

The mismeasure of masculinity: the male body, 'race' and power in the enumerative discourses of the NFL Draft

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ABSTRACT The athletic male body has long been idealized in western culture, and its dimensions are a key aspect of its iconic status. Oates and Durham examine the discourses of the athletic male body as it is presented in media discourses surrounding the NFL Draft. They focus specifically on the enumerative strategies used to define and delimit the racialized bodies of football draftees. Through a close textual analysis of publications that deal with the Draft, they uncover three main themes in the discursive construction of the athletes' bodies: the delineation of the body in terms of its dimensions; the assessment of the body's performance; and the body's productivity in terms of mastery of the sport. In characterizing the athletic body strictly in terms of its relationship to physical space, the discourses invoke aspects of hegemonic masculinity related to size, strength and the successful use of force. In addition, in the deployment of quantification by white team-owners and managers in the evaluation of mainly non-white players of a lower class position, the numeric logics of the Draft reinscribe power hierarchies of 'race' and class.

KEYWORDS corporeal theory, eugenics, football, gender, ideology, masculinity, media, NFL Draft, power, race, sport

The idealization of the athletic male body in terms of cultural power has a long history in western civilization. Ancient Greeks perfected the cult of the male athlete, enshrining his powerful, heroic and virile image in painting and sculpture, and organizing the precursor to the modern Olympic Games.¹ Athletes were presented in art as muscular, graceful, powerful and heroic. That Greek gods were represented as the ultimate achievement of the athletic ideal suggests the value placed on male physical development. These muscular gods also signal a visual trope that continues to this day: the hyper-developed male body as the embodiment of physical and cultural power. These ancient idealized male bodies occasionally were valued through measurement and enumeration. Polykleitos, a fifth-century Greek sculptor whose work would later influence that of Michelangelo, believed that rational sequences of numbers should administer the ideal

1 Kenneth Dutton, *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Male Physical Development* (New York: Continuum 1995).

human form. Such sequences were celebrated for their presumed moral power. The proper quantifiable symmetry was thought to reflect a moral quality inherent in the proper sequence of numbers. As Galen, a contemporary of Polykleitos, put it: 'the body's beauty consists of symmetry, not of its elements but of its numbers.'²

Strategies of measurement and quantification of the human body for the purposes of ranking and classification have long been deployed to maintain various social hierarchies. While some of these numbering schemes have purported to deal with the aesthetic elements of the human form, they have in fact been political in their aims and effects. As Stephen Jay Gould and others have pointed out, the pseudo-science of craniometry was developed to reify the myth of biological racial inferiority;³ colonial administrations used the census and other bureaucratic forms of enumeration as regimes of discipline whereby they could exert authority over subjugated peoples;⁴ and feminist theorists have noted that the emphasis on the physical dimensions of the female body serves to contain and constrain women's social roles.⁵ Thus, the measurement of the body has been shown to be a function of ideology: a tactic by which hegemonic power may be sustained. Perhaps because of this focus on the reassertion of hegemonic power through computation, little scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which contemporary male bodies are also constructed through numbering schemes. Increasingly, the precise dimensions of the male physique have gained importance in cultural discourse. But the significance of these discursive patterns, their socio-cultural meanings and their relationships to existing frames of gender, class, race and sexuality, have not been adequately theorized or analysed.

In what follows, we seek to demonstrate how such discourses of enumeration play out in a cultural forum that specifically showcases the male body in its most idealized form: the National Football League (NFL) Draft. In this annual event—arguably the most prominent in American male culture—male bodies are catalogued, classified, ranked and valued via an extensive and complex system of quantification that is the focus of national attention for a period of weeks every summer. The Draft is a media phenomenon, drawing hundreds of journalists, including representatives from four foreign countries.⁶ ESPN's telecast of the 2002 Draft consisted of more than seventeen hours of live coverage.

2 George L. Hersey, *The Evolution of Allure: Sexual Selection from the Medici Venus to the Incredible Hulk* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press 1996), 45.

3 Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton 1981).

4 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1996).

5 Sarah Banet-Weiser, *The Most Beautiful Girl in the World: Beauty Pageants and National Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1999); Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1993).

6 Jill Lieber, 'Audience adds kick: thousands of fans throw a party at Garden', *USA Today*, 17 April 2000, C1.

The ways in which the male body is brought into the public sphere via the mediated discourses of the NFL Draft give rise to a series of questions. What are the gendered politics of the quantification of male bodies in the discourses of the Draft? Similarly, what are the politics of race underlying these discourses? How is masculinity invested with meaning through these discourses, and what are the ramifications of such meaning-making? We seek to answer these questions by means of a close textual reading of media coverage of the 2002 NFL Draft. In order to approach such an analysis, it is important to situate the male athlete's body in its cultural/historical context, and to trace the connections between theories of masculinity, corporeality and discourse.

The male athlete: embodiment of an ideal

The cult of the powerful male body has existed in a number of different incarnations in various historical and cultural contexts, but it has never disappeared from the western imagination. The present day is replete with examples of a vigorous cult of the hyper-developed male body. Scholars in a number of disciplines have noted the uses of the muscular male body in film, advertising and politics.⁷ Building on the work of Antonio Gramsci, Australian theorist Robert W. Connell posits that an idealized form of masculinity, which he calls 'hegemonic masculinity', dominates the cultural landscape. 'Hegemonic masculinity' is defined as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women'.⁸ Many contemporary western societies have experienced the demands, if not their realization, of feminisms that present a challenge to the dominant position men have enjoyed. At the same time, white privilege has been challenged by civil rights demands from Blacks, Native Americans and other traditionally oppressed groups. Hegemonic masculinity, in Connell's formulation, is a whole set of responses to these perceived threats. In western culture, hegemonic masculinity often takes the form of a white-supremacist, powerful, aggressive, sexist and heterosexist ideal that exists most comfortably at the level of myth, and serves to equate whiteness, heterosexuality, athleticism and (of course) males with power.

