

CHALLENGING NORMALCY?
Masculinity and Disability in *Murderball*

by
Benjamin Neal Tollestrup

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Abstract

In 2005, MTV Movies and ThinkFilm released *Murderball*, a groundbreaking documentary about wheelchair rugby. Due to its popularity and its subject matter, the film presents a unique opportunity to reflect on representations of disability in the contemporary North American context. The narrative of the film constructs a rivalry between Team U.S.A., captained by Mark Zupan, and Team Canada, coached by Joe Soars. *Murderball* works exceptionally well to disrupt notions of people with disabilities as fragile and helpless, countering ableist assumptions about what persons with quadriplegia can accomplish. However, based on a close reading of the film, I suggest that *Murderball* accomplishes this disruption by also celebrating ableist, sexist and heterosexist representations. I critique the film's construction of the relationship between competitive international sport settings, disability, and masculinity by drawing on the tools of feminism and anti-normative politics. I also examine representations of hegemonic masculinity that are discursively linked to sport competition and violence in ways that work to support a U.S. nationalist and imperialist impulse. Overall, I suggest that recuperations of normative identity in *Murderball* rely on a jingoistic and violent air of moral authority where American men work to preserve the winning reputation of the U.S.A., while subjecting themselves to the constraints of normalcy.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
The Problem	2
Research Questions	3
Rationale	3
Methodology	4
Theoretical Approach	5
Hegemonic Masculinity	5
Anti-Normative Politics	7
Disability Theory	8
Feminist Intersectional Analysis	10
Chapter Outline	11
Chapter Two: Review of the Literature	13
Masculinity in the Context of Sport	13
Disability in the Context of Sport	15
Intersection of Masculinity and Disability in the Context of Sport	17
Media Representations of Disability	19
Stereotypes	19
Representations of Disability and Gender	22
Murderball	24
Militant and Nationalist Sport Settings	25
Chapter Three: Masculinity in <i>Murderball</i>	28
Physicality and Violence in <i>Murderball</i>	29
Zupan's Body	29
Antagonism and Rivalry	32
Battling Bodies	33
Invulnerability and Injury	36
Alternative Narratives	39
Sport Comes First	41
Representations of Women	45
It's a Man's World	46
Caregivers	47
Heteronormativity	51
Normative Desire	51
'Normal' Sexual Activity	54
Conclusion	59

Chapter Four: Nationalism and Imperialism in <i>Murderball</i>	61
U.S. Dominance	62
Rivalry	64
The Traitor	66
Flags and Team Rivalry	68
Sport Salvation and the U.S. Military	69
Conclusion	71
Chapter Five: Conclusion	73
References	77
Appendices	87
Appendix A Character Biographies	88
Appendix B A Summary of Wheelchair Rugby	91

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Murderball, also known as wheelchair or quadriplegic rugby, is a fast-paced, contact sport created by quadriplegic athletes who use an indoor court as the field of play. Participants with a wide range of functional impairment in all four limbs play offensive and defensive roles. The film *Murderball* is a documentary, music video, sports entertainment and narrative hybrid that traces the rivalry between the United States and Canadian teams in international competition, interspersed with stories of the athletes' everyday lives and personal relationships. Released by MTV movies and ThinkFilm, subsidiaries of the large MTV media conglomerate, *Murderball* is one of the highest grossing documentary films of all time, with international box office sales of over \$1.7 million dollars ("The Numbers," n.d.).

In *Murderball*, Team U.S.A., captained by Mark Zupan, is pitted against Team Canada, coached by an American, Joe Soars. The film follows the action between the two wheelchair rugby teams as they compete in Sweden at the 2002 World Wheelchair Rugby Championship, and then again in Athens at the 2004 Paralympic Summer Games. From the outset of the film, players from Team U.S.A., including Andy Cohn, Scott Hogsett, Bob Lujano, and Mark Zupan, are shown performing the daily tasks of their lives and talking about their impairments, their lives before injury and illness, public perceptions of disabilities, their social lives and sex lives, their families, and the sport of wheelchair rugby (see Appendices A and B for further details about the film's characters and the structure of the sport).

Due to its popularity and its subject matter, the film presents a unique opportunity

to reflect on representations of disability in the contemporary North American context, and to examine this context through those representations. This is the goal of my thesis.

The Problem

In portraying disabled men participating in a highly aggressive contact sport in intensely belligerent nationalist settings, the film differs from the majority of North American cinematic portrayals of disability. While these innovations are ripe for analysis in themselves, I was compelled to undertake a critical examination of the film by popular reviews of the story that repeatedly claimed that *Murderball* works exceptionally well to disrupt notions of people with disabilities as fragile and helpless (“Rotten Tomatoes,” n.d.), and that disability was humanized through the story presented. Kurt Lindemann and James Cherney (2008) similarly argue that: “wheelchair rugby is itself a communicative act that sends a complex message to both the community of sport and our broader social collectives that counters ableist assumptions about what persons with quadriplegia can accomplish (p.108). I am concerned, however, that the film accomplishes this disruption by also celebrating ableist, sexist and heterosexist representations. While humanizing disability and disrupting stereotypes about disability are certainly my concern, I am skeptical that the representations of the film work innocently to this end. I will therefore examine whether the film functions to delegitimize some ways of living with disability, paying particular attention to representations of non-normative embodiments of masculinity. With this in mind, my goal is to critique the film’s construction of the relationship between international competitive sport settings, disability, and masculinity, by drawing on the tools of feminism and anti-normative politics.

Research Questions

My thesis responds to three main questions:

- 1) How does the film *Murderball* construct and represent disability?
- 2) To what extent does *Murderball* offer an alternative to dominant discourse about disability? And to what extent does the film depend on representations of normative masculinity, heteronormativity, and militaristic nationalism?
- 3) What do the answers to these questions suggest about the power relations that constitute the cultural context of the film?

Rationale

The study of a widely consumed medium such as film is important since media representations do “not simply create nor co-opt the social, political, and economic conditions of [their] possibility, but rather become a vehicle for the concurrent proliferation and reification of those conditions” (Helstein, 2002, p. 37). Examining the relationship between masculinity and disability in the context of *Murderball* will thus allow me to explore how certain messages about disability are made tenable and become part of cultural commonsense.

In addition to offering an alternative reading to conventionally held ideas about disability and masculinity, my aim is to contribute to the very small body of research in the sociology of sport on the intersection of disability and masculinity. Four papers were presented on *Murderball* at the 2007 annual conference of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport (NASSS), a testament to the sociological questions the film presents. A number of published works also touch on the film and filmic representations of sport, masculinity and disability. I will address the arguments that these works make

and differentiate their analysis from my own in my review of the literature.

Methodology

The U.S. release of the film *Murderball* is an hour and twenty-eight minutes long. I watched the film twenty times and took the following steps: 1) Identified overarching narrative themes, key scenes, lead personalities/characters, and the sequence of events that hold the story together; 2) Transcribed the dialogue of those key themes, narratives, and personalities and noted the visual details that accompany them; 3) Examined the use of music and other visual and narrative features for their contribution to key themes and narratives; and 4) Undertook further viewings to re-examine earlier interpretations where necessary.

Once I gathered this information, I used textual analysis to examine the particular discourses made available by the film. Although the film can be interpreted in multiple ways, the production of the film employs many skilled crafts people who intend to produce a coherent preferred reading for an audience with a number of contextual similarities and thereby similar interpretive sensibilities. As David Andrews and John Loy (1993) suggest, popular culture has to be viewed as “a site of ideological struggle where individual lives and experiences are involved in a process of interpretive negotiation with surrounding social structures” (p. 269).

Although there are multiple angles from which the film can be read critically, my intent in this textual reading is to focus primarily on masculinity and disability as sites of ideological struggle and interpretive negotiation. Furthermore, although media audiences are active participants in making meaning and can work to produce resistant readings, Darcy Plymire (2005) points out that “the media have an unequal power to set the

cultural agenda in ways that favor the economic, political and social status quo” (p. 159). Plymire (2005) contends that the construction and interpretation of various cultural texts through media studies provides an opportunity to clarify the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life or particular culture (p.141). In line with feminist and disability studies critiques of the status quo, my examination of the film works to interrogate the problematic constructions and representations of masculinity and disability.

Theoretical Approach

In this thesis I draw particularly on feminist theorizations of hegemonic masculinity and disability theory informed by poststructural analysis. I focus my critique further through the lens of anti-normative politics.

Hegemonic masculinity. The first key theoretical position of my critique is derived from ongoing discussions about hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Robert Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) have worked to reformulate the concept and offer several details of this formulation including the following: Hegemonic masculinity is a power structure focused on a small dominant and normative group who enact a pattern of practice that allows men’s dominance over women to continue (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). A plurality of masculinities and hierarchy of masculinities are distinguished from and subordinate other masculinities, and embody the currently most venerated way of being a man; this requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it, whether that relation is one of complicity, abuse or benefit (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). While it works to

ideologically legitimate the subordination of women to men, it is not necessarily maintained by violent force, although it certainly can be supported by force (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinity's primary dominance is achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion; and since gender relations are cultural and historical, hierarchies are subject to change through struggle for hegemony, while older forms of masculinity are often displaced by new ones (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.833). Connell and Messerschmidt write: "Cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalization, and the marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities", and these features also secure what I will refer to as hegemonic masculinity (2005, p. 846).

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) engage with several critiques of the concept of hegemonic masculinity and further explain that "overlap or blurring between hegemonic and complicit masculinities is extremely likely if hegemony is effective" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 839). Furthermore, it is not intended as a comprehensive explanation or as a primary cause; rather, it is a tool for examining certain cultural dynamics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 841). Hegemonic masculinity comes to cultural significance through the production of archetypes of masculinity and not because it is entirely routine or fully embodied (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 846). It is also important to recognize that within the formulation of this concept, that regional and contextually significant exemplars of masculinity influence specific and local hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p.850).

Within my discussion of *Murderball* I investigate the ways that masculinity is enacted in the sport of wheelchair rugby and in the complex representations of the

athletes' lives. While Mark Zupan might be understood as an exemplar of dominant masculinity in several scenes throughout the film, I draw on the concept of hegemonic masculinity to analyze how he and other personalities in the film interact in the specific context of disability sport in complex and nuanced ways. None of the athletes can ever fully embody a singular dominant masculinity and yet they engage with and reproduce culturally illustrative patterns of practice. This is where my interest lies.

Anti-normative politics. The second key theoretical position of my critique is an anti-normative politic informed by Michel Foucault's (1977) conception of dominant cultural norms. Foucault (1977) demonstrates that normalization is a means through which people measure their own and others conformity to social expectations of appropriate behavior and acceptable embodiments. This is possible by way of judgments based on a person's adherence to rules and regulations at an individual and societal level that serve to hierarchize behaviors and bodies (Foucault, 1977). The establishment of a series of punishments and rewards related to this hierarchy powerfully imposes homogeneity and makes it possible to measure individual levels of adherence to the norm (Foucault, 1977).

Foucault's implicit critique of normalizing judgment and what scholars of queer theory and postmodern disability theory have demonstrated is that the notion of a unified and whole subject serves as the basis for exclusion and discrimination whether one is talking about disability, shamed sexuality or stigmatized bodies broadly (Warner, 1999; Jagose, 1996; Corker & Shakespeare, 2002). These scholars prefer to work with the notion of multiple and fragmented discursive subject positions and use their writing to trace the political struggles that help define particular aspects of identity as normal and

others as abnormal. Their research also implies that communities of identification are as multiple and fragmented as individual identities. Any one set of characteristics ascribed to a community, serves as the basis for normalizing judgment, discrimination and exclusion. It is the recognition of the fragmentation and multiplicity of discursive subjects that requires an anti-normative politics. Also, instead of making normal the measure for which social acceptance and rights are granted, anti-normative politics insists that social justice must be available for everyone.

To elaborate on this anti-normative political position, one might consider the tension between disability identity politics and anti-normative politics. Disability identity is a position assumed by people with disabilities who resist discrimination by affirming a coherent notion of what it means to be disabled. Anti-normative disability politics refers to an ethic of resisting discrimination out of a non-coherent, multiple, fragmented, and intersectional notion of identifications. As long as a homogenous conception of disability is the basis for arguments about the rights and needs of people with disabilities, people will be left out of the discussion. This anti-normative critical lens will allow me to assess the normative and anti-normative impulses of the film.

Disability theory. Within disability studies, conceptions of disability have shifted in the last several decades. Nigel Thomas and Andy Smith (2009) note that there has been “a shift from medical, individualized definitions and ideologies of disability to more socially constructed explanations of disability, which place more responsibility for disability on mainstream society” (p. 23). The medical model, however, is not without its merits. The usefulness of a medical model of disability is described by Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare (2002), who suggest that recognizing individual experiences of

impairment has allowed for a close connection between scholarship and activism in disability studies (p. 13-14) and provided grounds for emancipatory research that focuses on policy on disability and promotes practical institutional change (Corker & Shakespeare, 2002, p. 13-14). According to Tom Shakespeare (2006), the social model, favored in recent research, emphasizes barriers and oppression (p. 55).

Shakespeare (2006) favors a model of disability that focuses on the interaction of individual and structural factors, since the “experience of a disabled person results from the relationship between factors intrinsic to the individual and extrinsic factors arising from the wider context in which she finds herself” (p. 55). Since I am focused on the multiple representations of disability that appear in the film *Murderball*, it is impossible for me to utilize a model of disability that ignores either the social or individual factors that make up the narrative of each personality in the film. By engaging with anti-normative politics and the interaction of both medical and social models of disability, I acknowledge that the lives of people with disabilities are affected by diverse experiences of impairment as well as, “limitations to social life [...] that are the cause and subject of social and environmental constraints on disability” (Thomas & Smith, 2009, p. 12). No one narrative of disability needs to be privileged over another. In both the ways that disability is represented in the film, whether focused on impairment or oppressive structural limitations, my analysis follows those disability theorists that refuse the pathologization of difference.

