



Canadian Sports Fiction for “Reluctant Readers”

—Christopher Parkes

Diersch, Sandra. *Play On*. Sports Stories 73.

Halifax: Lorimer, 2004. 95 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-857-1.

Schultz Nicholson, Lorna. *Delaying the Game*.

Sports Stories 80. Halifax: Lorimer, 2005. 105 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-894-6.

Schultz Nicholson, Lorna. *Northern Star*. Sports

Stories 84. Halifax: Lorimer, 2006. 112 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-910-1.

Scudamore, Beverly. *Ready to Run*. Sports Stories

87. Halifax: Lorimer, 2006. 96 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-914-4.

Scudamore, Beverly. *Ice Dreams*. Sports Stories 65.

Halifax: Lorimer, 2003. 106 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55028-812-1.

Walters, Eric. *Juice*. Orca Soundings. Victoria: Orca, 2005. 101 pp. \$9.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-351-6.

Walters, Eric, and Jerome Williams. *Triple Threat*. Basketball Series 8. Orca Young Readers.

Victoria: Orca, 2004. 126 pp. \$7.95 pb. ISBN 1-55143-359-1.

Withers, Pam. *Vertical Limits*. Take it to the Extreme

6. North Vancouver: Walrus, 2006. 226 pp. \$8.95 pb. ISBN 1-55285-783-2.

According to Chris Crowe's *More than a Game*, sports fiction for young adults continues to suffer from the misconception that it is “lightweight” and has no place in the library or classroom (2). He

argues that the genre has been “doubly damned by its juvenile and sports roots” (2). Lately, as a result of recent high-profile cases of hockey violence, sport in Canada has taken a bit of a beating from

newspaper columnists who have come to question its value. For example, Robert Fulford, in an article about his lifelong dislike of athletics, declares that “sport narrows the mind” (5). He goes on to agree with Margaret Wentz, who writes of hockey, “Personally, I think that instead of promoting manly citizenship, [it] really promotes goonery, loutishness and diminished mental capacity” (qtd. in Fulford 6). Both Fulford and Wentz go out of their way to reinforce the facile belief that sports must necessarily be for loutish physical types who lack intellectual ability. Despite the recent backlash, however, the belief that sport is not just about the game itself, that it is also about teaching important life lessons and building character, remains popular.

In making his case for the inclusion of sports literature in the classroom, Crowe tackles the question of what it is that sports literature should accomplish. He claims that it allows for a “comforting opportunity for the reader to reflect on sport, society, family, human nature, love, life, death—all the things that matter most to us human beings” (5). Crowe places sport as one item in a list, but I think he means that sport itself is a way into an exploration of such important issues. More precisely, he argues that sport in literature can “create conflicts that integrate the agonies of adolescence with the potential agonies of athletic

competition” (21). To put it simply, the problems encountered on the playing field are smaller versions of the problems encountered in life.

Sociologists have taken a more quantifiable approach to the issue and have concluded that participation in sport does in fact have a positive effect on academic performance. As Beckett A. Broh concludes, “playing school sports boosts students’ achievement in the classroom and on standardized math tests” (84). He argues, as other sociologists have, that sport has the ability to increase the cultural capital of the student-athlete, that it can better integrate the student-athlete into the total life of the school, and, consequently, make him or her more committed to performing well. While cultural-capital theories of sport are somewhat controversial—the athlete’s improved test scores may actually be the result of an increased “goodwill” on the part of teachers—they are at the centre of a long tradition of promoting the benefits of sports for children. If Fulford and Wentz are right about sport—that it narrows the mind—then sport is probably not a worthy subject for literature that wants to be considered more than lightweight, but if sociologists are correct—that it can lead to better academic performance—then sport is a good fit for young adult fiction, and sports books should, as Crowe believes, be allowed a place in the classroom.



Many of the authors of the sports books under review here confront, in a very deliberate way, the misconception that sports and academics are incompatible, and find innovative ways to address this false dichotomy in their plots.



