Defeating Stereotypes: The Multi-Dimensional Lives of Adolescent-Athletes in Young Adult Literature
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Background
It was our aim to examine the complex ways a set of YA texts represent the adolescent-athlete in order to expand how these common characters are understood. It is our hope that complicating literary representations broadens how adolescent-athletes are viewed by teachers, coaches, administrators, and the larger community.

Perspectives Framing the Study
- Critical youth studies (Lesko, 2012; Talburt & Lesko, 2012; Tilleczek, 2014)
- Sports culture within literacy learning (Brown & Rodesiler, 2016; Fabrizi & Ford, 2014)

Guiding Questions
- How does sports-related YA literature represent the adolescent-athlete?
- Within this literary subgenre, what tensions between being and becoming must adolescent-athletes navigate in and outside the sports arena?

Text Selection
We sought stories…
- featuring female and male protagonists;
- describing extended sports-action scenes;
- with a history of positive reviews as quality YA literature;
- about sports beyond the most popular;
- that won awards and/or were written by award-winning authors;
- representing varied settings across the United States.
  o See Table 1 for book synopses.

Findings
Representations of the Adolescent-Athlete
- The adolescent-athlete as an altruistic figure
  o “Montana Wild”
  o The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
  o The Running Dream
- The adolescent-athlete as a multidimensional talent
  o The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
  o The Running Dream
  o “Montana Wild”

Being and Becoming
- Adult gaze and worry over becoming
  o The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian
  o Smashed
  o “Montana Wild”
- Being in the arena
  o Ball Don’t Lie
  o The Running Dream

Implications
Considering depictions of adolescent-athletes in sports-related YA literature stands to help…
- teachers embrace a more nuanced view of adolescent-athletes & the role of athletics in youths’ lives;
- teacher educators challenge narrow perspectives of the role of athletics in schools;
- students question how they, their peers, and adolescent characters are often positioned (cf. Lewis & Durand, 2014);
- adults remember that placing too much emphasis on what adolescents might become detracts from all they are in the present day.

References

Contact Mark Lewis at malewis2@loyola.edu
Contact Luke Rodesiler at rodesill@ipfw.edu
Table 1. YA Novels Analyzed

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<th>Book</th>
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<td><em>The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian</em> (Alexie, 2007) tells the story of an American Indian high school basketball player, Junior, who lives on the Spokane Indian Reservation and has high academic aspirations. However, upon realizing that opportunity is limited by a lack of resources on the reservation, he transfers to a predominantly White school, joins the basketball team, and must face his old friends on the court. While navigating his new environment, he endures multiple familial tragedies and backlash from his peers on the reservation. Multiple sports scenes are featured, including Junior’s new basketball team facing the reservation’s squad and scenes exploring the connection between Junior and his new coach.</td>
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The short story “Montana Wild” appears in a collection titled *Angry Management* (Crutcher, 2009). In the story, Montana, an ex-cheerleader, takes on a West Texas school board over her first amendment rights because they blocked her attempt to publish in the school newspaper an article about medical marijuana. To make matters more stressful, her father is the school board chairman. In addition to the battle over the school newspaper, Montana and her father also clash over the care of Tara, a foster child living with them. When her father sends Tara back to child services, Montana follows through with her threat to leave, too. The story culminates with a dramatic school board hearing over the censorship issue.

*Ball Don’t Lie* (de la Peña, 2005) is a “street ball” story, focusing on Sticky, who grew up in the foster care system in L.A. while enduring an obsessive-compulsive disorder. Sticky spends his time playing basketball at Lincoln Rec Center, where he’s the only White guy in the gym, and his fellow players give him advice (both verbal and physical) about how to play ball and navigate life. As a high school student, he begins dating Anh Thu, who he met while trying to shoplift at the store where she works. Sticky worries over treating her to a great birthday, making a serious mistake in the process, while also working on his basketball skills—both on the high school team and at Lincoln Rec—with the hopes of earning a college basketball scholarship.

*Smashed* (Luedeke, 2012) is a story about Katie, the captain of her high school field hockey team in a small town in Maine. She has a serious drug and alcohol addiction, exacerbated by her family situation. Katie’s father abandoned the family when she was young. Her mother works as a nurse, but her job is in another city, and she chooses to spend many nights with her boyfriend, leaving Katie to basically raise her brother on her own. Katie’s addictive behaviors spiral during her senior year as she sporadically dates a popular football player, which leads to a series of poor decisions and horrifying consequences. Still, her play on the field has led to a possible college scholarship and has her team vying for a state championship.

In *The Running Dream* (Van Draanen, 2011), Jessica, who identifies as an all-star on her high school track team, endures an accident in which her leg’s so badly damaged that it must be amputated. Forced to face life with a prosthesis, she finds solace in a new friend, Rosa, enduring cerebral palsy. Jessica learns to use her first prosthesis before getting fitted with a prosthesis for running, which is funded through a charity drive organized by her track coach and teammates. Her parents also find themselves in a fight with the school district over insurance payments, which they attempt to hide from Jessica. As she becomes more comfortable with her new prosthesis, Jessica decides to give Rosa a gift by forming “Team Rosa” for a local road race.