Mairian Corker (1999) suggests that “academics in the field of disability studies aim to develop a social theory of disability, which comes as close as possible to explaining the ‘reality’ of disabled people” (p. 627). She describes the failings of such

attempts due to the complexity and heterogeneity of experience of people with disabilities. In all of the ways that the personalities of the film are described, I offer an anti-normative critique to challenge the hegemony of normativism and make space for the heterogeneous experiences of people with disabilities (Corker & Shakespear, 2002, p.14).

Feminist intersectional analysis. While the work of feminist intersectional analysis is not primary to my critique, I will consider intersections of ability and gender. Although it is not the key theoretical position of my critique, feminist intersectional analysis (Crenshaw, 1989) has influenced my analysis. As Samantha King and Mary McDonald (2007) suggest, Kimberle Crenshaw's (1989; 1991) argument for intersectional analysis, "was designed to move feminist and antiracist analysis beyond the confines of homogeneity upon which identity politics rest" (p. 8). Although identity politics can be used to identify social differences, they often fail to identify intra-group differences (Crenshaw, 1991, as cited in King & McDonald, 2007). Identities are informed by innumerable discourses composed with complexities and even contradiction, and so discursive positions are always multiple and fragmented. Where *Murderball* is concerned, this position leads me to a critique of the gendered power relations represented in the film, in part because these power relations are the basis for a discursive positioning of disability. Since forms of discrimination interact in ways that vary as much as discursive positions, I will build my arguments about representations of disability and masculinity and draw these arguments together to examine the ways that the representations in the film interact.

As King and McDonald (2007) demonstrate, powerful discourses about social

difference always intersect and inform each other. Furthermore, it is “impossible to carve up bodies into discrete parts” such as masculine and disabled for analysis (King & McDonald, 2007, p. 8). In light of these insights, feminist intersectional analysis works to keep interpretations in context, so that multiple intersections of social difference and inequality are incorporated into the critique. In this way analysis is more relevant to lived experiences of discrimination and more effective in the disruption of power.

This theoretical grounding will serve as the basis for my methodology. As I think through my general research question, perceive themes and deploy my theoretical position with consistency, the validity of the argument and evidence can be assessed. The connection of specific practices to broader social and cultural forces can be accounted for as I reflect on the moments in viewing when I react critically. More specifically, following Plymire (2005), I can evaluate my textual analysis by asking several questions (p. 155). Do I measure what I claim? Am I consistent in my claims? Are there alternative explanations? What have I left out? Have I made useful connections between points of analysis? How does my critique reproduce and or contribute to an ideological or political position?

In chapter two I review sociology of sport literature on masculinity, intersections between disability and masculinity in the context of sport, and media representations of disability. In chapter three I examine representations of masculinity in *Murderball* including the physicality and violence of the athletes, and their relationship to women and heteronormative discourse. Chapter four examines the ways that norms of masculinity and sport play into U.S. nationalism and imperialism in the film through: representations of U.S. dominance; the narrative device of rivalry between Team U.S.A. and Team

Canada; the ways that sport is represented as a salvation for returning war veterans; and the context of the release of the film. In chapter five I conclude my argument and examine this thesis' contribution to sport sociology literature.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Masculinity in the Context of Sport

In the sociology of sport much has been written about masculinity. The dominant approach has been to critique what scholars call, “hegemonic masculinity.” In describing the term, most authors draw on Robert Connell (1987) who uses Antonio Gramsci’s (1971) theory of hegemony to identify domination in the form of masculinity characterized by “rugged, heterosexual figures, such as John Wayne” (Butterworth, 2006). A strength of this approach is in the recognition of a cultural process by which resistive masculinities are incorporated into the dominant ideal, and previously dominant characteristics change and fall out of taste. The topic of hegemonic masculinity is situated in different ways in relation to a number of topics to explore the problematic of an ideal masculinity. Some examples of this kind of analysis include: Eric Anderson’s (2002) suggestion that openly gay athletes contest aspects of hegemonic masculinity; Michael Butterworth’s (2006) description of baseball player Mike Piazza’s alleged gay masculinity as being articulated to hegemonic masculinity; and Laura Grindstaff and Emily West’s (2006) exploration of the relationship between cheerleaders and sport as a space that preserves hegemonic masculinity.

Those authors who acknowledge the plurality of masculinities tend to present a more nuanced reading of the construction of masculinities, with the intersections of masculinity, race and class being the most discussed. This approach seeks to “destabilize the notion that masculinity is [or has been] fixed, unified and immutable” by

demonstrating the contextual specificity of particular masculinities (Benyon, 2003, p.4). Ben Carrington (1998) problematizes the notion of a “universal and non-raced male subject who obtains and reproduces his dominance over women in a society conceptualized as lacking racial inequalities” (p. 278). King and McDonald (2007) note that he explores “a heterogeneous and fragmented subject, multiply constructed by a number of embodied intersections [...] to argue for analyses of sporting masculinities that do not naturalize, but instead interrogate” the falsely universal identity (p. 8).

Further examples of this nuanced reading of the construction of masculinities and intersections of race, class and masculinity include Todd Boyd (1997)’s work on the image of black masculinity as it is represented in basketball, the mass media, and consumer culture in relation to popular culture. Amanda Cosgrove and Toni Bruce (2005) look closely at representations of an America’s Cup sailor, Sir Peter Blake, who was regarded as a national hero in the context of changing notions of New Zealand’s national character that coincide with shifting notions of white masculinity. Sarah Banet-Weiser (1999) explores the gendered and racialized meanings given to basketball players during the inception of the Women’s National Basketball Association, noting how the fetishization of black men as “bad boys” contrasts with an emphasis on women’s supposed focus on skill fundamentals. Michelle Dunbar (2000) examines the potential for celebrity athlete Dennis Rodman to disrupt gender and race discourses through his mediated sexuality. An argument made by Abby Ferber (2007) details how elements of white male supremacy and the simultaneous demonization and admiration of black male athletes are historically reinforced in mediated narratives in which black men are sexualized and “tamed” out of supposed inherent aggression, hyper-sexuality and

violence. Kath Woodward (2004) delves into racialized masculinities in boxing focusing on mediated representations and ethnographic data to examine how masculinity, race and class are polarized and essentialized. All of these works demonstrate the complex interaction of context and identity as they contribute to the construction of masculinities. Following the lead of these authors I will place my critique specifically in the context of popular North American cinema. In particular I will engage with disability and masculinity as they inform each other in this context.

Disability in the Context of Sport

Disability has been written about in sport sociology with increasing depth in recent years. Themes that have been addressed include: disability sport policies, governing bodies, and the opportunities for participation they provide; media portrayals of disability sport; the ways that athlete's identities are negotiated through medical and social models of disability; and the role sports play in managing the stigmatization of athletes with disabilities.

David Howe and Carwyn Jones (2006) examine the classification of disabled athletes into competitive classes in amateur associations and Paralympic competition. They argue that the International Paralympic Committee has marginalized the disability sport practice community by controlling classification systems and thereby imposing limits on opportunities for equitable sports practice. This, they argue, threatens the ideology of Paralympism while ignoring the empowerment of non-elite athletes (Howe & Jones, 2006, p. 44). While providing an analysis of sport's structure, choices, and fairness for participants of all abilities, Howard Nixon (2007) advocates for the creation of diverse sports opportunities for people with disabilities. Mary Hums, Anita Moorman, and Eli

Wolff (2003) examine the inclusion of the Paralympics in the Olympic and Amateur Sports Act. My examination of *Murderball* does not extend to the sport's governing body, or policies that effect the sport. I am primarily concerned with the mediated representations of disability sport.

In terms of the ways that disability sports are mediated, Ian Brittain (2004) suggests that societal perceptions and misperceptions of disability, influenced by media coverage that reinforces a medical model of disability, inhibit disability sport involvement. David Howe (2008) investigates the control of information through events like the Paralympic Games and notes that agencies that support these events have a difficult time managing the image of the events because media production processes don't accurately portray the culture of disability sport. While I am interested in the representation of athletes with disabilities, I do not examine the ways that those representations impact athletes with disabilities, and will not make claims as to the accuracy of representations of the culture of disability sport in *Murderball*. I focus, instead, on the ways that the representations in *Murderball* reflect power relations in the context of North American cinema.

Chin-Ju Huang and Ian Brittain (2004) analyze how people with disabilities negotiate their identities through sport, and suggest that both social and medical models of disability affect disability sport participants' identity formation, while success in international disability sport can offer positive subjectivity, changed self-understanding, and an increased sense of personal empowerment. With emphasis on the medical model of disability, Stephen Page, Edmund O'Connor and Kirk Peterson (2001) examine factors underlying achievement motivation among athletes with disabilities. Their study indicates

that disability sport participation provides a way to demonstrate competence, offers a social outlet and promotes fitness while delaying the effects of impairment (Page, O'Connor & Peterson, 2001). Diane Taub and Kimberly Greer (2000) examine physical activity as a normalizing experience for school-age children with physical disabilities. This research indicates that physical activity is a normalizing experience for these children as it facilitates friendships and social identity (Taub & Greer, 2000). Diane Taub, Elaine Blinde, and Kimberly Greer (1999) interpret the experiences of male college students with physical disabilities and suggest that participation in disability sport might be one way to manage the stigma of a disabled body. While I am concerned with the stigma associated with disability, I do not focus on the experiences of athletes. I focus on the problems of normative aspects of the representation of athletes with disabilities.

Intersections of Masculinity and Disability in the Context of Sport

The intersecting embodiment of masculinity and disability will be of particular importance to my critique, however this is a less explored theme within the sociology of sport. Hayley Fitzgerald (2005) has examined masculinity and disability in Physical Education by researching the experiences of five young disabled students. He uses the conceptual tools of Bourdieu to explore the notion of embodied identities, and suggests that normativity prevails in physical education as it values strength, masculinity and skill mastery. Kay Maas and Cynthia Hasbrook (2001) have presented an analysis of class, hegemonic masculinity and disability. Their article examines how representations of disability in golf magazines reinforce hegemonic masculinity. Golfers' identities are further explored through an examination of media coverage in which Casey Martin, a young, upper class, white, male golfer with a physical disability was featured for

challenging the Professional Golf Association (PGA) rules prohibiting use of a golf cart during tournament play. Kevin Young and Philip White (2000) examine injury and hegemonic masculinity through quantitative evidence of severe sport injuries and disability through interviews about experiences of injured male athletes and literature on masculinity. By showing how social processes in sport interact to systematically produce injury, impairment and even death, the authors indicate that in a sporting context, being a male athlete is dangerous. Recurrent themes in this research are access to sport participation and the construction of disability and masculinity in sport participation.

Some work has been done on narratives of masculinity and disability within the disability studies literature; however, the narratives that these studies address are presented by men with disabilities in the process of self reporting. Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes (2004) draw on life histories from a small group of men who have experienced spinal cord injury playing rugby and now define themselves as disabled. Similarly, Andrew Sparkes and Brett Smith (2002) focus on the narrative identity dilemmas of four men who have experienced spinal cord injury through playing rugby and now define themselves as disabled and in pursuit of a restored self.

All these studies help form a broad context for understanding what is at stake politically in a film such as *Murderball*. They indicate, that is, the implications of the cultural meanings that flow from mediated representations of disability and masculinity.

One study of disability and masculinity is more closely related to the reading I will undertake in my analysis: Lindeman and Cherney's (2008) investigation of the communicative practices surrounding wheelchair rugby. Lindeman and Cherney (2008) argue that participating in wheelchair rugby is a communicative act that challenges

ableist views of disability via enactments of hypermasculinity. While the article deals with masculinity and disability in the context of the sport dealt with in the film, *Murderball*, they do not discuss the film specifically. I will draw on Lindeman and Cherney's (2008) discussion of the complex relationship between hypermasculinity and challenges to ableist notions about disability.

Media Representations of Disability

Stereotypes. Beth Haller, Bruce Dorries and Jessica Rahn (2006) look at how the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* frame cultural representations of the disability community and how those terminologies differ from those in the Americans with Disabilities Act. The study suggests that some journalists continue to use terms that perpetuate limiting, narrow stereotypes about people with disabilities (Haller, Dorries & Rahn, 2006). Awareness of this kind of language will allow me to focus on limiting representations made in the film. Charles Riley (2005) has written extensively about the use and abuse of disability memoirs and metaphor in popular North American cinema and television, as well as missed opportunities for representation of disability. While it is not possible to go over the full scope of the work on disability representation by Riley (2005) here, I will come back to elements of the critique that are relevant to *Murderball* further on.

Several authors have written about sensationalist and stereotypical portrayals of disability and the use of disabled bodies in the representation of villains (Bogdan, Biklen, Shapiro, & Spelkoman, 1982; Cumberbatch & Negrine, 1992; Darke, 1998; Longmore, 2000; Meekosha, 1999; Sutherland, 1997). While each of these articles critically examines the ways that disability is positioned as abhorrent and vilified, *Murderball*

creates heroes and villains equally out of athletes with disabilities, drawing specifically on the sporting context which has little or no bearing on the representations critiqued by these authors. I mention these articles primarily to acknowledge the well-documented relationship between disability identity and heightened use of metaphor when it comes to disabled characters.

Mairian Corker (1999) has written about the limits to 'accurate' theoretical representation of disabled people's experience, and Robert McRuer (2003) presents similar questions about representation of disability and offers an analysis of the intersections of gender and sexuality in the film *As Good As It Gets*. Both Corker (1999) and McRuer (2003) emphasize the importance of theorizing disability in a way that reflects the broad experiences of people with disabilities. McRuer (2003) further states the importance of reflecting on the breadth of experiences of queers and people with disabilities, insisting that representations not subordinate queerness and disability through reductive metaphors. The critiques by Corker (1999) and McRuer (2003) are important to my analysis of *Murderball* since I argue that the film employs representations of disability that conform to cultural norms.

