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THE BEAUTIFUL GAME: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORTS AND ARTS IN MODERN TIMES

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Sports and art have been intertwined since humans first started making marks. Dating back to the first evidence of art in the caves in Borneo, humans have depicted athletic endeavors in the broadest sense, recording stories of their hunts and ceremonial dances. From the Borneo paintings to the Knossos bull-leaping fresco, created in 1400 B.C.E, to Gabriel Orozco’s current paintings dealing with modern-day athletes, sports repeatedly appear in the arts. The relationship has started to become more reciprocal, as art has become an integral part of the world of athletics as we now think of it. Commercialism, new rules in different professional leagues, social media and changing perceptions of art have created a new and quickly growing field that straddles the two subjects. Based off of literature reviews and interviews with experts, this thesis examines how the relationship has evolved over time. It will explore the role sports and the arts have had together in developing human society, the artistic elements of sport and the developing idea that sports and art are not separate.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................................. iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ......................................................................................................................... iv

Chapter 1 Introduction ........................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2 History ................................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter 3 How art is used in sports ..................................................................................................... 11

Chapter 4 Are sports art? ..................................................................................................................... 19

Chapter 5 Why choose traditional art? ............................................................................................... 23

Chapter 6 Resistance to individuality in a team context ..................................................................... 27

Chapter 7 A growing field .................................................................................................................... 35

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................................... 44
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 Along with Derrick Henry from the Tennessee Titans and Special Olympics athletes, Marcus Rivero created a pair of cleats for Henry to raise awareness about the Special Olympics. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir Instagram page. 2

Figure 2 The black and gold the sports teams in Pittsburgh wear echo the blue collar mentality and steel mining ethos of the city. Photo by Giana Han 8

Figure 3 The Steelers logo has its history rooted in the American steel industry. Photo by Giana Han 10

Figure 4 Marcus Rivero custom designed shoes with static shock on them for James Johnson of the Miami Heat. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir Instagram page. 12

Figure 5 Penn State football players wear simple blue and white uniforms with simple black shoes. Photo by Giana Han 14

Figure 6 Kansas City artist Lonnie Powell directs a student workshop in Tower Club. Photo provided by Arrowhead Art Collection 21

Figure 7 Marcus Rivero created a pair of shoes for Dylan Cole, a linebacker for the Houston Texans, for My Cause My Cleats. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir website. 26

Figure 8 Marcus Rivero customized cleats for Tennesse Titan Rishard Matthews with an image of the controversial figure of Colin Kaepernick on them. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir website. 30

Figure 9 Painted with 24-karat gold, these cleats created a controversy when the NFL informed Marshawn Lynch he’d have to leave the stadium if he chose to wear them. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir Instagram page. 32

Figure 10 Wisconsin native Greg Gossel’s pop-inspired artwork, Titletown, tells of the Packers championship history through colorful pennants, photos, footballs and fan-favorite phrases. Photo Courtesy of Sports and the Arts; sportsandthearts.com 36

Figure 11 ArtsKC tours the Arrowhead Art Collection at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City. Photo by Rivas Photography, provided by the Arrowhead Collection 38

Figure 12 Nick Bensch’s original fans triptych, First Down!, was recreated into a tension system installed high above the Main Concourse. This advantageous location creates sightlines from two levels. Photo Courtesy of Sports and the Arts; sportsandthearts.com 40
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Chapter 1

Introduction

It all started with a pair of shoes and an Instagram post.

It was Valentine’s Day, and Marcus Rivero wanted to give the girl he was dating at the time a pair of shoes.

The problem was, he didn’t like the color of the shoes he bought for her. So he decided to paint them.

She fell in love with the shoes, so naturally she posted a picture. The response was overwhelming.

Now, Rivero designs shoes for over 1,000 NFL players — more than half of the league.

Before painting the shoes for his girlfriend, Rivero’s experience with art consisted of a piece he did of his dog and a great junior high art experience. He’d always had an appreciation for art, but it wasn’t a big part of his life.

His relationship with sports, however, was more concrete. Rivero starting playing tee ball when he was four and played baseball throughout his childhood. In high school, he discovered football, which led to a spot on the Case Western Reserve University team before he later transferred to the University of Miami (Rivero, interview 2019).

After graduating with a degree in business administration, Rivero thought he was going to develop an internet company (Soles by Sir, 2017). He hadn’t even considered a career in art or sports (Rivero, interview 2019).
Yet his shoe business, Soles by Sir, took off, and now, seven years later, Rivero represents a growing industry that straddles both of those worlds.

This industry is the result of an evolving relationship between the subjects of art and sports, both of which have played a critical role in the development of human society.

The two have complemented each other for millennia. Sports appear in art as a subject or theme, and art has been increasingly used in modern sports through areas as big as stadium design and as small as uniform and logo design.

However, art and sports are often thought of as separate— one highbrow and one lowbrow— or parallel to each other.
But people are starting to believe that the two aren’t distinct, individual things. There are athletes, artists and scholars making the argument that sports are art, and as such, it makes sense to incorporate art into the actual game experience of sports.

Not everyone agrees with this philosophy.

Allowing new levels of creativity can shake the balance between individualism and team when athletes start to make statements—political, artistic or personal—that are separate from their teams.

Leagues often try to prevent athletes from pushing the boundaries of regulations, as Rivero saw in the outrage that occurred when Seahawks running back Marshawn Lynch wore the 24-karat gold shoes he made for him.

However, some audiences enjoy the creativity, so leagues are starting to adapt to accommodate the artistic aspects of the game, before Rivero could find success.

But what lay the groundwork for Rivero and the other pioneers trying to find work in both art and sports to find success?

Art and sports have worked together for millennia, each playing a part in shaping human society, but changing ideologies, rules and commercial aspects have altered the nature of the relationship between art and sports.

