

(Is Sport Just) Fun and Games? The Cultural Politics of Sports

ANTH 2980.001

Spring 2026

M/W/F 11-11:50

Language 402

Instructor: Dr. Andrew Nelson, andrew.nelson@unt.edu

Office Hours: Sycamore 104C or Zoom; Mondays, 12:30-2; or by appointment

Course Description. The cultural, economic, and political processes of professional sports and global events like the Olympics or World Cup.

Prerequisites: None

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, the student will be able to:

- Apply anthropological concepts to the study of sport
- Analyze professional sport as an industry
- Interpret sport as a kind of politics
- Propose what society can learn from athletes and sport
- Practice collaborative skills in analysis and presentation

Required Texts: None. All readings will be provided as pdfs or links in Canvas.

Grading Scale (%):

A, 90-100

B, 80-89

C, 70-79

D, 60-69

F, 0-59

Grade

| Type of Work | Percentage of Final Grade |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| Attendance & Participation | 21% |
| Example worksheets | 24% |
| Unit Assignments | 30% |
| Presentation | 5% |
| Final Project | 20% |

I. Attendance & Participation (21%)

| Type | # of meetings/submissions | Points per meeting/submission | Total points |
|----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| Class meetings | 40 (one freebie) | 1 | 40 |
| Reading Passes | 13 (one freebie) | 3 | 39 |
| Away Games | 3 | 7 | 21 |
| | | | 100 |

Reading Pass: For each “film” (new content) day, students will be expected to arrive at class with a physical or digital reading pass that contains (a) one quotation from the reading; and (b) one question based on the reading.

Freebie: Students will be allowed one absence without an excuse; and one missed reading pass without an excuse.

Excused Absence: Students must provide documentation of an excuse according to the university’s [authorized absence policy](#).

Away Games: In lieu of class on March 16, 18, 20, students will be expected to attend three outside-the-classroom experiential meetings.

II. Example Worksheets (24%)

| Type | # of submissions | Points per submission | Total points | % of each submission's contribution to final grade |
|--------------------|------------------|-----------------------|--------------|--|
| Example worksheets | 12 | 5 | 60 | 2 |

On each “training” Wednesday, in groups of four, students will identify an example and complete a worksheet that demonstrates the week’s lesson. Worksheets must be submitted by the end of class. All groupmates will receive the same score. Worksheets will be scored based on effort and completion.

III. Unit Assignments (30%)

| Type | # of submissions | Points per submission | Total points | % of each submission's contribution to final grade |
|------------------|------------------|-----------------------|--------------|--|
| Unit assignments | 3 | 20 | 60 | 10 |

On the Sunday after the end of each unit (February 22, April 5, April 26), students will submit an assignment that builds on the example worksheets and unit review days (*the goal of the class is for work to be completed in class*).

IV. Presentation (5%)

In groups of four, students will give one presentation to the class. This presentation will be based on a selected example from the example worksheets, and consist of descriptive analysis, visuals, theory application, and classmate engagement.

V. Final Project (20%)

As a culmination of the class, students will design one alternative sport/league building on final days of class, April 27 & 29.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Film Mondays: Will introduce new content and emphasize analysis and discussion (*like a team analyzing film of their opposition*).

Training Wednesdays: Will be devoted to collaborative groupwork to prepare for the bigger assignments (*like a team practicing*).

Game Fridays: Will provide an opportunity to apply the week’s lesson through presentations and interactive discussions with guest speakers (*like a team playing a game*). *Jerseys are encouraged on this day!

| Week | Monday | Wednesday | Friday |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| 1: What is sport? Play? What is this class? | <i>Jan 12</i> Introduction | <i>Jan 14</i> Reading Pass #1: Besnier, Brownell & Carter (2018, 15-54) | <i>Jan 16</i> Reading Pass #2: Paes (2025); Kuper & Szymanski (2009, 203-220); SB Nation (2016); Schwell et al. (2016) |

