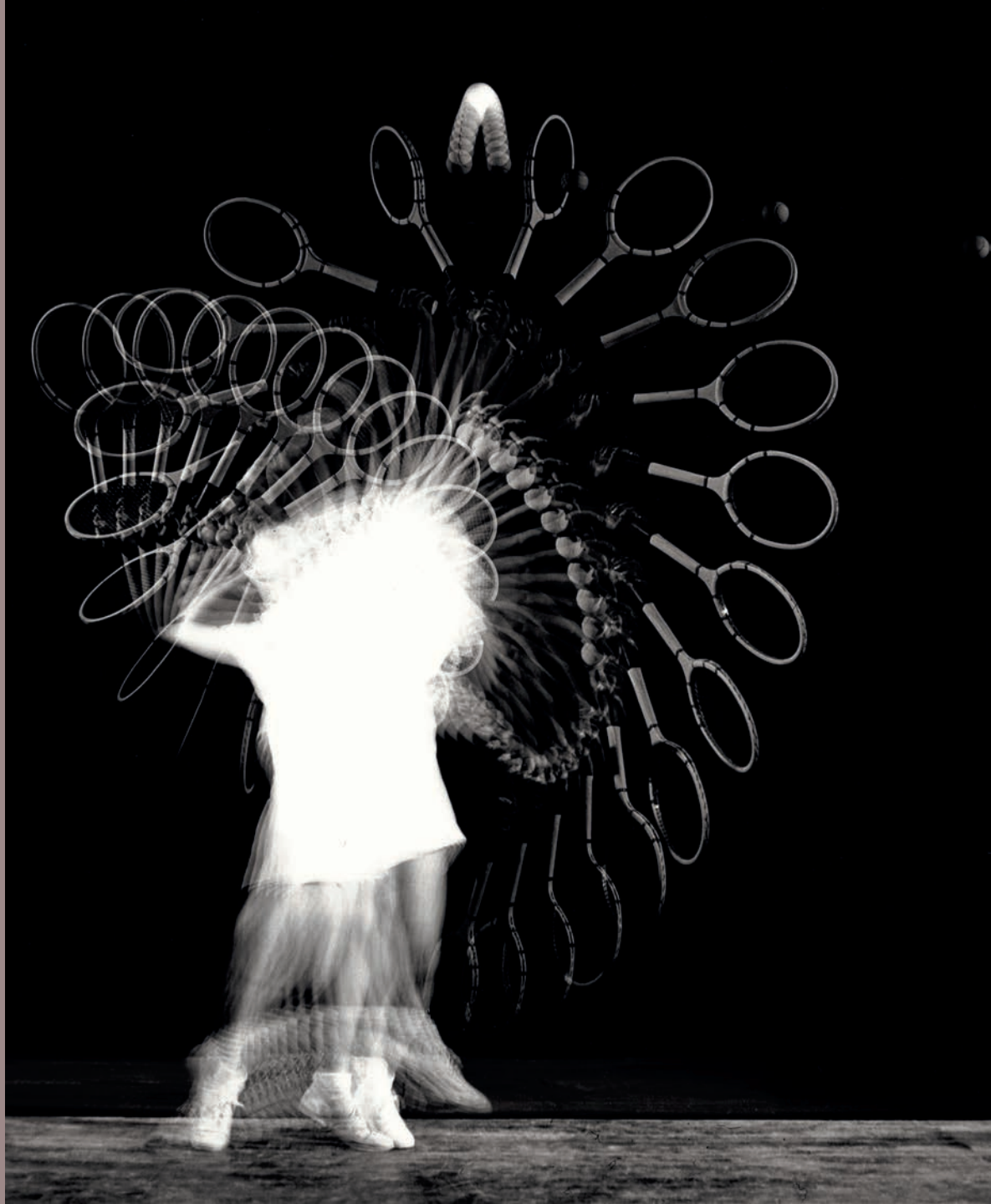


# SPORTS CULTURE

Gender, Belonging, and Nationhood



A SPACE *for* DIALOGUE 117

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



Sport has undoubtedly served many different functions historically and continues to reflect and shape society in the contemporary era . . . Put simply, sport is a vehicle, in many different ways, for the construction of individual, group, and national identities.

