

GUYLAND

The
Perilous
World
Where Boys
Become Men

MICHAEL KIMMEL

HARPER

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For Mitchell Tunick

We two boys together clinging,
One the other never leaving,
Up and down the roads going—North and South excursions making,
Power enjoying—elbows stretching—fingers clutching,
Arm'd and fearless—eating, drinking, sleeping, loving.

—WALT WHITMAN, *Leaves of Grass*

potential initiate has other arenas—as husband or father, perhaps—in which his masculinity is now demonstrated, and so there may simply be less on the line.

And yet, as these stories continually remind us, the stakes are enormous. The February 2005 hazing death of 21-year-old Cal State, Chico junior Matt Carrington led to indictments of several of his fraternity brothers. Carrington did not die of alcohol poisoning, but of “water intoxication.” He and another pledge were left in a cold wet basement doing calisthenics for hours with their feet in raw sewage while fans blasted icy air at their wet bodies. They were ordered to drink from a five-gallon jug of water that was continually filled.

The pledges urinated and vomited on themselves and each other. But then Carrington began having a seizure. Fraternity brothers didn’t call an ambulance, perhaps for fear their hazing activities would be exposed. By the time they did call, it was too late. Carrington’s heart stopped beating, his brain and lungs swollen beyond recognition from the water.

As they were sentenced to six months to a year in prison for their part in Carrington’s death, his fraternity brothers expressed remorse instead of defiant silence. “I did what I did out of a misguided sense of building brotherhood, and instead I lost a brother. I will live with the consequences of hazing for the rest of my life,” said Gabriel Maestretti, a former altar boy and volunteer coach who was a leader of the fraternity. “My actions killed a good person, and I will be a felon for the rest of my life. . . . Hazing isn’t funny, it’s not cute. It’s stupid, dangerous. It’s not about brotherhood, it’s about power and control.”

Here is the beginning of the conversation that should be happening across the country.

6 | SPORTS CRAZY

My son Zachary and I were returning by subway from a Mets game last season when a group of about eight black teenaged boys got into our subway car. They were talking loudly to each other as they stood near us. Some of the other riders became visibly anxious; a few moved away in the car, a few others got out at the next station to change cars. But Zachary was listening to them as they nearly shouted at each other in mock anger. Gradually it dawned on him (and me) that they were constructing the best starting five in NBA history, yelling back and forth, pulling players in and out. As is typical, they were dramatically overrepresenting current players—at least to my Baby Boomer ears. I mean, Dwayne Wade is good, but. . . .

Zachary looked up at one guy and said, “But Magic Johnson was the best passer ever, and he could shoot from outside and drive the lane. You have to have Magic!”

The guy looked down at Zachary. Stared at him. So did his friend standing next to him. And another. A few seconds passed. Then, the guy closest to us smiled broadly, put his hand out to high-five Zachary, and claimed Magic as his own choice. Zachary looked at me. “Dad,” he leaned in close and asked, “who was the guy you said was the best shot

blocker ever?" "Bill Russell," I replied. Zachary offered Russell over Shaquille O'Neal, which began another round of discussion—one in which he was now included. When the guys left, each walked past Zachary and high-fived him. And, having been accepted by kids who were both older and more knowledgeable, Zachary practically floated home on that train.

Walk into any dorm on any campus where there are guys sitting around watching TV—or into any fraternity house, or apartment shared by a group of single guys, or bar, or even, these days, many restaurants. You will be surrounded by sports, bombarded by sports. It's everywhere. Guys are sports crazy.

And we've been crazy about sports for more than a hundred years, ever since modern spectator sports—baseball, football, and later basketball and ice hockey—were first introduced at the turn of the last century. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the baseball diamond was the only place in America where rural and urban men bumped into each other, so separate were their worlds. And the stands were just about the only places where factory workers and office bureaucrats rubbed shoulders. Sports—playing them, watching them, exulting in victories, despairing over defeats—was one of the great equalizers of American democracy (except if you happened to be black; those barriers took another half-century to fall).

For more than a century, men have known that playing sports provided physical fitness, a healthy competition, and lots of fun. Watching has always instilled civic pride as we root for our home teams, bond across class boundaries, and experience the tonic freshness of bucolic splendor in the gritty city.

These days, American guys are possibly more sports crazy off the field than on it. They read the sports page, check out sports magazines online, listen to sports radio, watch sports on TV, and watch shows about sports on TV. They go to restaurants and bars that tune into several sports events at once. They wear more team and player-branded jerseys than ever before, and there is more bonding through athletic wear than through shared interests. They play fantasy baseball, football, basketball, and hockey, in which they select and manage their own

teams through an entire season. They participate in countless endless arguments about the relative merits of players.

