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Who are they to judge? Overcoming anthropometry through fat bodybuilding

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ABSTRACT

While fat activism has disrupted many dominant discourses that causally contribute to negative judgments about fat bodies, it has not yet penetrated the realm of competitive bodybuilding. The author introduces fat bodybuilding as a means of challenging the prevailing assumptions of maximally fat-exclusionary (sports) cultures while raising fundamental ontological questions about what it means to “build a body.” Specifically, he advocates for imagining a new classification within bodybuilding, termed *fat bodybuilding*, as a fat-inclusive politicized performance and a new culture to be embedded within bodybuilding.

KEYWORDS

Fat activism; fat bodybuilding; sport; anthropometry

People who inhabit fat bodies are constantly judged—morally, aesthetically, physically, emotionally, economically, and in other ways that undermine their dignity. Most of all, people inhabiting fat bodies are judged for visual and superficial reasons: for the bodies they inhabit. Fat activism stands in opposition to the social stigma associated with fat, and, more generally, fatphobic attitudes throughout culture, and it has had considerable successes even though these attitudes are hegemonic and entrenched.

Particularly, anthropometric (body measuring) and ever more refined judgments of bodies and forms of physicality are commonplace in sports, reaching their zenith in the cultural space of competitive bodybuilding. Within the bodybuilding arena, bodies defy the “thin” ideals of anthropometry, yet they are respected because of their association with strength, fitness, and health. A paradox of anthropometry thus arises: bodybuilders’ bodies exist outside anthropometric expectations yet are still afforded social prestige. This same prestige is not afforded to defiant fat bodies despite fat activists’ substantive contributions to disrupting dominant discourses that causally contribute to negative judgments about fat bodies (especially “obesity” narratives and the neoliberal exploitation of bodies). The explanation for this paradox seems to be fatphobic: Bodybuilders are not only scrutinized for any traces of fat, they are critiqued and penalized for showing even

minuscule amounts of it. That is, because bodybuilding is currently fundamentally fat-exclusionary, its deviations from thin ideals are considered justified in a way that remains inaccessible to fat bodies.

In this article I seek to challenge this imbalance and prevailing assumptions of fat-exclusionary (sports) culture by introducing fat bodybuilding. Specifically, I advocate for a new classification within bodybuilding, termed *fat bodybuilding*, as a fat-inclusive, corporeal, politicized category to be embedded within bodybuilding in a way that destabilizes its defining assumptions and raises fundamental ontological questions about what it means to “build a body.” Rather than maintaining exclusionary bodybuilding norms, anyone would have equal access to bodybuilding’s noncompetitive, all-gender, and all-ability cultural spaces *and* the opportunity to be taken seriously in a competitive fat bodybuilding arena.

Anthropometry and fatphobia

At the center of bodybuilding is anthropometry, which refers to the measurement of bodies in terms of their physical and corporeal expressions. As detailed by Levan (2014), anthropometry offers some benefits, such as designing furniture, clothing, and equipment that conforms to the ergonomic and stylistic needs of (certain) human beings, but because of tendencies to privilege various forms, anthropometry also carries exclusionary and harmful downsides. Standardization regarding physical shape and corporeal form is often exclusionary of larger (or other [e.g., disabled]) bodies that do not conform to privileged “idealizations” of human shape. In fact, principle among privileged corporeal idealizations is thin privilege and “thin normativity,” which reinforces fat-exclusionary dispositions and discourses. This cultural preoccupation with standardization of bodies around thin normativity proves emotionally and psychologically draining to the inhabitants of fat bodies, who are told that they “take up too much space” (Levan 2014).

Levan (2014) developed the concept of “blueprinting” the human body as a problematic consequence of anthropometry, poignantly criticizing it as “a process by which an individual renders herself invisible through the act of self-erasure and symbolic self-mutilation, ultimately to take up less space” (122). Bodybuilding both follows and defies this rubric in that the standard thin-normative, anthropometric blueprinting of bodies is not quite a bodybuilding goal, though conforming to problematic standardized anthropometric demands is. As in the case of fat, bodybuilding builds bodies outside of thin-normative ideals (e.g., both fat and bodybuilt bodies often struggle to find appropriately fitting clothing), making bodybuilders and fat bodies into strange, if divergent, bedfellows. Ultimately, then, whether applied to bodybuilding or to thin normativity *contra* fat, Levan (2014) was right to describe blueprinting as an “act of conformity” which “supports the

physical act of self-denial through dieting and targeted exercise” while promoting “a sense of future completeness” (123) that is hostile to the ethos of fat activism.

