

# The Spirituality of Sport and the Role of the Athlete in the Tennis Essays of David Foster Wallace

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## Abstract

The well-known novelist and creative writer David Foster Wallace (1962–2008) belongs to a select group of “occasional sportswriters” whose writings about sport have influenced cultural discourse about tennis and animated future sports writing. Wallace uses three rhetorical tactics—providing knowledge to the reader as confidant, making meaning out of the athletic cliché, and translating the form of professional tennis into prose—that establish his cultural authority on tennis while positioning the athlete as a transcendent spiritual practitioner. This characterization redefines dominant understandings of the athlete’s relationship to religion and the spectator’s relationship to the athlete, while discarding the possibility of recognizing the athlete as citizen.

## Keywords

communication and sport, rhetorical criticism, David Foster Wallace, sport and religion, occasional sportswriter

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## David Foster Wallace: Novelist and “Occasional Sportswriter”

David Foster Wallace (1962–2008) was among the most popular and respected authors of literary fiction during the late 20th and early 21st century in the United States. His work dealt with themes such as the difficulty of sincere conversation in an age characterized by irony, the ethics of seemingly banal decisions, and Americans’ addictions to different forms of “entertainment.” His novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) was listed by *Time* among the top 100 novels published during the magazine’s history (Grossman, 2010; Lacayo, 2010), and Wallace won a US\$500,000 MacArthur “Genius Grant” in 1997. After Wallace committed suicide in 2008 following a decades-long battle with depression, hagiography followed, especially among the young, White, and well-educated men who comprised his primary demographic. Unpublished work was collected and published, older work was reprinted, and Wallace became the subject of a *New York Times* best-selling biography (Max, 2012) and a feature-length film (Ponsoldt, 2015).

Wallace was not only a creative writer who authored novels and short stories, however. He was also an accomplished essayist and cultural critic whose objects of study ranged from the ethics of boiling live lobsters to John McCain’s 2000 presidential primary. At a memorial service after his death, writer Don DeLillo commended Wallace’s ability “to be equal to the vast, babbling spinout sweep of contemporary culture” (2012, p. 24). As an essayist, Wallace gained prominence for a “giant floating eyeball” method of observing and overhearing (Roiland, 2014). His “creative non-fiction,” a label Wallace settled on to indicate that his essays often included entertaining embellishments of truth (Scocca, 2010), allowed Wallace to blend ethnography with inventiveness at a variety of venues, from the Illinois State Fair to a luxury cruise liner and—of most interest to this journal’s audience—professional tennis events.

David Foster Wallace belongs to a select but important group of “occasional sportswriters.” As I use the term here, occasional sportswriters bring a reputation from outside the world of sports journalism to the athletes, events, and sports that they cover. Additionally, they often opt not to adhere to traditional standards and practices of beat writers and sports columnists. Rather than disqualifying their insights into sport, however, occasional sportswriters offer unique subject positions, prose styles, and knowledge-producing practices that signal an athlete or event is of particular cultural importance. This sense of importance translates into “prestige” for those venues that publish occasional sportswriters as well (Vogan, 2015). Wallace and other occasional sportswriters—such as the Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson, reporter and historian David Halberstam, and contemporary creative writers such as Colson Whitehead and Claudia Rankine—are worthy of study within the field of sports communication not only because they have produced interesting and meaningful interpretations of particular athletes, sports, and events, but also because their influence tends to be uniquely powerful and long-lasting. They act as a

constellation of stars that orient how future sportswriters and readers navigate the subject matter. At least among a certain highbrow audience, often including other practicing and aspiring sports journalists, occasional sportswriters are the unacknowledged legislators of the cultural meaning of sports.

In this essay, I engage Wallace's tennis essays through the tools of rhetorical analysis. Following the work of McGee (1990), I treat the five essays on tennis that Wallace published between 1992 and 2006 as a series of "fragments" that can be profitably stitched together into a constantly developing but cohesive argument about the role of the athlete in the United States during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Wallace's argument is inevitably shaped by his "rhetorical situation," what Bitzer (1968) describes as "a specific union of persons, events, objects, and relations, and by an exigence which amounted to an imperative stimulus" (p. 5). The venues in which these essays were first published, the physical form of tennis as a sport, and Wallace's desire to present himself as a credible and authoritative narrator result in Wallace's use of three rhetorical tactics—providing knowledge to the reader as confidant, making meaning out of the athletic cliché, and translating the form of professional tennis into prose—that establish his cultural authority on tennis while positioning the athlete as a transcendent spiritual practitioner. This characterization redefines dominant understandings of the athlete's relationship to religion and the spectator's relationship to the athlete. Bringing Wallace to the growing body of scholarship in rhetoric and sport helps demonstrate that the cultural meaning of sport depends upon the interaction of on-court bodies, sports and media institutions, and written discourse; the sporting event can only be understood in its persuasive fullness when bodies and words are analyzed in tandem. Therefore, treating Wallace's provocations as worthy of rhetorical analysis provides a number of future paths available to the rhetorical scholar of sport and sport communication.

This investigation into Wallace's tennis essays proceeds in four sections. First, I describe Wallace's essays on tennis, identify their original audience, and explain how Wallace thought of his own writing in rhetorical terms. Second, I demonstrate how Wallace's characterization of the athlete as a spiritual practitioner challenges prominent trends in scholarship on the relationship between sport and religion. Third, I outline specific rhetorical techniques that Wallace utilizes to build his own cultural authority on tennis. Finally, I close by sketching Wallace's influence on tennis writing of the past decade, noting how other prominent writers and outlets have written with, through, and against Wallace's arguments.

