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Sport: Pleasure and Violence, Competition and Sociality

Niko Besnier, Guest Editor

2014, the year in which this issue of *Open Anthropology* is being published, may be remembered for two key events in which sports, state power, money and violence all came together. The first was the [Winter Olympic Games in Sochi \(Russia\)](#), an extravagant event that at a reputed cost of [\\$51 billion](#), broke all records for Olympic Games expenditures, easily surpassing the prior record of \$43 billion that the Chinese government had spent on the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games. The Sochi games were held in a climate of state authoritarianism in Russia in the form of human right violations and the repression of gay and lesbian people, drawing widespread criticism from Western nations, which sent few high-profile representatives. A few weeks later, Russia invaded the Ukrainian territory of Crimea, an act that some believe to have been in [partial retaliation for criticisms of the Sochi games](#).

The second event is the [soccer football World Cup in Rio de Janeiro](#), which will be followed two years later by the first [Olympic Games ever to be held in South America](#). Preparations for both events in Brazil have involved considerable state expense and authoritarian actions such as the forced relocation of poor people and the “pacification” of slums deemed to be controlled by narco-traffickers. The costs and the actions drew widespread criticism, with thousands of people taking the streets in protest in various parts of Brazil. Anthropologist [Erika Robb Larkins](#) documents what she calls “The Spectacle of Security in Olympic Rio de Janeiro,” the title of her contribution to the “In Focus: Olympics” collection of essays in [Anthropology News](#), the newsletter of the American Anthropological Association edited by Amy Goldenberg, and which is included as the first item in this issue of *Open Anthropology* (4–8). [Jules Boykoff’s](#) and [Thomas Carter’s](#) article “The Olympics and Its Discontents” on the 2012 London Olympics in the same issue show that these problems are not specific to Rio (17–19).

The realization that money, power, competition and violence are deeply intertwined with sport is nothing new. At the same time, there are other aspects of sports that point in an entirely different direction: just as they can be deeply embroiled in some of the less savory aspects of human relations, sports can just as easily produce pleasure and fun, cooperation and belonging, as well as sociality, the very quality that make us capable of living at peace with one another.

The twelve articles and two book reviews gathered for this issue of *Open Anthropology*, which represent a selection from the [collection of journals](#) published by the American Anthropological Association, illustrate how anthropology in its various forms can shed light on these complexities. They demonstrate that the unique tools of anthropology can help us understand how sport can take on radically different and

in some ways contradictory qualities depending on the historical time, the social and cultural context, and the perspectives involved.

Sport is a form of human activity that exhibits recurrent characteristics wherever it is practiced. These characteristics include competition, fun, and physical prowess. At the same time, particular sports and particular ways of playing a specific sport emphasize certain characteristics but not others. Anthropology shows that while sport can easily be dismissed as a trivial aspect of our lives and unworthy of analytic attention, a focus on sports and the contexts in which they take place can answer a multitude of questions important to understanding what makes us human.

Sport is not a new phenomenon as it has long played an important role in human social life. Meso-American archaeology, in the region corresponding today to Mexico and Central America, includes a record of remains of ballgame courts as well as murals, carvings, and other representations of ancient Americans playing ball games, which are believed to be the first team sports ever played in the world. Early Spanish conquistadores described **ancient Americans playing a ball game** that consisted of keeping the ball in the air or in control of one team, whether through direct contact with the body or with the help of an instrument such as a racket or stick, and with players sometimes using protective gear. Native Americans of the region today continue to play similar games, known in Spanish as juego de pelota (ball game), although the extent to which they descend from the games played in prehistory is uncertain. These were serious games: they were generally brutally dangerous, were sometimes associated with human sacrifices, could be accompanied by spectacular pageantry, and were the occasion of extreme forms of gambling.

The second article in this issue of *Open Anthropology* is "[Sports, Gambling, and Government: America's First Social Compact?](#)" by archaeologists [Warren D. Hill](#) and [John E. Clark](#) about a 3,600-year-old ballcourt in what is today Chiapas, on the Pacific Coast of Mexico, which was excavated by Hill and his then-PhD supervisor [Michael Blake](#). The Hill and Clark 2001 article appears in *American Anthropologist*, the flagship journal of the AAA currently edited by [Michael Chibnik](#), which covers the [four subfields of anthropology](#). In keeping with this broad focus, the argument the authors develop about ancient Meso-American sports has implications for our understanding of politics in both the past and the present.

