

BODY LANGUAGE

WRITERS
ON SPORT



Gerald Early, Editor

Sacrifice

by
LOÏC WACQUANT

They are profane; they must change state. For this, rites are necessary which introduce them into the sacred world and engage them more or less deeply within it, depending on the role they will be called upon to play. This is what constitutes the entry into sacrifice.

HENRI HUBERT AND MARCEL MAUSS,
Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function, 1898

Every trade has its code of ethics, a set of rules and stipulations that define proper character, conduct, and intercourse to and amongst its members. In some occupations, this code is formalized, recited, even sworn to. In others, it is a loosely strung assemblage of norms and guidelines, learned and deployed in the very process of going about one's business. Thus medics take the Hippocratic oath and civil servants pledge allegiance to the public authority in the name of which they act, while new factory laborers receive casual yet pointed instructions from peers on how hard to work and when to renege on supervisors on the shop floor.

Prizefighting is no different. Boxers learn early on that, if they are to make it in the mannish craft of bruising, they must obey an occupational ethic that is no less abiding for being informally transmitted, no less stringent for being willfully embraced. Conveniently, the morality proper to professional fighters is encapsulated by a single solitary word: *sacrifice*. Sacrifice—the idea and the regulated practices it prescribes—seeps through and suffuses the lives of boxers in and out of the gym, from the bedroom to the ring, and everywhere in between. It is at once

leitmotiv, motto, mantra, and magic formula believed to unlock the door of success and open the golden stairway to the "big time."

Boxers are incessantly reminded of the imperatives of sacrifice by attentive trainers, concerned managers, punctilious matchmakers, and other fight people around them. Sacrifice is at once means and goal, vital duty and prideful mission, practical exigency and ethological obsession. Sacrifice is, on the one side, engine of discrimination—it inexorably separates pugilistic wheat from chaff—and, on the other, instrument of conjunction—it binds into one great chivalrous brotherhood all those who submit themselves to it, from today's obscure "club fighter" to the celebrated "champ" of the game's storied past. And it bestows upon all those who adhere to its forbearing dictates the specific honor of the craft.

Any "pro" fighter worthy of the name knows that he ought to give himself over to his trade body and soul, *religiosissime*.¹ His commitment cannot but be all-embracing and all-consuming. He must put his craft before everything else, be it his family and friends, his wife or lover(s), his job (when he has one), and all extant mundane concerns. His physical, mental, and emotional energies are to be conscientiously cultivated, preciously preserved for, and methodically channeled toward one purpose and one purpose only: maximizing fistic prowess and attaining peak performance in the ring. To this end, the wisdom of pugilistic tradition has laid down strict observances as regards three crucial domains of carnal existence: nutrition, social and family life, and sexual commerce. Together, these cultic conventions compose the holy trinity of the pugilistic faith.

Closing time at the Gary Police Gym on a damp September evening, a drab, vaultlike, room overdecorated with boxing posters on the edge of the 1-94, where half a dozen pros toil under the tutelage of Sergeant Baylor, a local boxing figure renowned for his garrulousness and the facility with which he rents out the services of his charges so long as he pockets his "cut" of their purses. Dave "Too Sweet" Bulman, a surly black middleweight who recently turned pro, is finishing his daily

workout under the watchful eye of big Zeke, his trainer (who holds two jobs round the clock at a local polymer factory), and his manager (a sleepy-eyed physician who heads his own sports-medicine outfit downtown). After a dozen rounds alternating "bag work" and shadowboxing, Zeke orders Dave to run thrice around the park at full speed. When the boxer returns a dozen minutes later, glistening with sweat, Zeke carefully towels his upper body dry and admonishes him on his culinary regimen, which has not been everything it should be lately:

ZEKE: Alright, stay off—no sodas, no sodas, a lil' Kool-Aid, you wanna just drink water, lotsa water, okay? Fresh fruits, try t'eat some broccoli an' stuff *raw*, if you can, salads fresh, stuff like that. Bake all your food, two steaks a week, y'know, you pick the days.

