Annie Blazer’s 2015 work *Playing for God: Evangelical Women and the Unintended Consequences of Sports Ministry* offers insight into the inner workings and experiences of female Evangelical athletes in the United States of America. The book provides a structured overview of Blazer’s research findings from following: members of the Charlotte Lady Eagles semi-professional women’s soccer team, an Athletes in Action (AIA) women’s basketball team, and a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) summer camp. Quotations and conversations with the players are dominant throughout the book, providing tangible and substantial insight into the views and struggles of the athletes featured. Blazer uses an historical and ethnographic approach in her research drawing heavily on interviews, giving the reader unique access into the world of Evangelical sport ministry.

The book has an introduction, followed by six chapters which are as follows: conversion and witnessing, the embodied pleasures of sport, spiritual warfare and Christlikeness, Evangelical femininity, sexual desire and deviance, and faith off the field. Blazer then concludes the book with what she views as the consequences of sport ministry for the athletes involved. There is a well-researched “notes” section highlighting related terms and concepts, followed by an index. Themes featured in the book cover the gamut of conversion, witnessing, the embodied pleasures of playing sport, spiritual warfare, Evangelical femininity, sexual deviance, and gender.

A strong feature of Blazer’s book is the focus on how sport ministry seeks converts by leading through example in sporting venues. This includes practicing sport etiquette, and playing by the rules. This value of leading by example came to a head multiple times in the book as the pressure to win, and therefore have a better chance at evangelizing, came in conflict with gamesmanship. This is an issue fairly distinct to sport ministry, where the audience for the Evangelical message only exists if the team wins. The audience at sporting events includes non-believers and it is less likely that non-believers will see value in the Evangelical message if they do not consistently win. Each player had a different view regarding the to which extent pushing the technical rules of the game is morally acceptable within the frame of their ministry. This area of contention has little formal documentation, and Blazer gives this distinct struggle a voice.

Femininity and lesbianism are two areas in the book that were particularly captivating to read. Blazer outlines the various ways that the female body is monitored when it performs gender in a masculine sphere. Emphasis is placed on the player’s performative femininity, such as a wearing makeup during games, and having a traditional family present at the games. Blazer concludes: “these performances of traditional femininity serve to counter on-court performances of masculine behavior like rough play and physical prowess, as if to reassure the audience and the athletes themselves that women who are performing masculinity do so in a bounded and temporary way” (117). Pressures that encouraged performative femininity are extensively explored and Blazer offers insight into how that translates into a monitoring of those athletes who were unmarried.

With regard to sexual orientation, the positions of most athletes within sport ministry on homosexuality was in a state of flux, and thus different than the “typical” Evangelical positions. Blazer postulates through inference that this dissonance is due to: 1) players knowing lesbian athletes, 2) some players...
having same-sex desires themselves, and 3) the complex understanding of the nature of homosexual sin in Evangelical Christianity (130-131). Blazer skillfully navigates this area of dissonance by portraying the views and opinions of the female players including the views of a former player who came out as gay. The book captures the struggles facing athletes involved in sport ministry as they navigate identity and sexuality questions that are not conclusively addressed within their faith and church leadership.

Blazer alludes to the distinctly American Protestant process of ‘Muscular Christianity’, a movement whereby energetic evangelism joined with a stronger focus on maintaining masculinity to aid in explaining the traditional view of sport as a masculine sphere. She supplements this history with the lived experiences of female athletes. This is an innovative strength of the book. Blazer provides a voice for female athletes in a way that many historical sport narratives do not. This book contributes to the significant lacuna in literature and research on females in sport. Additionally, Blazer does not overshadow the voice of her interviewees with her own views, negotiating the implicit power dynamic between researcher and subjects expertly.

Playing for God would be a valuable supplementary tool for any course that touches on the intersections of sport, sport history, religion, or gender. The attention taken by Blazer in including quotes and anecdotes is evident and one of the many strengths of the book. The use of multiple teams across different sports emphasizes that the layers of struggle these athletes face are not solely confined to a particular contexts. The result is a carefully thought out account of popular culture’s influence on evangelical ministry and the influence of sport on Evangelicalism.

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