

Predicting and Reflecting Changes in Culture: A Conversation on Young Adult Sports Literature with Chris Crowe

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If the appeal of young adult literature (YAL) is that it speaks to the universal experience of being a teenager and coming of age, then young adult sports literature holds a special place within YAL. With millions of adolescents participating in sports each year and with the popularity of sporting events ranging from the Super Bowl and the NBA playoffs to the Olympics, athletics is an important part of many teenagers' lives. However, young adult sports literature is not just about the big game or the vicarious feeling of elation that comes with winning or the catharsis that comes with reading about defeat. Instead, as young adult author and scholar Chris Crowe (2004) notes, many young adult sports books are about more than sports. Instead, they "deal with realistic social issues that real people, not just athletes, often confront" (p. 36).

For Crowe, studying and writing an overview of young adult sports literature make perfect sense. As a former college athlete and high school coach, his lived experience demonstrated the role that athletics has for teenagers and their development. As a high school teacher, a college professor, and a YAL author of books such as *Just as Good: How Larry Doby Changed America's Game*, he has firsthand knowledge of how young adult literature can harness teenagers' interest and imagination. Crowe synthesized these areas of interest into his scholarship, writing *More Than a Game: Sports Literature for Young Adults* as part of the Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature series in 2004. This work has served as the foundation for further research in the field of young adult sports literature.

Terri Suico (TS): I'm very excited to be talking to you about your book and about your thoughts on sports and young adult literature. How did you originally become interested in studying young adult literature?

Chris Crowe (CC): I was a high school teacher for ten years, and that's where I first encountered YA books. When I was an undergrad, they had a young adult literature class, but it wasn't required, so I didn't take it. As a new teacher, one of the things I learned was that book reports were a waste of time, but I wanted students to have some accountability for reading. I required them to read a book every quarter, but instead of writing a book report – and this took a couple years to figure out – they had to sit down with me and have an interview about their book. I would meet with kids, and I could see when they were jazzed about a book, and many of those books were YA novels. Students loved to say, “Hey, Mr. Crowe, you need to read this book.” I read it, and then we had this connection because of a book. Through these interviews, my students introduced me to the contemporary young adult books of the time – this was in the late-'70s, early-'80s.

While I was a high school teacher, I started graduate school at Arizona State, where Ken Donelson and Alleen Nilsen were. Their book [*Literature for Today's Young Adults*] I think had just come out or was in its second edition when I had Donelson's YA literature class, and so that class formalized the importance of young adult literature for me. We read like mad in that class, and we wrote a ton of stuff. Donelson really showed us how we could make a professional life studying young adult literature. Once I finished grad school and started teaching at the university level, it was something I wanted to do.

TS: It's wonderful that you got to study under Nilsen and Donelson.

CC: I know. In the young adult literature classes I teach now, the first thing I do is explain the YA literature genealogy to my students. Dora V. Smith was the first professor to teach a class in young adult literature at a university back in the 1930s. G. Robert Carlson was her graduate student, and he inherited those classes. Ken Donelson was his first graduate student at the University of Iowa, and I was Donelson's graduate student at ASU; I tell my students they're the fifth generation, and their heritage traces back to Dora V. Smith.

TS: What are some young adult books that you found especially interesting or influential?

CC: I can think of a couple for sure. I use *The Outsiders* as the first book in every YA lit course I teach. It's not necessarily my favorite book, but because of its influence on the field, it just can't be ignored. It does so many things well, things that have influenced nearly all YA writers whether they're aware of it or not.

Another book I really admire is *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*. For years, I resisted reading it—I don't really know why, I just didn't think I'd like it. But I had a colleague who nagged me to read it, and I finally gave in, and when I had finished it, I just thought, "Well, I was stupid. What was I thinking by refusing to read it?" Mildred D. Taylor is such a beautiful writer, and the themes she weaves into her stories and the way she addresses Black history are especially relevant today. Since then, I've come to admire Mildred and her books. She's not a fast writer, she just finished her last book; it just came out a few months ago.

Then there are other books like *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff. She didn't want to call it a verse novel at first, she was just messing around with form, she thought she'd try something kind of new, and it's a beautiful and wonderful book. Also, anything by Chris Crutcher, that voice he's got is just so on target, so right on, and authentic. His books make me think, "Wow, he knows the adolescent male voice, he's got that in his head."

