The Risks and Rewards of Sports Lit and other Bait-and-Switch Courses

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1st Quarter: "If you build it, they will come." ~*Field of Dreams*

"How many of you *love* literature?" I asked this last January on the first day of my Sports and Literature course. It was 8:00 AM sharp, and I was staring at what seemed to be a sullen group of fifteen students who were, apparently, being held against their will. In the middle row (the first was empty), two hands went up cautiously, the students raising them looking about as if realizing that they, unlike their peers beside and behind them, were the only ones in town to volunteer for the draft. After a dramatic pause, I then asked, "And how many of you *love* sports?"

I had tried to pose the question with a hint of intrigue in my voice, as if I was up to something pretty dang special, something along the lines of free tickets to the Super Bowl for everyone. Unfazed and, it seemed, possibly unplugged, the other students lazily raised their hands, as if they knew the question was coming and were hoping to earn an extra credit point or two for playing along. Then, one of the literature lovers spoke up, saying, "Wait. What? I didn't know there were two questions. Can I change my answer?" This was not an auspicious start to the semester, and I felt (and likely looked) not a little unlike Walter Matthau standing in front of his players on the first day of practice.

My players are, with the exception of the two who admitted to liking literature, just that: players. Four play hockey, two basketball, one golf, three baseball, and one softball; one of the non-college athletes (and truly one of the nicest students in the bunch) competes in some version of ultimate fighting and the other is a former gymnast turned dancer. None are, according to the letters they wrote to me at the beginning of the term, "readers," but each it seems would, as one allowed when signing off with a PS, be "cool with reading some stuff and books or whatever as long as we also get to watch the movies."

What had I expected when creating what I had brazenly referred to as a "bait-and-switch kind of course" when making it available to all comers? English majors pursuing sports minors? A bunch of Rhodes Scholars? The superhuman offspring of Neil deGrasse Tyson and Sonja Henie? I don't know for sure, but I am fairly certain that it wasn't at all what I ended up with.

I spent significant time over the past year developing a course that would examine sports themes and analyze the literary techniques authors, directors, and others employ when converting this seemingly facile facet of contemporary life into art. I worked my way through what are at times perfunctory preparatory tasks with an uncommon kind of ardor for this kind of work– rather than gearing up as I normally do for a new course with a casual, it-will-work-out approach learned over the last eighteen years of teaching, I geared up in ways more normally associated with getting ready for the Olympics or possibly a new season as a highly-paid NFL head coach. I planned the course–developing assignments and picking readings and laying out units and individual classes–as one might think through an entire season of close wins and sure things. "These novels and these films," I would say to myself with a smile and swagger usually associated with corrupt baseball managers betting against their own teams, "will, when combined

with my crazy-creative and challenging assignments and brilliant lectures, convert latent readers of literature into full-fledged scholars, a transformation akin to converting Dick Butkus or Terry Bradshaw into Harold Bloom or Milan Kundera." That much I knew for certain. My students, regardless of where they ranked as academic scholars on the first day of class, would by the end of the term, thanks to my efforts and theirs, be able to write the equivalent of a 40-yard dash in under 3.8 seconds and, as if that weren't enough, deliver presentations that were the metaphorical equivalent of a Jordon's iconic leap with tongue out from the stripe to the rack. I was as wrong as my dad was when he thought that, with practice, I would end up being as athletic as my older brother, Mr. Baseball in Idaho back in the early 80's.

2nd Quarter: "I will not be intimidated; that's just the way it is." ~*Remember the Titans*

Before the course kicked off, and before I met the students whose pictures–I will admit – made me a little uneasy due to the fact that they share certain resonant similarities with the angry mug shots you see of players in the athletic programs, I was supremely confident. I had been waiting to teach this sports and lit class for over ten years. I had watched hundreds of sports films (for work purposes, of course), had attended even more sporting events (that's dedication), and, more recently, had spent my own hard-earned money to attend the 2012 Project Narrative Summer Institute at The Ohio State University in order to bring some academic rigor to this undertaking.

We began the term with a rather long unit on film analysis, one that was to draw on the tried and true benefits of such pedagogical strategies as modeling, scaffolding, and progression so as to gradually introduce the non-English majors to the exactitudes and rewards of literary

analysis. I spent considerable time explaining the relationships between and among the concepts tied to "sport," "story," and "narrative." I was thrilled while gearing up for the course to identify what I see as an illuminating connection between sports events and how they become sports narratives. It really is the perfect metaphor and, by extension, method for making it clear how and why we turn reality into that which becomes a kind of fiction that is more true than false. Take the concept of narrative space/time, for instance. A sporting event has nine innings or three periods of four 15-minute quarters or whatever; it all depends on the sport. It has also seasons, eras, and careers. But a sports film can't simply present the nine unedited innings or four quarters of a game; that would be a sports broadcast, not a narrative (though even broadcasts are replete with narratological components). To make it a narrative, I have explained numerous times to the students as one might reteach some fairly straightforward facet of football such as the forward pass, one has to edit out most of the game and, in the process, fold in many other stories. In some instances, these stories are tied to what is happening in the context of an historical event (think *Miracle* here, or *Seabiscuit*), in others they are predominantly a part of a player's life (*Rudy*, *Rocky*, or *Prefontaine*), and in a third scenario they pertain in a general sense to culture (*Hoop Dreams* or *Above the Rim*). Of course there are those films that manage to incorporate stories from all three categories (*Field of Dreams*, *The Natural*, or *Cinderella M*an). [Sorry, I'm lecturing. I'll stop soon. I promise.]

