
Fashioning the Self in Sporting Magazines:
A Cult(ure) of Absence¹:

DRAFT

¹ The notion of absence is dichotomous and laden with intent. It can be playful or serious, accidental or purposeful, a minor oversight or a great conspiracy. Throughout this paper, it will be given intentional meaning by the author at times while "playing at others," on its own and with the meaning/subtext the reader imposes on it.

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1. Thinking about sport and its transmission as a civilizing process, a process which civilizes particular types of bodies in particular types of ways
 2. Thinking about sport as “unhealthy” practice
 - a. Why have the critiques concerning “unhealthy” not resulted in considerable changes? Why do we seem to be on the slippery road to “unhealthy” given our resources and knowledge?
 - b. That the solution is not about finding a “best” practice, getting rid of “bad” practitioners and hailing “great” ones, or about fixing costumes, addressing competitive schedules, etc.

Participation in sport is an endeavor (as well as a discursive practice) which idealizes the development of the athlete as healthy and well-balanced, one who experiences and learns values important to capitalist relations such as commitment, personal achievement and struggle. For sport practitioners, there is a constant tension between the holistic approach to pedagogy as suggested and the achievement of sport-specific performance (e.g., international results, rankings, records). There is a general belief that in order to achieve "optimal" or "excellent" performance/results, the socio-philosophical approach to the development of bodies must be of secondary importance.

Regardless of pedagogical intent (coach or athlete-centered), the acquisition of sport skills is achieved by the modeling of actions, what Foucault called “technologies of self”, or through efficacy, i.e., tournament success. This paper will examine the body as a semiotic environment which “learns” sport-specific techniques by “consuming” instructional articles in tennis magazines. Using genealogy, this paper will investigate specific absences and presences in representation, whether by error or purposeful omission. These omissions represent a cult (ure) of absence, an environment which reproduces “unhealthy” and dysfunctional pedagogical practices. I wish to demonstrate how these absences are complicit in the mis-representation of proper bio-mechanics and in so doing, the possible acquisition and practice of sports as an “unhealthy” endeavor.

This paper will begin to explore how to approach an examination of instructional lay-outs in sporting magazines:

1. How they function as a technology of self, as a vehicle for the acquisition of skill by the general population
2. How they equip individuals with “know-how”, so that they may function as competent subjects as they gain cultural capital
3. How they invite the subject to know themselves as autonomous and in control
4. How they function so as to view the athletic body in such a way as to encourage an emotional attachment to sport specific bio-mechanics acquisition

SO what's in a title?

The notion of absence or absence/presence has been a growing theme in social theory since Marx's theorizing about the commodity abstraction. My concern with "recalling" the body is informed practically by my experience as a physical educator and theoretically (at least where this project is concerned) by my reading of Judith Butler (1993), David McNally (2001) and Chris Shilling (1993). Butler notion of "performativity" and "reiterative citational practice" is important when considering how the body "takes-up" or "becomes." Both McNally and Shilling address the absent/presence of the body, in all of its corporeal, material, fleshy sense, in social theory; in essence, of how the body and issues of embodiment are talked about, but in the final analysis, forgotten or erased.

In this paper, the intentional use of the word "absence" and the notion of absent/presence draws upon the following subtexts, or what can be referred to as "open secrets." In some instances, absence can be a "good" thing, in others a "not-so-good" thing, but in most cases it works as a seemingly necessary illusion. What you see or think you see is quite often not what you get or what really is (happening). For instance, athletes travel the world and therefore have opportunities for education and adventure beyond the abilities of most and yet spend most of their time on practice courts, in press conferences or hotel rooms. Most will confess they never make it to a museum or an art

