

Sports: The Artistic Representation of Athleticism

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Sports have been enjoyed for many decades by millions of people in hundreds of countries. Sports are a language without words, spoken by few but understood by many. It is a way of expression. Art, especially photography, is another language without words, which is foundational to any language or interaction. Photography is not only a way of seeing and capturing, but a way of communicating and a way of life. It has become a main component of everyday life as well as one of the most consumed forms of media. It is as fundamental to how one lives and expresses themselves, just like music or writing. There is a certain feeling that photography evokes from the viewer, like music does to a listener. "Music makes pictures and often tells stories, All of it magic and all of it true, And all of the pictures and all of the stories, All of the magic, the music is you" (Denver). There are many different types of photography, different ways to tell stories, different reasons to tell those stories. This essay focuses on sports photography, the stories it can tell, and the ways it can tell them. Sports photography can range in subject, quality, and even type of coverage. It is a broad term to describe the act of taking photographs of sports. Soccer will not be photographed the same way as swimming or motorsports or baseball. But at the foundation of capturing these sports lies common traits and characteristics: looking at a sport/event, taking a camera, and capturing a moment in time from the photographer's perspective. However, every single person's perspective is different, and the same subject can and will be seen differently by viewers at the same moment.

Theories of Seeing

There are many ways of seeing, as discussed by Laura Mulvey in her work, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Although cinema is not exactly the same as sport, the act and process of watching either is very similar. Mulvey explains the different possible pleasures in seeing, scopophilia (pleasure in looking), narcissism and identifying with the image seen,

active/male and passive/female gazes, and how they interact with each other (Mulvey, 59-61). Scopophilia is the act of obtaining sexual pleasure from looking or being looked at (different from voyeurism where pleasure is derived from watching without the subject knowing). The male gaze is described as the active viewer (male) derives power from looking at the passive (female) subject. She goes on to explain that women are placed in a traditional exhibitionist role, and their erotic spectacle is derived from their “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 62). She also explains that “the meaning of the woman is sexual difference” (Mulvey, 64). Not all looking has a sexual motivation.

The sporting gaze is derived from Mulvey’s concepts in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” but applied from a different perspective, and with a different focus. It transforms a sexually motivated gaze into one of genuine love, passion, and interest.

Gaze theory suggests that there are systematic ways of ‘seeing’ what we as sports historians, fans, and players look at and that these ways of seeing can be described, analyzed, and explained. They can be set in a variety of contexts, historical, economic, social, cultural, and visual. Such an approach analyzes the systemic ways in which sports fans see, experience and consume sporting events, photographs, film and television, or even sporting memorabilia. Such visual material plays a central role in the creation of any sporting experience. It frames the sports fans’ gaze and fixes what would otherwise be an ephemeral view: it is by no means neutral. Some painters and photographers were not necessarily sports fans but aiming more to satisfy the demands of patrons or express themselves artistically. (Huggins, 320)

Unlike the male gaze as a whole, the sporting gaze is unique to each and every spectator because each spectator has their own unique history with sports. The sporting gaze also lacks an

underlying sexual desire for obtaining pleasure from it, however there is still a desire it satisfies and pleasure the spectator derives. It can vary from spectator to spectator, it can be to fulfill nostalgia, to fulfill a primal urge of athleticism (as a display of power), or to have a victor and a loser. Spectators can watch sports for enjoyment, or as white noise in the background for homework or social gatherings. Art, in an academic sense, has changed from the traditional types of paint and sculptures, into a way of seeing. Visual literacy is fundamental to understanding art, media, and life itself. The “visual turn,” referred to by Mike Huggins, could be one reason for why visual culture has taken off since the 1990s, as a response to television, the internet, and image-focused content (315). Art has always been a reflection of its period, and sports are no different. From physical appearance, to rules, to players, each sport has its own different eras just like art.

The Halo effect is a cognitive bias defined as “a bias that leads an individual to make perceptions about an individual, event or thing based on a single characteristic” (“The Halo Effect on People Around Us”). This effect can lead to positive and/or negative perceptions about what a person analyzes. This is important in media studies and in art because each viewer will perceive a work differently from the next person. The subject or person is not analyzed in an unbiased way, its perception becomes skewed with information around it but not about it, a lot of the time either unrelated to or out of control of the subject. This is multiplied even more with sports, because athletes are idolized for their athletic achievements while also being seen as a separate person when they are not competing. Sports fans build a strong devotion and allegiance to their favorite team(s) based on multiple factor(s): location (either in general or relative to the fan), players on the team, coaching staff, the history of the team, if family members like the team, etc. The Halo effect helps fans to like a team for one of those characteristics, or it could be

the reason why someone does not like a team. Players are traded from teams all the time in the sports world, and some fans will stop being fans of certain players because of who they play for.

The Sporting Gaze is a very complex way of seeing sports. It “is a culturally learned but not specifically taught way of looking both at sporting movement and visual representations of sport...It shapes what sports fans expect to see when they watch sport” (Huggins, 320). The gaze is both determined while also influenced by itself. By expecting what to see in sport, the gaze shifts from person to person, from place to place. The gaze can differ in each sport, in each city, in each country. Even the age of the viewer or the way they consume sports media will shape their gaze.