Sports is so ubiquitous in Guyland that it often seems to crowd out other forms of social life. Guys live for sports, and live through sports. It serves so many purposes—validating our manhood; bridging generational, racial, and class divides; cementing the bonds among men; and more clearly demarcating the boundaries between Guyland and Herland. Here are a few snapshots.

It's 10 o'clock on a Tuesday night at Goodfellas, a bar in downtown Wilmington frequented by college guys from the local campus of the University of North Carolina. The music is loud, the noise level high, and all eyes are glued to the large flat-screen TVs hanging from the walls, showing three different baseball games. Guys comment to each other about each game, and small cheers go up whenever something happens on any of the screens. (The guys also check out the few unattached women at the bar and the men's room is plastered with soft-core pornographic pictures, but the focus seems to be on a different type of scoring.)

At 6 p.m., when Nate comes home from work to the Philadelphia apartment he shares with three other guys, he grabs a beer and sits down with his pals to watch *SportsCenter* on ESPN and catch up on the days' sports news. They'll watch again at 11, when the rest of the country might tune into their local news show. And those who can't sleep will simply leave the TV tuned to ESPN and watch whatever is on late into the night.

At lunch, Walter, 24, joins about seven other stockbrokers and bond traders at Delmonico's, the famous steakhouse that has been serving the up-and-coming Masters of the Universe on Wall Street since it was founded in 1837. In the lounge, next to the dark wood paneling, TVs don't just have stock tickers in a constant stream, but also games, highlights, and *SportsCenter*. And if that's not enough, you can always go downmarket to Ryan's Sports Bar, a few blocks away, where TVs ring the bar, all with sports.

Every evening during his commute from work, Jim, 26, joins nearly a million other guys as he tunes into WFAN ("The Fan") radio in New

York, and listens to “Mike and the Mad Dog”—a five-and-one-half-hour call-in sports talk show that he listens to on his computer during slow moments, and then all the way back to the Long Island suburban house he shares with his wife and their 2-year-old daughter. “I love listening to Mike and the Mad Dog,” he tells me.

The guys who call are great, really knowledgeable, and Mike always steers the conversation away from nasty comments about women or about athletes’ private lives. You know, I mean sex lives. I think that’s why the athletes themselves go on the show, because they know he respects them. I’ve even called in a couple of times, you know. Once, I pulled over on the fucking L.I.E. to mouth off about the Jets or the Mets. And he completely agreed with me.

Make no mistake: There is nothing “wrong” with any of this. Some of my fondest moments as a child were arguing about who was the best centerfielder in New York—Mickey Mantle, Duke Snider, or Willie Mays. I love reading the sports page with Zachary, and I love discussing how our various teams have fared. I’m never happier than when I’m coaching his Little League baseball team, or his soccer team, or when we play roller hockey in the park as training for the ice hockey season. I love being a Hockey Dad and a Soccer Dad and I always smile as I listen to him argue with his friends about whether José Reyes or Derek Jeter is the best shortstop in baseball.

I say all this to be clear: *I love sports*. They have always been an integral part of my life. I play them, watch them, talk about them. Through sports I have felt connected to my family, my community (the Brooklyn of the Dodgers), and my friends.

But we need to ask some questions about what sports mean to us, to think about the place sports occupy in our lives. We need to talk about talking about sports. Talking about sports creates a female-free zone where guys can be guys. It mutes differences among men by race or class or age—differences that made others on that subway ride with Zachary visibly uncomfortable. Sports talk provides a temporary respite from

having to think about our differences and the complexities of life all the damned time. And not the least of these complexities involves women.

Once, of course, the entire public sphere was a man’s world. Today, everywhere you look—the corporate boardroom, the classroom, the military squad, the athletic field—there are women. Is it so surprising that guys today rely more on talking about sports, playing fantasy sports, and living and breathing sports 24/7? Sports talk has become the reconstituted clubhouse, the last “pure” all-male space in America.

Loving Sports

I asked guys across the country about sports—what they like and don’t like, what they watch and play, and what they talk about. Their voices rang like a nationally dispersed chorus that all sang the same song. But while they knew all the words, and were familiar with the melody, I had a hard time getting anyone to risk a solo and actually be articulate about the place of sports in their lives. They’d waffle between a sort of incoherent mumbling—tinged, at times, with an edgy defensiveness—and a vague but seemingly deep nostalgia.