While I focus on the contemporary portrayal of disability, Stephen Safran (1998) has written about the first century of disability portrayal in film and Lauri Klobas (1992) has written about the shifts in disability portrayal in the history of theatre, film and television. The historical context of the portrayal of disability in film remains important to my critique; however, representational differences are vast since *Murderball* is a recent release and is one of very few documentaries about disability released as a major motion picture.

Films are powerful cultural sites for developing understanding and have played a significant role in perpetuating dominant understandings of people with disabilities. Representations in movies have differed sharply from the realities of the lives of people with disabilities (Safran, 1998, p. 471). Such representations are purposeful. As Martin Norden (1993) suggests, "unlike other elements of the material world that often dissolve into movie backgrounds (cars, furniture, buildings, etc.), wheelchairs draw attention to themselves and virtually never appear in movies by accident" (p.187). Wheelchairs are not only indicators placed in narratives as specific plot and theme devices. Physical and mental disabilities share this purposeful placement in common. There are a number of films that include representations of disability in the North American cultural context; however, the films that receive the most attention in this context rely on limited numbers of recurring images and metaphors.

For example, early 1900s depictions of disability primarily include "image[s] of people careening wildly in wheelchairs for the benefit of ableist audiences looking for laughs" (Norden, 1993, p. 189). Abled audiences' emotive responses continue to inform contemporary representations. Mental disabilities have been often depicted for dramatic effect. Exploitive representations of mental disabilities often include savant conditions as in such acclaimed films as *Rain Man* (1988), and *A Beautiful Mind* (2001).

These depictions of disability that, "have been used to create metaphors not only of terror, pity, and ridicule but also of heroism, empathy and community integration" are limiting (Safran, 1998, p. 472). Understanding people with disabilities as unlucky individuals who have to heroically struggle for 'something better' seems to suggest, "if you don't stage a dramatic comeback (including a mandatory, climactic attempt to get up

out of the chair and walk), you are a failure" (Norden, 1993, p. 196). As opposed to portrayals of abled embodiments (particularly young white men) that are regularly the center and periphery of the scope of the camera's lens for numerous dramatic and symbolic purposes, the presence of acknowledged disabilities (for example, the presence of wheelchairs or the context of a psychiatric institution) are rarely intended to blend into the 'normal conditions' of life.

There are a number of films that include representations of disability in the contemporary North American cinema context. Roles that position people with disabilities as heroes or villains solely because of impairments are reductive in that they seem to measure possible representations by their metaphoric and dramatic value to people with little experience in complex and varied dimensions of living with disabilities.

Representations of disability and gender. The theme of media representations of disability and gender have been examined in a small number of articles. Marie Hardin and Brent Hardin (2004) explore the stereotype of 'Supercrip' in sport media. Through interviews with disabled athletes, Hardin and Hardin (2004) examine how these athletes accepted, negotiated and or opposed the heroic ideal of 'Supercrip,' a person with a disability who has an ability to perform feats normally considered not possible for people with disabilities. Otto Schantz and Keith Gilbert (2001) analyze newspaper coverage of the 1996 Atlanta Paralympics by the French and German press, and suggest that performances of athletes with disabilities and idealistic aspects of the games were not as important to the French and German sport press as the commercial value of the news in terms of national success and medal rankings. A media analysis of Paralympian, Hope Lewellen is undertaken by Lea Ann Schell and Stephanie Rodriguez (2001), who study

how she is empowered through sport to subvert stereotypical conceptions of gender and disability. Schell and Rodriguez (2001) also analyze how the sport media works to repress Lewellen's subversive potential by portraying her in ableist ways.

Ellexis Boyle, Brad Millington & Patricia Vertinsky's (2003) article on gender and disability in the film *Million Dollar Baby* assesses the narrative's portrayal of femininity, female athleticism, and power in the male-dominated genre of boxing films. By examining the extent to which the female protagonist can be viewed as resistant to dominant gender and boxing roles Boyle, Millington & Vertinsky (2003) demonstrate that the film's focus is not women's boxing or disability, but rather, is about the men in the film who struggle to protect the primacy of masculinity in boxing. Furthermore, the film demonstrates a relationship between violent sporting practices and injury and impairment. After a boxing injury results in quadriplegia, the main character asks another character to assist her suicide, citing a story of a lame family dog that was put down. Unfortunately the 'shooting the lame dog' metaphor and subsequent killing of a character with quadriplegia in the film suggests a eugenic impulse and that disabled life is not worth living.

In contrast, *Murderball* demonstrates that people with profound disabilities can live fulfilling lives. *Murderball* also shows that it is possible for people with quadriplegia to be aggressive and athletic. All of the people with disabilities in which *Murderball* focuses are top players in international competition who are shown making aggressive plays on the court and whose off court commentary is full of macho bravado. The fact that *Murderball* is a documentary, that it focuses on the lived realities of people with disability, and that it is laden with gender and militant nationalist ideology make it

difficult to compare to other analyses of North American cinema. Therefore, these articles inform my analysis particularly in the ways that they deal with disruptions and reiterations of dominant gender paradigms.

Murderball. Since my analysis of the film began, four academic treatments of the film have been published. Alexis Bender (2006) examines how the portrayals of quadriplegics in *Million Dollar Baby* (2004) and *Murderball* (2005) were received by various audiences through reviews in newspapers and magazines. Although I am concerned with audience receptions of *Murderball*, I will not investigate responses to the film in my analysis. Ian McDonald (2007) investigates a number of sport documentaries including tangential references to *Murderball* and its place in the milieu of sport documentaries. McDonald (2007) comments on the film's commercial success and format, and only briefly mentions the subject matter of the film.

Michael Gard and Hayley Fitzgerald (2008) look at the film as a site to begin thinking about the physical education experiences of young disabled people. Gard and Fitzgerald (2008) present questions about disability sport derived from a variety of moments in the film including the capacity of disabled bodies, differences between the Special Olympics and the Paralympics, and desire for disabled bodies. In contrast, I will not comment on the film's implications for disability sport practice, and will focus on the broad cultural context of the film.

Cynthia Barounis (2009) approaches the film as an opportunity to examine intersections between disability studies and queer theory. Barounis' (2009) compares *Murderball* (2005) with *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and emphasizes the remasculinization of personalities identified as homosexual and disabled. On the one

hand, Barounis (2009) claims that it is productive when popular cinema challenges the stereotype of the feminized or asexual male quadriplegic, and acknowledges that male homosexuality is not intrinsically linked to illness (p.69). On the other hand, Barounis (2009) argues that the remasculinization of the personalities in both films is dependent on antagonistic performances of hypermasculinity. Furthermore, Barounis (2009) argues that a critique of ablest discourses in *Murderball*, relies on repeated heteromasculine performances, while *Brokeback Mountain*'s queer identities are deeply invested in able-bodied performances of cowboy hypermasculinity. The primary difference in my approach is that I will address the characters' multiple and different relationships to women including, and not limited to, their sexuality.

Limited representation of people with disabilities in mainstream film may be understood as part of the pursuit of profit. In attempt to engage the largest audience possible to increase box office and rental sales, narratives are imbued with homogenizing representations and saleable themes. Normative narratives allow for as many audience members as possible to relate to the story, and the elements of normative masculinity evident in *Murderball* seem to serve the ideological function of positioning these athletes at the center of a very conservative political project. The film positions quad-rugby players as worthy subjects of the documentary according to their ability to participate in a sport that requires assertions compatible with normative masculinity.

Militant and nationalist sport settings. In an effort to understand the film's use of militant nationalist sentiment in relation to sport I will draw on the work of several authors who have examined the complex relationship between nation, war and sport. Atossa Movahedi (2005) argues that in sport and war value is placed on winning in an

international context and that in international sporting contexts nations engage in a symbolic war. Movahedi (2005), based on observations of the ongoing U.S.-Iraq war, argues further that both sport and war are televised in a way that draws in desensitized spectators who can choose sides and thereby feel good about supporting a winning team. While I will not offer an analysis of spectatorship for the film's militant nationalist sentiments, I will examine the ways that international sporting competition is used as support for the U.S. military and jingoistic nationalism in the film.

Sue Jansen and Don Sabo (1994) analyze language used in news media coverage of the first Gulf war, as well as discourse in the sport industry and sport media, to demonstrate how sport/war metaphors are used to construct and support hegemonic forms of masculinity, and thereby reinforce systems of domination that rationalize war. Although the media format under investigation in Jansen and Sabo's (1994) study differs from that of the narrative documentary hybrid *Murderball*, I will examine the ways that the sport/war metaphor is implemented in the film to construct masculinity and disability.

Samantha King (2008) examines the relationship between the National Football League's business strategy, the United States military, and U.S. administration policy after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. King (2008) suggests that association with the football league brand lends unprecedented support to military ventures and the ideological structure of the state. King (2008) also argues that militarization of everyday life and the sportification of political life are bolstered by the use of military metaphor in coverage of spectacles like soldier and football player Pat Tillman's death. The relationship between representations of sport and the U.S. military analyzed in this article is particularly important to my analysis, since I will examine this relationship in the context of

Murderball.

Michael Silk and Mark Falcoux (2005) examine the conservative rhetoric and moral pedagogies of sports media during the 2002 Super Bowl and the opening of the Salt Lake City Winter Olympics. Within this context, Silk and Falcoux (2005) suggest that political and militaristic language are imbedded and used to (re)produce conservative sentiment in the widely consumed arena of sport. Although *Murderball* is not nearly so widely consumed as the Superbowl and Olympic ceremonies, I will similarly examine the conservative and militant sentiment of the film.

CHAPTER III

Masculinity in *Murderball*

In this chapter I examine the ways that *Murderball* portrays masculinity through the main personalities' background stories, bodies, and behaviors both in personal and sport contexts. In the film, the featured personalities and their stories defy any notion that a person with a disability is necessarily weak or fragile. Violence, antagonism, athletic bodies and competition are on display throughout. Indeed, reductive conceptions of disability in which people with disabilities are perceived as necessarily weak and helpless are critiqued by a player in the film who says, "when people see you in a wheelchair they kinda treat you like you are made of glass, and you're fragile and things like that, but in wheelchair rugby its just kinda nice to be like bumper cars, it's a different way of thinking about it" (Shapiro, 2005).

This sentiment and desire for reinterpretation is important and clear throughout the film. While *Murderball* is a groundbreaking film in its portrayal of athletes with disabilities participating in a culture of disability sport, I am concerned that the representations of the film use hegemonic masculinity as a pivotal device for the recuperation of the athletes' identities. Furthermore, violence, athletic ability, misogyny, and heteronormativity prove to be the measure of the men's value to the narrative. While there are subplots, secondary personalities, and resistive moments that fleetingly cast doubt on the dominance of all of these features of representation, a predominant message remains – disabled or not, these men are typical "jock jerks."

Throughout this discussion I will refer to masculinity, and so I must describe the context in which I make claims about masculinity. Competitiveness, heterosexuality, and

violence and are discursively linked through a particular masculinity. While there is no single set of concepts here that can frame masculinity in any totalizing way, I would like to examine the more overt links in the discursive formations that I will call hegemonic masculinity and acknowledge the definitive influence of North American sporting culture in this frame of reference.

Physicality and Violence in Murderball

The players' ability to contest stereotypes about disability is unfortunately subsumed by a nearly constant reiteration of the athletes' capacity for athletic competition, and this is demonstrated through their sport participation and physicality. This situates the athletes' conformity to hegemonic masculinity in that "the athletic male body has been a mark of power and moral superiority for those who bear it" (Dutton in Dworkin & Wachs, 2000, p. 49). The opening scene captures the ethos of the film in this respect.

Zupan's body. In the first shot of the film, Mark Zupan undresses and gets himself ready for a workout. As he begins to dress in athletic shorts, he removes his shirt revealing a defined white, muscular torso, his physical presence doesn't seem weak or fragile. He is clearly capable of dressing himself, but the absence of a sound track is uncharacteristic for popular contemporary North American cinema. This leaves an uncomfortable silence as accompaniment for an intimate moment rarely depicted on camera. The fact that he has an obvious impairment and uses a wheelchair is also atypical for popular cinema. This silent visual representation provides context for the film's opening credits and sets up the primary subject of the film.

The uncomfortable image is contrasted with Mark Zupan's capacity to be

independent and fill the screen with his presence. His large bold tattoo is featured in the center of the picture as he lifts his leg with his hands. Zupan assembles a wheelchair emphasizing its mechanical efficiency with close up shots of nuts, bolts, spokes and a battered metal surface covered with an American flag sticker. An electric motor makes noise, as the wheels are pumped up. The name Zupan is affixed to the pump with athletic tape. Soon after, a garage door opens to reveal Zupan with headphones on, elbow sport tensor bandages, and his special metal sport wheelchair. Though he does not signify an entirely normative masculinity as a man with a disability, the other aspects of his embodiment in this scene – his strength, his ability to perform complex technical tasks self sufficiently, and his loud tattoo and goatee – are representative of a strong masculine physicality. His embodiment also works to code his non-conformity as marketable. While the tattoo and goatee signify confrontation and his disability does not conform to hegemonic masculinity, he is otherwise coded as normative through his sport participation, and strength.

Throughout the film Zupan plays a central role and is therefore a likely target of identification for viewers, though it is also likely that viewers who are able to identify with Zupan are also close to him in age, gender or culture. The rock and roll soundtrack that accompanies him as he leaves his garage is certainly no accident, nor was MTV's involvement in the film, since the corporation's primary business is marketing to teens through rock videos. The rock soundtrack and MTV branding code the images as aggressive and appropriate for the rock fan, the teen, and people who necessarily position themselves in relation to confrontational and idealized aspects of masculinity represented by Zupan and the music. The film targets viewers that can relate to the ways that young

masculinity is paired with violence, and rock music as a preference. The loud hard rock sound track is at once confrontational and popular. Like Zupan, the music can't be ignored, and the way that it takes up space codes it as masculine.