—Mike Cronin and David ,  
*Sporting Nationalisms*, pp. 1–2

*Sports Culture: Gender, Belonging, and Nationhood* explores how collective identity is constructed, imposed, and challenged through athletics. The selected artworks demonstrate these processes in various contexts within three broad but distinct categories: gender, nationality, and culture. Several objects, for example, demonstrate ways in which nation-states have utilized sports to assert government power and impose collective national identities, including in the Soviet Union and through 20th-century Native American boarding schools. As a female athlete myself, however, I am especially interested in the shifting and challenging relationship between sports and gender and will dedicate the space available to me here to comparing the roles and expectations of male and female athletes in light of the sexualization and heteronormative masculinity that permeate athletic spaces.

Pictured on the cover of this brochure, Gertrude “Gussie” Moran represents perhaps

the most famous case of sports sexualization of the 20th century. A magazine article from 1950 described Moran as “a good enough tennis player to win an occasional important match,” ignoring the fact she was the U.S. Women’s Indoor Singles Champion in 1949 and ranked 7th in the world. Instead of celebrating Moran’s athletic success, the article’s author focused on Moran’s lace panties. During the 1949 Wimbledon tournament, Gussie Moran’s lace panties became visible under her short tennis skirt as she moved around the court. The incident garnered Moran the nickname “Gorgeous Gussie,” and her position as an athlete quickly devolved into that of a sex symbol, with the article stating, “Whether Gussie wins or loses on the tennis court is a matter of supreme indifference to the people—mostly of the male persuasion—who watch her play.” Photographers would often lie on the ground, cameras angled upward, to catch low shots of Moran’s undergarments as she played.<sup>1</sup>

From a very different vantage point, Harold Eugene Edgerton’s photograph *Gussie Moran* draws attention to Moran’s identity as an athlete. His photograph blurs her face and body, and her lace panties are not visible. Instead, the image draws our eyes to the impressive intricacy and power of Moran’s racket moving through space. Without the title, the player’s identity is unknown. Edgerton’s decision to name Gussie Moran frames her as an athlete and not simply an object of the male gaze. Edgerton focuses on her actions rather than her body. Through Edgerton’s photograph, Gussie Moran reclaims agency and a sense of control.

Made thirteen years earlier, Jared French’s *Prize Fighter and His Lady* (left) illustrates the heteronormative sexual expectations of male athletes. The boxer sits at a table with a celebratory drink in hand and his arm draped around his female companion. He gazes directly at the viewer with a slightly smug smile on his face. The title frames the scene further—this is a crowned champion and “his lady,” the possessive language insinuating that the woman is this champion’s reward, objectifying her as a trophy or an object to be won. A woman in the background is the only

other figure included in the image, suggesting that the boxer's athletic prowess and success has perhaps drawn the attention of multiple admirers.

The character of the prize fighter presented here reflects the fact that hypermasculinity and the sexualization of male athletes manifests itself in a notably more positive light than does the sexuality of female athletes. Through this work, French clearly conveys the message that women were one of the most sought-after prizes for athletic men, correlating the male athlete's success and physical dominance with the number of women he could attract. The disparity with the story of Gussie Moran is clear—the femininity and sexualization of women in sports often strips them of their credibility and recognition as accomplished athletes. In contrast, the (hyper)masculinity and sexualization of male athletes situates them in positions of power and control.

Hypermasculinity also places constraints on male athleticism in the modern era, framing athletic spaces as centers of intensely heteronormative masculine culture. This tendency can be traced back to some societies in Antiquity where athletic competitions were closely associated with war and the demonstration of hierarchical power. In ancient Greece, however, homosociality and homosexuality were deeply intertwined with masculinity and athletics. The photograph *Sky #25* from *Gymnasts—NDGT (National Danish Gymnastic Team)* (right) taps into this classical notion of homoeroticism in sports while challenging the heteronormative masculinity often interwoven with sports culture. Titled *Sky #25*, the photograph evokes one of the four elements—air—by suspending the athletes in the sky, their defined muscles taut as they hold a stylized pose emulating Michaelangelo's famous scene between God and Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. Anderson & Low's decision to use gymnasts, the ideal athletes for such a difficult aerial pose, celebrates their athleticism and muscularity. At the same time, the pair's joint nudity and gaze into one another's eyes portrays a sense of masculinity, homosociality, and male sexualization that is very different from that of the fully clothed,



presumably straight, boxer in *Prize Fighter and His Lady*.