As noted by Hoskin (2017), discourses about fat are normative and “work to exclude alternative forms of knowledge or embodiment in their dissemination of homogenous ‘truth’ which maintains fat bodies as at risk, lazy, and expensive” (123). These tie into broader notions and discourses common within bodybuilding that fat is unhealthy (Burgard 2009; Campos 2004; Gaesser 2002), ugly (Levan 2014), and associated with physical weakness, ineptitude, and weakness of will (Fontana et al. 2013). For example, drawing on survey data of 5,000 primary care physicians, Foster et al. (2003) wrote, “Physicians, like the rest of our society, hold critical views of [fat] patients, often stereotyping them as ‘weak-willed, ugly, and awkward,’ ‘lack[ing in] self-control,’ and ‘lazy’” (1168). These notions are often treated as intrinsic properties of fat, but as illustrated by some historical preferences for fat wherein fat bodies are seen as healthy, strong, and beautiful (Stearns 2002), their true source lies in contemporary dominant socially constructed narratives around fat and fat bodies. Thus, these narratives can be overcome through fat activism that showcases fat bodies as acceptable as they are (Bacon and Aphramor 2014; Czerniawski 2015), though overcoming constructions seeing fat as weakness/incompetence has gained less ground (cf. Sparkes, Brighton, and Inckle 2017).

Fat activism

To bridge that gap, the considerable success at penetrating and disrupting adipophobic environments that fat activism has achieved within professional modeling (Czerniawski 2015) provides insight. These successes have furthered “healthy-at-every-size” narratives (O’Hara and Taylor 2014) while challenging ableism and fatphobia in broader culture. As competitive bodybuilding spaces are the apotheosis of an adipophobic society and are thus primary targets for similarly influential fat activist initiatives (O’Hara and Taylor 2014), they are potential fruitful sites for similar work.

Conceptually, fat bodybuilding emerged from applying that lens to a prototype: a disruptive “fathletic” event, the “Fattylympics.” The Fattylympics was an act of cultural disruption undertaken as a nonprofit community event in East London in 2012 to satirize the Olympics and offer a different take on “sport, bodies, community, [and] protest” (Cooper 2013; “Fattylympics” n.d.; Smith 2012). The Fattylympics ultimately relies on (Judith) Butlerian parodic performance, which has been effectively utilized as a culturally disruptive tool, especially with regard to gender/queer activism (J. G. Butler 1990, 1993; cf. Chalkin 2016; Hester and Walters 2016; Shogan and Davidson 1999). Here, as Monaghan, Colls, and Evans (2015) explained,

“Fattylympics illustrated the possibility of claiming a public space for resisting the dominant anti-fat ethic of sport and physical activity, constructing an alternative value set for active bodies and critically understanding the relationship between fat and health” (117).

Within the canon of fat studies literature, the Olympics tend to be viewed as highly problematic due to their intrinsic antipathy toward fat and fat bodies. W. S. Butler (2014), for example, clearly articulated a number of explicit problems with the Olympics when she writes that they

stand as an international media spectacle from which cultural, political, and social narratives emerge within the athletic struggles of the event’s competitors. Central to these narratives are the social constructions of the normative body, a concept that props up certain types of bodies as normal, natural, or ideal, while subjugating other types of bodies. Especially in athletic competition, where performance and ability are measured and ballyhooded, the ableist notions that some bodies are normal and some are abnormal construct hegemonic norms with worldwide reverberations. (ii)

Butler’s remedy for this is a simple observation: the possibility that “challeng[ing] normative constructions... can act as spaces of resistance to hegemonic norms.” In this sense, the underlying motivations for overcoming normative narratives with fat bodybuilding are nearly identical to those that inspired the Fattylympics.