My purpose here is to explore, by way of a review of some recent Canadian sports fiction for young adults, particularly recent titles in popular series published by Lorimer, Orca, and Walrus, how authors make a case for sports as a worthy subject within their narratives. As Tracy J. R. Collins points out in a recent article on teaching sports literature, sports and academics are often thought to be “mutually exclusive” and “their objectives at cross-purposes” (284). Despite the currency of cultural-capital theories, there is still a belief that sports and academics are incompatible, that they compete in direct opposition for a student’s time and effort, and that they require divergent attitudes. Many of the authors of the sports books under review here confront, in a very deliberate way, the misconception that sports and academics are incompatible, and find innovative ways to address this false dichotomy in their plots. One of the ways in which they address this misconception is by depicting athletes both on the playing field and in the classroom. By focusing on both settings,

children’s sports books can be about achieving a proper balance between sports and academics.

In many of the books, the protagonist is portrayed as a “reluctant reader,” an athlete who would much rather be playing sports than reading a book assigned by a teacher. Sports books are a good fit for reluctant readers, Crowe explains, because they are plot-driven and focused on an activity in which the reader is often directly interested.¹ If the protagonist is a reluctant reader, the book becomes that much more captivating and instructive for the child who may also prefer playing sports to reading. One of the dangers of marketing sports books to reluctant readers, and of making the protagonist a reluctant reader, however, is that, rather than dissolving the tension between sports and academics, the strategy can work to re-inscribe it. If reading is depicted as a chore and sport is depicted as the reward for completing the chore, the dichotomy remains. The author, if he or she chooses to address this issue, must find ways of moving beyond a simple chore-reward

relationship between reading and playing sports. It is my primary purpose here to review books that have protagonists who are reluctant readers and to examine the extent to which recent titles have been successful at re-imagining the relationship between sports and academics. It must also be noted that the books from these series are about a wide variety of team and individual sports that are played by both boys and girls. I will also look, therefore, at how the particular sport depicted and the gender of the participants exert an influence on the dichotomy of sports and academics.

Triple Threat, co-authored by Eric Walters and NBA star Jerome “Junk Yard Dog” Williams, is a book that will appeal to any child who has ever felt picked on or undervalued. Part of the Orca Young Readers series of chapter books for children ages eight to eleven, and the final book of the eight-book Nick and Kia basketball series, this is the story of two young basketball players who are bullied off their local court by teenagers who believe that the younger kids must automatically lack basketball skills. When Nick and Kia meet Williams (the author appears as a character) at a rally for his “JYD Project,” a literacy program that he runs in real life, they convince him to come to the local court and help them defeat the bullies in a game of three on three. The children realize their dream of playing with an NBA star, and, in the

ensuing game, they earn the respect of the older kids for their obvious abilities. Within the satisfying wish-fulfillment plot, much space is given over to the message of Williams’s literacy project. In fact, many pages are devoted to Nick simply standing in the audience at his local mall, listening to Williams talk about the benefits of reading and schoolwork. Initially, Nick attends the literacy rally because he is a very reluctant reader who has been told by his parents that he must read more. Although he would much rather spend the summer months on the court, he agrees to devote twenty minutes a day to reading. It may be that young readers who are also being forced to read for twenty minutes a day will appreciate Nick’s situation, and it may be that the exciting basketball portion of the book will ultimately elevate reading above a mere chore like taking out the garbage. But because the basketball portion reads like an exciting adventure story and the literacy portion reads like a promotional pamphlet, the book is unconvincing in its attempt to make reading seem anywhere near as appealing as playing basketball.