TS: Going from thinking about young adult literature in general to thinking about young adult sports literature, how did you first get interested in that genre?

CC: I played football in college and coached for a few years when I was a high school English teacher. When I started graduate school, I realized I couldn't do everything, so I had to quit coaching. But I always liked that alter-life that athletes have. As a teacher, I was Mr. Crowe in English class, and then after school I was Coach Crowe. It was like I was two people. I saw my student-athletes in different ways, and they saw me in different ways.

As a student, I felt the same thing, that I had two lives. I had my life in the classroom and then my life after school as an athlete in this different culture, so sports and sports culture were always part of

my life. Because of that, I think I was drawn to books where the main character wasn't just a kid who was good at a sport, but he also had a real and full life besides being a jock.

I think the very first article I published in *The ALAN Review* was about coaches who were dementors - this is way before J.K. Rowling used the term. I'd read a book in Donelson's class, I think it was called *Football Dreams*. That book had some memorable, authentic characters, but one was a coach who was stereotypically abusive and authoritarian. As a high school coach, I had worked with guys who were like that, and I'd seen it when I was in college, some of the coaches really were abusive. I knew there were coaches like that who hurt players. My article for *The ALAN Review* reviewed this kind of character in young adult sports books and how different authors portray them. For example, Crutcher almost always has a bad-guy coach, but he also has a mentor who balances the dementor coach, giving characters someone to connect with besides this toxic person. Anyway, that article was my way into writing about YA sports lit.

TS: What value do you think young adult literature in general, and young adult sports literature in particular, offers for readers, teachers, and scholars?

CC: In my young adult literature class, I require that my students talk to me. I call the assignment a colloquy; they come in, and for 30 minutes, they've got to have a conversation with me. They bring questions on anything in the world of young adult literature. The question, "Why do you teach this?" almost always comes up. I tell them that my buddies who teach Shakespeare, their course content is boxed in; there probably won't be any more Shakespeare plays, and in a 30- or 40-year teaching career, this is all they're going to teach. Maybe they will have new ways to look at the content, but the plays themselves aren't going to change.

In young adult literature, every six months there's a whole new body of work, and it's inventive and creative, it's ever-changing, it's dynamic. I think I'd get bored - even though I admire my colleagues who teach Shakespeare - I think I have more eclectic tastes. Young adult literature means I have access to all kinds of genres, mystery, sports literature, whatever, that's refreshed every six months, so that's what appeals to me. But I think the value to readers, and even to scholars, is that it's always

responding to what's happening in the world -- they're written in the context of our time, and so they're very relevant.

When talking about sports literature, I tell my students that the more adjectives we put in front of the word 'literature,' the more marginalized it becomes. Young adult literature is already marginalized, and young adult sports literature is doubly marginalized. And in some cases, maybe it deserves not to be taken as seriously. There's a range of what I would call young adult sports books; however, the best ones probably don't have to be called a sports book. I use the term *sportlerroman* for those books. They're just good books, and the character just happens to be an athlete, just like in some books they happen to be a musician, or they happen to be in the band, or they happen to have a job at a 7-11 or something. This activity doesn't define them, but it is an important part of their lives.

To me, those books help kids who have extracurricular lives to see themselves, the mirrors, and for readers who don't know kids for whom athletics are really important, it helps them understand that "There are those in my school who love basketball, and they think this way because of basketball. And because of basketball, their lives are influenced in ways my life is not."

For scholars, I think it's just another area to explore. It's just another pool in this big old river of books, and they can dive in anywhere they want.

TS: That makes a lot of sense, and I love the idea that these books can help students see themselves, so it is the realization of Rudine Sims Bishop's idea of mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. It can help them see themselves in these characters, or it can help them understand other people and develop empathy and understand perspective in regard to what other people value, what other people see is important. I also love the term *sportlerroman*.

CC: The term came from a friend of mine in the German department. There's already a term, *kunstlerroman*, which refers to a coming-of-age novel about artists, so I asked him, "If there were coming-of-age stories about athletes, what would you call them?" He said, "Well, there is no such word, but probably it would be *sportlerroman*," and I decided, "I'll take that."

TS: How do you see sports reflecting culture and society, especially now? You talk about it some in *More Than A Game*, particularly in regards to the need to win, and how winning and success on the football field or on the basketball court or in the hockey arena is more important than almost anything else in many people's views. But do you have other thoughts on how you see sports reflecting culture in society?

