Creative inspiration to connect the teaching of English with sports dates back, for me, to 1987 when I met Jim Deatherage and heard about his Reading, Writing, and Running elective at Richland (Washington) High School. Imagine an English class with dedicated time to leave campus and go running! (Read about it in the September 1980 issue of *English Journal.*) More recently, ongoing conversations with teaching and coaching colleagues about mission-driven initiatives to promote the value of competitive sports within our school community spurred me to consider ways to build bridges between athletics and academics.

According to Veronica Boix Mansilla, principal investigator at the Interdisciplinary Studies Project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s Project Zero, “While empirical research is scarce, learning theorists have associated interdisciplinary learning with higher levels of mental complexity, perspective taking, beliefs about knowledge and inquiry, and complex collaboration” (*Edutopia*). For the past decade, I have chosen a different interdisciplinary theme each year to unify my eleventh-grade English classes (e.g., Music; Science/Technology; Food; Travel; Wealth & Poverty; The Environment; Murder, Mischief & Mayhem; etc.). So, why not sports?

By examining sports-related plots and motifs in our traditional study of literature, students could think deeply about the role(s) athletics should play in their education, the impact of sports on their ideas about character development, masculinity/femininity, race/ethnicity, and connections between sports and politics, economics, media, and religion. In *What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance in the United States*, Dave Zirin, sports editor of *The Nation* magazine, writes, “the very passion we invest in sports can transform it from a kind of mindless escape into a site of resistance. It can become an arena where the ideas of our society are not only present but also challenged” (qtd. in Morris 20). Thus, I began to envision what would become the theme for 2011–12: “The Games People Play: Sports in Society and Literature.” In addition to broadening my teaching repertoire and forging collaborative partnerships with peers, my year of sports enhanced relevance of subject matter and stimulated engagement in the learning process for many students as we tackled creative projects and new approaches to connecting literature with life. Here are the highlights.

**Talking about Sports**

To place our classroom work within a real-world context, I invited the sports editor of our local newspaper to speak to my students about sports journalism, his education, and his career path. Here was someone who chose to do for a living what we were about to do: talk about sports, read about sports, research and write about sports. The pile of newspapers he brought provided a hands-on introduction to the course theme as we scanned headlines about the end of the NFL lockout, the NCAA scandal at the University of Miami, Djokovic’s victory at
Students then personalized the topic by composing and sharing aloud brief and informal “Sports Autobiographies.” Responses elicited memories demonstrating varied connections to sports. For example, while one student told us about running the 4x100 relay in the state competition, another wrote about singing the National Anthem at a cross country meet, and yet another recounted the Silent Night basketball game when the student section could not cheer aloud until the team scored 13 or more points.

A final activity sparked passionate debate and taught students the importance of defining key terms in any argument. We asked, “Why does ESPN broadcast the Scripps Spelling Bee and the Nathan’s Famous Fourth of July Hot Dog Eating Contest?” Then, working together in small groups, students articulated a definition of “sports” by sharing personal opinions about what should and should not be considered a legitimate sport. Should cheerleading be considered a sport? What about NASCAR? Video games?

Reading about Sports

Following this introduction to the year’s theme, we began our traditional literary studies. Selected texts ranged widely from works with explicit connections to sports such as Alan Sillitoe’s short story, “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner” (in which the protagonist is an athlete and the plot involves his training for and running in a competitive race) to works with more subtle sports motifs such as Tennessee Williams’s play, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

Students easily traced overt references, including the title, to baseball while reading August Wilson’s Fences. They conjectured that the work might have something to say about achieving dreams and goals because they knew that in baseball slang, when a batter tries to hit a home run, he swings for the fences. Students also noted that there are nine scenes in the play and there are nine innings in a baseball game. Analyzing each scene as an inning would therefore be important: Who hits? Who scores? Who strikes out? Students observed that Troy Maxson, former baseball player for the Negro Leagues, peppers his speech with baseball terminology and metaphors; and in Troy’s backyard, which...
The role of sports in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, however, was more difficult to discern. Students identified characters connected to sports: Jay Gatsby is featured in a photograph at Oxford with a cricket bat in his hand; James Gatz lists “baseball and sports” on his boyhood schedule; Jordan Baker is a professional golfer; Tom Buchanan is a former college football hero (and current “polo player”); and Wolfsheim claims to have fixed the 1919 World Series. While students pondered the relationship between sports and money, we asked: Are some “sports” really just leisure activities open exclusively to the wealthy and privileged? Can marginalized people use sports to gain wealth and societal acceptance? When students recalled that Fitzgerald himself had tried out for (and been cut from) the football team at Princeton and had purportedly died while making notes on the next year’s football team in a Princeton Alumni Weekly, they decided that sports helps to develop the novel’s themes about the role of class competition in failed pursuits of success, glory, and fame and about the corruption of the American Dream.

