Toward a Less Speciesist
Sociology of Sport

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Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours? Let’s face it: our lives are miserable, laborious, and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies, and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength; and the very instant that our usefulness has come to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty. No animal in England knows the meaning of happiness or leisure after he is a year old. No animal in England is free. The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is the plain truth.1

The manner in which a nation, in the aggregate, treats the other species, is one chief measure of its real civilization.2

Introduction: Regarding Animals

The Sociology of Sport has much to be proud of when it comes to playing a leading role in public knowledge about a constellation of social issues, including social issues that are sensitive, disruptive, controversial and/or urgent. The role that animals occupy in the ‘sporting’ cultures of the world represents one glaring exception. While this role has not been fully ignored, and while research is available on the human-animal relationship, surprisingly little of it is sociological. Indeed, the preponderance of the extant work on animals involved in human play, sport or entertainment comes from other disciplines—a fact that does not reflect flatteringly on our own discipline. As Arnold Arluke observed in the Editor’s Introduction to the first edition of the groundbreaking (and multidisciplinary) journal Society & Animals over 20 years ago: “It is ironic that so little research interest has been paid to studying the human experience of [animals] when animals occupy such a commanding presence in our society … as concerns mount and consciousness changes … over the proper use of animals, the findings of researchers will be absolutely crucial to make what is often an emotionally charged and highly polarized debate more reasoned and informed” (1993, p. 5).

In sociological circles at least, and certainly in the Sociology of Sport, little progress has been made. Otherwise thoughtful, inclusive, and even exhaustive

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introductory Sociology of Sport volumes, many published in multiple editions, rarely feature chapters or even sections on animals, and the main professional meetings in the field—notably NASSS and ISSA—have over the years seldom included sessions, or even papers, on animals. This seems especially odd in the face of widespread knowledge of animal cruelty in so many thriving animal sport cultures. As Michael Atkinson and I wrote a decade ago: “although generally disregarded as a legitimate subject of sociological inquiry, our view is that animal abuse, exploitation and victimization in ‘mainstream’ western sports/leisure pastimes warrants far more serious sociological investigation than it has received to date” (2005, p. 337).

It is clear that we live in a time of growing sensibilities to how we ‘engage’ animals—as companions, as ‘athletes’, as sources of mass entertainment, and as food (Safran Foer, 2009). At the center of this debate are philosophical and ethical questions of how humans should treat their animal companions, and whether the techniques of neutralization (Sykes and Matza, 1989) that have conventionally been used to rationalize animal-related risk, pain or death are as compelling as they once were in a dynamic contemporary culture apparently increasingly concerned with animal welfare. In brief, to date, our subdiscipline has been positively blinkered where the ‘animal-sport complex’ is concerned. This special issue is one small corrective gesture aimed at encouraging a less speciesist Sociology of Sport and a commitment to a steadier flow of human-animal research.

**Sociologically Imagining the Scope of the ‘Animal-Sport Complex’**

Animals have been used for ‘sport’ and human entertainment in almost all corners of the globe since ancient times (Gardiner et al., 1998; Cashmore, 2000; Jennison, 2004; Noyes, 2006; Griffin, 2007). As existing research on the ‘animal-sport complex’ has shown in graphic and disturbing detail (cf., Atyeo, 1979; Elias & Dunning, 1986; Pinker, 2011), historically animals were treated in ways that much of the contemporary world would consider barbaric and uncivilized (consider, for example, baiting ‘sports’ featuring bulls, bears or badgers, and other pursuits that either involved attacks upon tethered and chained—that is, largely helpless—animals, or animals being hunted and killed in their natural settings). While it is clearly the case that the number of animals that have not been used for human entertainment purposes far outnumber those that have been used, the range of animals that have featured in the sports, pastimes and mores of various cultures is vast.