In that it destabilizes many dominant assumptions associated with the Olympics, which it parodies, the Fattylympics is an effective form of fat activism. As exemplified by fatshion modeling (Czerniawski 2015); however, there exist additional opportunities of practical and political significance to fat activists utilizing a different tone. By penetrating a maximally adipophobic space and exhibiting fat bodies as “built bodies,” fat bodybuilding represents a unique form of fat activism operating in parallel to parodic performances such as Fattylympics. As a result of dominant moral and epistemic assumptions around fat, however, people both within and without bodybuilding culture are likely to exhibit a considerable degree of fatphobic pushback to the “intrusion” of fat and fat bodies into bodybuilding cultural spaces (cf. Bailey 2017).

The ontology of a built body

Because fat bodybuilding diverges from parodic satire, it is conceptually and practically different than the Fattylympics. Fat bodybuilding as fat activism relies on conveying the message that a fat body is a legitimately *built* body, and utilizing parodic performance as such risks mocking *fat* rather than bodybuilding. As Mitchell (2017) wrote, “It takes time to make a fat body. It takes even more time to make a politicized fat body” (11). This is precisely the message fat bodybuilding should convey: the fat body is a body built by time and work and deserves to be respected. Thus, fat bodybuilding raises

significant questions about the ontology of the “built body,” which has been understood heretofore only in fat-exclusionary (i.e., “fitness”-centric) terms. The ontological designation of a fat body as a built body, made through time and effort and presented against dominant assumptions and judgments, therefore becomes the point of contact through which fat bodybuilding offers a unique opportunity for fat activism.

Regarding the ontology of a “built body,” the immediate question is what it means for a body to be “built.” Building a body is often understood in terms of constructing the body according to some alleged ideal. The metaphor seems obvious: we build buildings, for example, by following the blueprint. Building, however, is a more inclusive concept that is not justified merely through reference to the standardization of what has been built. In bodybuilding, the thin-normative “ideal” body blueprint explained by Levan (2014) is rejected in favor of an alternative muscular-body blueprint around which the body is systematically built, and in fat, that same “ideal” blueprint is rejected utterly in favor of nondiscriminating body-acceptance. In this way, bodybuilding and fat share a common basis and a divergent disposition: bodybuilding adheres to relatively masculinist norms of strength, rigid order, and conformity by adopting an extreme anthropometric alternative blueprint while fat challenges those norms in favor of an equally valid yet more fluid, organic, amorphous understanding of the (politicized) fat body as having been built. That is, bodybuilding currently rejects the fat body, and fat bodybuilding challenges normativity by expanding the notion of the built body itself. The prevailing notion that the bodybuilder’s body has been built whereas the fat body has not is one that requires reconsideration and ultimately opens the door for the fat body to enjoy similar respect as is afforded to the traditional muscularly “built” body.

Fat activism and visibility politics

Fat activism is rooted in scholarship that builds upon and then moves beyond seminal works such as *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement* (Cooper 1999), *Fat and Proud: The Politics of Size* (Cooper 1998), and *Fat! So? Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size!* (Wann 1998). Fat bodybuilding draws on this history and finds specific theoretical grounding within Cooper’s (2016) view of fat activism as cultural work and her imperative for forging access for fat bodies, particularly in unwelcome spaces.

One cultural component of fat activism aims at making fat more visible. As Cooper (2016) phrased it, “Creative and cultural expression forms a substantial part of fat activism... Cultural production in fat activism makes fat embodiment and [the] fat activist community visible” (68). For Cooper (2016), cultural production within fat activism depends on securing access for fat bodies, and access specifically “refers to the ability of people to enter a

place, somewhere they want to go. Access is important in fat activism because it is common for fat people to experience political, psychological, social and physical exclusion in the world. The ability to enter a place creates the ability to transform it” (162). Once fat bodies are given access to cultural spaces, a window opens up for social transformation (Cooper 2016: 162).

Both cultural work and access are co-constituted, however, creating a Catch-22 for fat that has parallels in the experiences of other oppressed groups and yet applies uniquely to fat bodies. Specifically, to change the culture, fat bodies need access to those spaces in which they are most unwelcome, and yet to gain access, the culture must change to allow space for fat bodies. Compounding this challenge, access generates possibilities for being seen, which provides opportunities yet entails specific forms of privilege-preserving pushback (cf. Bailey 2017) and harm, as “affective responses of shame, disgust, and disorientation [are] often attached to the encounter with the image of the fat body” (Kargbo 2013: 160).