Unit 1: Sport as Culture (Fans)

| Week Theme | Film Monday | Training Wednesday | Game Friday | “Away game” |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| 2: Fandom emotions, anthropology of ritual, symbols, narrative | <i>Jan 19</i> No class | <i>Jan 21</i> Example Worksheet #1 | <i>Jan 23</i> Film Comparison of <i>Fever Pitch</i> (1997) & <i>Fever Pitch</i> (2005) | In groups, attend 1 of following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wed, Jan 21, 7pm: Men’s basketball Sat, Jan 24, 2pm: Women’s basketball Sat, Jan 24, 5pm: Men’s basketball |
| 3: Sport ‘nations’, anthropology of nationalism and community | <i>Jan 26</i> Reading Pass #3: Besnier, Brownell & Carter (2018, 217-248); Cohan (2024); New Yorker (2018) | <i>Jan 28</i> Example worksheet #2 | <i>Jan 30</i> Guest speaker: Lauren Herrera | |

| | | | | |
|--|---|--|--|--|
| 4: Marginalized fans, anthropology of alienation | <i>Feb 2</i> Readings Pass #4: Markovits & Albertson (2012); Tanner, Evans, and Hay (2021); Crafton (2022) | <i>Feb 4</i> Example worksheet #3 | <i>Feb 6</i> First group presentation | |
| 5: Sport journalism | <i>Feb 9</i> Reading Pass #5: Broussard (2020); Nelson (ms) | <i>Feb 11</i> Guest speaker: Saad Youssef | <i>Feb 13</i> Example worksheet #4 | |
| 6: Fan movements, anthropology of solidarity | <i>Feb 16</i> Readings Pass #6: Turner, Richards & Lawrence (2023); Ahmed & Garcia (2025) | <i>Feb 18</i> Example worksheet #5 | <i>Feb 20</i> Unit Review | |

Assignment 1: Social poetics of a fan group, due Sunday, February 22nd

Unit 2: Sport as Economy (Owners)

| Week Theme | Film Monday | Training Wednesday | Game Friday | Away game |
|---|---|---|------------------------------------|------------------|
| 7: Sport industries, anthropology of capitalism | <i>Feb 23</i> Reading Pass #7: Brownell & Besnier (2016); Vaczi (2022) | <i>Feb 25</i> Example worksheet #6 | <i>Feb 27</i> Guest speaker | TBD |

| | | | | |
|--|--|---|--|--|
| 8: Mega-events, anthropology of (neo)colonialism | <i>Mar 2</i> Reading Pass #8: Besnier, Brownell & Carter (2018, 55-82, 178-216) | <i>Mar 4</i> Example worksheet #7 | <i>Mar 6</i> Second group presentation | |
| 9: Class cancelled (March 9-20) | | | | |
| 10: Sport migration, anthropology of global labor | <i>Mar 23</i> Reading Pass #9: Besnier, Brownell & Carter (2018, 249-275); Curran & Nelson (2025) | <i>Mar 25</i> Example worksheet #8 | <i>Mar 27</i> Guest speaker: Rob Curran | |
| 11: Alternative sport leagues, anthropology of value and commons | <i>Mar 30</i> Readings Pass #10: Biyanwala (2021); Gazeres (2023) | <i>Apr 1</i> Example worksheet #9 | <i>Apr 3</i> Unit Review | |

Assignment #2: Value analysis report, due Sunday, April 5th

Unit 3: Sport as Politics (Players)

| Week Theme | Monday film | Wednesday training | Friday game | Away game |
|---|---|---|--|------------------|
| 12: Athletes as objects and commodities, anthropology of the body | <i>Apr 6</i> Readings Pass #11: Konstaple (2025); Strauss (2013); Litan (2019) | <i>Apr 8</i> Example worksheet #10 | <i>Apr 10</i> Guest visit: Dean Albert Bimper | TBD |

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|---|---|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| 13: Athletes and politics, anthropology of resistance, decolonization | <i>Apr 13</i> Readings Pass #12: Reading: Besnier, Brownell & Carter (2018, 83-87); Boykoff, J. & Carrington (2020) | <i>Apr 15</i> Example worksheet #11 | <i>Apr 17</i> Class cancelled | |
| 14: Athlete-led sports, anthropology of participatory action | <i>Apr 20</i> Readings Pass #13: Chappelet (2020); Irwin (2025) | <i>Apr 22</i> Third group presentation | <i>Apr 24</i> Unit Review | |

Assignment #3: Player-led sport modification, due Sunday, April 26th

Monday, April 27th: Final project lab #1

Wednesday, April 29th: Final project lab #2

Monday, May 4th: Final project due

Readings

Ahmed, Shireen and Melanie Garcia (2023) "[When Sports Fans Change the Game.](#)" *The Walrus*, January 20.