The authors describe an excavated ballcourt located next to a house that was re-built several times, each time in a grander style, while other houses in the vicinity faded away. This evidence leads the archaeologists to propose that ball games played a role in the society's transition from relative social and political egalitarianism to a rank-based society, in which hereditary leaders (who lived in the grand house at this site) claimed divine origins and controlled the labor of others. Prehistoric statuettes depict men of chiefly rank wearing ballgame protective gear, and the Mayan cosmological text [Popol Vuh](#) depicts the creation of the world as a ballgame that pits mortals against gods. For Hill and Clark, ballgames and the attendant activities played an instrumental role in establishing early forms of government. Sport for the ancient inhabitants of the region was serious business.

Anthropologists have long been interested in sport-like activities, although they tended to subsume these activities under the category "games." Early issues of *American Anthropologist* include many articles describing the games of non-Western peoples, particularly North American Indians. In the spirit of late 19th and early 20th century anthropology, American anthropologists saw their duty to preserve local knowledge before it disappeared forever, concentrating on what they called "traditional" cultures. Today, anthropologists understand that cultures have always been in flux, constantly changing, borrowing, and adapting, and that the so-called "pre-modern" and "modern" worlds have long been entangled, even when it comes to sport.

“Games in Culture,” the third article in our collection, is by [John Roberts](#), [Malcolm Arth](#), and [Robert R. Bush](#) who offer an integrated model comparing differences and similarities between “folk” games and modern sports. Roberts, the senior author, is [remembered](#) as an anthropologist who tackled topics that others considered “unimportant.” Published in *American Anthropologist* in 1959, the article is based on the comparison of play activities across 50 societies, information the authors obtained from Yale University’s Cross-Cultural Survey, a database that would later become known as the [Human Relations Area Files](#) or HRAF. At that time, HRAF was seen as a useful method to arrive at generalizations across societies and cultures, though these days many anthropologists think that HRAF inadequately captures the contexts and complexities of social life.

Roberts and his colleagues defined a game as organized competitive play involving two or more sides and based on pre-agreed rules and criteria for determining a winner. The authors do not mention the word “sport,” even though many of the activities they describe would be classified as such today. Rather, they establish a classification system that cuts across activity types, distinguishing between games of strategy, chance, and physical skill. Games of strategy, they argue, are played in societies concerned with social stratification, games of chance are associated with religious beliefs and practices, and games of physical skill seem to be linked to particular environmental conditions. In all cases, games provide participants with a model for how to act in situations deemed important to the societies in which they live.

The article is historically interesting, if somewhat dated. Anthropologists no longer use such terms as “tribe” and are wary of comparing societies on the basis of pre-determined categories and of assuming what constitutes a game. Hill and Clark’s paper on Meso-American ballgames, for example, shows us that even in ancient times, play-like activities were anything but just playful.

In the years leading to World War II, anthropologists began to recognize that culture is dynamic, a fact that becomes apparent to people who find themselves in situations very different from those in which their forebearers lived. I have chosen anthropologist Marvin Opler’s 1945 description of a [sumo tournament staged in a Japanese internment camp in California](#) to represent this juncture. The article, titled “A ‘Sumo’ Tournament at Tule Lake Center,” is also published in *American Anthropologist*, and is the fourth article in our collection.

[Opler](#) was an anthropologist and psychiatrist who studied under great anthropologists, including [Leslie White](#), [Ruth Benedict](#), and [Ralph Linton](#). His brother, [Morris Opler](#) also became a distinguished anthropologist.

In 1943, Opler had been appointed Community Analyst at the [Tule Lake Internment Camp](#). Unlike many other anthropologists who were so employed, Opler was very critical of the internment of Japanese Americans, a stance that eventually brought upon him the interest of the FBI. In this article, Opler somewhat naïvely cites one of his informants who characterizes sumo as an “ancient sport dat[ing] back to mythological times”; [later research](#) has revealed that sumo emerged in its present form only in the mid-nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, Opler’s empathetic description does broach differences between sumo as it was practiced in Japan (which, in war time, was largely a matter of hearsay) and as Japanese Americans practiced it. He is also sensitive to the kinds of generational misunderstandings that get played out over the proper protocol of practicing a sport, shown in this article to occur between first-generation migrants and their offspring. This is the kind cultural discontinuity that anthropologists have come to see as very common in transmigrant communities.