Animals are typically used in sporting pursuits in one of three ways: as targets to hunt, catch, hurt or kill (these include so-called ‘field sports’ such as fox hunting, hare coursing, stag and deer hunting, duck and fowl hunting, as well as angling and bullfighting); as direct competitors in ferociously violent contests always resulting in gruesome injury and sometimes death (such baiting and ‘pit sports’ include dogfighting and cockfighting); and, as ‘equipment’ and devices of competition (such as equines used in rodeo, horse racing and show jumping). In general, much of the research that does exist on animal sports tends to focus on highly contested sports, rather than sporting practices which are largely accepted by society. Research has often examined activities such as dog fighting,
cockfighting and hunting, where animals are directly harmed, maimed or killed for the sake of lurid gambling audiences (Hawley 1989; Wade 1990; Worden and Darden, 1992; Evans & Forsyth 1997; Windeatt, 1982; Kalof & Taylor 2007). For example, Hawley (1989) examined cockfighting from the point of view of both participants and animal activists. The central conclusion reached was that, once imbued with deep cultural meaning, cockfighting has over time in certain locations become attached to a widely mediated moral panic and ideological crusade which, much like the growing debate around rodeo events, is highly emotionally-charged. Meanwhile Wade (1990) studied sport hunting, looking primarily at the way the activity is perceived negatively by animal activists, but as an ordinary, permissible and even practical part of ‘nature’ by participants themselves (see Gibson in this issue).

Despite the perhaps predictable attention garnered by controversial field and blood sports, less explicitly abusive sports are increasingly coming under the purview of sociological investigation. For instance, in this vein, Michael Atkinson and I explored the cruelties faced by greyhounds, and noted that “we are interested in placing greyhound racing along a broad continuum of potentially harmful animal sports which, while clearly distinct from, for example, cockfighting and bear baiting in its intent and inevitably severe outcomes, nevertheless systematically produces abuse, neglect and harm in its animal participants” (2005, p. 337). While racing greyhounds are not intentionally killed for the sake of entertainment, their bodies and lives are subjected to a variety of forms of control and constraint, many of which cause the animals discomfort, stress and risk. Perhaps more than any other animal setting, the institutionalized abuses inherent in horse racing and other equine sports have been widely studied (cf., Yates, Powell and Beirne, 2001; Herzog & Golden, 2009), and equally widely mediated. Gerber and Young’s (2013) critical review of horse participation at the Calgary Stampede cites numerous cases of abuses in rodeo and other horse sports.

The ‘animal-sport complex’ is obviously only a ‘complex’ because humans are involved. In and of itself, this renders the animal-sport complex a fundamentally social issue and underlines the necessity of bringing a sociological imagination to an array of as-yet under-researched dimensions of this relationship. These include: how the use of animals in sport interfaces with culture, social class, religion and/or other social stratifiers, such as gender; definitional/conceptual ways of thinking about animals in entertainment cultures; ethical parameters of using—and abusing—animals for popular entertainment, including gambling and betting cultures; the social and psychological processes and structures that allow us to treat animals in inhumane ways; how nostalgia, tradition and romanticism legitimize death as ‘sport’ in certain cultures; breeding, training and performance practices; the role of the policy, law and governance in animal sports; sporting animals and social change; sport subcultures which feature and/or depend on animal ‘athletes’ and give situational meanings to activities often deplored elsewhere in society; animal sport as spectacle, including mediated spectacle; the social organization of rendering and slaughter; animals, medicalization and research experimentation; consumptive practices and changing attitudes to animals as food; sport as a carnivorous culture; and perhaps most importantly, how questions of civility, morality and empathy weave through the animal-sport complex to facilitate acceptable leisure forms, and how these questions have shifted over time.
Simply stated, it is accurate to note that research in our discipline on any of these elements of the animal-sport complex is slim. Two caveats are noteworthy. First, while sociological attention to the animal-sport complex is inconsistent and spotty at best, there are some memorable exceptions. These include, but are not limited to the in-depth figurational forays of Eric Dunning and Norbert Elias into fox hunting (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Dunning, 1999), Peter Donnelly’s (1994) and Ken Sheard’s (1999) work on verification in birdwatching, Adrian Franklin’s (1998) comparison of hunting and angling as an expression of ‘nation’, Atkinson and Young’s (2005) aforementioned study of the cruelties faced by racing dogs with respect to breeding, training, housing and disposal, Gilbert and Gillett’s study of equine athletes (2011), and their recent edited anthology Sport, Animals, and Society. Second, as Wade (1996) notes, the study of animal sport, not just in sociology but in general, has primarily been concerned with human participants, and has paradoxically ignored the animals themselves which clearly play a central role.