gallery though they do have time for shopping and the movies (i.e., things you could do without leaving home). Another example would be the "loss" or "sacrifice"² of opportunities: high school socials, parties, hanging out with friends, being home for your sister's birthday, the list goes on. Yet another instance of absence would be the absence for the viewer of what it takes before arriving on court to perform for an audience. Waking up unusually early, an hour of physiotherapy, 45 minutes of practice time, a massage – then arriving early at the event, the pre-match rituals and professional obligations, competing well (which is difficult to do when you earn your living at something and have a family³ to feed), signing autographs, the post-match interviews, getting worked on by the trainer, possibly getting ready for a doubles match, and if not, then back to the hotel to crash for a while before having to either pack and leave for the next city (in the case of a loss) or wash clothes for tomorrow (since there is an illusion that every player has an unlimited supply of outfits) only to "do it" all over again. Of course, somewhere in that day are physical training, tutoring and homework, family responsibilities and "eating to win"⁴. Notice the repetitive nature of sport, at all levels of (inter) action.

A more serious absence is of a physical nature, and involves notions of health, growth and sustainability. Documented examples of this absence include examples of elite female rowers who miss menstrual cycles for months at a time (as do many female athletes who train excessively hard and whose body fat is too low) and the long-term effect on bone growth and health. As well, injuries, and their "management," play a large role in any athlete's life. They affect the athlete physically as well as psychically and are virtually invisible except in terms of the noticeable tensor bandages or the color

² My use of sacrifice is intentional. By definition, a sacrifice is giving up something of greater value for something of lesser. An athlete who wants to succeed willingly gives up things and experiences in order to commit to development. And it goes without saying that not being a "normal" teenager and doing normal teenager things comes with trade-offs. However, as a high-performance coach, I more often than not hear athletes using the word sacrifice when supposedly what they are trading-off or giving up is supposed to be of lesser value since the thing of greater value is athletic success. There is something awry.

³ And for many involved in the proliferation of child labor, it is the teenage phenom who feeds her/his coach and family, literally with every ball struck and line painted with a winner!

⁴ The title of Martina Navratilova's famous diet that changed her life and her results by Dr. Robert Haas.

commentator's reporting⁵. Yet another absence deals with the cosmetic enhancement of one's body (e.g., breast reductions) in order to improve performance or lessen the risk of injury.

Absences, of course, can also a "good" thing. For instance, playing "in the zone," "treeing" or playing "out of her/his mind" are examples of states of being which describe performance of an unusually high level. They indicate an absence of conscious thought in the execution of movement. Another example draws upon a common theory of the stages of learning acquisition⁶. One moves from being unconsciously incompetent (i.e., I don't know⁷ that I don't know-how) to consciously incompetent (i.e., I realize that I don't know/how) to consciously competent (i.e., I know how to do it) and finally to the moment of unconsciously competent (i.e., Just do it⁸); in essence, from not being aware that you couldn't do it, to not being aware of how you did. Getting out of your head, having an absence of mind, is about getting out of your own way, a sense of dis-mindedness (as opposed to being mindful). For most athletes, this is not only a good thing, it's a necessary evil⁹.

There are many other absences not noted. This is in part due to my position as a former athlete, coach and administrator. At this point, I would like to point for a moment to the aspect of noticing or viewing. I want to also suggest that who the intended audience is has great bearing on the absences (as well as their ability to "read between the lines" – a form of resistance and agency). Although I will not take this up to any great extent in this project, it is nonetheless "present" in my thinking through issues of absence.

⁵ Conversations usually take on two streams of thought. The first is the glorification of the injury. "It's the price one must pay." The second is meant to illicit an emotional response, so that the viewer sympathizes with the athlete; in essence, comes to understand the hardship and the pain, the struggle.

⁶ This is of particular importance when considering what it is one "does" when mimicking a coach or modeling a movement after a layout in a sport magazine. Is there a conscious taking up of the movement? Does this matter? Certainly it is the case that effective coaching is benefited by unconscious learning, as is improved performance under pressure. To make things habitual without mental awareness is desirable by many if not all high-performance athletes.

⁷ I am playing with this word. Know in the sense of understanding as well as in the sense of awareness.

