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Letters

The DSK Dossier

Madison, N.C.

Re “Au Revoir, France” [June 13]: Is The Nation at least a little bit sorry about having printed that over-the-top ideological venting by Katha Pollitt about Dominique Strauss-Kahn?

Pollitt never had the least doubt that Strauss-Kahn was guilty as sin of everything the poor “victim” accused him of.

David Dalton

Yonkers, N.Y.

When I was 21, after spending a year in Paris working and living, I was raped. This man, who was French, was someone I considered to be a new platonic friend.

When my friends (from Guadeloupe) persuaded me to go to the police, I called my Parisian aunt to inform her that I would need to give a report of the crime at the local commissariat. Her response was, “Well, what do you expect? Of course you will be raped if you go to the home of a man you hardly know.” The police were equally enlightened. And when I went to a hospital for an exam, the trend continued.

From all I learned in those dreadful few days, the rape was apparently my fault. I was treated like a fierce perpetrator who was violating a code of honor over which French society had, long before my arrival, formed a deep and sacred pact.

It was not until reading Katha Pollitt’s column that I finally found someone who echoed, with total clarity, what I have tried to articulate regarding the collective French consciousness. I said, “Au revoir, France” in 1980… and never had the slightest desire to return.

Anne Pollack

More Jobs = Higher GDP

Lansdowne, Pa.

Alice Amsden’s letter [June 13] states that “increases in GDP raise paid employment.” This is an exaggeration. GDP is a result, not a cause. Gross domestic product results from a number of statistical factors, including paid employment.

Except in rare instances where the latest GDP number or trend might influence an employer to hire someone, or an employer does so as the result of a similarly influenced investor or government action, GDP doesn’t trickle up, down or sideways to create paid jobs.

Like the proverbial Better Mousetrap Theory, Amsden’s statement is, like many, if not most, supply-side economics concepts, literally backward. More paid jobs increase GDP.

John A. Moore

Correction

In “The Shelters That Clinton Built” [Aug. 1/8], authors Isabel Macdonald and Isabeau Doucet quoted the International Organization for Migration’s Bradley Mellicker as stating, “That’s a lie,” after the quotation from the Clinton Foundation’s COO, Laura Graham, claiming that IOM had played a role in the procurement process for the trailers. While IOM played no role, Mellicker’s statement was made in response to a claim by a different Clinton Foundation source that IOM had led the procurement process, and not in response to Graham.

We regret the error.

IOM’s communications director, Leonard Doyle, who declined to be interviewed for the article, has since clarified the matter: ”While IOM was not involved in the development of the particular Leogane project, nor in the identification of the contractor, an IOM staff member seconded to the Office of the Special Envoy helped compile a list of potential contractors at one stage in the process.”

The Nation understands that the Clinton Foundation and Office of the Special Envoy looked at the list of unsolicited offers and picked a winner, and that there was no public bid.
Busting Murdoch’s Trust

Before the shaving cream on Rupert Murdoch’s face even had a chance to dry, some commentators were already writing his corporate obituary, arguing that the “most humble day” of his life also represented a decisive turn in his family’s fortunes. Others argued that the doddering patriarch who appeared in front of a British parliamentary committee on July 19 gave a clever performance, bearing little resemblance to the hands-on, detail-obsessed tyrant terrifyingly familiar to British police and possible phone-hacking on US soil is encouraging. The Securities and Exchange Commission is also considering action, and at least ten executives over allegations of bribery. The most recent GAO report shows the company operating 782 foreign subsidiaries—of which 152 are in such notorious tax havens as the British Virgin Islands (sixty-two), the Cayman Islands (thirty-three) and Luxembourg (four). The career of Les Hinton—or indeed James Murdoch—demonstrates the ease with which the company shuffles managers from continent to continent. Tracking the flow of News Corp. assets around the world is far more difficult.

And that assumes that US and British officials have the courage to take on the Murdoch empire. With thousands of journalists on the company’s books—and an untold number of private investigators and other practitioners of journalism’s black arts paid off the books—News Corp. has the capacity to unearth the kind of titillating personal information that can put a troublesome regulator or legislator on Page Six of the New York Post or the front page of the Sun. Put that leverage in the hands of a corporation that routinely pays millions to favored politicians (Newt Gingrich was offered $4.5 million), and it is hardly surprising it took so long for the tenacious Guardian to get anyone else to pay attention to this scandal.

Criminal prosecution is indeed part of the answer, so we welcome reports that the Justice Department is seeking to cooperate with the British police—whose own reputation has been severely damaged by this scandal. Successful prosecution will take time and transatlantic coordination, but it is essential if only to prevent the hands-on, detail-obsessed Murdoch family but the Murdochization of British and US media. The result is a relentlessly coarsening public debate in which alternatives to the status quo are shouted down by a faux-populist chorus which alternatives to the status quo are shouting down by a faux-populist chorus. The issue is not the real disease: the concentration of so much power and influence in a single media corporation and a political landscape that offers virtually no check to the exercise of that power. Besides hacking into cellphones, News Corp. has bullied British politicians across the spectrum, dropped the BBC from its Star TV satellite in Asia to curry favor with China’s rulers and, through Fox News, fanned the flames of intolerance and hatred in America and fostered an atmosphere in which even the threat of debt default is preferable to any increase in taxes. The issue is not the Murdoch family but the Murdochization of British and US media. The result is a relentlessly coarsening public debate in which alternatives to the status quo are shouted down by a faux-populist chorus of well-paid thugs who make sure society’s victims direct their anger at one another.

So the news that the US Justice Department is preparing to subpoena News Corp. executives over allegations of bribery to British police and possible phone-hacking on US soil is encouraging. The Securities and Exchange Commission is also considering action, and at least ten separate British inquiries are now open. But the adage about too many cooks is probably just as relevant. One problem facing any regulator or national legislature is that News Corp. is a truly global company. The most recent GAO report shows the company operating 782 foreign subsidiaries—of which 152 are in such notorious tax havens as the British Virgin Islands (sixty-two), the Cayman Islands (thirty-three) and Luxembourg (four). The career of Les Hinton—or indeed James Murdoch—demonstrates the ease with which the company shuffles managers from continent to continent. Tracking the flow of News Corp. assets around the world is far more difficult.

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But whatever Murdoch’s fate, he’s not really the problem. Though far from blameless, he is merely a symptom of the real disease: the concentration of so much power and influence in a single media corporation and a political landscape that offers virtually no check to the exercise of that power. Besides hacking into cellphones, News Corp. has bullied British politicians across the spectrum, dropped the BBC from its Star TV satellite in Asia to curry favor with China’s rulers and, through Fox News, fanned the flames of intolerance and hatred in America and fostered an atmosphere in which even the threat of debt default is preferable to any increase in taxes. The issue is not the Murdoch family but the Murdochization of British and US media. The result is a relentlessly coarsening public debate in which alternatives to the status quo are shouted down by a faux-populist chorus of well-paid thugs who make sure society’s victims direct their anger at one another.

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avoid the corrosive cynicism that follows whenever malefactors of great wealth escape the consequences of their deeds. Activists will need to make sure that national boundaries don’t prevent officials from connecting the dots across jurisdictions—and that the current focus on individual acts of corruption doesn’t let the larger issue of media consolidation off the hook.

We also need to recognize that much of what’s wrong with News Corp. is nonetheless perfectly legal. Neither fines nor prison sentences will remove the chilling effect that comes when a country’s public conversation is controlled by a few powerful men and women—regardless of whether they have the same last name. Instead, we need to find ways to lower, not raise, the barriers for entry into that conversation—and to make sure that those who do enter are treated with civility rather than derision. We need a revival of anti-trust politics and a recognition that media monopoly will never deliver the fearless, accurate, incorruptible, independent reporting so necessary for the health of democracy. Freedom of the press is too important to belong only to the man—or the corporation—that owns one.

Obama’s Bad Bargain

The most distressing outcome of the deficit hysteria gripping Washington may be what Barack Obama has revealed about himself. It was disconcerting to watch the president slip-slide so easily into voicing the fallacious economic arguments of the right. It was shocking when he betrayed core principles of the Democratic Party, portraying himself as high-minded and brave because he defied his loyal constituents. Supporters may hope this rightward shift was only a matter of political tactics, but I think Obama has at last revealed his sincere convictions. If he wins a second term, he will be free to strike a truly rotten “grand bargain” with Republicans—“pragmatic” compromises that will destroy the crown jewels of democratic reform.

The president has done grievous damage to the most vulnerable by trying to fight the GOP on its ground—accepting the premise that deficits and debt should be a national priority. He made the choice more than a year ago to push aside the real problems that will need to make sure that national boundaries don’t prevent officials from connecting the dots across jurisdictions—and that the current focus on individual acts of corruption doesn’t let the larger issue of media consolidation off the hook.

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**Comment**

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Obama’s facile arithmetic essentially scrapped the Democratic Party’s longstanding commitment to progressive taxation and universal social protections. The claim that cutting Social Security benefits will “strengthen” the system is erroneous. In fact, Obama has already undermined the soundness of Social Security by partially suspending the FICA payroll tax for workers—
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depriving the system of revenue it needs for long-term solvency.

The mendacity has a more fundamental dimension. Obama helped conservatives concoct the debt crisis on false premises, promoting a claim that Social Security and other entitlement programs were somehow to blame while gliding over the real causes and culprits. Social Security has never contributed a dime to the federal deficits (actually, the government borrows the trust fund’s huge surpluses to offset its red ink).

This mean-spirited political twist amounts to blaming the victims. There should be no mystery about what caused the $14 trillion debt: large deficits began in 1981, with Ronald Reagan’s fanciful “supply side” tax-cutting. Federal debt was then around $1 trillion. By 2007 it had reached $9 trillion, thanks to George W. Bush’s tax cuts for the wealthy and his two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, plus the massive subsidy for Big Pharma in Medicare drug benefits. The 2008 financial collapse and deep recession generated most of the remainder, as tax revenues fell drastically. Obama’s pump-priming stimulus added to the debt too, but a relatively small portion.

Whatever supposed solutions Congress eventually enacts, the misleading quality of the debt crisis should become widely understood once the action is completed. The debt and deficits will probably keep expanding, because the economy will remain stagnant or worse, with near 10 percent unemployment and falling incomes, and that is fundamentally what drives deficits higher. It should become obvious that deficit reduction did nothing to revive economic growth or to create jobs. In fact, cutting federal spending may make things worse, because it withdraws demand from the economy at the very moment when demand for goods and services is woefully inadequate.

At some point, then, the president will have to change his tune. Instead of mimicking the penny pinchers, Obama will have to say something about the nation’s real problem—the sick economy and the terrible consequences facing millions of families. But it’s not clear he will have much to say beyond small-bore suggestions and the usual pep talks. If he does a sudden about-face and proposes big ideas for job creation, will anyone believe him?

The White House evidently thinks it’s good politics for 2012 to dismiss the left and court wobbly independents. Obama no doubt assumes faithful Democrats have nowhere else to go. It’s true that very few will wish to oppose him next year, given the fearful possibility of right-wing crazies running the country. On the other hand, people who adhere to the core Democratic values Obama has abandoned need a strategy for stronger resistance. That would not mean running away from Obama but running at him—challenging his leadership of the party, mobilizing dissident voices and voters, pushing Congressional Democrats to embrace a progressive agenda in competition with Obama’s.

To be blunt, progressives have to pick a fight with their own party. They have to launch the hard work of reconnecting with ordinary citizens, listening and learning, defining new politics from the ground up. People in a rebellious mood should also prepare for the possibility that it may already be too late, that the Democratic Party’s gradual move uptown is too advanced to reverse. In that event, people will have to locate a new home—a new force in politics that speaks for them.

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Michele: A Serenade by Iowa Social Conservatives*

(With apologies to the Beatles)

Michele, our belle,
Thinks that gays will all be sent to hell.
That’s Michele.

Michele, our belle,
Thinks they’re sick but could be made all well.
Yes, Michele.

She just needs to turn them toward Jesus.
They’re going through a phase
That leads to filthy ways.
But with her hubby’s help these guys could
All be John Wayne.

Michele, our belle,
Views you have are suiting us just swell.
Our Michele.

* Yiddish version (sung with schutzpah) titled “We Kvell, Michele.”

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Europe’s New Fascists

Two weeks after the terrorist attacks of July 7, 2005, in London, a student, Jean Charles de Menezes, was in the London Underground when plainclothes police officers gave chase and shot him seven times in the head. Initial eyewitness reports said he was wearing a suspiciously large puffa jacket on a hot day and had vaulted the barriers and run when asked to stop. Mark Whitby, who was at the station, thought he saw a Pakistani terrorist being gunned down by plainclothes policemen. Less than a month later, Whitby said, “I now believe that I could have been looking at the surveillance officer" being thrown out of the way as Menezes was being killed.

The Pakistani turned out to be a Brazilian. Security cameras showed he was wearing a light denim jacket and in no rush as he picked up a free paper and swiped his card. “The way we see things is affected by what we know and what we believe,” wrote John Berger in Ways of Seeing. When some Western commentators see a terrorist attack, they are apparently far more comfortable with what they believe than what they know.

So it was on Friday when news emerged of the attacks in
Chaos Made Clear

It has been called the third great revolution of 20th-century physics, after relativity and quantum theory. But how can something called chaos theory help you understand an orderly world? What practical things might it be good for? What, in fact, is chaos theory? Chaos takes you to the heart of chaos theory as it is understood today. Your guide is Cornell University Professor Steven Strogatz, author of Nonlinear Dynamics and Chaos, the most widely used chaos theory textbook in America. In 24 thought-provoking lectures, he introduces you to a fascinating discipline that has more to do with your everyday life than you may realize.

Chaos theory—the science of systems whose behavior is sensitive to small changes in their initial conditions—affects nearly every field of human endeavor, from astronomy to business. Professor Strogatz shows you the importance of this field and how it has helped us solve life’s mysteries. You learn how chaos theory was discovered and investigate ideas such as the butterfly effect, iterated maps, and fractals. You also discover practical applications of chaos in areas like encryption, medicine, and space mission design.

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Norway that have left an estimated seventy-six dead and a nation traumatized. Rupert Murdoch’s Sun in Britain ran with the headline “Al Qaeda Massacre: Norway’s 9/11.” The Weekly Standard insisted, “We don’t know if al Qaeda was directly responsible for today’s events, but in all likelihood the attack was launched by part of the jihadist hydra.” Jennifer Rubin at the Washington Post claimed: “This is a sobering reminder for those who think it’s too expensive to wage a war against jihadists.” In just a few hours an entire conceptual framework had been erected—though hardly from scratch—to discuss the problem of Muslims in particular and nonwhite immigration in Europe in general, and the existential threat these problems pose to civilization as we know it.

Then came the news that the terrorist was a white Christian and a neo-Nazi, Anders Breivik, raging against Islam and multiculturalism. Actually, the bombings—and the presumptions about who was responsible—suggest that the true threat to European democracy is not Islam or Muslims but fascism and racists.

The belief that Muslims must have been involved chimes easily with a distorted, hysterical understanding of the demographic, religious and racial dynamics that have been present in Europe for well over a generation. The general framing goes like this: Europe is being overrun by Muslim immigrants, who are outbreeding non-Muslims at a terrifying rate. Unwilling to integrate culturally and unable to compete intellectually, Muslim communities have become hotbeds of terrorist sympathy and activity. Their presence threatens not only security but the liberal European consensus regarding women’s rights and gay rights; overall, this state of affairs represents a fracturing of society, which is losing its common values. This has been allowed to happen in the name of not offending specific ethnic groups, otherwise known as multiculturalism.

One could spend all day ripping these arguments to shreds, but for now let’s just deal with the facts.

There have been predictions that the Muslim population of Europe will almost double by 2015 (Oner Taspiner, the Brookings Institution); double by 2020 (Don Melvin, the Associated Press); and be 20 percent of the continent by 2050 (Esther Pan, Council on Foreign Relations). Republican presidential hopeful Rick Santorum told Sarah Posner of Religion Dispatches, “The number I heard is every 32 years the population, the European population of Europe will be reduced by 50 percent. That’s how bad their birthrates are. This is in many respects a dying continent from the standpoint of European-Europeans.” This is nonsense. The projections are way off. While Muslims in Europe do have higher birthrates than non-Muslims, their birthrates are falling. A Pew Forum study, published in January, forecasts an increase of the Muslim population in Europe from 6 percent in 2010 to 8 percent in 2030. While Breivik feared a Muslim takeover, Muslims make up 3 percent of Norway. Black Americans have a greater presence in Alaska. (But even if these predictions were true, so what? There’s nothing to say Europe has to remain Christian or majority-white.)

Nor do immigrants struggle to integrate. In Britain, Asian Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus all marry outside their groups at the same rates as whites. For most ethnic minorities, half or more of their friends are white. According to a Pew survey, the principal concerns of Muslims in France, Germany and Spain are unemployment and Islamic extremism.

In most of Europe, the official multiculturalism that the likes of Breivik rail against—a liberal, state-led policy of supporting cultural difference at the expense of national cohesion—is an absolute fiction. Last year German Chancellor Angela Merkel claimed the “multikulti” experiment had failed. Earlier this year, British Prime Minister David Cameron said the same thing. The truth is that neither country ever tried such an experiment. “We never had a policy of multiculturalism,” explains Meckonnen Mesghena, head of migration and intercultural management at the Heinrich Böll Foundation. “We had a policy of denial: denial of immigration and of diversity. Now it’s like we are waking up from a long trance.” The real object of their ire is the existence of “other”—meaning nonwhite—cultures and races in Europe: the fact of “other” cultures, not the promotion of them.

And, finally, Muslims are nowhere near the greatest terrorist threat. According to Europol, between 2006 and 2008 only 0.4 percent of terrorist plots (including attempts and fully executed attacks) in Europe were from Islamists. The lion’s share (85 percent) were related to separatism. Put bluntly, if you have to assume anything when a bomb goes off in Europe, think region, not religion.

But there are some in Europe who are struggling to cope with the changes taking place—who are failing to integrate into changing societies and who harbor deep-seated resentments against their fellow citizens. They are a growing segment of the white population who have once again made fascism a mainstream ideology. In Germany the bestselling book since World War II, by former Bundesbank board member Thilo Sarrazin, blames inbreeding among Turks and Kurds for “congenital disabilities” and argues immigrants from the Middle East are a “genetic minus” for the country. A poll published in the national magazine Focus in September 2010 showed 31 percent of respondents agreeing that Germany is “becoming dumber” because of immigrants; 62 percent said Sarrazin’s comments were “justified.” In Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France and Italy, hard-right nationalist and anti-immigrant parties regularly receive more than 10 percent of the vote. In Finland the figure is 19 percent; in Norway, 22 percent; in Switzerland, 29 percent. In Italy and Austria these parties have been in government; in Switzerland, where the anti-immigrant Swiss People’s Party is the largest party, they still are.

Breivik was from a particularly vile strain of that trend. But he did not come from nowhere. And the anxieties that produced him are growing. Fascists prey on economic deprivation and uncertainty, democratic deficits caused by European Union membership and issues of sovereignty related to globalization. Far-right forces in Greece, for example, are enjoying a vigorous revival. When scapegoats are needed, they provide them. When solutions are demanded, they are scarce.

Gary Younge
Alexander Cockburn

Russian Hero

England in the late 1940s was famously grim. As I remember it, London back then was a very dirty place, from coal dust and smoke, from the grit stirred up every day by the jackhammers still clearing out rubble from the Blitz.