A fascinating analysis of the way in which cultures can bring to sport different values and understandings is in the fifth article in our collection. Kendall Blanchard's short essay, "Basketball and the Culture-Change Process," was published in 1974 in [Anthropology & Education Quarterly](#), the journal of the **Council on Anthropology and Education**, currently edited by [Sally Campbell Gallman](#) and [Laura A. Valdiviezo](#).

Blanchard is today a university president; in the 1970s, he conducted fieldwork among the Rimrock Navajos in New Mexico, many of who are Mormons.

Wherever it has implanted itself, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourages its members to play basketball. It considers the sport a good way for its members to develop the desirable spirit of individualism, a trait that fits with competitive capitalism. As Blanchard describes it, Rimrock Navajos took to the game with great enthusiasm but instilled it with their own values and priorities: instead of competition, they emphasized fun, solidarity among kin, and respect for hierarchy. Rather than basketball changing Navajo culture, Navajos adapted the game to their culture, imbuing it with the value of personal creativity. Yet Blanchard also notes that these players demonstrate a "razzle-dazzle style," which contrasts sharply with the style expected of the Navajos in their daily lives, so that the adaptation of basketball to Navajo values was not absolute.

Organized sports have spread widely since they were codified in the nineteenth century. As Blanchard's article reveals, wherever sports have landed they have taken on the local cultural specificities of the people who play them. A celebrated example of this process is the 1975 documentary [Trobriand Cricket: An Indigenous Response to Colonialism](#), which has delighted generations of undergraduate anthropology students. It shows Trobriand Islanders from southeastern Papua New Guinea playing cricket, which was introduced to them by white Christian missionaries in the early twentieth century. These games can last several days, are played in teams of several dozen men who enter the cricket ground dancing in full regalia, and often involve elaborate sorcery and political maneuvering.

University of Chicago historian and anthropologist [John MacAloon](#) has used the term "empty form" to characterize sport, which he sees as a set of practices that can be transported from one society to another but in the process get emptied of their original associations and then "refilled" with local meaning. This view captures the extraordinary malleability of sport and the creative ways in which people around the world adapt new practices to their local concerns.

[Susan Brownell's](#) 1995 book, [Training the Body for China: Sports in the Moral Order of the People's Republic of China](#), reviewed by [Nancy Nu-Chun Chen](#), demonstrates this process. Chen's review, the sixth article in our collection, appears in the 1997 issue of [American Ethnologist](#), the journal of the [American Ethnological Society](#), currently edited by [Angelique Haugerud](#).

Brownell reveals that when sport moved from the West to China, some of the central values that Westerners strongly associate with sport—such as fair play—found little resonance in the Chinese context. Instead, local values—such as a concern for saving face—came to play an important role in the way that Chinese people practice sport. [Yağmur Nuhurat](#) comes to a similar conclusion in "Making Fairness in Turkish Football," an essay on the meaning of fair play among Turkish soccer football fans that appears in the *Anthropology News* "In Focus: Olympics" collection (2–3). Even so, certain aspects of sport remain unchanged as sport spreads around the world, such as the feature of competitiveness, which seems to be inherent to it.

Still, the presence or absence of competition in sport depends upon the context in which it is played. [Harry Walker's](#) 2013 article, "State of Play" offers a fascinating illustration of this point. This article appears in *American Ethnologist* and is the seventh in our collection.

"State of Play" concerns the Urarina people of Peruvian Amazonia, among whom Walker conducted fieldwork. Urarina soccer games give free reign to individuals to display their creativity without much regard for teamwork, while also showcasing the pleasure of doing things with others. The anthropologist sees in this style of play a reflection of the Urarina emphasis on both individual autonomy and the importance of sociality. Walker was accustomed to a style of soccer in which the aim was to win, and admits his frustration playing soccer with Urarina friends, whose games often ended when the teams reached the same number of goals. This vignette is a vivid illustration of the insights that anthropologists can develop from their own reactions during fieldwork.

But in another context, Walker watched as Urarina villagers did engage the game competitively. That context was a soccer tournament that took place downriver, in a neighboring village that the author depicts as "steeped in modernity." Invited to a state-sponsored tournament, Urarina villagers fulfilled the expectation to conform to what was for them a very different way of playing soccer. There, competition took precedence over enjoyment, and the rituals of the state included identifying "community" teams. In Walker terms, the Urarina's journey downriver revealed a complex transition in which "traditional" individualism got transformed into "modern" communalism.

