

## WRESTLING WITH MASCULINITY

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Once you've found the gym at a high school you've never visited before the Saturday morning of a wrestling match, you pay a modest entrance fee and enter a world of thuds and whistles and cheers and boys' locker room smells. Depending upon the size of the meet—on how many schools brought teams and how many brackets—there will be one or more large mats laid out on the gym floor, mats marked with large boundary circles and a small center circle. At any moment, matches are at different stages—some beginning, some in progress, and some just ending with the victor's arm raised by the referee. There is a din of shouting—teammates urging on a wrestler, coaches shouting advice, whistles screeching, timers buzzing, parents and friends shouting, cheering, clapping. Wrestlers with their match coming up next have shed their sweats and loose-fitting basketball shorts, have pulled on the shoulder straps of their wrestling singlets, have donned the protective headgear, and are bouncing in place, pacing, or otherwise getting their bodies and minds ready for the match. Other wrestlers, between matches, are in their loose clothing walking around, talking, or off alone listening to an iPod in a corner of the gym. The scene resembles a cross between a three-ring circus and a high school quad at lunch time. You can almost smell the testosterone.

What, at first, might seem to be the most primal and brutal of male contact sports is far more complicated, civilized, and mental than one might think. Jay had only seen one college wrestling match before his grandson joined his high school wrestling team, and as a scholar of masculinity Jay saw immediately that the high school wrestling he was observing every weekend for months was a remarkable, often paradoxical, display of masculinity. Jay did not expect to see young women wrestling with the young men, but they were at every match in the lower Sacramento Valley circuit he observed in the 2008 and 2009 seasons. Sometimes the woman beat the man. He was unprepared to see the blind young man wrestling for one of the high schools, and unprepared to see him win his matches. He was surprised by a story told by a fan sitting near him of a one-armed high school wrestler who was amazingly good, and he was surprised to see on YouTube a video of a wrestler with no legs. Clearly wrestling is about more than brute strength.

Andy, the first author, comes to this collaboration with extensive wrestling experience, first as a high school student and later as a wrestling coach at a prep school in Atlanta's suburbs. The authors share an interest in studying the social construction and performance of masculinity in American culture, and the combination of Andy's insider knowledge and Jay's outsider knowledge seemed like the perfect combination for studying high school wrestling. We aim to understand how this particular form of playfighting-become-sport displays and performs masculinity. The presence of female wrestlers now complicates some generalizations about the sport, and we do address that gender issue, but here our attention is primarily on the young men.

With high school wrestling as our focus, we encounter the drama of the interaction of the formal organizational culture controlled by the adult coaches and adult volunteers and the informal adolescent folk culture of the wrestlers themselves. As Mechling says about the California Boy Scout troop he studied for decades (Mechling 2001), the culture created at a Boy Scout camp or on a wrestling team is a *tertium quid*, a third thing, which is neither the culture created by the adults nor the culture created by the adolescents but a culture that results from the dynamic interaction of the two, a hot “border culture.” The culture of a wrestling team is nowhere near the “total institution” (Goffman 1961) of a two-week Boy Scout encampment, where the boys and men eat, sleep, play, and work together. But the members of a wrestling team spend a lot of time together and, if all goes well, they create a strong adolescent male friendship group, a male folk group. As folklorists we have a broader understanding of the significance of the everyday “practices” by the young participants. We seek to understand the expressive functions of the everyday folk cultures of the young wrestlers as well as the instrumental functions that sociologists tend to emphasize.

The existing scholarship on scholastic (high school) and collegiate wrestling in the United States tends to be by sociologists interested in the role of the sport in the social construction of masculinity, and with that goal in mind those scholars place the masculinity learned and performed in wrestling within the larger context of the construction and performance of gender in American culture. That topic interests us, too, but when we approach scholastic wrestling as folklorists we are as attentive to the expressive aspects of the wrestling experiences as to the instrumental aspects. We bring to this inquiry a strong focus on play, particularly Bateson’s (1972) theory of play and fantasy, an approach and perspective missing in the other scholarship on scholastic wrestling. As folklorists we are more attuned to the informal folk culture of the adolescent wrestlers, an informal culture often at odds with the formal culture of scholastic wrestling. Nowhere is this difference more pronounced than in the folk practices of hazing new members, an aspect of adolescent male group culture the social science scholarship on scholastic wrestling generally ignores.

We begin with the most genuinely folk aspect of this study—namely, the informal playfighting that is so much a feature of the socialization of boys and young men in American culture. We then establish the importance of the central symbol in this sport—the male body—and then we get to our central thesis about the paradox of both informal and formal Rough-and-Tumble (R&T) playfighting: wrestling both is and is not combat, wrestling both is and is not sex. We consider the complexity of scholastic wrestling for the performance of normative masculinity, and throughout our discussion we pause to speculate on what wrestling means to the increasing numbers of women who participate in the sport at both the high school and college level.

### **From Playfighting to Organized Sport**

Formalized male wrestling is very old and nearly universal in human history and cultures. No doubt this physical form of Rough-and-Tumble (R&T) playfighting has

some roots in evolutionary biology and psychology, as humans are not the only mammals to engage in playfighting from an early age (Groos 1898, Burghardt 2005). There is also no doubt that playfighting serves cultural functions, and the many people who have written about the rise of male cultures and customs—from Bettelheim (1954) on initiation rites to Ong (1981) on male contest to Dundes (1997) on football and more—note how men have created cultural institutions to compensate for their lack of direct procreation and as substitutes for the lethal male combat so common in the animal world. Many of the features of performed masculinity, including the stylized violence that replaces real violence, can be understood as serving some very deep need in men for direct combat. Civilized society masks this urge in the games and sports it provides men as a safer, sometimes symbolically displaced, alternative to real male violence. Playfighting and real fighting, just as play war and real war, dance dangerously on the razor edge of controlled violence.