As the relationship has become more reciprocal and demands for creativity have increased, the gates to an entirely new field have opened, and it’s making people see the beauty of the game in a different way—one that points to a future of even greater collaboration between arts and athletics.
Chapter 2

History

Sport has been a part of human culture since the beginning of human civilization, but its meaning has varied depending on the time and culture (Guttmann 1, 2007).

Merriam-Webster has a number of definitions for the word sport, including “a source of diversion: recreation” and “physical activity engaged in for pleasure” (Merriam Webster, 2003).

But this definition is limited.

Allen Guttmann, who was a professor of American Studies and English at Amherst College, points out that the difference between sports and games—both of which can fit the dictionary definition—is competition.

Guttmann proposed his own definition of sport in his book “Sports: The First Five Millennia.” He says sport is “autotelic physical competition” (Guttmann 2, 2007). Or, in simpler words, it’s a physical game that has an element of competition and is played for the sake of itself and not for an outside reason. Its three essential elements are play, competition and the need for some sort of physical prowess.

However, this definition describes modern sport better than it does ancient sport.

Oftentimes, physical contests in ancient times were undertaken because of religious or political reasons, which would not fit the “autotelic” part of Guttmann’s definition.

The Native American tribes and African tribes participated in physical competitions that could be considered sports, but they were motivated by religions and beliefs (Guttmann 7, 2007).
Egypt, Guttmann writes, is the oldest civilization with reliable evidence of sports. The history is recorded in hymns, seals and sculptures, and they reveal that Egypt also used competitive physical games to enforce a belief system. The pharaoh, who Egyptians believed had to be physically powerful, took part in a ritual run across an area designed to represent his realm as a demonstration of the physical prowess that made him fit to rule (Guttmann 12, 2007).

The Greeks are known for their sports, which played a big role in their own literature and art and continued to appear in literature and art over time. Their tradition of the Olympic games lives on in current society with the modern version of the Olympics.

However, they, too, engaged in competition for religious and political means, and men were expected to stay in shape because “the aesthetic ideal was the result of military imperatives” (Guttmann 18, 2007).

While the “play” and “competition” part of the definition may remain true in ancient and modern times, it has additions when it comes to describing modern sport, Guttmann said.

Modern sports are generally secular, equal, specialized, rationalized, bureaucratized and quantified (Guttmann 5, 2007).

They also have an emphasis on identity that ancient sports often did not since they had religious or political motivations.

“Modern sports since the 1800s, (have) often been a tool to build identities for people to express who and what they are,” Mark Dyreson, a Penn State kinesiology professor, said. “And, sometimes it’s collective identity. So you can think of sport contributing to a sense of you being a part of the larger group.”

The microcosm of the United States’ sport demonstrates how sport can shape a culture.
When people began migrating to America, they brought not only their languages, foods and religions but also their sports.

In areas where the Dutch settled, Dutch sports like skating were popular. Throughout America, English bat games and forms of horse racing and hunting were popular because of the large number of migrants from England. The connection sports had with ancestral and regional identity was already evident.

Then, the movement toward independence began, and the way colonists viewed their pastimes reflected the mentality of the time.

Instead of racing across country in the way the English did, the colonists had their horses run around a circular track, reflecting a greater sense of equality where every spectator could see the finish line.

The game of baseball grew in popularity over cricket because it was like the English game — but American. The colonists were forming their own collective identity with their own set of sports (Dyreson, interview 2018).

Just like in Egypt and Greece, art worked with sports to reflect the culture, and it also revealed this sense of independence.

“So they’re painting—not scenes back in Europe, which the Europeans were doing—so they’re painting American landscapes, but it takes on its own national flavor,” Dyreson said. “American music, the same thing. And you can think of sport in a sense as an art like that’s expressing a national identity, and initially, saying we’re not British.”

As sports became more established and organized within the United States, the connection between sports and identity became even more regional, narrowing to smaller
communities rather than the nation as a whole. It started to create “tribal identity,” Dyreson said (Dyreson, interview 2018).

“It can be a way for you to find an identity within some more tribal group than the collective all of all humanity,” Dyreson said.

Dyreson used Penn State and Ohio State as an example of how closely tied people become to a team, tying their own identities in with the success of the different sports teams.

Based around sports competitions, people from Penn State claim to not like Ohio State as a whole and vice versa. The success of one school’s team over the other is a source of great pride for everyone related to the school, way beyond just the athletes themselves.

“Sometimes those identities are identities that allow us all to identify sort of collectively as one another, and sometimes those identities are very, are a way for us to say our tribe is better than your tribe,” Dyreson said.

And art, in addition to independently helping develop regional identities through local art movements, has helped tie teams to their communities.

Pittsburgh is known for its history in coal mining and the steel industry (Introduction to Pittsburgh).

Even if that is no longer the major industry in the city, it’s something the people of Pittsburgh take pride in, and the football team has used graphic design and art to tap into that blue collar, “old steel mining ethos,” said Brian Alfred, a Penn State art professor and youth soccer coach who was born in Pittsburgh (Alfred, interview 2018).
Figure 2 The black and gold sports teams in Pittsburgh wear echo the blue collar mentality and steel mining ethos of the city. Photo by Giana Han

The colors for the football team, the Steelers, are black and gold, colors that connect to the steel mining industry as well as the coal mining industry. In an article about the energy industry in Pittsburgh, Anya Litvak, a writer for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, referred to coal as “black gold” (Litvak, 2017).
“There’s a collective kind of unity in that city about black and gold,” Alfred said. “It kind of unites people through a visualization of something. And then, also, the feel of those colors, I think, resonates with the city.”

The use of the black and gold, as well as the way the graphics are designed, then creates an identity not just around the team but around the fan base and the city as a whole, Alfred said (Alfred, interview 2018).

The logo was also created with the steel mining ethos, according to the American Iron and Steel Institute.

Originally, the symbol represented the American Iron and Steel Institute, but Cleveland’s Republic Steel approached the Steelers about using the Steelmark logo in 1962 as part of a marketing ploy.

