

INTRODUCING THE CRITICAL CASE STUDIES

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2021 witnessed political power struggles within American culture that took shape in particular ways in sports media contexts. To consider how historical, economic, and cultural factors intertwine to inform sports media and politics this past year, we have curated a series of critical case studies to provide depth and nuance to some of our findings in the other sections of this report.

We use the term *critical* in its academic sense. The [critical tradition](#) examines how political, economic, and social power operate within cultural spaces such as sports media. As [Kent Ono](#) explains, a critical perspective questions the “broad set of beliefs, forces, and attitudes that become ingrained within a society that make people, for example, immediately rise and put hand over heart before the national anthem is played, unquestioningly use gender-segregated bathrooms, or accept a link between biological identity markers and intelligence.” In other words, scholars use this approach to investigate how political forces compel us to think, act, and believe in particular ways while carefully examining the consequences of those thoughts, actions, and beliefs in society.

This collection of case studies contemplates how political forces shape league structures, media conventions, historical events, and gendered and racial hierarchies. Each case considers specific leagues or athletes contextually but also signal how these cases have broader connections to American society writ large.

The first case study, “The 20th Anniversary of 9/11 and Sport’s Reliance on Unity” by Nathaniel Repay and Michael L. Butterworth, questions the fundamental American assumption that sports provide a space of “unity and shared purpose.” Repay and Butterworth posit that the commemoration of 9/11 represents a trend in sports and other American contexts of perpetually seeking “unity” even though that unity doesn’t include all Americans. While unity may seem like a worthy aspiration, Repay and Butterworth argue that we must first attend to how economic stratification, racism, sexism, and other oppressive structures divide us.



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The World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers visit with President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris at the White House.

The next case study examines other fundamentally American beliefs exemplified in sports. In “Kyrie Irving, Athlete Voice, and Vaccine Hesitancy,” Olivia S. Gellar and Michael L. Butterworth illustrate the tension between NBA basketball player Kyrie Irving’s willingness to view racial justice as a common good but his insisting that the pandemic is an issue of his personal health rather than public health. Gellar and Butterworth argue that rugged individualism guides Irving’s and others’ expressions of vaccine hesitancy.

The next case study scrutinizes how “paternalism” operates in college sports. In “NIL Is Just the Beginning,” Katie Lever considers the recent move by the NCAA to allow college athletes to profit on their names, images, and likenesses (NIL). Lever argues that although NIL rights are a step in a positive direction for increasing the agency of collegiate athletes, the NCAA’s default paternalistic treatment of young adult athletes remains consistent. She contends that college athletes should be treated as legal adults with the right to organize as laborers and negotiate their working conditions.

The next three case studies focus on issues and athletes that have received less coverage in 2021 (or in previous years) in sports media: transgender athletes, women's sports, and Black women athletes. These case studies center the fact that political power is wielded in sports media to privilege some identities and to marginalize others.

Vincent Peña and Jamie Jelinek demonstrate that major sports outlets such as ESPN and Yahoo! Sports have largely ignored legislative efforts to bar trans girls and women from participating in sports that affirm their gender identity in "Coverage of Anti-Transgender Athlete Legislation in Mainstream Sports Media." When these sports outlets do cover this issue, Peña and Jelinek argue that they focus on the effects of such legislation on political careers—a focus that fails to recognize the impact of increasing transphobia in America and further marginalizes trans athletes.

In "Breaking the Spectacle: Exploitation and Empowerment in the NWSL," Jessica Luther and Kathryn Hartzell also analyze the impacts of marginalization in women's sports. Luther and Hartzell demonstrate that a fear of bursting the mirage that professional women's soccer is an empowering space for women and girls led to a willingness to ignore how coaches harassed and abused players in the league. Now that

the illusion of empowerment has been shattered, NWSL players are advocating for policies and protections to make their working environment safer moving forward.



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While most of these case studies identify how dominant ideologies and beliefs support inequalities in sports media, the last contribution probes how marginalized identities resist media conventions that disenfranchise them. Lily Kunda and Amira Rose Davis examine how athletes assert agency in "Black Women Athletes Take Control of Their Own Narratives." Kunda and Davis discuss how professional tennis star Naomi Osaka and decorated Olympic gymnast Simone Biles use social media, digital platforms, and other streaming media to tell their own stories. While mainstream sports journalism has historically failed to represent Black women as

fully human, Osaka and Biles "get to tell textured stories that do not have to be reduced or simplified."

Each case study uses events in 2021 to examine the power struggles in American politics that circulate within sports media. While the specificities of each case are unique to this year, each one sheds light on longstanding beliefs, values, and ideologies that will continue to shape American society. ■



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