Williams’s message about literacy would be much more effective if it actually had an impact on the outcome of the story. The message would work better if reading was not constructed as the opposite of sports and if reading, rather than Williams himself, had somehow helped the

younger players win back their court. In the end, Williams is another adult, like Nick's parents, who tells the children that they should perform the chore of reading. As a character in the story, Williams might also have explained that reading helped him make it to the NBA or that it gave him a backup plan in the event that he did not make it as a professional. *Triple Threat* is a fun book, and its authors are to be commended for promoting literacy, but the narrative might have been more powerful if its worthy message had been better integrated into its plot.

Lorna Schultz Nicholson's *Northern Star*, part of Lorimer's Sports Stories series, aimed at eight- to thirteen-year-old readers, is another story in which the student-athlete is a reluctant reader. It tells the story of Peter Kuksak, an Inuit boy from the Northwest Territories who has moved to Edmonton to play minor hockey in a more competitive league. The story's appeal lies in its depiction of the struggles of a character who must leave the safety of his own culture in order to pursue his goal of playing in the NHL. It is a valuable book for all children who dream of competing at the highest level of sport for the way it remains realistic about the enormous dedication that goes into producing an elite athlete. Too often, the hard road to success is not depicted in sports stories. A recent example of this phenomenon can be found in the Disney

film, *Ice Princess*, in which a young figure skater is able to make it to the Olympics after only a few months of training. In showing Peter's hard work and loneliness, *Northern Star* is a good counterbalance to fairy-tale narratives. When Peter plays so well that he signs with a sports agent, we applaud his success because we have witnessed his sacrifices.

My main criticism of the book, however, is that Peter shows no desire to make similar sacrifices for the classroom. Granted, not all athletes are dedicated to education, especially when they are guaranteed to enter the NHL draft, but the story does not have to go out of its way to demonstrate an antipathy toward reading and schoolwork. When Peter is given a project in English class that calls for him to compare Louis Sachar's *Holes* with Disney's film version, he does not actually read the entire book. He tells his group, "I'm only halfway through the book . . . but I've seen the movie" (106). He relies on the girls in his group who have a crush on him to read the book and, in the end, the group simply prints off its information from the Internet. Surely Schultz Nicholson wants the reader to complete her book, so why does Peter not complete Sachar's book? Peter is no quitter on the rink, but he is a quitter in English class. It is not my task to interrogate Canada's hockey community, but I might also add that the author,



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whose partner is, as the dust jacket informs us, a senior hockey official, might have been more sensitive to hockey's current image problems. The message that pretty girls will do your homework if you are a future NHL player is one that the sport could do without; we do not need girls depicted as "puck bunnies." Her book's treatment of cultural difference in the hockey community scores a goal, but its treatment of gender issues misses the mark by some distance.

It is surprising that in many of the books that focus on traditional team sports the main characters are elite athletes. In the case of hockey books, they play "all-star" or "rep" hockey, they travel to tournaments, and they stay in hotel rooms. Very few of the protagonists play "house-league" hockey, which is what the majority of young hockey players in Canada play. Some recent findings of sociologists may indicate that the star athlete is not a good fit for children's sports books that are meant to address the issue of education. While participation in sports may,

according to the cultural-capital theory, benefit academic performance, participation in a sport in which there is the possibility of a professional career can, according to the sociologists McNulty Eitle and Eitle, actually be detrimental to academic performance. In a study of American student athletes, they found that "participation in football and basketball was found to be a drain on academic achievement" (141). They qualify this statement by noting that "[r]ather than sports serving simply as a drain on energies that could be spent in maximizing academic achievement, males may end up pursuing some sports because they lack the resources necessary to perform well academically, which only serves to disadvantage them further in achieving academic excellence" (142). To be fair to Schultz Nicholson, her hockey player's antipathy toward reading is in many ways typical of star athletes who put their energy into sports because they recognize where they are most competent, but, if the majority of her readers are not star athletes, they are not in a position to

neglect their studies. There is nothing wrong with depicting star athletes in young adult fiction, but, if the issue of education is made part of the narrative, it is probably better to have the star athlete be pro-education, as Jerome Williams is in *Triple Threat*. Otherwise, reluctant readers who are hockey players may, like Peter Kuisak, leave the book half finished as they make a similar choice about where to put their energies.