Both Blanchard's and Walker's articles illustrate anthropology's ability to delve deeply into any topic and they also demonstrate that seductively simple explanations of cultural phenomena are all-too-often misguided.

States invest in sport, because sport, like victory parades, coronations, and national celebrations, makes very good spectacle, and these spectacles often strengthen citizens' allegiance to the nation. The Olympic Games are perhaps the most spectacular manifestation of sport's ability to mobilize a sense of national loyalty among a citizenry, especially for the host country. Only countries with the ability to mobilize adequate resources to host the rest of the world are granted the role of Olympic Game host by the International Olympic Committee. In some eyes, being granted such a role is "proof" of the country's position as a world power.

Sport and the activities that surround it can also have a very different relationship to the state, as [Faedah Totah's](#) article on soccer football fans in Egypt illustrates. "Ultras Uprising or Boys Just Wanna Have Fun?" appears in the "In Focus: Olympics" *Anthropology News* collection (9–11). Totah explains that for young Egyptian fans, attending football matches in the period leading to the Arab Spring was the occasion for both fun and serious political protest against the corruption and repression of the state. [Joseph Alter's](#) article on wrestling in India illustrates this point using very different ethnographic materials. Alter spent decades conducting fieldwork on sporting and body practices in India. The Indian context is interesting because it has a long philosophical history of thinking about the body and its capacities independent of Western philosophical tradition. Yoga is the best-known example of this tradition, a topic of Alter's more recent work.

Alter's "The Body of One Color: Indian Wrestling, the Indian State, and Utopian Somatics," is the eighth article in our collection. It appears in the 1993 edition of *Cultural Anthropology*, the journal of the [Society for Cultural Anthropology](#), currently edited by [Anne Allison](#) and [Charles Piot](#).

Indian wrestling is a very different sport from the kind of wrestling that Westerners watch on their televisions. Alter shows that in India, there is deep concern with the body's physical capabilities as well as with the body as the object of religious observance and moral righteousness. Indian wrestlers follow very strict regimens to control their diets, sleep, waking activities, and bodily functions. Their performance as wrestlers is intricately intertwined with religious morality that is centered and "inscribed" upon the body.

A casual observer might be tempted to see the India case as evidence of an exotic, timeless tradition. Alter helps us understand what is really going on. He explains that wrestlers see their ascetic practices as a way to critique the corruption of the modern state and the moral decadence of an Indian society obsessed with materialism, consumption, and the worship of Bollywood and cricket celebrities. It also reveals that in some contexts, the regulation of the body is a form of resistance to "state regulation," even as in other cases, it suggests the workings of a larger power to control its citizenry. The latter point was made by French philosopher [Michel Foucault](#) who argued that in contemporary society the state and other dominant large-scale structures (e.g., medicine, schools, the army, the workplace, the media) shape and regulate our bodies by imposing schedules, restricting movements, and even promoting dietary practices. A different kind of relationship between a sport and the national context in which it is practiced is the subject of [Loring Danforth's](#) 2001 article on soccer in Australia, which appeared in *American Ethnologist*. Soccer is not generally associated with Australia, but for some among its citizens, it is the sport of choice. Australia is home to many different ethnicities, including groups whose forbears migrated from Balkan countries, such as Greece and Macedonia. For these ethnic communities, soccer represents a way of distinguishing themselves from the Anglo majority who play and watch other sports, particularly rugby, cricket, or "Aussie Rules" football.

This situation poses challenges to Australia in terms of its national narrative, the story it wants to tell about itself. Greek and Macedonian soccer clubs are deeply embedded in ethnic identity and old animosities, and matches often become contexts in which the political conflicts of the ethnic groups' countries of origin are played out on the field. For the Australian state interested in a "unified" nation, this kind of fragmentation and divisiveness is a major problem.

Danforth describes mainstream Australia's response as an effort to re-conceptualize the nation as a multicultural society in part by "de-ethnicizing" soccer. In the 1990s, soccer-regulating national bodies encouraged clubs to create ethnically neutral names and attempted to ban use of nationalist symbols, such as flags, from soccer matches. At first, the clubs strongly opposed these moves but eventually soccer was turned into an "Australian sport."