Despite the intense rivalry between Pittsburgh’s and Cleveland’s football teams, the Steelers accepted and adopted the logo as their own.
The three diamonds in the logo are hypocycloids, which have some scientific connection to the creation of steel. Originally, the American Iron and Steel Institute meant for the colors to mean “(yellow) lightens your work, (orange) brightens your leisure and (blue) widens your world,” but it was later changed so yellow represented coal, orange represented iron ore and blue represented steel scraps (History of the Steelmark).

Despite starting as a marketing ploy by the American steel industry, the Steelers ended up with a logo that connected to their city’s history and fan base through every aspect, including the origin of the logo and the meanings of its shapes and colors.

Art helped develop the story of Pittsburgh sports, just as it told the story of the Greeks competing in their war games thousands of years before, but now it is being used in more aspects of the game than just telling a story or creating a color palette that fits a city.
Chapter 3

How art is used in sports

In 2009, the NBA gave its players a Christmas gift—it loosened its rules about what shoes players had to wear during games.

Instead of requiring the shoes to be majority white or black, players were able to incorporate more of their team colors into the shoe, even up to the point of creating an all one color shoe.

According to ESPN’s Nick DePaula, “Christmas Day quickly became the annual showcase for players’ outlandish kicks” in honor of when the rules relaxed (DePaula, 2017).

Kobe Bryant is considered the player who started the tradition, DePaula writes, but Lebron James has the most Christmas sneakers. Both took their designs seriously and used the shoes as a canvas for expressing themselves.

Their designs ranged from depicting memories of childhood Christmas presents, like James’ shoe that was inspired by a basketball hoop his mother had gave him, to drawing on the colors of the venomous rhinoceros viper to convey Bryant’s nickname “Black Mamba” (DePaula 2017).

The Christmas day shoes were just the beginning.

By 2012, the NBA had added 10 “theme nights” where players could wear “storytelling shoes,” DePaula wrote. In addition to Christmas, this included Veterans Day and Black History Month, among other celebrations (DePaula, 2018).

Then, the rules were gone. The NBA took away all color restrictions for the 2018-2019, the only remaining rules dealing with third party logos, protruding objects and reflective surfaces (DePaula, 2018).
“They’re officially the first league that took off the rules. They literally, they said, the rules this year are done,” Rivero said. “So if you want to put Daffy Duck and you play for the Boston Celtics, go ahead and do it.”

The players have taken full advantage of their new freedom. Not only has Rivero’s business with NBA players quadrupled, but he’s designed everything from shoes with static shock on them to Elmo shoes (Rivero, interview 2019).

Figure 4 Marcus Rivero custom designed shoes with static shock on them for James Johnson of the Miami Heat. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir Instagram page.
Like the NBA, the NFL has also started allowing more art in its players’ shoe game.

On November 28, 2017, which was Giving Tuesday that year, the NFL celebrated “Unboxing Day.” In places like hospitals, schools and locker rooms, players revealed their custom cleats, which were designed to raise awareness and support causes of each player’s choice.

Then, on the following game day, the players got to wear their personalized cleats in a cause that became known as My Cause My Cleat (NFL Football Operations).

The next season, My Cause My Cleats returned, but it lasted for three weeks this time.

Based on his relationship with the players in the NFL—he works with over 1,000 players—Rivero found himself chosen as a designer for many of the My Cause My Cleats shoes. In the 2018-2019 season alone, Rivero worked with the teams in Tampa Bay, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Miami, Jacksonville, Oakland, Washington and Houston.

Having seen how its developed, Rivero thinks the movement is here to stay and the NFL will eventually take the same step as the NBA and allow freedom throughout the year (Rivero, interview 2019).

Art has just become a part of the game, Rivero said.

But, instead of paintings on the wall, the shoes are the canvas (Rivero, interview 2019).

Artists and designers aren’t just brought in to make sure the players are sporting nice kicks that tell a story. They’re also enlisted to make sure players are dressed in the best, most effective uniforms that send the right message.

That message can vary greatly, and it’s the careful consideration of the art and design elements that ensures its success.

Dyreson compared the aesthetic of Penn State and Oregon.
Penn State’s uniforms are “black shoes, basic blues,” as the popular slogan for the university goes. It all plays into the ethos of the “We Are,” a motto Penn State designs most of its sports branding around.

Penn State athletics preach that group success is what matters—football coach James Franklin always said he never focused on doing things so star running back Saquon Barkley could win the Heisman. Rather, he focused on the team as a whole because, with team success would come personal success for Barkley.
Likewise, Penn State sends a “your success is our and our success is yours” message to its community, which is embodied in the simple, unified graphics and uniform designs across all the programs.

Then there’s Oregon.

“They seem to change jerseys every game or whatnot, and they go from, sometimes interesting ones to … lime green or whatever,” Dyreson said.

For years before they reduced the number of combinations in 2017, the Ducks could wear a different uniform combination for every game of the season (Fentress, 2017).

The bright colors and ever-changing styles send a different narrative (Dyreson, interview 2018).

Like Oregon, many professional teams have constantly changing uniforms, and many have tapped into art and culture to connect the uniforms with their communities.

During the 2015-2016 season, the Atlanta Hawks did a complete rebrand.

As they created the new look, the Hawks considered what the passions of their target audience was, as well as how to connect to both the players and the fans with the new brand.

They found that their fans were passionate about fashion, entertainment and music, so the Hawks consulted local hip hop artists like T.I., Ludacris and 2 Chainz.

The resulting design included patterns and textures that draw on hip hop culture as well as the styles popular in Atlanta and the hawk as a spirit animal.

Retail sales saw triple-digit growth following the rebrand (Sargent, 2016).

More recently, in 2018, the Miami Marlins released their new uniforms, which featured new colors and fonts.

Each aspect was thought out and chosen with a purpose.
The colors go for an “electric and vibrant look” that is supposed to be “emblematic of the Miami energy and nightlife,” the Marlin’s press release said.

