In this article, Jeffrey Segrave explores the rich and varied language used to describe sporting practices: “sportspeak,” as it is sometimes called. In particular, he looks at predominant types of metaphorical conventions—those of violence, those of sex, and those relating to machines. Violence in sport is not a sign of social degration, but one of social sublimation. Sports allow us to purge pent-up instincts that, if left undischarged, would work toward our own destruction. Sexual metaphors, especially in the more combative sports, seem to suggest homosexual play. But in male-dominated sports, the real combat is heterosexual and the sexual violence here is a violation of space and person, though in a controlled manner. Last, mechanistic metaphors abound. In spite of the dehumanization this suggests, Segrave’s view is that mechanistic metaphors are a sign of our attempts to control, even tame, nature. It is an expression of our desire for immortality.

What these metaphoric conventions show is that our use of language in sports reflects a preoccupation with control both over ourselves and over the circumstances surrounding our destiny. Sport stands as a monument that testifies on behalf of our denial of the ultimate triumph of nature over human effort. It is ultimately an expression of human will.

Questions for consideration: The model Segrave gives here is Freudian. We find, through inspection of metaphors, that what seems most vicious about sport is really a natural reflection of ourselves. Through controlled violence, we curb our naturally aggressive tendencies by offering them some outlet. Do you agree? Does Segrave too easily gloss over moral aspects of violent and sexual aggression in sport?
Numerous commentators have noted how the rhetoric of the playing field has infiltrated our national language system (e.g., Hardaway, 1976; Lipsyte, 1975; Palmatier & Ray, 1989). Sociologists in particular have paid considerable attention to the social and political salience of the sports metaphor (Balbus, 1975; Jansen & Sabo, 1994; Lipsky, 1970; Segrave, 1994; Walk, 1995). Moreover, the notion that sport itself is a particularly fitting metaphor for life is so common in America and American literature that it has become a part of our conventional wisdom. But just as the language of sport is used metaphorically in a variety of social discourses, so the language of sport is metaphorically constructed. And it is the language of sport that I am concerned with here—the patois, patter, and banter used daily by sports writers and sportscasters, sports analysts and sports fans, and even sportsmen and sportswomen themselves—a language that has variously been called sportspal, sportuguese, sporting lingo, and sporting lexicon.

It is a fascinating, indeed fabulous, language that has historically gained much of its appeal not on the basis of the dull habits of accuracy but largely on the basis of a picturesque, technicolor jargon popularized by the likes of Grantland Rice, Paul Gallico, Ring Lardner, and Damon Runyon during the 1920s, the so-called Golden Age of Sport. There are those who would argue that the sports pages offer some of the best-written, most lively, and most informative prose in the newspaper. There are also those no doubt who would agree with Lewis Gannett of the New York Herald Tribune that “most sports writers suffer from hyperthyroid congestion of adjectives and are dope fiends for forced similes and metaphors” (quoted in Smith, 1976, p. 9). In either case, it is clear that sportspal has developed a distinctive style that leans heavily on hyperbole, or what historian John Rickads Betts (1974) once called “the extremely dramatic, the grossly bombastic, and the spectacularly original” (p. 364). It is also a language laced with metaphor; and to study metaphor, as Lakoff and Turner (1989) argue, is “to be confronted with hidden aspects of one’s own mind and one’s own culture” (p. 214). To understand the power of metaphor is to understand how we shape our arguments, organize our perceptions, create our ideologies, control our feelings, and, in the end, construct our public and private selves. Our entire language system is, of course, metaphorical in nature. We cannot avoid the use of the metaphor and its consequences; we cannot, as Wittgenstein would say, escape the web of language.

I am concerned here, then, with the web of language woven by the language of sport itself, especially as it relies on metaphor, because every sport has its own distinctive language, based on its own metaphorical preferences. Within this language—both the technical jargon and the informal folk speech, the argot—the mythic dimensions and ontological significance of sport are revealed. I am concerned in particular with the language of sport as it relies on three main metaphorical conventions—namely, the conventions of violence, sex, and the machine. In other words, it seems to me that the language of sport is dominated by the language of violence, the language of sex, and the language of the machine. This is not to say that we do not use other metaphors in the language of sport. We do: Metaphors from the world of finance and art spring to mind. We often hear reference to an athletic move as a thing of beauty or a work of art, or we say that a successful athlete “really put it on the money”; but we talk more often about sport as a battleground (as we did in the televised production of this year’s Super Bowl), about teams as enemies, and about athletes as warriors, or ideological shock troops as Edwards (1980) once characterized them. And we are far more likely to describe an athlete as a well-honed performance machine than as a creative artist. In the end, I wish to argue, these linguistic predilections reveal a particularly striking component of our contemporary ontology, one that attests, I will argue, to our obsessive, if indeed not neurotic, preoccupation with control—control over ourselves and the circumstance in which we find ourselves; control, ultimately, over our lot in life.