⁸ Thanks to Nike™.

⁹ In other papers I have discussed the absence of making connections between what's happening to the individual and to individuals in the system; in essence what Shiva (1993) suggests when speaking of "missing conversations." The absence of an ability on the part of the athlete, coach or administrator

A Cult(ure) of Absence¹⁰:

In my MA thesis, I explored how tennis professionals understood the nature of their expertise as well as standard teaching and learning practices and pedagogy in the acquisition of sport-specific skills. In these environments, daily "interaction rituals" (Goffman, 1967) frame how individuals and collectives communicate and learn, model and imitate, essentially (re)indoctrinating and (re)affirming the status quo. Simplistically speaking, excellence is achieved by the mimicking/modeling of behavior, what Foucault called "technologies of self," or through the efficacy, i.e., the production of results in tournament play.

Two frameworks

1. Foucault genealogy
 - a. I kept the genealogical approach principally as a method of elucidating how it is that the question/topic came to me in the first instance (though of course I have always been thinking through these themes). Essentially getting at the subject
 - b. "Genealogy introduces the problem of how, by becoming constituted as subjects, we come to be subjected within particular configurations" (Tamboukou, 1999, p. 208).
2. Hall, Mercer and Alexander representation theory
 - a. As a way of interrogating what is seen and not seen
 - b. As a way of understanding the construction of masculinities, femininities, sexualities and everything in between
 - c. As a method of thinking about viewers, audience and their interaction

(recognizing that athletes become coaches, etc.) to recognize the links between substance abuse, anorexia, abusive parents, depression with playing conditions, training environments, etc.

¹⁰ The notion of absence is dichotomous and laden with intent. It can be playful or serious, accidental or purposeful, a minor oversight or a great conspiracy. Throughout this paper, it will be given intentional

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- d. As a tool to reflect on how I look, observe and view
 - e. As a framework for thinking through representation as pedagogy

To do this work, I also employ Bordo (1993) who speaks of culture's "direct grip" on our bodies through repetitive and habitual action (p. 16) as well as Morgan (1996), who utilizes Foucault's "techniques of self" to examine personal training and fitness. Morgan elaborates on this notion, stating that "where bodies are disciplined as a means to an end...the focus on teaching...is the knowledgeable and ultimately disembodied mind of the learner" (p. 24). In examining particular techniques of (self) surveillance in personal training, she notes "Repeated practice leads to habit; when this becomes 'ingrained' as the very material of our life forms, it becomes an ethos, a way of life. The Greeks understood well that our habits become our disposition" (p. 36). I wish to demonstrate how the absence of "particular" and "purposeful" events are complicit in the reproduction of the status quo, the mis-representation of proper bio-mechanics and in so doing, the acquisition and practice of sports as "unhealthy" endeavor.

✓ **Why these articles?**

- (1) quite often it is the image in a set of images shown that comprises the "missing content" that disallows its audience the ability to emulate or model "excellence" while maintaining the illusion of its possibility
- (2) it highlights the frequency with which modeling behavior which models nothing is rampant at all levels of representation systems from media through systems of formal sport pedagogy and curriculum
- (3) it illustrates who within the profession is given voice or an ability to comment or speculate, essentially whose "truth" or "right to know" is privileged
 - They are the most widely read section of any sport magazine, outside of the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*. Advertising on pages with technical content are more expensive.

meaning by the author at times while "playing at others," on its own and with the meaning/subtext the reader imposes on it.

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- I have used them as a teaching tool and have contributed to their production.
 - Not only is sport cross-cultural, but also this type of representation as well as the readership is cross-cultural.
 - They highlight modeling behavior systemic in the transmission of biomechanics in sport culture.
 - They represent a site where "missing content", illusions and "unhealthy practices" are apparent and easily "read."
 - They represent clear and traceable patterns of exclusion.

