

Sports talk can help students develop critical thinking skills, says Stanford scholar

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The value of sports in higher education is not typically linked to critical-thinking skills.

However, Stanford English Professor Blakey Vermeule says that talking about and understanding the deeper aspects of [sports](#) can help expand the intellects of students.

Vermeule, whose research focuses on moral psychology and theory of mind through literature, argues that because "our knowledge of and passion for sports is something that is very intense, very personal, discussion and debate about sports has an intellectual resonance and meaning that can serve as a forum to explore intellectual capacity."

A passionate sports fan herself, Vermeule has observed in the classroom and in her research how watching and playing sports impacts cognitive development.

According to Vermeule, many of her freshmen students who discuss sports already demonstrate knowledge about moral and ethical reasoning, as well as the ability to construct complex intellectual arguments.

Because Vermeule sees these as skills that students will need to develop over the course of their university career, she wants to "convey the sense that their passions are not completely marginal to other intellectual parameters."

Vermeule's research incorporates theory of mind, a branch of cognitive science that refers to the capacity to attribute mental states to oneself and to others.

Her most recent book, *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?*, explored how readers feel close to fictional literary creations. Vermeule examined evolved neural mechanisms that trigger responses in readers when they read a novel.

"I focused on how literary fiction exploits the suite of cognitive tools by

which people come to perceive that we and others possess an elaborate mental life as distinct from the physical – a mental life with its own forces and properties," she said.

When it comes to sports, Vermeule is particularly intrigued by the "attachment to and passion for sports, the characters and storylines involved, and the knowledge that brings and how it has evolved up to now."

"Using literature as a starting point, my interest is in our evolved moral psychology, that is, human moral psychology from an evolutionary point of view," she said.

In 'the zone'

Vermeule explores a variety of examples from athletics, both on and off the field, in the introductory seminar she teaches, *Sports and Culture*. "I try to give students the sense that they already have an intellectual life if they have a passion for sports," she said.

Vermeule points to the O.J. Simpson trial as one of the first mass media events that attracted fanatical and passionate debate: "What led people to feel so passionately about the case? What are the stakes at play, and how can we look at both sides of the argument from an intellectual standpoint?"

That "spill-over of a type of religious passion or psychology into the world of sports," as she calls it, brings into relief intellectual concerns – moral judgment, fairness, reasoning and race.

"I want students and myself to be able to have a sense of what that intense culture of sports does to our moral psychologies," a trend that she notes is now especially important given the 24/7 presence of sports

media.

Along with exploring these moral and ethical debates, students watch videos of athletic excellence in class that lead to discussions about cognition and the unconscious.

As Vermeule explained, when a quarterback instinctively reads the defense or chooses to release the ball, he may not know or be able to explain what he is doing. Instead, athletes offload capacities into parts of the brain that are not accessible to consciousness and to speech.

"I am writing a book now exploring the unconscious mind as it is understood in science and culture after Freud, which relates to the notion of instinct or of 'being in the zone' in sports," she said.

"Top athletes, who have trained for such a long time and to such a level, often cannot articulate a response or explanation as to why they did something, an idea with clear cognitive and neuroscientific implications."

Athletics as teaching tool

Philosopher Noam Chomsky, in his book *Understanding Power*, wrote that the intense amount of passion for and knowledge about sports "occupies the populations and keeps them from trying to get involved with things that really matter."

Such sentiments, Vermeule points out, are traceable back to ancient Roman poet Juvenal's first satire, where he wrote that "bread and circuses" were the only cares of a populace who had given up their political freedom.

In the university and research realm, however, it was Stanford alumnus

Gerald Graff, now a professor of English and education at the University of Illinois, who helped to integrate sports into the intellectual realm precisely because of their widespread appeal.

Vermeule said the subject matter typically inspires students, and the seminars can quickly enter debates of important humanistic concern.

"There is often one less step with sports; much of the time we can just get straight into it, getting the students to investigate their own viewpoints much more quickly," she said.

That can contrast with teaching a novel, short story or film, when often a certain level of explication is needed for students to engage and to start a discussion.

One example is the debate surrounding the nature of the NCAA and the status of students in athletic programs. Such a reflection inspires students to think about the impact of a "tricky, thorny and relevant issue," said Vermeule.

"It allows for critical thinking about the university and athletics environment that they are involved with, either as a fan or as a player, promoting a critical and intellectual perspective," she said.

She remembers another situation when students discussed the debate surrounding South African athlete Caster Semenya, who in 2012 was subject to gender tests to ascertain whether she should be running as a female athlete.

"I looked round the table toward the end of the class, and it was mostly male freshmen varsity athletes. They were engaged in an ethical and moral discussion about gender, and how gender can be seen as a spectrum along which individuals move, and about notions of inclusion

and exclusion," she said.

The whole point of her teaching, Vermeule said, is to put any viewpoint on the table and to try to critically investigate it and see where it fractures.

In an academic environment, Vermeule sees value in harnessing what Chomsky called the "tremendous amount of expertise" that many people show when they engage in "extremely complex discussions" about sports.

"I want [students](#) to be confident speaking about their knowledge of sports as an integral part of their education, rather than saying that you should be talking about 'more important things' and switching off that part of your brain when you set foot on campus," Vermeule said.

Provided by Stanford University

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