



MALMÖ HÖGSKOLA

Languages on this page:

ISSN 1652-7224 ::: Published 1 September, 2010

Printer-friendly version

[Read more about the sociology of sports at idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org)[Read more about doping at idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org)[Read more in English on idrottsforum.org](http://idrottsforum.org)

The Australian sports sociologist and historian Tara Magdalinski has a wide range of research interests. Her undergraduate and postgraduate studies were conducted at the University of Queensland in the School of Human Movement Studies, with a focus on sociological and historical aspects of sport. She eventually moved to Europe and has for some years worked at University College Dublin, where she is the Academic Program Director at the Centre for Sports Studies and lecturer at the School of Public Health, Physiotherapy & Population Science. Magdalinski has a series of anthology chapters and peer reviewed articles to her name, on various topics such as the Olympic mascots, the commercialization of the Olympics, and cricket in Australia, as well as texts that heralded her first post-doctoral monograph, *Sports, Technology & the Body: The Nature of Performance* (Routledge). We sent Magdalinski's book all the way to Australia to get it reviewed by Wendy Varney. As usual, Varney reads carefully and thoroughly, and her review addresses the book's most important features, such as the true essence of sporting achievements, the boundaries separating what's natural and unnatural about the sporting body, and the fine line between acceptable and unacceptable performance-enhancing technologies. Varney, however, would also have liked to read a fundamental discussion on the place of values in sports, and she questions Magdalinski's views on drugs in sport and in society.

Outperforming Bodies, Out There Performing

Wendy Varney

Institute of Environmental Studies, University of NSW, Sydney, Australia

*Tara Magdalinski***Sport, Technology and the Body:
The Nature of Performance**

187 pp, pb.

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge 2009

ISBN 978-0-415-37876-5

There is little doubt that the body is a complex entity, autonomous in so many ways and yet totally at the behest of a range of interpretations in others. Tara Magdalinski's fascinating book *Sport, Technology and the Body*, touches on a subject that has been widely written on of late, yet she goes the extra mile in much of her analysis. Her book explores sporting bodies through the lens of controversies about modifications and technological enhancements in pursuit of better performance.

Immediately this opens other questions: What is performance? Is it the prime focus of sport and should it be? What is nature? What bodily modifications should be allowed and which disallowed? Or should there be a "no holds barred"?

Some of these questions get answered very adequately, others less so, but all Magdalinski's discussions are interesting, probing and articulate.



She points out, for instance, that, “unlike theatrical or other artistic presentations, where the audience is aware that the actors in front of them are merely reciting a predetermined script, sports performances are thought to be more ‘real’ or ‘authentic’, an accurate reflection of the personal motivations and objectives of each participant” (p. 10). This is an intriguing observation, given the constructed nature of celebrityhood around many sports stars whose actions on the field and the court are very deliberately cultivated for effect and to mark their ‘persona.’ If actors have to work at making their performance seem authentic, many sports people simply work at making it part of their image.

Not that the line is easy to draw. If tennis players enjoy ‘spitting the dummy’ and acting like precocious spoilt brats on the courts to good effect, there is nothing to say that that behaviour won’t creep – or even rapidly trample – into their off-the-court behaviour.

But it is not such behaviour and its boundaries with which Magdalinski is primarily concerned. Rather she asks about the boundaries that separate what is seen to be natural performance from that which is seen to be tainted and ‘below the belt.’ She puts together a strong case that the boundaries are murky. Indeed they are and I’m not sure that anyone has suggested otherwise so, in this respect, I felt she had put up an ‘argument of straw’ which could be easily knocked down.

She knocks it down well, admittedly, pointing out the role of notions of purity and cleanliness and how these attach particularly to expectations about female sport and how they can also become intertwined with notions of nationhood. The idea of ‘fair play’ lends itself easily to the idea that getting external assistance from, say, drugs is not fair and leads to an uneven playing field. Of course, the playing field has seldom been even in sport and this is nowhere more evident than in the Olympics where big, rich, powerful countries who have large pools of talent, money and other resources, scoop up most of the medals. This is often after they have lured the best coaches and support staff to give their teams the best chance of winning and team members often train overseas in conditions that will give them the edge, with corporate sponsorship that frees them from much of the non-sport work they would otherwise have to do.