7 Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 1994); Jackson Katz, 'Advertising and the construction of violent white masculinity', in Gail Dines and Jean Humez (eds), *Gender, Race and Class in Media: A Text Reader* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1995), 133–41; Susan Bordo, *The Male Body* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2000); Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1995).

8 Robert W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1995), 77.

Contemporary professional American football players currently epitomize the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.⁹ Jackson Katz refers to the football player as 'a signifier of violent masculinity', adding that in 'the male sports subculture...size and strength are valued by men across class and racial boundaries' as a marker of men's separation from women.¹⁰ Football has been classified by Michael Messner and others as a 'combat sport': a game in which high levels of aggression, violence and injury exist not as accidents or violations, but as intended, even desired parts of the game.¹¹ Football's violence serves as a symbolic assertion of power, and a warning to groups who would challenge that power on other fields, such as a political one. But the discourse of football serves dominant power in other ways as well. Athletes who pursue careers in combat sports can expect significantly reduced health or even life expectancy. They tend to be drawn largely from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹² Thus, while football serves to assert the power of men and the subjugation of women, the practices of combat sports also serve to maintain race and class hierarchies through violence, control and objectification.

The NFL Draft is the culmination of a long process of corporeal objectification. In one sense, this objectification begins the moment a player begins playing organized football and is sized up (literally) by the coaching staff. The culture of elite football itself is a continuous process of objectification, of attempts to measure players in numbers. But the process becomes a media spectacle during the Draft process. Prior to the Senior Bowl (an annual post-season all-star game in January), seventy-five of the best college senior football players in the United States will parade into a hotel banquet hall clad only in their underwear. From that moment, the process of measurement and re-measurement takes on a new seriousness. Over the next four months, NFL prospects will be measured, weighed, asked to run, jump, lift weights, take specially designed intelligence tests and quizzed about their injuries by professional teams. A majority of these players are African American; a majority of those who evaluate them are white. The mass media cover the process with unusual intensity, recording and dissecting each player's performance. Predictions are made about the outcome of the Draft and prospects are analysed according to carefully designed units of numerical measurement. The story of the Draft is largely told in statistics.

9 Tim Curry, 'Fraternal bonding in the locker room: a pro-feminist analysis of talk about competition and women', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1990, 119–35; Michael Messner, 'When bodies are weapons: masculinity and violence in sport', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1990, 203–20.

10 Katz.

11 Messner.

12 Harry Edwards, 'The collegiate athletic arms race: origins and implications of the "Rule 48" controversy', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 8, no. 1, winter/spring 1989.

But how do the enumerative logics of the NFL Draft contribute to the construction of masculinity in society in the United States? To begin answering this question we need to start with a larger, more general question: What does the objectification of the body mean? And, furthermore, what has it *meant*, that is, how have cultural theorists discussed the body as a site of power in recent western culture? For the last few decades have witnessed the body's emergence as an arena of cultural criticism and enquiry. The corporeal, once imagined as merely a vessel for our consciousness, has been repositioned as a crucial locus for our cultural/political experience as subjects. The body has recently been imagined as text, as a sign, as a cultural construction, as a performance.

Bodies, numbers and power

For Judith Butler, Susan Bordo and Michel Foucault, bodily identities are inextricable from discourse.¹³ All three see identities as strictly policed through discourse, and see possibilities for resistance arising from that discourse. Butler and Bordo expand Foucault's argument while applying it to feminist concerns. For all three, bodily discursions are occasions for the exercise of power. If, following Bordo, Butler and Foucault, we conceive of the body as a product of discursive practices, we can identify a distinct trend in that discourse: one that 'scientizes' and 'statisticizes' the body in ways that are intended to mark it, make it productive and otherwise colonize it.

The literature of the corporeal is rife with examples of the objectification of the female body via various domains of quantification and scientization. For instance, a number of scholars have demonstrated how the female body becomes a site for the exercise of power in medicine. Paula Treichler, for example, demonstrates that medical textbooks organize childbirth around the doctor, the foetus and female reproductive organs, while ignoring the woman's subjectivity.¹⁴ This disempowerment may extend to the whole realm of science as it has been traditionally conceived. Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth argue:

whereas nature, the body that scientific knowledge takes as its object, is traditionally constructed as feminine, the subject of science, i.e. the scientist,

13 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge 1996); Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*; Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage 1978); Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon 1980).