In the following scene, Zupan taunts the camera. He says, "I've gone up to people, start talking shit, and they are like 'oh.' I go 'what you're not going to hit a kid in a chair, fucking hit me, I'll hit you back'" (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan's remark and defensive posturing is at once an aggressive repudiation of those that do not seek confrontation, and an invocation of violence as a means to mitigate the coding of his disability as weak, or lacking traits like aggression that are associated with masculinity.

The repudiation of those who do not seek confrontation is a familiar cliché from the playground ("What are you? A chicken?"), and while anger is a response that is justified in the face of derisive attitudes about disability, because his remark is unprovoked, it functions more as an assertion of his power over others that are threatened by his aggressive and intimidating behavior. The inclusion of the dialogue, after focusing on his physicality, represents this athlete as a strong and capable masculine icon, who deserves, or at least demands, respect by way of his embodiment and attitude.

Marty, a pit crew mechanic for the wheelchairs of team USA says about Zupan, "Just to see him out on the court with the tattoos up his arm, with the goatee, he is intimidating. He is one of these players that people just try to stay away from" (Shapiro, 2005). Again, Zupan's physicality is linked to intimidation, and not weakness or fragility. Also symbolically reinforcing Zupan's strength, he is featured throughout the film giving an interview inside a weight room. The recurring images of metal – weight machines and his sport wheelchair, symbolically link their hard mechanical function to his physicality.

Reinforcing Zupan's physicality and masculinity are the crushing hits from chair to chair that are shown throughout the film. In reference to the chair's capacity to withstand repeated hits, one of the U.S. team wheelchair mechanics says, "What we do is we take these wheelchairs and make them into a gladiator, a battling machine, a mad max wheelchair that can withstand knocking the living daylights out of each other" (Shapiro, 2005). In this comment, bodies and wheelchairs are equated and the violence of the hits is recognizable. Athletes are equated to functional hardware for the sake of the sport.

Antagonism and Rivalry. Antagonistic rivalry is also an important aspect of the representation of the athletes' masculinities. A charged rivalry set up between Zupan and Joe best demonstrates the ethos of the film in this respect.

Before the rivalry between Zupan and Joe is fully explored, both of them are represented as tightly wound, aggressive personalities. At Zupan's ten-year high school reunion two of his friends talk about Zupan. One says, "My hypothesis on Zupan is, he was very much an asshole before he was in the wheelchair, so any attempt to point to the wheelchair or the accident as the cause of his grumpyness would be an utter hoax" (Shapiro, 2005). Joe, in his first appearance on screen, voices his anger with a coach of Team USA by saying, "Fuck you bitch" (Shapiro, 2005). This antagonism is demonstrated without a clear reason for his anger toward the coach, and rather seems to serve solely to portray Joe's aggression.

In reference to each other a number of rude comments are offered. Zupan talks about Joe early on in the film and says, "If Joe was on the side of the road on fire, I wouldn't piss on him to put it out" (Shapiro, 2005). Footage of Zupan playing continues after this, and he bats away a ball. As this happens Joe yells at him antagonistically,

“Yea. Yea. Yea baby” (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan then wheels by him and retorts, “Fuck off,” and Joe counters, “Any time big boy” (Shapiro, 2005). Their graphic and at times emasculating taunts ground this antagonism in a typical blend of sporting masculinity and macho rhetoric.

Their exchange continues as Zupan, again in the weightlifting room, says, “He thought that I should respect him, for just who he was. Fuck you, I ain't going to respect you for who you are, you've got to gain respect through me” (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan's assertion here is that his respect must be won rather than given, however the grounds by which it might be won are unclear. They are then shown passing each other in a handshake line at the end of a game. Zupan says, “I'll remove you from my face if you yell at me again,” Joe counters, “Uh, man if you think you are man enough. OK” (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan yells back over his shoulder, “You don't think I'm man enough,” then Joe replies, “Oh, go suck eggs boy,” again invoking emasculating and juvenile taunts.

The rivalry between these two players serves a greater narrative function as the film continues, but as these first scenes transpire it is clear that the antagonism between them initially serves to ramp up the atmosphere of competitive rivalry in the film.

Battling bodies. The antagonism between Zupan and Joe, and the competition between Team U.S.A. and Team Canada plays out in the context of this heavy hitting sport and an atmosphere where physical danger is commonplace. The violence of this context is positioned as a normal part of sport when the U.S. coach says, “We're going to take care of business, we're going to kick the shit out of them,” implying that it is the business of the athletes to do significant damage to the other team (Shapiro, 2005). The

players are willing and ready to place themselves and their bodies on the line for the sake of symbolic combat in this physically dangerous competition.

In the title sequence of the film, a chair toppling hit happens and then the title of the film is displayed across the screen in red ink written on a piece of white sports tape. *Murderball*, the name of the film, brings to mind the violent illegal act of homicide, and ties the violence of this act to sport through allegory. A celebration of the hit with cheering can be heard in the background of the title. Though murder is not generally a celebrated act, celebration of violence in the context of sport grounds the representation of these athletes. The film's representations imply that these athletes are to be celebrated for their engagement in sanctioned violence.

Bob Lujano is shown in uniform on the court and then is pictured outside ready for training as he describes how the game is played. An animation of the court with arrows, x's and o's comes up on screen while Joe yells, and Bob says: "The other guys stop you by slamming their chair into you" and "you have to dribble the ball or pass to a teammate every ten seconds, but other than that, it's basically, kill the man with the ball" (Shapiro, 2005). The yelling that is interspersed with game description illustrates the intensity of the aggression in the game. His use of the words, "kill the man," echoes the film's title (Shapiro, 2005).

The tryouts for team U.S.A. are indicative of the necessary physical performance required when working towards Paralympic participation. As the Team U.S.A. training camp commences in Birmingham, Alabama, at the Lakeshore Foundation Official Training Site for the Paralympics, athletes wheel around an indoor track. Players perform drills and race along the track while being timed. Out of five hundred people who play

wheelchair rugby in the United States, twelve are selected for the Paralympic team. Zupan is shown wheeling down the street with headphones on and his shirt off. His elbows are taped and he has a very intense grimace on his face, again emphasizing his athleticism. The elite level of wheelchair rugby skills in these scenes emphasize the physical capacity of the athletes as they are captured by cameras at wheelchair height, framing muscular upper torsos while muscles bulge and aggressive looks are exchanged.

On court displays of aggression are a mainstay of the film's representation of these disability sport athletes. Midway through the narrative there is an extensive scene in which team Canada plays against team USA to determine which team will be the number one seed going into the Paralympics. During the scene Joe yells, "Watch Zupan, watch Zupan... Attack, attack, attack, attack" (Shapiro, 2005). Another team Canada player blocks Zupan dramatically tipping him over, and the team Canada player with the ball scores. Joe is shown on the side of the court; he pumps his fist and yells, "Boom." Throughout the rest of the game, several more hits are shown (Shapiro, 2005). This graphic violence is consistent throughout the film.

The aggressive physicality in the film is not limited to on court play, however, early on in the film several wheelchair rugby players are shown play fighting in a hotel lobby. Zupan looks mischievously sideways, and shakes his head. "Jason. Jay, where do you want to go? Down or up? Where? Where? Where? Where do you want to go" (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan grabs the bottom of an unidentified person's wheelchair and starts to tip him. As they wrestle, Andy tips over and hits his head on the floor and pillar in a hotel lobby. Two hotel staff people look at the group of wheelchair users with concern. One asks, "Do you want us to call security?" The players fight, make a scene,

and regard the hotel staff's response with nonchalance (Shapiro, 2005).

In a different scene, Joe is shown talking about a time in his childhood when he beat up another child for making fun of him:

I remember I was seven or eight, and this one kid, he would just, he would call me cripple, and you know, gimp and everything else. He made me really mad, and I just made sure – I waited for the right opportunity, and I was close enough to him and I was sitting on the ground because of course I couldn't walk, and I tripped him, and he went down, and when I did, I jumped on him, and once I had him, I just beat the living hell out of him –
Because my upper body was a lot stronger than his. (Shapiro, 2005)

The portrayal of the common sense place that violent behavior apparently occupies in the lives of the players stabilizes their identities as aggressive and suited to the sport's violence.

Invulnerability and injury. The action between bodies emphasizes violence and masculinity, and so do the featured bodies themselves. The players are depicted as fascinating embodiments of mechanical rigor. A wheelchair is tipped over during play and then an ignited welding torch is used on the underside of another chair. Zupan is again pictured, this time in front of a weightlifting machine. He says, "The majority of people that play wheelchair rugby have broken their necks, so we have rods, plates, screws, inside" (Shapiro, 2005). A close up shot of the back of a players' neck fades into an animation showing a skeleton and the angle of the camera focuses on the spinal column. Screws, plates and bolts float into the picture and affix themselves to the spinal

column. Percussive, slow music with strongly highlighted sounds contextualizes the scene, and sounds much like the music used in forensic investigation television shows. It is as if the medical interventions that accompany impairment for these players were similar to details of a crime being slowly revealed. With the music and references to mechanical function, the portrayal suggests a hybridized body of mechanical efficiency.

The ability of the players to use their bodies to accomplish aggressive tasks is valued highly. The camera cuts from shots of play to another animated skeleton as Zupan describes spinal injuries and the quantification of players based on their level of function related to the injuries. This quantification of the players' abilities further establishes the players as valued for their level of function

Andy is also shown talking about this quantification and he says, "My hands don't close, they only open. So kind of like spatulas, for like pancakes or flipping people off" (Shapiro, 2005). He looks at his hands as he says this and then shows his middle finger sticking up to the camera. Andy's sense of humor about his arm and hand function draws attention to the way bodies are equated with instruments in the previous scenes. The physicality of the bodies shown in these scenes illustrate the ways that these athletes with disabilities are normalized as cold, hard, functional and masculine, as if the players and wheelchairs were merely mechanisms of the sport.

When Keith is shown first learning about wheelchair rugby in a rehabilitation hospital, he sits in a rugby wheelchair and says that he feels "like battering ram," then he taps on the wheel and says, "Feel how rugged it is? I can run into anything" (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan encourages him to bang into things while rehabilitation attendants ask him not to. The exchange in this scene is particularly revealing of the portrayal of wheelchair

athletes as mitigating vulnerability. Keith is not yet a wheelchair rugby player, but it is clear that Zupan is there to offer Keith a way to recuperate an aggressive sporting masculinity through the sport, and through the rugby wheelchair.

Zupan best demonstrates the discursive link between masculinity and rugged or invulnerable physicality in further comments during his visit to the rehabilitation center to talk about wheelchair rugby. Keith's mother asks, "Do you wear helmets" (Shapiro, 2005)? Zupan responds, "No Ma'am" (Shapiro, 2005). She then asks, "And why not" (Shapiro, 2005)? Zupan responds, "You don't want to do it with elbow pads, shin pads, a helmet or whatever, and that might just be a macho man thing, but..." (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan doesn't qualify this statement by saying what macho or man means, he relies on dominant understandings of masculinity to insinuate that men by virtue of gender norms do not protect themselves from injury, and perhaps rather seek it. This reinforces the cultural understanding that when boys endure pain it "is courageous, [and] to survive pain is manly" (Sabo, 1994, p. 87).

Masculinity is also discursively linked to violence through the stories of how the athletes became impaired. Significant attention is paid to the stories of the origin of each athlete's impairment as they are told and retold. One striking similarity between the stories is that accidents occurred while the men were participating in activities oriented to proving their masculinity. Scott Hogsett talks about becoming quadriplegic after being injured in a fist fight. He tells the camera, "I got injured eleven years ago, it was a freak accident out at a lake cabin. I got pushed off the balcony and I broke my neck" (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan was injured after playing college soccer. Post game celebrations lead to drinking in a bar and he passed out in the back of a friend's pick-up truck. Zupan offers

further details of the incident, “I spent thirteen and a half hours in the canal, holding on to a branch until somebody found me” (Shapiro, 2005). Andy is also shown talking about the car accident that led to his impairment. This car accident is paralleled by the Motocross accident that caused Keith’s impairment. Images of Keith in the rehabilitation centre are interspersed with images of motocross bikes and the sounds of their motors’ buzzing. His mother says, “All his life, ever since he was on a tricycle, he's been on wheels, bicycles, dirt bikes, quads; he loved wheels. Now one of the favorite things in the world to Keith hurt him” (Shapiro, 2005). His relationship to dangerous performances of masculinity in sports is presented to discursively link his interest in wheelchair rugby and its recuperative potential for his masculinity with his past interests.

The film highlights these injury stories and the stories of these particular personalities in a way that reinforces the discursive linking of masculinity with sport and sport with the recuperation of masculinity.

Alternative narratives. These injury stories are not the only representation of becoming disabled. Bob became disabled after he contracted meningococciemia. Bob Lujano’s role throughout the film, and particularly the way he is represented while talking about his embodiment, differs from how the other athletes are represented.

Bob is shown performing a number of tasks at home, at work, and in his neighborhood. He is shown using artificial limbs and modified steering and shifting mechanisms to drive. The time that the camera spends capturing this detail, and the absence of a sound track characterize the images as intimate and require that the audience pay singular attention to the images on the screen. This quiet is remarkably different from other scenes in the film where people are yelling, cheering, crowds roar and loud music

plays; it forces viewers to notice their engagement with representations of disability without these mitigating factors. These representations situate Bob as worthy of admiration and compassion for his daily triumphs and rely on identification with the metaphorical value of his struggle.

Bob talks about ways that he deals with living with disability. He says, “My father was very instrumental in helping me deal with everything. I remember times, I remember kids would kind of laugh or point and he would laugh along with them and kind of joke about it. Once I saw him kind of lightening the situation, you know it didn't make me feel upset, or you know, hurt” (Shapiro, 2005). Here Bob highlights his experience of coping with ableist views. He also makes a claim to normality as he says, “I am a thirty-three year old single male living in Birmingham, and I think I am living what every person that is a single male is supposed to be living. You know, I live independently, I take care of my self, I cook for my self, I have a job” (Shapiro, 2005). Although representations of Bob differ from other representations that highlight only sports related performances of masculinity, masculinity is still positioned as important in his role in the film.

