

# The Militarization of American Professional Sports: How the Sports–War Intertext Influences Athletic Ritual and Sports Media

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## Abstract

This article investigates how “war-speak” is incorporated into both sports media coverage and athletic rituals. It posits that while the militarization of American sporting events may help to comfort a nation in crisis and afford the Armed Forces a valuable recruitment tool, it simultaneously encourages a coercive patriotism that is morally problematic for many athletes and fans, especially during wartime. Likewise, although the use of war metaphors in sports media coverage provides exciting and dramatic language for players and sportscasters, it also devalues the war experience by trivializing its horrors and helps to sell the concept of war as sport.

## Keywords

sports, war, military

American sports journalist Robert Lipsyte has spent much of his career documenting the ways that sports metaphors have influenced U.S. discourses about war. In his 1975 book *SportsWorld*, he demonstrated how “sports-speak” was often used during the Nixon administration to explain and justify its decisions about Vietnam. When Secretary of Defense Mel Laird announced the stepped-up bombing of Vietnam and the mining of Haiphong, he likened the South Vietnamese to an “expansion ball-club” that “will not win every battle or encounter but they will do a very credible job” (p. 13). The

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administration, drawing on another sports metaphor, then referred to its new bombing campaign as “Operation Linebacker” and gave Richard Nixon the codename of “Quarterback” (p. 13). While trying to win the 1968 Presidential election, Lyndon Johnson’s vice president, Hubert Humphrey, likewise used sports-speak in an attempt to disassociate himself gracefully from Johnson’s policies on Vietnam, explaining to the public that he was not “calling the signals” in the war, but acted more as “a lineman doing some downfield blocking” (p. 13).

While *SportsWorld* primarily focused on the Vietnam conflict, sports imagery has continued to be a part of American war discourse throughout the decades. Many wars have been described as “kicking off” or “tipping off,” and during the first Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf likened the now famous “Left Hook” attack against Iraqi defenders to a successful “Hail Mary” pass (Dauber, 2000, pp. 31-82). Coverage of the second Gulf War was similar in nature, as one broadcaster described General Tommy Franks, the leader of Operation Iraqi Freedom, as having “called an audible at the line of scrimmage” to refer to the military’s decision to switch from a “shock and awe” campaign to something more akin “to the surgical ‘decapitation’ of Saddam Hussein” (Lipsyte, 2003). Even the aesthetics of 24-hr news networks blurred the lines between sportscasting and “warcasting” during that conflict. In his piece for *USA Today*, Lipsyte argued that after days of watching “soft-faced” news anchors such as CNN’s Aaron Brown “defer to ax-jawed analysts” like retired army veteran General Wesley Clark, news networks’ “play-by-play” coverage of the war began to seem more like an ESPN sports show. The constant coverage, complete with generals drawing battle lines on a glass map, quickly came to look like football commentator John Madden scrawling his famous X’s and O’s, argued Lipsyte. Likewise, when TV “warcasters” talked about “momentum,” the “run to daylight” from Kuwait to Baghdad, or the Marines “ramping up to ‘win ugly,’” he couldn’t help but wonder if he had “overslept into the NFL season.”

The proclivity for political and military leaders to utilize sports imagery is, in many ways, understandable. Such language helps the military communicate with the American public about its strategies in more accessible ways. Shapiro (1989), on the same note, argued that sports-speak can’t help but be employed in other realms because almost everyone has an identity related to sports, “whether it is active or passive, current or a matter of past personal history,” and there is a great “degree of overlap between the spectator-oriented sport culture and culture in general” (p. 72). Moreover, “with the decline of competing, shared objects of reverence . . . sports heroes and paradigmatic and memorable sporting events known throughout a nation” provide some of the “few cohesive aesthetics” with which people (and especially men) connect to the social body as a whole (p. 86). Thus, it is highly understandable that politicians and military officials revert to sports-speak in order to engage the public in discussions about nonsporting matters, since today “the average citizen arguably can be more easily summoned and engaged by sports talk than by religious or God talk” (pp. 78-79).

As Shapiro also pointed out, sports imagery has long been a part of military history and most sporting contests have their origin in military engagement or training

activities. British captain W. P. Neville even once brought a set of soccer balls to the front in the Battle of the Somme, offering a prize to the one of his four platoons that could “at jump-off” be the first to kick its ball to the German frontline (p. 70). Stark (2010) also explained that the first colleges to make sports a major part of student life were the Ivies and the military academies, the latter of which “endorsed the old General Wellington idea that battles were won and lost on the playing fields of youth” since they trained young men to be tough-minded competitors, excellent strategists, and physically fit: “The better the sports program, they reasoned, the better the soldier.”