Narratives, in other words, are built: directors, writers, actresses, actors, producers, cinematographers, and many, many others (I showed them the credits of several films to make this point stick as a dart might deeply into a good bristle-board's bulls eye) construct a narrative out of a real or possible sports event/story. They use numerous named and unnamed literary

techniques; they bend time; they employ flash-forwards, flashbacks, montages, music, and a myriad of other techniques to move viewers when telling/showing the story that is woven into the fabric of the narrative. "Our task," I explained through class notes, assignments sheets, and class discussions, "is to examine and appreciate the relationship between what the story is and *how* it is presented in narrative form."

Makes sense, right? Wrong. Not at all apparently. Generally, after explaining and reviewing and explaining these concepts–after putting the students in small groups, and after giving them projects and tasks designed to help the students better understand these concepts–I was repeatedly met either with stunned silence or a series of tentative questions that, were we on the football field, would have been the equivalent of a player asking in late October, "What's the play thing called where we throw the ball through the air?"

I had begun by late February to complain to colleagues and to my wife about this dang class and these students. Sure, I have five classes this spring term, and four are going just fine; but do I ever talk at anyone about the classes that don't keep me up late or get me up early? Nope. If your office was near mine for the past three months, you might likely think that I'm teaching just this one course and that I'm one of the biggest whiners you have ever known. I am fairly certain people started avoiding me in the halls; and when I would come striding across the small campus quad at 9:30 AM, I have no doubt I looked not unlike I once did as a high school pitcher when, after throwing a total of one pitch for the entire game, I walked with my hat in my glove to the dugout, having giving up a walk-off homer hit so hard and so far that nobody but the batter and the three base runners ahead of him moved.

Halftime: "It isn't hard to be good from time to time in sports. What is tough, is being good every day." ~Willie Mays

I was looking forward to this class because I was an athlete before I was a student; and before I pursued my Ph.D. and my current position as an associate professor of English, I was a high school football and baseball coach for five years, during the time I spent earning my teaching certificate and then teaching English and history at my alma mater. And here's the thing. When I coached, my teams won. A lot. The first football team I helped coach won the school's first State Championship (I know it's not capitalized, but it should be). Then, one of the other assistant coaches and I took over the junior varsity squad the following year; in four seasons, our football teams lost a total of two games. Two games. That's all, which is pretty amazing (to me and nobody else, of course) when you consider that when I had been in that same junior varsity program ten years earlier we had won one game in two years.

I have a picture from the end of our first undefeated JV season in my office at the college where I now try and teach Sports and Literature. It sits atop my tall bookcase propped against the wall, where it reminds me of another life I lived before I began living this one here in Minnesota. In the photo–one that all of the players signed and gave me as a gift at the football banquet–the players are standing in the end zone all smashed together and smiling and leaning into the frame in the way people do when they miscalculate how close the photographer is. Sporting grass-stained yellow football pants bulging with pads and wearing mesh black and yellow jerseys with shiny-smooth numbers, nearly all of the players are happy to the point of ecstatic, each poking a finger in the air to state the obvious–that we were, without a doubt, the greatest junior varsity squad in the world. It's at night, late on a crisp, not-quite cold October Thursday, and you can

see steam rising from the reddened foreheads of those players who had been on the field for the final few plays.

You can tell by simply glancing at the picture that this was one tight-knit group of young men who were more than merely teammates, classmates, or friends. And you can also tell that their two coaches are not, as coaches so often seem in stilted photos taken for the yearbook at the start of the season, separate from the team. We're right in there with them, beaming proudly with our arms around players on either side of each of us.

We worked our players hard, and we had fun. My colleague and I were the kinds of coaches who never threatened our players and seldom yelled; but we did expect a lot from them. We set goals at the start of the season and at the beginning of each week, my favorite of which involved encouraging and prodding each player to figure out what it takes to actually give a hundred percent—not in theory, mind you, but in practice and in the games—really leave it all on the field, as they say.