DAVID: [*Respectful*] Awright.

ZEKE: That's it for the steaks, [*Insistent*] no hamburgers, no French fries, no fried *nuthin'*, okay? That way when you get tired, you can, y'know, no greasy nuthin' in the way a-yo' breathin', y'understand? You wanna be [*Takes an exaggeratedly deep breath*] *wide open*, y'see what I'm sayin', be able to throw hard punches an' come back. Okay?

DAVID: [*Slightly reticent*] Awright.

ZEKE: An' you ain't got no weight to lose, really, y'know, it's fifty-eight right. They'll let you go with a pound. But you gotta, *you gotta stay ready, man*. Basic'ly now I want you to keep your diet straight—no sweets at all, okay?

DAVID: [*Growing more reluctant with every recommendation*] Okay.

ZEKE: No women, you stay away from 'em, just stay moved away from 'em. This is what you gotta do if you wanna win, if you don' wanna win . . .

DAVID: [*Interrupting his trainer with a firm voice*] Yeah, I *wanna* win.

ZEKE: . . . if you don' wanna win, you wastin' my time.

The first commandment of the pugilistic catechism is easily enunciated: Thou shalt not consume forbidden foods, foods that weigh the body down, excite its organs, and disrupt the delicately adjusted circuitry of its inward functioning and outward powers. But this commandment is

not so easily obeyed, for it is not simply the nature and quantity of aliments that one must severely restrict and monitor. Rather, the fighter is to recast the totality of his relationship to eating as a physico-symbolic activity so as to embody through it the nexus of self and world conforming to his occupation.²

There is an obvious practical reason why nutrition is a haunting and ubiquitous concern in the pugilistic cosmos. Boxers compete in pre-defined weight classes and must typically reach a target "fight weight" set several pounds below their normal, "walking-around weight." Dieting is indispensable to shed all excess fat and, ideally, step into the squared circle with not an ounce of unneeded tissue on one's frame—a tensionful, martial, organization of flesh, nerves, and muscles aimed at another similarly configured human aggression machine. Check out whom a trainer cooks for, and you will know for sure who his favorite pupils are.

Once "in training" for a fight, to "make the weight" becomes the compulsive motif of the fighter's quotidian existence, the bout before the bout, over which he and his entourage worry and fuss continually. Yet pugs are rarely as disciplined at the table as they should be and dieting does not always do the job. Thus it is not uncommon for them to have to lose five to ten pounds in a couple of days of fanatic fasting and exercising on the eve of the fight so as to "weigh in" at the mark. Running and skipping rope with vinyl sweats on, shadowboxing beside a hot running shower, abstaining from drink, sucking on lemons to spit, taking turkish baths and even chemicals that speed up one's metabolism: A fighter will drop the weight by whatever means necessary.³

But, over and beyond their instrumental purpose, culinary observances, like their social and sexual counterparts, function as a ritual of separation from, and elevation above, the mundane world. They tear the prizefighter away from the earthly seductions that other members of society fall prey to. They communicate to self and other the depth of his engagement in the craft. And they inscribe within and onto his organism the visible marks of his commitment to its ethic.

My gym mate and sparring partner, Ashante, recently discovered just how bad McDonald's is for the body—rich in sugars and fat as well as horridly greasy. As a precautionary measure and to the dismay of his

children, he has embargoed all fast food at his house until further notice. Cheese is another silent enemy he feels he must constantly guard against: "*Tha's bad for you, that make yo' stomach soft*. Tha's why I don't eat nona-that stuff when I'm in trainin'. But it's tough." Ashante is known to "blow up" between fights, putting on upwards of forty pounds on his stocky five-six frame. But through a murderous combination of dieting, running, and training, he somehow always manages to shed them in time for the bout. A matter of will, a test of occupational affiance and pride. Will he "make" 139 next month? He scoffs: "Ten pounds, that ain't nuthin'."

