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Athletes can posture and preen – they can even
beat each other up on the field – they just cannot
ask for more money. – Ronald Bishop¹

Some time ago, a reporter from the *Los Angeles Times* interviewed me concerning a new Home Box Office (HBO) scripted show revolving around the lives of current and former professional football players in the National Football League (NFL). He was primarily interested in whether or not shows like this one, titled *Ballers* (2015-), could build the viewership to sustain a lengthy run, while acknowledging in the eventual opening paragraph of his article that live sports (and increasingly, sports documentaries) remain one the most lucrative TV genres in terms of ratings.

Their scripted counterparts, however, often operate on the other end of the spectrum, struggling to secure future seasons. The reporter asked me why scripted sport failed to grasp the attention of otherwise rabid fans of the game. I blamed it on the artificial aura of these programs – the fake logos, the counterfeit team names, and the overall inability to replicate the authenticity of the athletic organizations, players, and in-game action which draw in staggering numbers each season in “real” sports. My response aligns most closely with Sebastian Byrne when he writes that scripted sport “still often fails to be believable in the eyes of the skilled viewer, because of an inability to capture a sense of realism in its imitation of real-life sport.”² This goes beyond mere action on the field; this speaks to Byrne’s dilemma of “actors who can’t play” as well as “players who can’t act.”³

What I may not have considered during the interview is what Kyle Kusz describes as American audiences’ desire to see “‘feel good’ morality tales that express ‘universal’ existential themes while simultaneously appearing to confirm the ‘truth’ of dominant American mythologies like individualism, meritocracy, hard work and personal perseverance.”⁴ Dubbed *new jock cinema* by *Time* magazine,⁵ the films and television shows which bring the drama without the box score continue to find networks, draw

big name actors, but more often than not, fail to sustain the Nielsen numbers to justify their primetime positioning.⁶

Ballers is a dynamic show with vibrant characters true to the brand of both its producers' former work (*Entourage*) and network (HBO). The thirty-minute program provides a glimpse into the lives of professional football players in the offseason, highlighting the action occurs off of the field. The show mirrors many of the narratives circulating today about the economic, legal, and physical struggles of current and former professional athletes. Throughout each season, every aspect of these fictional characters' lives includes various intersections of culture, finance, and media present in real life, whether on *ESPN's Sportscenter*, an athlete's Twitter account, or in financial publications.

The lead character, Spencer Strasmore (played by Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson), is a former player dealing with the potential cost of the game on his body and pocketbook after retirement. His life after football focuses on mentoring current athletes on their own business matters and convincing them that he and his firm will not fumble their financial futures.

This article examines the first two seasons of *Ballers* in terms of the the sports-media complex, player identity, and the embedded nature of culture and finance. Shows like *Ballers* examine and reproduce certain social practices, turning them into easily digestible discourses which reinforce ideas—in this case—about race, gender, class and the world of finance. Scholars have written extensively about the sports-media complex as a framework for understanding how these mediated moments support recurring forms of knowledge about these industries and individuals. *Ballers*, in the same vein as other sports-themed television shows such as *Coach* (1989-1997), *Arliss* (1996-2002), or *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), provides a commentary and a particular perspective on the world of sport. In the case of this show, the financial aspects of the game are emphasized, and issues of culture, cost, and community are constantly at play.

Scripted Sport

Previous research has lamented the lack of critical examination of scripted sport texts, arguing that the intersection of sport and cinema are worthy of further inquiry due to their status as popular cultural forms.⁷ Diana Young places sports films squarely within the domain of other popular art forms and argues these texts "evoke not only modern concerns with health, physical fitness and physical attractiveness, but also a neoliberal believe that subjects have control over their own destiny."⁸

While sport-themed films remain a growing area of inquiry—and even the subject of whether or not it can even be considered its own genre⁹—there is significantly less work invested in the ways in which sport is scripted on television. David Rowe argues that sports are ideal for the cinematic treatment due to the mythologies and values already in place which are then receptive to the types of storytelling often prevalent in mainstream Western cinema.¹⁰ These mythologies play off what he describes as binary distinctions between fantasy and reality.¹¹ Scholars also argue sports films are allegorical and bring the social and sporting worlds together—either connecting or clashing¹²—use the dramatization of sport to reflect shifts in the protagonist's character,¹³ and often, incorporate some semblance of difference while still privileging

whiteness thematically.¹⁴ Finally, the most important aspect of scripted sport is resolution. As Garry Whannel writes, “ideological tensions around aspiration and achievement, success and failure, individual and team, cooperation and competition have to be managed, and magical resolutions found.”¹⁵