CC: I think in a dark way, in an unhappy way, they reflect our current political tensions that for politicians - and not just Trump, but I think politicians all the way down to local leaders, if they have partisan elections, it's more important to win than it is to be a good person. People will sacrifice their ethics to make sure their party wins or make sure their candidate wins, and it's just like coaches who do the same thing—they turn their back on their morality and ethics to win a few games or to win a championship.

This was true even with athletes years ago. There was a survey done of Olympic athletes, and it asked them, "If you knew there was a pill you could take, and you would win the gold medal because of it, but it took five years off our life, would you take it?" and the vast majority of them said, "Of course I'd take it." There's the hyper-focus on winning. Whether they're athletes, coaches, politicians, or people who elect politicians, their priorities get fuzzy when something becomes more important than it really should be. To me, sport reflects this win-at-all-costs thinking, and now this extreme partisanship, this polarization has become even more prominent. The focus is only about being elected again; I don't think it's really about the issues. Politicians may claim it is, but in fact, it's more about wanting to be in power just like a coach wants to win or an athlete wants to win.

Then the other kinds of problems in society, and they all trickle into sports, so drug abuse, self-harm, racism, depression, anxiety, abuse by people in power, those things happen in the real world, and they happen in the sports world.

TS: The problems you mention sometimes seem even heightened by sports. Because if you're dealing with depression, and then there's also this additional pressure to win, that can be a perfect storm for something terrible to happen.

What do you think makes sports literature especially well-suited to reflect or perhaps change culture or society?

CC: In writing about these cultural activities, misplaced values, violation of trust by people in authority, all those kinds of things, the literature reflects what's happening in society. It gives us as readers a chance to slow down and think about it. There was a popular adult sports novel written – I think I read it in college – and it's by a guy who had played in the NFL. I don't remember the name of it. In the story, this was in the '70s, he pointed out that professional football was all about greed. The owners didn't care at all about what happened to the players, but they cared about making money. The irony in that story was that organized crime got involved, and it wasn't about getting people to games; it was about getting TV rights sold because that's where the big money was. They didn't care if anybody came to the game.

So there's this weird irony of this idea of sport: spectating didn't even matter anymore – it was about TV, and there was all kinds of criminal stuff involved in that, as you can imagine. This book predated cable TV and these big money deals, but the author could see the greed even then as a former player, and he could speculate that this is where we're going. Now, at the highest levels of sports, think of the Super Bowl and the halftime show, the way it's evolved in the last couple decades, it has nothing to do with sports, not even close. Now it's about popular music, but it's also about the commercials that are promoting products, so it's very much a commercialized enterprise. These aspects, and especially the halftime show, almost overshadow the very event they are a part of.

In some ways, sports literature can predict turns in culture, and sometimes sports literature can reflect changes in culture. In some cases, it could be cautionary that we're headed this way. It could also be an exposé of things that happen to athletes as individual human beings. You don't see it on the field when they play, but when they're in the locker room, when they're home, when they're alone, this is what they're dealing with. Young adult sports literature opens up a window into the real human cost that sports can take from kids, from athletes.

TS: Going along with that, because how sports can be a microcosm of what's going on in society, young adult sports literature can put the spotlight on an issue in a way that is somewhat familiar to

people. They're familiar with high school football or college football or hockey, gymnastics, or whatever. Then they can see how a particular issue, like abuse, plays out in that arena.

CC: One thing to me that accounts for kind of a universal interest in young adult literature is that everybody has been in school, everybody has been a teenager, so we all have that in common, and young adult books deal with that stuff. But also, for probably 90% of the kids or more, they've all been involved, they've had sports touch their lives in some way, whether they played on a team or club or something. They had to take PE probably at some point, and they were forced to play or run, even though they didn't want to. Or they were in a school, and so they attended the games, even if they didn't want to but because that's what people did. So there's again this kind of common understanding, even though it might be a misunderstanding, of sports. It's not interest necessarily, but it's familiar, and so it's an easy place to start to look at these issues. Like you said, it's a microcosm of society.

