

**Peter Alilunas**

University of Michigan

Dept. of Screen Arts & Cultures

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Roundtable: Televised Sports and its Contexts

As the title of this roundtable suggests, televised sports cannot (and should not) be viewed as a monolithic discourse. The construction of sex, gender, and sexuality (S/G/S)—and their intersections—within televisual sports regarding men and masculinity represents my primary interest in this discussion. I contend that this particular context represents a primary site of cultural creation, reception, and reinforcement of the slippery and ever-evolving notions of hegemonic S/G/S, as well as the accompanying negotiations, anxiety, and tension constantly circulating alongside. It is my further belief that this context, for an assortment of reasons, remains radically understudied. The result has been a representation of S/G/S that, while not without inherent contradiction and moments of continual disruption, remains mostly uninterrogated and frequently ignored by media scholars.

While “sports” encompasses hundreds of individual and team competitions, there can be little question that three types dominate the United States’ television marketplace and cultural conversation, all of which exclusively feature male participants: football (both professional and college level), basketball (professional and college), and professional baseball. This is not to suggest some hierarchy of importance, or to diminish the interest and participation of those outside the primary participatory and reception demographic (males between roughly 18 and 35), but simply to acknowledge the massive disparities in content, marketing, and reception (as well as advertising) between these three segments and all others. The overwhelmingly consistent depiction of hegemonic S/G/S within these three segments thus relies partially on market monopolization as a further insulator against criticism.

This portrait conforms to a highly predictable, if tenuous and vulnerable, set of characteristics. “Successful” male masculinity might be defined thusly: victory over similar male opponents supersedes all other variables, while competitive effort ranks slightly below; physical prowess and its nurturance receive slightly more adulation than intellectual acumen; loyalty to teammates against the opposition becomes increasingly prized as competition intensifies; adherence to the father-like coach and his (invariably it is a “he”) wisdom is strictly inarguable. Yet these are all surface details, highly visible to even the most casual viewer as they are constantly reinforced by the aesthetic presentation of event and through the constructed televisual narrative and accompanying advertising. My real interest resides in the more subtextual reinforcements occurring beneath these superficial layers.

“Successful” male masculinity, as presented in contemporary televised sports, does not deviate from the realm of heterosexuality. This requires massive and continual labor as the very nature of the sports themselves presents an undeniable homoeroticism. Yet the presentation does not acknowledge this obviousness; rather, such terminology as “male bonding,” “team spirit,” and “competition” allow for carefully contrived displacement. There is no acknowledgment of the potential pleasure the men receive from the activities other than “the thrill of victory” or the gratification of team membership. Televised sports (in these segments) emphasizes cheerleaders, female spectators, and an emphasis on the skill, rather than bodily contact, as a means of alleviating the homoerotic anxiety inherent to the process itself and shoring up the presumed heterosexuality of the competitors. It is entirely unsurprising, given the contemporary cultural context of homophobia, that not a single current professional athlete in these segments (or college, to my knowledge) is “out.” The mediated presentation strenuously labors to construct and reinforce heteronormative linkages between S/G/S and the acts of competition, so even the

possibility of transgressing those boundaries creates a sense of panic threatening to disrupt the very foundation, I would argue, of the sports and their televisual representations.

Such linkages within S/G/S are, of course, utterly intertwined. To be a “successful” man on the field of competition, these presentations continually suggest, is to be “masculine.” To be “masculine,” first and foremost, a man must be undeniably heterosexual. Thus televised sports, as is my primary point for this panel, allows for very few *deliberate* spaces of disruption—in fact, it labors intensely to avoid them. But as with hegemonic male masculinity more generally, such labor results in two, unintended, consequences: it *reveals* the fissures inherent to the structures of hegemonic male masculinity by exposing its own necessity, essentially rendering it visible as a rickety construct; and it *opens* a plethora of spaces for the very disruption it works so hard to prevent. Those disruptions allow for the full, actual continuum on which people reside in terms of their S/G/S to be acknowledged: the pain, the weaknesses, the injuries, the pleasures, the failures, and the extreme homosociality within these segments thus allow for obvious and immediate criticism of the “accepted” superficial message regarding hegemonic male masculinity, regardless of the continual attempts at diffusion and avoidance.

Ultimately, I believe it is important to stress that these choices made by television producers to highlight very specific and continual portraits of male masculinity are not incidental or accidental: they are deliberate, reinforce preexisting and dominant viewpoints, and attempt to strengthen regressive and homophobic views toward S/G/S. But, until those choices can be altered as progressive viewpoints begin to shift those perspectives, opening more obvious spaces for alternative S/G/S understandings, the feebleness and instability of the contemporary televised sports landscape regarding these issues can and should be highlighted by scholars in an ongoing and strenuous fashion. Indeed, such highlighting is a critical step toward that change.