The release also described the styling of the “M” as typography common to in Latin America.

“The look has as much to do with the infusion of the local Hispanic culture as it does with the history of baseball in Miami,” the release said.

Even the design of the fish was made with meaning.

The fish is meant to look more athletic and evoke feelings of a “legendary fighting spirit,” the team said (Miami Marlins, 2018).

If the definition of art expands beyond visual art to music, three-dimensional art and performance art, its presence in sports becomes even more evident.

When Billy Johnson saw singer Rufus Thomas dance to “Do the Funky Chicken” in the early 1970s, he was inspired.

After he crossed into the end zone in his next football game, he reached his arms up and began to move his knees back and forth in his version of the “Funky Chicken.”

The dance, the first touchdown celebration that moved beyond a spike, caught on quickly and established the role of dance in the NFL as a way to celebrate.

Over 30 years later, his dance still lives on, but it’s also given birth to a variety of other types of touchdown celebrations.

In 1988, Elbert “Ickey” Woods, the Cincinnati Bengals fullback, created a little dance, which he showed his mother, telling her he was going to use it as a celebration if he scored.

He was promptly told by her not to.
He did it anyway, and the shuffling dance is, to this day, still known as the “Ickey Shuffle.”

Other players have also become known for their signature touchdown celebrations, like the New York Giants’ Victor Cruz’s salsa and the Green Bay Packers’ Aaron Rodger’s Discount Double Check (Tomlinson, 2015).

Even the music that plays while the players dance after scoring or in between plays is an artistic element of the game, Brooke Leisinger, the Arrowhead Fellow at the Kansas City Chief’s Arrowhead Stadium, said (Leisinger, interview 2019).

The playlists are carefully curated and designed to pump people up, she said. It’s all part of the feel the NFL is going for (Leisinger, interview 2019).

Music becomes an even more personal form of expression in baseball.

David Kenyon, a reporter for Bleacher Report, writes that music can create the sense of environment at a baseball game or announce a certain player’s arrival.

The Arizona Diamondbacks catcher, Alex Avila, walks out to the batting box to the notes of “Icky Thump.” He is one of only two players that use that song in the MLB, so it heralds his specific arrival to the plate.

The music is a signal to fans and players alike.

“When the guitar riff starts playing, Boston Red Sox fans know exactly what's happening: Here comes Craig Kimbrel,” Kenyon wrote. “The fire-throwing closer enters to the sounds of Ted Nugent's ‘Stranglehold.’ Considering he's led the MLB in saves four times, that's a song no upcoming batter wants to hear” (Kenyon, 2018).

Another aspect of the environment, which Kenyon said can be as important as the game itself, at baseball games is the stadium.
The way the stadium looks has become art.

“We’ve moved away from these concrete bowl, multipurpose stadiums,” Dyreson said. Instead, they’re taking on a “retro” look, said Dr. Jaime Schultz, a kinesiology professor at Penn State.

The Baltimore Oriole’s Camden Yards replaced a multipurpose, concrete building, Dyreson said, and the new, brick building built around the existing community, is a “modern effort to recreate some notion of the past” (Dyreson, interview 2018).

Alfred can see the importance of stadium design through the absence of it.

As a soccer fan and a New Yorker, Alfred attends New York City Football Club games. They’re held at Yankee Stadium, and it’s awful for any other sport, which made him appreciate what thought should go into a stadium, Alfred said.

The angles of Yankee Stadium are meant for baseball, not soccer, and it means the fans are far from the field and lack a sense of collectivity.

“And that, I think, exemplifies how important visualization or a kind of look and feel aesthetically to a space goes beyond just how it looks. It’s also how it all works together,” Alfred said.

Design is an important aspect to the game, and people are starting to realize that, Dyreson said (Dyreson, interview 2018).

From football to soccer, the influence of art, whether it be design, music or performance, is present and becoming more and more a part of the game.
Chapter 4

Are sports art?

So far, it’s been established that art is used in sports and sports influence art.

But there are scholars, athletes and artists that make the argument sport is a form of art itself.

In his book *Beyond A Boundary*, CLR James, a journalist and avid sportsman from the West Indies, argues that sport may fall in the category of art in many different ways.

He begins with comparing it to the theater or a drama.

James said, “Two men boxing or running a race can exhibit skill, courage, endurance and sharp changes of fortune; can evoke hope and fear. They can even harrow the soul with laughter and tears, pity and terror. The state of the city, the nation or the world can invest a sporting event with dramatic intensity such as is reached in few theaters” (James 196, 1963).

Just like in literature or theater, sporting events pit man against man and man against nature. And, as the athletes compete, they demonstrate “the elemental human activities, qualities and emotions,” James wrote (James 198, 1963).

The difference is in the uncertainty of the narrative. Literature and theater have a set ending that will never change, while the glory of sporting events is that anything can happen.

The types of art that are uncertain and unplanned, such as improvisation performances, often aren’t accepted by mainstream consumers Dyreson said (Dyreson, interview 2018).

However, successful dramas and books, like sports, also employ a certain amount of uncertainty the first time they are experienced, James points out (James 197, 1963).

Beyond the similarities to theater, sport also shares artistic aspects with painting.
James wrote how artists place value on the movement of line and the relationship of colors and tones.

The motions of the athletes and the colors of what they wear and their surroundings fit in with these artistic values. They may not be permanent marks, but “They are repeated often enough to become a permanent possession of the spectator which he can renew at will,” James wrote (James 203, 1963).

James uses cricket as his specific example, but he said it applies to other sports, too, like soccer.

There’s a reason it’s called the beautiful game, Alfred said. The movement and the strategy create beauty.

When Alfred played soccer when he was young, it was fun but he didn’t have an appreciation for it as an art. Now that his understanding of the game has matured through years of playing and coaching and his observation skills have been developed as an artist, he can watch a soccer game without any ties to the teams playing just to appreciate the beauty of it.