## **The Tennis Essays of David Foster Wallace**

David Foster Wallace was fascinated by tennis for more than 30 years of his life. He was a highly ranked junior tennis player in the state of Illinois, played junior varsity tennis at Amherst College, and often challenged fellow writers to matches as a way to build friendships and assert a sense of masculine superiority (Max, 2012). Although Wallace's tennis essays vary in genre and original publication outlet, all

five essays revolve around a similar set of questions: What traits are required to become a professional athlete? How have technological changes in the sport affected the values that are associated with tennis? What does the United States' fascination with sports and its star athletes reveal about a particular cultural moment? The philosophical questions that Wallace raises mirror research avenues of scholars working at the nexus of rhetoric, identity, and sports (Brummett, 2009; Brummett & Ishak, 2014).

It is also important to note that Wallace thought of his own writing and others' with a rhetorical sensibility. Wallace's archives, housed at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, include several texts concerned with the theory and practice of rhetoric, including John D. Ramage's *Rhetoric: A User's Guide* and Martha Kolln's *Rhetorical Grammar*, the latter of which he frequently used while teaching. In an essay on the politics of American dictionaries, Wallace (2007a) defines rhetoric as "the persuasive use of language to influence the thoughts and actions of an audience" (p. 76n16). This emphasis on the relationship between author and reader began early in his writing career, when an editor suggested that Wallace needed to pay more attention to "the physics of reading," which Wallace later described as "a whole set of readers' values and tolerances and capacities and patience-levels to take into account when the gritty business of writing stuff for others to read is undertaken" (Max, 2012, p. 69). Like a first-year writing teacher, Wallace would chide those authors, such as Austin, whom he believed had fundamentally forgotten their intended audience (2007b, p. 144). In contrast, Wallace consistently lauded those authors he felt successfully cultivated an "Ethical Appeal," which he describes as "a complex and sophisticated 'Trust me'" that requires the rhetor "to convince us not just of his intellectual acuity or technical competence but of his own basic decency and fairness and sensitivity to the audience's own hopes and dreams" (p. 77). Many of Wallace's essays could be understood as his attempt to perform "a complex and sophisticated 'Trust me,'" wherein journalistic veracity is secondary to the performance of sincerity, expertise, and likeability (Roiland, 2014). As a result, Wallace often chose to include a first-person narrative voice in his essays, even though he admitted that the voice he uses in his essays tended to be "a little stupider and shmuckier than I am" (Max, 2012, p. 208).

Wallace's first foray into tennis writing is the 1992 essay "Derivative Sport in Tornado Alley" (1998a), ostensibly his most autobiographical exploration of his "near-greatness" as a junior tennis player (p. 5). "Derivative Sport" offers two explanations for why Wallace failed to progress at the pace of his peers, both of which are tied to the relationship between the body and the mind of the athlete. While Wallace overtly claims that his ascent was quashed by the late onset of puberty despite his superior on-court tactics, the narrative subtly insinuates that Wallace's near-greatness is a byproduct of his penchant for reverie and inability to focus while conducting the repetitive drills that are required to hone the athlete's kinesthetic sense.

In Wallace's 1994 review essay "How Tracy Austin Broke My Heart" (2007b), he continues his exploration of the pubescent athlete. In a scathing assessment of Austin's autobiography, Wallace suggests that the middle-aged Austin has retained the same level of childish naïveté she was known for during her career as a teen prodigy. This is, he complains, to be expected of all sports memoirs: "Great athletes usually turn out to be stunningly inarticulate about just these qualities and experiences that constitute their fascination" (p. 152). Wallace presumes that inarticulate-ness—the logical consequence of possessing a mind impervious to distraction during crucial moments—is a prerequisite for athletic success. In a way that excuses Wallace's own childhood reveries in "Derivative Sport" without ever directly referencing the essay, Wallace suggests that "blindness and dumbness" are part of the "essence" of athletic "genius"—not the byproduct of being distraction-proof, but the very gift itself (p. 155). Of all Wallace's tennis essays, "Austin" treads closest to stereotypes of the "dumb jock" and remains most skeptical of the athlete's ability to navigate the world outside of sport.<sup>1</sup> This argument would be reframed in more charitable and explicitly spiritual language in later essays.

Wallace's final three essays on tennis draw upon firsthand experience at professional events. The 1996 *Tennis* magazine essay "Democracy and Commerce at the US Open" (2013b) focuses on the commercialization of the spectator's experience. This essay is an account of how spectators (including Wallace himself) are divided between watching action on court and being drawn toward ubiquitous advertising. The irony is not particularly subtle: an event that proclaims itself to be for the people, held over Labor Day weekend, has ulterior motives: "the whole exhausting affair was about commerce right from the beginning" (pp. 146–147).<sup>2</sup> The 1996 *Esquire* profile "Tennis Player Michael Joyce's Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Discipline, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness" (1998b) allows Wallace his first opportunity to talk to a professional athlete. After interviewing journeyman Michael Joyce, Wallace discerns something other than what he describes in Austin as "the vapidness of [her] narrative mind" (2007b, p. 153). Instead, Wallace discovers in Joyce a type of "love"—for the sport and for what it enables Joyce to discover within himself—that requires "the very surrender of choice and self" that most people believe is necessary for a well-rounded life (p. 228n24). Professional athletes are grotesque in their incompleteness, though Wallace argues that this withdrawal is necessary to achieve "*technē*," "that state in which [the] mastery of craft facilitated a communion with the gods themselves" (2007b, p. 150). "Joyce" argues that asceticism allows the athlete to access a realm of transcendence. Wallace continues to pursue the divinity of the athlete in "Both Flesh and Not" (2007a), a hagiographic profile of tennis player Roger Federer, who is presented as the embodiment of "kinetic beauty." Through close observation of his bodily tics and a symbolic understanding of Federer's place within tennis's history—Federer unites the precise, finessed style of the 1960s and 1970s with the power baseline style of the 1980s and 1990s—Wallace argues that Federer, as he plays in the all-white outfit required at the hallowed grass courts of