As a further departure from representations of disability in the film, Bob talks about a recurring dream he has. He says, “I just remember having a dream where I was just flying out into the back yard, flying over the roof of the house, flying, you know among the trees” (Shapiro, 2005). This series of images is used to present Bob's story as a shift in the emotional resonance of the film. While situating Bob as a figure worthy of compassion the scenes build emotional investment in his struggles. Disability is shown here as an experience of hardship based on loss associated with impairment, as well as social constraint. Rather than relying on normative masculinity, aggression and sport

skill to mediate his identity, the inclusion of these scenes work to counter and reinforce stereotypes of disability. Bob is represented as a part of a community of sport, and as masculine, but his identity is not entirely wrapped up in these terms. The portrayal of his relationship to his illness, the experience of his impairment, as well as his experience of ablest attitudes, is candid and affecting, and yet follows the familiar structure of disability as an inspirational story.

Sport comes first. Although the primary impulse of the film is to recuperate the athletes' identities through masculinity and its discursive linkings, the cost of this normative project is visible because of the presence of Robert and Patti in the film. Robert is Joe Soar's youngest son and Patti is Joe's wife.

Joe's family is introduced at the Wheelchair Rugby World Championships, and the story lines of all of the athletes and coaches have already been established. It is clear that the presence of Joe's family is part of a secondary story line, and his work with Team Canada is of primary importance in the film. Throughout the film Joe refers to Team Canada as "his boys." When Joe hosts the players of team Canada at his home for a barbeque and Super Bowl party, he says, "In a year and a half, we have become the strongest family I've ever had," he hesitates and notices his family's presence, then continues, "as far as a second family, OK. You guys have really made me feel right at home and I absolutely consider you guys my boys, you guys are my boys, and you'll be my boys for a long time" (Shapiro, 2005). The consistent referral Joe makes to the team as his boys sets up several awkward moments in the film as his son watches the team, in hopes of finding a similar kind of attention and approval from his father.

Several images and stories come together to illustrate what markers of

masculinity are valued. During the Super Bowl party Robert plays his violin while sitting in his room. He misses some notes but plays a recognizable tune. Then he wheels through the house in a wheelchair following the family dog. He looks to the camera as his father continues to entertain the wheelchair rugby team in the background and says, "This is the poster of my Dad, um, actually got when he went to the Paralympics in 1996, and he's right here. He's going to chase by one of the guys with the ball" (Shapiro, 2005). Robert points out Joe on the poster, and then points to his t-shirt and says, "This is a shirt that my Dad actually ended up giving me, he didn't actually want it any more though, but I don't know why. It has the quad rugby team from 1996 on it" (Shapiro, 2005). Robert's keen interest in wheelchair rugby and his resignation to his father's cast off shirt, suggests that Robert himself is an afterthought for Joe.

When Robert points at another picture and says, "There's Joe, right there," Joe corrects him, "There is Dad," Robert quickly modifies his statement and says, "Dad. There is Dad" (Shapiro, 2005). The father son relationship that Joe has with Robert revolves around Robert's desire for his fathers' approval. In this scene it seems that Joe pays more attention to the wheelchair rugby team than his son unless it is to scold and correct him.

Robert is shown dusting his father's trophy case, and he says, "My Dad is one of the best rugby players in the world," then back in his room pictured with his violin, he says, "...but it's annoying to dust my Dad's trophy wall, because some times you even have to get a ladder and go all the way up to the top and dust up there, and dust in and out of every single trophy" (Shapiro, 2005). Again the relationship between Joe and his son's chore demonstrates that emphasis is placed on sport success in the Soars' home.

Robert, we learn, is an excellent student at school, but he is portrayed as a nerd who is bullied and picked last in gym class. Though Robert excels in the things that he does it is clear that he doesn't find the same social acceptance that he would if he were more athletically inclined. Joe's friend comments on this dynamic, he says, "Joe never really sat and bitched to me that, you know, my kid doesn't do this, my kid doesn't do that, but you could hear it in some of things he would say: like, "Oh he doesn't play sports and I wish he would." ...and he would try to convince his kid to do it, to do something and it wouldn't stick" (Shapiro, 2005). As if to confirm this sentiment, Robert's friend Sammy tells the camera: "Kids get very jealous and want to pick on me and Robert, or just Robert" (Shapiro, 2005). The inclusion of this scene in the film demonstrates that skills outside of sport are not valued in the same way as sports by Joe. Since it is through a father-son relationship that the role of sports is emphasized, the discursive linking of masculinity with sport is also demonstrated.

Joe responds to the trouble Robert has with his classmates by offering advice about another kind of normative behavior. Footage of in class work is shown and Joe says in a voice over, "I always told him, if some bully is picking on you, if you have no other course and they are coming after you, then go right for the nose" (Shapiro, 2005). Joe's suggestion of defensive violence seems incongruous with Robert's persona. Joe continues to illustrate the point as he recounts jumping out of his wheelchair and onto a boy who teased him, and punching him repeatedly. The differences between Joe and his son are obvious. The filmmakers draw significant attention to the differences between Robert and Joe, and create a tension between Joe's expectations and the reality of his son's life. This tension demonstrates that Joe places value on a more physical, aggressive and violent

male embodiment. The relationship between father and son functions as a critique of the value placed on these features of hegemonic masculinity but also seems to position them as inevitable necessities.

Later in the film, Joe's relationship with his team and his son are again paralleled when Joe foregrounds a discussion of discipline as a pedagogical tool and the place of violence in a relationship between men. The players look at him soberly and some with contempt. In a voice over he says, "My theory on discipline, if you start early and you let them know that you will back up what you say, then usually by age five, the discipline is already established" (Shapiro, 2005). In the next scene, Joe threatens Robert for what he sees as misbehavior and in a voice over says, "If you give them tough love, they learn the difference from wrong and right, and my Dad was a police officer. If you badmouthed him, you did anything at all there were consequences. He was very hard nosed and he had really huge hands and he hit really hard" (Shapiro, 2005).

Joe is shown in the kitchen with Robert peering over the edge of a counter listening in. Joe continues motioning to Robert, "I let him know that, it's not even close, to what I do to him, as compared, that what my father did to me" (Shapiro, 2005). This comment suggests that Joe uses some physical violence with his son as a form of discipline. Robert's reaction seems to suggest that he has been told this story before. Robert opens his mouth as if he might say something but he doesn't. The implication that Joe has been physically abusive toward his son doesn't seem out of context given the level of violence already displayed in the film, however, since Robert is shown as a sympathetic character harmed by Joe's violence, it is clear that a price is paid for the physicality associated with normative masculine embodiments and actions. Robert's

importance to Joe is eclipsed by the value he places on teaching everyone around him how to embody the norms of sport and thereby also hegemonic masculinity.

Despite sympathies the film might engender in viewers for Robert, or anyone who fails at aspects of hegemonic masculinity, the film positions norms of sport and hegemonic masculinity as necessary to the lives of the athletes. Since the film is primarily about these athletes and their relationship to their sport, this critique takes a back seat to the value placed on the embodiment of ideal sporting masculinity.

One other personality is represented sympathetically, demonstrating the cost of Joe's performances of masculinity. Joe's wife Patti is shown disapproving of Joe's aggression and the way he ignores Robert. The scene where Robert is being scolded for sitting on the family car is followed by a discussion between Joe and his wife Patti at their 22nd wedding anniversary dinner. Patti tells Joe, "You need to calm down with Robert a little bit" (Shapiro, 2005). Joe responds, "Do you think he would be who he is without his father, the discipline that he gets from me? He wouldn't be, OK, and sometimes yea, every parent goes a little overboard sometimes, but I would rather be too strict than not strict enough" (Shapiro, 2005). It is clear that she is subject to Joe's aggressive behavior and scolding as well. The relationship between Joe and Patti is both representative of Joe's antagonistic sport-centric behavior, and his misogyny.

Representations of Women

The athletes' misogyny is another aspect of the film that further contributes to hegemonic masculinity. In the film, women are consistently reduced to particular roles, usually subordinate caregivers or sex objects, and are always shown lending support to the authority of the men.

It's a man's world. A striking way that women in the film are marginalized is in the way that they come second to sport in the lives of the men as they are represented in the film.

During Joe and Patti's anniversary scene, as Joe finishes talking about Robert, he stops looking at Patti and looks over her shoulder. The camera cuts back to Patti's face. She looks at Joe with some nervousness and holds up her glass and says, "To you," he raises his glass in return and says, "To Team Canada hopefully, to the gold, baby, the Golden rainbow" (Shapiro, 2005). Patti takes a sip and looks over Joe's shoulder with raised eyebrows. He also looks away from her. It is clear in the scene that Joe is much less concerned with the anniversary than he is with wheelchair rugby.

In another scene, Patti is shown sitting on a couch in the Soar's family home. She says, "When it comes closer to the point in time when the game is going to go on, he gets more edgy, more irritable" (Shapiro, 2005). The camera shows Joe rubbing his face in his hands with game footage playing on the TV in front of him. The way that Joe is shown to value the sport above the presence of his wife, reiterates the imbalance of power between them.

Again, in these scenes when Joe is shown relating to his family, the cost of his misogyny and behaviors that conform to hegemonic masculinity are visible. Joe becomes a target for disapproval in the film through his blatant disregard for his family. While Patti's presence in the film may arouse sympathies for her, the film returns to misogynistic representations of women again and again.

In a long scene near the end of the film, the athletes show a clear disregard for women as they pull a prank on one of the women who is on the trip to assist Team U.S.A.

As she screams and jumps backwards in reaction to the prank, the players all laugh at her surprise. Again the woman in this scene is not identified specifically and is treated as a target for the athletes' entertainment. The filmmakers present this scene without critique, and rather include this scene as if it is some sort of comic relief. The disregard shown for her by the wheelchair rugby teammates implies that their camaraderie is more important than showing respect for this woman who is part of the team. When setting up the prank Scott says, "Call the girls" (Shapiro, 2005), so it is clear that he doesn't intend to frighten anyone specifically, but rather, thinks of all the women present in the hotel as suitable targets for this prank. By representing this woman without a clear indication of who she is, the filmmakers again show their disregard for the role of women in the lives of the men in the film.

Taking women for granted and positioning them as secondary to the masculine oriented sports culture presented in the film marginalizes women and reinforces the primacy of men. The self-centered masculinity of the men in the film is reiterated in the roles women are relegated to in the film.

Caregivers. A theme of the subservience and devaluation of women runs through the narrative. Mark Zupan's girl friend, Jess, is seemingly included as little more than a sex object and moral support for Zupan. In one scene Zupan is shown wheeling up to the edge of a pool in a bathing suit. His mother and girlfriend watch him jump into the pool and then they both show some concern as he sinks under the water. This scene presents a tension that is explored in the next few scenes between Zupan and his girlfriend. She is shown here and in scenes where he takes physical risks on the wheelchair rugby court wincing with concern for his safety. His aggressive behavior and her responses set up an

expectation of the role she takes with Zupan. In a later scene she briefly mentions that one of the attractions to Zupan for her is that she can fulfill a mothering role. She says, “I really think it is curiosity that attracts some girls to quadriplegics, and I think maybe also, to some extent, it is the mothering instinct.” She is then shown tying up his shoes and then pumping gas while he sits in the car. Her statement implies that her interest in Zupan is as a project, one that allows her to fulfill the role of a caregiver. Although Zupan is shown offering her affection in other scenes, when Jess is helping him, Zupan looks away with disinterest. The relationship between Zupan and Jess further illustrates the role that women are relegated to as unvalued helpers in the film.

Another brief appearance of a woman on screen is Zupan's mother who throughout the film nods in agreement with her husband without speaking herself. In several scenes Zupan's parents are shown in their family home speaking to the camera. In each of these scenes Zupan's father speaks, while his mother nods, and laughs in the background. Zupan's mother is also never identified in the film. When she is shown along side of Jess, Zupan's girlfriend, she is not identified and does not talk. Then beside her husband a subtitle is the only identification given to her and it says, “Mark's Parents,” without identifying her directly. Although she is represented offering a positive supportive role, she is almost completely unacknowledged in the film, and is thereby circumscribed by the filmmakers to a devalued role in the lives of the men in her family.

One of the few women represented in position of authority in the film, is a Team U.S.A. coach. Joe, the Team Canada coach, in his first appearance on screen, voices his anger with this coach by saying, “fuck you bitch” (Shapiro, 2005). This antagonism is demonstrated without a clear reason for his anger toward the coach, and rather seems to

serve solely to contextualize Joe's misogyny. This woman is the only representative of Team U.S.A. named in the film. Although there are women who participate in wheelchair rugby (often on the same teams as the men featured in the film), the film makes no reference to their participation. This coach is relegated to the role of team support staff and is one of few women shown involved with the sport. Furthermore, the only time when she is present on camera, her presence serves solely to contextualize Joe's relationship to women and Team U.S.A.

In the film several women working as rehabilitation therapists are also represented solely as helpers. Although most people in the film are introduced with subtitles below them on the screen, none of these women are introduced. In several scenes with Keith therapists play pass with him, and help him perform tasks like taking off Velcro shoes. The help given by these women without introductions in the film, devalues their role in the main characters' lives and in the important role that they play Keith's life.

This dynamic continues in the representations of Keith and his relationship to women in the film. As Keith leaves the rehabilitation hospital with his mother and girlfriend several women who are rehabilitation therapists, who have worked with Keith, give him presents. He thanks them but doesn't address them personally. When he gets home his girlfriend is not identified by a subtitle and she and Keith's mother talk but are not the focus of the camera. The filmmakers again neglect to include the viewpoints of women in these scenes, and only include them as superfluous or secondary personalities whose presence offers only simplistic feedback and help for Keith.