Said Rick, a junior at Emory, “Uh, I dunno. It’s fun, it’s, it’s cool, it’s like, well, it’s what guys *do*. I don’t think I understand the question. I mean, why do I like sports? Because I’m a guy.”

Jeff, a senior at Bowdoin, was no more helpful. “Why do I like sports? What’s not to like? It’s just what guys do.”

Ted, a former track star at Auburn, stressed the physical exertion:

There’s something so exhilarating about training hard, working your body, pushing it to its limits, and then competing against guys who have trained just as hard. Can you do it, can you take it up one more notch, can you find one more spurt in there?

And Justin, a sophomore at Penn, echoed these sentiments:

I grew up playing sports, watching sports. It was the only way to be a guy in my school. I mean, you could be smart, but you’d better

not show it. You could be, like, talented or artistic or whatever, but you better not show it. Everyone was always going around saying “that’s so gay” and “this is so gay.” And the one thing they never said that about was sports. The guys who never got bullied or teased were the guys who were into sports. So, like, sports was not only a way to be a guy, it was the single most important way to prove you weren’t, like, you know, like gay.

Guys like sports because it’s the easiest way to choose “guy” over “gay”—and make sure everyone gets the right idea about them. It’s reassuring, especially during a time of adolescent turmoil and inevitable doubts and questions when nothing is as clear as they wish it were. The novelist Zane Grey once wrote “All boys love baseball. If they don’t they’re not real boys.” Guys also believe the converse: If they do love sports, they are real boys.

Guys also like following sports because it’s a way to talk with other guys without having to talk about your feelings. It’s a certain conversation starter in any uncertain social situation—walk into a party, a bar, a classroom, and say “How ’bout them Mets?” Instant bonding. Sports talk clears a path for easy entry. Even when guys say it self-consciously, ironically, at a lull in the conversation, their recourse to it underscores its value as a sort of cynical currency.

Among the funniest scenes in the film *Birdcage* occurs when Armand (played by Robin Williams) is trying to teach his partner Albert (a drag queen played by Nathan Lane) how to pass as a “real man.” After teaching him to walk like John Wayne, Williams positions himself under a tree and instructs Lane to shake his hand forcefully and break the ice with a sure-fire conversation starter.

“How do you feel about those Dolphins? I mean 4th and 2 and they go for it . . .”

To which Lane responds as only a gay man—i.e. a “failed” man—possibly could. “How do you think I feel? Betrayed, bewildered.” The audience howls because Lane missed the cue. Williams didn’t really want to know how he was *feeling!*

The Crying Game

There is something else in the mix of men and emotions. Men use sports to both hide their feelings and to *express* their feelings. Sports legitimize our emotions, and enable us to express a fuller range of emotions than we ordinarily do in our everyday lives. They allow men to experience ecstasy. Watch guys’ faces when their team scores—pure joy. The emotions of sports are simple and uncomplicated: the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.

But perhaps the most important thing is that sports let men cry. We cry without getting stares that say we’re not real men. We cry from pain, from defeat, from the joy of winning a championship, from the intensely emotional feelings we have for our teammates.

A couple of years ago, my family took a Canadian friend to a baseball game at Yankee Stadium. August 13, 2005 was “Mickey Mantle Memorial Day”—ten years since Mantle had died. It was to be the day his plaque was unveiled in Memorial Park, part of the outfield (now behind the wall) that had been a pilgrimage site for Yankee fans for half a century. The ceremony, emceed by Billy Crystal and including former Yankee players and a few survivors of Mantle’s family, was interminable—an hour-long sob-fest. All around us, men my age and older were weeping unashamedly. My wife was so stunned by the cloying bathos in which the entire event was drenched that she pronounced it “a chick flick for guys.” My son fidgeted and wondered when the game would begin. But my friend and I, neither of us Yankee fans in our youth, were deeply moved by such public displays of affection for a fragile idol, especially coming from men who would do almost anything to toughen up their sons.

Sports enables men to defy the cardinal rule of masculinity—“Don’t Cry.” It enables men to access their emotions and get in touch with their “inner boy.” Men may not cry—but boys do. Sports are about a return to boyhood. They offer the pleasures of regression. Playing and following sports is a way for men to postpone adulthood indefinitely.

We may age (here I include myself) but the players we watch, they’re still 22 years old, and we still often feel like wide-eyed 12-year-olds

watching them, idolizing them, wanting to grow up to be like them—even if we are old enough to be their fathers. Sports enable us to fantasize that we are still the boys of summer, even as we age into the autumn of our lives.