Wimbledon, offers a “religious experience” to spectators: in watching the Swiss maestro, they recognize both the vast potential and incredible fragility of the human body (p. 8). Watching Federer play tennis offers a spiritual experience in sport that counters most scholars’ understanding of the relationship between sports, religion, and culture.

## **Rhetoric, Sports, and Religion**

While many scholars treat sports as a secular and commercialized form of contemporary religion, Wallace instead uses the language of spiritual practice to promote the athlete as an inspirational figure with access to a plane of transcendence. Wallace’s belief in the athlete as inspiration toward transcendence mirrors the work of the philosopher Sloterdijk (2013). At the same time, I argue, Wallace’s prioritization of transcendence offers an escapist ideal that challenges the work of sports rhetoric scholars who have written about the athlete as citizen.

Wallace also demonstrates that the communicative meaning of sports, as it appears in discourse, is bound not only to the media and genres in which it is published (whether through television or in print) but also to the historical and material forms of each sport and playing styles of individual athletes under consideration. The example of tennis is instructive. Tennis is a noncontact, primarily individual sport that demands a combination of precision, power, agility, flexibility, and proprioception.<sup>3</sup> The very nature of how tennis is played determines the range of symbolic values that can be attached to it, including religious value. Tennis offers something very different than team sports such as baseball and football. As Ladd and Mathisen (1999) have documented, the spread of “muscular Christianity” in the English-speaking world has often depended upon the evangelizing of athletes in team settings such as the locker room. This climate is particularly ripe for the combination of “locker room slogans, Old Testament allusions to religious wars, athletically slanted doctrines of assertiveness and sacrifice, and a cult of masculinity” that Hoffman (2010, p. 14) writes has come to dominate our understanding of the sport-religion relationship today. As Higgs (1996) explains, evangelical muscular Christianity views “the body as a means of bringing others to Christ” (p. 364). Because evangelical Christianity also connects religious belief to political practice, the bodies of evangelical Christian athletes such as Tim Tebow can become—if athletes and audiences agree to the characterization—symbolic carriers for a set of socially conservative values. In this way, they become divisive, doctrinal figures (Butterworth, 2013).

Although evangelical muscular Christianity is the dominant frame for understanding the relationship between sports and religion, it is not the only frame. Rather than explicitly trumpeting political-religious doctrine, sport can be understood as a spiritual practice. This frame alters the rhetorical import of the athletic body. As Higgs (1996) writes, when sport is treated as a spiritual exercise, the body becomes “an instrument in the attainment of divine knowledge” (p. 364). The spiritual

experience becomes more important than political or religious content. Wallace treats the athletic body as a spiritual instrument, and this decision is grounded not only in the form of tennis as a sport but also because of his selection of subjects, particularly Federer. Wallace may have struggled to recognize the professional athlete as the embodiment of kinetic beauty if Federer were not already widely regarded as “the beautiful player” (2013a, pp. 18–19n7).

When discussing the relationship between contemporary professional sports and religion, most scholars offer up versions of a “secularization” thesis. As Montaz de Oca (2015) explains, the secularization thesis argues that “as society becomes more technological it becomes increasingly secular,” and, as a result, “sport *replaces* religion in social life” (p. 224). The secularization thesis is most closely associated with the sport historian Guttman (1978). Guttman argues that sport has been used at various points throughout modernity as a project for and reflection of industrialization and cultural imperialism. The primary way that sports has subsumed religion, however, is in its emphasis on bureaucratization and quantification. If accomplishment is no longer measurable, it fails to have meaning. Premodern sports emphasize ritual, while modern sports prioritize records. Another theorist of the secularization of sport is Kellner (2003), who critiques the rise of “mega-spectacle,” drawing on the work of Debord ([1967] 1983). For Kellner, events such as the Super Bowl and iconic athletes such as Michael Jordan become conduits for the worship of capitalism and excessive consumption. According to Kellner, sport becomes an ideological state apparatus for the domination of capitalism, treated by sports fanatics with undue religious reverence. As Baker (2007) argues, evangelical Christianity has been most successful at retaining a connection to contemporary sports because of its welcome embrace of capitalist ideology. The opening of new markets echoes evangelical proselytizing.