My father was edging his way tactfully out of the Communist Party, though he was still spending time at the Daily Worker. He was under constant surveillance by the Special Branch, whose officers followed him and tapped his phone from 1934 to 1954. Logs available in nineteen boxes in the public archives in the British Library disclose my first entry into the shadow of state surveillance in 1948 when, at age 7, I called my father at the Worker and asked him to hurry home to read to me about Christopher Robin.

No one had any money. Fun for millions was the weekly flutter on racehorses or football teams. “Is the Middle Class Doomed?” asked Picture Post in 1949, and answered its question in the affirmative. Labor’s National Health Service opened for business on July 5, 1948, and the great race for drugs, false teeth and spectacles was under way. Spending on prescriptions went from £13 million to £41 million in two years, prompting Representative Paul Ryan’s ideological predecessors to howl that the NHS was on the edge of collapse. More than my father’s articles in the Worker, the NHS helped the masses see clearly.

Hundreds of thousands of poor people previously had recourse only to prescriptionless specs from the tray in Woolworths. Now they perched on their noses prescription lenses in the 422 Panto Oval frame, as did I, though it took John Lennon, fifteen years down the road, to endow it with retro-chic.

At the Worker, with or without prescription spectacles, there wasn’t much sign of the fabled millions in Moscow gold supposedly sent by Stalin to foment revolution. In practical terms the most important fellow in the office was a scholarly looking Burmese man who toiled away behind a vast pile of books and manuals. My father reckoned he was set to turn in a particularly meaty series on Burma’s prospects after independence, won in 1948 from British colonial rule. In fact he was the Worker’s racing correspondent, working up form for the coming season.

The Burman was red-hot as a tipster and soon had a wide following. Once my father found the Worker’s manager half-dead from apprehension. He’d put the entire office’s Friday wage packet on a pick by the Burman, in the hope of getting the comrades something decent to take home to their wives.

“No, that animal fail,” he said, trembling, “the lads’ll about the comrades something decent to take home to their wives. Wages were scrawny, particularly if you were a well-known worker. But when it came to Grand National day, March 26, 1949, no laborious toil over the form sheets was necessary. Among the scheduled starters that year was a horse called Russian Hero. Although the cold war was limbering up, Russians were still heroes to many. Not just members of the CPGB but a wider swath of punters in the union movement would be likely to plump for a horse carrying that name, if only as a side bet in honor of Stalingrad, the siege of Leningrad, the Kursk salient.

One of the jockeys riding that day was young Dick Francis, later the immensely popular author of a long string of racing thrillers. Francis was on a great but temperamental horse called Roimond. In the last mile he took the lead. With only eleven horses still in the race, he was set for victory. Then, just short of the finishing line, Roimond got passed by a horse going so fast Francis knew he had no chance to catch up. It was Russian Hero, ridden by Leo McMorrow, carrying starting odds of sixty-six to one. Russian Hero beat Roimond by eight lengths.

As the BBC man calling the race screamed out the finale, my father—who was no longer a party member but who’d staked his well-frayed shirt on Russian Hero—loosed a triumphant roar. So, across Britain, did all readers of the Daily Worker following the advice of the Burmese tipster, who’d picked Russian Hero, no doubt partly through rigorous assessment of the horse’s genetic profile—contrary though this Mendelian posture was to the doctrines of Lysenko, riding high in Stalin’s esteem.

It was by far the largest collective transfer of wealth ever to communism’s stalwarts in Britain. Around that time the party probably had about 50,000 members, and even a wagered half crown looked pretty good when multiplied by sixty-six.

Dick Francis took second in 1949. Seven years later, a champion jockey in his eighth Grand National, he rode Devon Loch, owned by Elizabeth the Queen Mother. Francis was ten lengths clear, less than fifty yards from winning, when Devon Loch suddenly went down on his belly, tearing muscles in the process. It’s one of horse racing’s great mysteries, though Francis thinks it was a sudden wave of noise from the crowd that spooked his horse.

“That’s racing,” the Queen Mother said stoically to Francis.

The event got Francis a contract to write a memoir. He retired from the track and took up a hugely successful life of crime writing. But “given the choice,” he says, “I’d take winning the National every time. I was a jockey first, writer second. It’s good having a book well received, but it doesn’t compare to winning a race.”

The biggest day in the National Hunt Steeplechase in England is the Grand National, run at Aintree, outside Liverpool, typically in April; four miles, 856 yards, thirty fences, often lethal to horses and devastating to jockeys. In 1928 the winner, Tipperary Tim, ridden by Billy Dutton and carrying odds of 100 to one, was the only horse out of a starting field of forty-two that didn’t fall.

Later, in Ireland, my mother bred horses. My father never cared for them, but he was pretty good at studying form and picking the odd winner, which was just as well because freelance earnings were scrawny, particularly if you were a well-known red. But when it came to Grand National day, March 26, 1949, no laborious toil over the form sheets was necessary. Among the scheduled starters that year was a horse called Russian Hero. Although the cold war was limbering up, Russians were still heroes to many. Not just members of the CPGB but a wider swath of punters in the union movement would be likely to plump for a horse carrying that name, if only as a side bet in honor of Stalingrad, the siege of Leningrad, the Kursk salient.
Katha Pollitt
Birth Control: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

The news that the Institute of Medicine (IOM) has recommended that birth control be covered by all insurance plans, and without co-payment, came just as I was finishing Janet Farrell Brodie's fascinating Contraception and Abortion in Nineteenth-Century America. You might not think a fine-grained, densely footnoted history of birth control would be an eye-opener and a page-turner, but you'd be wrong. Did you know, for instance, that birth control information and devices were in tremendous demand in antebellum America? Pocket-sized tracts like Charles Knowlton's Fruits of Philosophy and Robert Dale Owen's Moral Physiology went through many editions; newspapers carried ads for medications, douches and “womb veils,” early forms of the diaphragm, which some women wore for years at a time. Except in New York and Connecticut, abortion before “quickening” (mid–second trimester) was legal until after the Civil War and widely practiced; abortifacient drugs were easy to find under brand names like The Samaritan's Gift for Females. Nineteenth-century methods were stressful (withdrawal's not for everyone), cumbersome (reusable condoms? Yecch! And imagine douching with cold water and baking soda every time you had sex) and some of the information was sketchy (some experts got the rhythm method exactly backward, for instance), but taken together and backed up by abortion they sort of, kind of worked. The average native-born American woman had eight children in 1800 and only four in 1900, despite the clampdown on birth control and information by the Comstock laws of the 1870s.

As Brodie shows, contraception is not some newfangled fad foisted by the cultural elite on decent God-fearing folk. Americans have striven to separate sex from reproduction for more than two centuries. Today 99 percent of women have used birth control at some point. It is lifesaving and health-preserving medicine. And yet the myth that birth control is “controversial” persists. That was the very word applied by Time to the IOM recommendations. How many women equal one bishop?

The IOM asserts that birth control should be included as preventive care for women under the Affordable Care Act, along with annual checkups; mammograms; breast pumps; STD counseling; and screenings for HPV, HIV, gestational diabetes and domestic violence. This means financial relief for women who are paying out of pocket or who have high co-payments—some of whom are forced to skimp on meds or postpone refills, and wind up pregnant. It also means that women can choose the method that works best for their bodies, not their wallets: studies suggest that many would choose long-lasting, highly effective methods like the IUD and implants, which currently can cost up to $1,000 up front. With reproductive counseling, also included, women will get much better information about sex, their bodies and their choices.

It's hard to imagine anyone opposing broader access to contraception. But it's lucky that the HHS can accept these recommendations without Congressional approval, because this is America, where anything involving sex and/or women drives some people crazy. How crazy? Two weeks before the recommendations came out, Leonard Blair, the Catholic bishop of Toledo, Ohio, urged Catholic schools and parishes to cease raising money for Susan Komen for The Cure, the country's largest breast cancer charity, because someday it might fund embryonic stem-cell research. Better actual women should die of breast cancer today than that a stem cell be theoretically imperiled in the vague and misty future. Anti-choicers have their own theology—not one major so-called pro-life organization supports birth control—and their own biology too. An antichoices' evangelical tweeted on the hashtag #BCBC that “for every year a woman takes the Pill...her cervix ages 2 yrs.” (But according to the natural-family-planning website she sent me to, for every pregnancy it gets two years younger! Depending on your choices, by the time you're 40 your cervix could have its own AARP membership or be back in high school.) And let's not forget the plain old misogynists, like New Hampshire Executive Council member Raymond Wieczorek, who cast a deciding vote to slash funds for Planned Parenthood with the immortal words “If they want to have a good time, why not let them pay for it?”

How about: If people drive cars, let them pay for their own whiplash? If people eat meat, let them pay for their own heart disease? If people fall off a cliff hiking, leave them there! Almost everyone has “good times” that entail risks, but sexually active women—which includes the churchgoing, cake-baking wives anti-choicers want us to be—are just about the only ones against whom the “pay to play” argument is marshaled. The great thing about the IOM recommendations is that they acknowledge that sex is part of normal life, not some weird and semi-criminal activity. The Family Research Council claims it’s a violation of conscience to make people pay into plans that cover contraception. But what about the costs of not using contraception? Unwanted babies, stalled educations, poverty, ill health, misery—we all pay for that.

Forty-nine percent of pregnancies in America are unplanned—for teens, it’s 83 percent. Both are by far the highest rates in the developed world. The IOM recommendations would be worth taking even if they had no effect on those statistics—it’s wrong that women are nickel-and-dimed for a medication that only they take, as if preventing pregnancy was like getting a mani-pedi. But it's hard to believe the new rules won't help bring the numbers down. In Britain, where contraception has been provided on the National Health Service since 1974, the teen pregnancy rate is just over half ours. Still, 40 percent of pregnancies there are unplanned. It’s rare that technical fixes really solve social problems. But this is a good start. Our nineteenth-century forebears with their douches and womb veils would be cheering for us.

...and Robert Dale Owen's...
Howard Cosell called it rule number one of the jockocracy—the idea that sports and politics don’t mix. Playing the game, and playing it well, is all that matters. And yet, the closer you look, the more it becomes apparent that it’s not sports and politics that “don’t mix.” It’s sports and a certain kind of politics—the politics of protest and resistance. Athletes who speak out on issues of social justice invariably pay a price. It’s a problem that powerful commercial interests control the language of sports, not just because it shuts out alternative perspectives but because sports culture shapes other cultural attitudes, norms and power arrangements. Politics runs rampant throughout the sports world, a broad arena in which struggles for racial justice, gender equality and economic fairness are played out.

With stakes this high, we couldn’t sit back and watch as the sports world becomes increasingly dominated by politics from right field. Consequently, we decided to enlist Nation sports correspondent Dave Zirin’s help in planning a special sports issue, only the second in The Nation’s 146-year history, and not coincidentally at a time when two of the country’s major leagues were locking out their employees in fierce labor battles. The following articles and essays will, we hope, address the central areas in which sports culture intersects with the pursuit of social and economic justice. But the world of sports doesn’t just demand our attention; it also fires our imagination. The distinguished group of writers, thinkers and advocates who pay tribute to their favorite sports heroes in these pages express a feeling many of us share: pure love of the game. —The Editors

Jocks vs. Pukes

Understanding what defines these groups may be the key to unlocking the myth of male power.

by ROBERT LIPSYTE

In the spring of that hard year, 1968, the Columbia University crew coach, Bill Stowe, explained to me that there were only two kinds of men on campus, perhaps in the world—Jocks and Pukes. He explained that Jocks, such as his rowers, were brave, manly, ambitious, focused, patriotic and goal-driven, while Pukes were woolly, distractible, girlish and handicapped by their lack of certainty that nothing mattered as much as winning. Pukes could be found among “the cruddy weirdo slobs” such as hippies, pot smokers, protesters and, yes, former English majors like me.

I dutifully wrote all this down, although doing so seemed kind of Puke-ish. But Stowe was such an affable ur-Jock, 28 years old, funny and articulate, that I found his condensation merely good copy. He’d won an Olympic gold medal, but how could I take him seriously, this former Navy officer who had spent his Vietnam deployment rowing the Saigon River and running an officers’ club? Not surprisingly, he didn’t last long at Columbia after helping lead police officers through the underground tunnels to roust the Pukes who had occupied buildings during the antiwar and antiracism demonstrations.

As a 30-year-old New York Times sports columnist then, I was not handicapped by as much lack of certainty about all things as I am now. It was clear to me then that Bill Stowe was a “dumb jock,” which does not mean stupid; it means ignorant, narrow, misguided by the values of Jock Culture, an important and often overlooked strand of American life.

These days, I’m not so sure he wasn’t right; the world may well be divided into Jocks and Pukes. Understanding the differences and the commonalities between the two might be one of the keys to understanding, first, the myths of masculinity and power that pervade sports, and then why those myths are inescapable in everyday life. Boys—and more and more girls—who accept Jock Culture values often go on to flourish in a competitive sports environment that requires submission to authority, winning by any means necessary and group cohesion. They tend to grow up to become our political, military
and financial leaders. The Pukes—those “others” typically shouldered aside by Jocks in high school hallways and, I imagine, a large percentage of those who are warily reading this special issue of The Nation—were often turned off or away from competitive sports (or settled for cross-country). They were also more likely to go on to question authority and seek ways of individual expression.

This mental conditioning of the Jocks was possible because of the intrinsic joy of sports. Sports is good. It is the best way to pleasure your body in public. Sports is entertaining, healthful, filled with honest, sustaining sentiment for warm times and the beloved people you shared them with. At its simplest, think of playing catch at the lake with friends.

Jock Culture is a distortion of sports. It can be physically and mentally unhealthy, driving people apart instead of together. It is fueled by greed and desperate competition. At its most grotesque, think killer dodgeball for prize money, the Super Bowl. (The clash between sports and the Jock Culture version is almost ideological, at least metaphorical. Obviously, I am for de-emphasizing early competition and redistributing athletic resources so that everyone, throughout their lives, has access to sports. But then, I am also for world peace.)

Kids are initiated into Jock Culture when youth sports are channeled into the pressurized arenas of elite athletes on travel teams driven by ambitious parents and coaches. A once safe place to learn about bravery, cooperation and respect becomes a cockpit of bullying, violence and the commitment to a win-at-all-costs attitude that can kill a soul. Or a brain. It is in Pee Wee football, for example, that kids learn to “put a hat on him”—to make tackles head first rather than the older, gentler way of wrapping your arms around a ball carrier’s legs and dragging him down. Helmet-to-helmet hits start the trauma cycle early. No wonder the current concussion discussion was launched by the discovery of dementia and morbidity among former pro players.

There is no escape from Jock Culture. You may be willing to describe yourself as a Puke, “cut” from the team early to find your true nature as a billionaire geek, Grammy-winning band fag, wonkish pundit, but you’ve always had to deal with Jock Culture attitudes and codes, and you have probably competed by them. In big business, medicine, the law, people will be labeled winners and losers, and treated like stars or slugs by coachlike authority figures who use shame and intimidation to achieve short-term results. Don’t think symphony orchestras, university philosophy departments and liberal magazines don’t often use such tactics.

Jock Culture applies the rules of competitive sports to everything. Boys, in particular, are taught to be tough, stoical and aggressive, to play hurt, to hit hard, to take risks to win in every aspect of their lives. To dominate. After 9/11, I wondered why what seemed like a disproportionate number of athletic women and men were killed. From reading their brief New York Times memorials, it seemed as though most were former high school and college players, avid weekend recreationists or at least passionate sports fans. When I called executives from companies that had offices in the World Trade Center, I discovered it was no coincidence; stock-trading companies in particular recruited athletes because they came to work even if they were sick, worked well in groups, rebounded quickly from a setback, pushed the envelope to reach the goal and never quit until the job was done. They didn’t have to be star jocks, but they did have to have been trained in the codes of Jock Culture—most important, the willingness to subordinate themselves to authority.

The drive to feel that sense of belonging that comes with being part of a winning team—as athlete, coach, parent, cheerleader, booster, fan—is a reflection of Jock Culture’s grip on the male psyche and on more and more women. Men have traditionally been taught to pursue their jock dreams no matter the physical, emotional or financial cost. Those who realized those dreams have been made rich and famous; at the least, they were waved right through many of the tollbooths of ordinary life. Being treated like a celebrity at 12, freed from normal boundaries, excused from taking out the garbage and from treating siblings, friends, girls responsibly, is no preparation for a fully realized life. No wonder there are so many abusive athletes, emotionally stunted ex-athletes and resentful onlookers.

At a critical time when masculinity is being redefined, or at least re-examined seriously, this sports system has become more economically, culturally and emotionally important than ever. More at service to the empire. More dangerous to the common good.

Games have become our main form of mass entertainment (including made-for-TV contests using sports models). Winners of those games become our examples of permissible behavior, even when that includes cheating, sexual crimes or dog torturing.

Victor Navasky is publisher emeritus of The Nation.

When I was a kid, growing up in the 1930s on West 74th Street between Broadway and West End, the highlight of my day was ten in the morning, when Babe Ruth would emerge from his daily shave at the barbershop in the Ansonia Hotel, on my corner. Every day, if I could be there, I would stand on the street, and when the Babe appeared, I’d wave and say, “Hi, Babe.” He’d wave back and say, “Hi, kid,” and then get into his car. One day I got up the courage to ask him for his autograph, and he signed my book, date and all.

Victor Navasky is the author, most recently, of the memoir An Accidental Sportswriter (Ecco/HarperCollins).
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(SOUND FAMILIAR?)

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And how does that lead us to the cheating, the lying, the amorality in our lives outside the white lines? It’s not hard to connect the moral dots from the field house to the White House.

The recent emergence of girls as competitors of boys has also raised the ante. Boys have traditionally been manipulated by coaches, drill sergeants and sales managers by the fear of being labeled a girl (“sissy” and “faggot” have less to do with homophobia than misogyny). Despite the many ways males can identify themselves as “real men” in our culture—size, sexuality, power, money, fame—nothing seems as indelible as the mark made in childhood when the good bodies are separated from the bad bodies, the team from the spectators. The designated athletes are rewarded with love, attention and perks. The leftovers struggle with their resentments and their search for identity.

Of course, the final score is not always a sure thing. There are sensitive line backers and CEOs, domineering shrinks and violinists. Who won in the contest between the Facebook Puke Mark Zuckerberg and his fiercest competitors, the Olympic rowing Jocks Tyler and Cameron Winklevoss?

“I don’t follow that stuff these days,” says Bill Stowe, now 71, is still a conservative Republican. But he doesn’t like to talk politics. “It’s time to give up the torch,” he says. “People are still living in ignorance, but I’m not running it up the flagpole anymore. Life’s too short to fight.” He surprises me when we talk sports. “The big-league thing, that’s a circus. I don’t understand how anyone could look up to those guys. But the real issue is with the kids. Did you read where they’re building a $60 million football stadium for a high school in Texas? Just for the Jocks. Have you got any idea how much good you could do, even just in athletics, for all the other kids with that much money?”

I dutifully write all this down, which doesn’t at all seem Puke-ish now. We’re on the same page, the coach and I. There’s hope.

Why Do Mayors Love Sports Stadiums?

Public subsidies for sports facilities are a great deal for everyone involved—except the public.

by NEIL deMAUSE

On a busy streetcorner in downtown Brooklyn, the steel girders are starting to rise. After a decade of protests by residents (including local celebrities like Steve Buscemi, Jennifer Egan and Jonathan Lethem) and innumerable lawsuits, developer Bruce Ratner’s vision of a new arena to bring the New Jersey Nets basketball team to Brooklyn—with the aid of about $500 million in city and state subsidies—is taking root, with a scheduled opening in September 2012.