By taking this approach, however, let me acknowledge from the very beginning that I tend toward a masculinist analysis of the language of sport, partly no doubt because I cannot escape my own gender construction but mainly because the vast majority of the language of sport is written or mediated by men and hence reflective of a male view of the world. The language of sport, like sport itself, is a male-dominated practice, one that in the end reaffirms male power and privilege.

The Language of Violence
First, and perhaps most strikingly, let me begin by noting that the language of sport relies heavily on the language of violence. As Tannenbaum and Noah (1959) write: “No one wins a game today. Teams rock, sock, roll, stomp, stagger, swamp, rout, decision, down, drop, eke out, topple, top, scalp, and trounce opponents, but no one wins a game” (p. 165). In the vernacular of the 1990s, teams also kill, murder, destroy, slaughter, and bury.
The full metaphorical richness of the language of violence is humorously revealed in a delightful spoof published by *The New Yorker* in 1958. The purpose of the editorial was to offer “some advice” to the San Francisco newspapers, ostensibly on the arrival of the newly acquired New York Giants, “about the science and art of baseball-headline verbs,” which “we have seen evolve from a simple matter of ‘WIN’ and ‘LOSE’ into a structure of periphrasis as complex as heraldry in feudalism’s decadence.” The general rule therefore was as follows:

Any three-run margin, *providing the winning team does not exceed ten*, may be described as vanquishing. If, however, the margin is a mere two runs and the losing is five or more, “OUTSLUG” is considered very tasty. You will notice, S. F., the trend called Mounting Polysyllabism, which culminates, at the altitude of double digits, in that trio of Latin-root rhymes, “ANNIHILATE,” “OBLITERATE,” and “HUMILIA TE.” E.g., “A’S ANNIHILATE O’S.” (“The Talk of the Town,” 1958, p. 21)

*Nor was the American predilection for mascots lost on The New Yorker:* Each Baltimore journal is restricted by secret covenant to one “BIRDS SOAR” every two weeks. Milwaukee, with a stronger team, is permitted twelve instances of “BRAVES CLAW” before the All-Star game. “TIGERS CLAW” and “CUBS LICK” tend to take care of themselves. As for you, San Francisco, the lack of any synonyms for “giant” briefer than “behemoth” and “Brobdingnagian,” together with the long-standing failure of New York’s own writers to figure our exactly what giants do (intimidate? stomp?), rather lets you out of the fun. In view of this, and in view of the team’s present surprising record, you may therefore write “GIANTS A-MAYS.” But don’t do it more than once. (“The Talk of the Town,” 1958, p. 21)

Mascots and team names are a prime example of how the language of violence has penetrated the language of sport. According to Franks (1982), the 10 most common mascots are Eagles, Tigers, Cougars, Bulldogs, Warriors, Lions, Panthers, Indians, Wildcats, and Bears—images that are typically perceived as savage, powerful, and wild. Mascots, of course, are selected precisely because of their coercive and predatory images: Attributes of violence, dominance, and power are privileged over other attributes such as compassion, cooperation, and individuality. Like sport itself, mascots and team names emphasize male qualities of physicality and aggression at the same time as they reflect a patriarchal and demeaning attitude toward women. To call a women’s team Cowboys or Tomcats—that is, to use a male mascot as a false generic—is to contribute to the invisibility and hence infe-
riority of women’s teams (Eitzen & Baca Zinn, 1989). To feminize symbols and mascots—that is, to call the Governors, the Lady Governors, or to feminize the Bears into the Teddy Bears or the Wildcats into the Wild Kittens—is to emphasize gender, not athletic ability (Fuller & Manning, 1987).

