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## Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture

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*This article analyzes print and television representations of baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan to reveal how hegemonic masculinity is reproduced in mediated sport. The analysis concerns how the media have covered and commodified Ryan throughout his career. Five distinguishing features are analyzed: Ryan as the embodiment of male athletic power, as an ideal image of the capitalist worker, as a family patriarch, as a white rural cowboy, and as a phallic symbol.*

**Keyword:** Sports—Television; Sports—Print Media; Ryan, Nolan; Masculinity

Baseball pitcher Nolan Ryan, in his mid-forties, has become a national phenomenon. Although his major league baseball career spans over twenty-five years, he has received considerable publicity in the last few years following his seventh no-hitter in 1991, his 300th victory in 1990, and his 5,000th strikeout in 1989. With national endorsements for Advil, Bic, Nike, Wrangler Jeans, and Major League Baseball itself, he also has become a prominent sports celebrity. Sportswriters have called him "the ageless wonder," "a living legend," "miracle man," and "the last real sports hero."

This article examines print and television representations of Nolan Ryan as an illustration of how images of male athletes are reproduced in American culture. Specifically, I argue that the media have functioned hegemonically by personifying Ryan as an archetypal male athletic hero. In the next section, I present five distinguishing features of hegemonic masculinity and discuss the general role of mediated sport in reinforcing these features. Following this, the mass media's role in reproducing these features is analyzed.

### Hegemonic Masculinity and American Sports Culture

As Connell (1990) defined it, *hegemonic masculinity* is "the culturally idealized form of masculine character" (p. 83) which emphasizes "the connecting of masculinity to toughness and competitiveness" as well as "the subordination of women" and "the marginalization of gay men" (p. 94). Connell argued that such an idealized form of masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is widely accepted in a culture and when that acceptance reinforces the dominant gender ideology of the culture. "Hegemonic masculinity," concluded Hanke (1990), "refers to the social ascendancy of a particular version or model of masculinity that, operating on the terrain of 'common sense' and conventional morality, defines 'what it means to be a man'" (p. 232). *great!*

### Distinguishing Features of Hegemonic Masculinity

Media critics and scholars of gender ideology have described at least five features of hegemonic masculinity in American culture: (1) physical force and control, (2) occupational achievement, (3) familial patriarchy, (4) frontiersmanship, and (5) heterosexuality (see Brod, 1987; Connell, 1990; Jeffords, 1989; Kaufman, 1987; Kimmel, 1987a).

First, masculinity is hegemonic when power is defined in terms of physical force and control. According to Connell (1983), "force and competence are . . . translations into the language of the body of the social relations which define men as holders of power, women as subordinate [and] this is one of the main ways in which the superiority of men becomes "naturalized" (p. 28). In this way, the male body comes to represent power, and power itself is masculinized as physical strength, force, speed, control, toughness, and domination (Komisar, 1980; Messner, 1988, 1990).

Second, masculinity is hegemonic when it is defined through occupational achievement in an industrial capitalistic society (Ochberg, 1987; Tolson, 1977; Whyte, 1956). Work itself can become defined along gender lines. "Hegemony closely involves the division of labor," wrote Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1987), "the social definition of tasks as either "men's work" or "women's work," and the definition of some kinds of work as more masculine than others" (p. 94).

Third, masculinity is also hegemonic as patriarchy—"the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general" (Lerner, 1986, p. 239). Traditionally, such patriarchal representations include males as "breadwinners," "family protectors," and "strong father figures" whereas females are "housewives," "sexual objects," and "nurturing mothers." In fact, Segal (1990) argued that modern representations of the so-called "sensitive father" have remained hegemonic insofar as "the contemporary revalorization of fatherhood has enabled many men to have the best of both worlds" because "they are more involved in what was once the exclusive domain of women but, especially in relation to children, they are sharing its pleasures more than its pains" (p. 58). (See also Hearn, 1987; Pleck, 1987).

Fourth, masculinity is hegemonic as symbolized by the daring, romantic frontiersman of yesteryear and of the present-day outdoorsman. Frederick Jackson Turner's so-called "frontier thesis" (Berquist, 1971; Billington, 1971; Carpenter, 1977) argues that the general US image is so defined. In this context, the cowboy stands very tall as an archetypal image reproduced and exploited in literature, film and advertising (Cawelti, 1976; Kimmel, 1987b; Maynard, 1974; Rushing, 1983). As reconstructed in media representations of the western genre, the cowboy is a white male with working-class values (see Wright, 1975).