✓ **Problematizing for a moment**

- Is it about what we can represent versus what we mean to be doing?
- Does the technology exist to better accomplish the job?
 - We can see a ball on television traveling much faster.
 - Sports photographers are trained to do this.
 - Why are these magazines so popular, given the advent of the cd rom and media players on the internet (or any other video based medium) where one can "see" the entire stroke, stop the frames where you choose, and scrutinize from a variety of angles?
- Repetitious, mechanistic, reductionist, programmatic, formulaic

✓ **What am I not looking at?**

- Televised matches and events illustrating the following:
 - What images are allowed, for whom, about whom, focusing on what particular parts and aspects of whom (e.g., Graf's legs but never her breasts whereas Williams' black bodies are depicted quite differently as was Kournikova's). See Vincent (Vincent, Forthcoming book) for this discussion.

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- Another example is Evert's idealized life and femininity versus Navratilova's scandalized past and present.
 - Once again, who gets to commentate and what is it that they are allowed to say and about whom and what aspects of "life as a professional athlete" are glorified, depicted and hidden (e.g., contrasting the old ABC Wide World of Sports trailer versus the realities of travel, leaving school before completion, the pre and post match realities, etc.).
 - Technologies and their impacts.
 - The connection between injuries and advances in racquet technology, both among recreational and professional players.
 - The lack of an official "off-season."
 - The correlation between peak fitness and "unhealthy" and the science of periodization.
 - Tour sponsorship, in particular the Women's Tennis Association.
 - Linkages between tobacco and cosmetic industries, "You've Come A Long Way Baby" and the realities of cancer, eating disorders and body image issues.
 - Appearance money (technically illegal but practically rampant) and the illusion of sponsorship and on-court earnings.
 - The "raping" of managed chattel by management companies¹¹ (e.g., public accounts of athlete's earnings versus actual take-home earnings once commissions, fees and expenses have been extracted). This actually in fact also works curiously to place the professional athlete, who has strived to reach the pinnacle of

¹¹ Another contradiction/dilemma, and perhaps more important to note, is the allusion to the "business" of sport, as if what we "consume" is actually "sport" in the first place (footnote, entertainment, etc.). Evert (2004), in the May issue of TENNIS, states, "To the critics of this individual marketing, let's not forget that while off-court exposure personally benefits Andy and Maria by opening up other avenues, it's good for sport as well. Unlike golf or basketball, tennis isn't on TV every weekend, so our athletes need to draw the spotlight to the game whenever possible. Doing SNL (Saturday Night Live) or getting into Sports Illustrated or GQ helps broaden the fan base of the whole sport." She closes her editorial with this comment: "After all, it's OK to be famous, as long as that's not what you're famous for."

success, in a highly dependent relationship with others for success both on and off the court.

- Magazine articles which feature professional players, their lives, trials and tribulations, successes and failures, their road to the top, a basic how-to-get-there-road-map-to-the-top approach. These articles tend to focus on particular conversations while avoiding or not attracting attention to other aspects of their lives. As well, the language and rhetoric in these articles are couched in, regardless of the author, seems rote and intentionally apolitical in character and sentiment.
 - For instance, in considering the success of the Williams' sisters, Venus and Serena, nowhere is there a detailed examination of their avoidance of early junior tournaments (and all the trappings of the junior tournament structure/system).
 - These articles also exhibit the glorification of an "unhealthy and unbalanced" lifestyle (e.g., the lack of an off-season, continuous travel, eating and sleeping in one hotel room after another, not capitalizing on travel opportunities, lack of peer and mentor relationships, etc.)
 - Another example is the avoidance of conversations about "inappropriate" or "abusive relationships" (e.g., father-daughter, coach-become-husband, etc.).
- Other articles (other technical articles, player profiles, fitness and nutrition,
 - The William's lack of junior competitive experience
 - Graf's breaking the rules
- Gendered and racialized representations

✓ **What work do these articles do on the body?**

- They are an example of a technology of the self.
 - They equip individuals with "know-how", enabling to function as culturally competent subjects; they gain cultural capital.