One of the key differences between girls' and boys' participation in hockey is that girls' participation is not as affected by dreams of fame and fortune in the NHL. For this reason, in books about female athletes, success in hockey is not as likely to be constructed as a retreat from a lack of success in the classroom. Rather, girls are often depicted as competent in the classroom, but, if not incompetent, requiring much more education about their sport than boys. In another of the Sports Stories books, Beverly Scudamore's *Ice Dreams*, Maya, a young hockey player, looks back on her performance during a hockey game and remarks, "Even though I had hardly touched the puck, I managed to get three off-side violations" (50). Girls are much more likely to be portrayed as unfamiliar with the rules of the sport. The logic of the above sentence is flawed in that offsides have little to do with touching the puck. The sentence should read, "I hardly touched the puck and I managed to

get three off-sides." When she goes on to become the team's goaltender, she no longer has to worry about being offside.

Unlike Maya, who plays in a house league, many of the female hockey players depicted are members of all-star or rep teams, but even they demonstrate an antipathy toward discussing the technical details of the game they have just played. I can offer three reasons for this: a) girls' participation is a more recent phenomenon, b) learning the technical side of a subject has traditionally been associated with career training for boys and c) girls' enthusiasm for sports has, traditionally, been scrutinized and kept under control. The first reason is straightforward enough—girls are new to the sport—but the second and third reasons need some examination. According to Lucy Danziger, the editor of *Women's Sports and Fitness*, females have a different attitude toward sports than males: "We don't do sports the way men do Most women don't want to be given a grade, a shot, a stat sheet. We just want to be active, healthy and, above all, enjoy ourselves" (316–17). The presumption is that girls are less interested in the technical side of a sport because they only play for the love of the game. Grades and stat sheets are for boys who want to go on to have professional careers. It is dangerous, however, to generalize about how women "do" sports.

Canada's gold-medal-winning women's hockey teams would certainly disagree with Danziger. Indeed, they have inspired many young girls to take a more serious attitude toward hockey, and to be every bit as interested in the technical aspects of their sport. Women are not yet playing in the NHL, but there are many women who have built successful careers playing and coaching at a very high level. As Joli Sandoz argues, girls' enthusiasm for sports has, historically, been closely monitored. She notes that in the nineteenth century, female collegiate athletes had to be careful to conceal it: "Even students attending all-women's schools sometimes found it necessary to write letters home assuring worried parents that physical activity had not damaged their health or personalities" (4). Restraint in sports, Sandoz argues, was connected to sexuality: "If a woman athlete lost control in one part of her physicality, mightn't she lose control in another?" (5). Boys are encouraged to be obsessive about sports, but a similar obsession in girls has usually been viewed with suspicion.

The great strength of Lorna Schultz Nicholson's *Delaying the Game* (also part of Lorimer's Sports Stories series) is that it depicts a female hockey player, Kaleigh, who is disappointed by her teammates' lack of knowledge and commitment to hockey: "She liked how the boys lived and breathed hockey, playing mini-sticks in the hotel

hallways at tournaments" (9). While she would like to discuss the women's Olympic team and their exploits, her teammates would rather discuss boyfriends and makeup. Her teammates often appear more enthusiastic about boys than hockey because they understand, unconsciously, that their participation in the sport has taken them out of their traditional gender role. Both the aggression of the game and its technical details are quickly suppressed in the dressing room as the girls reaffirm their connection to traditional forms of femininity. In contrast, Kaleigh's grandmother, who attends her games and rings a cowbell loudly, is a hockey fanatic who loves statistics. A male friend tells Kaleigh, "She loves her hockey all right . . . She's the best at stats too. She knows everything" (18). While the granddaughter is at first embarrassed by the grandmother's enthusiasm, she comes to value her total involvement in the game. Ultimately, Schultz Nicholson's book does a fine job of showing girls that they need not do hockey differently than boys.