Several coming-of-age novels highlight how sports can help young adults cross social, cultural, and racial divides. The protagonist of Sherman Alexie’s *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* struggles to balance individuality with membership in two very different communities (Wellpinit and Reardon). For Junior, playing basketball provides the bridge. Alexie’s novel also gave students opportunity to debate whether or not using Native American names and mascots in professional, collegiate, and high school sports teams reinforces and perpetuates stereotypes.

With Robert Cormier’s *The Chocolate War*, students traced how “civilized” games such as football, boxing, and pranks can escalate into bullying, institutional corruption, socioeconomic class conflict, and wars like Vietnam. Students explored the relationship between sports and aggression through open-ended discussions about questions from the study guide for the documentary *Not Just a Game*: “How might the violent ideal of masculinity found in sports culture—specifically the message that real men should be willing to inflict and endure tremendous amounts of pain—contribute to definitions of manhood beyond the world of sports? Does comparing sports to battle glamorize war?” (Morris 8).

Our society often mirrors the games we play, and examining those games provides a unique perspective on the development of US culture. To highlight for us the connections between the social and political history of the United States with the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947, one of the history teachers presented a guest lecture. Students then identified parallels between the progress of Jackie Robinson’s first season with the Brooklyn Dodgers and the multilayered plotline of Pete Hamill’s coming-of-age novel *Snow in August*, which interweaves the lives of Michael Devlin, Rabbi Hirsch, Frankie, Sonny, Jimmy, and Mister G. in 1947 Brooklyn. All sorts of heroes and villains feature prominently; students explored how mythological elements from comic books, Irish myths, Jewish myths, and baseball work together to develop the novel’s themes.

Ernest J. Gaines’s *A Gathering of Old Men* provides an entirely different look at racial integration via sports. Students compared and contrasted the old world of Fix Boutan (leader of a Cajun family known for violence toward blacks) with the new world of the 1970s symbolized by his youngest son, Gil (an athlete at LSU who has a positive experience with desegregation on the gridiron). Students readily identified the teamwork of Gil and his black partner, Cal (a duo dubbed “Salt and Pepper”), as an important part of the novel’s rising action, and LSU’s ultimate victory over Ole Miss as a symbolic element of the novel’s resolution.

Shifting focus to sports outside the United States, *The Sun Also Rises* led to discussions of the Hemingway Code and its expectations of the true fan, or aficionado (Jake Barnes), as well as its expectations of the athlete (Pedro Romero). Students explored rituals of the bullfight, the running of the bulls, the procession of bullfighters in the ring, the killing of the bull, and the giving of ceremonial gifts such as the bullfighter’s cape and the bull’s ear. In addition to discussions about sports as art, sports as performance, and sports as entertainment, students debated the ethical use of animals in sports (e.g., How should Auburn University respond to...
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PETA’s call to retire its eagles from their traditional pregame flights).

Creative Collaborations

The anchor text for the interdisciplinary curriculum, however, was *The Power of One* by Bryce Courtenay—a moving and lengthy coming-of-age novel about a British boy in the South Africa of the early 20th century (1939–51) who pursues his dream to become the welterweight champion of the world. Students evaluated Peekay’s quest by identifying significant factors affecting his athletic career: the source of his ambition; his coaches; his manager; his fan clubs; his rivals; his matches; his record; his schoolwork. Who/what helps him to succeed and who/what holds him back? Can sports act as an equalizer? To bring the sport to life, Andy Smith, program coordinator and head boxing coach at Westside Boxing Club in Chattanooga, Tennessee, came to campus. He allowed student volunteers to don headgear and gloves to demonstrate punches and moves, and he spoke about how sports can and should build moral character.