Nonetheless, the overlap of sports-speak with war-speak is problematic because sports-speak employed in war coverage works to trivialize the weightiness of war and makes the whole process appear like a leisure-time contest that will result in a clear winner with few serious losses. More importantly, the use of sports-speak “narrows our perspective and obscures the larger debate,” Lipsyte wrote, about why America is involved in a particular war and how it might get out of it (2003). The conversation, in other words, becomes more about who is “winning” the war, rather than the legitimacy or purposefulness of the war and its serious economic and human costs.

These cases instantiate what I call the “sports–war intertext” in American culture. However, while there has been much interest in how sports rhetoric has influenced war rhetoric, little academic attention has been paid to the ways in which military imagery has influenced sports. But the war-to-sports direction of this intertext is no less important, especially given the massive influence of sporting culture in American society and, thus, its ability to influence public opinion on a multitude of issues. This article, then, examines how the military exploits sporting ritual for its benefit, and how sports people wittingly and unwittingly contribute to this effort. Some benefits for the military are obvious and openly pursued, such as the recruitment efforts we see at sporting events. Far more worrisome is the way athletic institutions have become forums for a type of large-scale, patriotic theater meant to promote a sense of national unity. Downsides to this theater are how it often ends up encouraging a coercive patriotism that is problematic for many athletes and fans, especially during wartime, and the way it helps to sell particular wars through the pageantry of sport, rather than through more thoughtful explorations of a conflict. Another worrisome factor is how the use of war metaphors in sports media coverage, however exciting and dramatic, ultimately devalues the war experience by trivializing its horrors and further conflates war and sports in the minds of the public.

To better understand these aspects of the sports–war intertext, it is important to establish that many of the military rituals observed at sporting events today were originally designed to instill a sense of unity during or directly after national crises. As Brown (2004) wrote, “Sports reacts after a tragedy by first cancelling games, then restarting them to signal and return to normalcy, and then through an incorporation of military and patriotic symbols to signify national unity in a time of crisis” (p. 37). For example, the introduction of the singing of the national anthem before a game and the incorporation of on-field, pregame ceremonies that honor various military contributors both originated during WW II, when team owners were looking for support from

President Roosevelt to continue playing their games during the conflict (p. 37). Likewise, the weekend after the assassination of President Kennedy, NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle began to fill his football games with “moments of silence, flag ceremonies, the singing of hymns, and other tributes to honor the fallen leader” (p. 37). Likewise, the replacement of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” with “God Bless America” during baseball’s Seventh Inning Stretch was introduced by the New York Yankees as a comforting gesture in the wake of the 9/11 attacks that impacted their home city. Even the small decals of the American flag currently worn on many college and professional athletes’ uniforms and helmets arose from organizers’ desire to show unified support for the first Gulf War (Mosher, 2006).

While many of these rituals can be seen as comforting a nation experiencing a national crisis, they have remained in the fabric of professional sports long after the initial event’s dissipation. As professor of Sports Broadcasting Charles LaMendola noted in a 2011 interview, the replacement of “Take Me Out to the Ballgame” with “God Bless America” made perfect sense during the 2001 baseball season, “when the sting of 9/11 was so raw.” It’s now a decade later, however, and the Yankees (along with other franchises) are still using the song in the Seventh Inning Stretch—a tradition which is now often televised and features players taking the field and holding their hats over their hearts, while a live vocalist belts out a dramatic rendition of the song. The Seventh Inning Stretch tradition, LaMendola noted, used to be about the simple joys of baseball, but that’s been replaced by “some sort of patriotic theatre” that feels less authentic a decade after 9/11. “The fact that the Yankees don’t cut away from this ceremony when broadcasting their games,” LaMendola said, just adds to the continued “patriotic stylization of baseball.” Thus domestic sporting events have only grown increasingly nationalistic over the years since sporting rituals that arise from national crises do not disappear once the “sting” of that tragedy dissipates.