How else might scholars bring a sociological imagination to questions of the animal-sport complex? To express things slightly differently, so far the focus of animal exploitation research (e.g., Atkinson and Young 2005) takes two forms. The first and more common approach considers the explicit nature of the activity itself and how animals feature, while the second and less common approach honed in on accidental or hidden dimensions. In this respect, animal sports may be understood in terms of what Goffman (1959) would call the ‘front’ and ‘back’ regions of social settings. Examples of the ‘front’ regions might include the graphically bloody way that a fox or a hare is literally torn to pieces by mauling hounds, or the slow, torturous violence imposed upon a bull by repeated bullring ‘performers’ culminating, depending on the cultural setting in which it takes place, in its public suffering and execution. Meanwhile, the ‘back regions’ of such pursuits would include practices related, for instance, to the preparation of the event, or the manner in which the participants are treated. Here, the focus shifts to the lesser known, and often disguised, aspects of these activities, such as the ways in which a bull is ‘prepared’ for its fight (for instance, by being antagonized behind the scenes by flagrantly cruel taunting strategies aimed at ‘taking the fight’ out of the animal), how horses used in bullfights may be drugged to dull the pain of goring, how rodeo horses sustain injuries that necessitate their euthanization (Young and Gerber, 2014) and racing horses are given drug cocktails to ‘produce winners,’ or the ways in which racing dogs are sometimes kept, housed, and/or discarded under inhumane circumstances (Atkinson and Young 2005). Needless to say, these are not the only approaches but they represent two central approaches toward sociologically imagining the scope of the animal-sport complex.

The Vicissitudes of Empathy:
Do We Really Understand ‘Life as a Bat’?

Without resorting to the science and language of, for example, cynology (a branch of zoology that studies dogs), necropsy (the dissection of the dead body of an animal to determine the cause of death), bute (short for phenylbutazone, a cheap drug used in horses for inflammation and pain that allows racing equines to compete while at risk of further injury), or other forms of veterinary science including
animal psychology. Sociologists of Sport must push the traditional boundaries of what we do to understand animals. Every discipline, including our own, has its parameters and limits, but it is clear that merely describing what we as humans do to, and require of, animals is insufficient. As Atkinson suggests in his paper to follow using animal standpoint theory (AST), we must also try to see animal involvement in sport and human entertainment practices from the point of view of the animals themselves.

Most scholars in animal science seem to agree that we do not fully understand the workings of the animal mind. Thomas Nagel’s (1974) classic philosophical essay ‘What it is like to be a bat?’ might not be typical reading for sociologists, but it is essential to fully grasp the quandary empathetic sociologists of animals face. Specifically, we can observe bats, we can understand their patterns and predict their behavior, but we do not fully comprehend their essential organism. However, as many of the early philosophers (e.g., Michel de Montaigne, John Locke, David Hume, etc.) argued, animals show clear signs of thought and reason, obviously feel pain, and many respond to people who mistreat them in ways not terribly different than humans. Much like humans, animals—a hunted fox, an equestrian horse, a fighting dog, for instance—seem entirely capable of reasoning and behaving in ways that flow from that reason.4

The limits and realities of some form of human-animal verstehen are not yet clear, and sociologists will no doubt labor to avoid lapsing into the sort of anthropomorphism that criminologists have discredited for centuries (e.g., Gould, 1996; Deutschmann, 2007), but to perceive animals as sentient beings which deserve, understand and respond to empathy seems imperative. Support for this position may be found in the papers to follow, where Butler and Gilbert display obvious affection and respect for—indeed ‘trust’ in5—their equine companions, Kalof is repulsed by the practice of breeding dogs to attack one another, and Gibson and Atkinson, much like their interview respondents, believe they ‘get’ the visceral violence of hunting from the point of view of the animals involved. The precise extent to which they ‘get it’ remains unclear. As Atkinson confesses, “Truly, I can never know”, but that he and Gibson come to their research from a position of empathy and respect for sentient animals is plainly evident.

