

## Expos 20: More Than a Game

Keating McKeon, PhD  
keatingmckeon@fas.harvard.edu



Eli Harold, Colin Kaepernick, and Eric Reid in October 2016 (Credit: *USA Today Sports*)

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

“Shut up and dribble,” snarled a broadcaster when basketball star LeBron James voiced concerns about the competence of then-President Trump in 2018. The message was clear: sports and politics don’t mix. In fact, as we will find across various media this semester, few things in the past century have been as closely intertwined. At the same time, the relationship often appears lopsided. Politicians show little hesitation to wade into issues pertaining to athletics, but athletes—like LeBron James himself—are discouraged from airing anything resembling an opinion on matters with a wider societal bearing. Through units navigating the NFL’s suppression of concussion science, the complex relationship of race to American sports culture, and the political dynamics of consequential events within the sporting world, we will consider the following questions: what makes the world of sports such a significant setting for political activism? What authority lies in the manipulation of athletic culture by politicians? In what ways do athletes become avatars of their cultural moment, and can they ever really exist “above the fray”?

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

Expository Writing 20 is an intensive seminar that aims to improve your ability to discover and reason about evidence through the medium of essays. You will have frequent practice in formulating questions, analyzing both primary and secondary sources and properly acknowledging them, supporting arguments with strong and detailed evidence, and shaping clear, lively essays. We will talk extensively about the “Elements of Academic Argument”—building blocks for designing an essay, crafting its thesis, and introducing its evidence—and they will be highlighted according to their relative priority in each unit. Revision will constitute a major component in our work together. Over the course of the semester, and through multiple rounds of redrafting, we will share a lively and ongoing conversation about your writing. You will leave this course equipped with a sharpened ability to engage with the pressing issues of the day through your written expression.

## COURSE OVERVIEW

### Unit 1: Ethics, Agency, and the NFL

In our first unit, you will **take a position** on a complicated question: is a dangerous sport an ethical one? Although we could approach this inquiry from many different vantages, we will look specifically at the issue of CTE (“chronic traumatic encephalopathy”) and the reluctance of the National Football League to acknowledge the scientific findings related to it. We will engage with both visual and textual media exploring the science of CTE, the actions of the NFL in responding to it, and the wider complexities of an industry seeking to confront an existential threat to its core business model. The NIH (National Institutes of Health) has defined CTE as “a form of brain degeneration that affects some individuals who suffer progressive, long-term consequences of repeated concussions.” As retired players encountered neurological challenges abnormal for their age, their family and friends—as well as scientists—began to suspect that years of hard hits had left their brains irreparably damaged. The NFL met these concerns with seeming evasion, publishing a series of research papers that sought to minimize the causal link between football and head injury. Critics likened the NFL’s strategy to that employed by the tobacco industry (“Big Tobacco”) in disputing science tying smoking to cancer, while the NFL vigorously denied the analogy, referring to Big Tobacco as “perhaps the most odious industry in American history.” With the facts of CTE now known, we will ask: where does the resultant burden of risk lie? Are we witnessing the free choices of consenting adults or an ongoing and dangerous ignorance originating in the NFL’s initial muddling of the science?

### Sources

- \*Belson, Ken. “When the Removal of 2 N.F.L. Stars From Playoff Games Is Progress.” *The New York Times* 18 Jan. 2021.
- \*Engber, Daniel. “The NFL Is Not Big Tobacco.” *Slate*, Mar. 31, 2016.
- \*Hohler, Bob, et al. “Gladiator: Aaron Hernandez and Football Inc.” *The Boston Globe*, 18 Oct. 2018.

- \**League of Denial: The NFL's Concussion Crisis*. Produced by Michael Kirk et al., PBS *Frontline*, 2013. PBS, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/league-of-denial>.
- \*Paolini, Mikayla. "NFL Takes a Page from the Big Tobacco Playbook: Assumption of Risk in the CTE Crisis." *Emory Law Journal*, vol. 68, no. 3, 2019, pp. 607-642.
- \*Rios, Edwin. "The NFL Really Doesn't Like Being Compared to Big Tobacco." *Mother Jones*, 24 Mar. 2016.
- \*Schwarz, Alan, et al. "N.F.L.'s Flawed Concussion Research and Ties to Tobacco Industry." *The New York Times*, 24 Mar. 2016.