While Schultz Nicholson's book successfully tackles the issue of girls' enthusiasm for sports, other books from the same series do not. In Sandra Diersch's soccer book, *Play On*, Trevor is continually quoting hockey statistics while Alecia, the girl he is interested in, finds his behaviour strange. Although Trevor plays soccer, he sees

his technical knowledge of hockey as the way to a professional career: “I can rhyme off hockey statistics but not multiplication facts. . . . Someday though I might like to be a hockey commentator. They’re so smart; can you imagine how much hockey stuff they have in their brains? That’s what I want to do when I finish school” (50). Clearly, the boy sees technical information in terms of mastery and control; he understands that hockey is more lucrative than soccer in Canada and that it can provide a career for him even if he is not a player. While he approaches sports in terms of career training, Alecia approaches it in terms of feelings and friendships. Alecia plays on a competitive team, but her mother puts pressure on her to declare an interest in boys over soccer: “You can’t keep running from this subject forever. Your friends are exploring these relationships and I want to know how you feel about it” (45). While it is true that Alecia still has the same interest in soccer after she ends up with a boyfriend, it is also true that boys in sports books are rarely depicted as having to balance an interest in sports with an interest in girls. Putting aside the obvious hetero-normative structure of such narratives, we can see how, for boys, success in sports often equals success with girls, while, for girls, success in sports rarely equals success with boys. While this might still be a reality that girls have to contend with, authors

might consider having female hockey players admired for both their knowledge of the sport and their playing ability. Why not make the girl the one who wants a career in broadcasting?

Another issue that needs examination is the question of which kind of sport—team or individual—provides the most benefits to its participants. It is a choice that the protagonists of sports fiction often face themselves. Collins’s approach to teaching sports literature, which I referred to earlier, focuses on the extent to which sport can be either a “socializing or a liberating agent” (284). In theory, team sports help athletes learn teamwork, which will then help them to function effectively within other kinds of groups, while individual sports help athletes to develop independence, which will then help them to function creatively as leaders. Broh writes, “while team sports may lead to stronger social ties with peers, . . . individual sports may build a stronger individual work ethic and locus of control” (86).

Returning to Scudamore’s *Ice Dreams*, we can see how her protagonist, Maya, deliberately chooses hockey over figure skating. She has two reasons for doing so: a) her Mexican father wants her to become a figure skater like her mother before her and b) she has a fear of attention that causes her to break out in a rash. While Maya does not completely reject her cultural background,

which is dominant in her home, she chooses hockey because she needs to be both different from her father and the same as the Canadian girls on her team. As Michael A. Robidoux writes in an article on hockey and nationalism in the nineteenth century, "The singularity of the game and the manner in which it was played were critical for a young and disparate nation to have as its own as it faced encroaching social, political, and cultural interests from Europe and the United States" (222). For Scudamore's female athlete, hockey becomes a way of resisting the encroaching cultural interests of her Mexican father, but the story is sensitive enough not to depict participation in hockey as an easy way to assimilate the children of immigrants. Instead, hockey functions as a more complex "third space" in which conformity and non-conformity are held in balance. Maya creates her own identity by playing hockey even as she conforms to the greater national identity. She becomes a "good Canadian," but she does not become a "good girl" who chooses the more genteel sport of figure skating. If authors are to equate hockey with the Canadian identity, they have to be careful not to create one-dimensional plots about immigrant children assimilating by choosing to participate in the sport. Scudamore's book avoids this trap and, in doing so, depicts Canada's hockey community

as dynamic, with the ability to incorporate new faces and new approaches. The book also does a good job of resolving Maya's fears about the attention that comes with playing individual sports. She starts off the book as a forward player but ends up as the team's star goaltender. In a team sport, the attention is not so focused on Maya, but she learns to deal with attention through her role as goaltender, a position that receives a great deal of the spotlight. In the end, hockey allows her to fit into a community and to contribute what is unique about herself to that community.

