



Sport and Gender

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TOBY MILLER: Hi, my name's Toby Miller. [Prof. Toby Miller, Professor of Media & Cultural Studies] I'm what you might call a professor at large in that I work at a number of universities in Cardiff, in London, in Columbia, and in Australia. And I'm here to talk to you about sport and gender. We're going to do a case study of some interesting figures

TOBY MILLER [continued]: and histories and issues that arise from the intersection of these two fascinating concepts. [Dennis Rodman]

TOBY MILLER: Sport and gender are inextricably interlinked. They connect. They go together like sport and media or sport and fun. Because some of the ways in which we define ourselves as men and women, as boys and girls, are determined by and express themselves on the sporting field or in our consumption of sports media.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: And what I'm interested in doing today is looking at some limit cases, some extreme examples, where issues of sport and gender come together. Sometimes when we look at these limit cases, or extreme examples, we are at the very fault lines of social identity. [Social identity] And when we can understand what we think of as normal and where normal comes from. ['Normal']

TOBY MILLER [continued]: One of the first instances I want to look at is that of Dennis Rodman. Dennis Rodman, a champion defensive rebounder in the National Basketball Association in the 1990s. He won NBA rings with both the Detroit Pistons and the Chicago Bulls. He was in a very unglamorous role in the NBA,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: but, outside the NBA, he rubbed up against many of the norms and the expectations of professional sports in the United States, but elsewhere as well. A 6 foot 9 rough and tough man on the court with a rough and tough urban background who talked about feeling desire for men as well as women, who frequently wore make up, who colored his hair, who

TOBY MILLER [continued]: was routinely depicted in women's clothing, who talked about having had a sexual relationship with Madonna, but being quite interested in the possibility, on a kind of complex spectrum of identity, of sexual relations with men. He even famously, in a major tournament, unsettled one of his opponents by talking

TOBY MILLER [continued]: about fancying this guy. So Rodman, who, as far as he's let us know, is somebody who is basically involved in heterosexual loving activity, is somebody who's prepared to push the gender norms-- a remarkable thing for a professional sports person to do. So when you see Dennis Rodman, 6 foot 9 defensive rebounder,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: winner of many NBA rings, dressed up in makeup, dressed up as a woman, talking about seeing sexuality on a continuum, you're seeing something that confronts the norms, the heterosexual, straight world of sports, and associates queer or different sexuality with someone far away from the mainstream

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of the rough and tumble of the court on which he's been so successful. Rodman is one of the limit case people who challenges us to rethink what we mean when we talk about sport and gender. [OJ Simpson]

TOBY MILLER: One of the key issues that's arisen, especially in the last 20 years, in the arena of sport and gender is the question of male violence towards women. [Male violence towards women] We've had numerous scandals across all sorts of sports where it's clear that elite sportsman engage in domestic and other forms of violence. They're not alone in this.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: Sadly, domestic violence is a problem across societies, across professions. Sexual violence in general is. A spectacular case that caught much of the world's imagination was OJ Simpson 20 years ago. Now OJ Simpson was a black man from a very deprived childhood

TOBY MILLER [continued]: who became a college star in football and then in the National Football League as a professional. He was also, in conventional heterosexual terms, a very beautiful man who went on to have a career as a movie actor, as a television host, and as a pitch man for various products in television commercials

TOBY MILLER [continued]: and as a commentator. But 20 years ago, he was arrested and charged with the murder of his ex-wife and a friend of hers. And, famously, he went from being somebody who was on the cover of magazines as this emblem of black beauty to being on the cover of magazines in mug shots. Most notoriously, Time magazine depicted him blacked up,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: by which I mean, in the front cover that they dedicated to his mug shot after his arrest, they made him look blacker than his original photograph did and that in fact he was in public. Now Simpson was exonerated from those felony charges. He got off. But later, in a civil suit which had a lower

TOBY MILLER [continued]: test of culpability, he was found liable for the deaths of these people and had to pay money to their relatives. He also went on, later, in fact, to be incarcerated as a consequence of different felony convictions. And so his story very much encapsulates the tragedy of black masculinity in the mythology of US life, i.e.,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: To come from intense poverty and discrimination, to make it in a white man's world, to be successful, to be greatly loved, and then, suddenly, to crash down, to crash and burn. And that's not just a story about blackness, that's a story about maleness and sports,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: where there is a peak that happens early in life, and then later on, and later on can be in your late 20s, a trajectory normally downwards towards impoverishment, towards low social standing, towards physical disability, Simpson has plenty of those, and away from the bright lights

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of narcissistic day that make men in sports objects of adoration. [Mike Tyson]