Finally, masculinity is hegemonic when heterosexually defined. Rubin (1985) refers to the "sex hierarchy" and predictably, the type of sexuality that rules "is 'good', 'normal', and 'natural' " . . . "heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial" (p. 280). Thus, hegemonic male sexuality "embodies personal characteristics [which] are manifest by adult males through exclusively social relationships with men and primarily sexual relationships with women" and it "requires not being effeminate (a 'sissy') in physical appearance or mannerisms; not having relationships with men that are sexual or overly intimate; and not failing in sexual relationships with women" (Herek, 1987, pp. 72-73).

Symbolism of male sexuality has received considerable attention from media critics (see Duncan, 1990; Dyer, 1985; Fiske, 1987; Segal, 1990) and not surprisingly, much of this symbolism is thought to center on the penis as "the symbol of male potency . . . that appears to legitimate male power" (Dyer, 1985, p. 31). As Fiske (1987) argued, "the phallus is a cultural construct: it bears a culture's meanings of masculinity and attempts to naturalize them by locating them in the physical sign of maleness—the penis" (p. 210).

### Mediated Sport and Hegemonic Masculinity

Perhaps no single institution in American culture has influenced our sense of masculinity more than sport. Throughout our history, dominant groups have successfully persuaded many Americans to believe that sport builds manly character, develops physical fitness, realizes justice, promotes order, and even prepares young men for war (see Dubbert, 1979). More recently, American football's hostile takeover of the more pastoral baseball as our "national pastime" has reinforced a form of masculinity which emphasizes sanctioned aggression, (para)militarism, the technology of violence, and other patriarchal values (Real, 1975; Real, 1989). The corporatization of sports also has provided far more opportunities for male participants than for female participants and has placed far more emphasis on marginalizing women as cheerleaders, spectators, and advertising images. Indeed, Naison's (1972) conclusion twenty years ago still applies: "as long as the social relations of contemporary capitalism generate a need for violent outlets and a vicarious experience of mastery in American men, the corporations will be glad to finance the sports industry and mold it in their own image" (p. 115).

The mass media, as key benefactors of institutionalized sports (see Jhally, 1989), have thus been a powerful site for fashioning hegemony. "Sports tend to be presented in the media," wrote Hargreaves (1982), "as symbolic representations of a particular kind of social order, so that in effect they become modern morality plays, serving to justify and uphold dominant values and ideas" (p. 128). For example, scholars have demonstrated that mediated sports reaffirm mainstream values such as teamwork, competition, individualism, nationalism, achievement, and others (see Duncan, 1983; Real, 1989; Trujillo & Ekdom, 1985).

Media representations of sport reproduce and reaffirm the features of hegemonic masculinity described earlier in important ways. Media representations of sport privilege these features of masculinity when they emphasize these features or link them positively with cultural values and when they ignore and/or condemn alternative features of opposing gender ideologies on preferences such as feminism or homosexuality (see Bennett, Whitaker, Woolley Smith & Sablove, 1987; Bryson, 1987). Media representations of sport naturalize hegemonic masculinity when they depict its features as conventional or acceptable and depict alternatives to it as unconventional or deviant (see Nelson, 1980; Wernick, 1987; Whitson, 1990). Finally, media

representations of sport personalize hegemonic masculinity when they elevate individuals who embody its features as role models or heroes worthy of adoration and emulation and when they castigate individuals who do not (see Hargreaves, 1982, 1986). "To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes" (Connell, 1990, p. 94). In Texas Ranger pitcher Nolan Ryan, the mass media have found an exemplar to celebrate as a hero and they have reinforced hegemonic masculinity through him in several ways.

### Reproducing Hegemonic Masculinity Through Nolan Ryan

Nolan Ryan's major league baseball career has spanned over 25 years as he has played for the New York Mets (1966-1971), the California Angels (1972-1979), the Houston Astros (1980-1988), and the Texas Rangers (1989-present). Although Ryan was publicized throughout his career, he became a mediated hero and celebrity in recent years; he also has become a striking image of American masculinity as well.

This analysis is based on an examination of over 250 articles in popular print media including newspapers (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Houston Post*, *The Dallas Morning News*, and others) and magazines (general ones such as *Life*, *Time*, and *Gentlemen's Quarterly*, and sports-oriented ones such as *Sport*, *Sports Illustrated*, and *The Sporting News*). The dates of these print materials span the period from 1965, the year before Ryan made his major league debut with the Mets, to 1991, the year Ryan pitched his seventh no-hitter at the age of forty-four. I also examined over 100 local (Dallas, Texas) and national television news reports videotaped during the time Ryan first signed with the Texas Rangers until the summer of 1990. Finally, I examined over 30 print and television advertisements featuring Ryan, most of which appeared in the last few years.

