

Doing Time, Doing Masculinity

Sports and Prison

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I am a white, male college professor in my forties, hunched over a table in Attica Correctional Facility. My heart is pounding, my upper body is locked taut and shaking, and I am gazing into the eyes of an African American prisoner who, like so many of the men in this New York State prison, comes from what sociologists call the "underclass." We are different in most respects, but right now we are alike. Like me, he's puffing and straining, trying not to show it, sometimes cursing, and returning my gaze. We are arm wrestling, and in this case he puts me down in about two minutes, which in arm wrestling can be a long, long time.

I started arm wrestling in the joint about five years ago. I enjoy the physical connection that the contest brings. The participants initially stalk one another over a period of days or weeks, keeping their distance, evaluating each other's strengths and weaknesses. There may be some playful bad-mouthing or boasting that leads up to a bout. Eventually, they make the necessary moves that bring each to the table hand-in-hand, eye-to-eye. Even though arm wrestling is overtly combative, it can breed a closer connection with another man

than is allowed for in most aspects of men's lives. It allows me to climb outside the bourgeois husk of my life and join with somebody in a way that temporarily suspends the hierarchical distinctions between free man and inmate, white and black, privileged and underprivileged, and teacher and student.

Arm wrestling also lets me pull my athletic past into the present, to enjoin youthful masculine spirits and facades. At the same time that these manly juices are resurrected, though, I try to tell myself and others that I don't take the competition so seriously. I want to learn the lesson that it is OK to be vulnerable to defeat.

Sometimes I win; sometimes I lose. It still matters to me whether I win or lose. I try hard to win, but, when I lose, I get over it quickly, accept it, and even welcome it as inevitable. Part of me is happy for the man who beat me. When I win, I savor the victories for a few days, bragging to myself, sometimes others, soothing my middle-aging ego with transparently masculine rationalizations that I am still strong, not over the bloody hill yet. Arm wrestlers understand that nobody wins all the time. Beneath the grit and show, we know there is more to it than winning or losing. We

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physical exercise and yoga to survive long stints of solitary and to bolster his political struggles against prison and legal authorities (Copeland, 1970).

In almost any sector of the prison, fans may jabber about who will win the Super Bowl, the NBA finals, or the next heavyweight boxing match. The taunting, teasing, and betting that typify sports fans outside the walls are also rife among inmates and guards and other personnel. Some men gather in groups around television sets to watch the Final Four or "Monday Night Football," while others sit alone in their cells jabbing with George Foreman or soaring with Michael Jordan. In short, sports and fitness activities in prison engage men's minds and bodies to varying degrees and, in the process, help them do their time. For some men, especially the young ones, athletics are no more than a fleeting pastime; a simple form of physical play; something to do to get to the end of another day. For others, sports and fitness activities are a crucial survival strategy, a life practice that is intended to create and maintain physical and mental health in a hostile, unhealthy place. For still others, working out or participating in sports helps them to displace anger and frustration, to get the rage out of their bodies and psyches before it explodes or turns in on them. And for some, the goal is to get big to be bad, to manufacture muscle and a jock presence in order to intimidate and dominate.

DOING MASCULINITY

The prison environment triggers a masculine awareness in me. I go on masculine alert. I don't walk around with biceps flexed and chest expanded, pretending to be a tough guy in front of anybody looking my way. That kind of suck-in-your-belly-and-lower-your-voice stuff faded away with my twenties. The masculinity that surfaces in the prison is more an attitude, a hazy cluster of concerns and expectations that get translated into emotion and physical movement in ways that never quite come clear. Though there are a few women around (for example, an occasional female guard, some women teachers), I see and smell the prison as an all-male domain. I sense a greater potential for danger and a heightened need to protect myself. I could get caught in a bad situation. I have been told not to trust

also know that part of the takes arm wrestling more than just a contest or pastime is that it somehow speaks to our beliefs and feelings about being a man. I have taught in prisons for fourteen years. My experiences, observations, and discussions with inmates have revealed that prison sports have different meanings for different men. I have learned that a great many motives, messages, and contradictions are crammed into the muscles and athletic pastimes of men in prison. Like men outside the walls, however, prisoners use sports as vehicles for creating and maintaining masculine identity.