TOBY MILLER: This question of male violence and its relationship to sports is well expressed in the area of boxing, sometimes called the sweet science for various strange reasons-- to me quite obscure, I have to admit. Boxing is one of those things that you would expect to be illegal given the damage it can do.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: We have several cases, some would call it a chronic problem, of male boxers suffering brain injuries as a consequence of the many hits to the head that they received during their professions. And probably the most extraordinary example of this, the most notorious, most infamous, example of male boxing in the history of the world

TOBY MILLER [continued]: is that of Mike Tyson. 30 years ago, 1985, he became world champion. People predicted that, at 20 years of age, he would go on to have a glittering career, perhaps remain unbeaten for a decade or more. In fact, after five years of pulverizing every opponent he encountered, the temptations, the pleasures, of life

TOBY MILLER [continued]: away from the training gym overcame him. He put on weight, lost some of his reflexes, lost his title. And in the time since, in the 25 years now since he was world champion, we have seen a constant series of comebacks, sometimes in the ring, sometimes in theater,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: sometimes on television, and so on, where he's tried to recreate his image and has always fallen again. And that narrative of crisis, of falling, is very much one of the boxer who goes down for the count. That's Mike Tyson's story, and sexuality is a crucial part of it. Famously, Mike Tyson was convicted

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of raping a woman. [Convicted of rape] Famously, Mike Tyson was denied a visa to come to Britain because of this. And Tyson, perhaps most notorious of all, bit off part of the ear of Evander Holyfield, one of his opponents during one of his many comebacks. And then there was a narrative of drug use, of losing all his money, of conversion to Islam,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of discovering a new Pacific self, of being a keeper of birds and a lover of

wildlife, of becoming a vegetarian and then a vegan, of a new renewed gentle masculinity. [Gentle masculinity] But throughout this narrative, Tyson would forever fall back into his old ways

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of domestic violence, of the wrong kind of violence in the ring, of drug use, of an incapacity to control himself. Mike Tyson brings together so many of the extraordinary contradictions of sport and gender. Most of all, the realization that

TOBY MILLER [continued]: for every boxer who is triumphant, wears the belt, shows off the body, has this extraordinary masculinity that is iconic, there is the boxer who loses the belt, who falls to his knees, who is decrepit, decaying, and corrupt. [Male body at its most extreme] Some of this is about the notion of the male body at its most extreme,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: fighting legally, legitimately in sports, and yet out of control that so often is a way of codifying and attempting to control and criticize black masculinity. But it's not only that. It's also an example of where sport and gender intersect in their most complex forms.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: Here are these almost completely naked men, they're wearing shorts, they're wearing shoes, but normally nothing else, exposed to one another, offering and countering and taking punches for 15 rounds of three minutes each, seeking to do damage most of all to the head area. This, in a sense, is saying your brain is what I wish to attack,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: your heart is what I wish to compromise, and your body is what I wish to diminish. It's easy to cast Mike Tyson as a victim, somebody from an impoverished background, impecunious for many years, suddenly famous, and then diminished, reduced to nothing. But in fact, of course, he's an agent of his own destiny

TOBY MILLER [continued]: who has a certain amount of control over what he does, and he's been a very successful media manipulator. You can watch him on talk shows making his point. You can see him chatting to Spike Lee about keeping doves, about using the media. You can see him in theater making his case for how he lives and why he lives. You can see him writing little stories.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: You can go on YouTube. There is Mike Tyson reading stories to children. So he is not just a victim of the tragedy of the story of the boxer or the tragedy of the black man. He is a person who manages to convey his own narrative, his own story, flawed as it may be.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: He is also somebody with control of his destiny. He's an intelligent, if uneducated, guy who knows how central the media are to his future survival. Somebody who's gone from being immensely wealthy and gifted to somebody who is immensely indebted and without a means of making money.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: So the media, which once helped to make him famous and make him wealthy, now become his attempted way back into prosperity and legitimacy. [Ben Johnson]

TOBY MILLER: The Olympics are probably the site where we see the greatest array of athletics, swimming and so on, and also where we see men and women competing and given roughly the same amount of attention from the mainstream media other than in Islamic countries where women are often excluded completely from coverage. Now, in the case of Ben Johnson, we

TOBY MILLER [continued]: can see some fascinating issues of sport and gender rubbing together in media coverage. Johnson was a Canadian sprinter who, initially, was awarded the gold medal for winning the 100 meters dash or sprint at the 1988 Olympic games in Seoul, the summer Olympics. Johnson, who hailed originally from the Caribbean,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: had moved to Canada, and then went on to represent the country and take the gold-- extraordinary run, 9.79 seconds. And commentators, live across the world, were saying, I can't believe what I've just seen. He was so quick. He was also big, muscular, powerful, and his eyes seemed to be goggling almost out of his head. So all sorts of racist cliches about the threat