His girlfriend, Darlene, hastens to reveal that Ashante ballooned up to 180 pounds before his last fight in Cleveland: "His face was biiiig [*Cupping her open hands around her blown cheeks*], his neck was thiiick like that." Ashante pleads no contest—he was so bloated that his friends were wondering aloud if he had caught some kind of disease. Tonight's is his last ice cream (he will eat a gallon of it the day after his bout): "See, I wanna eat as much as I can now 'cuz I know Monday I'monna start back trainin'. Then when I start, I won't touch no ice cream till I fight. Once I'm in trainin', I don't touch no food tha's bad for me."

Ashante had taken the habit of gulping down raw eggs daily right out of bed before his morning "roadwork." An old-timer at the gym had assured that it would help him lose weight as well as gain strength. He did so begrudgingly: "I really didn' like the taste, y'know, it make you kinda sick. I tried to put a lil' bit a-honey in it to cut the taste but it didn' work." Eventually, he stopped "'cuz you know the side effects it has for men, Louie. So Darlene didn' want me to keep doin' it. Plus I *really* didn't like the taste, really." His girlfriend jumps in, tittering: "*You know raw eggs, they do a man what vitamin E do females*. You eat a lotta them and you be *hard as a brick*. Make you real-real hard, then you in big trouble." And just to make sure everyone understands what she means, she plants her elbow on the kitchen table and raises her forearm straight towards the ceiling, fist clenched, oscillating as if under tension. Ashante cuts in: "Sure make you hard as a rock, yeah you be cookin' man!" Darlene blurts out: "Like Big Daddy Kane say, [*Singing*] 'Get to work! Get down to bu-si-ness!'" We all explode in

laughter. To compensate, Ashante now gobbles an assortment of vitamins, pills, and ginseng-based decoctions.

11

The second commandment of the prizefighter's catechism extends this abstemious principle from nutrition to sociability as follows: Thou shalt not lead a dissipated existence whereby your attention is scattered and your energies squandered. You shall minify the circle of people you deal with, curtail your transactions with them, rope off and stint whatever demands intimates press upon you, and give full priority to occupational requirements over all other intercourse. Most of all, you shall decisively refuse and repulse any and all activities that might tire, soften, or impair your body.

For Marty, who started boxing at age nine and has compiled twenty-four straight victories as a pro in only his twenty-second year, this is undeniably the most exacting claim the craft makes on its devotees. Growing up in lily white, working-class Hammond where he now holds a part-time job as purchaser for a metal recycling company, it was and is aggravating to turn away neighborhood buddies because you must rest, sleep, run, or train seemingly in perpetuity: "The hardest thing, really, I guess, givin' up like spendin' time with my friends sometimes you know or jus' *goofin' off in general*. 'Cause like three weeks before a fight, you know, I pretty much watch what I eat, I'm in at a decent hour, I'm up at a decent hour in the mornin' an' uh [*Firmly*] I don't have no sex two weeks before a fight usually. I go from my mother's house to the gym and from the gym straight to the house."

Detroit boxing guru Emanuel Steward has seen hundreds of talented kids fade and fall through the cracks because they could not let go of the joys of ordinary gregariousness or ended up getting "caught by the bright lights" of the city. They had the strength, the stamina, the skills, the style, but not the obstinacy required to become hermits of the ring. "When you train a kid at twelve or thirteen or fourteen, no matter how much talent he has, you can't tell if he's going to be a star because there are so many tests out there he's got to pass. It's like mines in a minefield. How many guys are going to get by all the mines? One guy goes to a

party, gets the taste of alcohol, he can't get away. Another guy, a drug pusher gets him. Some guys, as soon as they're successful, if somebody says 'C'mon man, we got a big party to go to tonight,' they can't turn it down, they got to go to every party. Other guys, they can't say no to girls . . . That's another of those mines that can explode."⁴

Rising at dawn to do your "roadwork," clocking in at the gym every afternoon to put in your fifteen to twenty rounds of shadowboxing, hitting the bags, sparring, rope skipping, and calisthenics, heading straight home to bathe and rest, retiring early to get your mandatory eight hours of sleep so that your body may withstand the strain and punishment of training: The regimented life of the prizefighter is austere and dull. It leaves precious little room and time for girlfriends, homies, and family. Recreation and excitement are out, denial and Spartanism are in. Under such an eremitical regime, the web of everyday sociality shrivels and personal attachments tend to gravitate toward and accrete within the occupational milieu. No wonder boxers often liken their gym to "a second mother" and think of its members as their "other family."