Team sports may teach lessons about teamwork, but they can also enforce a kind of pack mentality that causes sensible individuals to do things they would not otherwise do, such as taking performance-enhancing drugs. This is the case with the football players in Eric Walters's *Juice*, from the Orca Soundings series of books for teenagers who are reluctant readers. As one of the few books under review that actually addresses larger systemic problems within the culture of sports, it has an important story to tell. Here, an unscrupulous coach replaces a much beloved coach and quickly convinces the team that they need to take steroids if they want to win. The book comes to terms with the immense pressure on athletes not only to perform well but also to conform to the team mentality. The protagonist,



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nicknamed Moose, is put on a very sophisticated regimen of drug use that involves stepping up dosages or “pyramiding” (78). Young readers will appreciate the way the narrative offers an inside look at how doping in sports actually works, even as they come to learn the lesson, as Moose does, that whatever the short-term benefits of steroids are, they inevitably destroy the body. Whereas Moose follows the pack rather easily, his friend Caleb is able to resist. Caleb’s intelligence becomes connected to his non-conformist attitude as the book makes the point that while team sports can sometimes be about conformity, education can be a liberating agent. Moose struggles to maintain decent grades, but Caleb is at the top of the class: “He was a lot better than me at a whole lot of things—especially things related to school. He just breezed through classes, getting nineties” (19). Walters’s book shows us that team sports as a socializing agent must be balanced with education as a liberating agent. Education can protect the student-athlete from becoming too immersed in the

team mentality.

It is interesting, however, that *Juice* focuses on football, rather than hockey, in order to explore the issue of performance-enhancing drugs. Walters chooses football over hockey in a way that tends to make steroid use seem more like an American problem than a Canadian one. Football is certainly less fundamental to the Canadian identity than hockey. Also, the unethical coach is made to sound like an American import. He is described as rather too slick: “With that suit and hair he didn’t look like a coach—well maybe a coach in the NBA” (21). Perhaps basketball is referenced because it is even more American than football (at least in terms of the number of professional teams). I would suggest that Walters chooses football rather than hockey to examine problems within sports because he is reluctant to criticize a sport that is so connected to Canadian nationalism. The book ends up making steroid use a problem that comes from outside the country rather than one that comes from within. In this way, it ends up blunting its

own non-conformist edge.

Beverly Scudamore's *Ready to Run*, part of the Sports Stories series, uses the solo sport of cross-country running to address the issues of body image and self-esteem as they relate to athletics. Here, the benefits of sports are made quite literal as the hero, Remy, uses her new-found fitness to run to the rescue of her friend, Alison, who has arranged to meet someone she knows only from the Internet. While many of the girls on the running team obsess over body image and appearance, Remy is less stereotypically feminine. She remarks that Alison, who is obsessed with physical attractiveness, has changed since turning thirteen: "She seemed to be losing her self-confidence. I didn't get it. She had so much going for her. She was a popular student and a soccer star. Her cheeks had a sprinkling of freckles, her eyes were sapphire blue, and her hair was long and silky" (9). Initially, Remy wants to conform to Alison's model of beauty, and we see her searching the Internet for ways to grow out her short hair quickly. She also voices her distaste for schoolwork when her gym teacher assigns the class a five-hundred-word essay entitled "Why I Run." As the story progresses, however, Remy worries less about her appearance and begins to enjoy her schoolwork. When Alison ends up being lured by an Internet predator, Remy runs to her rescue as the actively

unconventional girl saves the passively traditional girl. The experience also allows her to complete the assignment given to her by the gym teacher. She says,

it didn't seem like such a difficult assignment anymore. Something inside me had changed. After all this time, I knew the answer. I had run for Mr. Jackson. I had run for Alison. Now I wanted to run for me. Closing my eyes, I pictured myself at the starting line, wearing my number six jersey. The starting gun fired. I surged forward, ready to take on a new race. (96)

At first, Remy cannot believe that a gym teacher would give a writing assignment, but, through writing, she comes to understand that her running is part of a larger process of self-discovery. The ending cleverly breaks down the false dichotomy between sports and academics when her identity is completed by both running and writing.