Like fraternity initiations and binge drinking, sports are sometimes another activity that almost-men engage in to prolong childhood and avoid becoming men—which we think means being sober, responsible, serious fathers and workers, unable to have fun. Sports recall the bucolic American past, unhurried by the drive of the corporate clock. They remind us of the purity and innocence of play. And there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this—except that in Guyland, many men never seem to leave the stadium. For them sports aren't a time-out; they're the endgame.

Like so many parts of Guyland, the continuum runs from harmless and even positive experiences of emotional expressiveness, friendship, and connection through the vaguely silly or gross, toward the other pole on which such positive experiences may be based on dominance, exclusion, and anger. Sports may provide a safe haven for guys to express their emotions, to connect with each other, to reach back to their childhood. And as a place of emotional vulnerability and expressiveness, love of sports can be easily manipulated and abused. A safe haven for guys cannot be based on making women feel unsafe.

Make Room for Daddy

Our love of sports may also be about connecting with one person in particular—the one person who has the power to validate your manhood or dissolve it in an instant: Dad.

It's my story too. My father caught my first pitches, was the umpire at my Little League games, the coach of my Pony League team. He'd take ten minutes in between patients (his office was attached to our house) when I'd come home from school to play catch with me, to ask me how my day was. He took me fishing. He taught me how to shoot a rifle, set up a BB gun range in our basement, and took me hunting. We learned to ski together, to ice skate together. We'd wake up at 5 o'clock

on Saturday mornings to play golf together, teeing off at 7 and arriving home just as the rest of the family was waking up. It was our time together, and I cherished it. He was the teacher, I his avid student.

My father taught me how to love a baseball team. For us, it was the Brooklyn Dodgers. A Brooklyn-based chiropractor, my dad counted several Dodger pitchers as patients. And, of course, like many a Dodger fan, my father taught me how to have your heart broken by your team. It wasn't just that they lost; it was that they left. My father cried the day the Dodgers announced their move to Los Angeles. We packed up and moved to the suburbs. He never watched a Dodger game again.

Watching sports with my father was one of the joys of my childhood. Reading about it in the paper, talking about our teams, cemented our bonds. Sports, guys told me constantly, was a crucial way to bond with their fathers. Sometimes, it was the only way they ever spent time together. Some guys waxed nostalgic, recalling moments of connection with fathers who had now grown more distant, who had drifted away after divorce, or who had broken those intimate bonds in some other way.

"My father wasn't around a lot," says Mike, 24, a recent Brown graduate who now lives in Brooklyn. "He traveled a lot, worked really hard, and then he and my mom got a divorce. But every weekend we'd go play ball together. You know, I think . . ." his voice trails off and Mike gets a faraway look in his eyes. "You know," he says, "I think the most intimate memory of my dad was when he reached around me and showed me how to hold a bat. I remember that every time I pick up a bat today."

I met Mike on the baseball field near my home where I was having a catch with my son. What is striking is that Zachary and I had known Mike for a grand total of about five minutes and his emotions—deep, tender—were so readily accessible to him. At least as long as we were all playing ball.

"When I was little, my dad was so much a part of my life," recalls Albert, a 25-year-old graphic designer in Boston. "Every day growing up, I could count on some things—playing ball, talking with him about the Sox or the Bruins, or the Celtics. Even the Patriots. I think that was the

only way he knew to be close to me, the only thing we could actually talk about. I still feel bad. He died in 2003, and he never saw the Red Sox win it all. Never." His eyes get a little watery.

Other guys wince at the memories, recoiling still from judgmental tyrants, Great Santiniesque fathers who pushed and pushed their sons to perform in sports, fathers who let them know that they had to work incessantly, and that still they would never be satisfied. Fathers whose competitive anger at their sons was a way to pretend that they themselves weren't getting old.

"It was the only way I was going to get my dad to pay any attention to me at all," said Jeff, now 27. "He was so critical, all the time, he just never let up. But I nearly killed myself, playing with injuries, screwing up my knees, pushing myself beyond everything, just to get his approval. Which, when I think about it, I think I almost did."

For decades, I've been hearing stories like this from middle-aged men—either the misty nostalgia of rare moments of connection or the wrenching struggle to perform well enough athletically to try to please an implacably tyrannical judge. But I didn't expect to hear it from younger men, from the guys who are, after all, our sons. I had thought we, the men of my generation, would have learned better: to stick around and remain a vital loving presence in our sons' lives when they weren't on the ball field, or to enable them to feel our love without it being contingent on athletic prowess.