DOING TIME, DOING SPORTS

Perhaps the most striking aspect of prison sports is their visibility. The yard is often a hub of athletic activity. Weight lifters huddle in small groups around barbells and bench press racks. Runners circle the perimeter, while hoopsters spin and shoot on the basketball courts. There is the occasional volleyball game and bocce tournament. Depending on the facility and time of year, there may be football practices or games, replete with equipment and fans along the sidelines. Some prisons maintain softball leagues and facilities. Inside the buildings, you will find a gym, basketball courts, and weight rooms. Power lifters struggle against gravity and insanity. Feats of strength produce heroes in the joint, sometimes even legends, or at least local legends. I have been told stories about Jihad Al-Sibbar, a man past his forties who weighs about 155 pounds. He is believed to be the strongest man in the New York State prison system, and I have heard it said more than once that, if given the opportunity, he could have competed at the Olympic level. I want and need to believe in these stories, not so much because they are tales of a strong man but because his triumphs say something about the potential of athletics to sustain sanity in an insane place.

Sports and fitness activities spill into the prison environment in other ways. An inmate may do daily calisthenics while in solitary. For example, Martin Sostre was an African American black power activist and inner-city bookstore owner who was framed by the police in 1967 and imprisoned for nine years. Sostre used

anybody—prisoners, guards, or bureaucrats. Nobody. It sounds crazy, but the tinges of distrust and paranoia almost feel good. Indeed, there are parts of me, call them “threads” or “echoes” of a masculine identity, that embrace the distrust and welcome the presumed danger and potential for violence.

These masculine prompts are seldom uppermost in my mind. They do not emanate from inside of me; they are more like visitors that come and go, moving in and out of me like tap water gushing through an overfilled glass. Arm wrestling allows me to play out masculinity in tune with other elements of jailhouse jock culture. At the same time, the wrestling breeds familiarity with prisoners, pushes toward closeness and trust, and subverts hierarchical distinctions based on class, race, and professional status.

Like me, many men in prison deploy sports and fitness activities as resources to do masculinity—that is, to spin masculine identities, to build reputations, to achieve or dissolve status. For the men in prison, as elsewhere, masculine identity is earned, enacted, rehearsed, refined, and relived through each day's activities and choices. I'm not saying that the gender scripts that men follow in prison are reinvented each day, from moment to moment, man to man. Masculinity does not unfold inside us as much as it flows through us. It is not a strictly individual or psychological process. In doing gender, each individual participates in the larger prison culture, which scripts masculinity by supplying direction, role models, props, motivations, rewards, and values (Messerschmidt, 1993; West and Zimmerman, 1987). For many men, sports are a part of the formula for shaping gender identity.

SOFTNESS AND HARDNESS

In prison, the manly injunction to be strong is evident not only in the bulk or bearing of many men's bodies but in everyday speech as well. I have often heard prisoners describe other men as “hard” or “soft.” Over the years, I have learned that there are many guises of hardness, which, inside and outside the prison culture, illustrate a variety of masculine expressions that stretch between the honorable and the perverse.

Being hard can mean that the individual is toned, strong, conditioned, or fit, rather than weak, flabby, or out of shape. A hard man cares for and respects his body. Life in prison is extremely oppressive, and it is extraordinarily difficult to eke out a healthy lifestyle. Cigarette smoke is everywhere. The noise on the blocks can jam the senses. Most inmates will tell you that the chow stinks, and, for those who think about such matters, a nutritionally sound diet is impossible to scrape together from the available cafeteria fare. For some men, then, the pursuit of sports and fitness activity is a personal quest to create a healthy body in an unhealthy environment. Those who succeed build a sense of accomplishment and garner the respect of others. Some men strive to be hard in order to build self-esteem. Being in prison is a colossal reminder of personal failure. A regular fitness regimen helps some men center mind and identity in the undeniably tangible locus of the body. For others, getting good at basketball or being recognized as a leading athlete earns the respect of peers. Damaged egos and healing psyches drink in the recognition and repair themselves.