Not all of the military’s influence on sports, however, stems from efforts aimed at national support or healing. Perhaps more than any other professional sports organization, the San Diego Padres reflect a different kind of influence of the military on athletics. In 1995, this Major League Baseball franchise became the first professional team to establish an in-house Military Affairs Department, which soon dubbed the Padres “The Team of the Military.” Since its inception, the department has worked to increase positive military imagery through baseball and increase tickets sales for the team. It helps fans host reenlistment and retirement ceremonies on the field prior to a game, organizes player appearances at nearby military bases, flies the POW/MIA flag at all home games, and offers 50% discount tickets to anyone attending a Sunday home game while dressed in military uniform. It has also erected a Military Honor Wall, which recognizes all Major League Baseball and Negro League baseball players who ever served in the military. According to the department’s 2011 website, “this wall, along with a large scale model of the USS Midway, act as the centerpieces of the Flight Deck area of PETCO Park” (Military outreach, 2011)

Most visible to those outside of the San Diego area, however, are the Padres’ uniforms (figure 1). In 2000, Padres players began wearing camouflage jerseys for Military Opening Day, a special day at the park that welcomes service members and



**Figure 1.** Examples of the Padres' military-inspired uniforms and fanwear.  
 Photo Source: MLB Shop. Retrieved from Shop.MLB.com

their families and includes military-themed pregame ceremonies and in-game segments.

The jerseys, which were redesigned in 2011 to feature a more Marine-inspired camouflage, are still worn on Military Opening Day, but are now also donned during each Sunday home game. In 2010, the Padres also introduced a new military logo based on the U.S. military aircraft insignia on their official merchandise.

The incorporation of military symbols and rituals by the Padres is not surprising in a city like San Diego, which is home to a large military community—thanks to its deep-water port. According to a San Diego Naval Base's public affairs release, roughly 15,000 businesses in San Diego County relied on Department of Defense contracts in 2008 and 5% of all civilian jobs in the county were military-related during that same year (Ham, 2008). Given the community it serves, the Padres' Military Affairs Department states that it is simply trying "to honor all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces" through their baseball franchise (Military outreach, 2011). But considering the fact that the military chose a baseball team, a sport deeply engrained in the culture as "all-American," as its vehicle for increasing recognition for the armed services (indeed, the military has almost no involvement with the San Diego Chargers), the pressure put on a nonconscripted military to recruit new members, and the Padres' use of events and uniforms designed for the easy conflation of sports fandom with national patriotism, it quickly becomes clear that there is much more embedded in the military's relationship with the Padres than simply "recognizing" the Armed Forces.

For example, while the Padres' public display of reenlistment and retirement ceremonies treat the honoree to a touch of celebrity, it also creates an advertisement for the Armed Services by encouraging, through public fanfare, the glorification of military enlistment and service. Likewise, by offering discounts to those who appear at games in uniform, rather than just asking them to show their military I.D., the Padres' promotion works to enhance the visibility and celebration of military personnel. These types of events become especially important in wartime, when the United States's nonconscription based forces struggle to garner new recruits and therefore need to glorify soldiers to help impress upon young men and women the rewards and cultural adulation that awaits them during and after enlistment.

The value of professional sporting events to the military's recruitment efforts is further highlighted by Laura Dermarderofian Smith, an Air Force public affairs officer at the Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base in Ft. Worth, TX. She noted in 2011 that Dallas' professional sporting events are great recruitment venues since organizers often allow recruiters to set up booths or hand out t-shirts at games in exchange for the Air Force providing bands, musicians, or other entertainment elements during the event. During the Air Force's Band Strike Tour, for example, Dermarderofian Smith will call the Dallas Mavericks and ask if she can have them perform at the game's opening or half-time show, or "just somewhere where they can get some exposure and recognition." At the same time, though, she will ask if she can have recruiters somewhere visible at the game, "handing out cards or t-shirts, or something like that," a request that venue organizers often approve. Similarly, when the Texas Rangers have big events where ticket giveaways and sponsor booths are set up in the parking lot before and after the game, she will work to have the Air Force band "out there just jamming," albeit accompanied by an armed services' recruiter. Even at my own university's recent college football game, Army recruiters were positioned outside of the stadium, inviting male passersby to see how many pull-ups they could do within a certain timeframe and inviting women to see how long they could hold a flexed arm hang. "Winners" received a t-shirt or keychain, but they were also asked to supply the Army with their contact details, thereby helping recruiters reach new potential enlistees. The military even views the practice of sending volunteer service men and women to unfurl flags at pregame ceremonies as recruitment and public affairs opportunities because even though an official recruiter doesn't accompany them, "We feel that with the flag unfurling, we still make our presence known," stated Dermarderofian Smith. "It's a way for us to say to the fans, 'Hey, we're here in your community. We're present. This is what your tax dollars are doing. We're sharp; we're fit, and we are highly trained.'"