One of the final scenes in the film is particularly revealing in terms of the role

women are given throughout the film. After Team U.S.A. loses to Team Canada at the Paralympics in Athens, the players come out into the hallway under the arena and are met by family members. In each case mothers and girlfriends show concern and offer hugs, kisses and other gestures of consolation. Scott Hogsett is met by a woman who leans in and hugs him. Another player is met by a woman who leans in and holds his face while closing her eyes and putting her forehead against the top of his head. Jess greets Zupan and leans in to kiss him and hug him. Another woman is shown with tears running down her face. Then the camera moves back to Zupan and Jess who are still embracing while Zupan uses her shirt to wipe his eyes. Zupan is then shown with Jess kneeling in front of him while the hands of other friends and family members, including his mother, rest on his back and pat his shoulder. This scene follows from other scenes in which the women in the film are primarily shown as caregivers for the athletes. The emotional support these women offer the athletes is presented without giving the women voice. The scene is accompanied only by music until Bob's father speaks to him about how proud he is of "His boy" (Shapiro, 2005). The absence of the voices of the women in this scene and the primacy given to the voice of a father talking to his son demonstrates the authority that men are granted, and the simplistic role that women are accorded, as devalued support for the men in the film.

The misogyny of this relegation works to support hegemonic masculinities, as the concurrent valuation of men and devaluation of women reproduces the dominance of men. Taking women for granted, and in this case, while offering support to men, marginalizes women, and reinforces the primacy of masculinity.

Heteronormativity

The power of sexist and heterosexist masculinity is on display in both the men's relationships to each other and to the women in their lives. Heteronormative features of hegemonic masculinity are presented as recuperations of masculinity for the men of *Murderball*. Throughout the film there is an ongoing discussion of the athletes' sexuality. In all instances this takes the shape of men discussing their attraction to and possible sexual engagement with women. The athletes make repeated references to the possibility of the phallic or 'normal' functions of their penises in having sex with women. Mark Zupan, Andy Cohn, Scott Hogsett, and Bob (players from the U.S. team) are interviewed about living with disabilities, how they are perceived and how they are treated in a number of social situations. They spend significant time talking about picking up, dating, and having sex with women. This representation of phallogentric and heteronormative sexuality relies on the erasure of complex and different sexual identities. There is no discussion of queer sexuality in the film, and the non-normative aspects of the athletes' sex lives are framed by the men as they interpret themselves as normative.

Normative desire. When the camera first captures the wheelchair rugby teams preparing for international competition, the camera turns to two attractive blond women who wander into the lobby of a building where the world championship event is being held. These two women are included in the film to demonstrate that attractive women are interested in the athletes' physicality and their relationship to sport, and have no importance in the narrative otherwise. The inclusion of this scene is indicative of the role of women in following scenes.

Zupan's girlfriend is also featured throughout the film to code his desire as

normative. She is introduced speaking in a voice over, saying, “Mark is definitely what I would classify as a jock” (Shapiro, 2005). Her statement serves as a reminder of his place in normative masculinity established through his sporting success. In this scene Zupan pulls Jess into the pool with him in her bikini, and she squeals. Her slender frame and diminutive behavior are contrasted by Zupan’s athletic build and conspicuous presence. The contrast, which is discursively linked to their masculinity and femininity, codes their desire for each other as heteronormative. Throughout the film Zupan and Jess are shown holding and kissing each other several times. The consistent displays of heteronormative desire between them positioned them as an ideal heteronormative reference point throughout the film.

Not all of the representations of heteronormative desire include representations of women. While playing cards and arguing with Joe, Andy says, “That's number two on the list of most stupid things I've ever heard. At this camp I heard Sam says he doesn't like big tits, and he'd dump a girl that had big tits if everything was perfect” (Shapiro, 2005). The group of men sitting around a card table in this scene argues with fervor. Sam says, “Don't lie. Don't lie” (Shapiro, 2005). Then Andy mimics Sam and says, “They get in the way,” Sam then defends himself by saying, “I like athletic girls, that's what I said all that night when they asked me” (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan responds, “You knew you weren't going to live that one down” (Shapiro, 2005). Sam says, “I'm comfortable with my sexuality, I can say that, I don't like big tits” (Shapiro, 2005). Then someone speaks from off camera and says, “You do like shoes though,” Sam agrees, “I do like shoes,” and the group laughs (Shapiro, 2005). The debate in this scene is not whether Sam conforms to heteronormative desire, but rather his level of conformity. The discussion demonstrates

the pressure placed on individuals within the group to conform to the features of hegemonic masculinity. Though it is not always clear what indicates fully heteronormative desire (interest in large breasts and not shoes may be a contested indication of conformity to normative patterns of desire) it is clear that the men measure their own and others conformity to hegemonic masculinity, and thus work towards normalization.

During the final credits of the film a few closing scenes are interwoven with production credits. During footage of a bar scene, a caption below Scott says, “Hogsett met the girl of his dreams at a bar” (Shapiro, 2005). The camera then shows a close up shot of Scott holding a woman's hand. The camera zooms out and shows her sitting on his lap with a group of people wearing USA Wheelchair Rugby t-shirts standing behind them. A caption below them reads, “They are getting married in the spring” (Shapiro, 2005). The camera then shows a close up of Scott repeatedly kissing her shoulder and smiling. During this scene the woman is not identified by name and is rather shown as evidence of Scott's success, and the link between his athletic prowess and this success, in courting a beautiful woman.

A similar scene is shown to capture Bob's similar heterosexual accomplishments. Bob is shown holding onto some one's back while the person uses his legs and arms to buck like a horse. This play is shown between members of team USA. As Bob falls off the back of the other person and sits up a caption says, “Bob has been dating a girl from Birmingham” (Shapiro, 2005). He and a woman kiss in front of a secret service agent standing on the White House lawn. A caption reads, “She is a Paralympic gold medal swimmer” (Shapiro, 2005). Rather than identifying the woman, she is again a symbol of

Bob's successful heteronormative life, and is positioned as a reward of his national sport team involvement.

Both scenes present summarizing statements about the athletes and position their heterosexual relationships as having key importance to their personal narratives and to the narrative of the film. The five most central characters are all represented as heterosexual men who desire women and have success with women thanks to their athletic involvement. These elements of the narrative fail to demonstrate the possibility of any sexual performance outside of heterosexuality. The singular focus on heterosexuality and normative masculinity negates other non-normative narratives. The representation of the athletes not only limits discussion about gender and sexuality, but also reinforces their masculinity since heterosexism is a feature of hegemonic masculinities.

'Normal' sexual activity. A primary way that sexuality is represented in the film is through discussions among the men about their ability to function 'normally'. Keith's recent injury and rehabilitation allow the film to follow his attempt to regain some semblance of what he perceives as normality, and allow for a comparison to be made between him and the wheelchair rugby athletes featured in the film. In several scenes, the sexuality of disabled men is fore-grounded with Keith as an example of someone seeking to begin a sexual life with a new disability. A doctor is shown in a clinical setting. Keith says, "I had a girlfriend prior to the injury and as I get discharged from here and I get back to my private life, how would that effect... would I be able to be sexually active?" (Shapiro, 2005). The camera zooms out to show him lying in a bed with the doctor standing over him. The doctor says, "The short answer is yes. We have a video to show you how to do it. As time goes on we are going to go through a whole program, in term

of what techniques you may need” (Shapiro, 2005). This discussion makes his heterosexuality apparent, and reinforces anxiety over the ability for a man with a disability to perform normative sexual practices.

As a video begins to play, within the frame of the film, the same doctor who was speaking to Keith is shown in the video. He says, “Often adjusting after spinal cord injury, involves a re-evaluation or reordering of priorities in ones life. One must work through the issue of why did this happen to me, and make a conscious decision to move forward in life” (Shapiro, 2005). Keith’s ability to get back to his heterosexual life is positioned as essential to his “moving forward.” From this video the film shifts to a nightclub where the Team U.S.A. teammates are shown as they move around a dance floor and women crowd around them. The awkward video gives way to a more commonsense heteronormative context of a sexually charged atmosphere. The contrast between the two scenes suggests that one of these two scenes follow each other, however, both scenes only include able-bodied women. The erasure of women with disabilities from these contexts performs a further heteronormative function. Since normative masculinity is discursively linked with able-bodiedness, and the representations of the film are already working to reclaim these disabled men’s normativity, the inclusion of women with disabilities would further trouble notions of heteronormativity. In this respect women are again marginalized and limited to particular embodiments for the sake of positioning the men as heteronormative. This also demonstrates ableism in the discursive configuration of heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity.

In one scene, Scott Hogsett is asked questions about his physical capabilities by an unnamed woman. In a voice over, he says, “You see it takes about ten to twenty

minutes of working that chick, and then she finally drops the bomb, “can you do it” (Shapiro, 2005)? Andy responds for Scott, “... it's all still very good” (Shapiro, 2005). Scott implies that all of the men present are capable of having erections and says, “I think everyone here, ding ding sing, woo hoo” (Shapiro, 2005). The woman responds, “Wait, so some can get it up but not...” Scott interrupts and launches into a story:

It's not a given with every quad. When I first got injured, I was in intensive care, and everyone was curious as to how I was going to be, how much function I was going to have when I came out of my coma, and I was about ready to wake up, and the nurses decided to give me a sponge bath, in the bed, and the one nurse got so excited that I got a woody, that she ran outside and got my mom and showed her my erection. (Shapiro, 2005)

As Scott's explicit discussion with this woman is contextualized by his comment about “working that chick,” the story serves two functions (Shapiro, 2005). It indicates his capacity for heteronormative sexual function, and he uses this discussion as a come on to the woman he is talking to. The reinforcement of his capacity for penile vaginal sex and his interest in this woman contextualize his desire and embodiment as heteronormative. This desire coupled with the limited representation of the woman in the scene serves to stabilize her as an object of his normative desire, while articulating his normative sexual ability.

Significant attention is also given to the ‘normal’ sexual activity of the men in terms of masturbation. Scott notes, “The first thing I learned how to do is jerk off. That's the very first thing I learned. You know I'd rather be able to grab my meat than grab a

toothbrush” (Shapiro, 2005). Further emphasis on the importance of masturbation is given as the camera switches back to the doctor in the video as he says, “Before you engage in sexual activity with any partner, it would be helpful to know how your new body works. This can most effectively be accomplished by masturbating” (Shapiro, 2005). The importance of masturbation in these two scenes reinforces the need to acquire abilities for ‘normal’ sexual function.

Other statements position the athletes as making efforts to attain normative sexuality. The video, ‘Sexuality Following Spinal Cord Injury’ shows a man pulling a pair of panties off of a woman with his teeth while she stands in front of him. The video continues showing this woman pull a man in a wheelchair backwards onto a couch with her. Jess, Zupan’s girlfriend, says in a voice over, “It may be humorous at times to watch the process of trying that, you know, you might fall over, you might have to do some modifications to it” (Shapiro, 2005). This is the only time in the film, where Jess speaks as a voice of authority. She is granted this authority to signify the normative desire that underlies an effort to modify and normalize the sexual activity of men with disabilities.

A moment in the representation of the sexuality of men with disabilities that doesn’t entirely conform to heteronormativity follows this scene. The woman talking with Scott and the group of players says, “Well, does the girl have to be on top?” Scott quickly responds, “A lot of girls like being on top” (Shapiro, 2005). Scott’s quick response suggests that although it may be more normative for a man to position himself on top during sex, sex with the man on the bottom is still perfectly normative. Another assertion of sexuality that doesn’t entirely conform to heteronormativity is made by Zupan who says, “When you are in a chair, you usually like to eat pussy” (Shapiro,

2005). This reference to sex as other than penile vaginal penetration is one of the only moments in the film when heteronormative discourses are somewhat resisted, but it is unfortunately fleeting.

Even when disability is acknowledged as these men talk about the exceptions to normative sexual practice, heterosexual desire is reasserted to ground their actions as heteronormative. A man in a wheelchair who sits at the edge of a track inside the Team U.S.A. tryout gymnasium describes his technique for reclaiming a heteronormative embodiment as he says, “I have a modified doggy style that I kind of perfected, because I have less hand grip, I use a towel, well belt, around her waist, and then I hold it right there” (Shapiro, 2005). Andy is shown expressing his fear about not being perceived as sexually capable. He says, “My first full on sex, after being in a wheelchair, was a very great moment in my life. Just knowing that I could just still, not just the physical act, but that, you could still go out one night and meet a girl and get lucky. Things that you don't think are possible anymore” (Shapiro, 2005). Although Andy doesn't fully describe what he means by “full on” sex, given the ongoing discussion of phallogentric sex in the film to this point, his statement comes across as another assertion of penile vaginal penetration.

While the film creates possibilities for discussion of ablest prejudice and the problems people with disabilities have when encountering ableism in relation to sexuality, or a discussion of non-normative embodiments and sex, the film moves quickly past these possibilities. There are brief moments of resistance to heteronormativity in the film, but the common denominator in the representations of sexual activity of men with disabilities, are claims to normative practice and embodiment that emphasize

phallogocentric sex, and therefore, the heteronormativity of the men in the film. The film has potential to make valuable contributions to popular discussions of disability and sexuality, but it is unfortunately dominated by emulations of normativity. In these scenes, the athletes' disability is mitigated by their heterosexual performances, and their ability to perform sexually is asserted as a recuperation of their masculinity.

Conclusion

Throughout the film *Murderball*, hegemonic masculinity is represented by dangerous behavior – primarily in competitive sport contexts through antagonist rivalry, and in sexism and heterosexism. The main personalities' background stories, bodies, and behaviors both in personal and sport contexts defy any notion that a person with a disability is necessarily weak or fragile, but the representations of the film use hegemonic masculinity as a pivotal device for the recuperation of the athletes' identities.

This recuperation comes at a significant cost to the lives of people with disabilities in the film and in the broader context, since the need for recuperation suggests devaluation in the first place. Although the wheelchair rugby athletes in the film somewhat conform to rigid standards of behavior and embodiment through which they can be interpreted as normal “jock jerks,” it is an ableist frame of reference that necessitates this conformity. This is also a problem for all people with disabilities many of whom do not conform to such norms since they are not only held to this ableist standard, but are left off of the representational map entirely.