ESPN’s short-lived show, *Playmakers* (2003), remains the golden example of these unresolved tensions, clashing societal and sport values, and a failure to establish enough distance between Hollywood scripts and real-life headlines. Featuring a fictional professional football team riddled with domestic violence, drug addiction, the physical tolls the game takes on players’ bodies, and much more, the show focuses on the evils of professional sport rather than the tightly-bound resolution and character development arc typical of scripted sport. This is direct contrast to Rowe’s binary of fantasy and reality typically depicted in the genre, which ultimately led to the show’s demise.¹⁶ In an article memorializing *Playmakers*, Aaron Gordon writes, “Despite the show’s relative success—1.62 million households per week, a solid number for a cable show at the time—ESPN received more and more ire from the NFL and its sponsors.”¹⁷ The show was eventually cancelled following its first season, its 11 episodes deemed too detrimental to ESPN’s relationship with the NFL. Gordon writes, “By forcing the show’s cancellation, the NFL implicitly acknowledged that it had something to hide, and that *Playmakers* was revealing it. Maybe it was simply seen as bad P.R., but far more likely is that, by depicting the players to be real people, the writers touched on truths the NFL didn’t want us to know.”¹⁸ In analyzing *Ballers*, the relationship between media, sports, and society remains an integral part of the show’s formation and execution.

Where Media and Sport Converge

Several scholars have theorized about the myriad of ways in which media organizations, sports leagues, and audiences interact with one another. Lawrence Wenner’s transactional model of media, sports, and society relationships connects society to the mediated sports production complex, comprised of sports organizations, media organizations, sports journalists, mediated sport content, and the audience experience.¹⁹ He argues that a sociological analysis would approach his model from the “outside in”, whereas his transactional model works inside out, beginning with the audience experience and working its way out towards larger societal values and relations. Transactions between each group occur as sports journalists cover their local or national teams, a fan tweets to his favorite player, or media conglomerates and professional sports leagues reach media rights agreements.²⁰ Wenner writes, “a transactional approach to mediated sport also entails assessments of content in conjunction with the forces that have led to the production of that content.”²¹ While Wenner and others provide a bird’s eye view of these relationships between fans, sports leagues, and media organizations, a closer examination of these partnerships reveals the chasms which can also exist.²²

If we are to understand Wenner’s characterizations of sport organizations, media organizations, audience, mediated sports content, and sports journalists as exhaustive—how then should we consider a show like *Ballers*, which seemingly focuses on the discords within each of these spheres? How should we theorize these tensions? How can we understand the potential and problems of this program to illuminate these various power struggles? “What sports on film offer”, Rowe writes, “is an opportunity

to elaborate on the exploration of the relationship between sporting and other worlds that is deeply inscribed within the discourses of sports reportage.”²³

The Embeddedness of Culture and Finance

Garry Whannel writes that the narratives inherent in sport link it to the ideology of capitalism – a minority of winners in a sea of losers. He writes, “sport as a topic then, is markedly well structured in terms of offering a metaphor for lived experience under capitalism, providing the terrain on which the ideological elements of competitive individualism can be worked through.”²⁴ This operates in strange tandem with seemingly conflicting ideological themes of community, teamwork and collectivism which also remain prevalent in sport.²⁵

In examining the themes of this show as they relate to the intermingling of culture and economic practices, this article follows in the footsteps of Viviana Zelizer’s body of work focusing on the concept of *embeddedness*—the ways in which “the economic action of individuals as well as larger economic patterns, like the determination of prices and economic institutions, are very importantly affected by networks of social relationships.”²⁶ Within the world of sport, this embeddedness—dubbed *sportsbiz*—operates at the intersection of capital, culture, and commodified civil life.²⁷ This is most visibly represented in professional leagues like the NFL, where a small number of athletes provide the physical capital to team owners who sell the game as a product to be consumed by masses of fans. Zelizer challenges those that study any forms of economic practice to include the “meaningful and dynamic interpersonal transactions” and emphasize the importance of including networks of relationships over studying the individual.²⁸ This relational approach emphasizes that “in all areas of economic life people are creating, maintaining, symbolizing, and transforming meaningful social relations.”²⁹ This, in turn, is actually a form of cultural symbolic work, according to Zelizer.