As folklorists we see the expressive functions of playfighting as well as the instrumental ones posited by psychologists (Pelligrini, 1988, 1993), sociobiologists and sociologists. As Sutton-Smith (1998, 2017) says, too many scholars neglect to acknowledge the main reason why we play—it is fun. The play frame, especially the frame for R&T playfighting, requires a level of trust, so paradoxically that play frame signals strong bonds of affection. Brown (2000) found in direct observation



*Fig. 1 – Boys' wrestling practice 1940s (Mechling personal collection)*

and in interviewing primary school-age boys (ages 6-9, ethnically diverse) that the R&T playfighting was "a means by which boys express care and intimacy for one another" (Brown 2000). Watching the game of Smear (short for Smear the Queer, see Dundes 1987), Brown observed many instances of "care" of one boy by others, including care for boys who fall and might be injured. The boys understood, as they said in the interviews, that the game frame permitted them to touch friends intimately in ways they could not outside of that play frame. Mechling discovered the same intimacy and bonding in the R&T playfighting he observed over several summers at the Boy Scout summer encampment he studied, including versions of Smear the Queer and Capture the Flag (Mechling 2001:73, 152-62). These expressive dimensions of playfighting for boys and young men are the sources of their enjoyment, pleasures probably more important to the boys than the "problem" of constructing a performance of normative masculinity.

Unlike informal R&T playfighting, formal amateur wrestling, from the required clothing and headgear to the rules, aims always at creating a fair fight, that is, a contest that protects (as much as possible) the wrestlers from serious injury and that makes for a real contest. Like boxing, wrestling is a weight class sport. Wrestlers compete against others roughly their same weight. Occasionally two wrestlers in a weight class will be very different heights, but height is not much of an advantage when one considers that the important element is the center of gravity. Wrestling moves and holds rely on balance and leverage. One of the paradoxes of wrestling is that the stronger wrestler does not always win. When a heavily muscled wrestler faces off against a less muscled one, or when a young man faces off against a young woman, we have learned not to assume that the stronger wrestler will win the match. Speed, balance, skill (knowledge of holds, escapes, and so on), strategy, and endurance count for more than sheer strength. Less talented wrestlers sometimes try to muscle their way through a match; it almost never works. A young woman who knows holds, leverage, and strategy will beat a strong young man who does not have mastery of those techniques and strategies.

Scholars sometimes have divided games into three sorts—games of chance, skill, and strategy—recognizing that many games combine these elements (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959). In ball sports, the ball provides a large measure of chance in the play. Wrestling involves very little chance. The first face-off is from the standing position, but the second round in a high school or college match (2-minute rounds in high school, 3-minute rounds in college) begins with a "coin toss" (actually a circle of cardboard, red on one side and green on the other, representing each wrestler) to determine who gets to decide his position in the prone start. In the third round (if there is a second or third round—a pin ends the match) the wrestler who lost the toss in the second round or deferred the choice in the second round gets to choose his place in the starting prone position. Skill and strategy drive this sport.

As promised, our aim here is to analyze the meanings of male wrestling in the performance of masculinity. Before presenting that structural analysis and its conclusions, though, we want to pause here to comment on the male body in wrestling.

## The Male Body in Wrestling

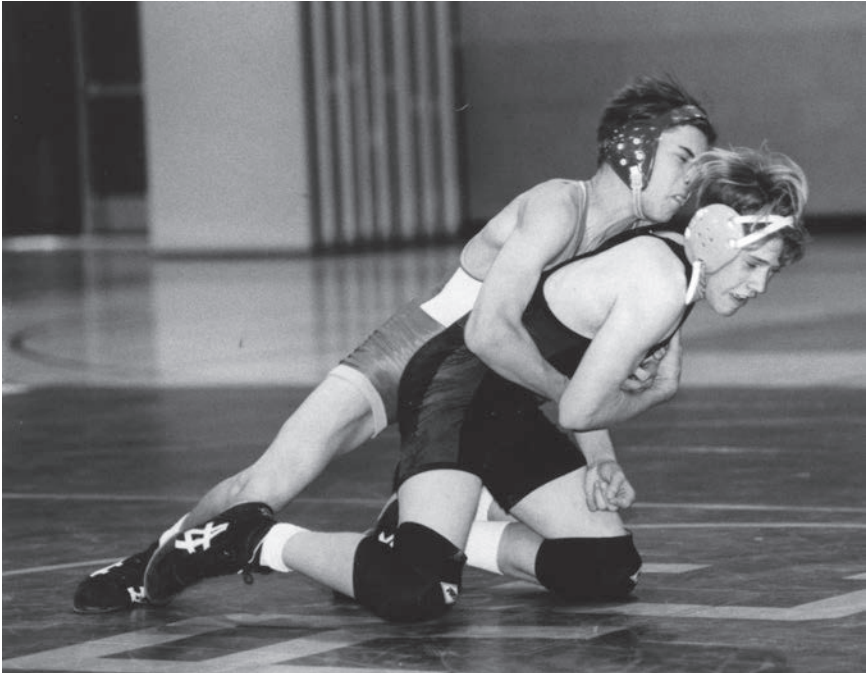
There is no escaping the presence of the male body in wrestling. The original Greek Olympic games were played in the nude. When the modern Olympic games were revived in 1896, the athletes were clothed. Clothing in the games required and still require unrestricted movement, but the additional issue in wrestling is that clothing should not provide an opportunity for a competitor to grab, hold, and pull an opponent. Nude wrestling would be ideal for that goal, so the clothing worn by wrestlers has always clung to the body to some extent. The modern singlet made of form-fitting materials (like Lycra) is the next best solution to being nude, as it provides the required modesty. But the singlet provides an odd brand of modesty, clinging tightly to the male genitals and buttocks. The thin arm straps on most singlets make visible the muscles of the arms and chest, while the short legs of the singlet expose the muscles of the leg. There can be no doubt that the male body is on display in wrestling, even before the match begins.

