

Veterans Who Became Paralympians: A Media Analysis of Identity Reconstruction Through Sport

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On September 7, 2011, U.S. soldier Bradley Snyder stepped on an improvised explosive device laid by the Taliban in Kandahar. The explosion did not kill him, but it left him completely blind. During his recovery in intensive care, Snyder made the decision to train as an athlete and not to let his injury prevent him from achieving new goals. Just five weeks after the explosion, he was back in the pool and happy with the reminder that he could still succeed as an athlete if not as a soldier (Global Post, September 7, 2012). Exactly one year after the incident, Snyder won the gold medal in the men's 400 metre freestyle race, his second of the 2012 Paralympic Games in London; a moment some in the media proclaimed as vindication for his injuries and his determination to overcome them.

This inspirational story is typical of the way in which the 2012 Paralympic Games have been discussed in the media. The Paralympic Games do not normally garner as much media attention as the Olympic Games, but in 2012 there was a noticeable increase in the weeks and months leading up to the event of coverage of US Paralympic athletes' stories, with a focus in the media primarily on those disabled athletes who were veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The stories themselves were intended to be uplifting and inspirational; a US soldier, risking his or her life to serve their country, was irrevocably injured while deployed overseas. The narrative usually carries on in this way: not being ones to let permanent disability slow them down, however, these brave men and women found new meaning in taking up roles as athletes and in continuing to represent their nation at international sporting events. The heightened media coverage of and interest in the stories of these Paralympic athletes can be seen to arise in part from the nature of the wars ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan, which have left significantly more soldiers injured and maimed than dead. The increasing presence of disabled veteran bodies within society poses a complicated and disconcerting problem; that increasing numbers of disabled veterans are encouraged to take up sport in an effort at rehabilitation is evidence of both the increase in volume of disabled bodies and of the increasing articulation between military and sport in American society. This relationship between veterans and their sporting practices post-war provides the focus for this paper.

To this end, this paper is the result of an investigation of online print media representations of veterans-turned-Paralympians. Twenty articles taken from popular online news sources between the months of July and September 2011 were qualitatively coded and examined in order to gain an understanding of their effect on both the individual veteran's identity as he or she attempts to reintegrate into society, as well as the identity of the nation as a whole in coming to terms with war and the bodies of returning veterans. It was found that the news stories generally served to transition the veteran from an identity based on his or her military service to an identity based upon success in competitive sport.

This paper, then, is concerned broadly with this sport-military complex, the depth of which has been increasingly theorized post-9/11, and the ways in which the embodied practices of veterans are figured with (new) meaning once they return from zones of war. In this vein, many scholars have written about the relationship between sport or sporting spectacles and ideas of an often-militaristic nationalism (Batts and Andrews, 2011; King, 2008; Scherer and Koch, 2010), and Batts and Andrews in particular have begun to theorize the significance of the disabled veteran's mobilization through sport as an arena in which military and nationalist discourses and bodies maimed by war make sense. They argue that the veteran's service to the nation is not finished once he or she has been deemed physically unfit to be a soldier; rather, the disabled veteran's body becomes a site of open political contestation and a site of struggle for meaning on the parts of the individual athlete, the state as engendered through the institution of the military, and all other citizens whose national identities are constituted in part through their relation to the military and the militarized aspects of everyday life. The US Paralympic Military Program operates, in this sense, to transform a veteran's military service into another kind of service to the nation through their performance in sporting competitions, but it also operates to produce other kinds of identities through its entrenchment within military-

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national discourses and discourses of what it means to be an able-bodied citizen. The program, while it can be theorized multiple ways, ultimately enables veterans to take up new identities in the wake of their injuries and to come to terms with their newly disabled bodies by maintaining a connection to ideals of national service.

This paper offers insight into the importance of sport for the rehabilitation and reintegration of veterans through an examination of the ways in which their newly formed identities are represented in media productions. Such an analysis also contributes to existing literature on the cultural construction of identities; not only are Paralympic veterans active in the reconstruction of their own identities, but the media also plays an active role in facilitating this act. An increase in the media coverage of the Paralympics in 2012, then, may correspond to increasingly successful efforts on the part of the US Paralympic Military Program to aid returning soldiers in their transition.