Her work focusing on the history and business of children’s life insurance³⁰ shows the embedded nature of culture and finance as it pertains to the body. There remains a complicated relationship between one’s value in the market and one’s emotional value, whether in examining “the economically worthless but emotionally priceless child”³¹ or a 320-pound defensive tackle in one of the most profitable corporations in the world. It is reported that around 40 % of NFL players insure their bodies (or certain body parts relevant to their position), according to a *CBS MoneyWatch* report,³² which makes sense, given that unlike the insured babies in Zelizer’s article, NFL players are both valuable and expensive. Whether insuring their own bodies, being sold or traded between teams like stocks—or some in William C. Rhoden’s corner would argue, slaves³³—the cost and value of NFL bodies are constantly in discussion, whether in NFL boardrooms, insurance companies, sports bars, or fantasy football leagues.

In *The Social Characterizations of Price* Frederick Wherry writes, “People at the top of the social hierarchy are thought to have a ‘rational’ understanding of prices, while those at the bottom are thought to have an irrational and emotional reaction, driven by subgroup pressures and occasional value-rational attachments.”³⁴ Wherry identifies four characters that interact with price—the fool, the faithful, the frugal and the frivolous.³⁵ He defines the fool as noncalculating, ignorant of prices, budgets, or constraint.³⁶ The faithful are “engage[d] in methodical calculations in order to abide by

a covenant.”³⁷ The frugal aim to save as much as possible and are sometimes from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.³⁸ Finally, the frivolous are noncalculating individuals who spend excessive amounts of money without dire economic consequences.³⁹ Mainstream depictions of professional athletes primarily mark them as either the fool or the frivolous; *Ballers* is no exception.

While the majority of professional football players are considered upper class, their individual identities (for example, race or ethnicity) factor into how their financial prudence is perceived. Their ability to scale the social status ladder is partially predicated on how they spend their money on luxury goods, homes and cars. Price becomes an instrument, according to Wherry, “used to assess the positive and negative qualities of individuals occupying different social positions in society.”⁴⁰ Many of the common narratives surrounding the financial decisions of professional athletes consist of tales of luxury, expensive bar and restaurant tabs, bad investments, and eventually, bankruptcy. These financial struggles are often attributed to athletes’ ignorance in terms of investing, their youth, or the lifestyle expectations in tandem with the high salary and public recognition which accompanies the celebrity of professional sport.

The *nouveau riche* athlete attempts to pivot away from their lower or middle-class upbringing in order to achieve (perceived) membership in the upper echelon of society. Fools, then, are identified as either calculating or noncalculating purchasers, either unable to manage money or lacking the knowledge to do so. Wherry writes that the fool “cannot be excused for lacking the relevant information to make an informed decision, nor can the fool be pitied for not being exposed to modeling behaviors from reasonable consumers in the marketplace.”⁴¹ The fool’s focus is immediate gratification and consumption, a stereotype often placed on professional athletes, especially those of color. The racial difference is important to note—especially given that almost all of the athletes portrayed on the show are Black. Wherry cites Lamont and Molnár’s in “How Blacks Use Consumption to Shape Their Collective Identity: Evidence from Marketing Specialists” to emphasize that for many within the African-American community, social membership within the U.S. is based on one’s “buying power.” This, he says, flips the script of the fool when the cultural nuances of these decisions are incorporated.⁴² This becomes especially important when one considers the ways in which sport is seen as “a way out” as well as a way up towards social mobility through physical labor power. However, this mostly occurs without disrupting sites of power, both within and outside of sport.⁴³

The frivolous, like the fool, avoids calculation and loves extravagant purchases, but is situated closer to the mainstream in their societal standing, as opposed to the fool, commonly situated on the edges of society. Where many scripted sports texts may tell the “rags to riches” story of professional sports, *Ballers* simultaneously reproduces this narrative in tandem with the reverse: the “riches to rags” story of life after hanging up one’s cleats.