North American cinema lacks representations of disability, and in the case of *Murderball* there is still a lack of representation that doesn't appeal to ableist sensibilities about what is worth watching on the big screen. Athletic masculinity is the standard that

people with disabilities are measured by in *Murderball*, but not everyone plays wheelchair rugby, or wants to be on a team where insults are hurled, and bodies are exposed to violence on and off the court of play. The pivotal role norms play in the way that the film grants value to the personalities on screen, devalue and erase queer identities, women, non-athletes, and all other identities that do not conform to the masculinities represented in *Murderball*. These representations of hegemonic masculinity reify and reproduce inequitable power relations as the sexist, heterosexist, and ableist frame of reference of the film articulates to broader power relations which are pervasive in the context of the film.

CHAPTER IV

Nationalism and Imperialism in *Murderball*

In this chapter I examine aspects of the film which articulate masculinity to a U.S. nationalist and imperialist impulse. Sport in the contemporary North American context is “one of the central sites in the social production of masculinity” (Whitson, 1990, p. 19) and Varda Burstyn (1999) has acknowledged the close relationship between sport, masculinity and war (p. 44). Furthermore, Stemple (2006) suggests that mediated sports have come to form a cultural ‘common sense’ in which masculinity and nationalistic ideals and morals define a field of politics in which imperialist military projects are imagined and through which support for those projects is generated (p. 102). With this in mind, I examine the narrative of the film as it is constructed based on an international wheelchair rugby rivalry between Canada and the U.S.A. Messages about the moral authority of the U.S.A., the symbolic proximity of sport to war, and the role of athletes as exemplars of patriotism abound. As the score is settled between the nations in sporting competition, the film positions some bodies as salvageable and other as disposable. My concern here is that athletic success is conflated with hegemonic masculinity and ideological support for the militarized nationalism, and that the representations offer this success as the basis of the value of people with disabilities in the film.

The pervasive subtext of hegemonic masculinity continues to organize those aspects of the narrative that focus on sport in an international context. In each of the three international competitions that the U.S. and Canadian teams attend, a violent rivalry is highlighted. Zupan and Joe are the focal points of this rivalry, and are represented as salvageable patriot and disposable traitor, respectively. It is in this context that the

specific messages about the worth of the athletes to a United States imperial moral position are made.

U.S. Dominance

Throughout the film, Team U.S.A. is represented as the rightful number one seed in wheelchair rugby. At the beginning of the film, Marty, a pit crew team member for Team U.S.A. says, “The United States has dominated the sport of wheelchair rugby for the last ten years” (Shapiro, 2005). The players of Team U.S.A. also reinforce the idea of their teams’ dominance. The camera follows Zupan wheeling around the gym with his teammates near-by. After a victory is secured during tournament play he yells, “That’s what we came to fucking do” (Shapiro, 2005). Immediately after Zupan’s comment a coach from Team U.S.A. says, “There’s been, I believe eleven international competitions. The U.S. has won all of them” (Shapiro, 2005). It is clear that amongst the members of the team, there is an expectation of national supremacy in the sport.

After world championship play is over, the film follows several players at the Team U.S.A. training camp where the Paralympic team is selected. Several minutes are spent on this scene in order to highlight the importance to those who are selected as representatives of Team U.S.A. The Team U.S.A. coach speaks in a voice over as images of a group of wheelchair athletes are shown together in a room. He says, “Selection is the hard part. We have got a great responsibility going towards Athens. Um, we are going there to win gold, and selected a team that I feel give us the best opportunity to do that” (Shapiro, 2005).

During the Team U.S.A. final cuts, the camera follows Andy and then all of the other featured players as they wheel up to the front of a room where the coach presents

them as new members of the Paralympic team. The crowd applauds as each of the players and when Zupan is selected the film changes to slow motion. Once the coach announces, “This is the 2004 U.S.A. Paralympic rugby team,” The crowd claps and yells, and the team huddles up to yell, “One Two Three, U.S.A., Rugby” (Shapiro, 2005). The status of the team as a national representative is repeated several times. The draft of Team Canada's players is never shown. This Team U.S.A. selection scene serves to position the individual players as elite representatives of the sport and of the United States.

Team Canada and Team U.S.A. meet in Vancouver, Canada, three months before the Paralympics. The game is an exhibition match to determine the number one seed. The Team U.S.A. coach contextualizes the scene, saying, “This tournament is very important for us because, it gives us an opportunity to reclaim what we feel is ours, being the number one seed going into the Paralympics” (Shapiro, 2005). His suggestion that the number one seed is deserved or owned by Team U.S.A. draws on a commonly mediated sentiment during U.S. broadcasts of international competition. U.S. sports broadcasts regularly position U.S. athletes as international favorites.

A strong sentiment of displeasure about Team U.S.A.’s dominance in the sport is voiced by a Team Australia athlete who says, “Look, I just want to be beat the bloody Americans, more than any team” (Shapiro, 2005). The combination of this and the previous scene sets up an identity for the American team in which their dominance makes them a target for competitive pressure. This scene is also quickly followed by a scene in which a Swedish man says, “All the teams find the Americans pretty arrogant. They have been winning this game for a long time” (Shapiro, 2005). While these statements indicate an objection to Team U.S.A.’s dominance of the sport, they also position the U.S. as a

victim, alluding to a “why do they hate us” rhetoric in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. This victim stance contributes to the rhetoric that polarizes opposition to the U.S. as evil, insisting, as then U.S. President George W. Bush did; ‘either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’ (address to joint session of Congress, September 20, 2001 in Falcous & Silk, 2005, p. 62).

Rivalry

Throughout the film antagonism between Mark Zupan and Joe Soars is utilized to construct and highlight a narrative of national rivalry between team Canada and Team U.S.A. As I illustrated in the earlier section on masculinity, Joe and Zupan are regularly shown insulting each other, yelling at each other and using graphic imagery to illustrate their antagonism for the other. This personal and athletic rivalry is made analogous to national rivalry as they are situated as spokes persons for their respective teams.

In the next live action between international teams, the camera zooms in on Team U.S.A. and is titled. The title reads, Team U.S.A. and Zupan is in the centre of the shot. Then the camera zooms in on Team Canada with the same kind of title, it reads, Team Canada and Joe is at the centre of the shot. Again the two are featured as symbols of international rivalry.

During the first scenes of international competition a title comes up over a blank screen which says; “For the first time, Joe will face his former U.S.A. team mates” (Shapiro, 2005). Nation is continually referred to and Joe's status as a traitor is reinforced. The Team U.S.A. coach says, “I don't want to see anyone else talking to anyone except your team. They're going to be talking all sorts of trash. Joe is going to say, what ever the hell Joe says. I don't care. The only reason Joe went to Canada is to beat the United

States. Were going to take care of business, were going to kick the shit out of them” (Shapiro, 2005). This statement shows that the whole team is aware of a building antagonism between Joe and Team U.S.A., and that the coach and others believe that Joe deserves the vengeance that the coach believes they are about to dish out.

During a close up of Joe the camera moves right into his face and he screams, “U.S.A. down” (Shapiro, 2005). The violence of his antagonism suggests that Joe is concerned with revenge, and so, is again positioned as a villain in the narrative since Team U.S.A. is the focal point of the film. After this scene, Team U.S.A. tryouts are shown and Zupan and other players discuss Joe. After two of the athletes suggest that Joe is worthy of respect for his role in helping Team U.S.A., Zupan responds to this, “Who cares? Does that just make him a shining star” (Shapiro, 2005)? Scott adds in, “Does that mean you go coach Canada” (Shapiro, 2005)? This ongoing discussion of Joe's value as a citizen of the U.S.A. and as a person given his involvement with team Canada demonstrates the nationalistic zealotry of the players. Zupan’s distaste for Joe sets Joe up as the antagonist in the film. The athletes of Team U.S.A. are venerated for their role as representatives of their nation.

In stark contrast to the scene in which Joe is vilified, Zupan is shown educating people in a rehabilitation center about disability sport. He presents a video and discussion about wheelchair rugby to the group. After the video that he plays mentions the national team a mother of one of the rehabilitation patients asks, “What team are you on, are you on one of those teams on there” (Shapiro, 2005). Zupan proudly says, “I play for the United States Paralympic rugby team” (Shapiro, 2005). The positioning of sport as a normalizing force in the lives of the athletes throughout the film is further exaggerated as

Zupan presents it as a key to the future happiness of people who have recently begun rehabilitation. The pride he takes in talking about his involvement with Team U.S.A., and the role he takes in presenting the sport to the people in the rehabilitation center, position him as a productive and esteemed patriotic personality in the narrative.

The Traitor. Joe is positioned as the morally reprehensible opposition to Team U.S.A. as a representative of Team Canada. His job as the coach of Team Canada is represented as treasonous and solidifies his role as the narrative's antagonist.

When Joe is first shown on screen telling a woman from Team U.S.A., "Fuck you bitch," his shirt bares a Canadian flag (Shapiro, 2005). As a representative of Team Canada cursing at a member of Team U.S.A. without cause, he is set up as an objectionable personality in the film. A Team U.S.A. jersey that says Soars across the back contextualizes Joe's presence in the movie as a former athlete for Team U.S.A. The woman that Joe curses at is featured explaining that Joe was cut from Team U.S.A., and then another Team U.S.A. representative says, "Joe got a little upset, a little angry, he didn't make the team, he tried to take us to court" (Shapiro, 2005). The head coach for Team U.S.A., John Bishop, gives further context for Joe's relationship to the team by saying, "He pissed and moaned and cried over it, [his exclusion from Team U.S.A.] and he lost all of his protests" (Shapiro, 2005). Another Team U.S.A. representative says, "Just because things didn't work out for him, he jumped ship and left to go up north, and now he's coach of team Canada" (Shapiro, 2005). This discussion of Joe's relationship to Team U.S.A. sets up his role as a selfish pest in the film, and as someone who the representatives of Team U.S.A. see as a traitor to their national team.

In the next scene, Team Canada is huddled in a circle around Joe, and the camera

focuses in on Joe. Again, the filmmakers use a representative of Team U.S.A. to explain the antagonism between the national team, and its once star player, saying, “He took our plays with him. He took some of our calls with him. So he'd know when to attack and how to attack” (Shapiro, 2005). Joe, is then shown amidst the team Canada players who seem to pay little attention to him. He angrily says, “U.S.A., learn a new way” (Shapiro, 2005). After a Team U.S.A. loss to Team Canada, a Team U.S.A. player tells Joe, “Buddy, if you had paid your dues in the U.S., you'd have been fucking head coach. I know you would have...” Joe interrupts and says, “I paid my dues for twelve years buddy” (Shapiro, 2005). The Team U.S.A. player huffs in disgust and then asks Joe, “How does it feel to betray your country man” (Shapiro, 2005)? The loss of team plays and Joe's participation in the Canadian team victory are equated with acts of betrayal, and further position Joe as morally reprehensible.

The film reasserts this role for Joe's with incredible persistence. At a Super Bowl party held in Joe's home a guest calls at Joe and says, “Traitor [...] you go from winning gold metals for the United States, just because he's snubbed at one try out camp, he's going to turn around and snub his entire country. ...because he is Benedict Arnold” (Shapiro, 2005). This statement contextualizes Joe's act with a reference to Arnold's treason in the American Revolutionary war. Joe responds to the comparison, saying, “Benedict Arnold was in a war, and when he betrayed his country, many people died because of that, OK, this was in a war” (Shapiro, 2005). As Joe defends his actions claiming that comparing him to a war traitor are absurd, this scene reinforces the links between nationalism, sport and war. The players featured in the film consistently chose violent metaphors to express their feelings about participating in the sport at the

international level.

Although several personalities in the film are represented as aggressive, misogynistic, and perhaps even morally ambiguous, Joe is represented as the primary antagonist. Later in the film, he is even positioned as a potential casualty by virtue of his character and his role in opposition to Team U.S.A. After aggressively reprimanding his son Robert and ignoring his wife in successive scenes, a scene is included in the film where a U.S. flag is shown fluttering in the wind while Joe suffers a heart attack. Through the presence of the flag in this moment, the editing seems to suggest that Joe's heart attack is deserved for his role as a traitor and bad person.

The representation of Zupan stands in stark contrast to the representations of Joe. Joe is vilified and Zupan is esteemed. Though they both display antagonistic, violent, misogynistic, and athletic masculinity, the representations of their respective roles in the narrative are very different. Situating Joe as a villain and Zupan as a hero emphasizes the rivalry and establishes a moral order in which sentiments about the player's respective nations are reflected.

Flags and team rivalry. An astonishing number of flags, scoreboards with team names, and spectators wearing national team apparel are on display throughout the film. Some of the most repeated lines in the film are the team cheers of Teams USA and Canada. Each cheer consists of the team huddled and counting out, "one, two, three," and then yelling the name of their country (Shapiro, 2005). The country's names are made visible or spoken more than a hundred times each through the film. Coaches and fans chant the name of the nation they support and medal ceremonies with national anthems being sung are featured. The constant presence of representations of nation and patriotic

display leave no doubt as to the importance of international competition context in framing the rivalry.

Game play is captured in painstaking detail and edited to highlight the drama of the games. Players are shown making key plays, smashing wheelchairs into each other and scoring. The game's scores are always shown when the two teams are close in points, and the clock is shown running down as key moves and final points change the outcome of the games. The placement board is shown several times flipping between Team Canada in the first position and second position, and Team U.S.A. from second position to first.

The climax of the film highlights the game between team Canada and Team U.S.A. in Athens. Images constantly reinforce the importance of nation to this spectacle. The scoring in this game is followed from point to point and the scoreboard bearing the nations names are in view between each point and often throughout play. Groups of audience members covered in Canadian team memorabilia and waving Canadian flags are shown, as are groups of Team U.S.A. supporters shown covered in Team U.S.A. memorabilia and waving American flags. At the end of this game a Team Canada player makes a hit and tips over a Team U.S.A. player while the music swells and the crowd cheers, and then the prominent team Canada player spikes the ball down on to the court and lets it bounce nearly all the way up to the rafters where national flags hang down. Mournful music accompanies this scene and the audience is situated at this climax in the narrative to experience the loss based on their identification with Team U.S.A.