As the above information highlights, the military's influence on sporting ritual benefits them in at least two ways: it helps them to boost recruitment efforts, and the patriotic rituals that are brought in by league organizers during national crises garner highly visible support for the military and, on some level, the wars they are invested in fighting. In fact, during times of war such patriotic theater cannot help but become even more commonplace in the sports arena, suggested journalist Andrew Bacevich,

who recently described a “theatrical production” at Fenway Park on July 4, 2011. On this day, the Red Sox arranged for a surprise reunion between Bridget Lydon, a sailor serving aboard the carrier USS *Ronald Reagan* in support of the Afghanistan War, with her unsuspecting family who had already been ushered onto the field. This reunion, he observed, undoubtedly warmed the hearts of fans who witnessed the genuine joy of a family reunited, but given that it took place against the backdrop of a gigantic American flag draped over the left-field wall, an Air Force contingent clad in blue, a Navy color guard, and the U.S. Marine Corps’ choral ensemble, the event was nonetheless a carefully scripted encounter between the armed forces, the Red Sox, and society—“a masterpiece of contrived spontaneity” that left spectators feeling good about both their baseball team and their military—“precisely as it was meant to do.”

According to Astore (2011), there are surely “well-meaning people who see such pageantry as an uncontroversial celebration of love of country, as well as a gesture of generosity and thanks to our military.” And Astore, a retired veteran, admitted that his heart also “swells” when he sees the “flag flying proudly and our troops marching smartly.” But the conjoining of corporate-owned sports teams that are invested in entertainment and earning a profit with the military, which “is ultimately in the deadly business of winning wars” struck him as disturbing. Presumably, this is because the relationship works to commodify war in order to sell both conflict and military service through the pageantry of sports and may generate the expectation that combat is fun and full of the thrills of competition, just like sports.

Further demonstrating the complexity of the sports–war intertext, Bacevich (2011) objected to the presence of military images at sporting events for different reasons, likening such pageantry to “a cheap grace” since no one actually has to pay to honor military servicepeople through sports pageantry, and the fact that it requires very little of fans and organizers. For example, at Fenway, the military personnel “showed up because they were told to do so;” they were already “paid for” by the military, as were the F-15s and the pilots who fly them, since these flights are simply logged as necessary training missions by the military and thus cost the ballpark nothing. Bacevich noted that whatever outlays the Red Sox may have made, they were “trivial and easily absorbed.” What such military pageantry at sporting events leaves us with, then, is a problematic dynamic in which sporting events are now “exploited to sell military service for some while providing cheap grace for all” (Astore, 2011). Such a dynamic, these authors implied, may actually diminish the possibility of a deep-seated respect of servicemen and women and an authentic, conviction of a war’s justness since national unity and patriotism are reduced in these venues to flag-waving, song-signing, and fleeting Jumbotron images.

In its theatrical displays of national unity, military pageantry at sporting events also ends up proscribing such a narrow definition of patriotism that fans and athletes’ more nuanced reactions to American foreign policy decisions, as well as pacifist ideals, are often silenced, or at least punished, in the sporting arena. To better understand the dynamic of coercive patriotism, consider the appearance of small American flag decals on team uniforms during Desert Storm. This war, which began on January 16, 1991,

led both college and professional sports teams (including those involved in that year's Super Bowl) to don the decals on their helmets and/or team uniforms. The issue became so prevalent that in January of 1991, the NCAA rules committee felt compelled to write a letter to the supervisors of men's and women's basketball officials, notifying them that "the magnitude of the events in the Persian Gulf has led to interest in wearing the American flag on basketball uniform jerseys" (quoted in Mosher, 2006, p. 155). While the appearance of flags on game uniforms were a technical violation of NCAA rules and warranted a two-shot foul to be called every time a player entered the game, the committee ruled that "because this gesture is patriotic in nature, the American flag may be worn on the game jersey," although the flag was not to obscure the player's number (p. 155). As Mosher pointed out, the committee's response highlighted organized sport's overt recognition of the flag as a patriotic symbol, as well as the expectation by colleges (and professional franchises) that all athletes on a sports team, even athletes who may be opposed to the war or are noncitizens, will wear a symbol that endorses it (pp. 155-156).

The expectation that athletes should engage in overt displays of patriotism under the discourse of national unity is, of course, highly problematic for some. Take, for instance, the case of Marco Lokar. A substitute guard for the Seaton Hall basketball team, Lokar came from a Slovenian-Italian family caught up in the Yugoslavian war. When the Pirates were expected to wear flags on their uniforms in 1991 in support of Desert Storm, Lokar refused to don the symbol because "from a Christian standpoint," he could "not support any war, with no exception for the Persian Gulf War" (quoted in Mosher, 2006, p. 156). His refusal to be co-opted by the sports-war intertext resulted in heavy media attention, and crowds began booing him every time he entered the game or touched the ball. Both he and his pregnant wife also received death threats, ultimately causing Lokar to withdraw from Seaton Hall and return to Italy.