Method

Throughout this research, I am guided by Garry Whannel’s line of questioning in examining the characters of *Ballers*: “What is going on in the narrative journeys that the characters take; by what discursive means are their journeys explained, and what ideological meanings are implicated in the suturing of identity and respect?”⁴⁴ To

answer these questions, I utilize multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), which examines language in tandem with other audio and visual elements of texts, involving music, gestures, colors, framing, etc. David Machin defines a multimodal approach as “an emphasis on meaning being created through combinations.”⁴⁵ In evaluating the first two seasons of *Ballers* (20 episodes total), I am specifically interested in the complex semiotics involved between characters which speak to larger ideologies surrounding sport, specifically professional football.

Throughout this research, I connect two analytical approaches to this multimodal discourse analysis. First, in watching and organizing dialogues, gestures, and sound from the show, I draw upon both Kress and Van Leeuwen’s *visual modality* – the ways in which an image is rendered more or less real based upon ways in which it is shot, edited and/or presented.⁴⁶ As Ayodeji Olowu and Susan Akinkulore write, “Modality is interpersonal rather than ideational in that it does not express absolute truth or falsehoods it produces shared truths aligning readers and viewers with what they old to be true for themselves, while distancing from others whose values they do not share.”⁴⁷ Second, episodes were analyzed through Ruth Wodak’s social actor analysis, where characters on the show are considered to be “social actors [that] constitute knowledge, situations, social roles as well as identities and interpersonal relations between various interacting social groups.”⁴⁸ She also writes that there are several ways that these discursive acts reflect society—in the creation, production and construction of certain social conditions and/or the restoration, justification, reproduction, transformation or destruction of a certain social status quo.⁴⁹ This theoretical framework serves as a foundational methodological guide, centering the analysis on each action between characters on the show and connecting their dialogues and nonverbal actions to stylistic choices which speak to larger societal issues and ideologies. Each interpersonal interaction was analyzed and organized into themes. These themes were then grouped under the following clusters: *sports-media complex*, *embeddedness*, and *the sporting body*.

Results

The embeddedness of culture and finance. Wherry’s frugal and faithful, while less emphasized throughout the show, remain an integral part of *Ballers* character Charles Greane, an offensive lineman whose modesty in his material possessions casts him as a “good guy” at heart. Greane is neither morally nor financially bankrupt, although he both struggles throughout the show to maintain his identity as both faithful (in his marriage) and frugal (in his lifestyle) as his career ends and he finds himself looking for a job after football. It is also important to note that these characterizations are not mutually exclusive. Even throughout the show, characters make career and financial decisions that place them within the spectrum of frugal to frivolous and faithful to fool.

Spencer, while seen as financially sound to those on the outside, is struggling to maintain his public persona as he also struggles with his own bank account. Ricky Jerret, a star player unsure of his football future given his reckless behavior with women and his own teammates, seems more financially secure than many of his counterparts, even with expensive taste. His character continues to shift throughout the series, eventually gaining the emotional maturity to match his physical and financial savvy.

One of the central storylines of the first season of *Ballers* is the negotiation of defensive lineman Vernon Littelfield's new contract, where his agent and his team are often seen arguing about his worth as a member of their team. These exchanges are of note, primarily because Vernon is never involved in these negotiations, he is always notified of where his contract stands after the fact.

The cultural divide between professional athletes and the agents and advisors that represent them is documented in several successful TV programs and films such as *Jerry Maguire* (1996) and another HBO show, *Arliss* (1996-2002), and like its predecessors, *Ballers* shows the disconnect between the predominantly white agents and advisors and the black star athletes. Spencer becomes valuable to his firm as a former athlete of color capable of translating the cultural nuances of the players and the league to his older, white counterparts (and vice versa). As Spencer fights for the right to represent (real-life NFL player) Terrell Suggs, he tells Andre, Suggs's financial manager, that his client no longer wants to work with him. Andre retorts, "He doesn't know what he thinks—he's a football player."⁵⁰ In another scene, when Ricky comes to Spencer's office to talk about his troubles, he asks that he leave Joe, his older, balding white partner, outside.