In turn, an acknowledgment of sentience moves us toward the associated organizational machinations of animal advocacy in the form of animal welfare and animal rights (DeGrazia, 2002; Gerber and Young, 2013; Young and Gerber, 2014). Writing on the human treatment of animals, Shanks has argued that “the issue as to whether animals have rights (or indeed any other forms of moral standing) is a complex, divisive [one] that is apt to generate much heated argument” (2003, p. 12). While Shanks focuses primarily on the use of animals for the purposes of biomedical research, this argument can easily be extended to the use of animals in sport. More implicit than explicit in the readings that follow, the always sticky welfare-rights debate is central to the changing role of animals in society. Historically, while prized in many cultures, animals have rarely been afforded the same significance as humans. Shanks (2003) correctly recalls Immanuel Kant’s philosophical position that because animals are not viewed as rational in the human sense, they are not considered to be of equal worth, and thus become marginal to the so-called ‘moral community’. Recently, in many countries around the world, this mindset has been challenged by a growing sensitivity to the inappropriateness
of exploiting animals, and to the cruelty they may suffer in the name of experimentation, exhibition, food—or ‘sport’. The vicissitudes of human empathy for animals might not be entirely clear, and we might not fully understand ‘life as a bat’, but what is clear, as Galvin and Herzog have observed, is that “the animal rights movement has had a major impact on public opinion concerning the use of non-human species” (1992, p. 141). Truthfully declared, this special issue likely stems both from a scholarly frustration with the relative lack of research attention to the place of animals in sport, as well as from the shifting social consciousness flagged by Galvin and Herzog.

The Vicissitudes of Tolerance: Animal Entertainment and Corporate Alliances

As one small illustration of sociological work recently undertaken on the animal-sport complex, in collaboration with colleague Brittany Gerber (e.g., Gerber and Young, 2013; Young and Gerber, 2014), I have recently examined one of Western Canada’s most recognizable and protected cultural forms—the Calgary Stampede—as a locus of the symbiotic relationship between forms of animal entertainment and corporate hegemony. At a time of growing public sensitivity to forms of violence, victimization and social justice in Canada, debates regarding the safety of animals have escalated in many Canadian communities and regions. This includes the Canadian West, where conservative attitudes to the place of animals in human entertainment cultures persist.

Organized by a Board of Directors comprised of well-heeled and influential Albertans, the Calgary Stampede and Exhibition is an agricultural fair that runs for ten days at the start of July every year. It is accompanied by a parade, a midway, concerts featuring top-level acts and all-day rodeo events. Thousands of animals are involved in the Stampede. Horses feature centrally, especially in rodeo events such as bareback and saddle bronc competitions, barrel racing, steer wrestling, tie-down roping and the increasingly controversial chuckwagon racing.

In addition to its formal corporate and business associations (all three levels of government help fund it, reputable businesses scramble to brand Stampede structures, billboards and events with their logos, as do literally dozens of media organizations), to note that the Stampede is a thriving example of ‘legitimate deviance’ (Listiak, 1981) would be an understatement. Quite literally, to overlook the hundreds of daily ‘Stampede Breakfasts’ across the city, the nonstop public partying that continues day and night and that brings the corporate engine of the city (and the downtown core) to a standstill, and the controversially expensive efforts by the city to beautify its roads, parks and venues for out-of-town visitors is to exist in a foggy cultural coma. To put it simply, everyone in Calgary knows the Stampede. Over 1.4 million people attended its centennial celebrations in 2012 (Booth, 2012). It, and the events it is known for, attract visitors from all over the world.

‘The Stampede’ has a long, rich and complex history. Far from transient or lacking cultural resonance, it has shown fortitude, resilience and cultural meaning in the face of growing criticism for the municipal imposition it represents, the risky and arguably cruel events it endorses, and the injuries to humans and animals that result. Many citizens enjoy the frivolous fun of the Stampede, and many revere it
for what it represents to them. This spills over to the federal government which, for instance, invested $5 million to promote its 2012 centennial celebration (‘Tourism marketing for Stampede pays off’, Calgary Herald, January 10, 2013, p. B1). But not everyone reveres the Stampede, or its practices.