Yet Atlantic Yards, as Ratner has dubbed his twenty-two-acre development project on the edge of the bustling neighborhood of Prospect Heights, won’t look much like the image he first unveiled in 2003. The “Miss Brooklyn” office tower, which was supposed to bring jobs to the community, is gone, a victim of the virtual collapse of New York’s commercial real estate market. Meanwhile, the condo towers that were supposed to provide more than 2,250 units of affordable housing are unlikely to be built anytime soon, if at all. (The latest plan involves a “modular” building, akin to stacking shipping containers thirty-four stories high.) The Nets, meanwhile, are spending two seasons playing in Newark’s Prudential Center, another heavily subsidized building ($200 million fronted by taxpayers) that was supposed to revitalize its surrounding neighborhood but that still rests among the same discount stores and fast-food joints that lined Market Street before the arena opened in 2007.

It’s a story that could have been told in almost any American city over the past two decades. Owners of teams in the “big four” sports leagues—the NFL, MLB, NBA and NHL—have reaped nearly $20 billion in taxpayer subsidies for new homes since 1990. And for just as long, fans, urban planners and economists have argued that building facilities for private sports teams is a massive waste of public money. As University of Chicago economist Allen Sanderson memorably put it, “If you want to inject money into the local economy, it would be better to drop it from a helicopter than invest it in a new ballpark.”

Studies demonstrating pro sports stadiums’ slight economic impact go back to 1984, the year Lake Forest College economist Robert Baade examined thirty cities that had recently constructed new facilities. His finding: in twenty-seven of them, there had been no measurable economic impact; in the other three, economic activity appeared to have decreased. Dozens of economists have replicated Baade’s findings, and revealed similar results for what the sports industry calls “mega-events”: Olympics, Super Bowls, NCAA tournaments and the like. (In one study of six Super Bowls, University of South Florida
economist Phil Porter found “no measurable impact on spending,” which he attributed to the “crowding out” effect of non-football tourists steering clear of town during game week.)

Meanwhile, numerous cities are littered with “downtown catalysts” that have failed to catalyze, from the St. Louis “Ballpark Village,” which was left a muddy vacant lot for years after the neighboring ballpark opened, to the Newark hockey arena sited in the midst of a wasteland of half-shuttered stores.

“Public subsidies for stadiums are a great deal for team owners, league executives, developers, bond attorneys, construction firms, politicians and everyone in the stadium food chain, but a really terrible deal for everyone else,” concludes Frank Rashid, a lifelong Detroit Tigers fan and college English professor. Rashid co-founded the Tiger Stadium Fan Club in 1987, and for the next twelve years he fought an unsuccessful battle against Michigan’s plans to spend $145 million in public funds to replace that historic ballpark. “The case is so clear against this being a top priority for cities to be doing with their resources, I would have thought that wisdom would have prevailed by now.”

Yet the amount of public money being spent on sports facilities continues to rise. According to Harvard urban planner Judith Grant Long, cities, states and counties spent a record $6.5 billion on stadiums and arenas in the 1990s, then shattered that mark the following decade with an additional $10.1 billion—a 31 percent increase after accounting for inflation. And that’s not counting hidden subsidies like lease breaks, property tax exemptions and the use of tax-exempt government bonds, which Long estimates have added at least another 10 percent to the public’s tab.

W

hy do new sports facilities have such a hold on local elected officials? The simplest explanation is fear: because team owners can choose new cities but cities can’t choose new teams—thanks to the leagues’ government-sanctioned monopolies over franchise placement—mayors feel they must offer owners anything they want. “Politicians continue to believe that it would be political disaster to lose a team on their watch,” Baade says.

Actually losing a team, though, is extremely rare. Most team owners prefer to keep plugging for new stadiums in their home-towns even after their bluff has been called. Florida Marlins president David Samson first declared in 2004 that a new stadium “has to happen in the next week. And if not, we’ll move on.” He repeated similar threats for four years, until the city of Miami and Miami-Dade County finally agreed to kick in more than $478 million for a new stadium with a retractable roof.

Similarly, after successfully using relocation threats to get the city of Pittsburgh to help fund a new hockey arena, Penguins owner and NHL legend Mario Lemieux admitted, “Our goal was to remain here in Pittsburgh all the way. Those trips to Kansas City and Vegas and other cities was just to go, and have a nice dinner and come back…. That was just a way for us to put more pressure, and we knew it would work at the end of the day.” (It’s also worth noting that even in those few cities where teams have moved, no local elected official has yet been voted out of office as a result. A Wisconsin state senator who cast the deciding vote for a new Brewers stadium in 1995 did, however, out of office as a result. A Wisconsin state senator who cast the deciding vote for a new Brewers stadium in 1995 did, however,
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THAT’S WHY SO MANY SOMEBODIES READ IT.

Russell Simmons is a longstanding Nation reader.

(Legally speaking, of course, everything has an owner, but as a Nation editor once wrote, “it is one of the superb facts about The Nation that you can no more ‘own’ it than you can own the spirit it represents.”

become his state’s first legislator to be recalled by voters.)

There are other theories that explain local officials’ enduring love for sports facilities. The “edifice complex” predisposes them to build big, shiny structures—which can display a plaque bearing your name more easily than, say, reduced kindergarten class sizes. Then there are the perks that accrue to those who befriend team owners, like getting to throw the first pitch or entertain donors in your own luxury box.

For politicians eager to embrace sports deals, it’s easy to find consulting firms willing to produce glowing “economic impact studies”—even though sports economists nearly unanimously dismiss them as hogwash. For example: Economic Research Associates told the city of Arlington, Texas, that spending $325 million on a new stadium for billionaire oil baron Jerry Jones’s Dallas Cowboys would generate $238 million a year in economic activity. Critics immediately pointed out that this merely totaled up all spending that would take place in and around the stadium. Hidden deep in the report was the more meaningful estimate that Arlington would see just $1.8 million a year in new tax revenues while spending $20 million a year on stadium subsidies.

Jeanette Mott Oxford, who was an antisubsidy activist before being elected a Missouri state representative, says it’s easy for her colleagues to be distracted with flashy claims. “Unfortunately, it doesn’t appear that elected officials are much into evidence-based decision-making,” she explains. “Folks believe the threat that jobs will be lost, that somehow the team will move. Then there’s the civic pride element around the status of having a team. I think that too often, those motivate people no matter what the evidence says.”

Outright manipulation also plays a role. As Kevin Delaney and Rick Eckstein discovered while researching their book Public Dollars, Private Stadiums, cities were far more likely to approve subsidy deals if they had strong “growth coalitions” of local political and business leaders spearheading campaigns on the owners’ behalf. Explains Delaney, “That can then keep the team owner more in the background, so they’re not getting so smacked with the idea that this is some kind of corporate welfare.”

Business leaders have also been known to donate to local political campaigns, of course. Yet even stadium critics in local government say that the sway provided by corporate pressure is not simply a matter of buying votes. For my book Field of Schemes, I asked Minnesota State Senator John Marty about how the Twins ownership had persuaded the state legislature to approve about $387 million in public stadium funds after more than ten years of repeated rejections. “One of the lobbying efforts that’s very effective is, ‘The only way this issue will ever go away is if we pass it,’” explained Marty. But more than that, he noted, the ubiquitous presence of lobbyists helped legislators dismiss polls that consistently showed two-thirds of Minnesotans opposed stadium subsidies. “Because of lobbying, most legislators don’t believe that: ‘This may be true statewide, but not in my district.’ The main impact of the lobbying, insisted Marty, was less to change minds than to provide political cover. “It warps our perspective of what’s going on in the world,” he said.

Even where elected officials have gotten smarter about rejecting subsidies, the sports industry is increasingly outmaneuvering them. Twenty years ago, most sports subsidies came in the form
of straight cash giveaways for construction costs. Today, they are more likely to arrive via tax breaks, free land, government-subsidized tax-free loans, or discounts to offset operating and maintenance costs. When Long looked at these hidden subsidies, she found that they added an average of 40 percent to sports facilities’ public sticker price. The most notable examples are the new stadiums for the Yankees and Mets, which opened in New York City in 2009. The team owners promised to pay all $1.7 billion in construction costs—but it was later revealed that they were collecting a combined $1.8 billion in lease and tax breaks against the outlays.

Jim Nagourney, who spent three decades negotiating stadium deals on behalf of government agencies and team owners, describes how he helped snooker city officials as a consultant to the Los Angeles Rams, who were then negotiating a move to a new stadium in St. Louis. “We had a whiteboard, and we’re putting stuff down” to demand in a stadium lease, he recalls. “I said, ‘Guys, some of this is crazy.’ And John Shaw, who was president of the Rams at the time—brilliant, brilliant guy—said, ‘They can always say no. Let’s ask for it.” The result, which Nagourney calls “probably the most scandalous deal in the country,” included a clause requiring the new stadium to remain “state-of-the-art,” or else the team could break its lease and leave. “The city was poorly represented—the city is always poorly represented…. We put in all of these ridiculous things, and the city didn’t have the sense to say no to any of them.”

The reason this dynamic recurs is simple, Nagourney says: cities rely on in-house legal teams to negotiate stadium deals. “A city attorney is not going to understand advertising, they’re not going to understand concessions—just a whole range of issues that the team officials intimately understand. They know where the dollars are, and the municipal attorneys do not.”

Despite recession-strapped state budgets and the fact that most teams occupy homes that are less than twenty years old, there appears to be no end in sight to the stadium-subsidy game. Teams that have recently received new stadiums have begun to go around to the back of the line for still newer ones. Latest on the list are the Atlanta Falcons (housed in the Georgia Dome, built in 1992 for $214 million in state money) and the St. Louis Rams (in the Edward Jones Dome, opened in 1995 for $280 million). The Rams are threatening to use Shaw’s “state-of-the-art” clause to move if they don’t get their way.

For Baade, the only answer is for local elected officials to start standing up and saying no to all demands for sports subsidies. “I think cities need to band together and say, Look, we’ve got some countervailing power, we’re simply not going to compete with one another for a professional sports presence.” (A bill briefly proposed by US Representative David Minge in the late 1990s would have forced localities to end the “economic war among the states,” as a Minneapolis Federal Reserve vice president called it, by slapping an excise tax on any subsidies designed to benefit individual corporations; the legislation died without a whimper.) “If they do that, then pro sports leagues that hold the ultimate negotiating card—‘We’re going to leave if you don’t give us what we want’—will have no place to go.”

But, he admits, “I think that’s a long way off.”
Revolution on Eight Wheels

Sassy, strong and aggressive, “derby girls” challenge traditional notions of gender and sport.

by DIANE “LADY HULK” WILLIAMS

I had no idea what to expect when I arrived at my first roller derby bout in Tucson, in 2005. As a former college athlete and coach, an amateur women’s sports historian and a gender studies nerd, I had heard buzz about derby and wanted to check it out. That night, the Furious Truckstop Waitresses, clad in pink waitress dresses, were playing the Police-themed Vice Squad. As women of all shapes and sizes whizzed by me in warm-ups, I noticed names like Barbicide, Whiskey Mick and Sloppy Flo emblazoned on their uniforms. Some wore fishnet tights, itty-bitty skirts and funky makeup. As excited as I was, I paused: Was this objectification disguised as empowerment? Were these women being exploited or were they totally awesome? I couldn’t tell. I settled in near the track, intrigued.

At the first whistle, the spectacle transformed into an exhilarating celebration of women and sport, complete with referees and play-by-play announcers. I’d never seen this many paying fans support an amateur women’s sport. After the game, I watched the skaters pack up the merchandise, sweep the floor and stack the chairs. Everyone did everything. This was a woman-focused, do-it-yourself sports culture, and I was hooked.

Roller derby has existed on and off since the 1930s, but this new wave originated in Austin, Texas, in 2001, the vision of a man known as “Devil Dan” and some feisty women. After he reportedly stole their money and skipped town, the burned-but-determined team captains carried on, reviving roller derby for the new millennium. Sassy, strong and aggressive, “derby girls” challenged traditional notions of acceptable female behavior through the male-dominated world of sports.

In 2005 the Women’s Flat Track Derby Association (WFTDA) was formed, creating a standard set of rules and supporting the growing derby community. Women held leadership positions in the association; men were involved as referees, coaches and announcers, but not skaters. This was a deviation from the sport’s co-ed history, but organizers insisted that the new derby have little connection to the promoter-owned derby their parents remembered. This roller derby was skater-owned, and WFTDA adopted the motto “Real. Strong. Athletic. Revolutionary.” I wore my WFTDA shirt proudly and cheered when Tucson hosted twenty teams for the first-ever national competition, the Dust Devil Tournament, in 2006.

Two years later, as a burned-out graduate student in need of adventure, I found myself on a date at a roller rink in Hadley, Massachusetts. I spent the whole night imagining myself playing derby as I swerved around the rink. Soon afterward, I attended “Fresh Meat Night” with the local league, Pioneer Valley Roller Derby. PVRD had a women’s team and the first men’s team in the country. They practiced together, a unique and progressive approach that I loved, and I found that the toughest-looking skaters were incredibly supportive and encouraging. Personally, politically and athletically, I’d found my home. “Lady Hulk” was born.

Roller derby marries an underground vibe with the fun of athletic competition in a blend of sport and spectacle that is as much fun to play as it is to watch. Teams compete on a small flat or banked track. Each team has four blockers and one jammer. Everyone skates around the track in a series of two-minute “jams,” trying to get their team’s jammer through the opposing pack of blockers, while holding the other team’s jammer back. Once through the pack, the jammers skate quickly around the track, earning points for each opposing player they lap. At the end of each jam, new skaters get on the track and a new jam begins. Games last for around sixty minutes, divided into two or three periods. Unlike in the old days of derby, today you usually earn a penalty for throwing elbows and get ejected for fighting.

Skaters come to derby from different backgrounds, and they all bring unique stories and style. Some rock fishnets and booty shorts, some have tattoos and piercings, and some practice in gym shorts and T-shirts. Many started after attending a bout or learning that a friend joined a team; others were drawn in through media coverage, Facebook, the movie Whip It or the A&E show Roolergirls. Some are former Division I athletes, while others were kids who hated PE.

For those burned out on traditional sports, derby provides a challenging, refreshing alternative. It’s a “love of the game” world where passion, community and the spirit of competition support leagues through the growing pains, budgetary challenges and inevitable derby drama. Even the refs and officials donate their time. One skater summed up the culture this way: “We don’t care about your body type or sexual orientation or whether you were the popular kid in school. As long as you want to come out and strap on skates and pads, work your butt off, and offer support and respect for those around you, there is a place for you here.”

According to Roller Derby Worldwide, there are 960 amateur leagues around the globe. This includes banked-track teams, WFTDA-affiliated and unaffiliated flat-track women’s teams, men’s teams (many affiliated with the Men’s Roller Derby Association), junior teams, recreational teams and teams that play...
by “old-school rules.” Some leagues are nationally ranked and participate in official seasons and championships; others are just starting up, with little more than a few skaters, new knee pads and a dream. Teams are playing in increasingly large venues, and more and more fans are cheering them on. Players can read game recaps and articles on strategy in the derby community trade magazines *Five on Five* and *Blood and Thunder*, and bouts are often streamed on the hugely popular online Derby News Network.

As roller derby continues to grow and evolve, many questions are popping up. Will it become an Olympic sport? Join the X Games? Can it remain local? Might the development of girls’ junior leagues lead to an increasingly competitive derby market? Will roller derby be on TV again? Will men’s derby push the community to be more inclusive? Everyone involved has an opinion and a hope for the future; but on the local level, we’re also busy getting ready for our next bout.

Those of us who play roller derby are part of history, part of making the spectacle of sport more apparent and celebratory, and leaving limiting ideas about appropriate sports for women and men in our eight-wheeled wake. Check out your local team and support the roller derby revolution!

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**Jennifer Egan on Monica Seles**

At first, Monica Seles was dominant in a way that some people found alienating. Like a lot of tennis players, she had a tendency to grunt while making her shots, and this prompted outrage that I think would never have occurred if she’d been a man. Opponents would lodge complaints, and Seles would be apologetic, but that was the way she played, and she beat everyone. She was just amazing. Looking back, I’m certain that the collective resentment of her—which I confess I felt in moments, mingled with my excitement about her strength—was an expression of our cultural discomfort with a kind of overt female aggression that seems to revel in itself. There was a perception of ugliness or unseemliness about her unbridled strength.

One reason her stabbing was so appalling—beyond the horrific fact itself—was that it felt like the apotheosis of the public resentment of Seles. And then the attack seemed to break her—she didn’t return for such a long time, and it appeared that she wouldn’t ever. I felt personally implicated in that. But the fact that she did eventually come back was an incredible triumph. She got out there all over again and fought like hell, which is what she does. When she finally retired, it was from a position of strength rather than victimization. My guess is that no female athlete will be criticized in the way she was again. I think everyone felt a kind of disgust, in retrospect, over the way she was treated. But she was stronger than all of it.

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**Jennifer Egan** is the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. 
How Players Won the NFL Lockout

by DAVID MEGGYESY AND DAVE ZIRIN

In 1987 Tex Schramm, then general manager of the Dallas Cowboys, told Gene Upshaw, executive director of the NFL Players Association (NFLPA), “Gene, here’s what you have to understand: we’re the ranchers and you’re the cattle, and we can always get more cattle.” Schramm’s statement perfectly reflects the arrogance of NFL owners and how they view player-employees and the collective bargaining game. It has been pointed out many times that the major sports leagues reflect the structure and operations of major corporations. In corporations, employees are essentially viewed as exploitable commodities and replaceable parts. It’s the same for professional athletes.

The difference is that while players may be seen as the cattle, they are also the workers who raise the cattle. They are the labor and the product, and therefore more difficult to replace. As former NFL great Brian Mitchell said, “The NFL is like going to a great steakhouse. The players are the chef. But they’re also the steak!”

During the most recent lockout—the longest work stoppage in NFL history—the owners neglected this fact, so they paid a terrific price. The owners, led by commissioner Roger Goodell, believed they could shut down the entire 2011 season. They believed they would be paid by the networks even if they didn’t deliver a product. They believed they could take the most successful product in the American entertainment landscape and get more. They wanted to expand the season from sixteen games to eighteen. They wanted dramatically reworked revenue distribution. They wanted more control over the lives of players. Make no mistake about it: they lost.

There are several reasons for this. First and foremost, the players, led by NFLPA executive director DeMaurice Smith, stood together. The hundreds of athletes showed extraordinary solidarity, considering that a typical pro career lasts only 3.5 years; the pressure to get back to work must have been intense. Divisions were more apparent on the ownership side, where many chief executives started to grumble that they were killing the golden goose, especially after a court ruled that they couldn’t receive network money for games that weren’t broadcast.

Second, the owners were wildly off in their prediction that fans would turn on the players. That’s the way it has always been in sports labor conflicts. At best, fans have seen it as “millionaires versus billionaires”; at worst, fans have jeered at anyone who would complain about “getting paid to play a game.” But not this time. The most obvious reason for the profound shift in fan sentiment is that it was a lockout, not a strike. The players’ slogan, “Let us play,” reflected the fact that they—just like the fans—were happy with business as usual.

Also, there is far more consciousness now among fans about the physical toll—including concussions as well as the deadly disease ALS—that football takes on the human body. This is a sport with a 100 percent injury rate. The fact that commissioner Goodell would express sympathy for the physical plight of players even as he demanded two extra games in the season (which, according to polls, fans didn’t even want) seemed immoral and greedy.