3rd Quarter: "Stay *down*, Rock! Stay down!" ~*Rocky*

Signs that this course would likely result in a losing record that, were I not tenured, would likely result in my demotion to the minors/middle school came early and often, the most ironic occurring when we were "reading" *Shoeless Joe* and "discussing" clips from *Field of Dreams*. It was in early February, and I had prepped the better part of the weekend, determined to have a great couple of classes and, in this way, get big MO on my side. I cued up a scene from the film after a handful of the students filed in and found their way to the back of the room, leaving their coats on and backpacks packed, each looking as if he might need to leave the class

an hour or so early. I passed out handouts and prompts and questions to those present and placed others on the tables where, I assumed, the latecomers would sit when they soon arrived. Then, I waited. And waited. I stepped out in the hall to see if there were stragglers. "Where is everyone?" I asked, returning to the classroom. The four or five of who had showed up looked at me mutely and shrugged.

I glanced up at the screen. *How would it be*, I wondered, when the players emerge from the corn there in right-center field, if only four of the eight White Sox showed "because it was so early and then I totally spaced it"? To put a finer, perhaps more ironic point on it, *How would it have been*–I thought, seething maybe just a little, while reading through my notes and checking my watch–if the men who walked out of the corn and onto Ray Kinsella's glorious gem of a diamond weren't that good or engaged or even interested in baseball?

Sure, I had built the course, I concluded later when moping back to my office. And, sure, fifteen students had signed up–even when colleagues in the department thought maybe non-English majors wouldn't sign up for an optional lit course. But, is it true what they say in sports circles about half the battle? Is it enough to show up? I don't know. It's hard to imagine Ray feeling all that upbeat about plowing under some significant percentage of his otherwise profitable crop if the players who came out of the corn wearing their radiant uniforms forgot their gloves, occasionally laid down and took naps, and, just as often, complained to nobody in particular about how hard baseball is, looking while "having a catch" as if possibly throwing with the wrong hand or maybe trying out the sport for the first time. Maybe Ray should play it safe next year, I figured, thinking that he should stick with Introduction to Literature or 19th-Century American Lit.

4th Quarter: "Great moments…are born from great opportunity." ~*Miracle*

Like a relief pitcher coming in from some gate hidden in the outfield fence or, better yet, like the rebel, Kelly Leak, from *The Bad News Bears* riding onto the baseball field on his motorcycle sporting those awesome seventies shades, my course had its ninth-inning, fourth-quarter savior. It came in the most unusual and yet perfectly appropriate form, that of the counterfactual conditional. The "counterfactual conditional" is the term which denotes the practice of thinking through various unrealized but once-possible scenarios, something both sports fans and teachers do constantly. It works this way: after the game, one fan or reporter or coach says to the other something along the lines of, "If Jones lays the bunt down on the third base line, Smith scores, Jones is safe at first and the bases are loaded with only one out, which means the tying run is up to bat and Johnson is on deck; and Johnson always hits well with men on, especially against Carter, who was already struggling." Instead, "Jones mishits the bunt right back at the pitcher, he turns a pair, and now we're down by two runs going into the 8th and they're at the top of their lineup. Game over." This works for games, it works for tournaments, it even works for careers–if Bo Jackson runs right and instead of busting the run wide to the left, he doesn't injure his hip and ends up in both the baseball and football halls of fame. Period.

Rather than focusing on the picture (or pictures), I decided to concentrate on the language. I began by introducing the counterfactual conditional, and at the same time I grouped the students according to their sports and had them develop slang dictionaries while considering the implications of the fact each sport has its own vernacular (baseball: easy fly ball = "can o corn"; hockey: awful player = "bender" (ankles bend when skating); gymnastics: often-injured

competitor = "Band Aid"). This worked. The students were emboldened by being experts, and they did fantastically well when it came to examining the implications of these discourse communities of which they were a part.

Strolling across the quad that fine day after getting a first win in the classroom, I started thinking in the academic equivalent of the counterfactual conditional: "You know, I focus on language early in the semester rather than later, I get most–and maybe all–of the students involved sooner, get them believing they can do this stuff. Then I go with a tour of Target Field, rather than saving that for the end of the term. After that I bring in the guest speakers, maybe some coaches, and we're set. Best Sports Lit course ever, a veritable slam dunk, grand slam, hole-in-one, gold-medal educational experience all rolled in one."

Typical teacher. Typical coach. I am always–even during the worst semester/season–thinking about the next time around. Nearly every time I have taught a course, and especially when teaching those that do not go nearly so well as I had originally hoped they would, I start thinking before it's over how I would and hopefully will do it differently next time. Perhaps it proves how perpetually optimistic all of us who teach (and cheer for the Vikings) must be.

Now, fifteen years and one fall season after that celebratory photo was snapped in the end zone, I find myself in the third quarter of a season/semester still wondering for the most part how good a course would need to be to result in an experience half as powerful as those the student-athletes when being athletes rather than students, when giving their all out there on the fields, courts, diamonds, rinks. Is it unrealistic to hope that I might one day work so hard on a course that I will end up with a framed photo of a bunch of ecstatic students bunched together in front of the chalkboard holding up their pens and pencils and grinning at the camera? Maybe. But maybe

the Vikings will win the Super Bowl this year and the Cubs the World Series (and maybe I will finally manage to dunk).