The oral tradition of the trade gives pride of place to those fighters, big and small, who forfeit their personal life for the ring and, so the stories go, reap the just rewards of their dedication. Countless anecdotes vaunt their abnegation and the vigor with which they applied the principles of the ethic of sacrifice. In the manner of the "great ascetics" of the world religions, "the contempt they profess for all that ordinarily impassions men" might seem excessive. But "such extremes are necessary to maintain among the faithful a sufficient level of distaste for easy living and mundane pleasures. An elite must set the goal too high so that the masses do not set it too low."⁵

"It wasn't so much the gymnasium workouts that Rocky did," adduces Marciano's trainer to explain the success of the only heavyweight champion in history to retire undefeated: "It's the way he lived. Every fighter pretty near trains the same, but all fighters don't live alike. If you were there looking at Rocky's training and the way he lived, it was hard to believe that a man could sacrifice so much of life and his family life and keep fightin'." Indeed, Marciano used to go into isolation and train for up to nine months at a stretch for a fight. His self-imposed

seclusion was so total that the only times he encountered his wife were during brief platonic marches together, hand in hand, on the tarmac of the airport between planes and under the stern gaze of his manager. Legend has it that Rocky's single known weakness was to eat between meals in training camp: On occasion his trainer would find a couple of bananas hidden under his pillow after dinner and badger him about it.⁶ No one is perfect, true; but everyone has a duty to strive to be.

The flipside of the drastic compression of social life demanded by pugilistic morality is the dilation and bolstering of the relationship of self to self. For sacrifice calls for an endlessly reiterated hermeneutic of one's own needs, desires, and capacities so as to regulate and reshape them, in short, a constant work of the boxer upon himself (as suggested by the etymology of asceticism, *askein*, to work). In his analysis of the "care of the self" in ancient Greece, Michel Foucault notes that there are "groups among which the relation of self to self is intensified and develops without for all that necessarily reinforcing the values of individualism and private life."⁷ This is an apt description of the pugilistic care of self: For the expansion of the prizefighter's relationship to himself translates not in an elevation but a lowering of personal attitudes; not in an increase but a reduction of the independence of the individual from his occupational universe; not in a greater valorization of the private sphere but, on the contrary, a loosening of familial obligations and a lesser involvement in domestic activities as these become subordinated to pugilistic interests.

III

Back in Gary, while Dave showers, I get to ask Zeke what he thinks about "this woman thing" and how it interferes with the preparation and career of pro fighters. The trainer opines gravely and launches into a spirited harangue:

It'll make you suffer, yeah. Y'know, if a woman says, "Hey, I, I, I wanna go to the show," an' uh, well you figger, you gotta have a full trainin' in, an' take her to the show too. Then your rest is important, y'know. An' then all d'time she squirmin' in her seat, 'cause she's

lookin' [*Wriggling his behind*] kinna good an' hot, y'know, an' lookin' at yo' beautiful body which you are *chiseling in d'gym*, y'know, an', an' then [*Raucous*] she gon' wanna do *som'thin'*, you know—*there you go!* she starts it, y'know.

An' you know yourself, after you done had *real good love* an' sex, man, what d'you do? Do you get up an' run aroun', or do you jus' lay down an' sleep? [*Triumphant*] What do *you do?* *Okay!* Y'see it makes you lazy, takes, takes somethin' outa you. You have to rest, you gotta get your nature back up, see.

So, there you go, you can make it to work. But can you make it to d'gym after you get offa work, y'know? An' then when you go home she's waitin' there, [*Whispering as if in shock*] *nothin' on under*, just a dress, pull the dress up, [*With an enticing, feminine falsetto*] "Hey baby," okay?