Besnier, Niko, Susan Brownell & Thomas Carter (2018) *The Anthropology of Sport: Bodies, Borders, Biopolitics*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Biyanwila, S. J. (2021) "The Struggle for Sports Commons." In *Sports Studies in India*, pp. 19-35. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Boykoff, J. and B. Carrington (2020) "[Sporting Dissent: Colin Kaepernick, NFL activism, and media framing contest.](#)" *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 55(7): 829-849.

Broussard, Ryan (2020) "'Stick to Sports' is Gone: a Field Theory Analysis of Sport Journalists' Coverage of Socio-political Issues." *Journalism Studies* 21(12): 1627-1643.

Brownell, Susan and Niko Besnier (2016) "Value and Values in Global Sport." *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Anthropology*: <https://doi-org.libproxy.library.unt.edu/10.1093/acrefore/9780190854584.013.19>

Chappelet, Jean-Loup (2020) "[The unstoppable rise of athlete power in the Olympic system.](#)" *Sport in Society* 23(5): 795-809.

Cohan, Noah (2024) "[Fandom usually means tracking your favorite team for years – so why are the Olympics so good at making us root for sports and athletes we tune out most of the time?](#)" *The Conversation*, July 3.

Crafton, Adam (2022) "'Abandoned, empty, guilty' – LGBTQ fans on how the Qatar World Cup made them feel." *The Athletic*, December 23.

Curran, Rob and Andrew Nelson (2025) "[The Ferryman of Dreams.](#)" *The Believer*, December 18.

Gazeres, R. (2023) "[Challenging neoliberal sport: Skateboarding as a resilient cultural practice.](#)" *Geography Compass* 17(1).

Irwin, Frederique (2025) "[How women's sports are rewriting history and building profitable leagues.](#)" *Forbes*, October 14.

Konstapel, Hans (2025) "[The Commodification of Athletic Bodies: a Critical Analysis of Sport Under Late Capitalism.](#)" *Constable Blog*, June 24.

Kuper, Simon & Stefan Szymanski (2009) *Soccernomics*. Nation Books.

Litan, Robert (2019) "Do professional athletes do it for the love or the money?" *The Athletic*, September 3.

Markovits, Andrei and Emily K. Albertson (2012) “Introduction” from *Sportista: Female Fandom in the United States*, pp. 1-12. Temple University Press: Philadelphia.

Nelson, Andrew (ms) “Nepali Football Journalism as a People’s History: The Reporting of Himesh Bajracharya.”

New Yorker (2018) “Superfans: The Tribalism of Sports.” February 1, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aY6GTSDYDRo>

Paes, Tom (2025) “[The Emotional Roller Coaster of Sport Fandom: Is it good for you?](#)” *Medium*, March 27.

SB Nation (2016) “The psychology behind sport fandom.” September 8, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iNJT5W09XeQ>

Schwell, Alexandra, Nina Szogs, Malgorzata Kowalska & Michal Buchowski (2016) “People, Passions – but What about Politics?” In *New Ethnographies of Football in Europe*, edited by Schwell, et al., pp. 228-234. Palgrave MacMillan.

Strauss, Ethan Sherwood (2013) “[When stats turn players into commodities.](#)” *ESPN*, March 8.

Tanner, Rob, Gregg Evans, and Phil Hay (2021) “‘Uncomfortable, horrible but getting better’ – Older fans tell current players about what it’s like being an LGBTQ+ supporter.” *The Athletic*, December 3.

Turner, Mark, Jessica Richards & Stefan Lawrence (2023) “[Introduction to Leisure and Fan Activism: Exploring New Cases and Contexts Across Men’s and Women’s Professional Sport.](#)” *International Journal of the Sociology of Leisure*, 7: 1-6.

Vaczi, M. (2022) “[Provincializing Global Sport: Modernity, Capitalism, and the Politics of Difference in the Age of Super Leagues.](#)” *Anthropological Quarterly* 95(4).