Despite efforts to unify the nation and its citizenry, we learn from Danforth that Australia has emerged as a culturally hybrid entity. This Australia is comprised of ethnic groups who keep their distinctive identity even as their integration into the nation as a whole is emphasized. The story of soccer in Australia illustrates the process. The hybrid version of the nation comes into being as clubs change their name to neutral terms while fans continue to refer to them by their old ethnic name. At soccer games, some fans shout, "Go, Lakers!" while others chant "Hellas! Hellas!"—the Greek name for Greece. Soccer in Australia is thus the focus of competing ways of conceptualizing a diverse and complex nation, but it also defines "what it means to be Greek, Macedonian, and Australian in the global world of the late 20th century" (381).

The importance that sport plays in defining who people are is the focus of [Thomas Carter's](#) 2003 article titled, "In the Spirit of the Game? Cricket & Changing Notions of Being British in Northern Ireland," the tenth in our collection. This article appears in the [Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe](#).

Carter, who teaches at the University of Brighton in the United Kingdom, explores the relationship between Irish and South Asian cricketers in Northern Ireland. In the course of its history, cricket was strongly associated with British imperialism and the distinct mores associated with it, including the notion of “fair play” as well as colonial superiority. The [distribution of cricket on a contemporary world map](#) shows that it corresponds almost precisely to the former British colonial empire.

Britain no longer dominates the sport today, having been displaced by countries such as India, South Africa, and Australia. But for the Northern Irish and people of South Asian origin in Northern Ireland, cricket continues to be symbolically entangled with histories of British colonialism in new and interesting ways.

Cricket figures into the sectarian conflict that has torn Northern Ireland for decades. Cricket fans and players are associated with British, Protestant, and Unionist identity in opposition to the Irish, Catholic, and nationalist identity that occupies the other side of the conflict and that favors soccer football. At the time of Carter’s fieldwork, the [Belfast Agreement of 1998](#) had put an end to formal political violence. Regardless of the formal agreement, Northern Ireland continued to be ethnically and politically tense, with divisions played out through symbolic means, including sport.

People of South Asian origin living in Northern Ireland add another wrinkle to the story of cricket in Northern Ireland. South Asian immigrants arrived in the context of the new prosperity that followed the end of violence in Northern Ireland. They bring a different cultural understanding of cricket from that of the native Irish. For South Asian immigrants, playing cricket is about the competition. In turn, Irish players and fans consider this view a threat to the “spirit” of the game (hence Carter’s title). Often, their criticisms of South Asian ways of playing have racist undertones.

Carter’s argument echoes Danforth’s analysis of soccer in Australia. Both demonstrate how sport can symbolize complex social and political processes and historical conflicts. In the Northern Ireland case, cricket serves to confirm and reinforce racial and ethnic hierarchies rooted in a long history of colonialism. British “whiteness” continues to dominate the sport, just as Britain dominates the Northern Irish political situation. The Irish, who in some ways historically benefited from British colonialism, nevertheless remain subordinate to the British. South Asians occupy the bottom of the hierarchy despite the fact that many are British citizens, a position that gets symbolically reproduced as native Irish denigrate South Asian cricket.

“Global Cholas,” a 2013 article authored by anthropologist [Nell Haynes](#) also explores how race and ethnicity are embroiled in sport, but with a novel and happier twist. Haynes’s article was published in the [Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology](#), the publication of the [Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology](#), currently edited by [Andrew Canessa](#), and the eleventh in our collection.

In Bolivia, *lucha libre* is a spectacular type of wrestling, inspired by the Mexican form of the sport that involves dramatic performances and theatrical outfits. The twist is that many performers in *lucha libre* today are indigenous women who compete as “*cholas*,” dramatic characters wearing rural market women’s outfits. Foreign tourists attend these performances thinking that they are witnessing a timeless traditional event, despite the fact that indigenous women’s participation in the sport only dates back to 2001 and most wrestlers are young working-class urban indigenous women who are stay-at-home mothers or who work in the service industries. The wrestlers themselves enjoy the cosmopolitan possibilities to which wrestling gives them access. They gain from it a visibility that they would otherwise not have, including being the subject of photo spreads, [articles in the international press](#) and [television](#)

[coverage](#). Some are invited to wrestle in North America. For the young Bolivian women wrestlers, this so-called “tradition” is a means of achieving global recognition and taking control of tourists’ attention, turning it to their advantage and becoming role models for their compatriots.