In addition to the boxing lingo and boxing metaphors found throughout the text, students examined the wide range of diction used by Courtenay including Afrikaner vernacular; typical adolescent vulgarities; scientific and botanical terminology; and African dialects such as Zulu and Fanagalo. To help students navigate this unfamiliar multicultural territory of the groups among whom Peekay so deftly moves, the school’s band director shared a Prezi presentation that he created on the differences between Western and African music (their purposes, instruments, sounds, musicians, and audiences). In a separate supplementary lesson, a colleague in the English department shared an image-packed PowerPoint about her homestay in Soweto during a college semester abroad studying nation-building, globalization, and the de-colonizing of the mind. In particular, she gave historical background on and contemporary views about the legacies of apartheid.

In March, we extended this interdisciplinary bridge-building mission through a cross-divisional collaboration. While eleventh graders read Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild*, the second graders in our Lower School read aloud numerous picture books about Alaska and the Iditarod. My students learned that for decades, despite graphic descriptions of animal cruelty, *The Call of the Wild* had been considered by many to be a children’s book. Then it became a popular choice for middle school English classes. Today, scholars write papers like “The Nature of the Beast in Jack London: Animality Studies and *The Call of the Wild*.” Subsequently, for their assessment, students identified not only the specific scenes, themes, and literary techniques in London’s novel that might appeal to younger readers but also the specific scenes, themes, and literary techniques that might appeal to older, more mature readers. Then they determined the most appropriate audience for the story—young children, teenagers, or adult readers—and defended their choices.

We enjoyed a PowerPoint presentation created by a middle school math teacher who had gone dog sledding in Alaska the previous summer with Junior Iditarod mushers. Her story powerfully conveyed that although *The Call of the Wild* was set well in the past, the geographical setting of the story is still vibrant and current. Seeing photos from the area, particularly along the Chilkoot Trail and Pass, helped students to visualize the ruggedness of the terrain and the hardships and challenges faced by the Klondikers. It also helped them understand that dog sledding, although it has evolved, is still a viable, important mode of transportation in Alaska, the Klondike, and the Yukon. Meanwhile, the elementary school children followed The Last Great Race online and engaged in many interdisciplinary lessons by relying on “The Iditarod Education Portal” at iditarod.com. During our “field trip” to the lower school classrooms, eleventh graders partnered with second graders to measure ingredients for trail mix and to write Trail Mail letters to the mushers they were following. We then enjoyed a special assembly led by Chattanooga physician and Iditarod veteran James Bardoner who brought to campus racing equipment, visual slides, and Sandy, one of his sled dogs.

Researching and Writing about Sports

In addition to composing the standard essays of interpretation that typically follow the reading of each literary text, students wrote personal narratives, gave “This I Believe” speeches, and drafted college application essays highlighting significant
people, places, events, and epiphanies in their lives. For these assignments of self-exploration, students identified coaches, teammates, rivals, and athletic competitions. For example, Caroline wrote about life as a competitive rider under the tutelage of her trainer: “He taught me how to drop everything, focus on one area or aspect of life, and chip away at it until it is perfect. Life is not about the balance of all things in moderation. Life is about having the passion to pursue what you love to do at the highest level. The world we live in is an all-or-nothing world; if you aren’t giving your all, you need to take your efforts elsewhere and explore different passions.”

Exploring passions is exactly what the I-Search Paper is all about. Coined by Ken Macrorie, the term refers to a work of writing that reflects who you are and what you care about—it’s a compelling story about your search for answers to a question that really matters to you. In addition to print and online sources, I required students to conduct at least two interviews, to make one site visit, and to generate original data through some kind of experience. H. G. Bissinger’s *Friday Night Lights* and Jon Krakauer’s *Into the Wild* served as model texts. Knowing that they would soon be attempting to imitate these authors with their own I-Search papers, students now read as writers. They closely examined how Bissinger and Krakauer incorporate themselves and their data into effective nonfiction narratives. Where is the “I”? Where are the data? Where is the narrative? What ties it all together?