The English Premier League featured a game with a 44-pass setup for a goal, and Alfred was able to watch it over and over again and see just how beautiful that one possession was, whereas if he were 16, “I’d be like, ‘Eh,’” he said.

While James and Alfred compared elements of the arts with elements of sports to show through the similarities that sports are art, Rivero dug into the definition of art itself.

Art, he said, is something that not just anybody can do. And if you’re doing something that not just anybody can do, then you’re doing art.

Under that definition, sports qualify as art because sports, he said, are something only a few can do at a high level.
“Just looking at anybody—like, a basketball player—just the way he shoots the shot is such an amazing art form,” Rivero said. “And a quarterback, the way he throws it. And the catch—Odell Beckham’s catches.”

All the little elements of the game add to the artistry, as well. From the way hats are bent to shoes are laced, it all contributes to making it a big, artistic show, Rivero said (Rivero, interview 2019).

As the Arrowhead Fellow at Arrowhead Stadium, Leisinger has practicing dealing with the question as well as asking others the question of what qualifies as art.
The stadium holds workshops for students in the Kansas City area, and Leisinger and the people she works with will ask them to define art.

Generally, people think of drawing, painting and sculpture—the traditional forms of art. Leisinger works to help the students expand their definitions to include architecture, music, and things that involve movement like dance—or football.

“I don’t know if you’ve seen Patrick Mahomes, our quarterback, throw left-handed, but you can’t debate that that’s not art,” Leisinger said.

In the end, though, the argument comes down to the true definition of art, or, rather, the elusiveness of the definition.

“You could argue that almost everything is a form of expression,” Leisinger said.

And, if sports are art, that would mean athletes are artists, Dyreson said.

The art is in their skill as they make lunge to catch the ball or sprint around a track, but it’s also in their participation in the creation of the tactile sensations of art.

When a baseball player throws or catches a ball, there’s a pleasurable sensation in the motion as well as the feeling when the ball releases from the hand and then gives a satisfying thud when it lands in the glove.

There’s also a music to it.

There’s a sound to a baseball landing in the glove, to a volleyball bouncing off a player’s arms, to a basketball swishing through the net.

And the athletes are an essential component of creating the music, the visuals and the feelings in each of these situations, which makes them the artists.
Chapter 5

Why choose traditional art?

As artists, there is nothing stopping athletes from expressing themselves through other forms of art, just as a painter may draw or a sculpture may incorporate music.

“They have aesthetic sensibilities, too,” Dyreson said. “Look at all the end zone celebrations in football games now. Sometimes they’re stupid, sometimes they’re brilliant.”

As goofy as it may have been, Johnson’s “funky chicken” brought dance into football as a way of expressing more than what could be said on the field.

“His dance was rooted in sheer excitement,” Tomlinson wrote. “It was an outlet to show both his bubbly personality and his pride in an accomplishment” (Tomlinson, 2015).

Many athletes have become known for having an appreciation for the art of fashion, which Sports Illustrated records through its list of the “Sports Illustrated Fashionable 50.”

Sports Illustrated’s most fashionable athlete, Victor Cruz, sees a fashion as a way to establish a connection between the way he dresses and his personality on the field.

“I make sure the way I look on the field is the same way I look off the field as well,” Cruz, who is a wide receiver for the New York Giants, told Sports Illustrated. “I think my clothes show that I pay attention to detail, take time to get dressed and think about outfits well in advance, which is all very true.”

The Golden State Warriors’ Andre Iguodala, who is ranked at eight on the list, explained how this connection between fashion and being an athlete works.
He told Sports Illustrated “being creative is what makes us great athletes and we took that same skill and applied it to our styling.”

Fashion is allowing the athletes to use a different type of expression other than sports.

“Everyone knows D-Wade the basketball player, but I am also a father, husband, businessman and friend—and my style reflects that mix,” Dwyane Wade, who plays for the Miami Heat and was ranked No. 7, said to Sport Illustrated. “Fashion has allowed me to expand my brand beyond basketball” (Lisanti, 2016).

As much as sports are a form of expression, how much athletes can actually say is limited.

“We don’t hear athletes speak very much, right?” Schultz said. “If we’re watching them play their sport, they’re not really speaking on certain issues. They’re really focused on what they’re doing, and they’re physical” (Schultz, interview 2018).

Certain athletes are extremely outspoken, like basketball megastar Lebron James, who has made pointed comments about President Donald Trump, but those thoughts aren’t expressed during the basketball game itself, Rivero said. A viewer would have to listen to what he says before or after the game (Rivero, interview 2019).

Or, James could use art.

“There’s ways to communicate to people without having to say anything,” Schultz said. “And I guess that’s what art does, sometimes, right? Is it makes a statement that it’s up to the people to interpret. You don’t have to explain it. It’s there. It’s on display” (Schultz 2018).

James has done just that.
He may have caused a stir with his Christmas shoes (DePaula, 2017), but James has sported shoes that go beyond the expression of the joys of Christmas and into political and social territory.

One of his most memorable pairs of shoes, according to Ella Chochrek, a writer for Footwear News, are his “Equality” shoes.

The shoes are a mismatched pair, one white, one black, with the word “equality” written in gold on the back.

They were followed up with a political statement about Trump, but the shoes themselves were powerful enough that they’re now on display in the Smithsonian (Chochrek, 2018).

James is just one example of how athletes are taking bigger risks and finding more ways to express themselves, Rivero said.

“More than an athlete. That’s their thing now. They want to be heard. They’re not just athletes that are talented at whatever sport,” Rivero said.

And they’re doing so in an environment constrained by rules.
Marcus Rivero created a pair of shoes for Dylan Cole, a linebacker for the Houston Texans, for My Cause My Cleats. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir website.

“In order to make a statement and, you know, they’ve got to wear the same jerseys, same shorts, same pants, helmet,” Rivero said. “What are they allowed to author? Their shoes.