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- They invite the reader to be just like a particular player, to attempt what they physically cannot.
 - They invite a particular look, a particular mode of seeing.
 - They attempt to represent a particular way of viewing the athletic body that encourages an emotional attachment to stroke production.
 - The excitement of the shot
 - Notice that emotional words are usually used when describing the strokes of European and South American players, gritty words when describing Australian.
 - They provide a vehicle for the acquisition of skill by a general population who might not be able to see tennis live or have the money for private instruction.
 - They provide a vehicle to popularize the game.
 - **Bottom line: they inspire one to go out and "try it", be "like" someone else.**

✓ **My findings (what absences do I notice)**

- Detailed account
 - The Pete Sampras sequences represent the only example in the fifteen years of TENNIS magazine layouts I viewed that demonstrated an ability on the part of the magazine to represent proper biomechanics and technique from a variety of perspectives/angles that allows, as best as one can in this medium, the viewer a relatively unobstructed learning chance.
- The images are always out of context (i.e., you do not see the court, the game or the opponent, much less are you told much about the situation, deep in the third set, killing the opponent 6-0, 5-0). In other words, the ball sent should = ball received, a specific coaching pedagogy, which maintains that a player's response to a particular situation is determined

by her/his position on the court, the ball being received and the position/strengths of the opponent.

- Are we concerned with the authenticity of the situation?
- Are we concerned with the accuracy of the information?
- Whose bodies do we choose to view and why?
 - Seldom the best technical example.
 - Do these shots necessarily relate to the player on the tour with the best of that type of stroke? Or are they representative of the best stroke of that player?
- The actual frame needed is almost never present; if it is, the angle of the shot is incorrect or at least not beneficial.
 - Much the same in television viewing.
- Who has the voice to comment, how do they do so, and what language do they use?
 - Why do we need words alongside the images?
 - How do words become the voice of authority given a particular author?
 - Do pictures give life through voice, truth and validity through the image of the player and the voice of authority. (Almost always a male former player who has the right to comment on how others perform)
- The words do not match the images and the images often depict unsound biomechanics that happen to "work" for this particular player. By this, I mean that they are successful in winning, but not necessarily in maintaining good health or reducing injuries.
 - Do they answer questions about conformity or about efficacy? What else affects efficacy?

✓ **Concluding remarks**

- **Does this imply that those who have access to private instruction can "fix" or tend to these problems or at least better "read" these articles?**
- I still want to explore the notion that meaning is not fixed, that it does not inhere in things. As a case in point, what does it mean that Agassi has not been able to "correct" technical problems over time (my data demonstrates the same problem in all three stroking sequences over the course of his career)?
 - What does it mean that this lack of correction has possibly not had a significant effect on his results (he has maintained a high ranking, reaching number one in the world and winning on every grand slam surface despite these problems)?
 - If this is the case, that conformity (technique) is not as important as efficacy (results), then why take the current approach to coaching pedagogy?
- If meaning is relational, arbitrary, (as constructionists contend), does this hold for expression of action in and on the surface of the body?
- What does it mean for a Spanish player to hit his serve like Sampras, for an American teenager to hit her forehand like Graf?
 - Is sport more heavily implicated in the civilization of the "other" than one might imagine?
 - Is there more to the notion of sport than just nationhood?
- If representation is about constant "play or slippage," then how might one account for translatability of unconventionality in pedagogical practice?
- In the advent of technology, why is the magazine medium still the personal choice? Why are layouts not produced to include these absences?

Additional citations to include in bibliography

(Butler, 1993; Gore, 1998; McNally, 2001; McNay, 1992; Meadmore et al., 2000; Morgan, 1996; Phillips, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 2002; Rolley, 1998, 2002; Sawicki, 1991; Tamboukou, 1999, 2003; Tamboukou & Ball, 2001; Trabert, 1996, 1999)

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