

Nathan Kalman-Lamb, *Game Misconduct: Injury, Fandom, and the Business of Sport* (Winnipeg; Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2018)

VULNERABLE HEROES?

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Reading Kalman-Lamb's *Game Misconduct: Injury, Fandom, and the Business of Sport* (2018) in our increasingly concussion-conscious moment in sport history is an enlightening and thus a troubling experience. Medical reports from student-athletes about yet another concussion or surgery as I have taught and assisted undergraduate classes at an American university, are the closest I have personally come to witnessing the many cycles of injury, pain, treatment and rehabilitation athletes go through during the course of their careers, and sometimes during the course of a single season, not to mention the accompanying anxiety about losing out in the tight competition for restricted rewards the athletic labor market promises. *Game Misconduct* reminds us of a more generalized link: the one-click distance between any fan following any team, or the appreciation of athletic beauty as the philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht would have it, and the constant infliction of harm, often irreversible, on athletes' bodies—so widespread as to deserve the metaphor of an “epidemic.”¹

Understanding the contours of this interdependency between fandom and injury is the original promise of *Game Misconduct*. Reviving the buried tradition of Marxian sociology with a touch of Durkheim, Kalman-Lamb theorizes this interdependency as the sacrifice of the athlete's wellbeing for the invention and sustenance of a social (and economic) bond between a team and its many fans. It's this sticky union, needless to say, that keeps fans' demand for their teams inelastic, as economists say, and provides a remarkably loyal consumer base to the owners of the means of athletic production and merchants of sports. As fans are infatuated by the “visceral pleasure of competition” and engage in the ritual consumption of mass mediated totems stamping their membership in one collective against a rival, the treadmill of business is fed the emotional (and monetary) energies it needs.²

Kalman-Lamb's is nothing less than a Marxian exploration of the modern institution of fandom which relates its effervescent, affective appearance to the hidden abode of production of athletic spectacles and their mass mediated consumption. Based on a classical and thus solid theoretical foundation, *Game Misconduct* is empirically substantiated with long excerpts from in-depth interviews conducted with sports fans and professional ice-hockey players around Toronto. It does a great job at unravelling the trivet (fandom-spectacle-athletes or consumer-commodity-laborer) supporting the business of sports and shows athletes' (labor's) physical wellbeing to be the invisible human cost of the market's routine operation. Methodologically organized to explore the interdependence between the ideological construction of fandom and the conditions of athletic labor, *Game Misconduct* particularly zooms in on the various demands made on the athlete by fan expectations. The conventions of a heavily mediatized athletic workplace today involve more than practices and games and extend to overtime "public relations" work where athletes are expected to cater to the emotional needs of fans and help sustain the ideology that the fan is not simply a consumer but part of a community, for this very fantasy is included in ticket prices or tv subscription. Sports business is such that the athlete must pretend to be more than a paid performer and strive to impersonate an epic hero and/or a community man. Media appearances, pub visits, small talk with the stands or autograph sessions demand from professional players not only time and effort but also an amicable (read marketable) appearance so the community (consumer loyalty) is reinforced. In keeping with the best of the Marxian tradition, Kalman-Lamb reminds us of the structural similarity between this affective labor athletes perform and other professions in capitalism and hence categorizes the work athletes do under the wider conceptual rubric of socially reproductive labor: the kind that works to satisfy the emotional/social needs of the workforce and ensures the smooth continuity of spatial-temporal routines, subjectivities and divisions of labor which orders the flow of capitalist society. Some of the psycho-social effects fans derive from fandom that Kalman-Lamb highlights are connectedness to an imagined community, civic pride and participation, cathartic rejuvenation and the enjoyment of polarized group rivalry.

Athletes, interview excerpts clearly demonstrate, are aware that satisfying fans is part of the "trade" on and off the ice. While the Marxian framework helps demystify sports' exceptionality, the empirical depth of the book reveals the specificities of sports. Given the exceptionally talented/trained capacities

which set apart specialized professionals from, say, your around-the-corner barista who knows your name in order to make you feel good and keep coming to the store, it is “the athlete’s *body*” that “becomes the temporary receptacle of the hopes and dreams of fans.”³ The athletic body is “the vessel” by which sportive narratives pass on to social identities, and construct towns, cities, nations, states, college alumni associations or whatever other social grouping a professional team purports to “represent.” Like any identity, fandom, too, is constructed by “an us-against-them lens”⁴—for competition among athletic rosters to be socially effective, these physical contests must display a sense of reality and “approach the level of a life or death struggle” as “athletes must portray the requisite level of passion, urgency, and desperation to make this imagined community possible.”⁵ That is, different than any other affective labor, it’s the potentially injury-ridden competitive exertion of practices and games that makes athletes into sports heroes. Sacrifice is precisely that concept which mystifies recurrent harm by representing what the athlete gives to the team community as a motivated generosity—or an uncompensated dedication—for the community. This demands from athletes an epic seriousness which must skillfully conceal the make-believe also required from them. Such concealment is continuous with waves of public denial throughout the history of modern sports, which refused to acknowledge sports’ status as one other industry, a denial which crystallizes in the aristocratic ideology of amateurism. The televised epics about communal heroism are similarly complicit in deferring urgent public/legal debates on the hazards of the athletic profession on its practitioners and preventive regulations. Kalman-Lamb’s interviews with fans and athletes show that this double—the incontrovertibly real (painful) exertion and the theatrical make-believe—coexist in the sport business, but fans, honest communitarians that they are, appear less willing to confront the athletic labor process that goes into making spectacles while athletes must learn to navigate this double game as part of their trade. Perhaps the most striking empirical example in the book is the account of a hockey player on being an enforcer, which the athlete compares to the status of a WWE Wrestler, a scripted performance denied the honorable status of “sportness” associated with football, soccer or hockey, and which is suspect of being “mere theater” for its lack of realness. Sacrifice, not acting, is what fans expect of athletes. This hints at fundamental questions on modern sports and violence: despite Norbert Elias’ classical treatise on modern sports as a theatrical deterrent of more violent forms of

aggression and as the leisurely correlate of liberal sociability, sports are, as literary critic Steven Connor writes, “zealously nonsymbolic and unillusory” and “the field of play” is less a theatrical stage than “a zone of legal exception where ordinary understandings of violent behavior are suspended.”⁶ The toll of this violence is paid in varying installments by professional athletes regardless of whether fans misrepresent injury as sacrifice for the community. That “fans envision players to be a species of supermen, unencumbered by the frailties that afflict average people” is far from a negligible fancy and is constitutive of fandom under capitalism and the style of competitive social reproduction at the heart of capitalist social relations, *Game Misconduct* argues.⁷ “Acknowledging the humanity” of athletes, the book’s manifesto-like conclusion suggests, is where a different nexus of fandom, sports, and community can be born.⁸

NOTES

- ¹ Nathan Kalman-Lamb, *Game Misconduct: Injury, Fandom, and the Business of Sport* (Winnipeg: Black Point: Fernwood Publishing, 2018), 12.
- ² *Ibid.*, 72.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.
- ⁶ Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport* (London: Reaktion, 2011), 175, 201.
- ⁷ Kalman-Lamb, 127.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.