

Furthermore, if there is no precedent for the millionaire slave, there has likewise been nothing like the contemporary athlete, whose body is publicly picked apart assigned value that is endlessly debated in public. The fact that the enormous amounts of wealth created by professional football are distributed in a relatively equitable way does not mean that power relations are somehow absent. As important as it is to remember that NFL players receive large amounts of wealth, it is equally important to understand that the NFL is an image industry, and that the fantasies created around the league are important cultural sites where power is asserted. After all, athletes are not the only



figures in contemporary capitalism, or even in the NFL media complex, who can boast seven- and eight-figure incomes. But elements of their public meaning *are* special, and those have been the focus of this study. Again, the wealth these players collect complicates, but does not invalidate, the analysis of the public meanings of the draft that has been carried out here.

It is worth repeating that there is nothing new about disciplinary technologies, eroticism, and even commodification in discourses about professional football. All three have long been associated with the game, even when it was practiced by mostly white men. What is remarkable about the draft is not that these discourses are present at all, but that they are so centralized, deliberate, and complete. The draft represents a new kind of discourse, one that marshals resources that have always been available in the cultural sphere of football, and presents them in new, much more focused and deliberate ways.

The NFL draft is a remarkable phenomenon, but it is not an anomaly. The draft is part of a growing number of sports-related entertainments that focus attention on the male body and encourage a sense of virtual ownership of players. Like the draft, fantasy football, the increasingly lucrative and profit-driven market for sports collectibles, and video games like *Madden Football* encourage fans not to identify with the players, but rather to imagine them as property.

A participant in a fantasy league typically plays the role of a general manager and head coach. Fantasy leaguers “draft” and “trade” players in order to build their imaginary teams. The actual performances of the players are carefully followed from week to week, and those performances are distilled into statistics and converted into points for the fantasy leaguer who own them. Like the draft guides, fantasy league sports

are the creation of fans, and have recently been transformed into a lucrative industry. Some fantasy leagues continue to be fan-run, but increasingly, sports news and entertainment brokers like ESPN, *The Sporting News*, and CNN/SI offer sophisticated management software to facilitate these games. On its nightly sports news program *SportCenter*, ESPN runs a weekly segment titled “Game Breakers,” in which NFL analyst Sean Salisbury delivers tips for fantasy players on the upcoming week, and ESPN.com provides a weekly guide as well.

The development of sports-related video games also has contributed to this emerging paradigm of virtual ownership. Many NFL-related football games are now officially licensed by the league, and feature the actual start-of-the-season rosters for each team. *Madden* video football games have generated more than \$1 billion in revenue for its maker and distributor, EA Sports and is, after apparel, the next largest source of licensing revenue for the NFL (Pham 2002). One option gamers have is to trade players, or build their own team from the league’s players.

The market for sports memorabilia, meanwhile, has evolved from trading among children into a multi-million dollar industry. Signed jerseys, balls, helmets, and cards are assigned specific values that ultimately reflect the implicit value of the players themselves. This economy is reflected in recent developments in the sports card industry. Select cards contain tiny pieces of the actual jerseys worn by the players depicted on the card, incorporating the illusion of actual proprietorship.

The NFL draft serves as an important date for the promotion of each of these industries. Fantasy leagues account for a significant portion of the draft audience, according to ESPN.com and *Pro Football Weekly* draft analyst Joel Buchsbaum (2002a).

Detailed information on rookies is, for hard-core fantasy-leaguers, invaluable information, and the draft is the perfect place to glean that knowledge. The draft also serves as a model for fantasy leaguers. Each fall, the new season begins with a fantasy draft, in which fantasy leaguers mimic the draft that is televised each spring. In fact, ESPN even offers a “draft kit,” which provides the same kind of detailed analysis of each NFL player as the draft provides on its prospects. The draft telecast is also an important marketing tool for EA Sports, which promotes the latest version of *Madden Football* by having highly selected draft picks introduce their virtual, video game persona. Finally, the draft creates a large market for sports collectibles. Signed footballs, helmets, and jerseys are auctioned off, as buyers again assign value to the players through their bids on the memorabilia.

The draft highlights the logic of capitalism in explicit ways. By assessing prospects according to unquestioned, rather strict standards, the draft presents a baseline of relevant information. As the previous chapters have demonstrated, there is virtually no debate about the legitimacy of the standards used to measure prospects. The disagreements tend to be about interpretations of the data, not the legitimacy of the data itself. This information is used to compare prospects with one another, and to evaluate each player’s relative potential. But the draft even celebrates in very explicit ways the connections between the draft as spectacle and the pleasures of capitalism. Comparisons to the stock market, the meat market, slave auctions and other bazaars do not question the legitimacy of the draft – they are meant to explain what makes it so popular.

Of course, the draft did not emerge as a conscious decision by anyone to exploit the growing American obsession with capitalist logic. Nor did it emerge in any explicitly

strategic way to address white men's concerns over their gradual retreat from athletic visibility. That the draft became the media spectacle it is today happened to a large degree by accident. Had ESPN not been a struggling network hoping to gain a foothold in the NFL, and had the league not been convinced that the draft was a viable option for television coverage, it is likely that Mel Kiper, Jr. would still be selling his draft guide to a tiny audience. Instead, he is a minor celebrity, and makes an excellent living doing little else but covering the draft. The draft is a clear example of an event utterly transformed to fit the needs of media, and it is instructive of the tenuous, uncertain and constructed nature of entertainment media forms. Only with the intervention of a number of ideological factors outside the control of the NFL and ESPN did it begin to flourish.

Ideologies are rarely the result of wholly conscious strategies on the part of ruling elites or anyone else. They are not conspiracy theories set in place to hypnotize dupes under their influence. Furthermore, those individuals who disseminate the ideologies do not do so consciously. As Foucault put it in an interview, "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (quoted in Dreyfus & Rabinow 1983, 187).

Ideologies are complex, frequently contradictory, and never complete. The emergence of the draft as part of a wider vocabulary of virtual ownership is part of a complex transformation that is taking place in the discourses of popular American sports, but I do not mean to suggest that virtual ownership is the only feature of this transformation. There are a number of competing discourses that challenge and confront the logic of virtual ownership. It is also important to note that the figuring of athletes as heroes and role models is by no means a thing of the past. But the discourses of virtual

ownership are in ascendance, and it represents an important and troubling development. In this dissertation, I have tried to map its important features as they are manifested in the draft. But this project marks only a starting point. What remains to be done is a more thorough analysis of the various manifestations of virtual ownership in fantasy leagues, the sports memorabilia market, and sports-related video games. A genealogy of this discourse is needed as well, tracing its emergence in greater detail. I believe that a thorough study of these discourses have much to offer media studies and sport sociology.

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