The *New York Times* correctly identified the Lokar case as symptomatic of "dark patriotism" that serves as a "troubling reminder of the efforts to extort conformity in a nation built on free speech and diversity" (quoted in Mosher, 2006, p. 157), but Lokar never received an official apology, presumably because, as Mosher argued, many fans, organizers, and commentators saw the foreign-born player through an "America, love it or leave it" lens. What the Lokar case also demonstrates, however, is that it is not just the military that promotes coercive patriotism through a sports-war intertext; fans and media outlets also unwittingly, and perhaps wittingly, contribute to it as well. Seaton Hall's expectation that its players would all don the flag in a public show of support for the war also underscores how illusory the intertext's version of national unity can be, as Lokar felt so strongly about his pacifist ideals that he chose them over his college, basketball, and American life and disrupted the neat package of sports conjoined with military support.

Unlike Lokar, professional athletes have union representation protecting their interests, but the problem of coercive patriotism through uniforms presumably does not escape them, either. Consider, for instance, that in 2009, 28% of Major League Baseball's opening day rosters were comprised of foreign-born players (Opening Day

Rosters, 2009), and roughly 20% of all NBA rosters were comprised of international players in that same year (Boeck, 2009). Certainly, some of these players would be uncomfortable wearing the U.S. flag on their uniforms, let alone wearing the Padres' military camouflage uniforms, since both work as a symbolic endorsement of the nation's military and foreign policy. Probably many more feel awkward, at best, about publically honoring the American flag while the U.S. national anthem plays before each game but fear that if they do not obey the rules of coercive patriotism, they too will be viewed through an "America, love it or leave it" lens and lose their teams' and fans' support.

An example of the way sports' coercive patriotism affects professional athletes is that of Toronto Blue Jays player, Carlos Delgado. During the entire 2004 season, Delgado refused to stand when "God Bless America" was played at ballparks across the majors. Fervently antiwar, Delgado, who called the U.S. invasion of Iraq "the stupidest war ever," usually disappeared to the dugout tunnel or remained on the team's bench when the song was played (Yankee fans boo, 2004). When the Blue Jays came to play in New York, fans knew of Delgado's dissent and booed him when he came to bat and even shouted "USA, USA" when the player lined out (Yankee fans boo, 2004). In a similar case, NBA guard Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf of the Denver Nuggets refused to stand for the national anthem during the 1995-1996 season because he saw the American flag as a symbol of oppression and believed that standing for the anthem would therefore conflict with his Islamic beliefs. Abdul-Rauf was suspended by the league for his public dissent until it came up with a compromise that required Rauf to stand for the anthem, but allowed him to close his eyes and look downward rather than at the flag.

It is not clear exactly how Delgado's or Abdul-Rauf's ethnicity played into fans' or the league's treatment of these players, but certainly their "non-Whiteness" made it easier for the larger sports community to mark these players as "trouble-makers" or even as "un-American" even though both are U.S. citizens. What is clear is that the experiences of both Delgado and Abdul-Rauf underscore the power of sports' coercive patriotism and how narrowly defined that patriotism is. By refusing to engage in patriotic fanfare because of their objections to U.S. foreign and domestic policies, these athletes were exercising their constitutional rights to engage in nonviolent, political dissent. Many would argue that their actions were as patriotic as those fans that stood for the anthem or "God Bless America" precisely because their actions embodied an important American ideal. As sports editorialist Borges (2004) wrote,

Having the freedom to say what you believe without someone trying to intimidate you to be silent was one notion the framers of the constitution felt strongly about . . . What Delgado is doing is what America is supposed to be all about, but many Americans seem to have forgotten that. To protest these days is to be considered subversive. To protest the actions of our government these days is to not be on the team, to not be true to your school, to not be an American. What dangerous nonsense.

He then ended by asking readers, why, instead of booing Delgado, “aren’t we cheering a man who is publicly teaching our sons and daughters that in the United States you are free to stand up for what you believe, even if your government doesn’t agree?” However, neither Yankees fans, nor the NBA, which actually suspended Abdul-Rauf for refusing to stand for the anthem, could initially allow for a more expansive idea of national patriotism—a fact that underscores how narrowly sports can help to define patriotism and how powerful its coercion methods are.