Wrestlers have all sorts of male bodies, thanks largely to the organization of the sport by weight class. Small, thin boys can wrestle their counterparts, and the heavyweights can be quite successful and admired with male bodies far from the cultural norm.

The organization by weight class introduces an unusual element into the individual wrestler's relationship to his body. Scholars make the point that men and women, thanks to both biology and culture, tend to have different relationships with their bodies. Women are more likely than men to experience themselves *as* a body, whereas men are more likely than women to experience themselves as *having* a body. Men tend to have an instrumental view of their bodies, and the folk speech men use to describe their body parts and actions support that view (Murphy 2001). Men's distance from their bodies has many consequences (ask any physician), and one is the sense of disappointment and anger when the body fails. A true man "plays through the pain," often not telling a coach or a team medic about an injury until the game is over.

Wrestlers, though, bear an added burden. Their workouts for strength and endurance, for flexibility and balance, may resemble the workouts of other athletes, but "making weight" always looms as a worry. The weight classes are pretty narrow, so the goal of a wrestler is to keep his weight in that range. The "moment of truth" is the weigh-in just before a meet begins. A wrestler can be disqualified if his weight is over or under the class he has been registered as. Weight becomes a wrestler's obsession.

Normally we talk about "eating disorders" in women, but Bordo (1999) and others write about the male equivalent, a medical category called "muscle dysmorphia" (Bordo 1999, 221). Put simply, most young men are dissatisfied with some aspect of their bodies, often believing they are not muscular enough. Wrestlers have that additional worry that they are too fat or too thin, so their obsession with food and fluids comes to resemble the obsessions medical and psychological professionals see in women with eating disorders. Male wrestlers often make themselves sick by avoiding food and drink to "make weight," and in the wake of some deaths of high school wrestlers the wrestling establishment modified the



*Fig. 2 – High School wrestlers (Mechling personal collection)*

weight categories and insist upon hydration tests at the weigh-in. So even before the wrestler sheds his sweats to step onto the mat in his singlet, he has had a long history of trying to shape, condition, and control his body.

Once on the mat, the two wrestlers' bodies are on display. They shake hands, take their stances facing each other, and when the referee's whistle blows their bodies come together in a stylized, choreographed, physical combat. The match is won either by pinning the opponent's shoulders to the mat for two seconds or by points awarded for holds, escapes, falls, near-falls, and a few other moves. Despite appearances, the match usually is not a "mixup" or "free-for-all"; rather, the wrestlers have learned and practiced moves, holds, and escapes, each with its own name, and the wrestler needs a strategy for combining these skilled moves to score points or even pin the opponent. Andy's coach called this aspect of the sport "physical chess."

A wrestling match looks primal, two bodies locked in holds, rolling, twisting, spinning, sometimes bending in ways limbs and torsos don't seem designed to bend without breaking. So what is happening when these two young men wrestle? What are the meanings of the event?

## The Paradox of Play in Male Wrestling

It amazes us that on each rereading of Bateson's remarkable 1955 (1972) essay, "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," we see something new. It is well known that in this formulation of the "play frame" Bateson is struck by the paradox of play, that (as he puts it using an animal playfight as his example) "not only does the playful nip not denote what would be denoted by the bite for which it stands, but, in addition, the bite itself is fictional" (1972, 182). That's the well-known part, but Bateson then goes on to say that sometimes this paradox has an odd effect, and he uses some examples from action films to show how some images "did not denote that which they seemed to denote, but these same images did really evoke that terror which would have been evoked" by a real event or threat (1972, 183). Bateson turns to some examples of films which encode sexuality. Since Bateson's view helps understand both Dundes's controversial analysis of football and the analysis of wrestling we are about to present here, it is worth quoting Bateson directly. In the film *Hans Christian Andersen*, writes Bateson (1972 183-4),

The hero starts out accompanied by a boy. He tries to get a woman, but when he is defeated in this attempt, he returns to the boy. In all of this, there is, of course, no homosexuality, but the choice of these symbolisms is associated in these fantasies with certain characteristic ideas, e.g., about the hopelessness of the heterosexual masculine position when faced with certain sorts of women or with certain sorts of male authority. In sum, the pseudohomosexuality of the fantasy does not stand for any real homosexuality, but does stand for and express attitudes which might accompany a real homosexuality or feed its etiological roots. The symbols do not denote homosexuality, but do denote ideas for which homosexuality is an appropriate symbol.

Bateson's stunning insight here is that play engages "a special combination" of primary (unconscious) and secondary (conscious) processes. "In primary process," explains Bateson, "map and territory are equated; in secondary process, they can be discriminated. In play, they are both equated and discriminated" (1972, 185).