And finally, workers across the nation have taken it on the chin at the hands of big business. This lockout would have sent to the unemployment lines stadium workers, parking lot attendants and everyone else who scrapes by thanks to NFL Inc. Steeler All-Pro Troy Polamalu seemed to capture the moment when he said, “It’s unfortunate right now. I think what the players are fighting for is something bigger. A lot of people think it’s millionaires versus billionaires, and that’s the huge argument. The fact is, it’s people fighting against big business. The big-business argument is, ‘I got the money and I got the power, therefore I can tell you what to do.’ That’s life everywhere. I think this is a time when the football players are standing up and saying, ‘No, no, no, the people have the power.’”

Standing strong together and going for the win is an attitude NFL players have been taught from day one. It served them well in a lockout that no one predicted they would win. In fact, one anonymous source in the union said, “These guys are so competitive, some of them don’t want to settle for a bigger piece of the pie. They want the whole bakery!”

Winning this battle didn’t only secure for the players a fair collective bargaining agreement. It didn’t only increase the earnings of veteran athletes, strengthen benefits and mercifully keep the season at sixteen games. It also raised even more important questions, which NBA players should be asking as well: What do we need owners for? Players are the game—no one shows up at Cowboys Stadium to watch Jerry Jones pace imperially up and down the sideline. We should be asking why we can’t have more fan-owned teams, similar to the Super Bowl Champion Green Bay Packers—that’s a team with 112,000 owners. Why can’t players get equity and even ownership of the franchises themselves? And why can’t a big chunk of the revenues that players produce go back to the communities where they play? A thick percentage of all proceeds at Green Bay’s Lambeau Field goes to local charities. Given the current state of our cities, this would be a huge benefit to urban America. Also, think about how this argument combines the logical and the radical. It opens up discussions about economic democracy that the people who run the NFL—and the people who run our country—would prefer we not have.

Pro football is a players’ and fans’ game. The fans come to see the players, and taxpayers build the stadiums. The one irrelevant element is the owners. It’s time for a change.

David Meggerys, a former linebacker with the St. Louis Cardinals, wrote the bestselling autobiography Out of Their League, co-founded the Esalen Sports Center and served as western director of the NFL Players Association. Dave Zirin, The Nation’s sports editor, is the author, with John Carlos, of The John Carlos Story, due out in October from Haymarket Books.
Cecile Richards on Carl Yastrzemski

I grew up in Texas rooting for Carl Yastrzemski, the great left fielder for the Boston Red Sox. Yaz was the up-and-coming hero, leader of the Red Sox when Red Sox Nation was just beginning. And most important, Yaz and the Sox were the underdogs. In my family’s worldview, we rooted for the underdog, and nowhere more than in baseball.

On the rare Saturday afternoon when the Sox were on TV, my dad and I would watch the game. He would rant against the hated Yankees, who persecuted his beloved Brooklyn Dodgers when he was a kid, and were now doing the same to Yaz and the Red Sox.

I was 9 when Yaz won the Triple Crown and led the Sox to the American League pennant for the first time in twenty-one years. But the Sox would have to wait until 2004 for ultimate glory. That season has a lot of memories for me too. My mom and I saw the Red Sox play the Yankees at Fenway during the Democratic convention—the last baseball game we saw together. The Sox won that day, and they kept on winning—all the way to the World Series.

Cecile Richards is the president of Planned Parenthood.

Bob Herbert on Bobby Thomson and Hank Thompson

My first sports hero was Bobby Thomson of the old New York Giants, who hit what was probably the most famous home run in history: the dramatic “shot heard ’round the world,” which deeply traumatized the Brooklyn Dodgers and their fans and propelled the Giants into the 1951 World Series against the Yankees.

I was 6 years old, and what I remember most whenever I think of Thomson and that home run was something my father told me. There was a player on that Giants’ team named Hank Thompson. Bobby Thomson was white and Hank Thompson was black. I asked my dad if they were brothers. He laughed and said, “No. You know how you can tell they’re not brothers?”

I said I didn’t. He said, “Hank Thompson spells his last name t-h-o-m-p-s-o-n. Bobby Thomson doesn’t have a ‘p’ in his last name. If they were brothers, they would spell their names the same.”

It was years before I realized what a terrific thing that was to say to a kid.

Bob Herbert, a former columnist at the New York Times, is a senior fellow at Demos.
The NFL’s Concussion Culture

Many former players are degenerating at an early age, but the league doesn’t seem to care.

by NATE JACKSON

A few months after former Chicago Bears star Dave Duerson committed suicide in February at age 50, researchers at Boston University confirmed that he had suffered from a form of dementia that has been linked to repeated brain trauma.

Until recently, the skeletons in the NFL’s closet were easier to hide. Sure, something stunk, but no one quite knew what it was. But now players from the 1980s and ‘90s are turning up dead. And it’s pretty hard to ignore the questions that spring from the shocking fact that the same brain disease that afflicted Duerson has been confirmed in at least twenty recently deceased players.

Why is it that men who were the strongest and fittest people alive when they were young degenerate so quickly? That’s the million-dollar question. Ask NFL commissioner Roger Goodell, and you won’t even get an answer. I guess I don’t really blame him. What can he do, agree with the critics? Yup, football kills.

One of the NFL’s latest plays, finalized in labor talks this past March, was to change the kickoff rules. Now the ball will be kicked off from the thirty-five-yard line, and the kickoff team will get only a five-yard running start instead of the unlimited start it had before (which rarely amounted to more than ten yards). This was all created by the “competition committee,” a group of NFL coaches and executives who tweak the rules every year based on perceived trends and public relations needs.

For example, in 2009 the competition committee eliminated the “wedge” from kickoff returns. I recall one member citing Kevin Everett’s 2007 spinal injury as an example of the perils of wedge returns. I was playing in that game in Buffalo when Kevin broke his neck, and I watched the play happen. The Bronco returner chose to carry the ball outside the wall of interlocked players, away from the “wedge” blocking formation that is now banned. He and Kevin Everett collided in a very routine football hit. The result was far from routine. By all accounts, Kevin nearly died on the field that day.

In a move that would symbolize the league’s strategy in dealing with player health, the NFL made an arbitrary change to the rules, hoping that eliminating wedges would come across as a genuine attempt to protect players. This new kickoff rule smells exactly the same. Knowing the wide reach of sports media, committee members find forums on lapdog platforms like ESPN, the NFL Network and Pro Football Talk, and speak in earnest about their concern for player safety. They say they understand that players don’t like it, but, Geez guys, we’re looking out for you!

If that were true, players would be better cared for when their bodies begin to fall apart in early middle age. They are forgotten on purpose because acknowledging the health issues of former players draws attention to a dirty little secret: when you sacrifice your body for the game, your brain goes with it. According to the Alzheimer’s Association International Conference in Paris, retired NFL players are more likely than similarly aged men to develop mild cognitive impairment, a form of dementia that can lead to Alzheimer’s disease. But don’t look to us for help. You’re on your own now, buddy. Unless you can still play, that is. Think you’ve got some juice left in the tank?

Under the recently expired collective bargaining agreement, vested players received five years of postfootball health coverage. So right about the time the player dug himself out of the hole he’d been living in after he realized his life peaked in his 20s, his healthcare ran out. And the real problems don’t show up for twenty years anyway—plenty of time for him to be forgotten. (Players now have the option of buying into the NFL’s health policy for life.)

For current players, the hypocrisy is equally disturbing. Players have little control over their bodies; they are the property of the team. When a player is injured, he is pushed back onto the field by an athletic trainer who is being pressured by the coach to get his guys playing again. The rehabilitation and surgical approaches for injuries are often decided by team doctors and trainers who are paid by the organization and have no vested interest in the long-term health of the man who is hurt.

Every day, players are risking long-term injury by rushing themselves back on the field after being hurt. The average NFL career lasts only 3.5 years, and the window of opportunity to carve out a roster spot is dangerously thin. Minimum salary goes up with experience, so the trend is to push out the veterans and bring in younger, cheaper labor.

Injured players are strapping it up every day because they are told by medical staff, voices they should be able to trust, that their injuries should be healed by now. And “split” clauses in many contracts severely cut pay if the player goes on injured reserve. In other words, players are punished for getting hurt and rewarded for acting like they’re not even when they are.

Compounding the problematic medical approach to injury treatment is an institutional pressure not to be a “pussy.” How tough are you? Can you play on that broken ankle? That separated shoulder? With that concussion? Your headaches are gone, right? Because this is glory, son. This is what people will remember you for. And besides, if you can’t suck it up and get it done, then we’ll find someone else who can. Test an athlete like that,

Nate Jackson played with the Denver Broncos as a wide receiver and tight end from 2003 to 2008. He contributes regularly to Slate’s “Sports Nut” column.
and of course he's going to make every effort to play.

But at what price comes the glory? And what glory is this, anyway, when no one can even remember who won the Super Bowl two years ago? The train keeps moving along, pausing only to refuel with new talent and lose the dead weight of broken bodies. But our football-adoring society sees only the refueling, because the NFL carefully crafts that image. For every rookie who makes a team this season, a veteran loses his job forever and packs his bag for a lifetime of physical pain. You’d think the NFL would try to lighten that load. But you'd be wrong.

Class Struggle on the Court

The National Basketball Association lockout isn’t about losses. It’s about breaking the union.

by ARI PAUL

There’s an eerie consistency to management rhetoric during labor standoffs, one in which the boss insists that without a drastic reduction in employee pay, the business or government entity in question is destined for insolvency. The NBA’s current player lockout, a result of the expiration of the collective bargaining agreement on June 30, is no different. The owners are citing a $300 million loss, with twenty-two out of the thirty teams said to be in the red. In a sluggish economy, they say, the only way to fix this is by cutting payroll through a hard salary cap, with a $45 million player payroll per team.

Included in that consistency are questions about the owners’ cries of poverty. The union has argued that as much as $250 million of those losses are from depreciation and amortization when a team is sold, and that owners can shift revenues among their teams and the other businesses they control that take in basketball-related dollars. An investigation by Forbes showed that while ticket revenue was down 6 percent from five years ago, media revenue has grown significantly, in part because the league is bound by long-term contracts. Nate Silver of the New York Times amplified this argument, pointing out that publicly available estimates, via Forbes and other sources, show the NBA has been moderately profitable in recent years—and the profits that big-market teams typically earn are more than enough to compensate for the losses of their small-market brethren.

The league claims these figures are inaccurate and says it uses Generally Accepted Accounting Principles, but this hasn’t extinguished doubt. Larry Coon, an oft-cited expert on NBA labor relations who runs NBA Salary Cap FAQ, said, “Just because something is legitimate from an accounting perspective doesn’t mean it’s a good argument in terms of dealing with the players.”

Despite the fact that many fans dismiss sports labor conflicts as squabbles between billionaires and millionaires, the current struggle between the National Basketball Players Association and the owners has much in common with classic labor disputes, including a misrepresentation of owners’ losses and so-called worker excess. The union, meanwhile, claims that at no point during this round of bargaining has it asked for anything more than a firewall against givebacks, and argues that the owners are using a weak economy to further erode the NBPA’s power.

The players now receive 57 percent of “basketball related income,” or BRI, which includes proceeds from ticket sales, TV deals, etc. In addition to reducing this percentage, the league wants to end exceptions to the salary cap. Currently, a free agent can receive a salary increase of up to 10.5 percent if he retains his so-called “Larry Bird” rights (more on this later) and 8 percent if he is re-signed to another team. The league wants to cut this to 3 and 2 percent, respectively, according to the union. “The owners are looking for pretty draconian changes,” Coon said.

From the get-go, even though the union has questioned the size of the losses, it has made serious concessions, including an offer to lower the percentage of BRI set aside for players. Initially the owners wouldn’t agree on a number higher than 39 percent and insisted on other cuts as well. In June, owners proposed a 50-50 split, contingent on redefining BRI. Union officials claimed players would lose between $900 million and $1 billion under this new definition, according to the New York Times.

Ralph Nader on Lou Gehrig

Lou Gehrig was and remains my sports hero. By the time he retired in 1939, the Columbia University graduate displayed exceptional stamina (he played in 2,130 consecutive games, whether fit or injured, between 1925 and 1939). He epitomized the dignified athlete and didn’t mind playing second fiddle to Babe Ruth while setting baseball records for decades hence. He hit in the clutch. Not a natural athlete, the “Iron Horse” perfected, with relentless, punishing practice, his fielding at first base.

The son of German immigrants, he warned about the fascism coming out of Nazi Germany before most politicians.

Never a scandal, a paragon of self-control, he was my boyhood “role model” before those words came into currency. His character shone to the very end. Dying of what is now called Lou Gehrig’s disease, he was given a rousing day of gratitude and love at a packed Yankee Stadium. Only Lou, still in his 30s, would have thought to say more than 60,000 tearing fans, “I’m the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

Ralph Nader is a consumer advocate, lawyer and author.
The New York Times, an excessive sum when the league is claiming a $300 million loss.

“They really weren’t serious about trying to reach an agreement. This wasn’t sufficient justification for what they were asking,” NBPA executive director Billy Hunter said in a phone interview. “It was just posturing to get us to capitulate.”

In addition, the union believes that if high-profit teams like the New York Knicks, Los Angeles Lakers and Chicago Bulls share their revenue with the league, the NBA can save the handful of teams the union believes are in actual economic despair. “It’s the nature of the beast,” Hunter said, noting that it is for the good of the league for the rich teams to help out the ones in need. “The LA Lakers have to play somebody. If they don’t have any other teams in the league, then what good are they?”

Only recently has the NBA buckled, after a decade of union concessions. The NBA labor deal of 1999, which was re-signed in 2005, already gave owners more controls on salaries than exist in the other major sports leagues. (The increase cap for free agents is higher in the National Football League and nonexistent in Major League Baseball.) Moreover, the union counts that the BRI (Basketball Related Income) percentage guarantee for players isn’t as generous as the owners insist. BRI is measured with eighteen types of revenue, and in thirteen of those categories, according to the union, operational expenses are deducted from the final sum, even though in some cases the expenses are for contract work done by a business that is also held by the team’s owner. There are other imbalances, the union believes, like the fact that players only take in 40 percent of the revenue of luxury boxes, a major growth area.

It’s tough for the NBA to get its message across to the general public, in part because labor negotiations are complicated but also because the players have often damaged their own image. During the lockout before the 1998–99 season, Knicks star and NBPA president at the time Patrick Ewing famously said, “Sure, we make a lot of money, but we spend a lot, too.” The tone-deaf image has stuck in fans’ minds and hardened the stereotype of players as spoiled brats who equate their bling and Bentleys with other people’s food on the table.

However difficult emotionally it might be for a middle-class wage earner to sympathize with an NBA star, what is often lost in the discussion is that top players like Kobe Bryant and LeBron James, who command high salaries along with big endorsements, are atypical of the NBPA. You don’t see most players in commercials, and while they might earn more than the blue-collar worker watching the finals in a bar, they don’t accumulate ruling-class wealth. The average basketball career, according to the union, is four and half years. Dallas Mavericks guard Jason Kidd is one of the oldest men at the factory, at 38.

If there is a settlement before the start of the season—the last lockout forced the cancellation of thirty-two games—it is not going to be between the owners and people like James and Bryant, but between the league and a large bloc of journeymen who actually do have to think about their livelihoods. It is for that reason that solidarity may falter as the season approaches; the longer the paychecks don’t arrive, the more likely that bloc will settle for whatever contract it can get. “It’s one player, one vote,” Coon explained. “A lot of players are going to be in the league for two years at minimum salary. These guys are numerous, and they have the votes.” He noted that the NBPA, under the presidency of Derek Fisher of the Lakers, has come a long way since Ewing’s flubs a decade ago. Fisher early on saw a conflict coming, and he urged players to show restraint in their spending and prepare for a possible work stoppage.

“Fisher has a much better handle on it. He knows that when there’s a downturn, they are going to be bearing some of the burden of that, but they’ve done a lot to corral the players,” Coon said. “They were a lot more naïve in ’99 and now they are a lot more savvy.” Hunter said player solidarity has strengthened as the owners’ stance has hardened: “I think we’re much better prepared.”

NBA commissioner David Stern told reporters in May that both sides were eager to come to a deal because a lockout would be “destructive for our business, from the owners’ perspective and the players’ perspective.” But Coon observed that the “owners would rather sacrifice an entire season than continue to play under an economic system they think is broken.”

Shorter contracts mean less economic security for players, as does a hard salary cap. Robert Boland, associate professor of sports management at NYU, points out that it is also a bad idea for certain owners, especially if a final deal scraps the aforementioned Larry Bird exception, which allows a team to go over the cap if it re-signs a player who has become a free agent. Suppose you’re one of the league’s stars—say, LeBron James—and your team is based in Cleveland, a town so undesirable that an infamous YouTube video proclaims one of its most redeeming features is that it’s “not Detroit.” You enter free agency, and Cleveland can’t go above the cap to re-sign you. Now, what motivation do you have to stay in a gloomy, cold Rust Belt city rather than play for a powerhouse team in a place where you can hang out on the beach in December, like the Miami Heat?

My sports hero as a kid? Easy: Toller Cranston. If you weren’t a Canadian growing up, or simply believed that men’s figure skating really wasn’t a sport, you may not have heard of the guy. But trust me when I say that he single-handedly reinvented men’s skating. Even watching him decades later, it’s still clear that it’s largely because of him that the sport went from a sequence of jumps, spins, jumps and grins to something that looks like a poem. I logged hours on the couch next to my mom watching him in Skate Canada after Skate Canada, and I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that I was subversive enough, even at 7, to love that he would rail against the starchy formal requirements of the sport (they finally did away with compulsory figures for men years and years later) and insist that it was all just, well, groovy art. Look him up on YouTube, all twisting wrists and craned neck. The crowds went nuts for him because you could see that he was born to do precisely what he did. The hardware—which mostly eluded him—was just gravy.

Dahlia Lithwick is a senior editor at Slate.
“Every collective bargaining agreement has unintended consequences that change the game periodically,” Boland said.

But there is a broader class struggle in this dispute, and it extends far beyond the basketball court. It won’t just be the players who will lose paychecks if there is no resolution. The owners will also be effectively locking out a vast labor force surrounding the game. This includes everyone from the highly paid sportscaster to the low-wage coliseum parking-lot attendant to the part-time concession stand worker, all of whom contribute in some way to BRI, and all of whom have rent and mortgages to pay. Michael McCann, director of the Sports Law Institute at the University of Vermont, points out that without a season people may be less likely to buy sports apparel, a blow to the retail sector. And what will happen to servers at sports bars who depend on big tips on game night? “They’re the most vulnerable victims, because they have no seat at the table,” he said.

Through that lens, the struggle is really not about billionaires versus millionaires but billionaires versus everyone else—including consumers, some of whom perhaps need to revisit a scene from the classic comedy Airplane! A young boy visits the cockpit of an airliner mid-flight and discovers the co-pilot is basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who denies visiting the cockpit of an airliner mid-flight and discovers the part-time concession stand worker, all of whom contribute in some way to BRI, and all of whom have rent and mortgages to pay. Michael McCann, director of the Sports Law Institute at the University of Vermont, points out that without a season people may be less likely to buy sports apparel, a blow to the retail sector. And what will happen to servers at sports bars who depend on big tips on game night? “They’re the most vulnerable victims, because they have no seat at the table,” he said.

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ADAM GOPNIK \n
My first sports hero, in a long and ever-expanding gallery, was Joe Namath, the great quarterback of the New York Jets, who brightened my largely lonely and isolated but imaginatively vital Canadian adolescence.