” *Surprisingly though, the other areas such as the vestibular system, auditive and tactile perception, which also may have an impact on movement acquisition, do not get the same attention and are just briefly mentioned.*

We should recognize these discrepancies, advantages and disadvantages, certainly, but does that mean that any advantage is a fair advantage? That is a separate question and Magdalinski tends to evade it. She points out many dilemmas and inconsistencies, such as between those drugs which are allowed and those which are not. I am not sure that the more rightful conclusion from her argument, however, might be that the list of allowed drugs needs a very thorough overhaul and will keep needing to be overhauled since obviously drugs come and go with great rapidity and research constantly throws new light on benefits, risks and other factors.

I would have liked Magdalinski to have been more explicit about values and to have perhaps answered whether she thinks there is a role for values in sport. No doubt values have very firmly embedded themselves in sport and those values have tended to change somewhat as money, celebrityhood and sponsors have come to play a greater role. It would be hard to envisage a moment at a 21st Century Olympic Games where an athlete would double back mid-race to help to check on another athlete who had fallen, as happened in the Melbourne Olympic Games when Ron Clarke fell in the final of the 1500 metres and John Landy went back to ensure he was alright. This gesture is widely celebrated – though of course it can afford to be because Landy, although initially overtaken by Clarke, made up the deficit and went on to win the race.

Landy of course put himself at this disadvantage and overcame it. The disadvantages commonly are more likely to come from elsewhere – from the ‘accepted’ disadvantages of being up against competitors with more resources, more support, better training, better equipment, etc. But then there are the disadvantages of being up against those competitors who might have taken performance-enhancing drugs. This is seen to be not just about fair play, according to Magdalinski, but is seen to disrupt the order and ‘true spirit’ of sport and to reduce the element of chance. She claims (p. 15) “Those who take a ‘chemical shortcut’ have their characters and morality questioned, are thought to lack discipline and courage, and are regarded as incapable of respecting ‘natural capacities and limitations’.”

Seen in the larger context of drugs in society and of social values, is this interpretation totally ridiculous? If sportspeople are role models for children, and it seems they are, then would it not be hypocritical to discourage children from partaking alcohol and drugs and from treating these cautiously when they come of age but then to celebrate drug-taking in sport? In Magdalinski’s defence, she does not appear to be arguing for the floodgates to open for drugs in sport, but nor does she seem to think of them as much of a problem beyond the murky boundaries that are necessarily set around them. Granted, she does open the book with stories of tragedies connected to sportspeople who took drugs – Zoe Warwick for instance. But I felt the issues were not resolved satisfactorily. Rather there was a critique of the objections to drugs in sport without constructing a model which would helpfully suggest just where the line should be drawn or perhaps without even concluding that a line needed to be drawn..


Having said that, many of Magdalinski's critiques are extraordinarily good and her analogies and analysis is often excellent. She succinctly cuts below the surface of our expectations of sport and the paradoxes that often arise in these expectations. She understands how health and morality intertwine and how bodies can take on another layer of these through gender. Only her discussion of the nature of nature was found wanting, seeming rather limp and divorced from broader discussions that have taken place with more fruitful results, mostly in the environmental philosophy literature.

One of the most interesting chapters is her expose of how the 'cleanup' of Homebush Bay, which was superficial and placed the Sydney Olympics atop a barely contained toxic waste dump, parallels the cleaning up of sports bodies in many respects, perhaps with more rhetoric than actual effect.

She also writes beautifully. Take this brief excerpt: "To many, the body is undeniably biological, rooted in the natural world and a product of organic processes. It is a fixed reality that finds its meaning within its fleshy depths?"

Perhaps that is the major thrust of Magdalinski's book, that we have placed so much more that is moral and cultural onto the body. Undoubtedly the body is a social construct, fulfilling multiple cultural roles and clamouring to meet varied and sometimes opposing expectations. However, the body is also a biological entity and, as such, the debate about drugs is reasonable, even if not always well reasoned. It is a debate worth having, and this book makes a very good contribution to it, but the contribution is somewhat incomplete, competently exposing an array of problems but seeming to suggest nothing in their place.

© **Wendy Varney 2010.**

 **Hitta bästa pris på boken hos Prispallen.se**

 **Kjøp boken fra Capris.no**

 **Sammenlign priser på bogen hos Pensum.dk**

 **Buy this book from Amazon.co.uk**

 **Buy this book from Amazon.com**