In the recent past, there has been an evident surge in the numbers of individuals and groups who are highly critical of the rate and extent of animal injuries that occur at the self-proclaimed ‘Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth’. In addition to annual flurries of hotly contested viewpoints from ordinary citizens captured in newspaper ‘Dear Sir’ Letters to the Editor, many animal rights and welfare organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the Vancouver Humane Society (VHS) and the Calgary Humane Society (CHS) have strongly opposed the use of animals in Stampede events. The popular media, of course, play a central role in the ways people ‘see’ the debate. Motivated as much by the well-known industry axiom ‘bad news is good news’ (Hall et al., 1978; Young, 1986) as by pure incentives to improve the event and save animals, heart-wrenching and difficult-to-look-at photographs of calves’ necks being violently snapped by roping cowboys and horses with broken legs lying in a mangled mess, all stitched together with provocative headlines, have become the norm (Gerber and Young, 2013).

As noted by Rollin regarding opposition to rodeo practices in general: “In the 1970s, a group of over 200 animal welfare/animal rights organizations signed a well-publicized document affirming that rodeo was absolutely unacceptable morally because of the pain and fear engendered in animals” (1996, p. 3). In 2010 the British Government, which banned its own rodeos as early as the 1930s, embarrassed the Calgary Stampede specifically by strongly criticizing the event (“Calgary Rodeo Condemned by UK MPs, Activists”, CBC, 2010). Indeed, the Calgary Stampede has never been under as much pressure as it is today to protect its animals and demonstrate policy, practice and outcome with more transparency. It is, further, undeniable that horse fatalities have occurred regularly over the last two decades, despite efforts to change event rules and apply procedures to make them safer for animal participants. Again, perhaps unsurprisingly, the Canadian media play an active, not passive, role by systematically reporting, often sensationally, on potentially contentious episodes. Among other things, they keep count of the number of animal deaths occurring at the Stampede. Many of these deaths occur in chuckwagon racing.

The corporate and spectatorial ‘jewel in the Stampede crown’, chuckwagon racing is a high speed and highly dangerous timed event involving teams of four thoroughbred horses pulling a covered wagon around a track followed by two ‘outriders’, part of whose task is to ensure safety. The logos of local businesses which bid huge amounts of money are branded on the skin (‘tarp’) of the wagons and thus, along with the drivers, become key identifiers of the teams. Each night at the Stampede, and concluding the day’s rodeo activities, teams compete against one another in heats, aiming for the fastest time and fewest penalties to proceed to the final race on the final night with the biggest prize money ‘payout’. As the Stampede’s own website puts it: “You’ll witness all the heart-stopping action as 36 drivers, 216 horses and the teams vie for over $1.15 million in prize money.” The 2014 overall winner, Kurt Bensmiller, took home $100,000.

All rodeo events are enmeshed in cultures of bravado, adrenaline and risk (cf. Mikkelsen, 2008; van Herk, 2008), but no other rodeo event is so underpinned
by such voracious spectator norms of collective drinking and gambling as chuckwagon racing. In turn, this culture apparently fuels the demand for spine-tingling ‘entertainment’ (read: speed, spectacle and risk). In an expensive horse community where many participants are barely paid, the prize money goes a long way, but so do the prestige, identity and bragging rights related to being part of the champion Stampede chuckwagon team. Importantly, these bragging rights extend to the corporate sponsors of the teams, which may be a bank, an oil company, a law firm, or a car dealership.

Countering their success as a spectator attraction (thousands of spectators pour into the Stampede grounds every night) and the undeniably popular view that ‘the chucks’ are exciting to watch, is their equally undeniable report card where animal safety is concerned. According to the VHS (2011), over 50 chuckwagon horses were fatally injured or had to be euthanized between 1986–2011. As noted generally by McBane and Douglas-Coope (2005) and, more specifically, by the CHS (2011), horses involved in, and being trained for, rodeo face regular physical discomfort and mental distress. Accidents, injuries and fatalities are simply a routine feature of the annual chuckwagon races at the Calgary Stampede. More troubling is the fact that unknown numbers of these take place behind the scenes (in the aforementioned Goffmanian sense, in the ‘back regions’) in preparation for competition—that is, in situations where the public normally has no access and where injury tolls go unreported. In 2005, at least nine horses died while being transported to Stampede Park. In 2006, two horses died as a result of chuckwagon races, in 2007 three died and, in 2008, one further horse died. In 2009, two horses died, and in 2010 six horses died (four in chuckwagon racing competitions, and the other two in other rodeo events). Despite well publicized rule changes to chuckwagon racing in 2011, a further two horses perished during the 2011 competition, and in 2012 three more died. Almost all of these deaths took place on the chuckwagon track. From this point of view, the GMC Rangeland Derby’s ‘Half Mile of Hell’ comes by its name honestly.