I recall precisely the moment I fell in love with Broadway Joe. In those days the imagery of pro football was controlled by NFL Films, which had the instinct to glorify the game not by showing it as the violent blue-collar thing it really was then (George Plimpton’s books are good on that reality) but by making it seem epic, and above all by grasping—OK, squeezing—to death—two visual devices. One was the slow-motion fall of the ball, spinning with impossible-seeming regularity toward the open thrust-out hands of the receiver and then coming to rest there—religiously, as it seemed, rather than being merely snatchable athletically. The other device was the strange power of steam-breath, emitted by giant men in capes. Both, set to orchestral music, with the Dr. Doom voice of a Philadelphia broadcaster, John Facenda, made the game matter. I happened to catch one such highlights show, featuring the Jets, on a Saturday afternoon in 1968, and that sight—the ball flipped from Namath’s hand, the camera rushing to follow its long, long arc, the ball settling down at last in Don Maynard’s hands—converted me. Namath had a unique throwing motion—or semi-unique, as Dan Marino, another West Pennsylvania boy, the only passer who was as beautiful to watch, shared, or rather borrowed, it—of holding the ball by his ear and flipping it forward with a decisive single twist of his upper body. He didn’t plant and throw; he looked and fired. It was such a beautiful, such a firmly fixed thing to see when he was “on.” The worst—the most disloyal—thing I’ve ever done was to have missed a legendary hockey game, Team Canada’s 3–2 victory over the Russians in Moscow in 1972, which set the pace for their comeback in the famous “Summit Series,” in order to watch Namath against Unitas in what became a legendary six-touchdown-pass game. Twice Unitas—still very much the canny field general, with his own insouciant pigeon-toed drop; Unitas and Montana were the two best QBs to watch run backward—led the Colts to touchdowns. And twice the ensuing drop, as Curt Gowdy liked to say, was instantly answered by Namath throwing another scoring bomb to the still-underrated tight end Rich Caster. It was the coolest, most knavishly assured thing I’ve ever seen in sports. (Namath made the cover of Time magazine, a very big deal in those days, for that one game.) Joe was cool, but what stirred me about him was not the playboy stuff, which I was already wise enough to know was naff and embarrassing, but the image of poise under pressure and the thrill of a last-minute decision zipping home. Like George Best in British football, he had a genius that was too short-lived and too quickly drowned in drink, but he gave a too-inward-turning teenage boy confidence in the authority of action.

Adam Gopnik, an award-winning author, is a staff writer at The New Yorker.
The Wired World of Sports

Thanks largely to online media, fans today are far more informed and vocal than ever before.

by WILL LEITCH

It has been more than a decade since the labor issues of major sports leagues have dominated the conversation as they have this summer. (Unless you want to count the NHL as a “major” sports league.) Major League Baseball, surprisingly enough, has a stable labor situation, but the NFL just brought itself back from the brink of apocalypse after a nineteen-week lockout that caused much permanent damage, and the NBA is in the midst of a fierce lockout, with the cancellation of the season looming as a legitimate possibility. I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know—which is fantastic news.

Today the general public is a lot more knowledgeable about matters of sports labor issues, and everything else, than it was a decade ago. In 1987 the NFL players went on strike mainly because they wanted to repeal the Rozelle Rule, which gave teams compensation when they lost a player to free agency. (The players wanted unfettered free agency after failing to secure a higher percentage of NFL revenues during the 1982 work stoppage.) In 1994 Major League Baseball canceled the World Series because of the players union’s protracted opposition to a salary cap; the union argued that the owners should not be protected from their own worst instincts at the expense of the players. In 1998 the NBA locked out its players and eventually canceled thirty-two games of the season because of a league-instituted renegotiation of the collective bargaining agreement seeking a cap on player salaries. Each of these was an attempt by leagues to reduce the power of players to assert employee rights and maximize their own profit.

At the time, though, I didn’t know any of that. Like just about every sports fan I knew, I was disgusted by both sides. Oh, no, billionaires fighting with millionaires… men playing a boys’ game for a fortune… both sides are just greedy… a pox on both houses. (The highlight of this was an infamous 1998 pay-per-view exhibition game involving various locked-out NBA players, most of whom were vastly overweight and out of shape, namely Shawn Kemp, who was never the same afterward. The game was a PR disaster that played into the worst stereotypes of the pampered athlete. It was also, frankly, kind of hilarious: I’m pretty sure I saw Karl Malone eating a cheeseburger on the bench.)

The issues of the disagreement were largely unknown to me and most sports fans, a couple of arcane, poorly explained paragraphs at the end of a wire story, likely lopped off because of space constraints. Our only real response was disgust: if we wanted to delve into the complex issues at the center of the labor fights, we needed to have a sports law degree or a family member affected by the strikes/lockouts. Lacking either of those, we had to take the spokespeople from both sides at face value… something you should never, ever do with spokespeople.

Today we no longer have to take the word of men who claim to speak for us; we can make our own judgments and decisions. If we want to know the intricate details of the NBA labor issue, we can visit Larry Coon’s NBA Salary Cap FAQ at chafaq.com, where sports labor expert Coon unpacks every argument on both sides of the lockout. If the owners claim they cannot earn a profit under the current rules, Coon—along with smart reporters at ESPN.com, Yahoo.com, the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal, all with detailed stories available with a two-second click—checks it out, runs the math, assesses whether it’s true or not. We have no excuse to be uninformed anymore. It’s actually difficult not to understand what’s going on.

The NFL, whose demands on the players union are even

Will Leitch is the founding editor of the Gawker Media sports blog Deadspin, a contributing editor at New York magazine and the author of four books.

When I was growing up, my biggest sports hero was Roberto Clemente, the right fielder for the Pittsburgh Pirates. I was very young (6 years old in 1956, when he was in his second year of major-league baseball), and though I later learned lots of other things to admire him for, I was mostly just blown away by the intensity and grace with which he played the game. Every play, every inning. Three seconds of seeing him move at long distance on a tiny black-and-white TV set, and you could tell who it was. He would work his neck and shoulders constantly in the on-deck circle, then step haughtily into the batter’s box, slash at a “bad” pitch, hit a screaming line drive, then run the bases like a madman. Or make a basket catch in right field and throw a rope to the plate to beat the runner tagging up and trying to score. Though I grew up with a pretty mixed ethnic bag of people, we didn’t have any Puerto Ricans living near us at the time, so I didn’t really have even a media-based idea of who they were until West Side Story came out in ’61. I thought he was just a black guy with an Italian last name (and that Chuck Berry was a white dude who was into cars). Sports and music are often where people of different races and ethnicities first get to mix in America, and a sports hero is more often someone you want to “be like” than somebody who is anything “like you.”

John Sayles is a filmmaker and the author, most recently, of A Moment in the Sun (McSweeney’s).
Sports and Spectacle

by NOAM CHOMSKY

I...
Sex Sells Sex, Not Women’s Sports

by MARY JO KANE

“The newest kid on the women’s sports block is finding that the old formula for attention-getting is as robust as ever. ‘Sex sells,’ says Atlanta Beat defender Nancy Augustyniak, who was astonished to learn she finished third in a Playboy.com poll of the sexiest female soccer players.”

—Wendy Parker, Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Last winter, champion alpine skier Lindsey Vonn won the downhill gold medal at the Vancouver Winter Olympics, the first American woman to achieve gold in this prestigious event. From 2008 to 2010, Vonn also won three consecutive World Cup championships, the first US woman and second woman ever to accomplish such a feat. For her unprecedented achievements, Vonn was named Sportswoman of the Year by the US Olympic Committee.

Even Sports Illustrated—notorious for its lack of coverage of women’s sports—couldn’t ignore this historic moment and devoted its cover to Vonn. SI’s cover, however, blatantly portrayed Vonn as a sex object and spoke volumes about the rampant sexual depictions of women athletes. Rather than emphasize her singular athletic talent, the magazine depicted Vonn in a posed photograph, smiling at the camera in her ski regalia. What was most noticeable—and controversial—about the pose was its phallic nature: Vonn’s backside was arched at a forty-five-degree angle while superimposed over a mountain peak.

Offensive as this portrayal may have been, it came as no surprise to sports-media scholars. Over the past three decades we have amassed a large body of empirical evidence demonstrating that sportswomen are significantly more likely to be portrayed in ways that emphasize their femininity and heterosexuality rather than their athletic prowess. Study after study has revealed that newspaper and TV coverage around the globe routinely and systematically focuses on the athletic exploits of male athletes while offering hypersexualized images of their female counterparts.

These findings are no trivial matter. Scholars have long argued that a major consequence of the media’s tendency to sexualize women’s athletic accomplishments is the reinforcement of their status as second-class citizens in one of the most powerful economic, social and political institutions on the planet. In doing so, media images that emphasize femininity/sexuality actually suppress interest in, not to mention respect for, women’s sports.

Many of those charged with promoting women’s sports take an entirely different view. As the quote beginning this article makes clear, the “sex sells” strategy remains rampant among sports journalists and marketers, who also believe that reaffirming traditional notions of femininity and heterosexuality is a critical sales strategy. This approach, or so the argument goes, reassures (especially male) fans, corporate sponsors and TV audiences that females can engage in highly competitive sports while retaining a nontreathening femininity.

The widely held assumption that sexualizing female athletes is the most effective way to promote women’s sports creates cognitive dissonance. To begin with, marketing campaigns for leagues like the WNBA also emphasize the wholesome nature of women’s sports, highlighting the connection between fathers and daughters. The underlying message is that women’s sports embrace traditional “family values” and that their appeal cuts across generational lines. Given this message, a “sex sells” strategy is counterproductive. How many fathers would accept the notion that support for their daughters’ sports participation would be increased by having them pose nude in Playboy? And should we buy the argument that what generates fan interest is how pretty athletes are versus how well they perform under pressure?

Mary Jo Kane is the director of the Tucker Center for Research on Girls and Women in Sport at the University of Minnesota.
I don’t disagree that when SI publishes its swimsuit issue males are quite interested in buying that particular issue of the magazine. It does not automatically follow, however, that their interest in women’s sports has increased. On the contrary, I would argue that what males are interested in consuming is not a women’s athletic event but sportswomen’s bodies as objects of sexual desire.

To investigate empirically whether sex truly sells women’s sports, I conducted a series of focus groups based on gender and age (18–34; 35–55) with a colleague at the University of Minnesota. Study participants were shown photographs of female athletes ranging from on-court athletic competence to wholesome “girls next door” to soft pornography and asked to indicate which images increased their interest in reading about, watching on TV and attending a women’s sporting event.

Our findings revealed that in the vast majority of cases, a “sex sells” approach offended the core fan base of women’s sports—women and older men. These two groups rated the image that portrayed athletic prowess as the one most likely to influence their interest in women’s sports. Said one younger female: “This image [of a WNBA player driving toward the basket] really sucked me in. I want to be there. I want to be part of that feeling.” In contrast, younger and older females, as well as older males, were offended by the hypersexualized images. One older male said: “If she [Serena Williams in a sexually provocative pose] were my sister I’d come in, slap the photographer, grab her and leave.”

Even when younger males, a prime target audience, indicated that sexually provocative images were “hot,” they also stated that such images did not fundamentally increase their interest in women’s sports, particularly when it came to attending a sporting event. The key takeaway? Sex sells sex, not women’s sports.

So what does sell women’s sports? The answer lies with women’s college basketball and the coverage it receives on ESPN. Each year during the NCAA’s March Madness tournament, women’s hoops garner record attendance and TV ratings. Coverage of the women’s Final Four bears a remarkable resemblance to that of the men’s—a focus on great traditions, conference rivalries (Duke vs. North Carolina), legendary coaches (Pat Summit vs. Geno Auriemma)—and, most important, showcasing sportswomen as physically gifted, mentally tough, grace-under-pressure athletes.

Millions of fans around the globe just witnessed such media images and narratives during coverage of the Women’s World Cup in Germany. Perhaps such coverage will start a trend whereby those who cover women’s sports will simply turn on the camera and let us see the reality—not the sexualized caricature—of today’s female athletes. If and when that happens, sportswomen will receive the respect and admiration they so richly deserve.

America’s Deepest Closet

Why does the sports world remain fiercely hostile to open participation by LGBT athletes?

by SHERRY WOLF

Last fall, Kye Allums, a George Washington University basketball player, made the courageous decision to come out as transgender. As Allums awaits surgery to transition from the female body he was born with, he is making history as the first publicly transgender athlete to play Division I women’s basketball. The response from coaches and teammates was best summed up by the South Florida Gay News’s headline: Kye Allums Is Trans; World Does Not End.

But is this story of tolerance a singular exception or another sign that the sports world is becoming friendlier to LGBT athletes? Of the approximately 3,500 men who play in the big four American sports—football, baseball, basketball and hockey—not one has come out of the closet while playing professionally. Of the 350 women’s Division I basketball teams in the NCAA, Portland State’s Sherri Murrell is the first and only coach to come out as a lesbian (the “no lesbians” edict in college basketball is the subject of a powerful documentary, Training Rules).

A majority of Americans accept gay and lesbian relations. Antidiscrimination and marriage laws are slowly catching up to social consciousness. So why does the world of sports, such a dominant part of our culture, remain fiercely hostile to open participation by LGBT people?

It’s tempting to presume that sports simply reflect the prevailing ideas in society and that athletes and fans make up a particularly homophobic demographic, but that doesn’t appear to be the case. A Sports Illustrated survey among 1,400 pro athletes in the big four sports shows that a solid majority in every league would welcome an openly gay teammate.

With a stunning 80 percent support, NHL players are practically ready to host Lady Gaga on their Gay Pride float, perhaps reflecting the abundance of players from gay-friendly Canada. In fact, Blackhawks defenseman Brent Sopel accepted an invitation from the Chicago Gay Hockey Association to stand atop its float alongside his team’s Stanley Cup trophy at the 2010 Gay Pride parade.

Even 57 percent of NFL players, emblems of the most orthodox hyper-masculinity, say they would play with an openly gay teammate, despite bugaboos about the locker-room showers.

Media tend to focus on the crassly bigoted statements of players like former NBA all-star Tim Hardaway, who declared “I hate gay people” in response to the 2007 coming-out story of retired NBA player John Amaechi; or the verbal knuckle-dragging of former baseball player John Rocker, who told SI he didn’t want to sit “next to some queer with AIDS” while ranting against blacks, immigrants and multiculturalism.

Far less attention is given to sports figures like ex-New York
Knicks coach Isiah Thomas, who said he’d “make damn sure there’s no problem” on his team if a player came out; or former quarterback and ex-ESPN commentator Sean Salisbury, who offered this advice to any homophobic football player after retired NFLer Esera Tuaolo came out in 2002: “Get over it…. If you think there aren’t other gay players, you’re crazy. And it takes a lot more of a man to do what Esera has done than it does to threaten someone for being different.”

As for the fans, in a poll published by SI in 2005, an astounding 86 percent said that it’s “O.K. for male athletes to participate in sports, even if they are openly gay.” Given these numbers, which reflect the growing embrace of sexual diversity throughout the population, we need a different explanation for why the locker room remains America’s deepest closet.

Most Americans believe organized sports have always been the sex-segregated, testosterone-infused nationalistic battles for dominance that define much of today’s big-money athletics. But like sexuality itself, organized sports were socially constructed in the nineteenth century along with the rise of capitalism.

As American society evolved from agrarianism to industrialism, a huge influx of immigrants settled in growing cities. Sports were consciously used to win them over to a fabricated national identity, and to improve the flagging health of newly industrialized working-class men. As for the scions of the elite, playing sports was thought necessary to prevent these future masters of the universe from going soft. In an increasingly mechanized world where the ethos of competition came to dominate, the rules, teams and nationalism of sports became part of the new “American way.” Theodore Roosevelt hyped “vigorously manly out-door sports” as an antidote to effete urbanization.

Viewed historically, sports culture doesn’t simply reflect the prevailing gender and sexual biases of its time; it helps to shape them. The brutal machismo pounded into male athletes from the earliest age—they are told not to “throw like a girl” or to “man up” and play through extreme pain—reinforces the denigration of femininity and vulnerability; as does the classic coaching tendency to mock players by calling them “ladies” or “girls” when they’re slow or when they drop the ball.

Sociologist Eric Anderson interviewed dozens of athletes, some closeted, for his book In the Game: Gay Athletes and the Cult of Masculinity and found that even gay athletes feel pressure to deride other male athletes. “I have to call them fags, or fear being called one myself,” one closeted high school football player reported. The pervasive reality of this gender forte is that it constructs a fiction of the male athlete as an idealized heterosexual while stigmatizing women in sports as unnatural outliers whose sexuality is universally suspect.

Though men’s sports tend to avoid the issue of homosexuality, a near-McCarthyite anti-lesbian atmosphere prevails on many women’s teams. The most notorious example is Rene Portland, who reportedly enforced a “no drinking, no drugs, no lesbians” rule throughout her twenty-seven-year career coaching women’s basketball at Penn State, which ended in 2007. More recently, allegations of public rants and verbal humiliation of players suspected of lesbianism by Shann Hart, the women’s basketball coach at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, led several players to quit the team. (Hart was fired last fall.)

When current and former women’s college basketball players were surveyed, 55 percent said that “sexual orientation is an underlying topic of conversation with college recruiters.” The practice is known as “negative recruiting,” and according to ESPN, “homophobic pitches are unique to women’s games. They are an open secret in college hoops, almost as open as the fact that there are lesbians who play and coach.”

The fact that sports is a bastion of social reaction when it comes to sexuality is at least in part a reflection of the millions of dollars at stake in endorsement deals. If you walk into any gay or lesbian bar in the country, you’d think equality is brought to you by Absolut vodka. But no major brand is ready to hand over its national profile to an LGBT spokesperson, and it’s clear that being openly gay is a commercial liability for athletes.

I asked Pat Griffin, author of Strong Women, Deep Closets, what impact, if any, team owners and advertisers have on professional athletes’ decisions to remain closeted. “Though we have come a ways since Billie Jean King and Martina Navratilova lost almost all of their endorsements when they came out, it is still a risk—probably more so for gay male athletes,” Griffin said. “Advertisers and team owners are basically conservative, both socially and politically. They are about the money. That means unless they can figure out a way to make supporting an openly LGBT athlete make money, they aren’t going to risk threatening their brand.”

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**Dan Rather Reports: Rube Walker**

Third-string catchers are rarely anybody’s hero, but Rube Walker was and remains one of mine. I met him when he was headed down and out of the major leagues. He’d been a player with the Cubs and Dodgers—only a .227 lifetime hitter, but the classic “rocking chair” catcher whom pitchers love. With his ever-present chaw of tobacco and a drawl as Southern as frost on cotton leaves, he was a throwback to the rural poverty of America in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1939, he’d just become a player-manager with the Triple-A Houston Buffaloes. I was a full-time general reporter moonlighting as the radio play-by-play man for the Buffs.

Rube took me and my wife, Jean, newlyweds all young, fresh, eager and ambitious, under his wing—treated us like a father. He had a heart as big as a locomotive, full of compassion, generosity and understanding. He helped the community’s poor; he taught young players and counseled old ones; he was a jovial encourager to everyone. In so doing, he taught us what it was to be a “big leaguer,” in the best, most noble sense of the term.

The Buffs fired him in midseason, on Father’s Day. When he told us, tears welled in Jean’s eyes. Rube touched her on the shoulder and said, “Don’t fret, hon’. Life’s full of curveballs.”

Dan Rather, the former news anchor for CBS Evening News, is the managing editor and anchor of the TV news magazine Dan Rather Reports on HDNet.
Despite these cultural obstacles, the once hermetically sealed locker-room closet is slowly cracking open. As with so many liberatory struggles, young people are at the forefront, aided by a few veteran LGBT athletes and advocates.