TS: When I was writing my review of *More Than a Game*, I started trying to think of sports in popular media, and I ended up finding so many instances. The students at my college are obsessed with the television show *One Tree Hill*, which went off the air some time ago. Two of the main characters play basketball. I can assure you, some, and perhaps most, of my students do not love basketball or sports in general, but they absolutely adore that show and get a better understanding of what basketball is just by watching it. So it's interesting to me just how pervasive sports is in popular culture.

CC: And your students wear Nike shoes or Adidas shoes or sweats or caps. Even if they're not athletes at all, they consume products that originated as athletic apparel or are marketed by athletes and endorsed by athletes. Even if they're not a tennis player, they still wear tennis shoes.

TS: Thinking about *More Than a Game*, I'm interested to hear more about how you came about writing this book and the reception that it received. How did you decide to write it? Was it something that you brought to the publisher, or did the publisher approach you about the topic after seeing your article on dementors?

CC: I proposed it. Scarecrow Press had a series on young adult literature, and there wasn't anything on sports, and it's a topic I'm interested in, and there's not a lot written about it – actually there was hardly anything written about it. It was a fertile field. The hard part was trying to think of what would be in the book. It's mostly bibliographic, but it surveys the history of sports lit as well as what was out there in terms of young adult sports literature.

The thing that was surprising to me was the general lack of awareness or acknowledgement in the scholarship regarding young adult sports literature at the time. I mentioned the Sports Literature Association in the book several times – I was a member for a long time. They have an annual conference, and they publish a really great scholarly journal that has fiction and poetry in it, too. It's interdisciplinary, so it's not just literature professors who publish in it; it's people from PE departments and other disciplines. It's a fine journal, and these are really smart people, but there's never a mention that I ever saw of young adult sports literature. Maybe because they're academics, they thought young adult stuff is not academic. Maybe this has changed since my membership lapsed, but this lack of acknowledgement made me realize that there is a void that needed to be filled. Someone needed to start talking about sports-oriented young adult literature in a serious way, or in an academic or literary way.

TS: What was the initial reaction or response to this idea of taking a scholarly look at young adult sports literature? Did you get any pushback or skepticism, or were people just excited that you were willing to look at this topic that didn't have a lot of attention drawn to it at the time?

CC: I think the book dropped into a black hole (laughs) – it might have been reviewed in one or two places, but I can't remember if that series was winding up at the time my book came out. I was really excited to get Chris Crutcher to write the forward, and I thought, "If they're smart, they'll make his name prominent on the cover because people love him." But they printed his name in blue on a blue background, so you can't even see it! That doesn't help anybody want to pick it up because who's Chris Crowe?

I mean all writers feel like their book didn't get enough attention, no matter how much attention it might get. Now, YA sports literature is really out there. But for my book, I think the time maybe wasn't right, there wasn't any interest.

So there was no pushback. I think Scarecrow was eager to have it. They saw it filling a space on a bookshelf. But in terms of impact on the field, I don't think it's had much negative or positive impact - I think it's had no impact (laughs).

TS: I wouldn't say that, I think that it served certainly as a foundation for a lot of the research that has come since then. I came to this book a little bit backwards, because typically for *Study and Scrutiny*, we try to keep the books that we review relatively current. Since Luke Rodesiler is one of the guest editors for this edition of the journal, we decided not to review his book (Developing Contemporary Literacies through Sports: A Guide for the English Classroom, co-edited with Alan Brown), which left me with articles. As I was reading different articles on young adult sports literature, I kept seeing references to *More Than a Game*. After the third article, I decided to read *More Than a Game* for review. So much of it is still relevant, and it is so foundational and seminal to the field of scholarship on young adult sports literature, that I think that it certainly has had an impact.

CC: Well, I accept your generous insights. (laughs) If it has had an impact, great. I mean that's what you hope when you write something, that somebody reads it and maybe it has some insights. The field really has evolved since the book came out, whether my book had anything to do with it or not.

TS: In terms of the relatively quiet reception that the book received when it first came out, one of my guesses is that young adult literature wasn't getting a lot of attention at the time. As Michael Cart would put it, we're in the second golden age of young adult literature. *More Than a Game* came out pretty early on in this second golden age, so I think the silence was due, in part, to timing. However, I've definitely seen it referenced in so many articles that I was excited to read it. As someone who is not a sports person, I found the book very informative about what young adult sports literature looks like and how it functions in a different way than adult sports books.

CC: That made my day, thank you!