... Keep the right frame a mind, reverse the psychology, y'know what I'm sayin'? [*Sternly*] *Reverse everything*. Y'know, the woman's up there [*Again, in a sweet, mockingly seductive voice*] "Come on, baby, let's do dis, or let's do dat." [*In a kind but firm, placid, baritone*] "No, I'll take you to the movies, but after that we gotta come home an' you sleep in *that* room an' I'll sleep in *this* one. You hafta help me, you hafta help me make a, be sussessful at this. [*Almost whining*] You hafta *help me baby, pleeze*." Y'know, an' maybe she can understand better like that, if you talk to her like that. Say, [*Jovial*] "Hey, after the fight though, *I'm gon' break yo' back!*" y'know. An' she'll say, "*Really?* Break it now!" [*Firmly*] "No I'm not"—but you know what I'm sayin'...

The third commandment of the ethic of sacrifice is that which most clearly sets boxers apart from all other athletes, even those who compete in kindred "blood sports": Thou shalt not engage in sexual or amorous intercourse for weeks and weeks before the bout. During the phase of intensive training that eventually culminates in confrontation in the ring, all *aphrodisia* are strictly off limits. A fighter must abstain from any action or situation liable to arouse sexual emotions, divert his concentration away from his opponent, and thereby interfere with the methodical crescendo of his own *libido pugilistica*.

Trainers, managers, and boxers share in the belief, handed down by predecessors, that having sex drains the legs, shortens the breath, weakens the muscles, takes away aggression, disrupts balance and co-

ordination, as well as blunts motivation. That weeks of training may be ruined by one single, brief sexual encounter, as Scottie, an old-timer from the Stoneland Boys Club, explained to me one evening as we sat watching the preliminaries of the Chicago Golden Gloves: "You can train for months, man, *if you fuck one time you're outa shape*, that's it." Why is that? I ingenuously asked. "*You be losing blood, man, when you fuck you lose blood*. You can't do it, I'm tellin' you. You're crazy if you doin' it." And he bent over toward me to whisper this ominous addendum: "You just can't afford to, man, don't fuck when you fight. You can't afford too: Boxin' is dangerous, *you can get killed in the ring*." Ashante nodded somberly and voiced his agreement with Scottie on this all-important matter: "Even for sparrin'. You can't make love if you gonna spar, Louie: It take out all your aggressivity. If I'monna be sparrin', I gotta be aggressive, I gotta be fierce, I gotta have that edge, I gotta be in shape."

Theological debates rage in the gyms about the precise mechanism that makes sex such a deleterious activity for prizefighters. One school holds that the leakage of sperm and other bodily fluids—including "blood from the spine" said to escape via ejaculation in the heat of orgasm—debilitates the boxer by undermining the delicate inner workings of his organism. Others argue that it is not the sexual act itself that triggers a pathogenic dynamic so much as what one has to get through to get sex. My good friend Curtis, who recently fought his first ten-rounder and hopes to break into the world rankings by year's end, is convinced that sexual intercourse causes such massive hemorrhaging of energy that there is no way one can recoup from it in time for the fight. "It weakens you. I don't care how much you been runnin' tha' day, you gonna feel weak after that, you gonna feel *exhausted*. [*In a sullen voice*] You not gonna keep your han's up. You not gonna be able to move d'way you normally woul' move. It's like, it's like bein' the day of the fight an' losin' nine-ten poun's before the fight: It takes a *whole hell outa you*, you-know-what-I'm-sayin'?" His certainty stands on the bedrock of personal experience: "When I get intimate with a young lady, I'm *into it*. I put my back an' everythin' into it. I'm you know, aw shit! I'm jus' into it: I'm dreamin' my body right away, see-what-I'm-

sayin'? It's like lettin' water out of a faucet [*He laughs and rocks back in his chair*]. It's like *takin' a cork out*."