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of the black male body expressing itself were alive and kicking. But three days

later, the gold medal was taken away from him because he was found to have used performance enhancing drops. Now, years later, it transpired that many other contestants in that race had done exactly the same thing. But for the moment, what we knew was that Ben Johnson

TOBY MILLER [continued]: had transgressed. What was his alibi for using this drug? Well, remember we're talking about a black man, eyes bulging, body at the very limits of its capacities, hurtling across the line, rather similar to all kinds of rape fantasies about the black man transgressing sexually. His alibi for taking the drug that he

TOBY MILLER [continued]: had used to enhance his performance was that he needed this pharmaceutical substance to counter a sexually transmitted disease from which he suffered. So the idea of the excessive black man with his excessive sexuality, his excessive body that he cannot control, was amplified several times over. Johnson was banned from the sport for many years,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: lost the sponsorships that he'd been given as a consequence of his earlier successes, and got to the point where he was, in his comeback attempts, constantly being tested for drug use and was suspended again and ended up in the extraordinarily demeaning situation of running professionally against riders on horseback

TOBY MILLER [continued]: to see who was faster. This brings us back to, again, the, if you like, encrusted cultural media understanding of the black man as not human, as reduced, diminished to the status of our fellow animals. Ben Johnson, not allowed to race against other men,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: condemned to race against other animals. This is, in a sense, the degrading of black masculinity, the association of black maleness with being an animal. Now, of course, we are all animals but not in the sense that a horse is an animal. And that degrading, that dehumanizing,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: that was done from the moment of the first media coverage of his transgression all the way through to media discussion of his racing against horses is the tragedy of the decline and fall of a black male figure. [Magic Johnson]

TOBY MILLER: I'd like to turn now back to the National Basketball Association, which was where Dennis Rodman plied his trade, and look at a story that is not about the tragedy of black masculinity, as was the case with OJ Simpson, Mike Tyson, and Ben Johnson, but the triumph of black masculinity in the face of adversity, specifically

TOBY MILLER [continued]: the instance of "Magic" Earvin Johnson. Magic Johnson, one of the all time greatest players in the history of the NBA, and now a very successful businessman in Los Angeles where he owns a chain of movie theaters and is also involved in the ownership of the Los Angeles, the basketball team for which he played

TOBY MILLER [continued]: in their halcyon days, and also involved in the Los Angeles Dodgers, a major league baseball franchise. It's possible to tell a story of Magic Johnson that is unfettered success-- a brilliant hoops career, a brilliant business career, a major media

TOBY MILLER [continued]: presence as a personality. But there is a trauma, a tragedy, relating to sexuality that, in a sense, bifurcates his career because towards the end of his many championships, in 1991, it was disclosed that Earvin "Magic" Johnson was HIV positive. This led to an immediate sexual and moral panic.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: How did he contract this disorder? Was he gay? Were other players gay? What was going to happen to his wife and unborn child? In the next year, he played for the United States at the Barcelona Olympics in their "dream team" the first time that the pros were able to play in the Olympics with Michael Jordan, Larry

TOBY MILLER [continued]: Bird, and so on. The Austrian Olympic team threatened not to play against him because they were afraid. One of his teammates didn't want to play with him. He returned in the NBA the next year, and there were also anxieties. So all of this had to be managed in some media way. What could he do to remain the figure, the symbol,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of beauty, intelligence, articulacy, and achievement that he had embodied? And, of course, has continued to embody because his health has remained okay, his wife and child are fine, and, as I indicated, he's a spectacularly successful businessman. But there had to be away, in the media narrative that he and the Lakers spun, to explain

TOBY MILLER [continued]: how he contracted this disease. How was it explained? It was explained in ways that demean women, because he said, well, when I came to LA in the '80s, thousands of women wanted to go to bed with me. They all wanted a piece of me. I gave in to their whiles. I guess one of them must've been infected, and that's how I got it.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: There could not have been homosexuality. Who knows? Who cares? Say aye. But why did it have to be the fault of women and their supposedly rapacious desire for the black man that caused this difficulty for him? That was the preferred media narrative. He was still the black stud of the conventions of racism

TOBY MILLER [continued]: and sexism, and he was a victim of a woman or women who perhaps held back from him their own infection and where there was unsafe sex between them. So here, as a means of explaining away this tragic experience of a disease, we have a misogynistic blaming of women