TS: Thank you. So thinking about this book as being the beginning of young adult sports literature scholarship, what were the challenges when it came to writing about the history of young adult sports literature? How did you go about researching this topic?

CC: I love history, I love digging and going backwards. That was one of Donelson's favorite things to do. In his textbook with Alleen Nilsen, he always would lament each new edition that the publisher made him cut back his chapter on history because it was always too long. Also, I think this is where being a member of the Sports Literature Association helped because there were three real leaders who wrote expansive articles or books about the history of sports literature with different angles.

The irony is that the history of sports lit goes back to a book for kids, *Tom Brown's School Days*, which they somehow forgot as the field grew up, I don't know why. So I liked going back and looking at what these guys who were writing about adult sports literature were saying about the history and evolution of these kinds of books and this kind of literature. They were using contemporary references like *Sports Illustrated* to show how literature has crept into sports culture.

Frank Deford had it right after 9/11 when he published an article about the need we have to get together again, we need to have these critical masses, and I feel like we're in that right now. People are eager to get away from quarantine and get back to packing a stadium, not because the sports are important but because gathering is important.

As a kid, I read a lot of books by – I can't even remember their names, but authors who wrote sports series – anyway, when I was growing up, I read these books because I liked sports, and I needed the vicarious opportunity to play because I wasn't yet old enough to play competitively. Going back to my own recollection, I knew those books were there. There was some stuff written about them, and so that was a nice place to start.

TS: As I was reading *More Than a Game*, I wondered about how you went about figuring out the lineage. You offer such a thoughtful analysis of the history, how it started and how it has evolved. I particularly appreciated that you have a section on young adult sports books for females, because that evolution is different.

CC: Yeah, and it's surprising that – as I say in the book, and the book is ancient now, but there still seems to be this lack of books about girls who are athletes. When I was a kid, it would make sense that there weren't many books about girls as athletes because there weren't many girls who were athletes. Since they didn't have the opportunity to play, they couldn't write from experience. I interviewed R.R. Knudson a couple of times because she was May Swenson's companion and literary executor. In the '70s, right before Title IX, Knudson published her first book with a female athlete playing a boy's sport. She was a real groundbreaker because there weren't many stories like that, and girls' sports were just starting, the opportunities just opening up, and so she was ahead of the game that way.

When I went to NCTE and attended dinners with publishers, editors would often say, "We want more books about girls who play sports." I thought, well now there are plenty of women to write those stories, but the books didn't seem to be big draws. I don't know if girls are less interested in reading about people playing sports, even if they're athletes themselves. My daughter-in-law played college basketball, she loves playing the game, but she never watches it, and she won't come to a game. I think, "Huh, that's interesting, maybe it's just her, or maybe that's gender preference that's different," I don't know.

TS: How did you come to decide to have a chapter dedicated to books for females and then another chapter dedicated to coaches? How did you come about deciding that those two chapters were ones you wanted to include?

CC: I think the coaches one came first because I'd done an article on that, and it just seemed that in every sports novel, a coach plays a role, you know, whether it's positive or negative. It goes with the territory if you're going to write about athletes, they're going to have a coach, depending on the sport, but they're going to have some kind of coach who is somewhat involved and maybe intrudes into their personal lives, and it either complicates the plot or helps resolve the plot or something, but they have a role to play. And as a former coach, I think I'm just interested in that dynamic of coaches in sports.

For women, I think it was actually probably Title IX that got me thinking about it. I was coaching right when Title IX was opening things up at the high school where I worked. When I was coaching track, some of the best athletes were the women in the school, they blew me away. There had been essentially no women's sports before, so that was just starting, and there were some really talented young female athletes who were finally getting a chance to play an interscholastic sport.

I have three daughters, two of them were athletes, and I watched them navigate sports and some of the barriers they confronted because they were female and the inequalities that goes with it. As I started digging into sports novels about women, what was really most curious to me was, why in the world aren't there more books? Because publishing ultimately is about money, about readership. For a while, of course, there just weren't very many books for or about female athletes. Now, it's not hard to find some, but why aren't they landing big, why aren't kids flocking to those books like they do Chris Crutcher's? And why aren't young women passing those books around to their friends, saying "you got to read this book"? I don't know why.