But the language of violence is most clearly crystallized in the language of football, a language that reflects the masculinist history of sport, a language, as a result, alive with military metaphor. Sportughese, in fact, is instrumental in bridging the gap between two institutions that promote masculine hegemony: After all, the language of football is the language of war. There are offensive and defensive lines, and air and ground attacks; we have bombs and blitzes, zones and flags, scouts and platoons; coaches are often referred to as generals and quarterbacks as field commanders. Roger Staubach, the Dallas Cowboy quarterback, for example, was affectionately known as Captain Combat. In particularly grueling contests, commentators often discuss the war going on in the trenches, and there is always the sudden death convention. Not long after the Persian Gulf war, Sports Illustrated ran a story revealingly entitled “Big D Day: The Dallas Cowboys Went on the Attack in the NFL Draft and Took All the Right Prisoners” (King, 1991), and Stephen Crane (1944) proclaimed in the Red Badge of Courage that he had learned all he knew about war from the football field. So loaded is football with war metaphors that, as Real (1975) notes:

Super Bowl coaches like Shula and Grant appear on television like field marshals directing troops trained in boot camp, aided by scouts, prepared for complex attack and defense maneuvers with the aid of sophisticated telephone, film, and other modern technology. In an enterprise in which strict disciplinarians like Vince Lombardi and Don Shula have created the powerful empires, the primer for coaches might be military manuals. (p. 37)

In fact, Woody Hayes, the notorious football coach at Ohio State, once explained his quarterback option play as if it had been drawn up by the Pentagon: “You know,” he said, “the most effective kind of warfare is siege. You have to attack on broad fronts. And that’s all the option is—attacking on a broad front. You know General Sherman ran an option through the south” (quoted in Ross, 1971, p. 35).

Of course, war metaphors are common to many other competitive sports, most of which make little or no effort to hide the frequent allusions to violence, aggression, and confrontation. But neither football in particular nor sport in general is war. The relationship may be intimate. Sport may well have
emerged from warrior activities, and it may well have been used—as it currently is under the ideology of character development—for developing moral qualities of body and soul. Certainly, both war and sport contain an element of dire struggle as well as the need for supreme organization, but sport is a sublimation of war, a ritualized form of violence that emerges, like religion and art, from the freedom from necessity. As Santayana (1894) once noted, sport is not fought for the sake of any further advantage. There is nothing to conquer or defend except the honor of success. War can become a luxury and flower into artistic forms, whenever the circumstances of life no longer drain all the energy native to the character. (p. 183)

In other words, sport is controlled violence; or to put it another way, sport is a ritualized form of self-control. As the cultural critic Christopher Lasch (1979) astutely recognized, the crisis in modern sport devolves not from the persistence of a martial ethic, the cult of victory, or our obsession with achievement, but from the collapse of conventions that once restrained rivalry and violence even as they glorified it.

The value of violence in sport, then, lies not in its expression but in its control; it is in fact only by controlling violence that sport sustains our interest and enlivens our attention. Sport detoxifies emotions and instincts that left unchecked would otherwise serve to our destruction, not our edification. Sport in this sense may well be one of our most important civilizing agents.

The Language of Sex

The language of sport is also infused with the language of sex. This has led at least one theorist, anthropologist Alan Dundes (1985), to offer a psychoanalytic explanation of football as “an unconscious homosexual struggle for supremacy” (p. 119):

The offensive team may try to mount a “drive” in order to “penetrate” the other team’s territory. A ball carrier might go “up the middle” or he might “go through the hole”. . . . The defense is equally determined to “close the hole.” Linemen may encourage each other to “stick it to ‘em”. . . . By the end of the game, one of the teams is “on top,” namely the one which has “scored” most by getting into the other team’s “end zone.” The losing team, if the scoring differential is great, may be said to have been “creamed.” (Dundes, 1978, pp. 83–85)

Nor is the underlying homosexual paradigm limited to football. Dundes (1985) also notes the homosexual connotations of a number of basketball metaphors, including dribble, shoot, back door, rim shot, swish, slam dunk,
spike, stuff, lay-up, and lay-in. Such tropes suggest to Dundes that competitive male team sports, in particular, embody ritualized homosexual combat. If such be the case, then the greatest irony of all for gay men in sport is that being gay and athletic is not a contradiction, and the intricate ways in which gay athletes attempt to manipulate appearances and reality for the purposes of appearing straight are unnecessary (see Pronger, 1990).