Most Western communities no longer condone the baiting, fighting, or even burning of animals solely for the purposes of entertaining crowds and fostering gambling environments (Mennell, 1992). But the role of animals in human entertainment and betting cultures is far from extinct. This is true not only of the deviant underworld where, for instance, animals such as dogs are trained to fight to the death (see Kalof in this issue), but also of some of our most championed cultural institutions that, at the end of the day, receive explicit support from governments and entire communities, as well as tacit support from ideological interest groups whose principal mandate (contradictorily, one might note) is to never put an animal in harm’s way.

The Calgary Stampede and Exhibition has enjoyed close to a century of local, regional and international support, recognition and prestige, but its legitimacy has recently been brought into question for its particular brand of ‘horse play’. Few social, cultural or political issues now divide Calgarians and Albertans quite like the matter of whether—and how—horses should be used for public entertainment at the ‘Greatest Outdoor Show on Earth’. As noted, the role of the local media in this debate in disseminating various standpoints as news is key, and the increasing resistance to the Stampede use of horses and animals more broadly cannot be understood aside from media coverage which, at the end of the day, represents the
vehicle through which most people come to ‘know’ the issue in the first place. It is likely that most people attending, and often fiercely supporting, Calgary Stampede events have never ‘stepped foot’ in a barn or ridden a horse, which in itself demonstrates the lengths to which relatively uninformed persons will go to protect the hegemony of the Stampede.

As just one site in the broader debate regarding animal rights and social justice, the Calgary Stampede represents a fascinating setting for the assessment of a changing social climate regarding the use of animals in all aspects of life, from factory farming to pharmaceutical testing to sport, games and play for popular entertainment. The use of horses at the Calgary Stampede has grown as an issue to be squarely a matter of what sociologists would call contested terrain, where there is a clear struggle between traditionalists and proponents of change. At the center of this debate is the thorny question of how humans should treat what Brandt called our “equine companions” (2009, p. 315).

The issue of animal welfare and animal rights at the Calgary Stampede is a complex one involving multiple points of view, some of which are opposed and some of which overlap. For animal rights groups, such as the VHS, the only viable solution to the debate over horse-use at the Calgary Stampede, or indeed any such competition, is the abolition of all events involving animals. This has not happened so far and seems unlikely to occur. On the other hand, animal welfare groups, such as the CHS, are interested in working alongside the Calgary Stampede to improve animal-related entertainment by implementing changes that better respect animals and render events safer for animals and human participants alike. As noted previously, despite initially frosty exchanges between the two, the CHS has grown to have an important and influential role within the debate over horse-use at the Calgary Stampede. Through partnership with the Stampede, they have successfully influenced a number of rule changes that might not have occurred without pressure being brought to bear on an otherwise quite autonomous and (crucially) self-governing organization. Currently, the CHS plays a vital role in this debate by monitoring the wellbeing of horses during the annual competition itself, but this is not to say that when animals suffer the various ‘sides’ in the debate see ‘eye to eye’ or quickly reach consensus on what should be done. Clearly, as with all cultural phenomena that are ‘contested’, the matter of whether and how animals might play a role at the Calgary Stampede is deeply ideological, and can quickly be oversimplified when ‘things go wrong’. At the time of writing, the role of horses in chuckwagon racing and other rodeo events at the Calgary Stampede commands as much public attention—and news space—as it ever has, and as a public issue shows no sign of disappearing soon.

Finally, as complex as the horse-use debate already is, centrally entangled in this debate is the question of whether there is a difference between animals used for entertainment and animal abuse? Are all sports involving animals exploitative and cruel? Quite aside from the undeniable issue that no animal, of course, can ever provide consent, the Canadian public has become increasingly concerned with animal sports that are inherently dangerous to both human and nonhuman participants. Clearly, the breadth of views on the use of animals for public entertainment is extremely wide, spanning from abolitionists on the one hand to advocates of existing (or even amplified) risk on the other. It seems naïve and unrealistic to suggest that animals, including horses, should never be used in sports, or that these events
might magically disappear under the weight of public opposition any time soon. Again, what seems important at a time of shifting public sensibilities to forms of injustice, exploitation and violence is to more thoughtfully—and openly—consider how these dimensions weave through our popular pastimes which, far from representing the ethical use of animals, seem to point in the direction of rationalized (and often comfortably rationalized) exploitation and harm.