In March Griffin launched Changing the Game, a project of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, to help LGBT athletes and coaches come out and challenge the persistent homophobia in K–12 sports. Changing the Game is exactly the kind of project that a generation pounding away at the closet door could use to overturn the sports world’s asphyxiating gender norms and homophobia.

The NCAA has banned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Another milestone came in May, when the NBA fined basketball great Kobe Bryant $100,000 for calling a referee a “faggot.” It is hard to say whether the decision was prompted by Phoenix Suns’ CEO and president Rick Welts’s coming out to the league commissioner the day before. Nonetheless, fining players for verbal abuse is a step toward combating the homophobia that pervades sports culture.

Perhaps a courageous closeted male athlete will soon come out while playing and crack open the door a bit more. But the big money is on the growing number of extraordinarily talented and brave young LGBT athletes coming up through the ranks who are out, proud and playing to win more than just a game.

Squash and Revolution in Egypt

by PAUL WACHTER

The Gezira Sporting Club sits on Gezira Island, which lies in the Nile River and is connected to greater Cairo by three bridges. The neighborhood, a place of embassies and luxury hotels, has surrendered to the din and dirt of the greater city. Yet the club remains an escape even in these revolutionary times. Inside the sprawling compound, there’s a golf course, horse racetrack, two pools, restaurants and a movie theater. There are also sixteen squash courts, and it’s here, on any given day, where you’ll find many of the world’s top players.

One day in late April, I ran into world No. 3 Karim Darwish; his wife, Engy Kheirallah (No. 37); and Tarek Momen, who is ranked No. 22. Other professionals, including world No. 2 Ramy Ashour, frequent the equally posh Heliopolis Club across town. Visiting a Cairene squash club is akin to walking into your local YMCA gym and finding LeBron James, Steve Nash and Kobe Bryant shooting hoops.

Of the top fifteen men’s players in the world, seven are Egyptian, and the women’s side is not far behind. That the country has emerged as a powerhouse in the past decade is no accident. The sport had an influential booster: deposed president Hosni Mubarak. And yet, in monitoring the squash news as the try has emerged as a powerhouse in the past decade is no accident. The sport had an influential booster: deposed president Hosni Mubarak. And yet, in monitoring the squash news as the masses took to the streets last winter, I could detect no fondness for the president-patron. “The people are fed up,” Momen told me that while some of his fellow pros were involved in sessions. Amir Wagih, the 43-year-old Egyptian national coach volunteered, “Of course, the corruption had to end.”

It took only a couple of points for me to realize what I had gotten myself into: a cardiovascular assault like I’d never before experienced. Had I played Roger Federer in tennis, the points would have been mercifully brief—an ace here, a forehand winner there. But a decent athlete can get to a lot of squash shots. And so I scammed around the court, lunging for one ball and then another, until I was tugged far out of position and Momen put the ball away. There was no “playlet of sudden reversals,” as the novelist Ian McEwan once whimsically described the sport. Only anguish. We played five games (to 11), and I won a total of eleven points, each of which can either be attributed to luck or my opponent’s kindness. When it was over I was dripping in sweat, my pulse racing, while Momen looked as though he had just awoken from a nap.

After we sat down and I’d caught my breath, I steered the conversation to politics. But Momen, 23, didn’t have much to say, despite his earlier comments in Michigan. “I’m not very into politics,” he said. When I pushed him further, he only volunteered, “Of course, the corruption had to end.”

This was consistent with what I heard from the other players at the club. I asked Darwish, who is six years older than Momen, what he had told other, non-Egyptian players when they asked him about the uprising. “I tell them that I’m not really into politics,” he said. “I tell them that I’m hoping for the best.” Like many of the world’s professional athletes, Darwish had adopted a public persona of apolitical blandness.

Darwish was playing in Sweden when the mass protests broke out. But even players at home didn’t find their lives disrupted that much. A few local tournaments were canceled, and the regime-ordered curfew meant a week’s loss of evening practice sessions. Amir Wagih, the 43-year-old Egyptian national coach and a former professional player, told me that while some of the top pros and juniors had gone to Tahrir Square, they hadn’t camped out there. “It was a good experience for them, to go and come back,” he said. “The revolution people, they stayed there for a month.” Wagih added that the revolutionaries of Tahrir were “Muslim people,” a refrain I would hear often in Cairo squash circles. But Wagih is also Muslim, as are the vast

majority of Egypt’s players. By “Muslim,” he meant the Muslim Brotherhood and their religiously conservative supporters. (Among other concerns he had about the Brotherhood was the fear that if religious conservatives came to power, they’d put an end to the women’s game.)

I spoke with Darwish’s wife, Kheirallah, on another day at the Gezira Club. The Alexandria native opened up more than her husband. “I think you’ll find that almost everyone was for the revolution,” she said. “But not necessarily how it was handled.” Kheirallah thought Mubarak should have been allowed to stay in power through September. Such an allowance would have minimized the economic disruptions, she said. For her, the shock (and joy—real, if muted) of Mubarak’s fall had given way to a deeper anxiety about the country’s future.

It’s a bourgeois anxiety. Top-10 squash players like Darwish, whose father owned a Cairo printing house, can earn $500,000 a year in prize money and sponsorships—about 100 times more than the country’s per capita income. Mubarak had ruled for thirty years, longer than either Darwish or Kheirallah had been alive. And before Mubarak there were the autocracies of Sadat and Nasser. Yet many of the elites—and not only squash players—were already impatient with this nascent political awakening. Wagih expressed his frustration over tea one morning. “The time for talking is over,” he said. “Now we need to work. Not just sitting and talking. Look at Germany, Japan and China. They’re at the top of the world, and it’s because they’re working—they’re not just talking. Each day, I drive 300 to 400 kilometers, going from club to club. I am working from 7 am until 10 or 11 pm every day. That’s why I make a lot of money. But a lot of people just want to sit.”

At the Gezira Club, it was easy to forget there had been a revolution. Lounging by the pool, bikini-clad women spoke into their cellphones, switching seamlessly between Arabic and English, and they weren’t discussing politics. But the club also caters to some of Egypt’s most powerful politicians. Mohamed ElBaradei belongs to the club, membership director Ahmed Shafi El Sahn told me. So does Amr Moussa. Both are vying to become the nation’s first democratically elected president.

“And what about Mubarak’s allies?” I asked El Sahn. People like former Interior Minister Habib el-Adly, who, during my time in Cairo, was sitting in a jail cell? Or other ministers who had been forced out? El Sahn declined to say, offering instead a sly smile. “Well, these men are innocent until proven guilty, yes?” (On May 5 el-Adly was sentenced to twelve years in prison for corruption.)

Squash is believed to have been invented around 1830 at Harrow, the London school for the upper crust, and, like cricket, it was exported across the empire. Founded by British officers in 1882, the Gezira Club gradually (and reluctantly) began accepting Arab members early in the twentieth century. (In his memoir, Out of Place, Edward Said recalls being thrown out as a child, even though his family belonged.) The club was nationalized when Nasser came to power in 1952, and today the vast majority of the 40,000-odd families that belong are Egyptian.

In 1933, five years after Mubarak was born, Egypt’s first squash champion, F.D. Amr Bey, won the first of his six consecutive British Opens. It was Pakistan, however, that dominated the sport from the 1940s through the mid-’90s. Jahangir Khan alone won over 550 straight matches between 1981 and 1986. But Egyptian squash got a boost after Mubarak assumed the presidency in 1981. The former air force pilot was a competitive amateur. “He wasn’t greatly talented,” said Khaled Sobhy, a 51-year-old former top-50 player who now lives in the United States. “But Mubarak was strong, a fighter, and he went after every shot.” The president used to invite Sobhy and other top players for games in the 1980s. “It was a little intimidating, because you’d be playing the president and everyone watching would be a general,” he said. The pros wouldn’t throw games, but they were wary enough to at least let them seem competitive.

When he visited the United States, Mubarak often played with John Heinz, the late Republican senator from Pennsylvania, who was considered one of the best athletes in Congress. “Heinz used to get creamed,” recalled his former aide Dennis Culkin. “After a while, I don’t think he really looked forward to playing Mubarak, but he knew, diplomatically speaking, that it was the right thing to do.”

Mubarak’s love for the game helped drive its popularity in Egypt. “Of course if the president plays, it raises the sport’s profile,” Wagih said. Mubarak attended ceremonies for new squash centers and lent his prestige to Egyptian tournaments like the Hurghada, which draws the world’s top men and women. An even bigger event was the Al-Ahram International, inaugurated in 1996 and held against the backdrop of the Pyramids. In the

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first year of the tournament, a young Egyptian prodigy, Ahmed Barada, stormed to the finals, where he fell to Jansher Khan, then No. 1 in the world. Mubarak congratulated Barada on his showing, and two years later Barada won the tournament.

“It was a defining moment for Egyptian squash,” said Ramy Ashour, currently the country’s top player. Ashour is among those who credit Barada with inspiring the current flock of Egyptian stars. And though the Al-Ahram is no more, Egypt now hosts many smaller tournaments. “With our talent inside the country,” Wagih said, “we can host a tournament in Egypt and not only get a great local draw but attract foreign players.”

After Barada came the lefty Amr Shabana, 31, and Darwish. Both have held the No. 1 ranking. The women’s side has yet to produce a world champion—No. 8 Omneya Abdel Kawy is Egypt’s highest-ranked woman—though much is expected of Nour El Sherbini, who shocked the squash community by winning, at just 13, the 2009 under-19 world junior championships (beating her compatriot Nour El Tayeb). Meanwhile, it’s Ashour, who is just 23 and held the No. 1 spot for several months last year (before being overtaken by Britain’s 30-year-old Nick Matthew), who’s likely to dominate the men’s sport for years to come.

I met Ashour on my last night in Cairo. By then, I had seen a lot of pro-level squash, but I hadn’t seen anything quite like Ashour. It was Saturday evening at the Heliopolis Club, and he was playing practice games against not one but two opponents, one ranked around 80 in the world, the other around 150.

A decent pro doubles tennis team would destroy Rafael Nadal, just as two NBA benchwarmers would kill Lebron James in a game of two-on-one. Like these sports, squash is a game of territory and positioning. But here was Ashour winning. Often he was on the defensive, lurching for balls and sending desperate shots off the back wall. But when he had time to set up for a shot, he’d often drill the ball into a “nick,” the intersection of a side wall and the floor, producing a dribble of a winner. Otherwise, he’d draw an opponent toward the front wall with a drop shot shots off the back wall. But when he had time to set up for a shot, he’d often drill the ball into a “nick,” the intersection of a side wall and the floor, producing a dribble of a winner. Otherwise, 

Like many of his fellow Egyptian players, Ashour comes from an upper-middle-class household. His older brother, Hisham, played squash—he’s currently ranked No. 13 in the world—so it was only natural that Ramy, a “restless, naughty” kid by his own admission, would follow suit. At 16, just a few months after major knee surgery, he became the youngest winner of the world junior championships. He turned pro shortly afterward.

On January 26, a day after the anti-Mubarak protests broke out, Ashour beat Matthew in the final of the JPMorgan Chase Tournament of Champions in New York. In a thinly veiled shot at the ruling regime, he dedicated his win to “all of Egypt.” After honoring exhibition commitments in Canada, Ashour flew back to Cairo on February 3 and went immediately to Tahrir Square.

“It was a proud moment to be an Egyptian,” he told me. “I shouted in Tahrir, and then I went outside Mubarak’s house—he lives close to me—and did the same.”

Ashour said he understood the apprehension of some of his peers. “Look, there were some shameful scenes during the uprising, and it’s natural to be scared,” he said. He pointed to subsequent prison breaks and scattered sectarian clashes. “For sure, it’s not 100 percent secure. But there was no way the revolution was going to go absolutely smoothly.”

Ashour also acknowledged that wealthy squash players, and many other segments of the elite, weren’t mistreated under Mubarak. “I was actually supposed to meet him soon, for the first time,” he said. “And I can’t say I didn’t want to, to get that sort of recognition for what I’ve done in squash.”

“But that’s just squash,” he continued. “Under Mubarak, a lot of people were being mistreated. The middle class was getting squeezed, and there was tons of poverty. There was corruption everywhere. Even me, who didn’t suffer like that, could feel it on the streets—the corruptness of the regime. You saw the police, and they stared at you and acted like you work for them, not that they work for you. The regime ordered people to shoot the people, and it wanted the military to do the same.”

Ashour agreed that the future was uncertain, echoing in gentler words what a friend in Cairo, who works for a democracy-building organization, had told me: “Anybody who tells you they know what’s going to happen in Egypt is full of shit.” But Ashour insisted that “we’ve done the hard part, and now we just need to keep going.”

It was the frankest political conversation I had had with a squash player in Cairo, and I asked Ashour if he had political ambitions. “No, I’ll never be a politician,” he demurred. “But for me, it’s important to say I’m for the revolution. I don’t think you can sit on the sidelines. Every tournament I’ll dedicate to Egypt, and I’ll stay in Cairo, and one day I’ll tell my grandchildren about what happened. That’s my part, don’t you think?”

Mark Cuban

I could never make up my mind who my ultimate sports hero was. One day it was Willie Stargell. The next day it was Roberto Clemente. Growing up in Pittsburgh, in an era when the Steelers were terrible every year, the Pirates, unlike today, were the team every kid on the block loved. Playing baseball what seemed like every day, I had to make my choice. Did I windmill my bat while waiting for a pitch, like Stargell, or put my foot deep in the batter’s box and rub out the lines, like Clemente? I tried to perfect both. But it really didn’t matter, because I rooted hard for both, listening to Bob Prince make the call for every game on KDKA radio. I was undeterred when neighbor kids were respectful of my game but wondered why I chose colored players to look up to. Honestly, I never understood the question. Willie and Roberto weren’t just the best; they were greatness. That’s all that mattered then, and to this day it’s all that matters.

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The Black Athlete Today

by MIKE TILLERY

In 1968, amid the fires of the Black Freedom Struggle, Sports Illustrated’s Jack Olsen wrote the groundbreaking and controversial piece “The Black Athlete—A Shameful Story.” It was an overview of black athletes in revolt. At the time, the best athletes in the country—Jim Brown, Bill Russell, Lew Alcindor (soon-to-be Kareem Abdul-Jabbar) and Muhammad Ali—were a part of this revolt. (There were African-American women athletes who would have been a part of this movement, but they found themselves shut out.) In addition, a group of African-American athletes, led by Tommie Smith, Lee Evans and John Carlos, were threatening to boycott that year’s Olympic Games in Mexico City. Olsen—for better or worse—focused on the shock felt by mainstream white sports fans that such a revolt would even be necessary.

As Olsen wrote, “What is happening today amounts to a revolt by the black athlete against the framework and attitudes of American sport, and that such a thing could occur in his own pet province has astonished the white sports follower. The reason for the astonishment is the man in the grandstand knows nothing about the Negro athlete whom he professes to understand, appreciate and ennoble as a symbol of the enlightened attitude of the world of sport toward segregation and intolerance. A wall of ignorance and unfounded suppositions is shielding the fan from the realities of the black athlete’s background and his hopes.”

Fast-forward to 2011: in an era of twenty-four-hour sports media, the dynamics described by Olsen are profoundly different but also disturbingly similar. Cable networks and fans lining up for luxury boxes are more distanced than ever from the reality that black athletes travel through to make it to the big leagues. In an era of fantasy sports, fans dream of controlling players instead of becoming them. The players also tend to come from impoverished backgrounds, as they did forty years ago, while becoming much wealthier than their forebears. That has created a canyon between the black player and the white fan and overwhelmingly white press corps. And the latitude of that press corps to be brazenly racist is often jaw-dropping. Witness prominent ESPN national radio host Colin Cowherd’s recent assertion that (white) NFL commissioner Roger Goodell is a “father figure” to African-American football players who never had the paternal structure and discipline that Goodell provides. Somehow he still has a job. This kind of easy ignorance about and antipathy toward African-American athletes has created a new phenomenon: the black athletic boogeyman.

Websites now compete for attention by parading the latest steroid user. Mendenhall argued on Twitter that rejoicing over Osama bin Laden’s death was barbaric. Harrison posed for a magazine with two of his guns and unleashed a stream of invective at Goodell (calling him a “faggot”). Yet despite the vast differences in the legality and morality of these acts, each athlete was pilloried in the press in a similar way: as a symbol of the moral degeneracy of black athletes. It’s twenty-first-century racism, and sports celebrity is used to make it palatable. After all, they’re rich, right?

Today there is no black freedom struggle—no movement—to challenge this state of affairs. That makes athletes hesitant to speak out. But unlike in 1968, when publications like Sports Illustrated dominated public opinion, athletes today have the financial and media power to challenge the way they’re depicted in the press. Social media have also had an empowering effect. Athletes can speak out more easily and thus play a role in how “the black athlete” is perceived. In the words of NBA player Etan Thomas, this “can be seen as a burden or blessing.”

“Athletes have a big responsibility,” NBA guard Deron Williams said to me. “They have a big audience. If they have an opinion and want it heard, there’s no better way to do it. We have the media outlets available to get your voice heard, so you go ahead and speak on it.”

The question is how to use this platform to make change and not just become the whipping boy of the moment. NBA all-star Grant Hill, now pushing 40, told me the following: “I think from where we are now to when my dad first entered the whole realm of professional sports, obviously we were better suited. We have more control of our careers. We have more of a voice. Whether it’s in social media or what have you, the African-American athlete has more wealth and more power. In terms of social consciousness, times are a little different than what Jim Brown, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Muhammad Ali had to go through. Because of those athletes, things are a little different. The main difference is power—the ability to move from team to team and also speak your mind.”

The question is, How can more athletes be encouraged to speak their mind? One who preferred to remain anonymous said to me, “I don’t speak out because all I’ll be doing is giving material to the local sports-radio assholes. Why would I want to make their lives easier?”

We need a movement to defend African-American athletes and their right to speak out, so they will feel they have a base of support. But even more critically, athletes need to realize that they can shape their own image much more successfully than athletes of previous generations could. The perpetual news cycle needs material. We can feed the beast, or the beast will feed on us, and if it does, we’ll be stuck in a cycle where athletic success fuels rather than challenges racism in America. Too many athletes do too much good to have it swallowed up, unreported and forgotten.

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The Venice Biennale is the United Nations of art exhibitions. It represents high ideals and noble aspirations, and reliably shows itself incapable of fulfilling them. This year’s edition, the fifty-fourth, on view through November 27, is even more disappointing than usual, which is a bit of a surprise because its directorship was entrusted to Bice Curiger, the Swiss curator of Zurich Kunsthaus and editor of the au courant magazine Parkett. Her broad familiarity with contemporary art across the world should have been ideal preparation for the many difficult tasks she faced at the Biennale, above all the organization of its vast main exhibition.

As usual, this year the main exhibition is uneasily divided between the Central Pavilion in the spacious Giardini della Biennale (the former Italian Pavilion) and the old shipbuilding warrens of the Arsenale, a fifteen- or twenty-minute walk away. For a long time the trend was to keep expanding the curatorial section of the Biennale—ever more space, ever more artists. The unwieldiness spun out of control in 2003, when Francesco Bonami’s sprawling exhibition, “Dreams and Conflicts: The Dictatorship of the Viewer,” took the form of a sort of conglomerate of exhibitions, some curated by Bonami and others farmed out to various colleagues.