I didn't put this in the book, but in speculating about the issue, I was thinking if you go back to the '50s, men were the spectators, they went to the football games, basketball, and baseball games. If you look at old photos of Yankee Stadium, the fans are mostly all men. It's changed a little since then, but still the majority, in some cases the vast majority of spectators at a live event, or watching on TV, are men. More women watch than ever, but still the spectators are mostly men, so it made me wonder if men are more willing to be passive observers of sports, that they find some kind of pleasure in just observing.

Then I wondered if women like my daughter-in-law, former athletes who are choosing not to go to games, maybe for them participating is more important, more satisfying than merely observing. Maybe it's the sisterhood, the team-manship, the aspects that come from being involved in the sport and in the practice, in the game, the locker room, all that stuff - that's what's important, not watching a game. I didn't know how to find out if that's even true, and it sounds like gender bias or stereotyping. I didn't know where to go with that, but it was something that just kept teasing me all the way through the writing of the book. It just seems to be the case that men are content to sit and watch, and women want to get in there and play the game.

TS: It's interesting that this goes against the gender stereotypes that we have. We think of men as doers, and they're going to go out and be active and do something, and we think of women as being observers. That is really fascinating, I wish that you or somebody would do that study now. I'd like to know the answer to it.

Going back to coaches, you explore the trope of the dementor coach, and I know that you did that for *The ALAN Review* as well. How has the trope evolved in young adult sports literature and in society in general, or do you think it hasn't evolved, has it remained the same since the early-2000s?

CC: I do, I think that it's changed because the nature of the game has changed, or nature of athletics, whether it's Generation X or the millennials. When I grew up, Vince Lombardi was the head coach of the Green Bay Packers, and he had all these maxims, and many of them were about brutality in football. You play with small hurts, the only thing to fear is fear itself, you know, some of these are military mindsets. The head coach at Arizona State when I was in grad school brutalized his players; it was well-known that he did. He subscribed to the Lombardi approach: "You take it, you suffer, that's the coach's job, and if you're a wimp, you quit." It's almost Darwinian. In those days, athletes took all kinds of abuse, verbal and physical abuse from coaches because that was the way it was.

I used to play racquetball with one of the football coaches here, and he would say that they got phone calls from parents complaining about their sons not getting enough playing time. I said, "Are you kidding me? This is a university, these are young men, not boys. And dad and mom are still calling?" And he said, "Oh yeah, especially if it's a quarterback." I thought, "Well, it's a different time now." Kids today—and their parents—would never put up with the type coaching that existed decades ago.

Maybe because of societal exposure, coaches today have realized that if they want to be successful, they have to have the athletes stay on the team. The old guys would say athletes today are coddled, but I don't think it's coddling as much as recognizing proper boundaries and a life/sport balance. Sports aren't the most important thing, even in professional athletes' lives; athletes realize they're going to have a life after the game. So I think there are fewer coaches today who could be called dementors, but there are still some. There are always some.

TS: In the book, there's a line from a young adult book where the main character is saying, "No one argues with coach." Then the commentary follows with "indeed, no one argues with coach, and nobody argues with a Bobby Knight or Joe Paterno either." Since the book was first published, that has taken on a new meaning. How do you view this line in the wake of Penn State in 2012 or with more recent events of Black athletes speaking out against long-standing White coaches, like Gundy at Oklahoma State University?

CC: It was good reading on your part - I had to go back and look that up. And I think it was maybe boomers who started that kind of thinking where you just didn't question authority; maybe it was a World War II thing.

TS: Similar to the "my country, wrong or right" mindset.

CC: Yeah, this idea of military leadership, and somebody has got to be the general, and he's got to have the troops who obey him to be successful. There were some articles back then that the Sports Literature Association published about muscular Christianity, about how they used Christian tropes and also military tropes to indoctrinate athletes. That's changed now, but you can see how that mentality led to somebody like Joe Paterno being protected, and how he felt like he not only could, but had the right to protect his coaches, even though they were doing despicable things.

With Gundy being called to account - he's not as old as I am, but I think he exhibits vestiges of Vince Lombardi with the "I'm the coach, dad-gummit, I can do whatever I want. I have all the power over these kids' lives" mindset. I'd bet anything when certain kinds of coaches get challenged by their players, whether it's about race or anything else, that it ticks them off, and they probably think, "Who are you, kid?" I think the more successful coaches are not just trying to be politically correct, but are trying to be morally correct and listening to their athletes, respecting the issues, and being attuned to what's going on in the world around them to help their athletes become good young men and women, as opposed to doing whatever it takes to win games.