Joe later begins to bond with potential clients at a firm-sponsored yacht party over a game of dice, only to lose the little cultural capital he just acquired with black athletes when he uses the "n-word" to address the crowd. He later apologizes and eventually rebounds from this experience, commenting in the second season at a tennis tournament, "I like that I feel uncomfortable around this many white people now."⁵¹ Spencer as a translator of culture is valuable to the firm, but he often feels on the outside of two worlds – he's no longer entrenched in the life of an NFL player on or off the field, and his coworkers view him as lesser ("some jock in a tailored suit"⁵²) due to his career path and as only a tool to recruit football players to the firm. When he is fired from the firm and returns to negotiate a potential offer to buy the entire company, he looks around and says, "This place got really Caucasian really fast,"⁵³ a snarky nod to the tokenism he feels as the lone advisor of color on the team.

While race is undoubtedly a major divide between the players and their financial representatives, class remains an important schism as well. Jason, the agent who works with Spencer and Joe to secure players' contracts, finds a greater divide with a white potential first round draft pick who lives in the Everglades than any of his black clients. The insults hurled between the player, Travis Mack, his family and his potential agent largely stem from perceived differences in class. Jason accompanies the draft hopeful on his boat in the middle of a swamp to prove his interest and willingness to take part in the cultural traditions of rural Florida life, only to find himself abandoned, waist-deep in the murkiness of the Everglades.⁵⁴ This hazing ritual presents a power disruption and gives the draft pick some semblance of bargaining power, which he uses to his advantage leading up to draft day. As Rowe writes, sport serves as a means to both reproduce inequalities of power as well as a potential space of destabilization and reconfiguration.⁵⁵

Jason later comments on draft day as he stands in the midst of banquet tables, "I'm looking at a billion dollars' worth of talent and everyone's waiting for their phone to ring,"⁵⁶ a reference to the draft tradition of waiting by the phone for a team's front office to offer them the opportunity to play the game they love professionally. His

relationship to Travis becomes one complicated by risk, potential profit, and a market driven by the quality of workouts, game film, and front office interviews.

Over the course of two seasons, an underlying but recurring ideology reinforced throughout *Ballers* is a popular one, articulated by Rowe as the way in which “sport is a prime illustration of the success that waits those racial and ethnic groups who commit themselves to excelling at it.”⁵⁷ But what happens when they achieve it? For Vernon, his family and friends become part of his entourage, expecting him to pay for everything and draining a significant portion of his NFL salary. This reflects what James Carrier describes as a gift exchange, when “societies are dominated by kinship relations and groups, which define transactors and their relations and obligations to each other...objects are inalienably associated with the giver, the recipient, and the relationship that defines and binds them.”⁵⁸ This is in opposition of the plan Spencer and Joe have in mind for Vernon, which is rooted in traditional commodity exchange – investments, savings, and implied safety from bankruptcy. In commodity exchanges, according to Carrier, it is the exchange of value that remains more important than the individuals involved.⁵⁹ Vernon, caught between these two forms of exchange, faces the anger of either his financial advisors or his loved ones, who expect his support.⁶⁰

Vernon’s assumed lack of financial savvy also extends to his entourage. In a candid conversation with Joe, Vernon’s best friend and hanger-on Reggie admits he has no financial knowledge even though his lifestyle may appear otherwise “I’m 24 years old, I drove here in a \$ 400,000 Rolls Royce and I don’t even have a checking account,” he says.⁶¹ He asks Joe for help in an effort to remove himself from Vernon’s gift economy and shift to a commodity exchange as a salaried member of Vernon’s team, which results in tension between Reggie and Vernon for some time.⁶²

It is in the first season, when Spencer can’t withdraw \$ 200 from an ATM due to insufficient funds, that viewers discover the former player’s own financial problems and experience in the gift economy—he later references “taking care of a lot of people”⁶³—even as he tries to convince others to trust him with their money. In one particularly poignant scene, Spencer is driving down the street and receives a call from his bank about his overdrawn funds as he chugs prescription painkillers.⁶⁴ His financial woes continue in the second season, where he is eventually let go for his shortcomings and tries to scrape up enough money to buy the firm that fired him. When he asks Ricky for a loan, Ricky rightfully responds, “How you expect to handle my cash when you can’t even walk in the building? If y’all ain’t the most broke ass financial managers I’ve ever met !”⁶⁵ He eventually invests millions of dollars into Spencer’s effort.