Just as surprising as the immediacy of guys' emotions was how apparently raw and unstudied they seemed to be. Maybe this was why they seemed so inarticulate: Somehow sports touch them in a way that is so deep that they find it nearly impossible to speak of it. Sports make us aware of the love we crave. Here's Ted, 26, a Pittsburgh native now a technical consultant in a division of an investment bank:

My father [an accountant] was never there when I was growing up. Always on calls, always working, even on weekends. I wanted so much to get his attention, earn his respect. I knew he loved sports—God, the only time I saw him relax was when he would be watching the Steelers on TV. I went out for football, I think,

because it was cool, and everyone was into it, sure. But I think I went out for football because it would get *his* attention.

"Did it?" I ask.

No, not really. I mean, well, yeah, I guess. He said he was proud of me and all. But then I separated my shoulder in my second game, and that was pretty much the end of my football career. He never mentioned it, never talked about it, never really paid much attention to me after that.

"Did you ever talk about it?" I ask.

It's funny, you know. The year before he died, before we knew about the cancer and everything, he said something to me about it. In his own way, sort of indirect, you know? He told me one Christmas when I was visiting, that his dad had never paid any attention to him, and that he always felt that he had been a disappointment to his dad. He tried out for the baseball team as a kid in the fifties, but didn't make it. "I was so proud of you when you played football," he said to me. "I hope you know that."

I told him that actually I didn't. I didn't even think he was paying attention. "Oh, I didn't want to make too big a deal out of it. Your mother wasn't happy about it, and then your brother wasn't going to ever be good at anything. I didn't want to seem like I was singling you out."

Funny, but suddenly it wasn't like I finally got what I wanted from him, you know? It was more like I finally realized that I had been trying for so long for something that actually was there all the time.

Guys carry those early moments with them, both in their relationships with male authority figures like their coaches, teachers, and others, and in their relationships with each other. Sports are a place of intense emotion; it's the glue that holds male friendships together. Some friendships

that have lasted for decades are based on sports talk. It both facilitates sharing feelings and enables us *not* to talk about our feelings—what’s *really* going on in our lives. As long as we talk about how we feel about our team, our players—as long as *they* break our hearts—then we can both talk about heartbreak and not talk about it at the same time.

Sports vs. Girls

There’s another reason guys love sports. It’s not just a return to boyhood, it’s a return to a specific moment of boyhood—the moment before girls. Remember the movie *Stand By Me*? This boy-bonding movie is about a group of pre-adolescents enjoying the last summer before they’re saddled with high school and other adult responsibilities. High school, the boys feel without ever saying, will change everything, thrusting them into a world where the purity of their friendships will be tainted by competition for girls’ attention, accolades, and rewards.

Through this lens, loving sports is also about loving your friends and hating what you see as the forces that threaten to break up that merry band of brothers. Sociologists Mike Messner and Don Sabo, two of the most insightful writers about the place of sports in men’s lives, call men’s experience with other men in sports a moment of “dominance bonding.” It’s not just innocent connectedness, there’s an edge to it, a sense of superiority. It’s where the safe haven of sports can turn dangerous for others.

It’s the threat to dominance bonding that elicits the defensiveness when women invade formerly all-male spaces—whether professions such as medicine or law, or the science lab, or the military, or the sports locker room. At these moments, men feel threatened by women’s equality, because equality includes access to those private spaces.

Fields of Dreams

Those spaces needn’t be real, of course. One of the fastest-growing sports in America is fantasy leagues, in which “owners” organize a league and each owner selects his team in a draft (where they are limited by salary

caps and other constraints). These teams are disaggregated teams—that is they are composed of players who are actually on any team in the sport, so that charting your team consists of tabulating the results of each of the individual players on your team. It doesn’t matter how your home team does—it matters how any particular player that you “own” does.

Fantasy leagues exist in virtually every sport, and 15 million American men are playing them. U.S. businesses lose about \$200 million in productivity each football season because employees are managing their fantasy football teams instead of working. One journalist writes that fantasy sports “allow you to indulge your inner Theo Epstein [General Manager of the Boston Red Sox] from the comfort of the couch; and for the hyper-competitive, adrenaline-craving, statistics-spouting sports geek, there is no modern ritual more sublime than the fantasy draft.”

“It’s better than sex,” said Evan, 27, explaining how he and his friends wait all year for the fantasy football draft. In a recent popular film, *Knocked Up*, one character’s wife suspects her husband is having an affair, and so she enlists the help of her sister and her sister’s boyfriend and together they troop off to catch him in the act. She finds him in a suburban house, dressed in a Baltimore Orioles uniform, participating in a fantasy baseball draft. When she asks just what in the world he is doing, he gushes, “It’s a fantasy baseball draft. I got Matsui!” (She considers this as much of a betrayal as if he had been sleeping with her best friend.)

