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This book addresses questions about constructions of contemporary masculinity with the starting point in how cultural politics shaped the American NFL (National Football League). The author is assistant professor Thomas P. Oates, in American Studies and School of Journalism and Mass communication, University of Iowa, and he urges us in these times of political turmoil to look beyond media sport coverage. Drawing on the Trump appeals that echoes of longing for the self-made man back in control again, Oates proposes a critical eye to the links in sports between entertainment and politics to discover unjust power structures that often are disguised in popular culture. Building on theories from feminist theory Oates discusses the complex processes of changes in societal understanding of gender that challenge the old traditions of white masculine domination in sports like NFL, which he uses as a
case for media studies. In this process we find cultural narratives told in several formats. The media coverage in sport channels, in films and in sport articles are used as examples to illustrate how ambiguous the ideals are for NFL masculinity as well as masculine ideals beyond the context of sports. The book’s main part is divided into four chapters, highlighting aspects of the relationships in the sport of professional football: teams, players, coaches and fans. Given the central place that professional football holds in U.S. media culture, Oates demonstrates the need for a critical perspective on the power structures in order to “better understand how white masculine hegemony is reconstituting itself in the service of contemporary capitalism” (p. 23).

Chapter 1, “This game has got to be about more than winning”, introduces dramatized serials and films that offer narratives of masculinities as problematic and ambiguous. The white masculine dominance defines and controls ethnicity, women and sexuality, in order to support and preserve power structures. In the light of the #metoo campaigns at last fall, this first chapter bears a horrifying testimony to how NHL star players endure homophobia, racism and misogyny. The stories about the players use familiar categories of gender roles we find in mainstream media representing western culture. These re-articulations of whiteness are on the one hand signs of deep anxieties and ambivalence over masculine domination, and on the other expressions of a need to challenge old, and find new, masculine ideals.

Chapter 2, “We ought to see what we’re buying”, pick up on the challenges presented in the first chapter, of how to handle the male crisis within the NFL draft and the representation of players. The draft has developed into an event covered by media during several months. The media’s techniques and close connections to the sports organizations made it possible to expand the coverage over time. How NHL and media correspond to the capitalist model for sport products is easy to see. Not only media is creating a past reference of belonging, Oates also describes how the production of content dehumanizes the draft as a staged show. The players are handled like livestock and their bodies divided in parts for careful examination. Referring to Foucault (1977 in Oates) the techniques of power by using the gaze to define individuals’ capacities is created by the media. The audiences are invited together with the experts in the virtual observatory (p. 66). The combined techniques serve as praising rituals for the male body’s efficiency and beauty, and at the same time reinforce strategies for exercising white power.

Used with support from a firm theoretical framework of feminist perspectives and media theory, this book has the potential to enrich many relevant syllabi.

Chapter 3, “Male order”, continues by examining books offering guidelines for leadership and self-development. The NFL coaches produce several books presenting visions for leadership related to their style of and approach to the management of NFL-teams. From coaching with an iron hand the shift goes to emotive managerial styles, related to the human relation movement in corporations and the public sector management of organizational communication. To handle NFL-coaching is compared to business, religion or warfare, noticeable in the metaphors used in the language and examples from the books described here. But as we know, sport metaphors are also dripping into business, as Wal-Mart has its coaches and its family (p. 114); we see this also in the Swedish company IKEA’s “Family”. The Bible metaphor teaches NFL coaching to trust in the fate to God with
clear evangelic overtones, reinforcing the male hierarchy, patriarchy and natural facts.

Chapter 4, “Man Management”, turns to video and online games as products for consumption by the fans. The role offered to the fans in these games is the coach, and playing the coach presuppose large quantities of knowledge in order to handle the players in the games as commodities. These games clearly can be the last bastion of masculinity symbolizing traditional male dominance in football. The men experience having control over the masculine body and its parts. As identity work is project related to reflexivity in late modernity according to Giddens (1991), the aspects of what masculinity means are tested and processed by the players. Oates views this as opportunities to do more than invite to practice different skills. The men playing games also create space for reconciled masculinities (2017:152). The cultural space created for this hyper-masculinity offered through football gaming provides a secure room of masculine validation linked to identity formations and fan culture.

The last section starts with an open question: “The end of Football?”. Oates discusses the medial injuries linked to football and permanent brain damage covered by journalism and media. The Webster story and the documentary League of Denial is a sad account about who is responsible for injuries the players eventually will sustain due to the game. Mike Webster, a famous Pittsburgh Steelers player and Super Bowl champion practiced a drill known as the “Oklahoma drill”. In full force two players were required to slam into each other, with the aim to knock the opponent backwards. In the end this was to show willingness to endure pain and show toughness, to be a man and to sacrifice for the team. The Webster story however has another side than the traditional about someone coming from a troubled, deprived background and made it to success. The documentary League of Denial is an autopsy that uncovered several serious injuries, the worst of all the brain disease Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy(CTE) (pp. 157–159). The links between the grim cult of hyper-masculinity and Webster’s fate is just one of the examples presented in this section that addresses the importance of challenges to make change.

The supposed readers of this book are familiar with the NFL related to the American media culture, but it nevertheless provides good insights into how gender ideals in sport are embedded in our everyday lives as the sport products we consume. The references to sport researchers covering a broad context of scholars and media material are frequent but perhaps not so clear. I perceive this book as directed towards scholars already familiar with feminist and media theories. However, I see great opportunities to use the book in University courses on Gender, Journalism and/or Media to discuss and problematize masculinity. Used with support from a firm theoretical framework of feminist perspectives and media theory, this book has the potential to enrich many relevant syllabi.

The overall impression is that Oates offers highly interesting insights into masculinity and identity formation that can open up for debates about gender roles, media products and sport cultures. The parallels to European ethnicity and masculinity ideals in sports, especially football, are easy to pick up while reading this book.

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