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## Assistant Professor Teaches Effects of Athletics on Culture and Sociology

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By Robby Nisenfeld

A native of Chicago, Cheryl Cooky knew little about Cal State Fullerton when she accepted a teaching position here last spring, and her friends in the Midwest knew even less.

But one topic repeatedly came up during her Windy City conversations.

“People may not know anything else about Fullerton,” Cooky said, “but they know the baseball team.”

That was no surprise to Cooky, assistant professor of kinesiology. Cooky, who has a doctorate in sociology from USC, is teaching “Sports, Games and Culture” and “Sports Sociology” and is well aware of the affect sports can have on culture and vice versa.

She tries to stress to her students that sports aren’t solely about competition or winning and losing, but can reflect the societal views on a grander scale.

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**“Sports is a powerful way to create national identity and to bring people together in times of adversity and crisis. After 9-11, I think everyone wanted New York to win [the World Series] and show people that we can move on and still play the World Series in New York even after something so tragic.”**

“Sport is a very complex social institution that’s intrinsically tied with other institutions like politics, religion and the military, and we tend to dismiss sports as entertainment,” Cooky said. “But when we study sports, we see there are other connections, and by understanding it, we can help understand our society. I think everyone is connected to sports in some way, whether they like it or not.”

Cooky said views of sports in America tend to be positive and are largely shaped by societal ideologies of individualism, equality and meritocracy. She said this is played out over and over again in narratives on television and in the movies, which often point to athletics as a way to triumph over adversity.

Movies like “Hoosiers,” “The Natural” and “Rudy” portray the idea that America is the land of opportunity, and those who work hard will be rewarded regardless of their gender, race, class or ability, Cooky said.

However, that isn’t the norm.

“Our positive view of sports is a commercialized view,” Cooky said. “What sociocultural studies of sports give us is not necessarily a negative view, but an empirical view. Based on research, sports may be a way for some kids to ‘get out of the ghetto,’ but for the vast majority of youth, this is not the case.”

Numerous factors, such as lack of money, transportation, parental involvement and the availability of sports programs can keep youngsters from realizing their athletic dreams, said Cooky, whose doctoral dissertation focused on sports programs for disadvantaged girls.

She said that societal beliefs of women and their place in sports have changed drastically over the centuries in this country.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, she said, sports served as a way to teach young boys how to be men. Women's involvement in sports was limited, largely until Title IX was enacted in 1972. Title IX is a federal act that prohibits sexual discrimination at educational institutions, and has served as a springboard for women's athletics.

Women's sports now have become so popular that professional leagues, such as the WNBA, have been able to survive and prosper.

"There's been a tremendous cultural shift in what it means to be a girl," Cooky said. "Before, an athlete wasn't a girl, and that's changed. Now, when you know a girl is an athlete, it's no big deal."

Not so in some parts of the world. In Afghanistan before the fall of the Taliban, for example, women could be beaten and killed for participating in sports.

Playing soccer, which still can be dangerous for women in Afghanistan, is viewed as a breakthrough and championed worldwide as a sign of freedom and opportunity.

Sports often have played this type of significant role in politics and helped galvanize groups, large and small.

Whether it's the way Cal State Fullerton pulled together when the Titans reached the College World Series or the way Americans rallied behind the U.S. Olympic hockey team when it squared off against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, or the nation cheering the New York Yankees following 9-11, sports can help unite entire communities.

"In 1980, when the U.S. defeated the Soviets in hockey, that wasn't just about sports. People viewed it as capitalism defeating

communism,” Cooky said. “In 1936, Jesse Owens won [several Olympic gold medals in Germany] and it was viewed as a triumph over Nazism and really changed some views internationally in terms of the black man’s inferiority both intellectually and physically.

“Sports is a powerful way to create national identity and to bring people together in times of adversity and crisis,” she added. “After 9-11, I think everyone wanted New York to win [the World Series] and show people that we can move on and still play the World Series in New York even after something so tragic.”

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