Professional and aspiring athletes have been circulating country to country since sports as we know them were invented in nineteenth century Great Britain, North America, and continental Europe. This circulation was instrumental in spreading the idea of sport to all four corners of the globe, piggy-backing on colonial domination, missionary efforts, and other forms of global expansion.

In the early twentieth century, sports teams began hiring non-local players based on certain criteria they considered “safe,” defined in terms of “cultural similarities” between nations or on the basis of personal relations among club managers, players, and potential recruits.

By the end of the twentieth century, the global circulation of professional athletes had intensified dramatically, going hand-in-hand with the corporatization, mediatization, and commercialization of professional sports. The stakes of hiring became higher, players were transformed into professional workers, their cost rose dramatically, and recruiters went further afield into more “risky” territory in search for talent. These dynamics have led to a remarkable increase in the number of foreign-born or ethnically and racially marked athletes employed in athletic workplaces in the industrial world, particularly those emerging from developing countries. In Western European professional soccer football, non-Europeans today reportedly constitute [more than 50% of foreign players](#).

Anthropologist [Alan Klein’s](#) book [Sugarball](#) (1991) and historian [Rob Ruck’s](#) [The Tropic of Baseball](#) (1999) are two pioneering studies of baseball players from the Dominican Republic employed or seeking employment in the United States, stories that reflect the global circulation of professional athletes. The two books were reviewed in *American Ethnologist* by [George Gmelch](#), a professor of anthropology who was himself a minor league baseball player and who has published widely on the subject. We include Gmelch’s 1993 review as the twelfth article in our collection.

These books note the plentiful baseball talent in the Dominican Republic, a developing country where baseball is a passion and the labor market is very limited. These conditions are not lost on professional American baseball, which has been recruiting heavily in the Caribbean island since the 1950s, especially through the sport academies that they have established there. Klein subtitles his book about baseball, “the American game, the Dominican dream,” to capture the fact of the enormous discrepancies in wealth and power between the Dominican Republic and the United States. One result of these discrepancies is that the wealthier country has its pick of the best players, and fans in the poorer country don’t get to see their successful compatriots play live. Aspiring and successful Dominican players have little choice but to accept this colonial-like situation, which also gives those who succeed opportunity to support many people back home and to be seen there as a national star.

My own article, entitled “The Athlete’s Body and the Global Condition” and published in *American Ethnologist* in 2013, concerns a much less well-known case, the trajectory of rugby players from the island kingdom of Tonga to Japan. Just as baseball figures in the Dominican Republic, rugby in Tonga is a passion: most young boys begin to play very early in life and everyone is deeply involved in the sport at all levels, as players, fans, and coaches. While Tonga’s presence on the world scene is not particularly significant, it occupies a prominent position in the world of rugby. This is because Tongan men are widely viewed as excellent players since many have a body constitution that makes them ideally suited to the sport: muscular, tall, and very powerful, so long as they are young.

Not unlike the Dominican Republic, Tonga is a developing country with very few resources that today offers few employment opportunities, forcing many people to migrate for work. Most who do manage to migrate take on low-level employment in their host countries. In the last few decades, rugby emerged as an opportunity for a few Tongans to migrate under much improved conditions, and as a means to support large numbers of people back in the home country. Japan is one of the main destinations for Tongan male rugby migrants, even though rugby is not particularly popular in that country. Even so, salaries for rugby players in Japan are relatively high and playing there opens up opportunities for Tongan players to be recruited by clubs in countries where the sport is important, such as the British Isles and France. Yet sport careers are fragile and short, and Japanese society is not free of racist stereotypes, leaving Tongan migrants in potentially vulnerable circumstances that highlight the complexities of migrant sport careers for men from the developing world.

Back in Tonga, rugby has quickly become the focus of boys' dreams about the future. Like their age-mates elsewhere in the world (see for example the 1994 film [Hoop Dreams](#) about black youth hopes for a basketball career in inner city Chicago), Tongan boys and young men fail to consider that the possibility of a successful rugby career is not the same as its probability. Even the lucky few who manage to find a career in the sport are vulnerable. They work in a field marked by the brevity of youthful masculine vigor, the specter of injury, the capricious nature of corporate interests, the precariousness of adoptive forms of belonging and the sometimes-unforgiving responses of the public. Together, these factors bestow upon the playing field a profoundly fragile quality.