Since then, the successive curators have reined in the shows’ centrifugal tendencies, but only to some degree. None have thought to bypass the Arsenale or the Central Pavilion and make a unified exhibition in a single location, but the urge to encompass more and more artists seems to have been stifled. On the other hand, the compulsion to give the exhibitions grandiose titles that don’t commit the curator to any particular aesthetic or intellectual program has remained irresistible. Curiger has offered “ILLUMInations,” evoking light both in the literal and the intellectual sense (not to mention the inevitable references to Arthur Rimbaud and Walter Benjamin), while also insisting that within the global art world, the idea of the nation is still an important and relevant one. No kidding: as always,
nationhood is everywhere at the Biennale, no more so than in the pavilions of dozens of countries ranging alphabetically from Albania to Zimbabwe and in size from the Republic of San Marino to the People's Republic of China, not to mention the "collateral exhibitions," of which several represent such peoples-without-a-nation as the Greeks and Romans. While every artist at the Biennale is somehow or other ascribed to a nation, for what that's worth, if you read their biographies in the catalog you'll learn that many of them reside outside the country of their birth. What does that suggest about Curiger's contention that "the idea of 'nations' can be taken in metaphorical relation to the community"? Art relates to a different, more dispersed and more ambivalent form of community than that of the contemporary nation-state. It somehow associates at once with the global circulation of capital (and of capitalists) that occurs somewhere in the stratosphere above the terrain of the state, and with the vast underground migrations of people, whether legally or otherwise, across borders always more permeable than the governments that police them would like to believe. But art often relates antagonistically, if at all, to the sovereign states that claim to divide up the earth's landmass among themselves. It sometimes seems that the cultural values of developed countries, at least, can be manifested only through antagonism, by artists biting the hand that feeds them.

The paradigmatic example of this antagonism is probably Hans Haacke's installation *Germania*, for which the artist (a longtime resident of the United States) tore up the floor of the German Pavilion in 1993, thereby winning (together with Nam June Paik) that year's Golden Lion for best national pavilion. Perhaps the organizers of this year's American Pavilion hoped for a similarly antagonistic triumph when they selected Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla to represent the nation; the work of this Puerto Rico–based collaborative duo has often highlighted the traces of the island's quasi-colonial status under the Stars and Stripes. Given the big soap box of the Biennale, they might have been expected to turn up the volume on their normally rather understated denunciations. But although they did pull off one excellent (if incredibly spendthrift) joke—an ATM joke—functions as a pipe organ, playing portentously dissonant chords when a PIN number is entered to make a transaction—most of their satire of American life is ham-fisted and tame, not excluding the overturned tank repurposed as an exercise machine parked in front of the pavilion. In any case, it is curious that polemics about nationalism and particular national cultures are more common in the national pavilions—one might have thought that the internal politics of the state bodies that do the commissioning would impede the acceptance of work that seems to critique the state—than in the relatively autonomous curated exhibitions, including Curiger's, with its evocation of the idea of the state in its title. Perhaps things would have been different if Curiger had included artists whose lives and work have been dramatically at odds with accepted ideas of nationhood, such as Gustav Metzger, who has been living in Britain as a stateless person since the 1940s. Curiger claims that "in an understated and sporadic way the theme of the outsider plays a not insignificant role" in the exhibition—but that role is not large enough to exert sufficient pressure on the Biennale's accent on nationality.

Another reason this year's Biennale seems strangely becalmed is the indifferent quality, and the overfamiliarity, of so much of the art, whether in the exhibition or the pavilions. Naturally there are exceptions: I was particularly taken with Gabriel Kuri's light-handed sculptural assemblages and the videos of Nathaniel Melors, which bring something of Monty Python's anarchic humor to an otherwise pretty earnest exhibition. But these are rare. "The stuffed-shirt milieu of the early Biennale," the catalog of the latest one announces, "maintained a belated historicism as its expression of social distinction." The implication is that things have changed, but how much? Historicism is everywhere here, especially in the heavily ironic mode of Urs Fischer's giant wax candle in the form of Giambologna's Mannerist sculpture *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, slowly melting away in the Arsenal. As for the curator, one wishes her sense of irony had been sharper. Is it all that revelatory to drag three big Tintorettos to the Central Pavilion from the Galleria dell'Accademia and the church of San Giorgio Maggiore, as Curiger has done—as though the people who come to look at contemporary art would never have thought of spending just as much time in the museums and churches of Venice as at the Biennale? Is it controversial to say that such works "still possess the power to engage a contemporary audience," as if the only way engagement can be elicited is through theatrical juxtapositions? And when Curiger writes of the pieces she has chosen by a contemporary artist such as Christopher Wool—eerily empty silkscreens on canvas of seemingly random blotches, like blown-up lab records of bloodstains from a crime scene—that "one can instantly believe that he has been studying Tintoretto's works closely for years on end," well, at first you might think that she's making a little joke, but then that she is in desperate need of an argument. Not that she is mistaken to suggest that Wool has studied Tintoretto with interest; any serious painter would. But it is presumptuous to suggest that "one can instantly" ascertain the mark of Tintoretto on Wool's canvases, the implication being that what might take an artist years of study and practice to articulate can be seen in a flash by the knowing curator, like a wink exchanged between artist and viewer, two astute connoisseurs of signature brands.

Like previous Venice directors, Curiger has abandoned the principal, quasi-journalistic function of a biennial: to present and make sense of new developments in art, especially for a broad public that will not have been assiduously attending its local galleries and museums, let alone jetting around the world to see what's being shown elsewhere. Curiger's weakness for revisiting works of earlier decades—not just by the likes of Tintoretto but by well-known artists of the recent past like the painters Jack Goldstein and Sigmar Polke and the photographer Luigi Ghirri—suggests, as does the choice of so many weak new pieces by well-known artists, that her show is not primarily about interpreting the art of the present. If a sense of the moment is conveyed, it is not necessarily by the art but rather by the assumption that curating is a sovereign enterprise, an end in itself, manifested not only by the choice and juxtaposition of works but also by the contriving of theatrical architectural scenarios to control the presentation of the art.
This approach has been a mainstay at Venice since at least 1999, when the director was the fabled Harald Szeemann, “for whom exhibiting was the continuation of art by curatorial means,” as art historians Beat Wyss and Jörg Scheller put it in this year’s catalog. What is most striking is the caution with which Curiger stakes out her curatorial dominion, especially when compared with the abundance of ideas, cultivated idiosyncrasy and showmanlike panache Szeemann evinced in his long career as a curator, though hardly most brilliantly in Venice. At least Curiger hasn’t turned her exhibition into a sort of funfair, as some curators try to do these days (a strategy many artists are all too willing to play along with). She knows that good art does not give up its secrets quickly or easily. But the dominating presence of the three great Tintorettos at the heart of her Central Pavilion is a bit of a fizzle as coup de théâtre. Hardly more effective was her invitation to four of the artists in “ILLUMInations” to make works that would function as what she calls “para-pavilions,” “largish structures of a sculptural, architectural nature capable of harboring works by other artists.” Far from helping bring artworks “into a more intense exchange with one another,” as she hoped, the arrangement encourages forced comparisons. Monika Sosnowska’s vaguely star-shaped structure, for example, creates cramped, uneasy spaces that merely distract from works that have nothing in common with it or one another, namely South African photographer David Goldblatt’s “Ex-Offenders at the Scene of the Crime,” a documentary series about people trying to live with their criminal pasts, and British artist Haroon Mirza’s tenuous, almost self-effacing installation incorporating sound, light and makeshift objects. The most successful of the para-pavilions is the one made by Franz West for the Arsenale. It is a rendition of his kitchen in Austria, including all the works by his friends that normally hang there, thereby introducing his own curatorial choices into Curiger’s overarching structure, not to mention a dose of honest-to-goodness homeliness to remind us that even in the Biennale’s high-octane setting, it remains possible to look at artworks empathically rather than judgmentally.

That judgmental gaze, and the nervousness it induces in artists and curators alike, is a problem for any biennial. There’s something self-contradictory about exhibitions on this scale. Not conducive to focused, unhurried engagement with art, they demand a lot of triage on the viewer’s part: one has to check things out quickly and superficially, devoting more time and attention only to relatively few works, because they’ve simply caught your eye or because they’re by artists you already know. But as for the rest, they have a much harder time getting seen than they would in a typical art gallery show. Whatever else Curiger’s para-pavilions are supposed to be, they are also an attempt to solve the problem of scale by creating smaller, more intimate, self-contained environments within the Biennale’s visual melee and crush of people. That’s a good thing, but at the same time the effort can feel strained and artificial, and above all something of an imposition on the viewer. In the para-pavilions you can’t wander freely. Someone—the curator, the artist, whoever—is trying to compel you to move through the space in a certain way and no other, to see things in a given relationship and no other, to see and understand and experience the art in a certain way and no other. One naturally rebels, because the viewer’s liberty is or should be one of the basic givens of art. Not “the dictatorship of the common man,” a slogan that Szeemann famously didn’t use, but the viewer’s liberty, which we certainly do not give up quickly or easily.
Kurt Schwitters meets CNN in the hyperbolic cross-references of ‘Crystal of Resistance.’

are vaguely disquieting, but the concept is pretty thin and hardly needs to be reiterated so many times. All the worse, then, that the artist has contrived a mazelike structure for the interior of the pavilion to lead the viewer from piece to piece, as if each one were so unusual it deserved its own chapel. Instead, each strains for the same effect, and isolating them from one another doesn’t hide it.

Another maze is to be found in the Danish Pavilion, and it doesn’t convey much about the doings of contemporary Danish artists. The Danish Arts Council has put the Greek curator Katerina Gregos in charge, and she has chosen eighteen mostly very good artists from ten countries—only a couple of them are from Denmark—for an exhibition called “Speech Matters,” part of whose purpose, she says, is to show that “the essence of visual artistic practice…fundamentally entails conditions of freedom of expression.” It’s pretty to think so, though I suspect that art may thrive just as well under conditions of restraint as of freedom; but in either case, what does any of that have to do with the complicated multileveled scenography through which the various artworks are disposed throughout the Danish Pavilion? It’s hard not to see the pavilion as a rambling art installation by Gregos that has less to say about her announced theme than most of the individual works do on their own.

The competition between art and curating is even more intense in the German Pavilion, where there is a one-man show devoted to Christoph Schlingensief, a film and theater director who recently devoted himself to installation art. He’s a big name in Germany, although less well-known abroad. In August 2010, a few months after he accepted the invitation to exhibit in Venice, Schlingensief died of cancer. He was not yet 50 years old. Thus, as the pavilion’s curator, Susanne Gaensheimer, explains, “What was conceived as his personal project now turned into a collective reconsideration of his existing work”—although it looked less like a reconsideration than a canonization. The pavilion has been turned into a sort of church in which Schlingensief’s films function as altarpieces. Its inspiration is a Schlingensief installation called A Church of Fear vs. the Alien Within, but it feels like a chapel devoted to Schlingensief himself, erected to encourage not disinterested understanding but devotional pathos. Is this what the artist would have wanted? There’s no way of knowing, but we can be sure that had he lived he would have done it differently. He might well have wanted to create a single immersive installation out of many of his works, which is essentially what Gaensheimer has done—but it all would have been his work, however collaborative. What we see in Venice seems instead to be Gaensheimer’s unacknowledged artwork in homage to Schlingensief, using his works as raw materials—a very different proposition altogether, and one that is inappropriate in this context, above all because of that lack of acknowledgment.

A different way of reappraising the works of the dead can be found in the Czech Pavilion. There, Dominik Lang, until this year’s Biennale an artist hardly known outside his homeland, offers a cool yet poignant look at a personal history that is also a social and artistic one. What one sees in this exhibition, “The Sleeping City,” is a sequence of installations built around plaster sculptures, some of them broken, done in a somewhat generic style of abstracted figuration redolent of the 1950s, and encompassed by pieces of furniture and other everyday objects; for example, a statue of a girl leaning over to pet a dog breaks through a wooden table as if it were the surface of a pond. The plaster sculptures were made by Jiri Lang, Dominik’s father, but never exhibited. The young artist looks back at his father’s efforts with equal measure of irony and affection; he honors him without heroizing him. Here is an artist who has succeeded in his aspiration to “deeply explore the past to be able to understand the present whatever risk it takes and whatever disturbing or disappointing facts it might reveal.”” The relationship between past and present in art, in families, in nations is always bound to encompass a lot of regret; but there are ways that regret can be made bearable and even, in some way, usable. Wit and tenderness are chief among them, as Dominik Lang shows.

Tenderness is not among the eminent virtues of “Crystal of Resistance,” Thomas Hirschhorn’s work for the Swiss Pavilion, and while there is a lot of wit, it takes the form of the most scathing irony. But the intensity of passion made manifest is truly extraordinary. Here, if anywhere, the strategy of immersive installation—which seems so creaky in Curiger’s parapavilions, and in the Austrian, Danish, German and many other national pavilions—redeems itself. Hirschhorn speaks of how “the ‘crystal’ motif helps me to consciously point out just one single facet or several facets. Because it’s only as facets, with no overview, that things don’t lie.” More than in any work of Hirschhorn’s that I’ve seen, this installation gets the balance just right between vivid, sometimes unbearable details and the swirling reality that encompasses them without any resolution, so that all the elements work to intensify one another to the utmost. Kurt Schwitters meets CNN in the hyperbolic cross-reflections of this cavern of foil and plastic, in which everything is held together by brown tape. Information overload becomes a concrete corporeal sensation, yet individual details never stop arresting your gaze. One that sticks with me is a bank of video monitors showing close-ups of a finger flicking through images of war atrocities on an iPad. The frantic movement of the finger gives a new sense to Al Held’s famous remark that conceptual art is just pointing at things. Hirschhorn draws his imagery from the most traumatic political matter of the present, in all its mass-mediated horror, but he’s made a kind of beauty from it because he’s made it out of the honest desire to know, and to find a form, however makeshift, for that knowledge.
there’s a scene in the documentary film *Birmingham’s What I Think With* (1991), directed by the Northumbrian poet Tom Pickard, in which Roy Fisher happens upon the house in working-class Birmingham where he was born in 1930 and lived until he was 23. The house has a fresh, new door, and the poet, a large white-haired gent in a parka, gives it a knock. A young Sikh boy answers. Fisher introduces himself and inquires whether he might have the old door, which he had noticed in the rubbish. His courteousness wins the boy over, and later we see the two studying a sandstone crag in a nearby wood; Fisher takes out a penknife and digs in, showing the boy how easily sandstone crumbles. Upon that foundation, the poet points out, Birmingham was built.

Fisher, now 81 and still a perennial outsider in British poetry, has just had his first *Selected Poems* published in the United States. It’s long overdue, considering that as an accomplished poet and jazz pianist, Fisher has owed much to our free verse and free jazz. But his reputation rests largely on his scrabbling penknives into British bedrock, beginning with his first book, *City* (1961), and continuing through works like *The Dow Low Drop* (1996), which, as Fisher explains, takes its title from “the steep but backless hill that rises behind my house in an upland valley near the headwaters of the Derbyshire Dove. It is part of a line several miles long, formed from limestone of exceptional purity and until recently topped for some three thousand years by many grave mounds of Bronze Age dignitaries, set so as to be clearly visible from their farmlands to either side.”

The bedrock of Fisher’s land- and cityscapes is his preoccupation with time, and the struggle to grasp its scale. Tracing the imprint of time on sandstone and soil, or streets and buildings, is a challenge to trifling human memory. But whenever our forgetfulness falters, morbidity creeps in. Consider “The Memorial Fountain,” which starts with a faithful description of what is seen and then grapples with the mood of asceticism memorials impose on public space:

The fountain plays
through summer dusk in
gaunt shadows,
black constructions
against a late clear sky,
water in the basin
where the column falls
shaking,
rapid and wild,
in cross-waves, in back-waves,
the light glinting and blue,
as in a wind
though there is none....

This scene:

people on the public seats
embedded in it, darkening
intelligences of what’s visible;
private, given over, all of them—

Many scenes.

Still sombre.

As for the fountain:

nothing in the

describing

beyond what shows

for anyone;

above all

no ‘atmosphere’.

It’s like this often—

I don’t exaggerate.

In its setting and prosody, “The Memorial Fountain” calls to mind three of Fisher’s American predecessors: William Carlos Williams and the descriptions of the city in *Paterson*; Charles Olson and his “open field” poems about Gloucester; and George Oppen and the spare phrasal...
fragments with which he pieced together the poems in Of Being Numerous. Fisher soaked up the influence of these poets at a time when they were either unknown or dismissed in Britain. As for Fisher's remove from the literary culture of his time, it has something to do with his geographical distance from the London literary scene. But it is also preserved by his poems, with their reticence and deliberate drabness, like the camouflage of a fledgling avoiding predators. (The young Fisher stopped writing for a period when he caught wind of a rumor that strangers were reading his poems.) The avuncular Fisher of Pickard's documentary is different from the poet one encounters on the page—gimlet-eyed, impersonal, critical. "The Memorial Fountain" ends:

And the scene?
a thirty-five-year-old man,
poet,
by temper, realist,
watching a fountain
and the figures round it
in garish twilight,
working
to distinguish an event
from an opinion;
this man,
intent and comfortable—

Romantic notion.

A deflated posture distinguishes the "thirty-five-year-old man"; Fisher indents and gives a parenthetical air to the description of his life's work. After all, he does not "exaggerate." One might doubt the modesty of a man who is, after all, an artist, but one cannot question the severity of the style—there is no dissembling in it.

"The Memorial Fountain" was written in 1966, continuing the important work of City, which contains one of Fisher's earliest and best-known poems, "The Entertainment of War." In that iconic title lies a tangle of feelings particular to Fisher and the postwar provincial England the poem documents. The poem recalls how an aunt, uncle and two cousins Fisher barely knew perished in the Birmingham Blitz (between August 1940 and April 1943, some 2,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Britain's second-largest city). The 10-year-old Fisher can't pretend to mourn them; he registers, instead, his "classmates' half-shocked envy" at the attention cast upon him by his kin's misfortune, and the drawings of naked blondes in the notebook he inherits from a slightly older cousin (along with his pencils).

The British critic Angela Leighton has called "The Entertainment of War" "one of the coldest elegies ever composed," but it seems so only because the poet refuses to embellish the feelings of his 10-year-old persona, acknowledging instead something no adult could admit: "And the end of the whole household meant that no grief was seen; Never have people seemed so absent from their own deaths." That's not entirely true:

But my grandfather went home from the mortuary
And for five years tried to share the noises in his skull,
Then he walked out and lay under a furze-bush to die.

The grief wasn't actually absent, only protracted. Fisher's lack of immediate grief for his kin will transmogrify into a lifelong concern with memory and elegy, and with the less transparent feelings that become emergent only with reflection:

This bloody episode of four whom I could understand better dead
Gave me something I needed to keep a long story moving;
I had no pain of it; can find no scar even now.

But Fisher's poems belie the claim that he can "find no scar even now." The "bloody episode" bequeathed to him not only the impulse to elegize but the imperative to criticize what he calls "the fiction":

But had my belief in the fiction not been thus buoyed up
I might, in the sigh and strike of the next night's bombs
Have realized a little what they meant, and for the first time been afraid.

What Fisher means by "fiction" is that naive "willing suspension of disbelief" that was Samuel Taylor Coleridge's formula for poetic faith. It is this fiction that persuades us that we will never be the victim; the adult Fisher atones for the fiction to which his 10-year-old self clung. This atonement takes two forms: skepticism toward personal emotion and austerity of style. Because he "had heard the bombs/Sing and then burst themselves" over Birmingham, this poet will not mimic them or call attention to himself with verbal fireworks. His prosody shuns the musical effects of meter and rhyme that his near-contemporary and fellow realist of provincial England Philip Larkin employed with a vengeance.