Thus, fat bodybuilding must proceed aware of the problems inherent to visibility politics, which have been significant, even perilous, in the LGBT/queer communities (cf. Duggan 2003). Particularly, there are potential perils in making the excluded more visible on the front end of visibility politics—participants will face ridicule, shame, and disgust while risking that their visibility will provoke backlash and greater exclusion, marginalization, and oppression. Additionally, there are the inevitable problems associated with acceptance of any variant of the queer deemed most palatable within the mainstream through visibility (e.g., married gay couples with standard families, just like their straight counterparts but same-sex). These can evoke exploitation and thus further oppressions through neoliberalization and tokenized “acceptance” along with further justification for marginalizing more radical presentations (Duggan 2003).

Why fat bodybuilding?

Hence, I agree with Grombacher’s (2014) observation, “stigma, rather than fat, is the true enemy to be conquered” (ii), and with Cooper’s (2010), “it is not the fat body that is at issue, but the cultural production of fatphobia” (1020). Despite rejecting idealized standards of anthropometry, competitive bodybuilding insists on situating itself as an exaggerated yet paradigmatic symbol of fatphobia, judgment, shame, and vilification, which makes it a primary target for disruption by fat activism. Disrupt the mechanisms of production and distribution and a new counternarrative can emerge to undermine dominant values that produce shame, disgust, and stigma. As Levan (2014) wrote, “In an egalitarian society, heightening people’s awareness of adverse effects of standardization of spaces is crucial. One size does not fit all and the invisible needs to be made visible” (127). The immediate

goal of fat bodybuilding is therefore to disrupt sizeism and other variations of oppression such as sexism, ageism, racism, classism, transphobia, pro-anorexia, thinspiration, and fitspiration, within bodybuilding-relevant cultural spaces (cf. Chrisler and Barney 2017; Lupton 2017), so it aims to enable politicized fat bodies to creditably enter the most pronounced adipophobic environments (“environment[s] that create fat hatred and weight stigma” [O’Hara and Taylor 2014: 272]).

This allows fat bodybuilders to disrupt fatphobic discourses and assumptions embedded within “healthism” narratives (i.e., “health as a moral imperative or a social responsibility to the political order” [Bacon and Aphramor 2014: 137–138]) that circulate within bodybuilding-related spaces (gyms). Furthermore, fat bodybuilding seeks to challenge dominant “obesity” discourses and their vast array of accompanying harms (cf. Greenhalgh 2015; Herndon 2014; Saguy and Almeling 2005; Ward, Beausoleil, and Heath 2017; inter alia). This situates fat bodybuilding in parallel to a vein of disruptive scholarship exploring wheelchair bodybuilding as challenging ableism (Sparkes, Brighton, and Inckle 2017). Indeed, fat bodybuilding seeks to address a persistent problem articulated by Levan (2014), who explained that anthropometric prejudice forces bodies to conform to dominant concepts of “ideal proportion as it persists in the representation of the human body through visual means” (119). That is, fat bodybuilding seeks to disrupt the “moral discourse around fatness” (Cooper 2008) that lies at the center of and reinforces fat exclusion. Fat is not a moral issue. Weight bias and fatphobia, however, are moral issues and thus concerns for social justice activism. Consequently, fat bodybuilding can perhaps best be understood through a social justice lens (Nutter et al. 2016) with the co-constituted aims of reinventing bodybuilding and changing the discourses that inexorably link fat with morality (Metzl, Kirkland, and Kirkland 2010). The ultimate question that underlies fat bodybuilding, then, is: *Who are they to judge?* Particularly, who are they (judges, audiences, bodybuilders, society, etc.) to judge the legitimacy of anyone’s built body?

That said, as competitive bodybuilding is already well-developed sport with long-standing assumptions dominating its cultural space, introducing fat bodybuilding will present considerable fat-exclusionary pushback that seeks to maintain current standardized norms and expectations (cf. Bailey 2017). Overcoming this problem requires understanding sport in a broader way.