14 Paula A. Treichler, 'Feminism, medicine, and the meaning of childbirth', in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (eds), *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science* (London: Routledge 1990), 113-38.

has usually been seen as masculine . . . In other words, hierarchies involving both gender and power . . . are intimately associated with the ideology and practice of science.¹⁵

Scientific knowledge has also been deployed as a justification for the colonialism that subjugated men and women of a different 'race'. The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, for instance, featured the display of hundreds of South Asian people as evidence of a racial hierarchy and, by extension, as justification for American imperialist practices in the region.¹⁶ Sporting practices also played a role in this instance. On 12 and 13 August 1904, the 'Anthropology Games' were held, in which the Exposition's human exhibits competed in various athletic contests. The competition involved both western sports and those deemed suited to the contestants' 'natural' skills, such as pole-climbing and mud-fighting. The goal of the games was not merely to provide entertainment, but also to gather 'scientific' information relating to human performance and presumed racial hierarchies. As Dr W. J. McGee, an eminent anthropologist and head of the Exposition's Department of Anthropology, told exhibit supervisors: 'The object of these contests will be to obtain for the first time what may be called interracial athletic records.'¹⁷ The games were judged to be something of a disappointment. The official report on the Exposition found the contestants 'inferior athletes and vastly overrated'.¹⁸ McGee noted that the event 'demonstrated what anthropologists have long known, that the White man leads the races of the world, both physically and mentally . . . in all-round development no primitive people can rank in the same class with the Missouri boy'.¹⁹

Science is intricately bound up with the exercise of power. Some recent scholars have come to view enumerative strategies as another scientized power tactic. In his extended critique of modernity, Foucault identifies the use of statistical knowledge of human populations as a key component of the technologies of power that emerged in the nineteenth century. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes

the constitution of the individual as a describable, analysable object . . . in order to maintain him in his individual features, in his particular evolution, in his own aptitudes or abilities, under the gaze of a corpus of knowledge; and, secondly, the

15 Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth, 'Introduction', in Jacobus, Fox Keller and Shuttleworth (eds), 6.

16 Robert Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1984); Christopher A. Vaughan, 'Ogling Irogots: the politics and commerce of exhibiting cultural otherness, 1898-1913', in Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press 1996), 219-33.

17 Quoted in Rydell, 166.

18 'A novel athletic contest', *World's Fair Bulletin*, vol. 5, September 1904, 50.

19 Ibid.

constitution of a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given 'population'.²⁰

This new subjectivity was institutionalized in 'the sciences of man' (*sic*), such as demography, criminology and other pursuits that sought to know human populations via enumeration. This process has been integral to what Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow call 'the historical achievement' of 'the modern individual—objectified, analyzed, fixed'. The individual, as Foucault famously commented, 'is the effect and object of a certain crossing of power and knowledge. He [*sic*] is the product of the complex strategic developments in the field of power and the multiple development in the human sciences.'²¹ Enumeration is so central to modern logic that it seems eternal, or at least very old. But, in fact, statistics as a tool for minimizing risk has a rather short history. Ian Hacking identifies its emergence in the early nineteenth century, and sees enumeration as a critical tactic of modern power strategies: 'Statistics have helped determine the form of laws about society and the character of social facts. It has engendered concepts and classifications within the human species.'²² Statistical knowledge, however neutral it may appear, is nonetheless constitutive of modernist thought, and is deeply implicated in the exercise of power in the industrial and post-industrial West. Hacking is quick to acknowledge the positive influences of statistical knowledge. But, while acknowledging that enumerating populations has improved public health, safety and general welfare, he asserts that the practice is also intimately connected with modern technologies of power. It has been deployed to identify and control deviance and to maximize industrial and bureaucratic efficiency.

By the mid-nineteenth century, this logic of enumeration found popular celebration in sports journalism. Since the first baseball box score appeared in 1863, sports journalism has become increasingly reliant on statistics. Presently, numbers and measurements are commonly known and discussed even by casual fans. The connection between statistics and player value is enacted in the commemoration of statistical 'milestones', events that are being choreographed with increasing care. Numbers as a measure of a player's performance and relative value also play a central role in the wildly popular fan pursuit of 'fantasy leagues', in which fans are asked to imagine

20 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage 1977), 190.

21 Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982), 159–60.

22 Ian Hacking, 'How should we do the history of statistics?', in Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1991).

themselves as managers, organizing and deploying the increasingly black labour force. Sports have become a stage for the ritual affirmations of a rather conservative, statistically based regime. They have become, in other words, advertisements for 'the comprehensive measures, statistical assessments and interventions' that Foucault notes are aimed at the 'body politic' or the 'social body'.

While enumeration helps to validate a particular regime of knowledge, it also has been used to establish and authorize hierarchies in modernist societies. The power to measure is an important legitimating tool for usually white and male elites. Recent scholarship on the slave trade has suggested that the measurement and assessment of slave bodies served not only to facilitate the most infamous example of commodity exchange of bodies, but also to reassert the slave owner's position of power. The measurements that were an important feature of slave auctions served not only to facilitate the commodity exchange, they also clarified the power relationships between master and slave.²³

Power was also a key marker of colonial relationships between colonizer and colonized subjects. Arjun Appaduri argues that the counting of colonized bodies by the British bureaucracy in India played an important role as an agent of social control (and ultimately contributed to group violence in contemporary India). The census, of course, already existed in Britain itself, but in India it took on a new importance. It was an 'encounter with a highly differentiated, religiously Other set of groups . . . This created a situation in which the hunt for information and archives for this information took on enormous proportions, and numerical data became crucial to this empiricist drive.'²⁴ Appadurai suggests that what makes this particular case distinct from Britain's larger fascination with collecting demographic information during the period is the exotic nature of the Indians and the orientalist gaze that the British state brought to the project. In the essentializing discourse that resulted, 'the bodies of certain groups are bearers of social difference and moral status'.²⁵ The usefulness of enumeration is easily understood. As a means of collecting knowledge (and hence power), it provided 'concise ways of conveying large bodies of information, and . . . served as a short form for capturing and appropriating otherwise recalcitrant features of the social and human landscape'.²⁶ Enumeration served to justify the British presence in India, but it also played a pedagogical and disciplinary role, reinscribing the colonized body with the politics of difference.