The all-male competitive camaraderie is sort of the point. In their recent book, sports writers Erik Barmack and Max Handelman explain, as their title puts it, *Why Fantasy Football Matters (And Our Lives Do Not)*. To Handelman, it’s innocent regression. “The whole trash-talking and chest pounding and borderline immaturity that guys revel in that they can’t otherwise do in adult society,” is what it’s about. “Guys’ egos ride a lot on this stuff, which is kind of crazy because it’s numbers and it’s fantasy.”

But, he hastens to add, it’s precisely that adolescent inanity that poses its charm. “The vast majority of fantasy football fans, myself included, revel in the absurdity of it all. It’s like adult Dungeons and Dragons—

it's ridiculous. We know we're a bunch of clowns." And then, "When a woman pops up in the group, it brings an air of legitimacy to it. And we're thinking, we can't have that." Women remind us that we are supposed to be grown men. Other guys allow us to be immature boys. No wonder guys get so easily pissed off at women's intrusion.

The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football

The passion men have brought to playing and watching sports has been a relative constant. What has changed dramatically in recent years is the participation of women and girls. In the past three decades women's sports have undergone a revolution—women have gone from being cheerleaders and occasional spectators to being active participants, and even commentators.

Just look at the numbers. In 1971, fewer than 300,000 high-school girls played interscholastic sports in America, compared with 3.7 million boys. By 2005, the number of boys had risen to 4.1 million, but the number of girls had skyrocketed tenfold, to 2.9 million. In 1972, the year Title IX was enacted, requiring gender parity in collegiate sports, women's sports teams averaged about two sports per campus; by 2004, it had increased by more than 400 percent to 8.3 teams per campus.

In one sense this dramatic increase in such a short time is a testament to the joy of sports—the camaraderie, the competition, the sense of physical efficacy. But it's also a testament to the sway of Guyland. For decades girls had heard that sports was where it was at, the same way that their mothers heard that the workplace was where real life happened. And so, naturally, if those fields were the place to be, they wanted to be there too. And once the obstacles were removed, they swarmed onto them. It sort of proves the axiom that begins *Field of Dreams*, perhaps the quintessential guy flick of all time: "If you build it, [they] will come."

Women have definitely arrived in the sporting arena. But let me be clear: This does not mean that women and girls have achieved anything close to equality in sports. According to sociologist Mike Messner, female athletes still face inadequate resources and substan-

dard coaching and are often funneled into more "gender appropriate" sports like softball instead of baseball. Few universities are in compliance with Title IX, "as funding for recruitment, scholarships and ongoing support of women's athletics teams lags far behind that of men's teams." Indeed, a decade of conservative efforts to stop Title IX in its tracks has resulted in as many lawsuits by men's teams citing discrimination as women's teams.

In Guyland, the story isn't about the empirical fact of girls' entry into the sporting arena. It's about the impact of their entry on boys' ideas about how to prove masculinity. And that impact has been dramatic.

When women first began to seek entry, the response by men was simply to try to exclude them. Biologically, they said, women just cannot compete. They can't do it physically or temperamentally; they have neither the bodies nor the competitive fire that men have. "A woman can do the same job I can do—maybe even be my boss," said one athlete to sociologist Messner. "But I'll be damned if she can go out on the field and take a hit from Ronnie Lott." True enough. But then, neither could I—nor could virtually any of you, for that matter. Does that mean we should be disqualified from playing—or enjoying—sports?

Even today, the concern over the cutting of men's sports to achieve some warped vision of equality is but a surface-level mask over the efforts to push women back out of the athletic arena. Often it's simply a scare tactic to try to turn back the clock to pre-Title-IX-mandated equality. It's as if women's sports and men's sports exist in a zero-sum universe, in which if women get more, men have to get less.

But the response of most men hasn't been to bar the doors and keep women out. Rather, it's been to circle the sex-segregated wagons, and try and ignore them. A 1989 study of coverage of women's sports found that the three network affiliates devoted only 5 percent of their air-time coverage to women's sports. Fifteen years later, as women's participation had mushroomed and professional leagues had taken off in soccer and basketball, coverage had increased a whopping 1.3 percent—to 6.3 percent of total air time. And the two sports highlights shows are even worse: ESPN's *SportsCenter* devotes about 2 percent of its air time to women's sports, virtually exclusively tennis and golf.

Sporting men seem to deal with what they perceive as an invasion by retreating to those sports and those arenas in which women can't compete equally or aren't interested in doing so. The rapid rise in popularity of sports like rugby, ice hockey, or lacrosse testify to this. On websites like EXPN.com and extreme.com, there's plenty of coverage of surfing, skateboarding, mountain boarding, off-road ATV driving, and other extreme sports. Women, when they appear at all, do so in bikinis.