Sport Salvation and the U.S. Military

The rivalry between the two teams is shown to have a heedless militaristic

intensity when one athlete, in reference to the Paralympics in Athens says, “It’s war to me baby... look out Athens” (Shapiro, 2005). Sport/war metaphors abound (King, 2008).

At the end of the film, when the U.S. team fails to win gold medals and reclaim what has been insinuated to be their rightful place as top seed in the world, the athletes are shown teaching wounded Iraq war veterans to play wheelchair rugby. Camouflage Hummers (military SUVs) are overlaid with a title that says, “Demonstration for Iraq War veterans from Walter Reed Hospital” (Shapiro, 2005). Scott and Zupan describe technique and tactics to a few young veterans. As a game that includes the veterans begins, the camera cuts away. Sentimental music plays as the team crowds around in another shot at the gym as they yell, “U.S.A.! Rugby!” (Shapiro, 2005).

This scene reiterates the relevance of international sport to war; as it seems to suggest a recuperation of the veterans’ identities in the form of athletic ability. While the soldiers of any nation are positioned as expendable or disposable in the war effort, killing and being killed in battle, these soldiers return with disabilities and are positioned as salvageable. While they have risked injury and become injured and impaired in service of militant nationalist goals, the film seems to suggest that now they can continue to productively serve nationalist ideals through wheelchair rugby like the athletes of Team U.S.A.

During the closing credits of the film the role of sports in nationalism is fortified by summarizing notes about the players. George W. Bush, standing in front of a large crowd of U.S. Olympians, says, “Congratulations, and may God continue to bless our country” (Shapiro, 2005). As the crowd claps, the camera finds Zupan in the audience and a caption says, “Zupan became the official spokesman for Team U.S.A” (Shapiro,

2005). Zupan's role as an exemplar of patriotism is represented as his defining accomplishment. Then at a team barbeque, Andy is pictured with the caption; "Andy has begun training for the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing." The overlapping of nationalist ideology and the athletes' contributions to sport in this context show that they are able to perform a duty for the nation.

Personal sacrifice in service of national supremacy, both in militaristic and sport settings, is honored in the film. The ability to participate in the behaviors associated with masculinity and patriotism are conflated as the two settings are brought together in the film. Sport and military participation alike are positioned as suitable endeavors for demonstrating nationalist commitment.

Sport participation and masculinity and participation in U.S. imperialist sentiment factor together in the normative project of salvaging the lives of men with disabilities in the film. The non-athletes, soldiers of other countries, women, queers, and any person who might be considered as opposition to or traitor to U.S. national supremacy, is left out of the film and is thereby positioned as disposable.

Conclusion

The representation of rivalry in the film coincides historically with a period of policy differences between Canada and the U.S. Although there have been political differences that have produced mediated public tensions throughout the history of the two countries, including anti-Canadian sentiment when draft dodgers from the U.S. fled to Canada during the Vietnam war, tensions rose significantly preceding the release of the film. In 2003 the Canadian government opted not to participate in the war in Iraq or offer support to the U.S. war effort. At the same time the Civil Marriage Act had been

introduced in the Canadian House of Commons, foreshadowing the legalization of gay marriage in Canada.

Between the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the release of the film, U.S. officials criticized Canadian laxness of immigration and refugee policies as well as policing of the country's U.S. borders (Eagles, 2006, p. 821). Media reports of disputes on softwood lumber issues, fishing disputes, and acid rain continued, and disputes over differences on law enforcement concerning illegal drugs escalated. The opening of safe injection sites for heroin addicts in Vancouver and policy differences in terms of marijuana were particularly controversial. While the U.S.A. continued its much publicized war on drugs, bills introduced by the Canadian Minister of Justice in 2003 and 2004 would have reduced penalties for possession of small quantities of marijuana and growing small quantities of the drug.

While the film does not comment directly on any of these issues, situating U.S. opposition to Canada through Joe as the film's antagonist, who is positioned as morally reprehensible in the context of violent sport competition, sends a clear message about how military and moral opposition to, or difference from, the U.S. will be tolerated. Throughout the film, opposition to Team U.S.A. is represented as dangerous behavior. U.S. imperialism, and its discursive links to masculinity in service of jingoistic nationalism are represented as important for the recuperation of the athletes' identities.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

This thesis has engaged with several themes presented in sport sociology literature, including masculinity, disability, masculinity and disability in sport, militant and nationalist sport settings and media representations of these themes. My critique has centered on the context of popular North American cinema, and disability and masculinity as they inform each other in this context.

I have contributed to the small body of literature that addresses the intersecting embodiment of masculinity and disability. Little has been written on this topic and this connection has not been explored previously in relation to media representations of disability sport. This thesis also addresses the way that elements of normative masculinity in *Murderball* are linked to nationalism and imperialism. The relationship between sports media and constructions of masculinity, nationalism and imperialism has been well documented. This thesis demonstrates that ability also factors into those constructions. As the film attempts to reassert normative masculinity, I argue that disability makes this difficult. I also reiterate the need for representations of broad experiences of people with disabilities.

In *Murderball*, the representation of the athletes at the centre of the narrative functions to measure people with disabilities by their ability to conform to ableist, sexist, heterosexist, and U.S. nationalist and imperialist norms. The film emphasizes the value of antagonistic competition and normative masculinity, but it is not possible or desirable for every person with a disability to participate in such a violent sport or mirror the players' normative masculine embodiments. Some images in *Murderball* may be uncomfortable

for some viewers, such as the opening scene which features Zupan changing clothes in his wheelchair, and other stark representations of disability rarely seen in popular North American cinema. However, MTV capitalizes on the aggressive assertion of masculinity that makes this discomfort “safe” and saleable to an MTV and documentary film audience.

The ways that the narrative of *Murderball* relies on a jingoistic and violent air of moral authority creates a dichotomy between bodies that can be read as salvageable or disposable. While making themselves available for sport, apparently without regard for their self-preservation, the athletes preserve the winning reputation of the U.S.A. As they do, they demonstrate the will to embrace normative masculinity and nationalism and are championed instead of being reviled or perceived as a disposable enemy.

The discursive linking of violence, dominance, heterosexuality, misogyny, militaristic nationalism, productivity, and masculinity is exceptionally problematic. *Murderball* presents these discursive links through: athletic physicality and sport-centered antagonism; men’s relationship to men and women in a sexist and heterosexist frame; and imperial impulses in the international sport context. Nations dominated by U.S. imperialism, people with disabilities, women and people with non-normative sexualities suffer the consequences of these representations. Efforts to slot people into normative categories and subject them to the norms of those categories are damaging for those who cannot or do not want to conform.

Throughout *Murderball* representations of the embodiment and performance of hegemonic masculinity and jingoistic nationalism mutually constitute a recuperation of identity for people with disabilities. While this might have the effect of normalizing and

making saleable a version of living with disability that appeals to MTV audiences, other identities and embodiments are rendered unintelligible in the film. This can be articulated to the broader power relations of the context of the film. In sport and war the citizens of nations are positioned as salvageable or disposable depending on their ability to conform to the norms of these contexts.

Furthermore, *Murderball* seems to be masquerading as a cutting edge documentary informed by identity politics since it deals with disability, but it is conservative in terms of gender ideology, and reinscribes the importance of masculine productive patriotic abilities as much as it disrupts ableist norms. This documentary about disability sport does work to disrupt notions that people with disabilities are fragile and helpless, but fails to present a complex rendering of living with disability. MTV exploits limited metaphors of disability and thereby capitalizes on inclinations of audience consonant with the context of the films' release.

Murderball seems to serve as a metaphor for post 9/11 U.S.A. The recovery of perceived weakness through sporting masculinity, idealized as invulnerable, and assertions of moral supremacy in the film can be compared directly to jingoistic ideologies of the context of the film's release. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Norden (1993) describes a common deployment of disability as metaphor in which unlucky individuals with disabilities undertake heroic struggles to stage a dramatic comeback (p. 196). Post 9/11 rhetoric in the U.S. includes the need to demonstrate strength in the face of opposition and anti-U.S. sentiment. For both wheelchair rugby athletes and post 9/11 U.S.A. the stage is set for a dramatic comeback, but the metaphor is limiting. It prevents us from seeing the realities of the lives of those who do not buy into the metaphor or are

completely left out of the narrative. *Murderball* disposes with people whose narratives do not have commercial value and are not normalized in the context of hegemonic masculinity and sport/war synergy.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Character Biographies

Keith Cavill: The only key personality featured in the film that does not play wheelchair rugby. Keith's injury from a motor cross accident and resulting quadriplegia are featured as a secondary plot line, which highlights his recent injury and rehabilitation process, including his growing interest in wheelchair rugby. After actively racing motocross and participating in activities such as snowboarding, street biking, four wheeling, and ice hockey, he must undergo considerable lifestyle changes and arduous rehabilitation. Attention is also given to his inquiries about resuming a sexually active life and his family's support as well as their reactions to his disability.

Andy Cohn: A wheelchair rugby player for Team USA. A young athlete in several sports, he suffered a broken neck and spinal cord injury as a passenger in a car accident at age sixteen. He is featured talking about the depression he faced after his resulting incomplete quadriplegia. He is most often shown in the film palling around with Scott Hogsett, Mark Zupan, Bob Lujano and other members of his team.

Scott Hogsett: A wheelchair rugby player for Team USA. Throughout the film he is shown drinking, partying and paying attention to many different women. Details are given about a play-fighting accident that took place at a house party which rendered him an incomplete quadriplegic. After finishing his bachelor's degree in recreational therapy in 2000, he began to focus on playing wheelchair rugby for team USA. Significant emphasis is placed on his flirting with women and his brash and cocky attitude.

Bob Lujano: A wheelchair rugby player for team USA. He became a quadruple amputee after contracting meningococemia, which is a rare blood disease and form of meningitis. In ten years of playing wheelchair rugby he has won five U.S. Quad Rugby National Championships and three medals for team U.S.A. He works at the Lakeshore Foundation, an official U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Training Site, as the Coordinator of Athletics. Significant emphasis is placed on his dreams of recovery and his ability to perform daily tasks as a quadruple amputee.

Joe Soares: The head coach of team Canada's wheelchair rugby team during the making of the film. Joe is, alongside his rival Mark Zupan, one of two principle personalities featured in the film. Joe contracted polio as a child and became impaired. He started playing wheelchair rugby in 1989 and participated in 13 consecutive U.S. National Championships. He is also a very successful wheelchair tennis and basketball player. Joe and his wife Patricia have two sons, Joseph and Robert. Robert and Patricia are also featured in the film.

Robert Soars: Joe Soars' son. He is featured participating in scholastic and musical endeavors, and emphasis is placed on his lack of sporting prowess. The relationship between him and his athletic excellence-focused father is one of estrangement and then reconciliation and mutual pride later in the film.

Mark Zupan: A wheelchair rugby player for team USA. He is one of two principle personalities featured in the film. He is referred to as Zupan throughout the film and is the only personality who is not referred to by his first name, thus granting him an air of authority and importance. Zupan's story of injury in a car accident and resulting

quadriplegia are featured in the film as well. A soccer teammate and friend drove home drunk with Zupan in the back of his truck and Zupan was thrown from the truck into a ditch. While recovering with incomplete quadriplegia at Jackson Memorial Rehabilitation Hospital, he was introduced to wheelchair rugby. While in pursuit of an engineering education at Georgia Tech in Atlanta, he began to play the sport. He relocated to Austin, Texas, in 1999 with hopes of joining the USA Paralympic Team. In 2004 he was a starter and team captain for Team USA at the Paralympics in Athens, Greece, after which he was appointed the official spokesman for the team.

Appendix B

A Summary of Wheelchair Rugby

Wheelchair rugby is an international sport. Major competitions include regional, state and provincial championships in most countries where it is played. World championships are held quadrennially, as are the Summer Paralympic Games. These two competitions are the largest wheelchair rugby competitions and happen on a rotating basis every two years.

Wheelchair rugby players use manual custom-made sport wheelchairs that are designed for regular impact. The chairs are equipped with front bumpers and wheel guards to assist with striking and holding opponents chairs. Large metal spoke protectors cover the large wheel where the hand-rim is located, and each chair is equipped with an anti-tip device at the back. Players use a variety of strapping mechanisms to maintain comfortable body positions in the chair.

The court for the game follows the dimensions of a regulation basketball court, and is most often played in the same gymnasium as volleyball and basketball. The ball is a slightly textured volleyball, and players utilize gloves covered with adhesives of their own preference.

Four of twelve players from each of two teams play on the court at one time. It is a mixed gender sport, however, all of the players featured in the film are male. The game begins with a tip off at centre court, and players try to cross the opposing team's end-line in possession of the ball to score. Two wheels of the player's chair must cross to score.

Striking, toppling or blocking the opponent is integral to defensive and offensive

play. Striking from behind and dangerous hits, as determined by the referees, are not permitted and can result in a one-minute penalty, a loss of possession or a penalty goal. Fouls can also be given for spinning the opponent's chair by striking behind the main axel, or holding by grabbing or falling onto the opponent. The game is played over four eight minute quarters (Battock, 2008).

Wheelchair rugby athletes involved in regulated play must have some level of impairment in at least three limbs. Spinal cord injuries, amputations, polio, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and other medical conditions are common amongst players, spinal cord injuries being the most common. Players are classified according to their level of functional ability and assigned a point value from 0.5 to 3.5. Higher point values are associated with higher levels of functional ability and the total point value of four players on the court per team cannot exceed eight. Athletes' point values are given based on neurological, muscular and range of motion tests of the limbs and trunk. Classification is revised in the case that the player demonstrates new abilities or increased ability during play. Athletes can protest their assigned point value. Players can also be granted a permanent classification if no change is observed over a series of test by physicians, physiotherapists, or occupational therapists (Battock, 2008).