23 See Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2001).

24 Appaduri, 118.

25 *Ibid.*, 119.

26 *Ibid.*, 120.

This reinscription of bodies of difference has a history outside of colonial relationships. Nineteenth-century practices of craniometry and phrenology all proposed a connection between measurement of the head and face and human behaviour. Nazi specialists categorized facial structure into twenty-one discernible types with the goal of eliminating undesirables.²⁷ More local examples can be found in American popular culture. Sarah Banet-Weiser's study of beauty pageants suggests that quantification has played an important role in scientizing the evaluation of female bodies. The 1923 Miss America pageant graded bodies on a 100-point scale, in which 'construction of head' was worth 15 points, 'eyes' 10, 'hair' 5 and so on.²⁸ Although this scale proved too confining, it has influenced the current scoring system that remains heavily number-centred. The vital statistics of *Playboy* centre-folds are another example of the enumeration of the spectacular female body.

The NFL Draft as site of enumeration

But women are not the only ones to find their bodies the subject of intense statistical scrutiny. The NFL Draft provides an unlikely venue for the production of what Foucault calls 'useful bodies', through the process of enumeration. The Draft is preceded by the annual National Football League Scouting Combine in Indianapolis's RCA Dome, where players' individual talents are assessed and measured. The Combine generates much of the data that will be spun at the Draft. Until recently, these work-outs were closed to the media, but by 2004 the NFL Network, the league's new television channel, broadcast footage from the Combine. In the press release that announced the new Combine programming, Steve Bornstein, the president and CEO of the NFL Network, said: 'From a fan's perspective, this is an opportunity they've never had until now—a chance to see for themselves what their team sees when it comes to deciding who to take in the draft.'²⁹ While Bornstein is overlooking the vast literature that follows each Draft, he does point to an important feature of Draft coverage: it encourages fans to identify with management, and to view the players as commodities to be compared.

At the Combine, and subsequently at the Draft, players are introduced to the process of quantification that marks the relationship of their bodies to the league. In scholarly terms, the Draft discursively empties the male athletic

27 Richard M. Lerner, *Final Solutions: Biology, Prejudice, and Genocide* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press 1992).

28 Banet-Weiser, 55.

29 'NFL Network to provide unprecedented coverage of the NFL Scouting Combine', 12 February 2004, available at www.nfl.com/nflnetwork/story/7083320 (viewed 5 May 2004).

body of its subjectivity, making it a commodity to be bought, sold or traded. In vernacular terms, the process is one that a number of commentators find more than a little creepy. The Combine is 'where fresh beef is brought to one central market, where it is poked, prodded and tested', according to the *New York Times*.³⁰ The *Times* also notes 'an assembly-line process with hints of the slave auction'.³¹ Former player Tim Green, a veteran of the Combine, remembers being 'loaded up with other players onto a bus instead of a cattle truck and transported to a local hospital that has the necessary gizmos to further scrutinize what you once thought was your own body'.³² Players invited to the Combine are assigned a number and, according to the players, are not referred to by name. As Green notes: 'You don't just feel like a number, you become one.'³³

It takes four full days for trainers, doctors, scouts and coaches from the NFL's thirty-two teams to encode the nearly 400 prospects with a series of numbers. The process is startling for its invasiveness, comprehensiveness and studied dehumanization. The potential draftees are assigned a numbered, grey uniform, and have the same number written on their hand. Players are not called by name, but summoned by their numbers. Each team has personnel on hand to record this information that they then use, together with data collected from their own private tryouts involving potential draftees, to assess each player's physical potential. The investigation at the Combine quantifies the dimensions and health of the athletic bodies and the bodies' athletic abilities. These numbers are then used to create a numerical measurement of relative talent.

Each player has his height, weight and hand-size measured and his body fat percentage estimated. After this information is acquired and recorded, each player undergoes a series of questions and tests designed to determine his health. One popular measure is the Cybrex score, a quantified measurement of the strength and power of each leg's muscles. An unbalanced score indicates the possible presence of injury. Players are questioned extensively about their past injuries, but with millions of dollars potentially riding on their responses, it is not surprising that player responses are not widely trusted. The numerical scores, however, are a different story. As one former NFL team physician put it: 'The Cybrex doesn't lie.'³⁴ Players are also asked to submit to a test of knee flexibility called Lachman's test, which is also measured on a numerical scale. As coaches and scouts test a prospect's quickness and agility, each team's

30 William Rhoden, 'NFL meat market opens for business', *New York Times*, 25 February 2001, A24.

31 Ibid.

32 Tim Green, *The Dark Side of the Game* (New York: Warner 1996), 6-7.

33 Ibid., 7.

34 Pierce Scranton, *Playing Hurt: Treating and Evaluating the Warriors of the NFL* (New York: Brasseys 2001), 7.

medical staff attempt to estimate the percentage of the player's fast twitch v. slow twitch muscle fibres. When these figures are compiled and studied, the medical staff assign the draftee a medical 'grade'. Usually, the grading scale runs from 0 (the equivalent of failure) to 9 (perfect health). Grades below 3 indicates a serious medical risk. These medical grades play an important role in determining each player's final draft grade, as explained below.