The incorporation of coercive patriotism into sporting events is not just problematic for athletes, however; it is problematic for fans, too. As aforementioned, the incorporation of “God Bless America” during the Seventh Inning Stretch, the use of military flyovers during pregame ceremonies, the singing of the national anthem before each game and the unfurling of giant American flags during pregame ceremonies are all rituals designed to elicit a public display of national unity and military support. Indeed, public announcers basically command fans to stand for the national anthem, making those who wish to remain seated, for whatever reason, feel uncomfortable. Likewise, fans are sometimes coerced, through manipulative scheduling, into acts of military appreciation. For example, I have been to several games where just as fans are applauding the singer of the National Anthem and the game’s imminent start, a military flyover occurs, meaning that fans who were clapping for on-field reasons suddenly find themselves applauding an overt display of American military prowess. In the case of the Padres, one can also consider the problems that fans face when they want to applaud their team when they enter onto the field, but disagree with America’s foreign policies and occupations. By being asked to cheer for a team that is dressed in a military-inspired uniform, are they not also being asked to applaud the nation’s military and war efforts?

Consider, too, academic Peter Gabel’s experience when he took his son, an opponent of the Iraq War, to opening day at Dodger Stadium in 2008. While Gabel’s son does not like to stand for the national anthem because he objects to coercive patriotism in general, he does so, so as not to disrespect those who do stand or at least not to “get punched” in the mouth. The national anthem on this day, however, was also accompanied by the unfurling of a gigantic American flag that gradually covered the entire outfield. Such a large display of patriotic symbolism during a time of war, Gabel wrote, proved to be “morally compromising,” since the standing for the unfurling of the flag during the anthem suggested, albeit implicitly, that he and his son also supported the nation’s foreign policy and engagement in Iraq, which they did not. This whole dilemma was then repeated during the Seventh Inning Stretch, which left Gabel feeling like in addition to a baseball game, he had also participated in a ritual that tried to reaffirm a sense of national unity during a questionable and unpopular war. “The point is the more telling,” he stated, “when you consider that since the game was in Los Angeles, and even factoring in the self-selection of those who go to baseball games, more than half that crowd likely voted for Kerry, opposed the war, and felt confusedly pulled along by some iconic larger ‘We’ that overpowered and more-than-half-silenced them” (2008). Critics of Gabel might point out that, for him, the flag

stood as a symbol of the Dodger's support for the Iraq war, even though it could have stood for a symbol of American pride, or something more innocuous. However, given that the flag, which is often unfurled by military personnel on the field, was displayed while the conflict was ongoing, makes his interpretation reasonable.

Finally, while fans, the military and sports organizers are all complicit in promoting the sports-war intertext, it is important to recognize that athletes and sports broadcasters also perpetuate the presence of war metaphors in the sports arena. Indeed Ratto (2001) and End, Kretschmer, Campbell, Muller, & Dietz-Uhler (2003) have explained that war analogies are pervasive in sports writing and broadcast language. For example, NFL and NBA draft rooms are now referred to as "war rooms;" quarterbacks are "terrorized" by tough defensive lines; home runs and three-point shots are called "bombs;" kickoff teams "blow up" kick returners; college division games are "battles;" and even the Texas Tech basketball coach Bob Knight is referred to as "the General," while team leaders are, more broadly, referred to as "floor generals." Likewise, the vying for rebounds in basketball is often called the "war on the boards," "a battle in the trenches" refers to a confrontation between offensive and defensive football linemen, "a dog fight" signifies an extremely competitive athletic contest, Arkansas's system of substitutions in college basketball is known as "platooning," and athletes are often called "warriors." Even golf's 1991 Ryder Cup, which was held at Kiawah Island, was billed as "the war at the shore," and writers like the *Boston Globe's* Michael Holley have used war analogies to illustrate sporting events. (Holley once wrote that Red Sox manager Joe Kerrigan's reliance on inexperienced players was akin to bringing "babies to the war" after the Sox lost to the Yankees in a 2001 matchup.)

Individual athletes also invoke military language when talking to the press or fans about their performances. In March 2011, LeBron James described his mentality when preparing for the Miami Heat's upcoming play-off games. He tweeted that he had "20+ games left in phase 2. I'm ReFOCUSED! No prisoners, I have no friends when at WAR besides my Soldiers." University of Miami tight end, Kellen Winslow, also compared himself to a soldier in 2003 when his team was defeated by Tennessee. Describing the game, Winslow remarked that "It's war . . . They're out there to kill you, so I'm out there to kill them. We don't care about anybody but this U. They're going after my legs. I'm going to come right back at them. I'm a . . . soldier" (Drape, 2003). Just one year later, Minnesota Timberwolf Kevin Garnett described the importance of an upcoming play-off game against the Sacramento Kings with similar language: "This is it. It's all for the marbles. I'm sitting in the house loading up the pump, I'm loading up the Uzis, I've got a couple of M-16s, couple of nines, couple of joints with some silencers on them, couple of grenades, got a missile launcher. I'm ready for war" (DuPree, 2004).