If athletes often choose between team and individual sports, many also choose to turn away from older, more conventional sports (ones traditionally featured in professional leagues), to participate in the new "extreme" or "action" sports. Alternative sports, such as snowboarding, surfing, skateboarding, and mountain climbing,

are often called “lifestyle” sports because the participants often see themselves as living the sport rather than simply playing it. For participants, such sports are about developing individuality, taking risks, and rejecting commercialism. They are born out of a rejection of the demands of coaches, the pressures to take performance-enhancing drugs, and the codes of macho conduct that are part of conventional sports.

Robert E. Rinehart argues that extreme sports appeal to “participants whose fundamental impulse is to discover themselves and their relationship to the world through activity with the world” (“The Performative” 122). His assessment implies that extreme sports have a built-in process of self-discovery that is lacking in other sports. While he is careful to acknowledge problems within the various extreme-sports communities,² he is able to identify certain core values that comprise the extreme-sports philosophy. These values are “egolessness and humility, a trust in the true Self as the seeker of knowledge, . . . an avoidance of hostility and competition, and . . . a rejection of authority as a path to knowledge or understanding” (“The Performative”126). If Rinehart is correct, extreme sports can be viewed as an alternative form of education in which adult authority is replaced by child-directed discovery. Rinehart argues that, unlike a sport like football,

a sport like skateboarding allows the participant to pursue an “individual learning style” (“The Performative” 131). He writes,

While the successful action sport athletes are organized and dedicated to their craft and art form, they also portray a dynamic sense of resistance. The very ethos seems to say that they are going to learn and evolve and create new sport forms in anti-authoritarian ways so that they may demonstrate the illusion that they are in control of themselves. (“The Performative”133–34)

Participants see their sport as an alternative not only to the structures of traditional sports but also to the structures of the school and its learning processes. They are reacting to an authoritarian regime in which the physical and the mental are constructed as binary opposites, in which grades are a means of generating competition, and in which learning is too closely aligned with job training and career aspirations.

If we look at the Walrus series, *Take it to the Xtreme*, written by Pam Withers for readers ages twelve to fifteen, we can see why children are increasingly turning away from traditional sports to pursue extreme sports. Certainly a major part of the appeal of extreme sports is the danger involved,

but, in *Vertical Limits*, the mountain-climbing book in the series, we find that Withers is able to make the sport attractive beyond a simple celebration of risk-taking behaviour. It tells the story of a young climber, Peter Montpetit, who performs a solo climb of a very dangerous mountain. The most startling scene in the book has him attempting to sleep hundreds of feet above ground; he is battered by the wind and rain as he hangs suspended in a rope harness. Having come so close to death, Peter reconciles team sports with individual sports when he realizes the necessity of a support team in ensuring survival. In fact, he is rescued by a female climber who demonstrates great knowledge and technical ability. The book acknowledges the need for support in completing such a climb, even as its protagonist is on a kind of vision quest that involves a great deal of self-reliance.

Unlike a hockey player, who is at the mercy of coaches and league officials who control team selection, a climber does not have to integrate his or herself into a hierarchical social order. For this reason, some might argue that mountain climbing is too independent, that children need to deal with the social order rather than escape from it. While extreme sports may not provide the same boost in cultural capital as team sports, they can, if Withers's book is any indication, inspire a kind of self-directed learning that combines

sports and education. If extreme sports are often about individuality and non-conformity, Withers is careful to emphasize that such sports can also be built around networks of friends and participants that include both boys and girls and that share knowledge of the sport. Technical knowledge of mountain climbing is presented as life-saving knowledge and, in this way, the book breaks down the false dichotomy between sports and academics to an even greater extent than books about non-traditional sports. Extreme sports are, of course, dangerous—that is part of their appeal—but, as the danger increases, the participant's level of technical knowledge becomes that much more important; it becomes a matter of life and death. Peter performs mental exercises to increase his levels of concentration. He also reads up on the technical side of mountain climbing and the biographies of famous climbers. He understands that, while one can step out on the hockey rink without reading a book, one cannot try to climb a mountain without doing some homework.