“So that’s kind of where, it allows them to be individuals in a format that is not meant for individuals.”
Chapter 6

Resistance to individuality in a team context

In October 2015, Steelers cornerback William Gay decided to wear purple cleats to raise awareness about domestic violence.

The NFL promptly fined him $5,787 for the uniform violation (Fowler, 2015).

When Gay decided to wear the cleats, he was using his platform to speak up about domestic violence, a cause he feels strongly about. He was expressing himself in a way that, it could be argued, was an artistic statement.

But, as Gay made his visual statement, he was making it as an individual and distinguishing himself from the unit of the Steelers that consisted of 52 other players wearing similar shoe colors.

The NFL did not approve of him setting himself apart and diverging from the set rules for cleat colors, so it fined him. Two of his teammates were also fined for uniform violations—DeAngelo Williams wore eye black with the words “Find the Cure” in them to support breast cancer awareness, and Cam Heyward had “Ironhead” in his eye black in honor of his father (Fowler, 2015).

The fines weren’t just being given out for expression through uniform violations.

The NFL also cracked down on touchdown celebrations.

“The slowed heartbeat of the touchdown dance can be linked to league rules dating as far back as 1984, when it was determined the Washington Redskins’ Fun Bunch was, well, having too much fun…in a bunch,” Tomlinson wrote.
In 1984, the NFL rulebook defined illegal celebrations as “any prolonged, excessive, premeditated celebration by individual players or groups of players.”

In 1989, the NFL designated areas where players could and couldn’t celebrate.

In the 1990s, the rules loosened a bit, but they started to become strict again in the 2000s.

In 2006, the NFL banned props from being used in celebrations. Players were also no longer allowed to go to the ground.

The competition committee chairman, Jeff Fisher, told the AP “Individual celebrations are getting out of hand… The players’ association was unanimous in wanting to get it under control” (Tomlinson, 2015).

The fines are a recent example of a narrative that has existed for years.

“I think there’s always been a tension,” Dyreson said. “In team sports, in particular, I think one of the parts of the narrative … is always the narrative of how much do you showcase your individual brilliance and how much do you sacrifice that for the good of the team. That’s at the heart of the narrative of team sports.”

Underneath the theoretical struggles that lead to fines and crackdowns also lie the matters of money and race.

“Some of the argument about celebrations in the NFL is that they came from African American culture and wanting to be more individualistic,” Dyreson said.

The late 1960s and 1970s marked an increase in the visibility of the black athlete. It was a time that sociologist Harry Edwards called “the revolt of the black athlete,” Dr. Schultz said.

During that period, coaches were cracking down on rules about hairstyles and players’ appearances, and Schultz said she thinks it was really a response to the influx of black players.
who weren’t docile and had political opinions that differed from coaches and owners (Schultz, interview 2018).

Even Johnson, who was so famous for his touchdown dance, was not free from judgment.

In addition to his “funky chicken” dance, he was also known for his white shoes, hence the nickname Billy “White Shoes” Johnson.

He wore the shoes at a time when most players wore black shoes, though, so he was viewed as flamboyant by some.

Much of the white audience at the time, Dyreson said, tolerated flamboyant acts like that if they were performed by players on their own team.

But players on other teams weren’t shielded from their criticism. They were disparaged for showboating and distinguishing themselves from the team (Dyreson, interview 2018).

Many of the celebration fines that are given out to players who are “overly expressive” are given to black players, said Vernon Andrews, a kinesiology professor at San Jose University, because most athletes that score are black.

And when the conversation about the topic focuses on the center of the group, it makes it appear as if that’s the norm for all black athletes (Andrews 63, 2003).

To go with the issue of race is the motive of money.

Leagues will be a lot more accepting of acts of expression if it helps their revenue, Rivero said.

For example, when players started taking a knee during the national anthem, it created a huge division among viewers, and the NFL could be made to look like the villain from either side of the argument.
Figure 8 Marcus Rivero customized cleats for Tennesse Titan Rishard Matthews with an image of the controversial figure of Colin Kaepernick on them. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir website.
If it banned players from kneeling, then the league was restricting freedom of speech from one perspective. If it allowed it, it was permitting disrespect from the other perspective.

People complained and boycotted games. TV ratings dropped.

But, when players use their shoes to speak out, people don’t complain as much, and they sometimes think it’s cool, which helps viewership, Rivero said, so it’s tolerated more (Rivero, interview 2019).

Rivero has seen his share of criticism for helping players express themselves through their shoes.

In 2015, Marshawn Lynch decided he wanted to wear a pair of gold cleats in the NFC championship game.

Not gold colored cleats—cleats with actual gold on them.

He commissioned Rivero to help, and Rivero melted 24-karat gold into the paint.

The NFL was not nearly as excited about the idea as Lynch was.

It told him that he would be in violation of the uniform code and wouldn’t be allowed to play unless he took them off.
Figure 9 Painted with 24-karat gold, these cleats created a controversy when the NFL informed Marshawn Lynch he’d have to leave the stadium if he chose to wear them. Photo provided by Marcus Rivero from the SolesbySir Instagram page.

As the designer, Rivero was a little scared at first. The Players’ Association got involved. The agents got involved. Reporters were blowing up his phone.

Eventually, though, Rivero realized that if people were getting so worked up about one pair of shoes, he was heading down the right path, one where a single pair of shoes could make a difference.
He was not alone in the mentality that the NFL could fine as much as it wanted, and he’d still make the shoes.

When Rivero first started designing, there were rules about what percent of the shoe had to be an “approved color” and rules about what colors shoelaces had to be and rules about how much of the shoe could be a different color and rules about what that different color would be.

With all the creative shoes Rivero was making, a lot of Rivero’s clients got fined.

They didn’t care. A few thousand dollars isn’t that much to players who earn millions of dollars a year.

But the NFL is starting to loosen up, Rivero said.