Method

### Pitching With Power: Ryan as the Embodiment of Male Athleticism

Media representations of Nolan Ryan have reaffirmed the power of the male body. Throughout his career, Ryan has been described as a "power pitcher." Early media coverage during Ryan's career with the Mets focused on his unique ability to throw the ball with force. *The New York Times* characterized him as "the rookie pitcher with the cannonball serve" (Durso, 1968, p. 24) while *The Sporting News* labeled him the "Texas flame-thrower" (Lang, 1968, p. 26). A *Life* magazine article revealed that Ryan had "a fast ball that has been described as faster than Bob Feller's (98.6 mph)—the fastest ever timed." ("Brine for Nolan Ryan," 1968, p. 78). These early articles suggest that Ryan embodied the force of male athletic power.

However, although Ryan had the force, he did not have control. [See Connell's (1983) distinction.] He was described in *The New York Times* as the "tall, slim Texan . . . who has not yet mastered control and consistency" ("These are the Mets," 1969, p. 57) and "as wild as the spinning Black Dragon ride at Astroworld" (Chass, 1970, p. 59). Reporters presented this lack of control as a challenge to Ryan's athletic success. If Ryan could not control his ability, his "heat" would be just a "flash in the pan" and he would fail as many fastball pitchers had failed before him.

Ryan, though, would not achieve success with the Mets. On December 10, 1971, he was traded to the California Angels. In a *Los Angeles Times* report, Angel general manager Harry Dalton used synecdoche to emphasize Ryan's promise: "We've obtained the best arm in the National League and one of the best in baseball. We know Ryan has had control problems, but at 24 he may be ready to come into his own" (Newhan, 1971, p. 3, part III). At this point, Ryan was disembodied power; he was "the best arm" in baseball who might develop into someone complete.

With the Angels, Ryan developed enough control to win and set several pitching records. With success, his status as power pitcher was embellished by the sports media. One feature in *Sports Illustrated* documented that a group of Rockwell scientists timed his pitches during a game at speeds of 100.8 and 100.9 miles per hour, the fastest pitches ever recorded (Fimrite, 1974). His dominance over batters was ritualized in sportspage cliches, as when power-hitter Reggie Jackson said this about Ryan: "He's faster than instant coffee. He's faster than a speeding bullet and more powerful than a locomotive. He throws wall-to-wall heat" (Newhan, 1972, p. 1, part III). And stories about Ryan's power took on a mythological significance as well, as when a feature in *The Saturday Evening Post*, titled "Nolan Ryan: Whoosh!" made a direct case: "All the while he was leaving a trail of incidents that formed a legend—or myth. The day he tried out with the Mets before signing, his fastball broke through the hands of catcher John Stephenson and broke his collarbone. At Williamsport, Pennsylvania, he bounced a warmup pitch in front of the plate and gave catcher Duffy Dyer a concussion. Not with a fastball, but with a changeup" (Jacobson, 1974, p. 16). Ryan's power—manifested in his force and, in part, in his ability to hurt people—was celebrated as baseball mythology.

In his later years with the Astros and Rangers, Ryan still was portrayed as a fast, power pitcher. One feature in *Gentlemen's Quarterly* put it this way: Ryan "is grateful he can remain true to his singular purpose, which is to rear back, show his numbers and throw a baseball that becomes, in its flight, the approximate size of a ball bearing" (Hoffer, 1988, p. 292).

With age also came media reconstructions of other features of Ryan's masculinity. One article in *The Dallas Morning News*, titled "Pitching with pain not new to Ryan," told readers that Ryan had pitched his sixth no-hitter with a stress fracture in his back but that because of his "will power" he was able to "block it out" (Frale, 1990, p. 6B). A feature in *Sport* magazine even reconstructed his toughness as a child, quoting his mother: "'I remember when we first came to Alvin, this young wife, a friend of ours, kept pestering me to take Nolan to the doctor,' says his mother, 'because he didn't cry enough'" (Furlong, 1980, p. 68).