On a basic level, these analogies between sports and war make sense; both events are about a unit working together to best an opponent, and as Dauber (2000) has pointed out, the use of militarized language in civilian circles helps to denote a level of importance that could not be conveyed as effectively in other ways (p. 381). In the sports world, in other words, militarized language helps players and commentators

convey an inflated sense of drama during games to excite fans and to endow professional sports, more broadly, with a sense of weightiness and importance. In fact, while Garnett eventually apologized for likening sports to war, he explained that he “was just metaphorically trying to come up with a way to talk about the enormity of the game” (DuPree, 2004). And as Ratto (2001) wrote, these metaphors were continually used in sports (pre-9/11) because they often sounded “cool . . . to the players who liked the mythology of athletes as warriors, the coaches, who liked the mythology of coaches as generals and military strategists, and to the fans, who just liked the imagery.” By comparing players to soldiers and games to high-stakes battles of life and death, militarized language also helps to justify, or at least make seem less ridiculous, the multi-million dollar salaries and hero-status American culture gives to professional athletes.

However, this language is not without its drawbacks. As Helin (2011) argued, athletes “using military terminology and saying they are at war while the country is actually at war and people are dying is a public relations disaster waiting to happen.” The backlash against Winslow, for instance, caused him to apologize for his remarks, stating that “As for my reference to being a soldier in a war, I meant no disrespect to the men and women who have served, or are currently serving, in the armed forces. I cannot begin to imagine the magnitude of war or its consequences” (quoted in Drape, 2003). Even the condemnation against LeBron on Twitter was “fast and furious” because, as Helin wrote, LeBron will make tens of million of dollars, while “soldiers actually risk their lives for an annual salary James blows on a night out in Vegas.” Likewise, while “James is playing games and living large at home, soldiers are changing lives in cramped conditions in far off lands.”

End et al.(2003) pointed out that several national sports columnists also expressed disdain toward the use of sports–war analogies, especially after 9/11. Holley (2001) wrote that after the September attacks, he had “difficulty looking at sports analogies without being embarrassed” because “a sports–war connection is more than trivial. It’s disrespectful.” That’s because:

There are already soldiers who have left their families so they can fight. Some of them, unfortunately, will not return. They won’t have the luxury of having their contest officiated and wrapped up in a neat 60 minutes, 48 minutes or nine innings. Most of them never will have the money or the fame of the misnamed warriors who play games for a living. With all respect to those who work in professional sports, there is no comparison.

Of course, within just 6 months of September 11th, the war analogies had already returned to the sports world and at least one study has suggested that while most sports fans recognize the dissimilarity between sports and war, they do not find such war analogies inappropriate or disrespectful (see End et al., 2003). Others insist, however, that such language works to trivialize the horrors of war and devalues the war experience that many veterans undergo. It also helps to conflate sports heroes with war heroes, which may cause the line between war and sports to be further blurred in some

youths' minds and help attract a segment of the population to the military under the expectation that war is simply a challenging pursuit, full of the thrills of competition, just like sports.

Sportscasters and athletes cannot be solely blamed for this conflation, though. As the introduction of this article demonstrates, the military and American politicians have long encouraged the overlap of sports-speak and war-speak. By likening war to a sport, they aim to make military strategy more accessible to civilians, but they may also succeed in making the actual act of combat appear less threatening to those who consider putting themselves in physical danger. As Dauber (2000) summarized, the language of sports and games from civilian life often cycles into military usage precisely to downplay "the level of seriousness involved" (p. 382). Indeed, the military even employs images that encourage the sportification of war in its recruitment ads to make service seem less dangerous. As Astore (2011) pointed out, recent Army commercials (which often air during televised sporting events) depict soldiers playing volleyball, lifting weights, climbing mountains, and engaging in similar sporting activities, while a voiceover stresses that military service "promotes teamwork and toughness." Absent are images of soldiers under fire, wounded soldiers, or disabled veterans. "Army service in these ads," he wrote, "is celebrated as (and reduced to) an action-filled sequence of sporting events." Astore objected to this conflation of war and sport precisely because war is not a leisure-time activity, nor is it entertainment. Military service should not be sold to American youth with sporty imagery, he argued, or with stadium pageantry.