Not many people see it that way, he thinks, but out of the thousands of shoes he made for players in the 2018 season, not a single one resulted in a fine.

“Those are the things that I think the league is doing in such a great way that a lot of people don’t see and don’t understand it,” Rivero said. “So to me, the league is really making an effort to allow these athletes to be individuals.”

The extension of the My Cause My Cleats period in 2018 also gives him hope that the NFL is heading towards shoe freedom year round (Rivero, interview 2019), like the NBA instituted for the 2018-2019 season as part of the “ongoing effort to allow its players to be more expressive on the court” (DePaula, 2019).

The leagues aren’t the only ones policing the amount of expression in sports, however. The players themselves also enforce unwritten rules about individualism, Dyreson said.

Yasiel Puig, a right fielder for the Cincinnati Reds and previously for the Los Angeles Dodgers, is not shy about celebrating his own success. He has often celebrated a homerun by flipping his bat up high into the air.
It’s part of his Cuban personality, he says.

Some players don’t buy it, though. They say he’s showboating and throw at him when they play him (Dyreson, interview 2018).

Whether it’s the league policing it, the players or a personal dilemma, it all becomes a balancing act in the narrative of the tension in team sports that Dyreson described.

“You can be individual to a certain extent, but you also want to make sure you’re not overshadowing your team,” Schultz said.
Chapter 7
A growing field

When Tracie Speca-Ventura walked into a sports art gallery in Los Angeles at 19, she found her calling.

She had no experience with art nor with curating. Her relationship with sports consisted of enthusiasm and a college tennis career, but no professional experience.

But, in that gallery, she saw an exciting new field, one that would bring the two together, and she wanted to be a part of it.

So she asked for a job.

Speca-Ventura started working at the gallery, where she learned to curate art, manage a gallery and work with different teams in Los Angeles (Speca-Ventura, interview 2019).

In 1992, she founded her own company, Sports & the Arts, which looks to bring fine arts to sports through large-scale art collections tailored to the venue and personality of an organization.

Since its inception, Sports & the Arts has worked with teams including the New York Yankees and the Green Bay Packers, installing art into their public spaces and private training areas (Sports and the Arts, 2019).

When Sports & the Arts starts a project, the entire program can get involved in the process.

The team and Sports & the Arts sit down and talk about what message they are trying to send through the art they place in the stadium, and sometimes the coaches and even the players get involved before the “top dogs” have their final say about the message and what they want.
For the Packers, that message was one of greatness.

To convey that sense, Sports & the Arts dug into the past and found photos to reinforce the history of the team. It also made sure it found artists that were the “best of the best” to fit the theme.

Figure 10 Wisconsin native Greg Gossel’s pop-inspired artwork, Titletown, tells of the Packers championship history through colorful pennants, photos, footballs and fan-favorite phrases. Photo Courtesy of Sports and the Arts; sportsandthearts.com.

While looking for the elite artists, Sports & the Arts also tries to bring in local artists because it understands the tie between a team and its region and its artists.

“You want to make that bridge or connection,” Speca-Ventura said. “It’s important for a team to involve that community.”

The Kansas City Chiefs also have a similar philosophy, but they’ve made it a part of their identity as a club rather than reaching out to a company like Sports & the Arts.
As the Arrowhead Fellow, Leisinger works with the collection of art for the walls of Arrowhead Stadium curated by a panel of leading members of art institutions in the area, and most of it is art by local artists.

“They’re (in the art) look like their own backyard, and I think it gives them a sense of connectedness to the team that they may not get otherwise,” Leisinger said.

The workshops at Arrowhead Stadium also work to create the community connection by having the players participate alongside the fans.

And, just as Speca-Ventura described it, Leisinger said it makes a bridge between the public and the team.

“You can’t really have a football team without the fans,” Leisinger said. “They definitely are tied to your region, so of course they want to celebrate the region.”

Both Leisinger’s and Speca-Ventura’s work helps the community on multiple levels.

There’s the monetary aspect, of course — Leisinger said the Chiefs have contributed seven figures to the local art community — but they are also helping educate everyone surrounding the program.

At Arrowhead Stadium, the Chiefs hold workshops that kids, adults and players attend. In addition to teaching about local art, they also try to open up the participants’ thinking about art in general (Leisinger, interview 2019).

While Sports & the Arts doesn’t work to educate people in a manner that is so explicit, its goal is to find new and exciting things as it tells stories about the program.

One of Sports & the Arts’ sayings is “how do we trump the super fan?”

It wants to be able to put pieces up on the walls that surprise even the most devout fans by showing them something they didn’t know or had never seen.
Additionally, it helps those within the program stay educated.

Speca-Ventura mentioned the players that get traded or the newly drafted players who might not know much about their new team can learn from the pieces that Sports & the Arts chooses to put on the walls around them.

While part of the movement to decorate sports spaces is driven by an attachment to the community, it’s also driven by money, as most things are.

With stadium attendances dropping around the league and in sports in general, there has to be a reason for fans to go to the game rather than watch it on television.

“What will keep the people in the stadiums? Because, at the end of the day, it’s a cost revenue,” Speca-Ventura said. “So you want people there as much as you can.”

Teams are trying to get their stadiums involved with the community beyond game time.

Stadiums with art collections or museums have started to include art tours in their ticket packages to get people into the fans on non game days.

Figure 11 ArtsKC tours the Arrowhead Art Collection at Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City. Photo by Rivas Photography, provided by the Arrowhead Collection
They’re also creating downtown areas and live venues for fans to go to before and after the games, Speca-Ventura said.

And they need the art to make these places attractive and photo-worthy. The more people take pictures in front of things related to the team and post them to social media, the more brand exposure the programs get (Speca-Ventura, interview 2019).

The leagues are also noticing how the creative elements of the game draw in fans, and, in return, revenue, Rivero said, which is why the players are being allowed more expression through the shoes he designs as well as things like touchdown dances.