In addition to measuring the body's dimensions and relative health, scouts and coaches also use the Combine as an opportunity to measure the body's possibility for productivity on the football field. This potential is gauged not through play, as one might suspect, but via the more abstract measures of speed, leaping ability, strength and agility. One reason the Combine is held in Indianapolis each year is that the domed stadium allows for a controlled environment suitable for the quasi-scientific nature of the enterprise. Warren Anderson and Tim McClellan, two trainers who specialize in training players for the Combine, argue that numbers are crucial to Draft position: 'NFL scouts strongly emphasize measurements and numbers. Athletes who are not prepared to turn out the numbers that scouts want to see are devalued as a commodity in the combine.'³⁵ To collect these numbers, each player at the Combine is given the opportunity to run the forty-yard sprint and to perform a vertical and broad jump, a strength test that consists of lifting a 225-pound bench press as many consecutive times as possible, and an agility test that consists of running through cones. Each team is likely to have players they are interested in drafting try out individually for the team's scouts and coaches. These work-outs are valued in part because individual teams can have control over the conditions and measurement, a luxury that eludes them at the Combine. As one scout notes:

You'd be surprised at how often you'll find that the forty-yard dash a player runs is actually thirty-nine or thirty-seven yards. That's why, when we go to a workout, we pull out the measuring tape to make sure that it truly is forty yards, wherever they're running.³⁶

While an overwhelming amount of attention is paid to the bodies of prospects and their capabilities, traditional conceptions of intelligence do not escape the process of enumeration that precedes the Draft. Nearly every NFL prospect will take the Wonderlic Personnel Test at least once. This test, developed in 1937 by the company of the same name, claims to measure 'cognitive ability' by means of a twelve-minute test consisting of fifty questions. The average score for NFL draftees is 21.³⁷

35 Warren Anderson and Tim McClellan, 'Combine crunch', April 2000, available at www.momentummedia.com/articles/tc/tc1203/crunch.htm (viewed 4 May 2004).

36 Vince Carucci, 'Sizing up prospects is a year-round job', *NFL Insider*, April–May 2000, available at www.nfl.com/ce/feature/0,3783,5192903,00.html (viewed 4 May 2004).

37 Ibid.

While the Indianapolis Combine is the climax of the professional scouting of college players, these four days in February are by no means the beginning of the scouting process. Indeed, it is a process that never stops. Scouts are predictably active during the college football season, viewing tape and watching players in person. Performance statistics are noted and used in the judgement of players. The collection of these statistical measures of bodily dimensions, physical performance, intelligence and statistical production creates an unwieldy mountain of numbers on the 350 or so serious prospects. To make the fruits of their collection manageable, teams distil these numbers into a single numerical ranking that designates that player's potential. This service is in such high demand that two organizations, BLESTO in Pittsburgh and National Football Scouting in Tulsa, do nothing else but provide subscribing teams with numerical assessments of each prospect. Teams go about this process differently, but most teams grade a player's overall potential on a nine-point scale. Come Draft day, these numbers will be used to rank players against one another.

Perhaps the emphasis on enumeration might best be demonstrated by attending to the one area of assessment in which it becomes especially difficult. The wild card in this quasi-scientific assessment is the element of character. Recent public relations disasters—such as Ray Carruth's conviction on charges of murdering his pregnant wife and linebacker Ray Lewis's conviction on charges of obstructing justice in a Florida murder investigation—have led teams to entertain questions about a player's integrity. In the image industry that is the NFL, this is undoubtedly a well-placed concern, but it provides a problem for teams specifically because of the difficulty they have in assigning a numerical measurement to the quality. As ESPN reporter Bob Ley notes: 'It is a remarkable irony that in a league where prospective rookies are tested and evaluated to the limits of science . . . NFL teams say they increasingly make draft day decisions based on a most subjective quality, a person's character.'³⁸ NFL head coach Bill Belichick complains that character is 'the hardest thing for us to quantify'.³⁹ In fact, the league is very interested in collecting as much information as possible on the off-the-field behaviour of players and prospects. NFL security, a quickly growing league bureaucracy, collects and disseminates information on the legal scrapes of players and prospects, and conducts mandatory workshops on the potential public relations disasters that can accompany the benefits of a highly visible image industry.

That the assessment of NFL prospects is largely a matter of enumeration is revealing enough about the practice of power in professional football, but what is more difficult to explain is the fact that this process of enumeration

38 'Outside the lines: does character count in the NFL draft?', transcript of ESPN broadcast, Sunday, 9 April 2000, available at <http://sports.espn.go.com/page2/tvlistings/show2transcript.html> (viewed 4 May 2004).

39 Ibid.

should find an audience outside of the teams themselves. And yet, amateur Draft analysis has emerged as a cottage industry, and a growing one at that. At last count at least five different print publications offered volumes dedicated solely to the evaluation of NFL Draft talent. Many more offer web-based subscription services that update Combine and work-out number, college statistics and overall player ratings.

In what follows, we undertake a critical textual reading of these publications as discursive arenas in which the male body is deliberated and conceptualized via the logic of enumeration. The texts we have selected are the three most popular print circulars covering the Draft: *Pro Football Weekly 2002 Draft Preview*, *Mel Kiper Jr's 2002 Draft Report* and the *Sporting News Pro Football Draft Guide 2002*.⁴⁰ We examine these texts for ideological themes underpinning the uses of numbers and statistics in the representation of the players' bodies, and evaluate the strategies at work that suggest preferred readings of the figures. We then reflect on these ideological textual practices in the context of the contemporary socio-political climate of masculinity in the United States.