However, in the big money schools like Oklahoma State or Alabama, or Penn State even, a lot of money is at stake. Those football coaches face enormous pressure to win, to keep the money flowing, so I think the pressure sometimes leads them to compromise their own standards. When they get

exposed, like Gundy did recently, and even his response was kind of lukewarm and half-baked. He seemed pretty tone-deaf, and in the long run, that hurts coaches.

TS: In the time that we're in now with the renewed attention on the Black Lives Matter movement, it's been interesting to think about sports and coaches through this additional lens or from this other perspective. We've seen a turnaround with how the NFL and the general public respond to Colin Kaepernick taking a knee.

CC: Kaepernick, that was something. He echoed those guys in the Mexico City Olympics in '68, Tommy C. Smith and John Carlos. They had the black-gloved fists up in the medal ceremony, they weren't trying to make trouble, they were just trying to say there's a problem. But US Olympic coaches and administrators didn't stand up for those two young men who got thrown off the team, lost their medals, and kicked out of the Olympic village.

In '68 was when Kareem Abdul Jabbar, who was then called Lew Alcindor, was at UCLA; he was the best basketball player in America. He's always been politically sensitive and active, and he refused to represent a country that didn't represent him, so he chose not to play on the Olympic team, and he was criticized for it.

The San Francisco 49ers coach, I can't remember who he was, but I don't think he really tried to stand up for Kaepernick because he probably knew he'd get fired, along with Kaepernick losing his job. It's different now because society has turned and has been horrified by systemic racism, which is sad to me because these horrors aren't new, and even the publicness of them isn't new. However, the momentum has turned where coaches now aren't afraid to, or almost feel compelled to stand up and take care of their athletes, to respect them and protect them.

TS: Looking ahead, what have you found especially exciting about the field of young adult sports literature recently? Do you have any book titles you would recommend?

CC: I think having a special issue of *Study and Scrutiny* is cool, and it shows that there's a growing body of people interested in not just the books themselves, but in what they can do with them. My

book is really about the literature, it's not about the effect the literature has. It's really about the books.

It's now a broader field than when I wrote about it, and so I'm glad to see it moving in that direction. I'm also glad to see how NCTE includes now several panels or presentations on sports literacy and sport in culture in the program. I don't know if it's trickling into curricula at universities or colleges or even high schools. In secondary schools it might be impossible to work around the Common Core, but in universities, certainly there could be room now for more courses in sports literature than there have been in the past.

Two recent books that I really admire are both by women, and I think they're within the last couple of years. The first one is *A Heart in a Body and the World* by Deb Caletti; it was a Printz Honor book. It's about girl who's a runner, so she's definitely an athlete, but not necessarily on a team sport. However, the book is not about her athletic life, running is an outlet for her. Also, Mindy McGinnis wrote a book called *Heroine* that deals with other issues such as addiction and friendship and commitment to sport. It just handles those issues in a beautiful way.

The cool thing is that it's not surprising that these books are written by women. When R.R. Knudson wrote a novel about a female athlete, the response was like, "Oh, a woman wrote a book about sports?" So it's cool that that's no longer a big deal, it's like here's another book, and wow, this is a good one. Also, there are more books that aren't just about football or basketball, but they're about all kinds of athletes, lacrosse players or swimmers or whatever. The books are recognizing there are all kinds of kids playing all kinds of sports.

TS: We've talked a little bit about this before, but in the time that's passed since *More Than a Game* has been published, what changes have you noticed in young adult sports literature?

CC: As I mentioned just now, with authors like Mindy McGinnis and Deb Caletti, it seems like it's not a big hurdle for a woman to write a sports book. I think, too, that there are fewer books that just portray vicarious game stuff. Maybe I'm seeing fewer because I'm not looking for them, but I do think young adult sports literature has become more sophisticated.

Maybe the *sportlerroman* term is not even necessary anymore. Now, there's the sense that here's a fine novel, and oh, by the way, the main character is some sort of athlete. In these books, sports are not the main issue; the novel is about something else. If you were pitching the book premise to a publisher, you wouldn't call it a sports book. That label is a turn-off for many readers. My students, I have to admit, are skeptical of what they see as sports books. I like Crutcher's earlier novels, and my students have to read one of his books. However, the covers of those books almost always put them off because they think "well I don't want to read a book about a football player."