But the truth of the matter is that sex metaphors in sport derive from and refer to heterosexual relations, and a patriarchal heterosexuality at that. After all, the default assumption is that virtually everyone in sport is heterosexual: Otherwise, why else segregate locker rooms? But as a result, the language of sport becomes another one of a variety of techniques and cultural practices whereby women are subordinated and inferiorized to men in a complex semiotic that in the end constitutes male power and privilege. The use of sex metaphors in sportspike linguistically legitimizes the use of physical force and strength. Words like penetrate, drive, and score have the effect of reducing both the athletic contest and sexual relations to the level of a technical problem, not a problem in human relations and human morality. As Sabo (1994) notes, sexual relations become “games in which women are seen as opponents, his scoring means her defeat” (p. 38).

But like war and sport, sex, too, may be regarded as a stylized form of violent behavior in which one individual physically violates the space and sanctity of the other. But as in sport, and unlike war, the violation of space and person is agreed upon. It is a mutually accepted—indeed, even contrived and desired—violation that serves to morally enlighten and edify the individuals involved. In fact, it is the controlled nature of the violent behavior in sport and sex that allows both to develop in distinctly aesthetic ways. As Kaelin (1968) argues:

Not even the bad joke of referring to lovemaking as America’s most popular indoor sport could make the comparison profitable. More to the point, however, is the manner in which the creation and release of psychic tension becomes qualitatively one; or, to put the matter in another way, how man’s need for violent activity is expressed in a context in which the partner is not destroyed, but edified in and through the experience. (p. 21)

**THE LANGUAGE OF THE MACHINE**

Given the nature and trends of the 20th century, it is perhaps not unsurprising to also find the language of the machine deeply entrenched in the language of
sport. Athletes rev up, burn up the track, work well, produce the goods, and turn out the results. When athletes break down, their machine seizes up or they run out of steam or, more in keeping with the current era, they run out of gas. A successful team is like a well-oiled machine, and athletes themselves are sometimes just cogs in a machine. Adorno and Horkheimer (1971) have noted how the “oarsmen, who cannot speak to one another, are each of them yoked in the same rhythm as the modern worker in a factory” (p. 55). Writing in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Casting offers a particularly striking example of the machine metaphor in her description of the East German handball team:

“Every cog appears to fit in perfectly with the others. Rarely can the comparison of the sports team with a machine have been more accurate: the E. German team is like a steam-roller made up of tireless human robots capable of keeping up the same pace for an hour, physically and mentally cast in the same mold: cast-iron morale, steely nerves and brazen muscles. It would be almost true to speak of a team of steel-workers. (quoted in Brohm, 1978, p. 30)”

The language of the machine, like the language of violence and sex, also tends to reflect a male view of the world; impersonal and technical, with a focus on the “other.” No wonder at the height of the Cold War we typically and easily characterized the U.S.S.R. Olympic teams as “the Soviet machine” and their athletes as robots, pharmacologically created automatons and decidedly unfeminine. Maybe we need our athletic rivals to be mechanized because machines can be unplugged, and because other more compassionate and humane explanations are more frightening or more demanding. It is particularly easy for men to construct and accept an us-versus-them mentality.

The language of the machine is also, of course, the language of control, not control of the emotions or of the instincts—in short, not control of the self—but control of the environment. Our obsession with machines and technology is after all merely another one of our futile efforts to act upon nature, to tame nature, another one of our efforts to bend an otherwise inert environment to the service of our will. We change nature for our pleasure and satisfaction. Even our arenas and stadiums offer us a tidy microcosm in an otherwise opaque and confused reality, “nature humanized” as Heinegg (1976, p. 154) nicely puts it. So the machine and all that it can master serves as an expression of our efforts to enlarge our human powers of sensation and action.
By likening athletes to machines and the results of the athletic endeavor to productivity, we seek to attain immortality. But in so doing, we depersonalize the athlete, both male and female. No wonder we harbor such ambivalence toward the machine analogy and the technologically created athlete. Even though to treat one’s body as if it were a machine is to enter into the spirit of the age, within this model production replaces process, performance supersedes effort, ends replace means, and machine replaces athlete; but nature is controlled and mortality is vanquished.