In the past couple of decades, the scene of masculine resistance to women's entry has also shifted from the playing field to the locker room. All those female journalists, were they to have access to the locker room, might see men—gasp!—naked! How many blogs and sports-radio commentators—as well as threatened male athletes—have weighed in on that score, conveniently forgetting that women professionals do what any competent professional does—their job.

And then, of course, there is football, the one field of dreams on which women usually don't—and can't—tread. Football has gained in popularity in part because it remains so steadfastly single-sex. As Mariah Burton Nelson, a former Stanford basketball star turned women's sports activist titled her book, *The Stronger Women Get, the More Men Love Football*. Yes, there are female players and teams and leagues, but they pale in comparison to the men's side.

If the playing field was occupied territory, and the locker room invaded, men had to figure out another place where they could be men with other men. The solution was sports talk. And that, sports fans, might be the real story.

Dialing for Dominance

Among young men, watching sports and talking about sports has replaced playing sports as the line of demarcation between women and men. Girls may be running around the next soccer field, and women can be working out and toning up as much as the next guy, but the one thing women don't do is talk, endlessly, about sports. They may even be sports fans, and watch sports on TV or in the stands, but they don't pore over

the box scores as if it were the Talmud. The woman you work with, or the one sitting across from you in a chemistry lecture, may be as athletic as you are, but she wouldn't be able to tell you Roger Clemens's ERA in 2005, or how many triple doubles Jason Kidd racked up in the 2004–5 season. (FYI, the answers are 1.87 and 8, respectively.) Nor would she care. For most women, sports are something you do, not necessarily something you are.

Of course, there is one big difference between the world of sports and the other public spheres that women have entered so decisively in the past three decades. Unlike every other arena, sports remains sex-segregated. While there may be coed volleyball or softball leagues in many places, and little kids might play on integrated U8 AYSO soccer teams or T-ball, the overwhelming majority of sports play is done on same-sex teams. This means that the accomplishments of female athletes are rarely compared to, and thus rarely threaten the accomplishments of, male athletes. Even so, men seem to need a place where women don't typically go: the radio dial, the TV, the sports pages, the sports bar. If girls can compete on the field, then sports-talk—and talk radio, ESPN Zone, and the host of sites and blogs and commentary—is the new boys' club, the place where the homosocial purity of the locker room is reproduced.

In 1987, a failing country music radio station in New York City was purchased and transformed into an all-sports all-the-time format, WFAN (The Fan). Currently, there are nearly 400 all-sports stations in the U.S. Only sports radio, Christian-themed programming, and "alternative" radio have shown any appreciable growth over the past few years—indeed, they're the only niches that haven't declined precipitously. And eight out of ten listeners are male.

The most popular sports radio show, *The Jim Rome Show* boasts about two million listeners daily. The announcement heralding his show suggests a slightly older demographic than 18- to 26-year-olds, but allows for significant cross-generational bonding as well: "Your hair is getting thinner, your paunch is getting bigger, but you still think the young babes want you! That's because you listen to Sports 1140 AM. It's not just sports talk, it's culture."

It's as homosocial a space as you are likely to find on your radio dial—or, indeed, virtually anywhere in the country, real or digital. Between 85 and 90 percent of the audience is male.

Communications scholar David Nylund has been interviewing guys who listen to sports talk radio, and especially to Jim Rome. Here is what one 27-year-old told him:

It's a male bonding thing, a locker room for guys in the radio. You can't do it at work, everything's PC now! So the Rome Show is a last refuge for men to bond and be men. . . . I listen in the car and can let the maleness come out. I know it's offensive sometimes to gays and women . . . you know . . . when men bond . . . but men need that! Romey's show gives me the opportunity to talk to other guy friends about something we share in common. And my dad listens to Romey also. So my dad and I bond also.

Male bonding in a purified all-male world. Sports talk, write sociologists Don Sabo and Sue Curry Jansen, “is one of the only remaining discursive spaces where men of all social classes and ethnic groups directly discuss such values as discipline, skill, courage, competition, loyalty, fairness, teamwork, hierarchy, and achievement.”

Sports radio depends on listener participation; listeners call in with comments, criticisms, and observations. It's the pure democracy of the New England town meeting. If you know your stuff, you get to participate in the conversation. If you are the informed citizen, you win the admiration and respect of your community.