The temptation of the military to exploit sports for its own purposes is difficult to resist, however, as the case of Pat Tillman clearly demonstrates. As many know, Tillman played football for the Arizona Cardinals before giving up a contract worth US\$3.6 million over 3 years to join the U.S. Army in 2002 (Holden, 2010). Tillman was widely celebrated by the government for this decision, especially since he was the first NFL professional to voluntarily leave the game for military service since WW II (Brown, 2010). The U.S. defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld even sent Tillman a personal note commending the "proud and patriotic" choice he had made, and then e-mailed the Secretary of the Army, Tom White, to note that they should "keep our eye on (Tillman)" since he sounds "world-class" (Brown, 2010). As journalist Mick Brown wrote, "No scriptwriter in the Pentagon press bureau could have devised a more persuasive poster boy" for the war in Iraq or for army recruitment.

Tillman was far from a poster boy though. He often declined interviews that asked him to explain why he had enlisted, and it is clear that after his first tour of Iraq, he became disillusioned with the war and questioned its legitimacy (Brown, 2010). However, when the military offered to release him via an honorable discharge to return to football, he declined, noting that he had agreed to serve a full 3-year term, which he intended to honor. Outside of Tillman's criticisms of the war, the manner of his death was also a problem for the military. After being killed in Afghanistan in April 2004, the Pentagon was quick to paint Tillman as a patriotic hero. They claimed he died while trying to save the lives of fellow soldiers during a mountain ambush by the

Taliban (Holden, 2010), celebrated him as an inspiration “both on and off the field” (Brown, 2010), and posthumously awarded Tillman the Silver Star—a medal earned for bravery in the face of enemy combat. Four months later, the NFL also joined in the patriotic celebration of Tillman’s sacrifice in another attempt to create a sense of national unity; during its own day of commemoration, every team in the League wore a memorial decal on their helmets in Tillman’s honor, while his number 40 shirt was retired in a ceremony at a Cardinals game, as President Bush appeared on a video screen offering tributes (Brown, 2010). What the public didn’t know at the time, however, was that Tillman had actually died by three gun shot wounds to the head during friendly fire, that the military had burned his personal diary instead of returning it to his family (perhaps to suppress his criticisms of the war), and that the military had covered up the truth of his death in order to mold him into a prescriptive hero who gave his life to save others in a dangerous circumstance (Brown, 2010).

The Pat Tillman story is a sad one, but it is discussed here because it highlights how powerful the sports–war intertext can be. After all, Tillman was a real athlete–soldier who seemed to perfectly fit both the military and the sporting world’s ideals about citizenship, intelligence, loyalty, and responsibility. In fact many stories about Tillman emphasized his high GPA while in college, and commended his loyalty to both his country and his teams, citing the fact that he turned down a US\$9 million contract from the St. Louis Rams out of loyalty to the Cardinals (“Former NFL player turned soldier gets documentary film” [2010]; Lumpkin, 2004). When information later presented itself that disrupted the narrative of national unity that the sports–war intertext works to create, it was purposefully hidden. This is because the manner of his death called into question whether his highly publicized decision to leave professional sports was ultimately “worth it,” as did the revelations that Tillman eventually grew critical of the war. His death also exposed how vulnerable all soldiers are in war, since in the public’s mind, Tillman, a chiseled-face footballer, was among the toughest men the United States had to offer. That he could die, by friendly fire no less, was a cold reminder of the horrors of war that undermined the very idea that war is “sporty.” It reminded the public that people die in war; they do not die in sports, and having all the athleticism in the world won’t save someone’s life in combat. What started out as the military’s attempt to exploit Tillman for recruitment purposes, in other words, turned into one of the greatest disruptions to the sports–war intertext in recent memory, at least for those who followed the Tillman story to the end.

What all of these examples reiterate, then, is that professional sports are never just a game. They intersect with other cultural institutions to produce meaning beyond those located in athletics alone. In the case of the sports–war intertext, the military exploits sports to boost recruitment, to promote a sense of national unity, especially during times of conflict, to glorify its members through pageantry and athletic ritual, and to downplay the seriousness of combat by likening military service to sport. The military is not the only party involved in this type of exploitation of sports, however; fans, sports organizers, the media, and even athletes are complicit too. Each of these groups employs war metaphors and imagery to coerce citizens into displays of

patriotism and national unity when it may not exist and to quiet political dissent when it arises. By using war metaphors to describe sports, these groups also make competitions seem more dramatic and important than they might otherwise appear. While this element of the sports–war intertext seems mostly harmless, the conflation of sports with war works to trivialize war’s serious and horrific consequences and helps to sell military service through a rhetoric of leisure-time competition, which may ultimately devalue military service and, as aforementioned, make it appear less threatening to those considering combat service.

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