According to this interpretation, the prescription of sexual abstinence seeks to control what comes *out* of the body, just as the first, nutritional precept of the pugilistic ethic purports to monitor what enters *into* it. Not so, counter those who maintain that it is the social and emotional exertion required to obtain sex that wrecks the fragile architecture of training. Angelo Dundee, who worked the corner of two of boxing's brightest stars, Muhammad Ali and Sugar Ray Leonard, does not buy the hydraulic theory of sperm leakage: "I've had fighters who had to be locked up at night to keep them from chasing broads. Or had to have a sentry outside their room. And sometimes even that didn't help. One night I left my pal Lou Gross in charge of a fighter. Lou wandered away to have a drink and smoke a cigar, and when he got back, he looked in the room and found the fighter on top of a chick. Lou yelled, 'Don't come! Don't come!' I always tried to baptize my guys early: It ain't the sexual act. It's the chase. That's what wears you out."⁸

The two theories are not mutually incompatible and many are content to conjoin them. A veteran referee who campaigned for eight years in the middleweight division on both sides of the Atlantic provides this account of the cumulative effects of sexual pursuit and catch: "I think the way that it affects a fighter is that mostly it *softens you up*, it takes the edge away, you know, it makes you soft, you're just not as mean a fighter—a *fighter should go in the ring mean*, you know. If you don't have sex, you get a little mean. [*His voice softening for dramatic effect*] Sex makes you *mellow out*, um . . . also a fighter, when a young guy's having sex, *to get sex*, if he don't have his regular girl, he's going to be out *prowling*, losin' his sleep. And he might go in a bar and have a beer or something and sorta wear him out." More importantly, though, both schools concur that sex broadly defined tends to soften, weaken, pacify, in short, "feminize" the prizefighter's body. And for this reason it must be shunned like a plague. "I tried it," confesses Craig, a rugged, white light-heavyweight who joyfully returned to the ring after months of punishing rehabilitation to recover

from a near-fatal motorcycle accident. "I just wasn't up to par. Wasn't fully the *man* I thought I'd be."

Again, fighters are continually reminded of the sexual sacrifices consented to by the legendary fighters of yore. This eloquent tirade on Sugar Ray Robinson by my venerable coach is typical of the genre: "He did like 'em women, yeah, but *he didn't mess wit'em, not too much* no-how. Not like some of the other guys. He like to have a lotta ladies 'round, enjoyed their company, for sure, but he left 'em alone when the time came for him to get down t'business. How d'you think he fought like he did for twenty-five years? Shiiiit, Sugar Ray knew how t'take care of his self! All them old-timers, Sugar Ray an' Archie Moore an' Sonny Liston an' them, *they didn't last twenty, twenty-five years for nuttin': They wasn't messin' with d'ladies.* [*With a soft, rustling, voice*] They knew what they wanted." The message to the present generation is pellucid: If you want the glory, you have to withstand the agony. Be prepared to suffer. Enter into sacrifice.

IV

He who ardently wishes to enter and rise in the pugilistic cosmos must strive to expatriate himself from the mundane world, disengage from its games, and grow indifferent to its seducements. He must be prepared to slaughter all of his profane interests on the altar of the ring. For only in and through the rigorous asceticism and occupational sequestration commanded by the ethic of sacrifice will he forge those qualities of toughness, abnegation, endurance, and disciplined rage needed to master the Sweet Science and to endure in the crafty trade of knocks.

If and when he does so, the boxer reaches a higher plane of existence. For sacrifice lifts him above his everyday station to thrust him into a special moral and sensual universe. A fighter becomes a greater man when he renounces those common things that common men cannot forego. For, as Emile Durkheim wrote in his celebrated analysis of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, "[a]fter he has submitted himself to the prescribed prohibitions, man is not the same as he was. Before, he was an ordinary being. . . . After, he has moved closer to the

sacred by the mere fact that he has distanced himself from the profane. He has purified and sanctified himself by the very fact of detaching himself from the lowly and trivial things that previously burdened his nature."⁹ In sacrificing himself, he has engendered a new being out of the old.

NOTES

1. It is not by happenstance that the expression "body and soul" is the title of numerous movies, novels, articles, and paintings about prizefighting (as well as about music, art, and religion), the most famous being the 1947 movie by Robert Rossen.

