

INTRODUCING THE CRITICAL CASE STUDIES

Jennifer McClearen



Message in opposition of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, China

Survey data and content analysis of politics in American sports provide us with a broad picture of the political pulse of 2022. To add nuance and depth to some of the report's other findings, we round out the report with a series of five case studies that allow us to delve into a few of the stories that have bubbled to the surface of public discourse this year.



The case studies in this year's report each interrogate how sports have become a battleground for political power struggles over issues of ideological importance that continue to influence the identities, communities, and material conditions of our lives."

The authors of the case studies use the critical tradition of academic research to investigate political, economic, and social power in sports. Each author recognizes that sports are a microcosm of the larger political ecosystem and that it is important to understand the nuance and specificities of these cases in depth. According to sports scholar [Daniel Grano](#), context is important because any study focusing on a specific object or problem, like the stereotype of Black athletes as criminals, must consider the "larger relations between social forces" impacting that stereotype. In the case of the Black criminal stereotype, this might include "racial pseudosciences, mass imprisonment, reality TV, policing, drug politics, [and] league disciplinary structures."

Each case study analyzes the use, abuse, or challenge of power in various sports media and cultural contexts. Because, as media scholar [Douglas Kellner](#) puts it, "media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence, and who is not." Power can be understood in a number of intersecting ways, including social, political, economic, legal, hard, and soft, and so on.

The first two case studies examine how financial deals impact the politics of the multi-billion-dollar global sports industry. In their essay, "Branding Coffee and Conservative



All-Pro Reels from District of Columbia, USA/Wikimedia Commons

Tennis legend Serena Williams competes in her final match, at the 2022 U.S. Open in New York.

Politics with the Dallas Cowboys,” Michael Butterworth and Olivia Gellar analyze the NFL team’s partnership with Black Rifle Coffee Company (BRCC), a business that openly aligns itself with conservative politics like MAGA, white male victimhood, and gun rights activism. The partnership between the NFL and BRCC, according to Butterworth and Gellar, is an example of the larger trend of businesses taking political positions through their brand messaging. But the authors express concern about the Dallas team’s financial ties to a company that sells an “AK-47 Espresso” in the aftermath of a mass shooting at a Texas elementary school.

“Sportswashing and the LIV Golf Tour,” a case study by Kathryn Hartzell, scrutinizes how soft power—i.e., coercion rather than force—operates at the global nexus of politics and business. She discusses how Saudi Arabia’s Public Investment Fund bankrolled the creation of a new professional golf tour

as an example of sportswashing. Sportswashing refers to the practice of governments investing in sporting events such as LIV in order to boost their countries’ international standing, no matter the cost. Hartzell’s essay contends that sportswashing is notorious for concealing human rights abuse and cautions us to question how these business-government partnerships operate.

The majority of the case studies look at coercive power rather than forceful power. The essay on Brittney Griner’s wrongful detention in Russia, on the other hand, also discusses hard power, which refers to military intervention or police force. In the “The Underwhelming Coverage of #FreeBrittneyGriner,” Lily Kunda and I show how the WNBA player is both a pawn in global politics and a victim of an apathetic American public that has done little to demand her release. Hard power can be used to physically imprison someone, but the Griner essay also argues that social power influences the American media’s decision that a Black, queer sportswoman’s freedom is not worthy of coverage or concern.

Michael Butterworth also analyzes the power of national identity on the global stage in his case study, “Eileen Gu and American Exceptionalism in China.” The freestyle skier made waves at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing by winning three gold medals while representing China rather than the United States. Butterworth argues that Gu was chastised in the American media because she posed a threat to America’s global dominance. American exceptionalism seeks to preserve the soft power of the United States’ influence in global culture and sports, which explains why American media were quick to criticize Gu’s decision to represent China rather than the United States.

The final case study investigates the role of the American judicial system in the struggle for dominance between conservative and progressive politics. “Sports and Religion Intersect at the Supreme Court,” by Nathaniel Repay, considers the case of a high school coach who was suspended by a local school board for publicly praying at football games. Instead of citing the principle of separation of church and state, the conservative-leaning Supreme Court ruled that the coach’s suspension was unjust because it violated his religious freedom. Repay contends that sports is another social space where the competing political tensions between the separation of church and state and religious freedom jockey for power.

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Support for this report comes from the Governor Ann W. Richards Chair for the Texas Program in Sports and Media.



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