Well, sure, it's filled with as many masculine virtues as an all-night bull session with Alexander the Great. But its function, I believe, is somewhat less than heroic. Sports radio provides what so many other venues, now lost to the steamroller of political correctness, used to provide. Sports talk is decidedly *not* politically correct. It's offensive—especially to women and gays. That's because much of sports talk turns out not to be about sports but about those other groups. Joking about gays and women, putting them down, this is the ground on which male sports bonding often takes place. It's hardly innocent; in fact, it has a

kind of defensively angry tone to it. “This is our space, dammit, and it's the last place where we can say what we really feel about them!”

Sports Talk as Racial Healing

In sports radio, guys have permission to be as sexist and homophobic as they want to be, without guardians of the Nanny State policing them.

But the one thing that is out of bounds is racism. Say what you want about women and gays—but since sports radio is also the ground for racial healing among men, racism is not tolerated. This is what fabulously popular and defensively politically incorrect talk show host Don Imus found out to his eternal discredit. It wasn't the sexism in his comment that the Rutgers women's basketball team (which made an unpredicted run to the national finals in the 2007 NCAA basketball tournament) was “a bunch of nappy-headed hos” that got him in trouble. Everyone calls women bitches and hos on talk radio. It was the “nappy-headed” part—that old-school racism—that immediately mobilized everyone from the Reverend Al Sharpton to New Jersey's governor.

As guys talk about sports, there may be many other conversations taking place. But none is more important than the conversation about race. Sports talk brings men of different backgrounds together, bridging a racial or class divide that would otherwise be hard to breach. In the sports bar, or on sports-talk radio, white and black men share a similar love for a team, or a player, and find out that they have a lot in common. Their gender is suddenly more important than being black or white.

Sports talk “can temporarily break down barriers of race, ethnicity, and class,” as literary scholar Grant Farred put it. “White suburbanites, inner-city Latino and African-American men can all support the New York Knicks or the Los Angeles Dodgers.” And the rage expressed at women (especially “feminists”) and gays is the foundation of that cross-racial bonding.

For black men, this cross-racial bonding through sports talk may serve as a way to assert their intelligence, their ticket for entry into a white-dominated world. Jason, a black 20-year-old junior at Lafayette College recounted his first year on campus.

Whenever I would run into kids during the first weeks of school—you know, like freshman orientation or something—the white kids would be all friendly and come up to me and say, “Hey, what sport do you play?” like to break the ice and to be friendly and all. But the joke was that I don’t play sports. I am actually here because I had the grades to get in. But these nice suburban white kids—well, they couldn’t imagine a black kid on campus who wasn’t an athlete. So when they’d ask me what sport I played, I’d say, “Chess.”

Black guys are accustomed to white scrutiny of their physical prowess on the athletic field; talking about sports is a way for them to also assert that they can exercise the muscle between their ears.

If sports talk enables black men to enter a largely white-dominated arena, it also enables white guys to enter what they often perceive as a black-dominated arena. Like those legions of white suburban guys who listen to gangsta rap, talking about sports with black guys is a form of self-congratulatory racial reassurance, many guys’ way of demonstrating to themselves and others that they are not racists. Talking about sports with black guys is often the only time they actually talk with black guys at all, and sports is the only safe subject they can talk about. It’s a moment of racial healing, a way to feel that they are part of the solution, not part of the problem.

At times, this can be a genuine effort to bridge the racial divide—at least as individuals. At other times, it can be a substitute for the serious conversation about race—and racial inequality—that is so necessary to truly bridge that social divide. When it replaces that social and political conversation with a moment of bonding, sports talk may reproduce the very problem its adherents seek to transcend.

Sports talk is the *lingua franca* of Guyland. It is a currency that one can spend in any male arena in the nation. Sports talk enables conversation across race and class, even if it sometimes offers a false sense of racial healing. It enables men to bond in a pure homosocial world, a world free of the taint of women’s presence. It offers the solace of masculine purity, and the cement of those bonds. Sports—and talking

about them—is a way for guys to feel close to each other and still feel like real men, feel closer to their fathers and, perhaps, further separated from their mothers. Sports provide a way for men to have their emotions without feeling like wimps. Sometimes, sports serve as the only way for men to talk, to connect, or the only way they can express their emotions at all.

But if the athletic field has been Guyland’s most sacred space, it is challenged today by the “intrusion” of women. So the boundaries of Guyland are pushed ever outward, toward some pure homosocial Eden where men can get to be men. Once, that pristine world existed at the edge of civilization—riding the range, huddled in the trenches, manning the space capsules. Today, it may be that the frontier is entirely virtual—radio and TV waves, cyberspace and the landscape of video games.