Add it up: the uses of enumeration in Draft guides

The editor's introduction to *Pro Football Weekly 2002 Draft Preview* includes the following explanation: 'All 40-yard dash times are the most accurate averages we could come up with and are curved to take into account the type of running surface. Heights and weights are the latest verified figures we could obtain, except in a few cases where they are estimated.'⁴¹ The next paragraph refers readers to a glossary on page 188, but words and phrases as story-telling techniques run a distant second to the numbers found on nearly every page: numbers that measure the bodies, abilities, potential and productivity of the prospects vying to become the NFL's next superstars and multimillionaires. In all three of these texts, numbers are the preferred means of coding the bodies. Three key themes emerge in terms of how the enumeration of the body is accomplished. The first is the delineation of the body in terms of its dimensions; the second is the assessment of the body's performance; and the third focuses on capturing each prospect's value.

The *Pro Football Weekly 2002 Draft Preview* is divided into scouting reports by position, preceded by a two-page Draft overview (which provides general commentary on the depth at each position). These individual reports are also made available on ESPN.com's special NFL Draft site. Nearly every

40 Joel Buchsbaum and the editors of *Pro Football Weekly*, *Pro Football Weekly 2002 Draft Preview* (Northbrook, IL: Pro Football Weekly 2002); Mel Kiper, *Mel Kiper Jr's 2002 Draft Report* (Jarrettsville, MD: Mel Kiper Enterprises 2002); *Sporting News Pro Football Draft Guide 2002* (St Louis, MO: Sporting News 2002).

41 Buchsbaum *et al.*, 2.

conceivable position is accounted for. The number of players considered runs from 2 (long snappers, whose sole job is to snap the ball to the punter) to 103 (wide receivers), but almost all the positions list at least 50 college prospects (in alphabetical order).

All players, regardless of their position, have their height and weight displayed prominently beneath their name. That these numbers are so prominently displayed suggests that they are to be read as key factors in the prospect's relative worth. This numerical delineation of the body's dimensions is followed by an assessment of the body's performance. Most of these prospects are described in short sketches that have brief subdivisions. The section titled 'Notes' highlights the players' accomplishments, such as college productivity, athletic versatility or durability. This information is sometimes related in short anecdotes, but the favourite means of communicating is by means of statistics. For example, Dougie Allen, a wide receiver prospect from the University of Kentucky is described as follows in the 'Notes' section:

High school sprinter. Lettered as a freshman in 1998, when he played in 11 games, started one and caught 13 passes for 102 yards. Played in only five games in '99 before hurting his right knee and having reconstructive surgery. But in those five games coming off the bench, caught 25–263 [25 catches for 263 yards]. Played in nine games in 2000 and caught 22–315–2 [22 catches for 315 yards and 2 touchdowns] before tearing a tendon in his left ankle. Stayed healthy in '01 and played in every game, but started just one. Ended season catching 26–283–0.⁴²

Following the 'Notes' are sections that detail a player's 'Positives' and 'Negatives'. These qualities usually make some mention of the prospect's body (if the body type conforms to the ideal for that position), quickness or strength, or knowledge of the position. This information is sometimes, but not usually, relayed through statistics.

The final part of the guide is entitled 'Player Printout'. This section, as the authors explain, assigns each player a grade on a nine-point scale. In this case, numbers are used to assess the athlete's likely productivity and hence his relative overall value. The grades take into account 'workouts up to and including the Indianapolis Scouting Combine', with the caveat: 'Late workouts and other information can change grades, sometimes dramatically.'⁴³ Each numerical ranking suggests a prediction of the player's potential. For instance, a grade of 8.00 to 9.00 indicates the authors' belief that the player is a 'Franchise player', while a grade of 5.10 to 5.49 suggests the authors' belief that the prospect 'Has a better than average chance to make an NFL roster'.⁴⁴ Using these grades, players are ranked against others

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

in their position, then ranked against all other prospects regardless of position.

Mel Kiper Jr's 2002 Draft Report was published a week later than usual because the NFL Combine was held later than in years past. In a section entitled 'From the Editor's Desk', Kiper explains that, in order for the ratings and analysis found in the *Draft Report* to be as up-to-date as possible, 'we had no choice but to push back our press date'.⁴⁵ He reminds his readers to 'make sure you check out ESPN.com every day to take advantage of my constant updates on the prospects'.⁴⁶ Like the *Pro Football Weekly 2002 Draft Preview*, Kiper's guide also provides individual sketches on a large number of prospects. Scouting reports are presented by position and, within each position, players are ranked. The top-ranked quarterback's summary appears first, followed by the second and so on. Each of these sketches highlights in bold-face type the prospect's name, height and weight, followed by the time the athlete took to run the forty-yard dash, followed finally by the player's overall grade, as designated by Kiper. The contents of the sketch also serve to enumerate the prospects. This can take the form of speculations about potential weight gain. For example, offensive tackle Jeff Hatch 'checked in at 296 pounds late this past season, but figures to top out anywhere from 315 to 320'.⁴⁷ The enumerative process might also take note of a player's speed, as it does in Kiper's assessment of cornerback Quentin Jammer: 'In high school, he ran 10.3 seconds in the 100 meters, and 21.5 in the 200 meters',⁴⁸ or it may highlight a prospect's statistical productivity as a college player: running back Leonard Henry 'finished with 1432 yards rushing, averaged 7.8 yards per carry and scored 16 touchdowns'.⁴⁹

Near the end of the guide, a position-by-position ranking is provided, supplying the name, height, weight, college, forty-yard dash time and player grade for all players receiving a grade of 6.0 or higher. Players are then ranked against one another regardless of position. A ranking, by position of players who will be eligible for the Draft in 2003 follows, with rankings for rising juniors and sophomores as well.