Although he came to be portrayed as a complete pitcher, some writers continued to disembody his power. Features in *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (Hoffer, 1988) and *Life* (Brewster, 1989) presented photographs of Ryan's disembodied right arm; in the former feature, past Dodger pitcher Don Sutton described Ryan's arm as a weapon, as "a howitzer" (Hoffer, 1988, p. 292). Correspondent Dick Schaap concluded his *ABC Evening News* report about Ryan's 5,000th strikeout on August 23, 1989 by providing the length of the appendage: "Nolan Ryan's arm is 35 inches long. It will fit perfectly in the Hall of Fame." An article in the *New York Post* noted that Ryan was "blessed with the most remarkable arm in the history of the game" but it cut off his legs as well: "Ryan has a pair of tree-trunk legs that supply a great deal of the power behind his fastball" (Hecht, 1983, p. 102). Even in the end, the force—the essence—of Ryan's power remained disembodied.

### **Pitching Records and Pitching Products: Ryan as Capitalist Worker**

If sport and work independently play a role in producing hegemonic masculinity as some have suggested (Fiske, 1987), then the construction of sport *as work* is even more powerful. The mass media represent sport as work in at least three ways. First, mediated sport reaffirms the Protestant work ethic. "Athletes," wrote Sadler (1976), "often are aware that what they do is not play. Their practice sessions are workouts; and to win the game they have to work harder" (p. 245). Second, as in American society, there is in sport an overemphasis on success as occupational achievement, defined (and quantified) in terms of team victories and individual records. If "achievement and successful performance (the primary definers of masculinity) are the fundamental requirements of capitalism," as Fiske (1987, p. 210) argued, then sport is a key arena for displaying exemplars of successful and unsuccessful men in a capitalist society. Finally, sport is commodified inasmuch as leagues, teams, and individual athletes are sold as commodities in a competitive marketplace (see Brohm, 1978; Jhally, 1989; Rigauer, 1981).

Media coverage of Nolan Ryan has reinforced all of these features and, as such, he has been reproduced as a successful male worker in an industrial capitalist society. First, Ryan's work ethic has been exalted throughout his career. When he enjoyed early success with the Angels, one *Sports Illustrated* story quoted former player and then coach, John Roseboro, as saying: "There is no pitcher in baseball today who is in better shape than Nolan Ryan. He knows what work is, and he works" (Leggett, 1973, p. 27). Then, as he continued to achieve success as a power pitcher in his later years, his work ethic was reified in vivid detail when publications such as *Newsweek* and *The Dallas Morning News* printed his entire "rigid workout routine" (see Givens, 1989; Ringolsby, 1990). Ryan's commitment to this workout was described as so regimented that a *USA Today* reporter wrote that even after throwing his sixth no-hitter, "Ryan was riding the stationary bicycle in the middle of the Rangers' clubhouse" as "his teammates were either fastening their ties, drinking another beer or driving back to the hotel. . . ." "You don't deviate from your routine," he said (Shea, 1990, p. 8C).

Second, Ryan's success has been quantified in records of individual achievement. The Texas Rangers 1991 Media Guide states that Ryan has set or tied 48 major league records (see Texas Rangers, 1991, pp. 71-91). Most of these records involve two categories of athletic dominance: no-hitters and strikeouts.

The no-hitter is one of the most dominating forms of pitching performance over athletic opponents. Ryan achieved his record seventh no-hitter in 1991 at the age of 44; Sandy Koufax is second on the list with four. Ryan's no-hitters were celebrated in media accounts and, with each one, the lore of previous no-hitters grew in significance. One sportswriter for *The New York Times* retold the story of his second no-hitter—against the Tigers in 1973—on the occasion of his fourth one—against the Orioles in 1975: "With two outs in the ninth, Norm Cash of the Detroit Tigers strolled up to the plate in surrender. Instead of a bat, he was carrying a broken-off piano leg. He even got into the batter's box with it before glancing back at Ron Luciano, the umpire." (Anderson, 1975, p. 39). Through coverage of Ryan's no-hitters, the media defined complete dominance over others as ultimate occupational success.