Hypermasculinity and sexualization have long been systematically conventionalized in athletics. As women entered this sphere, they encountered a male-dominated and regulated space with clearly defined expectations regarding the character of an athlete. In recent years, athletes have begun to directly confront the roles that have been imposed upon them, but underlying stereotypes remain. Sports have a great deal of power to shape an athlete's identity, but athletes can push back, challenging and redefining how sports and their participants are viewed. By asserting their own identities, athletes will perhaps one day be judged purely on their ability and character rather than on the imposed cultural expectations they fulfilled, exceeded, or defied.

Madysen Buchalski '24  
Conroy Intern

#### NOTE

1. Gabriel Prevor, "Gorgeous Gussie," *Hearst's International Combined with Cosmopolitan*, vol. 129, no. 4, (October 1950): 52-55, 117-118.

## CHECKLIST

Anderson & Low (Jonathan Anderson and Edwin Low), English, founded 1990, *Sky #25* from *Gymnasts—NDGT (National Danish Gymnastic Team)*, negative 2001, print 2005, gelatin silver print. Gift of Nancy and Thomas F. O'Neil III, Class of 1979; 2014.66.1.

Artist once known, Hopi / American, runner's plaque (awarded to Elmer Lomahaitewa), 1964, galleta grass (foundation), yucca fiber (weft), native dyes, clay, and coiling technique. Museum purchase; 164.42.15529.

Dmitri Baltermants, Russian (born Warsaw, Poland), 1912–1990, *Sports Parade, Red Square*, negative 1945, print 2003, gelatin silver print. Purchased through a gift from Harley and Stephen C. Osman, Class of 1956, Tuck 1957; PH.2003.56.845.

Harold Eugene Edgerton, American, 1903–1990, *Gussie Moran (Tennis)*, 1949, gelatin silver print. Gift of Barbara and Robert Levine, Class of 1954, Tuck 1955; PH.997.55.5.

Samuel D. Ehrhart, American, 1861–1937, *Newport*, 1898, pen and ink on illustration board. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth; 2015.42.29.

Jared French, American, 1905–1988, *Prize Fighter and His Lady*, 1936, etching on laid paper. Gift of Ilse Martha Bischoff; PR.950.32.8.

Bobby C. Martin, Muscogee (Creek) / American, born 1957, *In Pursuit of Civilization #4*, 2004, digital collage on paper. Purchased through the Hood Museum of Art Acquisitions Fund; PR.2004.64.

Louis Prang and Company, Boston, American, after Henry Sandham, Canadian, 1842–1910, *Lawn Tennis*, 1886, chromolithograph. Purchased through the Appleton 1794 Memorial Fund; PR.949.78.

Mother of Raphael Tortes, Luiseño / American, dates once known, trinket basket decorated with the initials R.T. and a figure of a baseball player, collected 1905 or 1907, grass, sumac, rush, and sea blight. Bequest of Frank C. and Clara G. Churchill; 46.17.9314.

Aaron Young, American, born 1972, *Freeformdome*, 2003, chromogenic color print. Anonymous gift; 2018.37.421.

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The exhibition *Sports Culture: Gender, Belonging, and Nationhood*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, March 9–May 4, 2024.

*A Space for Dialogue: Fresh Perspectives on the Permanent Collection from Dartmouth's Students*, founded with support from the Class of 1948, is made possible with generous endowments from the Class of 1967, Bonnie and Richard Reiss Jr. '66, and Pamela J. Joyner '79.

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Printed by Puritan

Cover image: Harold Eugene Edgerton, *Gussie Moran (Tennis)*, 1949.

Inside left: Jared French, *Prize Fighter and His Lady*, 1936.

Inside right: Anderson & Low (Jonathan Anderson and Edwin Low), *Sky #25* from *Gymnasts—NDGT (National Danish Gymnastic Team)*, 2001. © Anderson & Low. All Rights Reserved.

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