Like most sports, bodybuilding has two aspects. First, it embodies Foucault’s (1988) “technologies of the self” applied to the realm of sport (Markula 2003; cf. Scraton and Flintoff 2002) and can be seen as a means by which athletes seek personal meaning (see esp. Guthrie and Castelnovo 2001). In this regard, building a (politicized) fat body already falls under the designation of bodybuilding as sport as technology of the self, and fat bodybuilding is already a sport, even recognizing inbuilt paradoxes of conformity (Chapman 1997; Markula 2003;

Wesely 2001). These views are not identical but are consistent with the use of sport as a postmodern disruption (see Pronger 1998) and with seeing new sporting activities as intentional parodies (see Shogan and Davidson 1999). Rather, the intention to engage in postmodern critique and parodic disruption, even through sport (as seen in the Fattylympics), is itself an application of Foucault's technology of the self-intersecting with sport in a way relevant to fat activists.

Second, aesthetic exhibition sports like bodybuilding are defined by rules, competition, and replicability of outcomes, which depend on judging criteria. Under prevailing bodybuilding rules, fat is excluded and fat bodies are dismissed, so fat bodybuilding will (at first) need to exist in parallel with its own unique set of rules (International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness, n.d.) enter and remake bodybuilding spaces in a more fat-welcoming way. That is, fat bodybuilding must adopt rules and guidelines consistent with the overall conceptual ethos of "body-building" while being both fat-inclusive and disruptive to existing norms. To proceed, this requires being cognizant of the significant challenges that arise when marginalized groups attempt to assimilate the norms and ideals dominant within sports and sporting enclaves (see Davidson 1996; Symons 2010; e.g., for insight on how this played out in the queer context of the Gay Games, which faced considerable pushback from the outside as well as from within the LGBT community). It also demands acknowledging ways in which success for the fathlete may compound problems for the fat subject who remains outside of its purview (cf. Crawford 2017). Of course, this subject is best discussed by fat scholars and fathletes, so I proceed combining 50 years' experience in professional bodybuilding with having been introduced (by my granddaughter) to fat studies literature and perspectives, thus made aware of the free pass to which I was previously oblivious due to my thin (and other) privilege, which limits my perspective.

Fat bodybuilding

Developing guidelines defining competitive fat bodybuilding alongside yet within competitive bodybuilding requires understanding how current judging criteria are hostile to fat and fat bodies. Currently, bodybuilding is organized hyperexclusively and not only excludes fat and fat bodies while normatively placing an unrealistic premium upon a hyper-"fit" aesthetic, but also focuses almost entirely upon categorizing and judging bodies accordingly. Competitors are segregated according to embodied characteristics such as weight, sex/gender, physicality, size, and competition type (Santonja 2017). They are then judged according to strict "ideals" and subsequently ranked by a scoring system centered on features such as overall muscularity, symmetry, proportion, thinness of waist, comprehensive or specific physique (including "classic" physique), extremely low body-fat composition, and successful display of these features (via

posing while wearing clothing such as posing trunks or bikinis). As a result, to be competitive, bodybuilders adhere to a narrowly defined, explicitly fat-exclusionary rubric preoccupied by anthropometry against which almost no variation is permitted (cf. Wesely 2001), and do so while participating and perpetuating the demands of the existing neoliberal system (cf. Land 2015). This seems inconsistent with fat activism and the body-positivity movement, which seek to remove judgment from any body and to value diversity of body shape while putting emphasis upon those bodies currently most undervalued—fat bodies. Any extension to bodybuilding that seeks to include politicized fat bodies must remain true to this defining goal.

Though no single approach can be perfect, I therefore offer the following template for “rules” governing a competitive aesthetic sport of fat bodybuilding:

- (1) Any-body can enter. There are no weight classes, size, ability, or gender restrictions.
- (2) Entrants are judged on their capacity to showcase fat through poses (which may be adapted from traditional bodybuilding) that display fat in a body-positive way. This runs in direct parallel to the traditional bodybuilding showcasing of muscle, which is just another tissue of the body, earning fat bodybuilding credit as a fat-based sporting endeavor that interprets the notion of the “built body” in an ontologically broader way.
- (3) Entrants may wear “fatshion” of their choice (see Harju and Huovinen 2015). (That is, they may dress however they feel comfortable, though posing outfits should ideally showcase fat in a body-positive way.)
- (4) All participants are given equal posing opportunities as other bodybuilders participating in separate categories.