Bateson's insight helps us see the unique meanings of wrestling. Everything Dundes (1997) says about football and other ball sports applies in some ways to wrestling, but wrestling distills the symbolism. In wrestling, there are no distancing, mediating symbols; the male contact is as direct and as intimate as a sport can get. For the wrestlers, but also (we think) for the observers, wrestling combines primary and secondary processes. Put differently, *wrestling both is and is not combat. Wrestling both is and is not sex*. It looks and feels like combat, and it looks and feels like sex, but the peculiar, paradoxical genius of the wrestling play frame is that it both is and is not either of these.



### **Wrestling Both Is and Is Not Combat**

We begin with the informal R&T playfighting that seems to be such a constant element in the folk cultures of boys. Girls sometimes engage in playfighting, and scholars of play have chronicled how girls' play has become increasingly like boys' play, especially after Title IX began giving girls and young women access to the team sports that are part of the upbringing of boys and reflect the male friendship group.

Males are capable of injurious violence, so to sustain the bonding of the male friendship group, most boys learn how to perform "stylized" violence, violence in the play frame, violence that has the look and sound and feel of real violence, but keep in mind that what is signified in the play frame is "not real."

The stylized violence can be verbal, as in ritual insulting, or can be physical. Wallis and Mechling (2015:278-9) begin their inquiry into the puzzle of warriors' R&T playfighting in the combat zone (Iraq and Afghanistan), a puzzle because it seems so risky, with a look at the scholarship by psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists on playfighting in children. Without reproducing that survey here, we can say briefly that boys' playfighting (elementary school age) helps develop social competence in the male friendship group (Pellegrini 1988, 1993). Boys often "script" their playfighting using popular culture narratives from television, movies, even video games (Jarvis 2006:273, 277; Jordan 1995:76; O'Donnell and Sharpe 2004; Botvin and Sutton-Smith 1977; Sutton-Smith, Gerstmeier, and Meckley 1988). R&T playfighting in the boys' group teaches them about hierarchy in the male friendship group and experience with playfighting in the play frame teaches them the difference between fantasy violence, stylized violence, and real violence (Jones 2002). It also teaches them that what happens in the play frame means nothing outside of the play frame. Boys also learn that you can play fiercely and competitively in the play frame, but once you leave that frame you are still friends. In fact, the stylized combat in playfighting actually functions to reinforce the male bonding, as boys can participate in the frame of playfighting only if they trust each other.

This last point lets us comment briefly on R&T playfighting in girls and young women, as this is relevant to our speculating below on what scholastic wrestling means to young women. Scientific studies find playfighting in mammals as common in young females as young males, so culture rather than biology overly determines gender differences in human play. Through the 20th century girls' play in the U.S. has become more and more like the play observed in boys of the same age, though ethnographers rarely observed girls engaging in R&T playfighting for most of the century. That changed by the 1990s, when ethnographers began to observe elementary school girls playing as aggressively and as competitively as the boys on the playground (Thorne 1993; Hughes 1993, 1999; Beresin 2010). Wallis and Mechling (2015:295-299), based on their reading of the war memoirs by female veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, note that many of those veterans report their own "tomboy" upbringing among brothers and male playmates, an upbringing that made them more comfortable as members of the very masculine cultures of the military folk group (platoons and smaller units). Even



these warriors could not engage in the R&T playfighting so common among the men; female warriors have to negotiate a difficult identity project so as to not be perceived as sexual objects. The female warriors, especially those raised as “tom-boys,” were comfortable with the stylized aggression of the male friendship group, often in the form of insults, teases, even practical jokes, forms of stylized violence involving less intimate body contact than male R&T playfighting. In this regard the female warriors could avoid what female wrestlers cannot, for female wrestlers in high school are engaged in the intimate body contact of wrestling. We return to this point below.

What had changed by the 1990s to make girls’ play more like boys play? In part the women’s movement of the 1960s created a generation of parents determined to raise their daughters in less stereotypical ways, buying them fewer Barbie dolls and more baseball mitts. Young women entered youth sports more easily in the 1970s, and the passage of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 opened up for women of all ages access to the team sports that had been the realm of boys and men. Several of the female warriors studied by Wallis and Mechling (2015:297) had been athletes in high school and college, and they attributed to team sports not only their physical fitness for the military but also their easy familiarity with male folk cultures (Solaro 2006:243-44).

Scholastic wrestling takes the folk play of R&T playfighting and turns it into a more formal activity. The pleasures of formal, scholastic wrestling lie in the more basic drives and needs in both young men and women. Biology starts out making no gender distinctions regarding playfighting, but culture and history worked on making those gender distinctions, making the pleasures of R&T playfighting out of the reach of young women. It is only in the past two decades that American culture has made it possible for women to engage fully in everything valuable in R&T playfighting.

R&T playfighting both is and is not combat. As such, it creates a frame for stylized combat, as need felt (apparently) by both males and females, and provides the pleasures one experiences in stylized combat—the pleasures of the contest (Ong 1981). The novelist John Irving always writes and talks about his love of writing and his love of wrestling. His long autobiographical essay, “The Imaginary Girlfriend,” traces these two threads in his life, and the essay explores the meanings of wrestling from the viewpoint of a wrestler. Irving says that “wrestling is not about knocking a man down—it’s about controlling him” (Irving 1996, 36).

Another paradox of this play is that wrestling doesn’t seem to suffer from the usual symptoms of the “trouble with testosterone” (Sapolsky 1998). Wrestlers tend to be exceedingly polite and civilized on and off the mat. You do not see in wrestling the stylized, performed masculine aggression you might see in football, basketball, and baseball, for example. Before a match wrestlers are too busy preparing themselves mentally for the match (some pace, some listen to music or inspirational recordings on their iPods, some sit in quiet meditation) to puff and swagger, and after a match they are too exhausted to waste any energy on male foolery. Moreover, you can’t wrestle angry; that’s a sure path to losing a match. As primal and seeming violent as a match is, wrestlers need cool concentration to succeed.