The secularization thesis has been countered by a “sacralization thesis.” As Montaz de Oca (2015) summarizes the sacralization position, all sports are “essentially religious activities in disguise” (p. 224). A major proponent of this position is Hutch (2010), who argues that sport provides a cultural location to increase individual spiritual awareness. Hutch opposes the spirituality of sport to organized religion, which attempts unnecessary dogmatism. For Hutch, “The spiritual style begins with an inner desire to know and understand the world as fully and deeply as possible” (p. 191) through sporting experiences that are “largely inexpressible and, if not patently transcendent, at least a bit extraordinary when everything goes well” (p. 183). Of note is the contrast in focalization between Kellner and Hutch. While Kellner Debord focuses on the event of sports spectatorship, Hutch’s explanation of spirituality begins with the ritual-like practices of individual athletes. Crowds are almost never involved; to engage spiritually with sport is, at least for Hutch, to commune with nature.

This tension between event and athlete is retained in Wallace’s tennis writing. Essentially, Wallace blends the secularization and sacralization discourses into a sporting world that attempts to divorce actor from scene. While the setting of

contemporary professional sports belongs to capitalist modernity, elite athletes retain a premodern spirit. Wallace's ethnographic observations identify commercial impulses throughout stadium advertising (2013b) and in the "prepackaged PR-speak" of Austin's memoir (2007b, p. 151). However, Austin and Joyce are presented as too dedicated to their *technē* to recognize the influence of marketing opportunities and unequal prize money distribution on the outcome of their matches (2007b, p. 148; 1998b, p. 222n15). To succeed as athletes, the scope of their focus remains tremendously limited. Spectators, including Wallace's readers, are therefore divided: They are tempted by the ever-present commercialism of the contemporary professional sports stadium—but encouraged by Wallace to ignore the bright ads and ever-present vendors so that they may properly observe the transcendent art being practiced on center court.

In this way, Wallace's argument comes closest to Hawhee's description of rhetoric and athletics in ancient Greece. Hawhee (2004, pp. 172–185) argues that both oratory and athletics were agonistic forms of training that offered their participants the opportunity to demonstrate the production of virtue, corporeal cunning, fitting timing, and the capacity to respond and transform to contingent situations. Even ancient skeptics of athletics such as Demosthenes, who anticipates Kellner in challenging the athletic festival as a site of spectator passivity, recognized that the gathering force of a crowd transformed festivals into public places where honor circulated. Wallace also believes in the athletic competition as an occasion for honor, only in a much more contemporary milieu: Televised and high-profile matches offer Joyce the opportunity to manifest values such as "courage, persistence in the face of pain or exhaustion, [and] performance under wilting scrutiny and pressure" (1998b, p. 254). These values are tied closely to an understanding of athletic training as a set of "almost ascetic" spiritual practices (1998b, p. 237).

In presenting the athlete as an ascetic practitioner, Wallace's understanding of the athlete–spectator relationship mirrors that of the philosopher Sloterdijk (2013). Both Wallace and Sloterdijk view the athlete as potentially inspirational for the spectator. For Sloterdijk, a top athlete can become an "attractor" whose bodily practice issues a "metanoetic command" that compels the spectator to achieve his or her "innermost not-yet" (pp. 25–26). The transcendent body of the athlete summons the spectator to practice, though without limiting the field in which such practice should occur. However, while Sloterdijk suggests that athletes are notable and visible attractors in our society, he does not limit attractors to the world of sports; in fact, he cautions that a cultural overemphasis on athletics and the spectacle of sport can promote unethical behavior such as doping and the cult of the body at the expense of the mind. The doping athlete prioritizes the *telos* of glory and riches over the virtue of practice, and too many fans are willing to ignore or forgive shameful behavior on the part of athletes.

It is unclear whether Wallace glosses over shameful behavior. He does challenge Austin's lack of awareness about drug use among tennis players as improbably naïve



(2007b, p. 148). At the same time, Wallace's preliminary notebook on Michael Joyce includes details of Joyce gambling on sports that never make it into an otherwise meticulous and robust published profile (1995). It is most likely that such details would challenge Wallace's narrative of professional athletes as "our culture's holy men." As Wallace writes of athletes, "[T]hey give themselves over to a pursuit, endure great privation and pain to actualize themselves at it, and enjoy a relationship to perfection that we admire and reward" (1998b, p. 237n42). Including details about Joyce's penchant for gambling would weaken Wallace's characterization of Joyce and limit Wallace's ability to assert himself as a cultural authority inspired by ascetic athletic spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

Wallace's figuration of athletes as "our culture's holy men" should be added to the competing swirl of cultural discourses about the place of sports and the role of the athlete in American culture. This characterization of the transcendent athlete adds nuance to another prominent narrative: the decline of the activist-athlete. This narrative is best outlined in Khan's (2012) work on Curt Flood. Flood adopted the language of slavery to gain publicity and moral standing and challenge baseball's reserve clause and pursue free agency. In Khan's telling, Flood appears as the point of merger between two competing strains of thought among black athletes and sportswriters in the United States in the mid-20th century. On the one hand were assimilationists, such as Jackie Robinson and Arthur Ashe, who promoted sports as a cultural domain with values of tolerance and acceptance; in this telling, sports offer a path to respectability. On the other hand, radicals such as Muhammad Ali and John Carlos used sports as a staging ground to confront systemic racial inequality. Khan positions Flood as a figure with radical language who ultimately ended up helping black athletes achieve liberal assimilationist goals. Khan historicizes and challenges those cultural commentators who have suggested that black athletes have "sold out"—that they remain apolitical to retain and maximize their potential endorsement deals. In some ways, Wallace offers a simpler explanation of the same phenomenon: the athlete knows nothing beyond the realm of sport. This limitation is not presented as either good or bad so much as a necessary prerequisite for athletic success. A generous reading of Wallace considering these essays' neoliberal context might surmise that the financial lure of athletic success demands onerous professionalization that prohibits athletes from taking the time to become civically aware. Never does Wallace explicitly deny athletes the ability to function as civic actors. However, his idealized athletes—Federer and Joyce, as opposed to athletic bodies that are inherently politicized, such as the Williams sisters—are divorced from the realm of political judgment. Through a set of rhetorical tactics that I discuss in the following section, Wallace essentially renders the professional athlete voiceless to assert his own cultural authority. In his selection of protagonists, narrative of athletic asceticism, and rhetorical tactics, Wallace displaces the possibility of what Butterworth has called "the athlete as citizen" (2014).