## Unit 2: To Take a Stand (Or Not)

From the earliest participation of Black people in America's organized sports, they have faced additional burdens ranging from heightened scrutiny to outright violence. In our second unit, you will examine this history through four distinct instances of engagement with matters of identity and activism. Colin Kaepernick, O.J. Simpson, Michael Jordan, and the Atlanta Dream: each a Black athlete or, in the case of the Dream, a Black-majority team, yet these figures have adopted approaches to politics—and to the reality of their own identities as Black people in America—that diverge in significant ways. Some athletes choose to use their highly visible public profile as a platform for activist messages. These individuals can find themselves met with demands that they avoid contentious social topics and limit themselves to the particular context of their sport. Other athletes embrace this idea of the transcendent sports person—a figure existing beyond the fray of political and cultural conflicts to focus solely on their physical craft. Your **comparative analysis** will consider the complicated and oftentimes conflicting quality of these perspectives in order to illuminate their persistent through-lines. At every stage of this unit, you will probe the idea of the athlete as an avatar of their cultural moment, weighing both the amplified interest in their political participation—and the uniquely vehement response that such activism can provoke.

### Sources

- \*Branch, John. "The Awakening of Colin Kaepernick." *The New York Times*, 17 Sept. 2017.
- \*Coombs, Danielle Sarver, et al. "Flag on the Play: Colin Kaepernick and the Protest Paradigm." *Howard Journal of Communications*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2020, pp. 317-336. *Researchgate*, doi:10.1080/10646175.2019.1567408.
- \*Deb, Sopan. "W.N.B.A. Players Escalate Protest of Anti-B.L.M. Team Owner." *The New York Times*, 4 Aug. 2020.
- \*Dyson, Michael Eric. *Reflecting Black: African-American Cultural Criticism*. University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Project MUSE, 2015. <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/32850>.
- \**The Last Dance*. Directed by Jason Hehir, ESPN Films, 2020.
- \*O.J.: *Made in America*. Directed by Ezra Edelman, ESPN Films, 2016.
- \*Rhoden, William. *Forty Million Dollar Slaves: The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of the Black Athlete*. Three Rivers Press, 2007.
- \*Streeter, Kurt. "Kneeling, Fiercely Debated in the N.F.L., Resonates in Protests." *The New York Times*, 5 June 2020.

\*Streeter, Kurt. “The One Name the W.N.B.A. Won’t Say.” *The New York Times*, 5 Oct. 2020.

\*Williams, Linda. *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson*. Princeton UP, 2001.

### Unit 3: Leaving It All on the Field

In our third and final unit, the ball is in your court: you will build on the questions addressed—and skills developed—during the semester to pursue an independent **research project**. Over the course of the semester, we will encounter the inevitable—and inextricable—intersection of sports and politics in American life, with a range of disparate, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, responses. You will see athletes affected by the political machinations of their employers; athletes castigated for entering the arena of civic debate; and athletes marked by their choice to abstain from engagement with the social issues of the day. In Unit 3, you will continue this exploration from a starting point of one of three sources representing three discrete topical frameworks. Each of these frameworks—“The Olympic Stage,” “Gendered Perspectives in Sports,” and “Patriotism and the Player”—offers a context for assessing issues of pressing importance for the sporting world and society at large.

### Sources

\*Bass, Amy. *Not the Triumph but the Struggle: The 1968 Olympics and the Making of the Black Athlete*. University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

\*Rapinoe, Megan, and Emma Brockes. *One Life*. Penguin Press, 2020.

\**The Trials of Muhammad Ali*. Directed by Bill Siegel, PBS *Independent Lens*, 2014. Kanopy, <https://harvard.kanopy.com/video/trials-muhammad-ali>.