R&T playfighting offers another set of pleasures, as well. We turn now to exploring the second truth about framed playfighting, namely, that wrestling both is and is not sex.

### **Wrestling Both Is and Is Not Sex**

In speculating on the psychological functions of the structures of male contests, from verbal dueling to football, Alan Dundes (1997) uses the folk speech of the contestants to argue that the key theme in these contests is the male's proving his masculinity by feminizing the male opponent, by "putting down" the male opponent (that is, down into the female, submissive and receptive position in conventional Western intercourse). "Typically," continues Dundes, "the victory entails some kind of *penetration*" (Dundes 1997, 27; emphasis in original), and he argues that the fear of symbolic anal penetration, the ultimate feminizing act for a male, energizes the contest. Football players drive toward the opponents' "endzone," basketball players put "balls" through ringed holes, hockey players slap the puck into the "crease," and so on. Dundes borrows from Ong (1981) to point out that the Latin roots of the word *contest*—*con* (with) and *testis* (testicle)—confirm these sexual meanings. Feminist psychoanalytic theory (e.g., Chodorow 1978) provides the understanding that masculinity is a fragile construct, needing proof every day, and that the act of feminizing another male through words or physical actions is a favored strategy for distancing oneself from the feminine (Mechling 2005).

Heterosexual men's touching each other, from hugs to pats on the butt, has to be framed and performed carefully to be read as non-sexual, hence non-feminizing. Horan's (1988) ethnography of the folk culture of a group home for boys concludes that the playfighting among the boys is the only carefully framed, permissible touching in their lives, satisfying even minimally their human need to be touched and solving the problem that for the abused boys touch is a highly problematic experience. The lesson beyond Horan's particular ethnographic site is that American boys and adolescents need to be touched and need to touch each other, but only under carefully framed circumstances. Playfighting and wrestling provide those cultural frames.

The playfight frame, including formalized wrestling, permits men to embrace and touch each other in ways otherwise forbidden or carefully framed to maintain heterosexual performance. Some of the holds themselves resemble sexual positions (true for male-female wrestling, as well). The folk speech of wrestling, including the formal names of the holds, sometimes reflects these sexual resemblances. For example, a wrestler may be "on top" or "on bottom" in a given hold or moment, language similar to the common references to "topping" and "bottoming" in gay sex. In fact, to be "on bottom" in wrestling clearly means to be dominated, to be in the passive, submissive position, in short, to take the feminine position in sex. A wrestler lying face-to-face on another wrestler is in the top, male position, but holding another wrestler around the waist from behind is also a dominant position, in that case symbolizing a threat of anal penetration. Sometimes a wrestler with such a grip on another will be on his own back and technically on

the bottom, but in that position he can bring the opponent's shoulder's back down upon the mat for a pin, a dominant male move.

Other language reinforces the sexual symbolism. Coaches talk about aggressively "penetrating" the opponent from the standing position. Wrestlers look for the "takedown" (another version of putting the other male "down" into the female position). In John Irving's wrestling memoir he talks about another wrestler as a "rider"—"he could ride me" (1996, 51)—language that could be used to describe sexual intercourse. One hold, the "double grapevine," is also called the "Saturday Night Ride" ([www.urbandictionary.com](http://www.urbandictionary.com)).

The t-shirt vendors are hard to miss at wrestling meets. Many of the sayings on the shirts traffic in sexual double entendres (e.g., "Other sports play with them, wrestlers have them"). Delfino reports that the most common t-shirt he has seen at matches announces the "Ten Reasons to Date a Wrestler":

10. Always wears his headgear
9. Will eat anything
8. Knows when to push and pull
7. Endurance, Endurance, Endurance
6. Goes hard from start to finish
5. Can work a two-on-one
4. Knows how to use his hips
3. Can score from any position
2. Never stalls on bottom
1. KNOWS HOW TO RIDE

The homoerotic dimension of male wrestling is lost on neither the participants nor the fans. As Brian Pronger notes in his study of sports, homosexuality, and sex, a common genre of gay pornography features athletes, including wrestlers (Pronger 1990, 145). In his interviews with gay and straight amateur athletes, Pronger found that the homoeroticism in wrestling was a recurring topic. For the gay men, it was their first, safe, framed "opportunity to explore, unwittingly, the homoerotic potential of masculine physical contact" (1990:183). "Boys and teenagers are intuitively aware of this kind of fun," writes Pronger, "and wrestle with their friends. Some are content with the subtle, nongenital expression of the paradox..." (1990:184). As for Dundes (1978), Pronger sees "territorial domination" as the key objective in male contests (Pronger 1999:376).

Young male wrestlers report worries about getting erections, which would be all too obvious in their singlets and might signal something more serious than playful homoeroticism among heterosexual males. Actually, the physiology of erections means that it is highly unlikely that a wrestler in a real match would get an erection; the demand for blood for other muscles in use is too great. But some of the young men interviewed by Pronger did mention unwanted erections while playfighting with teammates between matches (1990:185). And, as Pronger notes, the lack of erections does not diminish the homoeroticism in wrestling any more than the absence of erections in nude male hazing negates the homoeroticism of those events and customs (Mechling 2008, 2009).