## Rhetorical Tactics in the Tennis Essays

If Wallace is not interested in presenting a vision of the athlete as citizen, then what are his motives in consistently returning to the theme of tennis in his writing? Wallace's first goal is persuasive: to convince readers of the beauty and spirituality of professional tennis, a task made especially difficult because of his readers' mediated distance from the live sporting event. In the process of attempting to bridge this distance, Wallace demonstrates how discursive explanations of the role of the athlete emerge from material, bodily experience—both the experience of athletic performance and spectatorship. Wallace's arguments are tied to the events and individuals that he covers. The critique of capitalism in "Democracy and Commerce" is written from the US Open nosebleed seats, the conclusions about asceticism in Joyce are yoked to a lesser-known tennis player at an event with few attendees, and the conclusions about transcendence may not have been reached if Wallace were not in the front row, watching the sport's best player, at its most prestigious tournament. This final experience inspires Wallace to attempt to translate the form of professional tennis into the form of prose for readers unable to watch Federer in person. However, Wallace cannot accomplish this first persuasive goal without establishing his *ethos*, his "complex and sophisticated 'Trust me.'" Wallace positions himself as uniquely capable of crossing the realm between novice spectator and "near-great" athlete, causing his audience both to identify with his inadequacies and to be grateful for his expertise. Burke (1969) notes that an author's ambiguous mix of identification and division toward his audience is "the characteristic invitation to rhetoric" (p. 25). Therefore, this section examines three rhetorical tactics that Wallace uses to make this characteristic invitation: conveying knowledge to the reader as confidant, making meaning out of the athletic cliché, and translating tennis into prose. Through these tactics, Wallace succeeds in gaining audience identification while representing tennis for a set of athletes whom he constructs as incapable of representing tennis on their own.

### *Knowledge and the Reader as Confidant*

Wallace establishes himself as a technically expert and audience-aware rhetor by disclosing insider knowledge offered to the reader as confidant. To make this move, however, Wallace first displaces spectators' preconceptions about tennis. He tackles this project explicitly in Joyce when he writes, "If you've played tennis at least a little, you probably think you have some idea of how hard a game it is to play really well. I submit to you that you really have no idea at all. I know I didn't" (1998b, p. 236). Note that, even as Wallace begins to set himself up as an expert, his authorial voice is rarely pedantic. Rather, Wallace recognizes how the privilege of being able to observe and absorb tennis knowledge firsthand has allowed him to correct some of his own previous misperceptions. The second-person injunction carries moral weight because of the parallel first-person confession: Readers are asked to alter

their likely perceptions, just as Wallace admits that his belief that he could passably rally with Joyce was “absurd and in a certain way obscene,” despite Wallace’s history as a competitive tennis player (p. 240). By offering himself as a model of self-correction, he asks readers to accept new knowledge.

Much of this new knowledge is acquired through the transitive property: Wallace absorbs and conveys the insights of Sam Aparicio, Joyce’s coach. Wallace writes that Aparicio possesses “the sort of inward self-sufficiency of truly great teachers and coaches everywhere” and confesses that Aparicio is “so cool I’m kind of scared of him” (1998b, p. 233n35). Wallace compares watching tennis with Aparicio to “watching a movie with somebody who knows a lot about the technical aspects of film: he helps you see things you can’t see alone,” and then offers a detailed explanation of the geometric complexities of different players’ tactics (p. 253). Wallace positions himself as seated at the foot of wisdom, listening intently to a sage. In passing along Aparicio’s wisdom, Wallace acquires Aparicio’s sagacity.

This sagacity is enhanced by the experience of watching live tennis at very close proximity. To an audience that may only have watched tennis on television, Wallace begins contrasting appearance with reality. Consider the opening representative anecdote of Joyce: “When Michael Joyce of Los Angeles serves, when he tosses the ball and his face rises to track it, it looks like he’s smiling, but he’s not really smiling—his face’s circumoral muscles are straining with the rest of his body to reach the ball at the top of the toss’s rise” (1998b, p. 213). By starting with the smallest of Joyce’s facial muscles, Wallace indicates his penchant for close observation. He distinguishes between perception and reality while displaying an anatomically precise vocabulary. Thematically, the anecdote introduces the philosophical issues of choice and free will as they are written on the bodies of elite athletes. At the same time, casual viewers are chastened: what they might interpret as actively chosen, purposive action is no more than the aggregate result of a series of rote repetitions.<sup>5</sup> The denial of spectators’ ordinary perceptions is achieved through a common syntactical structure: Throughout Joyce, Wallace returns to the framework “It seems like . . . but actually . . .” This subtle form of refutation corrects his audience while building identification with them, as Wallace strengthens his authority.