2. For an insightful account of this process in a different context, Anna S. Meigs, *Food, Sex, and Pollution: A New Guinea Religion* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1984).

3. Joe Louis reportedly took regular sulphur baths to get from 238 down to 218 pounds when he came out of retirement to face Ezzard Charles in 1950. Thirty years later, Muhammad Ali ingested a thyroid medication that causes severe dehydration in his ill-advised attempt to return to the ring and earn a fourth heavyweight title long after his body had given out on him.

4. Cited in Dave Anderson, *In the Corner: Great Boxing Trainers Talk About Their Art* (New York: Morrow, 1991), 199.

5. Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1912, reprint 1950), 452.

6. Ronald K. Fried, *Corner Men: Great Boxing Trainers* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991), 186.

7. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3 *Le souci de soi*. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), 57.

8. Cited in Anderson, *In the Corner*, *op. cit.*, 80.

9. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, *op. cit.*, 442.

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Publication of this volume is made possible in part by a grant provided by the Minnesota State Arts Board through an appropriation by the Minnesota State Legislature, and by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Significant support has also been provided by Dayton's, Mervyn's, and Target stores through the Dayton Hudson Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, the General Mills Foundation, the St. Paul Companies, and other generous contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. To these organizations and individuals we offer our heartfelt thanks.

Additional support for this publication was provided by the Patrick and Aimee Butler Family Foundation, the Star Tribune/Cowles Media Company, and the Lannan Foundation.

James A. McPherson's essay, "Grant Hall," was published in *DoubleTake*, Winter, 1998.

David Foster Wallace's essay, "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley," was published in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (Little, Brown & Co., 1997).

Published by Graywolf Press
2402 University Avenue, Suite 203
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55114
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www.graywolfpress.org

Published in the United States of America

ISBN 1-55597-262-4
ISSN 1088-3347

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1
First Graywolf Printing, 1998

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-70216

Cover photograph: Douglas Dearden
Series and cover design: AND

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Introduction

You can't judge people by what they do. If you judge them at all,
it must be by what they are.

EILEEN WADE in Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*

I dreamed of Ted Williams
leaning at night
against the Eiffel Tower, weeping.

GREGORY CORSO, "Dream of a Baseball Star"

Muscle and pluck forever!

WALT WHITMAN, "Song of the Broad-Axe"

The appeal of sports, especially of high-performance athletics, in the main for the participant and the spectator, is that they permit us to judge people exactly and precisely by what they do. Sports tell us that people *are* inevitably and irrevocably what they *do*. This greatly simplifies life because it greatly simplifies meaning and the search for it. We might still be interested in motives, the athlete's own in doing what he or she does, or our own (if we are not the athlete but the spectator), in why we should be interested in what the athlete does. But the primary interest is in a moment of action, in a moment of execution that either fails or succeeds. That the action is not merely physical, but indeed an extremely strenuous, intensely ritualized rendition of a highly developed physical skill, a kind of superphysicality, makes it all the more definitive because meaning becomes, in this way, strikingly specific and discernible, explicit and self-evident. The body is not simply given an artistry, an expression, like dance, but a goal. Sports do not etherealize the body but make it even more concrete.

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Body Language: Writers on Sport, the second book in the Graywolf Forum Series, gathers thirteen contemporary creative writers who offer personal reflections on our public obsession: from the pool hustler to the closet baseball fan; from late-night rodeo on cable TV to tennis games on the weathered fields of Illinois; from the aging basketball player to the anxious young girl determining whether to strike out the boy who is her friend. Through these individual narratives we begin to recognize the universal themes that galvanize both sport and literature: conflict and sacrifice, ritual and passion, humiliation and heroism.

Gerald Early (editor) is the author of **The Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prize Fighting**, which won the National Book Critics Circle Award.

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Graywolf Press

ISBN 1-55597-262-4

Cover Photograph: Douglas Dearden

Cover design: A N D

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Edited by
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GRAYWOLF FORUM



BODY LANGUAGE

WRITERS
ON SPORT



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