For some wrestlers and observers, the male body in pain may be erotic. Wallis and Mechling (2015) found many references to the eroticization of pain in the memoirs by war veterans and in commentary on experiences in Basic Training and in the combat zone (see Zeeland 1996, for example). Snyder (2012) sees “hard work” as a phrase male wrestlers use in their construction of a hard, tough masculinity, a rhetorical defense against the perception by others that male wrestling is “gay,” and we read this as a celebration of pain.

Please note that we are *not* arguing that male wrestling is a form of homosexual behavior or that straight-identifying wrestlers are repressed homosexuals. Rather, if we understand and take seriously Bateson’s point about the paradox of play, then we can see that male wrestling does not stand for real homosexuality, but it does stand for the unconscious need for male intimate touching with other males, touching that can be an important component of the emotional bonding with other males in the group. Some male sports mask these meanings with far more indirection and symbolic displacement than does wrestling.

### **Wrestling and the Performance of Masculinity**

For good reasons, many adolescent males worry about their performances as males. Although high schools now are the sites for a broad range of performances of masculinity, in general adolescent males continue to experience strong pressures to perform a normative (hegemonic) heterosexual identity, regardless of their actual sexual identity. Masculinity is always a fragile construction, and young men in high school encounter daily tests to “prove” their masculinity.

The sociologists who have studied scholastic wrestling hone in on the problems of “impression management” (Goffman 1959, 1963) for young men who wrestle. The “problem” facing these wrestlers is the outsiders’ too-often held view that “wrestling is gay.” All of the wrestlers interviewed by Fair (2011:492) mentioned the homophobic teasing they endure among their high school peers. The young men, in most cases, want to bolster the impression that they are heterosexual, even though some teams (e.g., Michael 2015) practice “inclusive masculinity” and will accept gay wrestlers in their folk group, so long as the gay teammate does not “hit” on a straight member of the group.

Fair argues that “wrestlers achieve normative masculinity by symbolically framing sexual relations as acts of domination” (2011:492), and it is easy to see how domination in wrestling (putting the opponent “down” in the female role, as we have said) bolsters the performance of normative heterosexuality. Fair also found a second male wrestlers’ strategy for constructing and performing normative masculinity: “the way in which wrestlers’ use of ‘pussy’ parallels how other adolescents typically deploy the epithet ‘fag’” (2011:492). Andy experienced this same pattern in his own high school wrestling team, where the coach often sang “pussy... pussy...” in a falsetto voice while making a simulated vulva with his fingers. The boys got the message; wrestle hard, wrestle tough, wrestle like a man.

Fair’s explanation for the common use of “pussy” and not “fag” or “faggot,” the latter terms so often deployed in adolescent male culture (Pascoe 2005), centers on penetration, taking Pascoe’s (2005:329) point that faggots “represent a penetrated

masculinity,” the greatest threat to masculinity. “It is precisely this specter of penetrated masculinity,” writes Pascoe, “that functions as a regulatory mechanism of gender for contemporary American adolescent boys” (2005:329).

Fair develops his own argument about “penetration discourse.” The team he studied had a folk term, “Girly D,” short for “girly defense,” to describe “a defensive wrestling maneuver that is deemed somehow ‘girly’ or feminine,” especially when the move is in defense against “an offensive attack on the opponent’s legs... called the ‘penetration step’” (Fair 2011:499). The homophobia and misogyny so common in adolescent male folk groups mix and reinforce each other in all this discourse. And if in male sports a major source of anxiety is fear of symbolic “penetration” by the opponent (Pronger 1999), a feminizing act, then wrestling intensifies that anxiety in both its bodily actions and folk speech. The figurative penetration in wrestling becomes literal in some hazing practices, as we shall see.

Baker and Hotek (2011) discovered in their ethnographic study of a high school wrestling team more evidence of the “inclusive masculinity” other researchers have found. The authors observed a range of behavior the young men employed to perform masculinity. Some body practices were stereotypically masculine (“being strong, taking pain”), while others were more androgynous (“making weight”), and others even stereotypically feminine (“physical intimacy”). They see the same spread of gender performance across “performance practices” and “emotion practices” (Baker and Hotek 2011:53-60). In short, as physically aggressive and combative as wrestling seems, the male adolescent wrestlers actually construct, maintain, and repair, if necessary, their performances of masculinity across a range of folk practices, from orthodox masculinity through androgyny to some practices stereotypically feminine.

## Women Wrestlers

We titled this article “Wrestling with Masculinity,” realizing at the same time that an increasing number of women are wrestling at the high school level and necessarily are wrestling as a sexual minority on male wrestling teams (Lewin 2007). As folklorists interested in the social construction, maintenance, and (when necessary) repair of masculinity in American culture, most of our examples and discussion reflect the experiences of young men. The presence of young women in scholastic wrestling (and, later, in the military) raises some interesting issues and puzzles as we attempt to understand the multiple meanings of wrestling.

We have not interviewed high school women who wrestle, and we have not found any ethnographic accounts of the experiences of those women. Hall (2015) provides some insight, having both wrestled and coached collegiate women’s wrestling, and it makes some sense to read her study as applying to high school women, though a significant difference is that women wrestlers at the collegiate level wrestle only women. We are in dire need of ethnographic accounts by folklorists of the experiences of high school women who wrestle.