In the final episode of the second season, Spencer goes to the NFL’s annual Rookie Symposium to confront Eddie George (an actual ex-NFL player). Apparently, George is the reason Spencer’s NFLPA certification was rejected; he filed a grievance against Spencer with the player’s union to keep him from advising current players. Initially framed as violating an unspoken “code” between players by reporting him, George is unrepentant when Spencer approaches him. “I should have filed a lawsuit,” he says. “Do you even have an MBA? You have no right managing anyone’s money.”⁶⁶ He then tells Spencer how his life spiraled after following Spencer into a bad investment and losing everything—how he worked at coffee shops, lived out of his car, and even contemplated suicide. In order to drop the grievance, Spencer agrees to speak in front of the rookies and tells the story of how he bought into a bad real estate deal and convinced other players, including George, to do the same. “I lost every cent,” he tells

the crowd of new NFL players, “and I lost a friend.”⁶⁷ He then warns them of trusting their financial future to just anyone, even if it happens to be someone close to them. He cautions, “If you don’t smarten up, it’s not gonna be some guy in a \$ 5,000 suit, it’s gonna be your brother, your sister, your parents.”⁶⁸

The sporting body. Throughout the show, *Ballers* illustrates through both obvious plot points and subtleties the physical cost of a professional football career for the athlete, where many of the payments are due after they stop playing the game. The physical and mental toll football takes on the body has remained—and literally so—under the microscope as of late, with the discovery of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), a degenerative brain disease caused by repeated blows to the head over time. Recent films like documentary *League of Denial* (2013) produced by PBS Frontline and feature film *Concussion* (2015) both focus on the discovery of this disease by Dr. Bennet Omalu and the denial of it by the NFL. In *Concussion*, Will Smith plays Dr. Omalu and says in front of league representatives, “You lose your mind, your family, your money and eventually, your life.”⁶⁹ The film provides a statistic that 50 % of NFL linebackers suffer from concussive syndrome and a center will take over 70,000 hits impacting the brain over the course of an average professional career.⁷⁰

With these staggering statistics now known, Spencer possesses a tremendous amount of anxiety over possibly having CTE, and when his girlfriend Tracy schedules him to meet with a neurologist, the viewer realizes just how much he is affected by the fear of being mentally unsound.⁷¹ When his doctor recommends an MRI just to confirm he is in good health, he sneaks out of the office, afraid of what the results may reveal. He eventually returns, and is relieved to discover he currently shows no signs of brain damage, although his doctor implies that his issues appear to be psychological rather than physical.

Spencer is also haunted by his career in the NFL, with one play in particular that causes him nightmares regularly. He ended a fellow player’s career with one big hit during his time in the league, and relives the scene throughout the season. He eventually reunites with the player, who has found a second career repairing cars, and they not only reconcile the issues surrounding the hit, but find common ground as former players trying to figure out what life looks like after football. This is seemingly in line with Diana Young’s argument in “Fighting oneself: The embodied subject and films about sports” where she writes,

The idea of the body as project also suggests a temporal dimension; characters have a relationship with their own histories. The past may be seen as an essential part of the subject’s formation that continues to play a role in shaping his/her development even as he/she is transformed by experience...The past may provide the narrative with a sense of inevitability, wherein the subject’s formation either propels him/her to victory or to self-destruction.⁷²

After dodging his doctor’s warnings that his growing addiction to painkillers put him at risk for serious physical and mental illness (and refusing to write him another prescription), Spencer finds himself at a questionable health clinic where pills are seemingly doled out without question (or examination). His doctor urges him to find a long-term solution for his physical pain and upon examining him, tells him he has arthritis and urgently needs hip replacement surgery. Spencer is incredulous—how could a man of his stature—bulging muscles pressed against the seams of his expensive jackets—need a procedure often recommended for senior citizens? This coincides with