“It drew a whole bunch of publicity and media coverage and women and men that didn’t really watch the sport loved to see a 300-pound offensive lineman doing the limbo,” Rivero said.

The leagues are smart enough to realize that, and their attempt to capitalize on it has led to more and more creative license (Rivero, interview 2019).

And while the field that Rivero, Speca-Ventura and Leisinger work in is small, it’s growing.

Speca-Ventura said when she first started there weren’t many artists trying to work with sports, and there weren’t too many programs that embraced the idea either.

In the art world, it was frowned upon to paint athletes, and in the sports world, decorating spaces wasn’t a priority.
Figure 12 Nick Bensch’s original fans triptych, First Down!, was recreated into a tension system installed high above the Main Concourse. This advantageous location creates sightlines from two levels. Photo Courtesy of Sports and the Arts; sportsandthearts.com.

Now, it’s a part of the budget.

“People are starting to spend money on the walls,” Speca-Ventura said.

The fans are coming to expect it as well, which prioritizes art since the fans drive the revenue (Speca-Ventura, interview 2019).

In terms of actual museums within the stadiums, rather than installations, the Arrowhead collection is one of two collections like it in the country, Leisinger said, but she sees growth there, as well. More and more teams are starting to incorporate collections into their venues (Leisinger, interview 2019).

And, of course, business is booming for Rivero.

The extension of My Cause My Cleats and the new shoe design freedom in the NBA opened the floodgates for Soles by Sir, and, if Rivero’s prediction of design freedom in the NFL comes true soon, it will only increase.
No matter how long that freedom takes, though, Rivero thinks that art is already integrated into the game, anyway.

“Same way you would go to a gallery to see any artist that you’re fascinated by, people literally turn into sports just to see art, like let me see what shoes he’s got on, or let me see the touchdown celebration,” Rivero said.

The nature of sports, itself, helps ensure the growth of the field.

“It’s competitive,” Speca-Ventura said. “Sports are competitive. So each building wants to look better than the last.”

Walls, shoes or cars, each player and program wants to be unique and the best.

“I compare athletes, in the most respectable way, to kids that have a lot of money,” Rivero said. “But, if you have a lot of money, and you and all your buddies have Lamborghini, you want your Lamborghini to stand out. So, how do you make your Lamborghini stand out? Oh, let’s paint something on it.”

But, it’s not just the nature of sports that will perpetuate the field’s growth. The nature of art is also ensuring that it’s here to stay.

As they’ve gone about their work, Speca-Ventura, Leisinger and Rivero have each seen art open up people’s minds and change their perspectives.

Speca-Ventura has seen athletes become more comfortable with the art world from both the collector’s and artist’s side after interacting with the installations Sports & the Arts puts in.

Some reach out to her to help decorate their homes since they have a greater appreciation for high art, while others are comfortable exploring their own creativity through art. Some have even sent their children to intern with her.

“It’s not so scary anymore,” Speca-Ventura said.
At Arrowhead Stadium, fans and players alike are realizing how the word “art” encompasses so much more than just a painting on the wall. It can mean dance, it can mean uniform design or it could mean the sport itself (Leisinger, interview 2019).

By letting athletes become involved in the design process of the shoes, Rivero has helped unlock the creative sides of many athletes.

Many athletes come to him, at first, and ask for something simple like “Hey, I just want you to do white. Turn my black shoe all white,” Rivero said.

But then, as they realize what more they can do, it turns from white to blue.

Then, by the end of the season when all their eyes have been opened to all the possibilities, they’re asking for things like “Let’s put the Golden Gate Bridge on it.”

By showing them the possibilities, Rivero is ensuring that these athletes never lose their appreciation for art, which, in turn, helps secure the future of his field.

“If I showed you his first shoe and his last shoe, you can see—whether they admit it or not—their appreciation for, not only my skill, but art in general,” Rivero said.

“And I guarantee those people, they never revert back to ‘just painting my shoe white.’”

At times, working in the field of art and sports can be uncertain — Speca-Ventura said that it was a grueling road to success, and Rivero still works another job.

It’s also a small field that’s not talked about much. A Google search of the words “art and sports” does not yield many relevant results, and it’s extremely hard to find the names of the actual designers for the My Cause My Cleats shoes.

Even so, it’s here to stay.

Those who actually work in the field say that they’re seeing increasing interest as well as greater acceptance.
And, according to what those who study sports for a living say, the nature of the times is demanding that creativity not only flourish but proliferate and constantly provide something new.

Leagues need something to keep their audiences interested and to bring in money, which pushes them to be creative themselves as well as to allow athletes to be creative individuals.

With leagues accepting more and more artistic expression, athletes are starting to view themselves as individuals and not just employees of a larger team.

As such, they want to create their own brand, and they turn to fashion and art. As they get into art, they draw in their friends, like Good Vibes by Chico, which is created by Steeler Marcus Allen and supported by his athlete friends, like Barkley.

They also draw in their competitors, because, as Rivero said, if each athlete has a Lamborghini, each athlete wants his or her Lamborghini to stand out from the others.

As small and difficult as the field may be now, the competitive nature of sports, the exploratory nature of art and the commercial nature of each ensures its expansion.


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Thesis Title: The Beautiful Game: The relationship between sports and art in modern times
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Covered Penn State baseball, basketball and
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Reading Eagle/ Football reporting intern /2017-Present
Write articles after Penn State football games
Transcribe interviews and publish videos after press conferences

The Daily Collegian/ Senior reporter/ 2015-Present
Covered men’s volleyball, men’s basketball and football
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Off the Block/ Special contributor/ 2016
Wrote NCAA men’s volleyball national championship gamer
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Photograph events for promotional purposes and for social media

Association for Women in Sports Media / Graphic design chair / 2017 / General member / 2016-Present
Attend biweekly meetings and designed graphics for announcements and social media

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Mentored incoming freshmen in the Schreyer Honors College
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