### *Making Meaning of the Cliché*

Athletic clichés are often lampooned or satirized as the least thoughtful, lowest common denominator of sports media pabulum (Curtis, 2013, 2014). Wallace, in contrast, views the athlete’s cliché in spiritual terms: Athletes repeat clichés as mantras that allow them to aid their concentration and avoid distraction. The use of clichés is one mark of their membership in an elite spiritual caste. As opposed to typical understandings of clichés as overused and unoriginal turns of phrase, Wallace suggests that clichés are true for professional athletes in a way that nonathletes cannot imagine.

Wallace makes this argument most forcefully in Austin. He writes of watching a 14-year-old Austin on television as a kid, not “so much jealous as agog” at her poise and unflappable calm (2007b, p. 143). Wallace gives a very precise label to Austin’s talents: “She was a genius and I was not” (p. 144). This genius is not a result of bookishness—Austin is a “genius-in-motion” rather than a “genius-in-reflection” (p. 153). Wallace’s exclusion from the caste of elite athletes results not primarily from athletic incompetence, but from a psychological tendency toward distraction first explored in “Derivative.” As he writes,

In my own comparatively low-level junior matches, before audiences that rarely hit three digits, it used to be all I could do to manage my sphincter. I would drive myself crazy: “but what if I double-fault here and go down a break with all these folks watching? . . . don’t think about it. . . . yeah but except if I’m consciously not thinking about it then doesn’t part of me have to think about it in order for me to remember what I’m not supposed to think about? . . . shut *up*, quit thinking about it and serve the goddamn ball . . . except how can I even be talking to myself about not thinking about it unless I’m still aware of what it is I’m talking about not thinking about?” and so on. I’d get divided, paralyzed. As most ungreat athletes do. Freeze up, choke. Lose our focus. Become self-conscious. Cease to be wholly present in our wills and choices and movements. (2007b, pp. 153–154)

Note that this passage orients readers in Wallace’s head and in his body. In addition to offering a physiological marker of what high-stress tennis feels like, Wallace uses sentence structures to replicate the experience. Wallace’s stream-of-consciousness recollection of tense moments from his playing career is followed by a series of sentence fragments. In contrast, Wallace argues that the paratactic faucet of doubts is stoppered, for elite athletes, by the cliché: *Focus*. As Wallace writes, “[F]or top athletes, clichés present themselves not as trite but simply as true, or perhaps not even as declarative expressions with qualities like depth or triteness or falsehood or truth but as simple imperatives that are either useful or not and, if useful, to be invoked and obeyed and that’s all there is to it” (p. 154). The cliché is a necessary tool for the job; aesthetic qualities are subordinated to practical imperatives. The cliché serves as not only equipment for living, but equipment for winning.

In Austin, Wallace skirts dangerously close to pairing the cliché with stereotypes of the dumb jock. By the time he writes Joyce, however, he abandons that formulation. For Joyce, Wallace suggests, a reduction in the amount and sophistication of language that he uses is less a sign of stupidity or vapidness than a signal of “the radical compression of [Joyce’s] attention and self [that] has allowed him to become a transcendent practitioner of an art” (1998b, p. 254). Here, Wallace explicitly links “radical compression”—the denial of a full life, including the denial of thought during competition and the denial of language outside of practical clichés—to the achievement of transcendence. The athlete’s use of the cliché is a habit that must be cultivated to attain and maintain transcendence. The use of the cliché resembles

steps in Foucault's (2006) discussion of the ancient "care of the self": Techniques for focusing the mind were paired with *anakhoresis*, a withdrawal from the world of everyday events, to gain access to truth. This generative reading of the cliché both acknowledges the existence of dumb jock stereotypes while seeming to move beyond such stereotypes in acknowledging the athlete's exalted status. In his evaluation of the athletic cliché, Wallace positions himself as able to understand the athlete's mind, while not restricting himself to the athlete's language. He nears the transcendent without suffering the same forms of denial and deprivation. He presents himself as both among the "average unbeautiful watchers" and apart from the average fan (2007b, p. 143). He recognizes the spiritual underpinnings of banal clichés and places these seemingly meaningless soundbites into a meaningful, spiritual context. In the process of asserting his own expertise, the athlete is characterized as incapable of offering commentary on everyday life, intentionally and purposively withdrawn from matters of civic importance.

### *Tennis Match as Metaphor*

There are three moments across Wallace's essays that indicate he is wresting cultural authority on tennis away from its foremost practitioners. The first moment occurs in the final line of *Austin*, where Wallace suggests that "It may well be that we spectators, who are not divinely gifted as athletes, are the only ones able truly to see, articulate, and animate the experience of the gift we are denied" (2007b, p. 155). Here, Wallace suggests that spectators, as a class, could possess insight that tennis players themselves may not be able to achieve. The second moment is a subtle use of apophasis in *Joyce*, when Wallace disingenuously remarks that "This article is about Michael Joyce and the untelevised realities of the Tour, not me" (1998b, p. 243). This moment is followed by several pages of backstory into Wallace's own tennis career, and frequent mention of his past tennis-playing exploits abound throughout the essays. Wallace indicates that his life experience playing tennis gives him privileged access, even among spectators, to understand the sport's importance. He positions himself as the gnostic guide providing access to a secret domain of spiritual knowledge. Finally, in the closing passage of "Flesh," Wallace concedes that Federer's "genius" is not "replicable" but is inspirational, and that inspiration is "contagious" and "multiform" (2013a, p. 33). Here, Wallace signals that "Flesh" is an attempt to practice what he preaches: Federer's genius has inspired Wallace to translate the form of tennis into prose form. A closer look at *Flesh* bears out this attempt. Although Wallace cannot physically place us at Wimbledon in front of Federer, he does model both the temporal speed of professional tennis and the dialogic nature of the back-and-forth rally.