**The ‘Call’, the Response, the Papers**

I am not the first Guest Editor of a special issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* to acknowledge that “One is never quite sure what the response will be to a special issue call for papers” (Andrews and Silk, 2011, p.1). In the present case, the idea for this venture grew out of previous (e.g., Atkinson and Young, 2005, 2008) and ongoing (e.g., Gerber and Young, 2013; Young and Gerber, 2014; Young, 2012) interests in the animal-sport complex I share with the current editor of the journal. From contact with colleagues and familiarity with the literature, both of us were aware of a nascent interest in the place of ‘animals’ within the Sociology of Sport, and frankly found it incongruous that neither of what most people would consider the two major journals in the field (this journal and the *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*) had ever tackled the subject matter head-on. Thus, following the normal administrative protocols and in the hope of assembling some sort of showcase of the work that was available, we circulated an initial ‘Call for Papers’.

What came in, both in terms of submissions and inquiries made two points unambiguously clear. First, and as represented by a veritable trickle7 rather than an avalanche of submissions, Sociologists of Sport seem manifestly uncertain of what to make of this field and what work needs to be done. Second, what work does exist, with apparently only minor exceptions, is far more indicative of a sociology of horses than any wider engagement with animals more broadly; or, far more seriously, with applying sociological questions to a broad range of animals. Preferring to avoid an homage to equine sociology (as important as that might be in its own right), the only animal involved in rejected papers was the horse (still leaving two contributions dealing with the place of horses in sport). This unexpected conundrum was compounded by an initially meager ‘draw’ in response to the Call for Papers, itself culminating in an extended deadline and a second ‘call’. This is neither to suggest that the research being done, and certainly not the papers to follow, are in any way second-rate. Far from it. It is far more likely that in the same way that our subdiscipline has taken time to undergo its “intellectual migration” (Andrews and Silk, 2011, p. 1) toward a Sociology of Physical Culture rather than Sociology of Sport per se, perhaps scholars have both been blinkered by a rather speciesist orientation to our subdiscipline and/or are uncertain about how animals might be inscribed. Unquestionably, the focus of the Sociology of Sport heretofore has been on human participants, even where animals are involved. The fascinating question of the parameters and limits of our subdiscipline is never far removed from this debate.8

Arguably, the sport-sociological study of, for instance, the media, forms of violence, sport’s potential link with social development and peace, etc.—all comprehensively researched and robustly anchored in our most recognizable publication
and communication venues—is no more intuitive, natural, pressing, accessible or even sociological than the sport-sociological study of other living things with whom we share the planet. However, the fact of the matter is that on this issue sociologists have thus far taken a back seat to scholars trained in, for instance, anthropology, history, philosophy, ethics, communication studies and the languages, as well, less surprisingly, as the biological and medical sciences. How animals might feature in sport and human entertainment cultures certainly seems to lend itself to multidisciplinary approaches and to a multitude of disciplinary approaches, but thus far sociologists have hardly been champing at the bit with any consistency or vigor.

An exception may be found in the following collection of papers. Ostensibly, two papers deal with horses, two with dogs, and one with chamois and tahr. More sociologically, each of the papers grapples, although in different ways, with fundamental moral and scholarly questions regarding human-animal relations and the animal-sport complex.

Deborah Butler kicks off the special issue by exploring the gendered underpinnings of the horseracing industry in the UK. Using the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu as ‘thinking tools’ and viewing horseracing as both a sport and an industry, she presents the case of a former professional jockey to highlight the challenges females face in a still male-dominated and often chauvinist sports domain. Intersectionality becomes key for Butler, who weaves qualitative interview data through her narrative to aptly demonstrate how social class and gender overlap to create limited opportunities for female participants.

While the topic (the social organization of terrier work) of Michael Atkinson’s evocative essay will not surprise readers of this journal, his approach (to animal sentience and researcher empathy) might. Drawing on an eclectic range of conceptual ideas, Atkinson graphically describes the use of small but aggressive dogs in the English countryside to trap and kill foxes. Attempting to write as much from the point of view of the animals involved as from the position of ethnographer—among other perspectives he invokes AST to do this—he recounts the respective visceral experiences of researcher, fox and hound as he walks us through the various ethnographic stages (access, trust, observation, departure, etc.) of his work.