In the preface to *Friday Night Lights*, students detected the key elements of an I-Search. Bissinger “went in search of a place where high school sports keeps a town together and keeps it alive.” He moved his family to Texas to attend practices, pep rallies, and games, and to become personally acquainted with the players, their families, teachers, friends, and fans. Krakauer physically retraced the geographical journey of his subject in *Into the Wild*, searching for the truth about who McCandless really was and how he died. Krakauer talked to those who knew McCandless best, and he incorporates letters, diary entries, and even marginal annotations made by McCandless in the books kept on the bus in Alaska, all the while juxtaposing his own wilderness adventures to those of McCandless.

After reading the mentor texts, students successfully investigated all sorts of interdisciplinary sports-related issues and topics. For example,

- A student investigated hypertrophic cardiomyopathy, a medical condition that runs in his family, to learn about why young athletes are so susceptible and what programs exist to promote awareness.
- A student wanted to know whether or not sports can affect politics and what roles politicians play in sports. She interviewed several history teachers, visited the Jesse Owens Museum in Danville, Alabama, and conducted a peer survey using historical photographs.
- A student’s swim coach promoted carbohydrates as the most important part of a swimmer’s diet whereas his weight trainer told him that protein was more important. So, this student interviewed a dietician, a trainer, and a nutritionist and then tested different diets in an attempt to discover how he should eat as a teenager who swims up to ten times a week.
- A student investigated how to pursue a career in the horse racing industry by interviewing several trainers and an ex-jockey, visiting Trinity Thoroughbreds in Falkville, Alabama, and keeping a jockey’s fitness regime including weigh-in, muscle work, and endurance exercises.
- Curious about the impact that sports equipment can make on the success of an athlete, a student asked: Just how different is sports gear from year to year? Do companies advertise new designs but use the same old technology or does the use of outdated equipment hold one back? He interviewed a professional golf coach, a head pro-equipment guru, and visited several golf courses while testing golf clubs and golf balls of varying ages.

**Playing with Sports**

In addition to serious academic research, we devoted some time to games and play. In November, we headed to the school library not to consult sources but to celebrate the American Library Association’s National Gaming Day. The librarian hosted a variety of games and we spent our class period...
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playing Apples to Apples, Word on the Street, Catchphrase, Zombie Fluxx, Pandemic, and Settlers of Catan. In April, we celebrated National Poetry Month by holding “The March Madness Poetry Tournament,” an activity described on the NCTE website that incorporates NCAA brackets and numerical rankings. Students selected poems and gave dramatic readings of them (two poems per round). After each round, the class discussed the poems presented and voted for the “best” one. Match-ups continued until all poems were shared; winners advanced along the tournament bracket until an ultimate champion was declared.

Passing the Baton

Promoting the value of competitive sports by building bridges between academics and athletics via the English curriculum proved effective. Cross-curricular conversations led to further interdisciplinary connections even after my own year of sports came to an end. A colleague in the English department taught A River Runs Through It and invited members of the Tennessee Valley Fly Fisher’s club to lead his class through a fly-casting seminar that incorporated concepts from physics and biology. A colleague in the history department used Warren St. John’s Outcasts United: An American Town, A Refugee Team and One Woman’s Quest to Make a Difference in her current world affairs elective.

Titles chosen by faculty committee for the general Summer Reading Requirement have since included Unbroken, Laura Hillenbrand’s biography of Olympic athlete Louis Zamperini, and Christopher McDougall’s Born to Run: A Hidden Tribe, Superathletes, and the Greatest Race the World Has Never Seen. McDougall’s text inspired an ethnography project in one English class where students connected sports to cultural anthropology. Finally, the history teacher who gave the guest lecture to my English students about the Negro Leagues, Branch Rickey, and Jackie Robinson during our reading of Snow in August found himself so energized by the experience and by the amount of research he had generated from just that single lesson that he created a semester-long elective called Sports in Society. He offered the new class the following year and has continued to offer it ever since.

While faculty members were made aware of ways to enrich their own teaching, students also benefited from the integrated learning. By engaging in this English course grounded in a sports theme, students immersed themselves in material from myriad disciplines. They came to see that “the sports world is a good place to look if you want to understand how power arrangements work in society more generally” (Morris 5). This unifying idea also gave the class a common language and a narrow lens that served as a helpful starting point for close readings while the interdisciplinary components provided students with a wider lens. Athletes and game players, student groups often stereotyped as unmotivated readers, came to appreciate the value of literary works, while the non-athletic literary types grew to appreciate the value of sports.

Works Cited

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