Whereas the playing field and the classroom are often deliberately pitted against each other in traditional sports books, in Withers's book, the mountain becomes the site where book learning and physical training come together to produce a successful climb. It is also the site where the spiritual and the physical come together.



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Certainly, it is possible to incorporate metaphysical discussion of sports into a hockey book, but it is a requirement of the genre in extreme sports, because the participants themselves often foreground the metaphysical side of their sport. Climbers speak of the sublime majesty of the mountain and surfers rhapsodize about the oneness they achieve with the wave. In contrast, there is often a reluctance to take a metaphysical approach to traditional sports. Fulford certainly does not buy into such an approach to team sports when he notes that Arthur Schlesinger Jr. “once remarked that he would support a constitutional amendment making it illegal for American intellectuals to write about baseball. He had read more than enough about the awe-inspiring stillness of the game” (6). Unlike books about traditional sports, Withers’s book is richer for its look at the awe-inspiring stillness of its mountain setting. Extreme sports can be dismissed all too easily as reckless risk-taking behaviour, but her book shows us that a sport like mountain climbing does not rely only on

its dangerous setting for its appeal. The climbers themselves are committed to breaking down false dichotomies about sports and education and, in the process, mountain climbing becomes an education of the mind, body, and spirit.

Parents are understandably reluctant to allow their children to take up extreme sports, but there are benefits to these sports that are lacking in more conventional sports. If we focus only on the danger and the risk-taking involved, we forget that extreme sports are a challenge to an education system that produces so many reluctant learners. In many cases, participants are looking for processes of discovery that challenge the self as a whole. It is not, therefore, a question of simply giving extreme sports books a place in the classroom; rather, teachers would do well to understand how extreme sports intelligently challenge the foundations of the education system. While books about team sports struggle, sometimes in vain, to find ways to connect sports and academics, books about extreme sports demonstrate how new forms

of sport have developed as a reaction to the ways in which the education system perpetuates false dichotomies. Sports like mountain climbing are born out of the participants' recognition that it is only by completing a goal using both physical and mental exertion that one achieves self-discovery. For this reason, extreme sports (and extreme sports books) will continue to grow in popularity, while team sports (along with team sports books) will continue to decline. Schools that provide rock climbing walls and classes on mountaineering will also grow in popularity.

As my discussion indicates, sports books for young adults should not be considered lightweight. In many of them, there is a serious desire to

address the issue of sports versus education by making the protagonist both a student and an athlete. There is a genuine concern to promote literacy to children who would much rather be outside shooting baskets than inside reading a book. While some of the titles under review here are unable to move beyond a simple binary relationship between sports and academics, many are able to construct the classroom and the playing field as mutually supportive. New forms of sport, new ways of doing sports, and new ways of writing about sports are beginning to re-imagine the field of play as a space in which the mind, body, and spirit come together to create new structures of self-discovery.

Notes

¹ "See Jones et al., *Connecting with Reluctant Readers*, and Reynolds, *I Won't Read*, on strategies for teaching reluctant readers.

² Problems include gender discrimination and a lack of ethnic diversity. See Rinehart, "'Babes' and Boards," and

Anderson, "Snowboarding," for the treatment of female snowboarders. See Kusz, *Revolt of the White Athlete*, for race and extreme sports. There is some evidence to support a progressive view of gender roles within extreme sports. See Thorpe, "Jibbing the Gender Order."

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