Ryan's strikeout achievements also were praised as records of dominance, especially his record 5,000th strikeout on August 21, 1989 against Rickie Henderson of the Oakland Athletics. Stories about this milestone appeared on national news broadcasts and in major daily newspapers across the country while Texas papers published separate sections with stories, color posters, and "K" sign inserts; *Sports Illustrated* even ran a complete list of Ryan's 1,061 separate strikeout victims ("K," 1989). Reporters used testimony from baseball luminaries as well as unknown fans in attendance to corroborate the historic nature of the 5,000th strikeout; for example, the front page of the *Dallas Times Herald* quoted a nine-year-old boy who said "I'll probably tell my grandchildren it was the most exciting thing that ever happened in my life" (Henderson, 1989, p. A-1). A report in the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* indicated that President Bush, father of Ranger owner George W. Bush, watched the game on television and it published the full text of Bush's brief epideictic address which was played on the ballpark's Diamond Vision screen after the milestone strikeout (and which represented state support of Ryan's domination): "Congratulations Nolan Ryan. What an amazing achievement. Indeed, everybody that loves baseball pays tribute to you on this very special record-breaking occasion. Well done, my friend. Well done, my noble friend" ("President's Message," 1989, p. 6, section 3).

Although all of Ryan's milestone achievements of domination were exalted, some sportswriters still charged that he was mediocre in terms of the occupational bottom line—the won-loss column. For example, Ryan's career record after the 1979 season with the Angels was 167-159; when Ryan became a free agent that year after he and Angel general manager Buzzi Bavasi failed to agree on a new contract, Bavasi told *Los Angeles Times* reporters that he could replace Ryan "with two 8-7 pitchers," a sarcastic reference to Ryan's 16-14 record in 1979 (Littwin, 1980, p. 1, part III); in the same article, the reporter himself critiqued Ryan with the statement, "He's won numerous battles but he keeps losing the war" (Littwin, 1980, p. 1, part III).

In fact, ultimate occupational achievement eluded Ryan until late in his career when, on July 31, 1990, at age 43, he won his 300th game, becoming only the 20th pitcher in history to do so. The Associated Press story on Ryan's victory over the Milwaukee Brewers began with this lead: "Nolan Ryan, a pitcher defined by great numbers, finally got the number that defines great pitchers" (see "No. 300," 1990, p. E1). A reporter for *The Dallas Morning News*, commenting on Ryan's critics, wrote that "No. 300 cuts their vocal chords" (Horn, 1990, p. 2H); a columnist for the same newspaper wrote that Ryan's 300th win "represents a triumphant and unarguable validation of the man and his heroic career" (Casstevens, 1990, p. 2B); another columnist for the same newspaper went even further: "God is good. But Nolan Ryan may be better." (Galloway, 1990b, p. 1B). His status as a successful male achiever at last was confirmed. Even so, Ryan's life-long quest for success epitomized the paradox of masculinity in a capitalist society that Fiske (1987) described when he wrote that "men are cast into ceaseless work and action to prove their worth" such that "masculinity becomes almost a definition of the superhuman, so it becomes that which can never [at least rarely] be achieved" (p. 210).

Finally, Ryan has been represented as a valuable commodity with instrumental impacts on his teams. A *Sports Illustrated* feature on Ryan called him "an Angel who makes turnstiles sing" (Leggett, 1973, p. 26).<sup>1</sup> Yankee-owner George Steinbrenner, quoted in *Sports Illustrated*, called Ryan "one of the most desirable quantities in baseball" (Keith, 1979, p. 34). Reporters then bragged for Ryan when he signed with the Astros as the first million dollar free agent to become "not only the best-paid player in the history of baseball but one of the best paid players in the history of team sports"—at least in 1980 (Furlong, 1980, p. 66).

Reporters bragged for Ryan and his earning power in part because they represented him as a humble, honest man who was not preoccupied with money, unlike many other athletes who have been depicted as greedy, selfish men. One article in *The Sporting News*, titled "Ryan raps pay preoccupation," quoted Ryan, who then was making \$125,000, as saying that he had "never seen a ballplayer worth even \$250,000" and that he himself was "not bugged over money" because "I feel I have all I can do to keep my mind on conditioning and on pitching" (Durslag, 1976, p. 12). Years later when the Rangers exercised their option to keep Ryan for the 1990 season at an under-market-value of \$1.4 million, reporters commended Ryan's refusal to renegotiate as other athletes would have done; as he was quoted in one newspaper report: "That signature on your contract is the same as your word" (Galloway, 1990a, p. 1B). Reporters also reinforced Ryan's commodification of himself as an endorser and entrepreneur when they wrote that he was "a good spokesman" because "he uses the products he talks about" (Baldwin, 1990, p. 1A) and that he was a smart businessman who recently bought a bank and then "sat in on loan meetings" and "formulated bank policy" (Montville, 1991, p. 124).

In sum, as the media juxtaposed Ryan's values of hard work and modesty with his achievements and his earning power, they reaffirmed his identity as a successful businessman and reinforced the Protestant Ethic and system of American capitalism