That caution aside, we have some clues signaling the sorts of issues and questions that ought to guide the ethnographic work with young women on high school wrestling teams. For example, men and women have different “body

issues.” There are some high school and collegiate sports that require physical conditioning producing musculature in women similar to that of athletic men. In her senior thesis on a collegiate women’s rowing (crew) team, Bosworth (2000) notes that many of the women were self-conscious about the non-stereotypical musculature the women were building in their physical training, and these women often changed quickly from their tight-fitting rowing uniforms into loose-fitting sweatshirts and pants at the end of a race. Similarly, women wrestlers face issues with their clothing, from their tight wrestling clothes (for obvious reasons, not cut the same way as are the men’s singlets) to the clothes they should wear during team workouts (Hall 2015:6-7, 18, 20). The folklorist can assume, reasonably, that the women on a sports team might muster folklore to allay the social and psychological anxieties surrounding their bodies.

We expect that the paradox that wrestling both “is and is not combat” and “is and is not sex” would create a different social and psychological drama for the women wrestlers than the ones we found with the young men. First, as we indicated above, girls’ play in the U.S. slowly became more like boys’ play through the 20th century. Traditionally girls were less likely to engage in R&T playfighting than were boys, but the access to team sports Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 created for girls and young women seems to have accelerated the movement of girls’ play toward the way boys play. One might say, for example, that team sports began to teach young women the framed, stylized aggression boys learned on the playing field. So the observation that wrestling “both is and is not combat” should apply to how young women understand the playfighting as well as do the young men. Folklorists and other ethnographers should be able to find increased “stylized” aggression and violence in the folk groups that include women.

The second point we take with Bateson in mind—namely, that wrestling “both is and is not sex”—is that wrestling becomes more problematic when one of the wrestlers is a young woman. A young man facing a match against a young woman often is reluctant to wrestle and will sometimes even forfeit a match, facing (in his mind) a lose-lose situation. Beat a woman, not so impressive; lose to a woman, you are less than a woman. For boys wrestling boys, the play frame usually sustains the “both is and is not sex” fiction. Without any evidence, we have to speculate that the dual nature of the playfighting frame is even more fragile and difficult to sustain for male-female matches.

### **Wrestling Haze**

Most of the scholarship on scholastic wrestling steers clear of discussing a folk practice that lives mainly underground in the folk culture of wrestlers. Hazing is common in all male folk groups, and over the past 20 years highly publicized hazing incidents, some resulting in injury and death, have led to efforts to ban hazing in the military, fraternities, and sports teams. Some of the publicized hazing incidents were on university women’s sports teams, though we will not deal with the issue of scholastic wrestling and women’s experiences of hazing for lack of any evidence. Instead, we focus on the young men and their hazing customs.

Hazing on male wrestling teams does not surprise us. Nor does it surprise us that efforts to ban and suppress hazing have largely failed, driving the practices further underground. The urge to haze and initiate members into the male group is strong. Anthropologists long ago recorded and analyzed male initiation rites across many cultures, and in most cases those are rites created by adult males to mark the transition of a boy into manhood. In contrast, many scholars of the social construction, maintenance, and repair of masculinity in American culture (e.g., Kimmel 2008) note that our culture is more a fratriarchy than a patriarchy, so it is peers who do the initiation into manhood. Lacking more formal male initiation rites in American culture, these folk groups of young men must “invent” ways to initiate neophytes into the group, invent tests of manhood that must be passed to prove a masculinity free from feminine traits (Raphael 1988, Bronner 2012:251-67). Hence the misogyny and homophobia in these male folk cultures (Mechling 2005).

Delfino witnessed no hazing in his own wrestling days, nor did he get a hint that the team he was coaching hazed the new members. We do not mean to suggest that hazing on scholastic wrestling teams is widespread; it is common, but it is likely that hazing is mild on most teams. Curiously, the serious cases of hazing on scholastic wrestling teams seem, from reports, not to involve alcohol, as do some many serious hazing events (some fatal) on the collegiate level (Nuer 1999, Nuer ed. 2004). Most of the high school wrestling team cases that reach the newspapers take place in locker rooms, showers, and on team buses.

Lundeen (2013) reports the 2012 cases of three Iowa high school wrestling teams discovered to be hazing new members. Public details were few, but the hazing involved “humiliation” and nudity (2013:55). In one case, the hazing involved sexual assault with a jump rope handle (2013:59-60). An ESPN (2002) list of hazing incidents on athletic teams just from 1997-2000 describes hazing incidents on high school wrestling teams in California, Connecticut, South Carolina, Utah, Michigan, and Nebraska, many of them involving sexual assaults using mop handles, brooms, and (again) a jump rope handle. These cases appeared in newspapers so usually there is not much detail so as to protect the victims, but the account of a Hilton Head, SC, hazing of younger wrestlers by older includes reference to specific practices—“trademarking,” which involves hitting the wet body to raise welts, and “dinking,” which involves placing a finger on or near the rectum, a move sometimes used even during a practice match to startle the opponent. The “butt drag,” a permissible move in wrestling which involves one wrestler’s grabbing an opponent’s butt for leverage, lends itself to “dinking,” and a 2010 court case in Modesto, California, opened a public debate about the “butt drag” hold; the allegation in that case was that one wrestler sexually assaulted an opponent in practice by “ramming two fingers into a teammate’s anus” (Anteola 2010).

None of the scholarship on scholastic wrestling (Baker and Hotek 2011, Fair 2011, Snyder 2012, Michael 2013, and Hall 2015) discusses hazing, possibly because it is an aspect of adolescent male folk groups that the scholars worry would cast a negative light on the sport. On the contrary, we think that hazing in scholastic wrestling teams expands our understanding of the unique meanings of the sport for the young men, a formal sport which, as we noted, actually is a formal



extension of folk R&T playfighting. R&T playfighting requires the play frame, of course, which is fragile and can be broken easily by the wrong acts or words.