Atkinson’s focus on canine violence and ritual displays of masculinity continues in the paper that follows where Linda Kalof explores both bloodsports in general and American dogfighting in particular. Influenced in turns by feminist and figurational thinking, Kalof’s main argument is that while on the surface dogfighting involves disturbingly savage canine violence, this violence serves as much to consolidate the gender and sexual identity of the human owners as much as it does to rank animal competitors. Viewing dogfighting as “a ritual of macho sexuality infused with aggression and menacing violence”, Kalof concludes that blood sports are far less about animal competition and far more about external “fundamentally social factors” endorsing predatory, hostile and heteronormative values.

Kass Gibson’s paper on a rarely studied topic—deer, tahr and chamois hunting in New Zealand—takes us in a more philosophical direction on animal sport. In exploring the understandings and rationalizations of hunters, Gibson makes a case for relational ethics. Specifically, his main point is not to judge whether his hunter subjects are morally right or wrong but to illustrate, in vivid and engaging ethnographic style, that a complex—and widely understood—fabric of insider ethics guide their hunting principles and practices.
The final paper of the volume returns to the equine industry, to questions of interspecies trust and interspecies empathy. Reporting ethnographically from a position of obvious practitioner expertise, and interpreting mixed method data derived from female riders using the work of Mead and Luhmann, Michelle Gilbert demonstrates how equestrian sport only truly prospers under conditions of ‘interactional trust’ and the development of an emotional partnership between horse and owner.

Overall, my goal was to capture, as much as one can in such a modest venture, some sense of the breadth and depth of the research being undertaken by sociologists on the animal-sport complex. Five papers does not constitute a fully representative sample, but is certainly sufficient to offer more than a glimpse of the work being done in an area whose parameters remain cloudy. Simply put, in spite of the incisive and encouraging studies that follow, what we do not know about the animal-sport complex far exceeds what we do know. It is my hope that, aggregately, this admittedly cursory introduction and the five perspicuous and thought-provoking papers to follow will pique readers’ intellectual curiosity, and that this in turn will encourage future research endeavors in a much under-studied—and, I would suggest, socially important—area that so clearly requires development.

Notes

1. From George Orwell’s *Animal farm* (1945, p. 8).
2. English humanitarian, vegetarian and food ethicist Howard Williams (1883, p. 287), using a phrase often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi.
3. Of course, if we extend our focus from mainstream sociology to social science more broadly, we find some classic studies of the animal-sport complex, few more notable than Clifford Geertz’s still widely-cited anthropological study of the cultural meanings of the Balinese cockfight (1973), Richard Holt’s (1990) meticulous account of traditional British sporting lives, Marvin Scott’s (2005) exposé of the various ‘players’ in the horse racing industry, Garry Marvin’s (2001, 2007) ethnographic explorations of English foxhunting and foxhounds, David DeGrazia’s (2002) delightfully succinct introduction to animal rights, and Arnold Arluke and Clinton Sanders’ (2009) comprehensive reader on human-animal relations.
4. I am deeply grateful to my colleague Max Foran, animal advocate and editor of the most robust collection of essays yet published on the controversial Calgary Stampede (2008), for his help in formulating my ideas on this matter.
5. The papers in this volume, and Butler and Gilbert in particular, raise the critical, but controversial possibility of animals themselves deriving pleasure and excitement, even ‘trust’, from sporting arrangements that may represent, at least in part, mutually beneficial and rewarding underpinnings rather than exploitative/violence/abuse underpinnings.
6. Parts of the current section are reworked from Gerber and Young (2013) and Young and Gerber (2014).
7. This situation-specific “trickle” is consistent with Arnold Arluke’s view of the pace with which sociologists are arriving at animal studies: “Although sociologists have shown increasing interest in this topic, it can hardly be called a flood” (2002, pp. 369–370).
8. By introducing novel theoretical and methodological approaches, and certainly requiring more multidisciplinary thinking, it is, of course, perfectly possible that human-animal studies might potentially change the directional flow of sociological studies of sport, and perhaps even sociology in general.
References