Geoffrey Hill, another poet of the Midlands, has written insightfully about atonement—both as a motive for writing ("everyone writes from impure motives.... If that is so, let us postulate yet another impure motive, remorse") and as an end ("the technical perfection of a poem is an act of atonement"). He reminds us of what T.S. Eliot said of atonement: "when the words are finally arranged in the right way," the poet "may experience a moment of exhaustion, of appeasement, of absolution, and of something very near annihilation, which is in itself indescribable."

Interesting word, "annihilation." The annihilation of the little family in its garden bomb shelter is an obscenity; the annihilation of the ego in art is an instrument of atonement, and sublime ("indescribable"). Lyric poetry is the art in which it is most difficult to annihilate the ego. If there is an art in which it is less difficult, it might be music. If the point of music is to create beauty not with words but with notes, which don't represent subjective experience and whose relationships are much more structured than those of words; and if songs are less individuated works than pieces that give themselves to a collective, becoming "standards"; and if jazz musicians must more or less subjugate themselves to the dynamics of the band (except when permitted a solo); then Fisher the pianist might teach Fisher the poet a thing or two about the medium in which mastery transmutes ego into atonement. Yet Fisher's poems about jazz are thick with cockiness and violence. Take his justly renowned "The Thing About Joe Sullivan":

The pianist Joe Sullivan, jamming sound against idea hard as it can go florid and dangerous slams at the beat, or hovers, drumming, along its spikes [...] For all that, he won't swing like all the others; disregards mere continuity, the snakecharming business, the 'masturbator's rhythm' under the long variations:

Why so violent? Why the hostility toward swing? "Snakecharming," masturbatory poems aim only to seduce. But seduction
is fictive; so is consolation. Sullivan is thus Fisher's stand-in; his violent piano-playing takes the place of Fisher's violent lyricizing in the face of time's violence:

And that thing is his mood: a feeling violent and ordinary
that runs in among standard forms so wrapped up in clarity
that fingers following his
through figures that sound obvious
find corners everywhere,
marks of invention, wakefulness;
the rapid and perverse
tracks that ordinary feelings
make when they get driven
hard enough against time.

The fingers that “find corners everywhere” are not unlike the bombs that “sang” down and found corners in Birmingham, to deadly effect. In Fisher's poems violence is embedded in the drabness: “The sun hacks at the slaughterhouse campanile”; “stretches of silver/gashed out of tea green shadows”; “Style? I couldn't begin./That marriage (like a supple glove/that won't suffer me to breathe)/to the language of my time and classes.” Art for Fisher really does rehearse our “ordinary” violent tendencies (the word “ordinary” is repeated twice in “The Thing About Joe Sullivan”), and expiate them.

It isn’t just one dead family, or the dead from one war, for whom Fisher seeks atonement: his “time and classes” are a cause for expiation as well. In “One World” he thinks about some Birmingham students he has taught: “When I last saw them they were eleven,/born on a council estate/halfway to the next town,/sold into the lowest stream/at five or so: you can recognize/a century of Brummagem eugenics/in a child.” He remembers their appalling lives, and some of the deaths he has heard of, and then he ticks off some of their names. The poem ends: “if they’re offended, they can tell me about it./It would be good to know/we all look at the same magazines.” This gibe recalls a remark of William Wordsworth's in a letter to a friend in 1802, a time when reviewers objected to Lyrical Ballads for its focus on the life and language of the rural poor: “People in our rank in life are perpetually falling into one sad mistake, namely, that of supposing that human nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same.” Those literati who do look at all the same magazines, whose parents looked at all the same magazines and whose students look at all the same magazines should take note. As for Fisher's students, the best he could do for them, he tells us, was to teach them “pacification and how to play.” When his realism takes in social relations—which are always implicit in his descriptions of bleak industrial cityscapes, but not always explicit—irony reaches a pitch. “It would be good to know/we all look at the same magazines” isn’t just sardonic. It is angry. The idea of people peacefully sharing “one world,” or at-one-ment, is an impossible dream.

The foreword to Selected Poems has been furnished by the American poet August Kleinzahler, an ardent, colorful, worldly writer who is seemingly Fisher's opposite. But both poets have grounded their work in the prosodies of midcentury American Modernism, just as both have cast an observant eye on city and landscape. Kleinzahler's sympathy for Fisher's work doesn't blunt his honesty: “Roy Fisher has never aspired to a readership.... It is a poetry almost entirely without charm.” But Kleinzahler also advocates on behalf of Fisher's best poems, and he implicitly makes a case for Fisher as a genuine experimental poet, one who sees his work as an investigation, who maintains an empirical method and for whom scruples of method are more important than the judgment of contemporaries and the fickle dynamics of taste. (There are interesting biographical tidbits in Kleinzahler's foreword as well: the fact that Fisher was an accomplished child painter, for instance, and that he has “near photographic recall.”)

Because Fisher wrote many more long poems than he did short, anthology-friendly ones like “The Thing About Joe Sullivan,” it makes little sense that Kleinzahler and the publisher have excerpted long works like “The Ship's Orchestra” and “A Furnace” (which Kleinzahler calls Fisher’s “masterwork”). The few fragments of “A Furnace” printed here do not differ much from the shorter lyrics surrounding it and contribute to the sense of Fisher being a poet given to bursts of close attention to objects and landscapes rather than to experiments with narratives and structures in longer forms. There are also many rhetorical poems that show Fisher at his most sour. “At the Grave of Asa Benveniste” takes a swipe at Sylvia Plath in an elegy for an obscure friend who was bitter enough to put on his tombstone Foolish Enough to Have Been a Poet. “Freelance” sneers, “So glad I'm not really/hired to take a class in Creative Writing/at a bus stop in Barcelona.” There's more of this sort of piffle in the British edition of Fisher's collected poems, but at least there it looks like off-the-cuff occasional verse—grumbles addressed to friends—set amid ambitious long poems; in this Selected Poems, it claims the status of representative work.

That is an unfortunate but minor matter, and it needn't distract us from appreciating the reward of reading an unsettling poet who “has never aspired to a readership”—to be reminded of the long view. The poet who has revisited and revised his works so often over the years is the same poet who nicked at Birmingham sandstone with his penknife, for whom feelings and motives leave unsentimental formations that come into focus only over the arc of a life. Fisher writes about what's sorely missing, or is often dodged, in our virtual world of speed and simultaneity—the full weight of time.
Let Us Dispute
by SAM STARK

The first thing Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg reveal about Isaac Casaubon in “I have always loved the Holy Tongue” is that he was the owner of two books now housed in Harvard’s Houghton Library. One is a 1578 edition of the comedies of Plautus, which includes a “massive” scholarly commentary. This, we are told, is just the kind of book Casaubon would be expected to own. The second book, from 1554, is Sefer HaNukh beHire Yab: John Calvin’s catechism, translated into Hebrew—a surprising choice of reading for someone who has always been best known as a Hellenist. These two artifacts establish a character and a line of inquiry: a classicist from a vaguely remembered age of erudition, but with some eccentric interests.

Who reads Calvin in Hebrew? It reveals an integral link between two types of humanism: textual scholarship and the study of humanity.

The reader might imagine a vast room full of books and two learned Jews sorting through it together. A door opens some minutes later, and a silhouette appears. Schechter and Casaubon pause at a sentence with one transliterated Greek word in it: “He stands right in the diazeugma and tells foreigners how much money he has invested at sea.” What is he calling a diazeugma? Casaubon wonders in his commentary. “It seems to be some kind of gap or transverse beam on a bridge,” reads the befuddled translator’s marginal note, “or a port, or the vestibule of a building.”

Casaubon decides the text must be corrupt. Drawing a line to a scholium on The Knights by Aristophanes, he argues that the word must be Deigmati, referring to a place outside Athens where foreign merchants gathered to display their wares.

Thus a simple connection, and a correction, reveals a man and a bit of his world: geography, economy, community. That greedy capitalist, counting his profits too soon, is no longer just an illustration of “boastfulness.” He has a place in history, even if he is a fiction. It’s a miraculous result to get from linking some writing of unknown purpose to a footnote to a comedy and correcting a single word. It reveals an integral link between two types of humanism: textual scholarship and the study of humanity.

Who was Isaac Casaubon? His official titles varied. He began his career as an overtaxed professor of Greek at the college founded by Calvin in Geneva; he worked for some years in the library of Henri IV of France, where he was happy enough until his patron was assassinated; he spent his last years in England, serving James I. For both monarchotherapy the heated debates about the Reformation, the turn to pagan antiquity and the turn to Scripture. For him, Casaubon is a tragic casualty of the conflict between religious faith and scholarly objectivity. His setting is dramatic: a Europe marching grimly from the Renaissance to the carnage of the Thirty Years’ War. Ca-

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“I have always loved the Holy Tongue”
Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship.
By Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg.
Harvard. 380 pp. $35.

even 400 years after his death—we meet him again, at work on one of the critical commentaries that earned him renown. He is reading a Latin translation of the Characters, a set of caricatures composed “for unknown reasons, at an uncertain date,” by Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle. In a sketch titled “The Boastful Man,” Casaubon pauses at a sentence with one transliterated Greek word in it: “He stands right in the diazeugma and tells foreigners how much money he has invested at sea.” What is he calling a diazeugma? Casaubon wonders in his commentary. “It seems to be some kind of gap or transverse beam on a bridge,” reads the befuddled translator’s marginal note, “or a port, or the vestibule of a building.”

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Casaubon’s Huguenot parents, we are told, were forced “to fly for their lives from Gascony”; his father “had a narrow escape from being burnt alive.” They went to Geneva, where Casaubon was born in 1559, then returned to a small town in France in 1651, where Casaubon’s father led a congregation—but they were never secure. After the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, according to one account, they had to hide out in a cave, where the 13-year-old Casaubon kept up with his Greek by parsing an oration by Isocrates.

Pattison traces Casaubon’s career in minute detail, from Geneva, to Montpellier, to Paris, and across the Channel to England. Again and again, both the facts and Casaubon’s words portray him as a victim of his time, persecuted by Catholics, mistrusted by more radical Protestants, misused by patrons who could not appreciate his genius. Pattison’s story ends in comic misery. Lured at last, against his better scholarly judgment, into religious controversy, Casaubon squanders his final years on a critique of Cardinal Baronio, a twelve-volume history that traced the earliest days of Christianity. Casaubon makes it halfway through Baronio’s first volume, to the year 34, when he dies at the age of 55. The autopsy shows a strange malformation in his bladder, “aggravated by sedentary habits, and inattention to the calls of nature, while the mind of the student was absorbed in study and meditation.” Casaubon’s tragic flaw as a scholar, it seems, was his continence: his stubborn determination to hold it all in. It was almost certainly Pattison’s biography that inspired his friend George Eliot to borrow Casaubon’s name for Reverend Casaubon of Middlemarch, the aged pedant who dies trying to write a “Key to all Mythologies.” Scholars have argued that Eliot based the character partly on Pattison, perhaps sensing how strongly the biographer, a dolorous Oxford don, identified with his subject.

Starting with its sexy title, Holy Tongue is so thorough a reassessment of Casaubon that it also serves as an introduction to him and his world, even though it focuses only on a sliver of his work, his attempts to study Judaic books and manuscripts. Because Casaubon’s Jewish studies are “intimately, even organically connected” to his classical scholarship, Grafton and Weinberg argue, the question of Casaubon and the Jews becomes one about his vocation as a whole. The focus on Casaubon’s Jewish studies is not just some PC intervention into the goyish fields of Renaissance studies and the history of classical scholarship. It captures just those distinctive aspects of Casaubon’s critical practice that we might otherwise miss: his motives, methods and tastes. It shifts the emphasis from his erudition and determination to his creativity and curiosity. It reveals the deeper coherence of his classical scholarship and his Protestantism, and emphasizes the modernity in both.

Holy Tongue refutes that great origin myth of modernity, in which Bacon and Descartes liberate us from a world of obscure and useless learning. It reminds us how much their work took for granted the achievements of that world. The early modern period was an age of “information overload” during which “scholars of encyclopedic and passionate curiosity fought to master the sludgy mass of old and new texts that the presses flung into studies and libraries across Europe.” Taming this textual flood required the humanists to use marginalia, notebooks and memory; to store, process and retrieve amounts of information that seem superhuman today, often constructing vast “memory theaters” out of nothing more than pen, ink and paper. This work was not only technical but also passionate, as Casaubon’s formal rituals show. He combed his hair and prayed for divine assistance before he began to read, much as Machiavelli would dress up in regal garb before he began to discourse with the ancients.

Treating all of Casaubon’s writing, published and unpublished, as one “as yet undefined project,” Grafton and Weinberg work from the “material text,” including Casaubon’s library, his annotations in his books and his notebooks, presenting the individual and his world almost from scratch. The primary evidence is lively, with pictures of pages from Casaubon’s books showing his enthusiastic marginalia; in some places the scribbling is so thick that he has drawn lines on the page to keep his ideas from running together.

In writing about Casaubon, Grafton and Weinberg are also reflecting on their own critical practice as historians (Grafton is a professor of history at Princeton; Weinberg, a Reader in Jewish Studies at Oxford). Casaubon’s identification of the Boastful Man, for example, is an allegory for their own project, its way of moving from books to the individual, weaving a textual web fine enough to trap a personality. This is only one of many instances when the unstated analogy between the authors of Holy Tongue and their subject works to guide the reader—when a fact about Casaubon or a quotation from him, put forth
Yahoo! (A Lion, a Duke, the Tax-Rate Fungi)

If men read epic poetry in bed,
And never change their Eeyore underwear,
On bunny kidney they’ve unwisely fed:
That’s whorehouse food, and most unwholesome fare.

If lotus eaters kick spondaic asses,
And love trochaic bunny ears the best,
It starts a war between the lower classes
And puts poetic hooey to the test.

If op art poet laureates go bald,
And end up haunting Fred on Scooby-Doo,
It’s they who to a nunnery are hauled:
They have some vinyl bunny ears for you.

On Yahoo! you are only who you are,
And no one there is anyone… so far.

K. SILEM MOHAMMAD
lifelong quest. The contrast with Pattison is particularly stark in the way *Holy Tongue* ends, with Casaubon's Faustian final work, the attempted critique of Baronio's history of the early church.

Rather than seeing it as a torture imposed on him by cruel Anglican overlords, Grafton and Weinberg frame it as an opportunity for Casaubon to apply his hard-won knowledge of Jewish antiquity to a subject dear to his heart. In trying to establish a strict chronology of the Crucifixion by resolving discrepancies in the New Testament (a task that even Casaubon seems to find boring), he is led again beyond the text to human life, and beyond his culture to the Other. He studies how the ancient Jews celebrated Passover and the Sabbath, how they handled necessary tasks when work was forbidden, how they buried their dead. This was, the authors say, “a new approach to the New Testament and to early Christianity.” It is also a moving way to end a book about a scholar who, that Casaubon was not so impressed by the story even Casaubon seems to find boring), he is a less-famous specialist in Jewish studies, who must have guided his colleague through this foreign terrain. Beyond this, though, the ending seems to offer a picture of something more general, transcending the bounds of discipline and the university. It is one unit of the greater community often called the republic of letters, a community that Casaubon took to be more durable than any church and something distinct from academia. It is telling that Casaubon and Barnet work together in a library, that haven of the independent scholar. Casaubon, who had no formal schooling until he was 19, proudly called himself (in Greek, of course) an autodidact and an isomath, a late learner. Leibniz tells a story about him that, if true, suggests that Casaubon was not so impressed by the universities of his time: “The hall of the

an actual Jew. Finally, when working on his Baronio in the Oxford library, Casaubon makes a Jewish friend, Jacob Barnet, who steers him through the thickets of Talmudic commentary and thus contributes in a small way to Casaubon’s last adventure.

In this ending, there is another obvious analogue to the tellers of this tale: one a wide-ranging and eminent historian and essayist, the other a less-famous specialist in Jewish studies, who must have guided her colleague through this foreign terrain. Beyond this, though, the ending seems to offer a picture of something more general, transcending the bounds of discipline and the university. It is one unit of the greater community often called the republic of letters, a community that Casaubon took to be more durable than any church and something distinct from academia. It is telling that Casaubon and Barnet work together in a library, that haven of the independent scholar. Casaubon, who had no formal schooling until he was 19, proudly called himself (in Greek, of course) an autodidact and an isomath, a late learner. Leibniz tells a story about him that, if true, suggests that Casaubon was not so impressed by the universities of his time: “The hall of the

Sorbonne was shown to Casaubon, and they said to him: this is the place where they have disputed for so many centuries; he replied, to what conclusion have they come?”

The discourser to King James was no humble freelancer. The closest thing to royal patronage today may well be tenure. At a time when we face basic choices about what to do with our universities, libraries and graduate students, Casaubon’s wayward career can help us see better what is at stake in those decisions. It is an example of how the humanities can pursue truth rigorously while still being humane. More than institutions and credentials, canons and curriculums, it shows that the pursuit of humanistic knowledge can be a way of creating new communities. *Holy Tongue* mentions *Middelmarc* only in passing, but even those of us who have never made it to the second chapter of the novel may be reminded especially of the sentence that sets it in motion: “The really delightful marriage,” thinks Dorothea Brooke, “must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it.” Her Reverend Casaubon will make her miserable, but Rabbi Yitzchak Kassabian seems to step forth from that Christian girl’s strange erotic dreams.
**Puzzle No. 3202**

**JOSHUA KOSMAN AND HENRI PICCIOTTO**

**ACROSS**

1. Comic-strip character pops back uncooked cabbage (5,8)
2. Live and drunk, one comic actor (7)
3. Write graffiti in shelter or small house (7)
4. Solution for smoothing out advisory councils? (6,8)
5. Game medicine enthralls teams, five of which can be found in the completed diagram (7)
6. Once healthy, let breath out (7)
7. Two rebels, Southern parasites (7)
8. Goethe: a terrific source for drama (7)
9. After Sunday, doctor here supplying piece of surgical hose (5,9)
10. In a very long time, reversed speech impediment the tiniest bit (7)
11. Phosphorus alters mushy and gooey substance (7)
12. Astonishingly, Ma spies murder case involving eggs (8,5)

**DOWN**

1. Young socialite with heart—ultimately, that's a liability (4)
2. Leader of Decency Coalition’s amorous byplay (9)
3. Yes, Virginia, there is a greeting inside school (7)
4. A drink suitable for the whole family? This is getting old (5)
5. A Schubert composition for a European city (9)
6. Hunter fit poorly in capital (7)
7. Trash a message to hide embarrassment (5)
8. Disorder I do recall at the beginning, for a month in revolutionary France (8)
9. Lawyer smashed head of insolent Florida athlete (9)
10. Runner and pitcher skirting defense (7)
11. Peel top from cherry, in papier-mâché (7)
12. Keep some containers for salts (5)
13. Athlete supporter with label for naked boy (5)
14. Lemon, say, in the middle of street (4)

**SOLUTION TO PUZZLE NO. 3201**


DOWN 1 anag. 2 letter bank (R, I, N, G) 3 anag. 5 init. letters 6 anag. 7 anag. 8 R + ESUR + GENT (nice rev.) 11 GIR + A + SOLE (vag rev.) 14 anag. 15 2 defs. 16 LANDS + LID + E 19 anag. 21 RAI M + T (airmen anag.) 23 anag. 24 anag. 26 rev.

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Rachel Maddow