The Dominican and Tongan cases also illustrate the important role that stereotype often plays in professional sport. Recruiters, trainers, and coaches view Tongan rugby players and Dominican baseball players as "naturals." They are imagined to possess some inherent "natural" quality that makes them ideal baseball or rugby players. This theme is also taken up in Susan Brownell's [Training the Body for China](#), discussed earlier. Chinese sport recruiters see women of peasant background as particularly well suited to the rigors and aims of athletic training, not only because hard work in the fields has made them strong and resilient, but also because the hardships of rural life have prepared them for the grueling regime of training. The positive consequence of these stereotypes is that women athletes in China never faced the struggles for legitimacy or questions about their femininity that women athletes face elsewhere.

Stereotypes about the physiological characteristics supposedly inherent to particular racialized, ethnic, social class or religious groups simplify reality. They also obscure many other factors that drive people towards engaging in one activity or another that have little to do with inborn group-specific qualities. These factors have to do with employment prospects and opportunities, expectations placed on young men or women by families and society at large, the years individuals spend on perfecting their skills, or the sheer enjoyment individuals get in playing sport and playing it well. No one denies, of course, that some people are born with physiological characteristics that are out of the ordinary, such as an unusual lung capacity or exceptionally resistance to fatigue, which may give them an unusual advantage in sport competitions.

Sex is one kind of physiological variation that gets attention from the institutions that regulate sports. In the *Anthropology News* "In Focus: Olympics" collection offered here, [Rebecca Young-Jordan](#) and [Katrina Karkazis](#) discuss this issue in "Some of Their Parts" (12–14). The authors note how "gender verification" in high-level sport has acquired increasing importance over the years. Policies that have sought to "scientifically" separate women from men have repeatedly failed because the biology of sex turns out to be more complicated than generally imagined. Even as new sex testing rules focus on testosterone levels, this variable relates to sexual identity and athletic prowess in very complex ways and is thus an unreliable indicator of what makes a man or a woman. Some women, deemed biologically "too masculine," have

been excluded from competitions based more on sport doctors' subjective judgments than on any exact science.

Stereotypes are always complicated in that, more often than not, positive stereotypes are yoked to negative ones. For example, sport officials, the media, and the larger public tend to represent Pacific Island rugby players' physicalities as "naturally" designed for rugby as well as other sports, but they also characterize them as undisciplined, unreliable, and difficult to train. Even the positive stereotypes can have negative social consequences. In places like West Africa and the Pacific Islands, generations of young men are investing their future in the possibility of being recruited as sportsmen. Often encouraged by parents, school counselors, and the glamour of the superstar athletes they watch on television, in their quest for a future in sports, these young men may neglect formal schooling, a decision that may contribute to their future social and economic marginalization.

This issue of *Open Anthropology* closes with an obituary of W. Montague Cobb (1904–90), the first African American physical anthropologist, who spent most of his career at Howard University. Cobb worked tirelessly as both scientist and activist for social justice, chairing for a number of years the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#). The obituary appears in *American Anthropologist*, and is written by [Lesley Rankin-Hill](#) and [Michael Blakey](#).

Rankin-Hill and Blakey tell us that, in 1936, Cobb published an important paper debunking the myth that African Americans are endowed with particular anatomical characteristics enabling them to excel in track and field. Cobb's work corresponded in time and topic with the [Jesse Owens](#) case, one of the most dramatic historical events that provoked debates about the alleged physical prowess of particular racial groups. Owens was a four-gold medal winner in track and field during the 1936 Berlin Olympics Games. As with any modern Olympic Game, the 1936 games were designed to showcase the achievements of the nation that hosted them. In this case, Nazi Germany was the host and its racist ideology was on display.

Owens's Olympic prowess also triggered a storm of debate among scientists in the US, discussions that took place amidst acrid intellectual debates about social Darwinism and the so-called natural superiority and inferiority of racialized groups. Cobb's refutation of the crude biological determinism of the dominant perspective has stood the test of time.

The articles selected for this issue of *Open Anthropology* illustrate the kinds of insights that anthropology in its various guises can provide on what people at different times and in different places do with sport, how they integrate sporting activities in their lives, and how sport becomes a tool for thinking about society and culture. Anthropologists are particularly well placed to analyze the complexities of what human beings do in social groups and to understand the power of sport to variously provoke pleasure, incite violence, arouse competition and promote sociality.

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[In Focus: Olympics](#)

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