**The Language of Life and Death**

To some the language of the machine in the context of sport is the ultimate language of violence, even the language of death. F. T. Marinetti, the most significant theorist of futurism, worshipped both the athlete and the machine. In Marinetti’s masculinist fantasies—fantasies in which “wings are asleep in the flesh of man”—the fully technologized athlete of the future appears in nascent form as a “nonhuman and mechanical being, constructed for an omnipresent velocity, and he will be naturally cruel, omniscient, and combative” (in Flint, 1972, p. 91). This sort of athletic Nietzscheanism also appears in the paintings of Lothar Bechstein (see his *Discus Thrower*) and Albert Janesch (see his *Water Sports*), the sculptures of Joseph Thorak (see his *Comradery*), and in the performance psychologies of East European coaches and sport technocrats, and it crystallizes a tendency toward the utopia of the body-machine, a conservative utopia in which the physique of the athlete is fully mechanized and the psyche is completely eliminated. The language of sport incorporates the athlete-machine synthesis because it is, of course, a modernism; contemporary athletic “training,” writes Ellul (1954), “turns men into efficient machines who know no other joy than the grim satisfaction of mastering and exploiting their own bodies” (p. 347). It is also a conception that too easily reminds us of the fantastic ideologies of those Fascists who saw the ultimate glorification of men as mechanized bodies in which both the athlete and the machine were “one of war and of sexuality” (Theweleit, 1989, p. 536). Control in this case becomes repression.

And once again, the thanatological-machinist references in the language of sport are reflective of a male perspective. As Stillion (1985) reminds us, women tend to occupy the middle ground between life and death: In myth, they both give and take life. “Thine it is to give and take life from mortal men,” wrote Homer (quoted in Harrison, 1938, p. 4). For men, on the other hand, the issue of death is less complex and sinister: Confrontations with
death are violent and impersonal, often linked to issues of courage and patriotism. For men, heroism and death are concurrent themes. Men stoically march off to war, or to “the game”; women weep or cheer.

But the language of sport is not only the language of violence and death. It is also the language of life, and I do not mean simplistically and superficially that sportspeak borrows from all areas of our national language system. I mean that sportspeak at a deeper and certainly more profound level offers us fascinating glimpses of an important ontological sort. Consider, for example, the distinction between playing and being in baseball. Fielders merely play positions, but the batter is at bat and the pitcher pitches or is on the mound. This type of language seems to reaffirm life. It would seem absurd to talk of Kirby Puckett playing the batter for the Minnesota Twins or Roger Clemens playing pitcher for the Red Sox. The more active the role in baseball, the more the players are what they do: “Playing” is reserved for the more passive, defensive roles. The proactive roles instantiate being. The language of being rather than playing also characterizes proximity to home; after all, stranded batters are said to die on base.

**Conclusion**

So the language of sport, sportspeak, is about life and death; or perhaps I should say, metaphorically, the language of sport is a matter of life and death. As Ross (1971) so eloquently noted, the essence of the life and death issue is crystalized in the sports of baseball and football. Baseball, Ross argues, is a pastoral sport, played in a park, in the spring, the time of birth, renewal, and promise. Football is more sensational, heroic, and urbane; it is played on a gridiron, in the gloom of winter, the time of death and decay. It is, of course, a well-known portrayal of the mythic significance of sport, a mythic representation that harkens us back to the genesis of sport as a component of various fertility cults whose rituals and ceremonies honored and conventionalized a male-dominated social and political order. Even the Olympic Games emerged in conjunction with the fertility rites of the agrarian god Pelops. But there is more to it than simply a matter of life and death, or a matter of gender.

The language of sport reflects our efforts to control matters of life and death—in short, to control our fate. Sport is a social drama in Turner’s (1974) sense, but it is also a cultural drama, and it demonstrates how a group draws on rituals and symbols as well as language to face a crisis, the ultimate crisis of its existentiale. Humans have forever been chafed over their power-
lessness—powerlessness over themselves and their environment, and particularly over their mortality. We are typically and easily insulted by the final triumph of nature over culture, and seeking to develop concepts that might stay our sentence, we cling to our cultural constructions like sport, a no more or less thinly veiled quest for existential control than any other cultural rite. In the end, however, as Euripides so well understood, questions of control, power, and supremacy are relevant, and the language of sport in all its slangy and facetious style offers us a fascinating window into the very soul of our existence.

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