Being hard can also be a defense against prison violence. The hard man sends the message that he is somebody to contend with, not a pushover, not somebody to “fuck with.” The sexual connotations of this last phrase take on particular significance in the prison subculture, where man-on-man rape is part of life. The act of prison rape is tied to maintaining the status order among a maze of male groups. Blacks may rape whites or vice versa in order to establish dominant status. Older prisoners may use rape to enslave newcomers. Guards or prison administrators have been known to threaten to expose prisoners to greater threat of rape in order to evoke good behavior, to punish, or to squeeze out information. As Tom Cahill, himself a victim of prison rape, observed, “Once ‘turned out’—prison parlance for raped—a survivor is caught in a bind. If an inmate reports a sexual assault, even without naming the assailant, he will be labeled a ‘snitch,’ a contract will automatically be placed on him, and his life expectancy will be measured in minutes from then” (1990:32).

Men's efforts to weave webs of domination through rape and physical intimidation in prison also reflect

expression and physical freedom. On the other hand, prison officials know that involvement in sports and exercise activities helps make inmates more tractable and compliant. Therefore, the cultivation of the body through sports and fitness activities is simultaneously a source of personal liberation and social control.

It is easy for men in prison or on the outside to get trapped by the cultural mandate of hardness. The image of the male athlete as a muscled, aggressive, competitive, and emotionally controlled individual dovetails the prevailing definition of masculinity in sexist culture. Conformity to this model for manliness can be socially and emotionally destructive. Muscles may remain "the sign of masculinity" (Classner, 1988:192) in the male-dominated culture and the gender hierarchies that constitute the North American prison system. And yet my observations tell me that prisoners' relationships to muscle and masculinity are not simple or one-sided. Men cultivate their bodies in order to send a variety of messages about the meaning of masculinity to themselves and others. Whereas conformity to the credo of hardness for some men feeds the forces of domination and subordination, for others athletics and fitness are forms of self-care. Whereas many prison jocks are literally playing out the masculine scripts they learned in their youth, others are attempting to attach new meanings to sports and exercise that affirm health, sanity, and alternative modes of masculinity.

Perhaps the greatest contradiction pervading prison sports is that, despite the diversity of gendered meanings and practices that prisoners attach to their bodies through sports and exercise, the cultural mandate for hardness and toughness prevails. Men's soft sides remain hidden, suppressed, and underground. The punitive and often violent structures of prison hierarchies persist, breathing aggression and fear into men's bodies and minds. The same tragic contradiction informs men's lives in sports outside the prison walls, where structured gender inequality and sexism constrain efforts to reform gender relationships toward equity and healthful affirmation of the body.

Arm wrestling teaches me that the cages in men's lives can be made of iron bars, muscles, or myths. The harder I wrestle, the more I dream of escape.

and reproduce men's domination of women in the social world beyond the walls. In the muscled, violent, and tattooed world of prison rape, woman is symbolically ever present. She resides in the pulpy, supple, and muted linguistic folds of the hardness/softness dichotomy. The prison phrase "make a woman out of you" means that you will be raped. Rape-based relationships between prisoners are often described as relations between "men" and "girls" who are, in effect, thought of as "master" and "slave," victor and vanquished.

The hardness/softness split also echoes and fortifies stereotypes of masculinity and femininity (Bordo, 1999). To be "hard" means to be more manly than the next guy, who is said to be "soft" and more feminine. It is better to be hard than soft in prison. To be called hard is a compliment. To be labeled soft can be a playful rebuke or a serious put-down. The meanings around hardness and softness also flow from and feed homophobia, which is rampant in prison. The stigma of being labeled a homosexual can make a man more vulnerable to ridicule, attack, ostracism, or victimization.

CONCLUSION

Prison somehow magnifies the contradictions in men's lives, making them palpable, visible. For many prisoners, the pursuit of manhood was closely linked to their efforts to define masculine identity and worth—for example, robbing in order to be a good provider or husband, joining a gang in hopes of becoming a "big man" on the street, being a "badass" or "gangster" as a way of getting respect from peers, braving the violence of the drug trade, raping or beating on women in order to prove manly superiority, or embezzling to achieve financial success and masculine adequacy. The irony here is that these scripted quests for manly power led, in part, to incarceration and loss of freedom and dignity. For lots of prisoners, and countless men on the outside, adherence to the traditional pathways to masculinity turned out to be a trap.

Men's participation in prison sports is fused with yet another contradiction. On one hand, sports and exercise provide prisoners with vehicles for self-