The *Sporting News Pro Football Draft Guide 2002* is compiled and written by a team that refers to itself collectively as 'The War Room'. The nod to the nickname for professional teams' scouting headquarters is meant to be taken as an emblem of tactical efficiency. As founder Gary Horton states: 'We're trying to run The War Room like an NFL scouting department . . . We want to be like the NFL's 33rd scouting department.'⁵⁰ Horton himself was a football scout for twenty years, and he and his staff claim to attend training camps

45 Kiper, 119.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 41.

48 Ibid., 69.

49 Ibid., 9.

50 *Sporting News*, 10.

and games in person as well as 'breaking down' film in an effort to get information on a player that is as complete as possible.

That information, predictably, includes heavy doses of enumeration. Like the other two guides, the *Sporting News Pro Football Draft Guide* divides its discussion of the prospects by position. Beneath each player's name is a listing of his vital statistics: height, weight, time in the forty-yard dash. Sections on each position include a box entitled 'Job Requirements' that lists the 'NFL optimum' height, weight and forty-yard dash time, and the 'NFL minimum' for those same measurements. Players are assigned numerical grades for the various skills they will be expected to perform in the NFL. For instance, wide receivers are assigned grades (on a ten-point scale) for 'hands', 'patterns', 'run after catch' and 'release'; while linebackers are assessed 'vs. inside run', 'vs. outside run', 'Blitz/coverage', 'Run/pass recognition' and 'Pursuit/tackling'.⁵¹

Race, power and the NFL

What is the purpose of such a prodigious assignment of numbers to nearly every conceivable aspect of the athletes in the Draft? On one level, the answer is straightforward. Enumeration makes manageable the enormous body of information collected on prospects. It supplies coaches, scouts and fans with a standardized and usefully condensed measurement that facilitates assessment. But what of the ideological uses of such practices? To understand the answer to this question, we must elaborate on the hierarchies that operate in the discourse of professional football.

Race is a crucial feature of the landscape of the contemporary game. In stark contrast to the general population, in which they make up less than 10 per cent, black men are plentiful in the labour force of the NFL. Almost 7 in 10 NFL players are black men. There are, of course, still white players, but they are outnumbered by Blacks at a rate of more than 2 to 1. These very unusual demographics of NFL athletes are rarely mentioned explicitly. Perhaps this is because of the uncomfortable and demanding work of coming to grips with the historical and cultural complexities of race, and because recognizing the continuing relevance of race in the United States is politically hazardous. Whatever the reasons, when the 'taboo' of race in athletics is addressed at all, it is usually done in the context of race-based 'scientific' explanations.⁵² But, however black the league may appear on the field, it would be a misnomer to call the NFL a black-controlled industry. Administrative and managerial control as well as ownership remain solidly

51 Ibid.

52 Jon Entine's bestseller, *Taboo: Why Black Athletes Dominate Sports and Why We're Afraid to Talk about It* (New York: Public Affairs 2001), is a good example of this kind of engagement with race and sport.

in the hands of Whites. While nearly two-thirds of players in the NFL are African-American, Blacks only hold 28 per cent of the assistant coaching positions. Further up the hierarchy, the personnel profile is even less diverse. Whites currently hold 30 of the 32 head coaching positions in the NFL. Every majority owner of an NFL franchise is white.⁵³ The disparity of opportunity that exists reflects the larger inequalities of contemporary American society. Of course, the labour force of professional football is not *all* black, and it is true that players participate with a measure of choice and are handsomely rewarded for doing so. Nevertheless, we would argue that, in the symbolic realm, the NFL's hierarchical structure plays an important role in legitimating the race- and gender-based hierarchies that dominate the larger culture.

A number of scholars have demonstrated how spectacular sport serves to elevate the status of both men and Whites in the face of increasing challenges to the authority of both. In their study of O. J. Simpson, Leola Johnson and David Roediger argue that Simpson's phenomenal crossover success (prior to his arrest) was due to the fact that he was able to appeal to a mainstream white audience by distancing himself from African-American political movements and advertising his 'middle-class' values and lifestyle, while displaying a set of physical skills (even in a car rental commercial!) that marked him as a 'real man'.⁵⁴ Simpson 'sacrificed his body' on the field and was described as 'the perfect gentleman' off the field, in spite of well-circulated rumours of infidelity and domestic abuse. He was manly, yet unthreatening to the white male audience for whom he seemed eager and happy to perform. Hence, male audiences could identify with him for his lifestyle and non-confrontational manner while at the same time admiring his feats of 'masculine' skill. Johnson and Roediger conclude that sports are in part 'a spectacle in which the male body and the White mind are at once exulted, and in which White men feel especially empowered to judge, bet on, [in the case of the NFL Draft, one might add, speculate on and commodify,] and vicariously identify with African Americans'.⁵⁵ The African-American professional combat-sports athlete, then, is marked with a double veil of difference. In addition to the colonized body that all non-white Americans possess, the athletic body is further colonized as a representative of hyper-masculinity. Repeated references to prospects as 'freaks' and 'monsters' suggests the othering of these athletes that is a product of this discourse.