Wallace translates the materiality of tennis into the materiality of language. He uses paratactic sentences built with conjunctions, ellipses, and present participles to describe what he calls a "Federer Moment," points when Federer's kinetic beauty appears divinely inspired. About a point Federer plays against Andre Agassi in the

finals of the 2005 US Open, Wallace writes a stunning single sentence that captures the pace of professional tennis. This performative sentence, in full, reads as follows:

There's a medium-long exchange of groundstrokes, one with the distinctive butterfly shape of today's power-baseline game, Federer and Agassi yanking each other from side to side, each trying to set up the baseline winner . . . until suddenly Agassi hits a heavy cross-court backhand that pulls Federer way out wide to his ad (=left) side, and Federer gets to it but slices the stretch backhand short, a couple feet past the service line, which of course is the sort of thing Agassi dines out on, and as Federer's scrambling to reverse and get back to center, Agassi's moving in to take the short ball on the rise, and he smacks it hard right back into the same ad corner, trying to wrong-foot Federer, which in fact he does—Federer's still near the corner but running toward the centerline, and the ball's heading to a point behind him now, where he just was, and there's no time to turn his body around, and Agassi's following the shot in to the net at an angle from the backhand side . . . and what Federer now does is somehow instantly reverse thrust and sort of skip backward three or four steps, impossibly fast, to hit a forehand out of his backhand corner, all his weight moving backward, and the forehand is a screamer past Agassi at net, who lunges for it but the ball's past him, and it flies straight down the sideline and lands exactly in the deuce corner of Agassi's side, a winner—Federer's still dancing backward as it lands. (2013a, pp. 5–6)

The most obviously remarkable aspect of the sentence is its length—257 words. The sentence is exhausting to read aloud, the ellipses and em-dashes functioning as the holding of baited breath, rather than the downtime of the period in which the reader can pause to reassess the scoreboard. Federer is presented as both physical specimen and remarkably balletic. Wallace's choice of present participles allows the Federer Moment to sustain its energy, as prose and as highlight, rendered into an “always-present” tense. Because Federer is so “impossibly fast,” his winning shot is recorded not as the sentence's conclusion, but near its end. Rather than focus on the ball's path as the cumulative event, our eyes are diverted by the fact that “Federer's still dancing backwards as it lands,” a graceful appearance belying preternatural power.<sup>6</sup>

While using sentence construction to mimic the pace of professional tennis, Wallace uses footnotes to model the back-and-forth of tennis rallies. Throughout his writing Wallace's footnotes often move beyond digression, supplementation, and aside to wrest control from the main body of the essay. Wallace's footnotes participate in a many-hued dialectic, by occasion complementing, amplifying, disagreeing with, or changing the emotional pitch of the body text. Nadel (2012) uses the language of tennis to understand many of Wallace's footnotes. Nadel likens footnotes that contrast the style or tone of the body text to extraordinarily angled replies that counter hard-hit groundstrokes. Nadel writes that

the surprising angles and shots in top tennis are set up early and planned. Similarly, every footnote is prepared by the text, just as every successful shot of Federer's or Nadal's is set up three, four, or even five shots earlier. (pp. 238–239n21)

For Nadel, footnoting is the creation of angle, a new perspective disrupting the linearity of the body text of Wallace's essays. In addition to recognizing the footnotes in dialogue with the main text, so too should the doing of sport and the practice of writing about sport be understood as dialogic. The form of tennis—essentially, how the sport is played—shapes Wallace's writing decisions; at the same time, Wallace's writing decisions attempt to encapsulate and in so doing shape the sport.

Over the course of his tennis essays, Wallace builds his *ethos* by disclosing knowledge, making meaning out of the athletic cliché, and translating the form of professional tennis into prose form. That Wallace's posthumous collection of essays is titled *Both Flesh and Not*, after the Federer essay, is hagiographically symptomatic. David Foster Wallace was not a professional tennis player, but he uses his essays on tennis to persuade readers to identify him as the next best thing: a technical expert on the subject matter with firsthand experience and close access to professional athletes who understands the athlete as a member of a spiritual caste and is capable of animating the experience of tennis in prose form. By the close of "Flesh", his final essay on tennis, Wallace becomes Federer's amanuensis, a figure uniquely qualified to transcribe Federer's thoughts and actions onto the page.

## Conclusion

Wallace's tennis essays have a good deal to offer the field of sport communication. For rhetoricians of sport, Wallace's essays offer a reminder that the persuasive fullness of the sporting event can be charted only by accounting for the interactions among the bodily actions of athletes, the material conditions in which sport is played and viewed, the swirling discourses of sports media, and the ideological institutions that govern media and sport. That is not to say that scholarship that does not address each of these components is not rhetorical—only that sport is a complex rhetorical phenomenon that bridges any outdated stereotypes of mind-body dualism. Secondly, the richness of Wallace's essays also provides a warrant for analyzing the discourse of individual sports media producers, especially since sports media constitute a complex network where prestige circulates among different outlets unevenly (Vogan, 2015). These different producers circulate varying conceptions of the athlete's role in society.