The first guideline, “any-body can enter,” exists for fat bodybuilding to avoid becoming complicit in exclusionary attitudes about bodies—even if those bodies cannot be considered “sufficiently fat” to be *fat* bodies (Cooper 2016). Thus, the purpose of fat bodybuilding cannot be to provide a “safe space” for fat bodies. As Cooper (2016) pointed out, “While the impetus to create safe space is laudable, the reality of its policing is troubling. The distinction between insiders and outsiders is not necessarily clear. The perceived transgressors may be part of the very fabric of fat activism, they cannot be turned out or avoided, nor should they be” (164–165). She explained, a “safe space is not safe for everyone who might have a claim to it. People experience painful exclusion when they disrupt the tacit agreement of sameness, or are the wrong kind of people, or simply reflect intolerable taboos” (Cooper 2016: 165). In this sense, fat bodybuilding officials must remain anthropometrically neutral. Rather than creating a safe space for fat bodies, then, fat bodybuilding creates a disruptive political space in

which fat bodies are no longer considered less valid than other bodies. In other words, people with any body would be allowed to enter.

The value of such an endeavor for fat activism is almost beyond question, even if only in concept (though in terms of implementation, there exists an obvious parallel to trans inclusion within women's sports, which is slowly gaining ground [Buzuvis 2011]). Returning to Levan (2014), "The preference for representing the human figure in its 'ideal' form and in perfect proportion persists even today" (125). Though she referred to graphical representations of the body, such as DaVinci's *Vitruvian Man*, the blueprinting impulse is applicable throughout society and is paradigmatic within competitive bodybuilding, even while bodybuilding, like fat, intrinsically defies it. Thus, not only would fat activism benefit from the inclusion of fat and fat bodies within bodybuilding, bodybuilding itself would be improved. As Levan (2014) noted, "Far from promoting healthy lifestyles, weight-loss programs focus on reshaping the body in order to conform to beauty ideals that require participants to engage in symbolic self-mutilating, and distorted behaviors in order to gain success." This generalizes to all programs demanding bodily conformity to idealized forms, shapes, and sizes and is especially true in competitive bodybuilding, where the minimum standards of idealized form are exaggerated extremes of human physicality.

A new opportunity for fat

Fat bodybuilding presents a unique opportunity for fat activism. While it is debatable whether or not fat activism is "losing touch with its earlier radical energy... [and] causing it to become inaccessible" (Cooper 2016: 162), what is clear is that fat activism has made absolutely no inroads into the realm of bodybuilding—despite a shared defiance of anthropometric standards (cf. Levan 2014) and shared ontological status of a "built body." Fat bodybuilding is thus offered as a way to reify the "political imaginations of the fat community" (Cooper 2016) by entering a cultural arena that was hitherto unpenetrated. With this move, fat bodybuilding is a unique chance to repudiate conventional beauty, diets, weight-loss culture, weight bias, anthropometric prejudice, and associated factors that operate in normative cultural milieus. It also takes advantage of this opportunity within a unique cultural arena where fat-shaming is taken to an extreme, fat is (currently) demonized and judged, and the disgrace of fat bodies is valorized.

To advance fat bodybuilding, entrenched cultural and moral systems must be destabilized, and deliberate critical rethinking of normative bodies, behaviors, and attitudes is needed. Cooper is correct to claim that fat activism presents "limitless opportunities for social transformation" (Cooper 2016: 216). She was also correct in her assertion that ideas germinated within fat activism should "move beyond the world of the university" (5) and that we

need to develop a “new activism” (217). Fat bodybuilding presents a unique opportunity to fulfill Cooper’s ambition by drawing upon the methods and successes in pushing fat acceptance into culture achieved by fatshion modeling and blogging (Brown 2017; Czerniawski 2015), including in sport (Chastain n.d.a, n.d.b). Given these moral, epistemological, ontological, and extrascholastic ambitions, fat bodies can enter venues to which they have been explicitly forbidden. In fact, it is precisely because fat bodies have been physically prohibited entry into these spaces and accompanying discourses that there should be equal and respected access. Fat bodybuilding is one such opportunity.

Notes on contributor

Richard Baldwin is an emeritus professor of history at Gulf Coast State College who has dedicated his retirement to fighting oppression and promoting social justice. He is a professional bodybuilder with more than 50 years of experience in the sport.

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