TOBY MILLER [continued]: whose apparently rapacious desire for the beautiful black body places the black man at risk. And this is a theme that applies not only to Magic Johnson and HIV. It applies right across the way in which many, many sporting codes, sporting activities, regard the threat of women.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: So you get seminars for the National Football League, for people in rugby league in Australia, for people in the English Premier League in the UK, where players are warned about women who are "on the make," who want to sleep with them in order to boast about their prowess, in order, potentially, to get pregnant and then be able to claim the need for finance

TOBY MILLER [continued]: to support her child. This blaming of women, and the idea of the vulnerable, desirable, male body, is a recurring theme in the way in which we talk about sport and gender. And it's tragic that a wonderful story of the success and triumph of Magic Johnson in sports and business

TOBY MILLER [continued]: and in health gets brokered through this misogynistic media narrative, and also, sadly, that is utterly typical of the way in which gender relations get handled in dominant media stories. [Pat Tillman]

TOBY MILLER: I'm going to talk now about Pat Tillman, a tragic figure in many ways, a famous college football player United States who went on to the National Football League, and who decided, in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 that he wanted to forsake this glittering career with many prizes,

TOBY MILLER [continued]: much money, massive media attention, an iconic stature within US public life, in favor of military service. He subsequently lost his life in Afghanistan where he went and fought alongside his brother who, we're pleased to say survived, and immediately became another kind of icon.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: ESPN, the big, Disney owned national and international sports cable network, covered his funeral. Senator John McCain, who went on to become Republican nominee for the presidency in 2008, and who was himself a veteran of Vietnam War who had suffered torture, gave a eulogy though he'd not met him.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: He was on the cover of Sports Illustrated, the top media magazine of the industry in the United States. His name was on billboards. He was a pinup boy, a poster boy, for pro-war forces in the US, particularly the Fox News Network and other cheerleaders for the US invasion

TOBY MILLER [continued]: of Afghanistan. General Stanley McChrystal, who was in charge of the US military in Afghanistan, signed off on the award of the medal to Tillman based on the understanding that he had lost his life as a consequence of attacking fire from the enemy.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: There were just a few problems with this story. First of all, he, like his brother who accompanied him into the theater of war, had become a skeptic about the US role in Afghanistan.

[Noam Chomsky] Much influenced by the writings of Professor Noam Chomsky, a noted scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Pat Tillman had written to Chomsky and arranged to meet with him to talk

TOBY MILLER [continued]: about this weighty skeptic's negative views of US militarism in Afghanistan on his return from theater. Next problem-- he had not, as in the citation that was granted along with his medal, been involved in a firefight with Afghan opponents. In fact, he had died from what is called "friendly fire."

TOBY MILLER [continued]: [Died from 'friendly fire'] His own side had killed him and also an Afghan, "never given a name," with whom he was at the time. And the next problem was that his brother, also in country as I said, and his mother, all the members of his family, were denied the truth of this by the State Department, the White House, the Pentagon, and all those

TOBY MILLER [continued]: involved because there was such investment not only by the media, but by the government itself, in a particular vision of Pat Tillman as an All-American male hero, the shedding of whose blood justified the entire campaign. As a sporting hero, he became a military hero. In death, he managed to represent

TOBY MILLER [continued]: the entirety of the country because of his gender, perhaps because of his race, and because of his sporting trajectory. But the lie that underpinned this was so big, so deep that it ran right across US society. Pat Tillman was an icon of US masculinity both as a tough, rugged football player

TOBY MILLER [continued]: and as a victim of the war. ['Ultimate patriot'] He was described by the media as the "ultimate patriot," and when the reality came out that he had not died as a consequence of action by the enemy but through friendly fire, that he was an opponent of the war, a skeptic about what he himself was doing, and that he and his family had been lied to by the senior

TOBY MILLER [continued]: echelons in the State Department, in the Pentagon, and in the White House, media coverage saw a vast array of commentators saying, he's an All-American man. This can't be true. The "this" that couldn't be true was that Pat Tillman was a skeptic about the war, was killed by friendly fire, and was backed up

TOBY MILLER [continued]: to honor his memory by his family's search for truth. This is an example where the tragedy of the military, the tragedy of one young man's life, the tragedy of an ideology of masculinity and patriotism, run up against material reality. There were two material realities.

TOBY MILLER [continued]: One was Pat Tillman coming to a recognition of the absurdity in his eyes of the US military's role in Afghanistan, and the second material reality was the tragedy of his death and the subsequent denial of his true legacy by the mainstream media. He was not the kind of American man they wanted him to be.