Back in the '80s and '90s, publishers were thinking they would market Crutcher to boys, and the covers had to scream sports. I think we're past that now, and the covers are more sophisticated as are the novels. I think all young adult literature has improved, all the genres have gotten better, it's just so competitive now that you really have to be good to get a book published. Now we are getting to the point where we can say hey, here's a really great novel, read it, and we don't have to single it out because it's about sports; it's just a story that reflects part of American culture.

TS: If you were to update or write *More Than a Game* today - and I would love for you to update it - what would you want to include, or what might you change or omit?

CC: We talked about women in sports, and I'd like to include more on that. Now it would be interesting to talk to editors who acquire manuscripts and try to figure out if there is some inherent bias against sports books. If editors were never athletes themselves, if they get a manuscript about a girl who's a runner, does that put them off? Or is it a tokenism where they think, "We've got to have more sports books, so I'll pick one or the other." I'd like to try to get some insight into that process.

I'd also like to talk with marketing people and ask the people who design the covers and who do marketing campaigns what happens. How do you see this book? How do you target this audience? How do you even know who the audience is? Is sport a big deal or not? The publishing side would be something I'd like to try to understand better.

I think too, I could've done a better job with the focus. I think my scope was too wide. Now, I'd like to do better at finding graphic novels, for example, and collections of poetry, short stories, online fan fiction. I don't know if that exists or not, but maybe there is fan fiction that has some kind of

sports angle. I think now too, looking at the societal issues involved with Black Lives Matter, and the movement started by Colin Kaepernick.

It would be interesting to trace social issues as they've been reflected in books from the middle of the 20th century to now, and see how courageous they were in taking on what was happening. For instance, during World War II, were there sports books that were pacifistic, or was it all rah-rah, let's go give up your life for your country? It would be interesting to see if there were stories about athletes who were socially conscious, and maybe at risk like Kaepernick was for taking a stand that wasn't popular.

TS: That would be fascinating to see, because for a lot of these athletes, and especially if they are going to the Olympics or if they're professional in some way, taking a stand could cost a lot, both personally and monetarily.

CC: Yeah, and college scholarships get yanked. Professional sports have a morals clause, where the team can disassociate itself from an athlete if there's some scandal. There's not exactly a parallel with that, but I think universities don't want to bring a kid to campus who has a criminal record. The Black Lives Matter Movement has turned the spotlight on so many injustices that we now know that some "criminal" records that keep athletes from getting into college may not be valid. We have no way of knowing how many athletes have lost an opportunity to get a college education because of a trumped-up crime in their past. So yeah, those issues are real.

And there are plenty of other kinds of injustices athletes have endured, like the Michigan State gymnastics team doctor who preyed on women for decades. We'd like to think such things are rare, but I'm sure they're not as rare as I wish they were. Young athletes in club sports like gymnastics that require lots of individual training, I think they're probably more vulnerable. Anyway, it'd be interesting to see when books tackling those issues started to surface. I'm sure there were some before Nasser, but I would assume after that big scandal with U.S. soccer too, that maybe more of those issues are being addressed.

TS: What would you like young adult sports literature to do in the future, both in terms of the books themselves and in terms of the scholarship?

CC: I would love it if there were some pedagogical applications where there would be a way for a strand of these books to worm their way into a curriculum in secondary schools. It'd be nice if there were more sports literature courses as high school electives. That would be great, but I think that's unlikely to happen.

I would love it if a university English department, for example, offered special topics courses on studies in sports literature. That would be kind of a cool thing, and it shouldn't be too hard to convince people to include such a course in the curriculum. But to be honest, I think it'd be an uphill climb in my own department to establish a sports lit course.

TS: Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you wish we had talked about?

CC: I'm flattered obviously that there's interest in a book that's so old, so the fact that there's a book review, especially in a place like *Study and Scrutiny*, made my day. I'm also glad there's a special issue on young adult sports literature in *Study and Scrutiny*, and I would love to see other scholarly venues offer special issues related to sports. I know *The ALAN Review* has had a special issue on young adult sports literature and so did *English Journal*, but it'd be nice to see opportunities in other journals, too.

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