The formal version of R&T playfighting—scholastic wrestling—satisfies the wrestlers so long as the play frame remains in place. That is, the wrestlers experience the practice matches and the competition as “both is and is not” combat and sex, satisfying the adolescent male’s need for stylized aggression and permissible intimate touch of another male. That formal play frame in scholastic wrestling seems to us less fragile than the play frame of informal R&T playfighting, as the wrestling holds are more formally planned and policed by the referee.

What strikes us about the hazing practices in the cases made public is the absence of a play frame, which has many consequences. One problem with Bateson’s theory of the play frame is that he seems to assume that everyone in the play frame is there voluntarily and has equal power in the frame. Goffman (1974) corrected that romantic view of the play frame by showing how players in the frame can be there with hidden motives, using the frame to manipulate others. Goffman thought all of socially constructed reality was, in essence, a confidence game, with the actions aimed at convincing others in the frame that everyone was there voluntarily and had equal power. Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne (1984) also draw our attention to “the masks of play,” to the ways people will mask other motives with the play frame (“it’s only play”).

Hazing can be consensual, of course. Mechling (2009) argues that hazing most often takes place in a play frame and that most times those being hazed experience the humiliation and other elements (nudity, mild pain) as “not real” (see, also, Bronner 2006). Hazing becomes abusive when, for example, alcohol destroys the inhibitions of the members hazing the neophyte or when one or more members of the group use the play frame of hazing to “mask” other motives, most often a streak of sadism. These are the ingredients that too often result in injury and fatalities in hazing.

The publicized cases of hazing on wrestling teams complicate the meanings of the R&T playfighting of scholastic wrestling. Recall that formal and informal wrestling appeals to adolescent men precisely because the play frame of playfighting is a “safe” frame for expressing aggression and even symbolic sexual contact, all in a frame that affirms the strong male bond between the members of the male folk group. There are some things that can break that play frame, like an unwanted erection, but in general the play frame of both formal and informal R&T playfighting serves well the psychological and social needs of the young men.

The cases of hazing on wrestling teams, hazing practices that go beyond mere humiliation (which can be executed in the play frame) and involve sexual assault, actually threaten the male bonding that both wrestling and less violent hazing cements. For example, several of these cases involved sexual assault with jump rope handles, broom handles, mop handles, and in one case a brush handle, all inserted in the anus, symbolic sodomy which, apart from the significant pain involved, humiliated the young man being hazed by feminizing him. In his analysis of the custom of paddling in fraternity and some collegiate sports team hazing, Mechling (2008) notes that it is important to the male bonding that the paddling involves the buttocks and the potential of sodomizing the initiate without actually doing so. Not

so when the members actually penetrate the victim's anus with a symbolic phallus; that actual penetration destroys the trust and the bonding, which can remain intact when the penetration is symbolic and potential, never enacted.

Although we know that women's sports teams sometimes haze the new members, we have no ethnographic evidence or direct testimony from participants to make any solid generalizations about the specific hazing practices or their meanings for the participants. The anecdotal evidence from college women's sports teams, evidence gleaned from publicized cases, suggests that women's hazing practices often reproduce the male traditions, which puzzles us. We see clearly the social and psychological functions of those folk practices for the dynamics of a male folk group; how those same practices serve the women is unclear. As Bosworth (2000) and the memoirs of female warriors make clear, though, one major aim for women in sports and in the military is to prove to each other and to men that they are as "tough" as men, that they can work and play "through the pain" as well as any man.

## Conclusion

Of all the team sports played by adolescent men, wrestling poses the greatest challenges to the young man as he attempts to perform a masculine identity. Adolescence is a precarious stage of life in American society, in any case, but young men often count on organized sports as a venue for "proving" their normative masculinity. Most sports young men play, from football and rugby to soccer and lacrosse, provide rather easy ways to demonstrate the physical toughness, emotional control, and ability to withstand pain that are among the qualities Americans consider signs of masculinity. The unique nature of wrestling provides a much more precarious stage for the construction of adolescent masculinity.

Our Batesonian analysis of some of the meanings of male wrestling based on its structures and folk speech suggests the usefulness of the paradoxes of play for male wrestlers as they experience the pleasures wrestling brings, especially the pleasures of R&T playfighting boys learn from a very early age. The two paradoxes—that wrestling both "is and is not combat" and "is and is not sex"—address the social and psychological needs of the adolescent boys in a "safe," symbolic frame. And the male body, so central in the performance of normative masculinity, is on display in wrestling as it is in few other sports. Like all play frames, wrestling's frame is fragile, sometimes accidentally broken by accident (e.g., an erection or an accidental touch of the opponent's anus) and quickly repaired, but we also see in unauthorized hazing practices on some teams the cost of violating the play frame.

What the fields of folklore studies and play studies need now are ethnographic studies of female wrestlers in high school to understand better the gender revolution sparked by Title IX and by other forces in the last half century. And to make the matter of wrestling and the social construction of gender even more complicated, even as we write this essay a female-to-male transgender high school wrestler in Texas is causing turmoil in the world of scholastic wrestling (Babb 2017).

Also on the subject of rapid cultural changes regarding gender, gender identification, and the performance of gender in folk groups, the near-full integration

of women into the armed forces of the U.S. becomes the testing ground for this gender revolution. Wrestling seems like a framed play setting ideal for socializing women into the formal institutions, especially the military, that still are extensions of the informal male folk group. If, as the Duke of Wellington is said to have intoned, "The battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton," then perhaps the battle for women's success in previously all-male organizations such as the military will be won, at least for some, on the wrestling mat.

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