In the mediated spectacle of the NFL Draft, audiences are encouraged to identify, not with the players, but with management. Fans are encouraged to assess the relative value of the prospects, and to assume the perspective of owners, general managers and scouts. For instance, viewers of the televised

53 Jon Saraceno, 'Keeping score', *USA Today*, 2 October 2002, 3C.

54 Leola Johnson and David Roediger, 'Hertz don't it? Becoming colorless and staying black in the crossover of O. J. Simpson', in Toni Morrison (ed.), *Birth of a Nation 'Hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O. J. Simpson Case* (New York: Pantheon 1997), 197–239.

55 *Ibid.*, 230.

Draft are encouraged to 'participate' by logging on to ESPN.com in order to cast votes for the player that the currently selecting team should choose. The voting is tracked continuously in a box to the left of the main screen. ESPN's website has also a more formal game for fans. By logging on to the site, participants can register their Draft forecast. Winners are announced on the site and are awarded prizes.

A number of authors have observed that narratives of sport often present technological, western capitalism as the apex of human civilization, and serve to legitimate and naturalize consumption.⁵⁶ The Draft is no exception. It is continually referred to in the media discourse as a 'speculation'. On Draft day, Madison Square Garden becomes a marketplace where masculine bodies are openly appraised, claimed and traded.

The cover of *ESPN: The Magazine's* April 2000 issue pictures three likely NFL Draft picks engulfed by what appears to be some sort of digital manifestation of data (presumably the vast amounts of information gathered on these players). The caption reads: 'Upside: The Hottest Picks on the Market: NFL Draft Preview'. Inside, the magazine expands on the theme; Luke Cyphers writes that 'these times love the NFL Draft'.

Makes sense. These times love investing and speculating in markets—and sports of course—and what is the Draft but a microcosm of all that? . . . Risk it all on one play[er] or trade down and hedge by drafting volume . . . Folks at E*Trade have nothing on the Draft Day traders in the league front office.⁵⁷

In this context, the use of statistics that marks the Draft serves to transform the mostly black prospects into commodities. The largely white, middle-class audiences are encouraged to use those statistics to compare prospects and determine their relative value.

Colour by numbers: the cultural politics of the NFL Draft

Susan Bordo posits that the western cultural emphasis on the dimensions of a woman's body speaks to a need to control and regulate women's physical and psychic presence in the public sphere.⁵⁸ Slenderness, she argues, is a cultural imperative for women because it disciplines women's bodies in order to render them 'docile'; the ideal of thinness reflects an ideology that works to contain woman's power by diminishing her physical presence.

56 Sut Jhally, 'Cultural studies and the sports/media complex', in Lawrence Wenner, *Media, Sports and Society* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage 1989); George Sage, *Power and Ideology in American Sport: A Critical Perspective* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics 1998).

57 Luke Cyphers, 'Hot startups', *ESPN: The Magazine*, 17 April 2000, 81.

58 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.

In parallel fashion, the enumeration of the male body in the discourses surrounding the NFL Draft reflects an ideology of gender that similarly defines the male form strictly in relation to physical space. By privileging the numerical logic that ranks these men according to their bodily dimensions—height, weight, girth and so on—and according to their ability to dominate space by leaping, running and catching, a taxonomy of masculinity is constructed that rests on quantification. In the structural logic of this taxonomy, male superiority hinges on achieving higher scores on specific measurement instruments. While these numbers afford an index of the athletes' potential to perform well in the game they seek to play, the numbers also frame ideal masculinity in these terms, since football players embody iconic masculinity in a society that interprets maleness in terms of physical strength and the potential to use force successfully.⁵⁹ The numbering schemes of the Draft offer a simple formula by which to distinguish victors from victims, achievers from failures, men from lesser men.

The numbers also invoke issues of power along other axes, especially in the context of *who* evaluates *whom* on the basis of these enumerative logics. In the Combine and the Draft, the athletes are objects of the gaze of wealthy white men. John Berger offered us a classic formulation: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.'⁶⁰ These relations of gazing, he contended, are indicative of relations of gendered power wherein the gazer holds power over the object of vision. The discourses of the NFL Draft disturb Berger's formulation a little, in that both gazers and objects of the gaze are male. Yet the relations of power he posited hold. In the Combine and the Draft, the gazers use numbers to evaluate those at whom they gaze. The system of numbers and its attendant meanings are formulated and deployed by the gazers. The numbers determine the future of the players, and the numbering system is a construct fabricated by the owners and managers who will select these players for their potential to increase the owners' wealth. The gazers are socially privileged in terms of economic status and race. As Bordo has noted: 'Social power [is] connected to the ability to control and manage the labor and resources of others.'⁶¹ In the mediated NFL Draft, readers who may be of widely varying social standing are encouraged to adopt the gaze of the owners; the numbers induce consent to the power order implicit in the Draft process. The numbering system of the Draft accords a great deal of social power to those who (literally) size up the draftees. Thus, the enumerative logics of the Draft reinscribe racial and class hierarchies.

The statistical construction of athletes' bodies in the discourses of the NFL Draft can thus be understood to be more than a simple formula for predicting athletic potential. The enumeration of the male form that is a

59 Katz.

60 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin 1987).

61 Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 192.

hallmark of the Draft offers a dense transfer point of ideology; in the Foucauldian formulation, it is (like any discourse) not innocent, but deeply imbricated in social relations of power. The numbers mask structures of racism and exploitation while normalizing a conception of masculinity that reasserts class dominance while controlling and managing the labour potential of the hyper-masculine physique. By constructing the male athlete's body in terms of numbers, the discourses of the Draft stabilize and sustain hegemonic masculinity via popular communication.

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