Aaron Baker's notion that scripted sport, which primarily focuses on male athletes, "provides a useful site for the analysis of dominant ideas of masculinity, [and] how it has been refigured over time in response to changes in American society."⁷³ Football stands as one of these last remaining bastions of masculinity, the remnants of what was assumed to be "in crisis" as far back as the late 1960s.⁷⁴ According to Kusz, as far back as the mid to late 1990s, this remasculinization effort, often packaged as what "real men" do, was expressed through the images and narratives of sport primarily through men's bodies in motion.⁷⁵ Spencer and his body appear to represent what occurs when that body is no longer in motion; he is seen at the end of the second season being prepped for surgery, finally caving to the pressure of his doctor and addressing his health problems.

In several ways, *Ballers* directly responds to Sebastian Byrne's call in "Actors Who Can't Play in the Sports Film: Exploring the Cinematic Construction of Sports Performance" to shift scripted sport texts towards a "heightened sports performance...by teasing out the layers of conflict that exist in the bodily exchanges between the players, and by establishing obstacles through the cinematic magnification of their contrasting and competing physical skill-sets."⁷⁶ This can be seen in one of the final scenes of the second season, where Vernon goes one-on-one against his team's first round draft pick who plays his position. It is his first day back on turf, and he remains determined to prove he still deserves the starting job and is ready to compete with the incoming rookie. He arrives early to camp, only to find his primary competition has as well. The team owner looks on as the two players battle one another, both looking to assert their strength over the other.⁷⁷ The visual of an affluent white "owner" observing two black players engaged in physical combat vividly embodies inequity inherent in the NFL without a word of dialogue.

The sports-media complex. From the show's pilot, the sports-media complex is on full display, whether players use the video game Madden to think through their new position on the field, or another getting caught in a fist fight in a club, which circulates on TMZ immediately after, due to a patron recording the altercation on their phone.⁷⁸ An entire episode is dedicated to a party where everyone's eyes are glued to televised coverage of the NFL Draft.

In the second season, ESPN NFL analyst Mark Schlereth continues to question to potential value of Travis Mack, the first-round draft pick of Spencer's firm, in various television segments leading up to the draft.⁷⁹ In order to quell his doubts, they set up a meeting between Schlereth and Mack, connecting them over their mutual love of fishing. While Travis struggles to convince the former offensive lineman-turned-broadcaster of his potential for success in the league, he eventually decides to perform the most popular aspect of the NFL Combine for Schlereth—the 40-yard dash.⁸⁰ Far from the bright lights, snug Dri-Fit material, and dozens of cameras, Travis slips off his sandals and runs barefoot in the sand at an amazing speed. He impresses Schlereth, who begins speaking favorably of him on TV.⁸¹ Travis also appears on Jay Glazer's TV show to prove he also possesses the mental prowess required to excel at the highest level. When Glazer stumps Travis with an X's and O's pop quiz, he steps outside of the studio with Spencer and admits he froze up due to the pressure of the cameras and his personal struggle with a learning disorder. He later returns and completes the segment successfully, playing to his strengths and once again utilizing the sports-media complex to his advantage.⁸²

Spencer appears afraid himself to appear on Fox Sports personality Jay Glazer's show, even as he encourages his clients to do so in each season. He tries to avoid the appearance repeatedly, telling Glazer "I make Marshawn Lynch look like JFK" and "I want our business acumen to speak for itself."⁸³ When he finally accepts Glazer's offer to appear on the show to publicize his work as a financial advisor, his nemesis Terrell Suggs appears on the show in an apparent setup for drama and ratings. Suggs tells Spencer, "I wouldn't even have a problem with you if you didn't post that shit on Twitter back in the day...you posted some asinine shit about me being more concerned with my stats than about winning."⁸⁴ Spencer tries to apologize and explain he meant to send his comments as a personal message. The confrontation soon escalates into a physical skirmish between the two on live television.