The popularity of Wallace's work among not only culturally elite readers but also fellow sports media practitioners enhances the need to chart the circulation of prestige in contemporary sports media. Both authors of literary fiction and tennis writers have continued to wrestle with and revise Wallace's arguments, often while paying homage to his rhetorical tactics. MacDonald (2009), Tignor (2009a, 2009b), Pilon (2015), and Sullivan (2016) are among the writers whose thinking about tennis

has been shaped by Wallace's influence. However, no writer has folded Wallace's thought into his own writing as well as Phillips (2011, 2015, 2016). Writing for the ESPN prestige brand *Grantland*, Phillips meditates on Roger Federer's improbable tenure as a "still" (2011) great tennis player, despite Federer's powers ostensibly waning. Against the normal narrative ascribed to athletes, in which meteoric rises transform into periods of dominance that abruptly succumb to the ravages of age, Federer has rewritten our notions of athletic decline. He may have once embodied kinetic beauty, a conduit to the divine; now, Phillips (2015) argues, he resembles nothing so much as a man who thoroughly enjoys his work. Where Wallace described a spiritual caste with an ascetic dedication to a craft, Phillips finds, nearly a decade later, a man waking up every day and playing tennis not by necessity but by choice. This is a fundamental revision of "Joyce", which suggests that athletes must surrender choice to practice their art, grounded in the fact that Federer is no longer at an age where ascetic devotion is expected or warranted.

Similar to Wallace, Phillips relies upon the conjunction of sport form, athlete style, and audience demographic as rhetorical resources. Federer becomes a white-collar professional who could easily retire early and bask in his career successes; the fact that he continues to go to work each day is a different form of inspiration to readers than the inspiration of transcendence that Wallace suggests. Nevertheless, Phillips's argument works out of the terrain that Wallace initially carved. Even as Phillips creates a space for the athlete *in* everyday life instead of *above* it, Federer is not treated as a civic actor. And Wallace is largely responsible for this characterization. In his most recent essay on Federer, Phillips (2016) essentially conceded Wallace's domineering shadow over contemporary tennis writing, acknowledging that "Roger Federer as Religious Experience" is "the piece of writing that did more to construct the terms in which we now view Federer than any other."

In short: The stories told about athletes matter, for both the people telling the story and the athletes themselves. In characterizing athletes, and in denying athletes certain characterizations, sportswriters such as Wallace cultivate their own authority and refigure the nature of the author-athlete-spectator relationship. Wallace elevates the pursuit of kinetic beauty to the level of the sacred; in doing so, he offers two alternatives to dominant conceptions of the athlete in society. Against the evangelical muscular Christianity of team sports, he offers the alternative of spiritual experience; against the narrative that athletes have sold out their political status for commercial gain, he offers sport as a divine art that its truest practitioners divorce from commercial concerns. Although Wallace does not mount an argument for "the athlete as citizen" (Butterworth, 2014), such an argument can easily be made once the athlete is decoupled from the financialized lifestyle of neoliberalism. This is one possible promise of sports communication: as such discourse circulates—and, in some cases, achieves renown, ubiquity, or unconscious influence—it can help shape the material conditions and practices of athletes and sports in a world that extends beyond the athletic.



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## Notes

1. Wallace (n.d.-c) originally intended Austin to be a review essay of three sports memoirs by Austin, baseball player Kirby Puckett, and basketball player Spencer Haywood. How and why the transition to a single review occurred is unexplained, though Austin retains a casual misogyny characteristic of early Wallace writing that may more easily be characterized as a reliance upon the dumb jock stereotype if Puckett and Haywood's memoirs were also addressed.
2. In correspondence with editor Jay Jennings, Wallace (n.d.-a) revealed himself to be unhappy with the heavy-handed editing of Tennis editor-in-chief Donna Doherty, referring to her in dismissive gender-inflected terms. "If you like," he told Jennings, when she asked that he remove several instances of swearing he had quoted in dialogue, "have the [Connecticut] lady in the sunhat call me and I'll give her a whole mimeto-aesthetic rant complete with French theory and Latinate polysyllables." Wallace was, by his own admission to Jennings some months before, a "truculent editee." As someone who cared deeply about how grammar affected meaning, Wallace famously lobbied all the way to executive editor Bill Keller to become the only author ever known to use the serial comma in the *New York Times* in "Roger Federer as Religious Experience."
3. Among Wallace's (n.d.-b) research materials as he composed "Roger Federer as Religious Experience" is a Wikipedia entry on proprioception.
4. As MacDonald (2009) reveals, Joyce is fundamentally ambivalent about how he is portrayed in "The String Theory," even though he admitted he is still approached about the essay two or three times a week, regardless of where the tour travels.
5. It may be of note to rhetoricians that Wallace renders the (nonsymbolic) motion of rote repetition into (symbolic) action through his reading of the athlete as ascetic spiritual practitioner. For more on the distinction, see Burke (1978) and Hawhee (2012, pp. 156–167).

6. The *New York Times*, which published Play Magazine, later issued a correction because Wallace incorrectly described the point as it occurred. Wallace may have believed this discursive representation of Federer's play was more faithful to the experience of spectatorship.

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