The source of Spencer and Suggs's dispute is one of many occasions where social media becomes an especially important component to the show. Vernon laments the comments made about him on Twitter as he recovers from surgery, and Ricky's father's tweets cause him to lose a potential contract offer from a new team.⁸⁵ The use of new media throughout the show points to the tensions and disruptions within the sports-media complex due to the emergence and dominance of social media technology.

Ballers also extends a storyline to Spencer's girlfriend and sports reporter Tracy, who discovers her male counterpart makes \$ 20,000 more than her. When she confronts her boss, who repeatedly calls her "Legs"—even as she asks him to stop—he makes light of her complaint and continues to belittle her and diminish her accomplishments.⁸⁶ Tracy promptly quits at the table and walks away. She later tells Spencer, "For four years, I laughed at their terrible jokes and played the game perfectly, and they still paid Mitch more."⁸⁷ She later receives a job offer from ESPN and moves to Bristol, an upgrade professionally with potential consequences for her personal life, including her relationship with Spencer. Tracy's storyline is only one of the ways in which *Ballers* illustrates Whannel's argument that "the dominant construction of sport is that of a male oriented and dominated cultural practice in which masculinity is confirmed and conferred."⁸⁸

Discussion

Ballers is a show defined by the ideologies of professional football, often rooted in hegemonic masculinity — the stereotypical concept of "real manhood" built upon the domination of women, ruthless competition, and an unwillingness to display emotion or admit weakness.⁸⁹ Many of the dominant ideologies which operate within the world of football also function within financial institutions, whether in assessing monetary worth, potential risk, or long-term sustainability through investment. The marriage of football and finance on display on *Ballers* reflects the similar values and ideologies present within both industries.

David Rowe argues for another form of embeddedness specific to the scripted sports text—*thematic plasticity*, where mythology and values meet and are recognized and considered by the viewer.⁹⁰ These myths and legends circulate throughout the sports-media complex, reinforcing a variety of ideals. Foucault writes that the body is submerged in a political field where it is worked over by power, as it is invested, marked, tortured, forced to perform, carry out tasks, or produce signs.⁹¹ Throughout the show, racial hierarchies remain unchallenged and often reinforced. Even with a

diverse cast and crew, including former NFL player Rashard Mendenhall in the writing room, there remains ambivalence in the execution of each character's development; issues of inequity are often referenced without consequence or confrontation. Previous research has found a connecting thread of "colonial systems of white dominance"⁹² even in films and TV shows rooted in themes of "overcoming" racism through sport. And while this paper primarily focused on issues of identity in terms of race and class, there is also a substantial argument to be made that the portrayal of women in sports-themed shows and films needs further exploration, as *Ballers* features more women without clothing than those with recurring speaking roles. Future research could further delve into the role of gender in scripted sport texts, both in the verbal and the visual.

Ballers most successfully executes Byrne's more balanced multidimensional approach to scripted sport, where obstacles and conflict are foregrounded through the body, bodily exchanges between players, and open up what he describes as "new directions for exploring the construction of character in spectacle sequences of goal-driven cinema."⁹³ The use of the body-through injury, addiction, or peak conditioning, speak to the ways in which the corporal self can speak to larger conditions within and outside of the world of sport.

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ABSTRACTS

This article explores the intersection of economy, sport and media through a thematic analysis of the first two seasons of HBO's *Ballers*, a scripted TV show centered around the financial successes and struggles of professional athletes. *Ballers*, in the same vein as other sports-themed television shows such as *Coach* (1989-1997), *Arli\$\$* (1996-2002), or *Friday Night Lights* (2006-2011), examine and reproduce certain social practices, turning them into easily digestible discourses which typically reinforce hegemonic norms. In the case of this show, the financial aspects of the game are emphasized, and issues of culture, cost, and community are constantly at

play. Ballers is defined by the ideologies of professional football, often rooted in toxic masculinity and located at the tension between individual accomplishment and collective victory. Many of the dominant ideologies which operate within the world of football also function within financial institutions, whether in assessing monetary worth, potential risk, or long-term sustainability through investment. The marriage of football and finance on display on Ballers reflects the similar values and ideologies present within both industries.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Political economy, NFL, media studies, cultural studies, sport communication, scripted sport

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