So when we apply gaze notions to sporting art, the complexity of the gaze immediately becomes clear. Several different key forms of gaze can be identified, depending on who is doing the looking, whether the spectator, the camera, other sports participants. The role of the viewer is important too, allowing a range of readings or mis-readings. (Huggins, 320)

The sporting gaze is a derivative of gaze theory in the way that it analyzes how the viewer interacts with the subject. “One of the roles of the visual arts, as in recent sports history, is to challenge and change perceptions, to encourage the viewer to see familiar things differently. Sport has always been marked by a wealth of imagery and visual symbolism, value-laden interpretations of the sporting world, varying from period to period and place to place, and both reflecting and contributing to the social and cultural context in which they were produced” (Huggins, 312). Society influences culture, which influences sports, which influences society. Sports are ever changing, in who plays it, where it is played, who watches it, etc. The baseball culture in the 1980s is different from the baseball culture of today; past vs. present has been and

will always be an argument in each sport. And yet, photography captures it all. But why is the medium important to the subject?

The medium is important to the subject because it transforms the meaning of the subject and how it is interpreted. Medium theory is “a set of approaches used to convey the difference in meanings of the message conveyed with regard to the different channels used to communicate it” (“Medium Theory”). In simpler terms, “the medium is the message.” The way in which media or information is conveyed influences how that media or information is interpreted, consumed, and even what it means.

There are “similarities between a fan’s identification with a sports team and how people identify with their nationality, ethnicity, even gender. Team identification ‘is the extent to which a fan feels a psychological connection to a team and the team’s performances are viewed as self-relevant,’ says Daniel Wann” (qtd. in Wang, 2006). “Identification is not just with the team — that might be the target or the focal field — but what draws with that is the identification that comes with it” (Wang, 2006). Identifying with a fanbase gives fans a sense of belonging, identity, and community with other fans. Devotion to a team (or teams) for a long period of time also gives a sense of nostalgia, whether it be through childhood memories with their family or previous periods of success. These feelings tighten the bond between fans and clubs.

In recent times, Instagram accounts like [@sporarts](#) and [@artbutmakeitsports](#) have become very popular. [@sporarts](#) is mostly focused on sports photography captured in a more traditional style (like studio or portrait), while [@artbutmakeitsports](#) takes moments (not just photos) from recent sporting events and compares them to traditional pieces of art (from paintings to sculptures). Both of these accounts are amazing at what they do.

Gender in Sports

In the United States, college sports especially bring people together and have a cult following. A lot of college students and graduates feel connected and can bond over their institution's sports teams. College football is a massive industry in the sports world, however that was not always the case. This came along because of the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961, which legally determines that organized professional football cannot have:

...all or a substantial part of any professional football game on any Friday after six o'clock postmeridian or on any Saturday during the period beginning on the second Friday in September and ending on the second Saturday in December in any year from any telecasting station located within seventy-five miles of the game site of any intercollegiate or interscholastic football contest scheduled to be played on such a date...
 (“15 USC CHAPTER 32”)

as well as restricting sports organizations from being monopolies. This restriction on broadcasting has basically made it illegal for professional football to be played on the same days as high school and college football to protect those lower divisions and promote their success. But what does this have to do with sports photography? Why am I mentioning this? All types of sports and levels of competition are valued in some way, and such are photographed in some way. It is important to understand the context and foundation of how sports became what they are, to then further the understanding of the art created around it. The Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961 is not the only time the government has created laws on how sports can be conducted, especially in reference to college athletics.

Eleven years after the the broadcasting act, the United States Department of Justice determined “[n]o person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (“Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972”). Colleges and universities are not allowed to discriminate against students based on their gender, and in the perspective of athletics, cannot give one gender more opportunities, unequal funding or facilities, or sports without offering them to both genders. This allows students of both genders to further their athletic careers while also receiving a higher level of education. But the entirety of sports is not governed by Title IX or the NCAA, which means there is still gender inequality in sports and even the coverage of sports. Not only is this a topic of legislation and conversation for athletics, but also the focus of a photography project. Alana Paterson, a photographer from Vancouver, B.C., has created a photography project under the same name, emphasizing girl’s junior and college hockey in North America. “She captured them with a Nikon F100, using Kodak Portra film and the on-camera flash to emulate bright, poppy sports imagery from the 1980s and 1990s, when prospects for female athletes were even more grim” (Mallonee). In an interview with Zoe Sottile, Paterson explains why she chose to use film instead of digital photography:

With film, you’re very intentional, you’re making choices. And there’s also a bit of strength in not being able to show (the subjects), because a lot of people go, ‘oh, can I see it?’ afterwards, (but) you can’t do it, like ‘oh sorry, it’s film.’ And that kind of creates a nice space for them, to not think about themselves, or to not become insecure. (Sottile)

It would be so much easier to capture these photographs with a digital camera, but using film is a stylistic choice that not only deeply mimics the photos she wants to replicate, but also creates a

more genuine moment in time because there is no re-taking of that photo. Film photography is very “you got the moment or you didn’t.” Sports photography is very similar because moments come and go with no influence or control from a photographer. But that does not mean moments are not created, manipulated, or repeated.



Fig. 1: Alana Paterson, *Title IX*, 2017.



Fig. 2: Bettmann, *Wayne Gretzky Listens to Reporter's Question in Locker Room*, 9 Feb. 1983.

Moments in photography, especially for sports, can seem like they repeat or are inspired by past moments. A lot of sports will have moments that look repetitive, but with context are completely different. Paterson’s and Bettmann’s photos look very similar (intentionally done by Paterson): they both feature a hockey player sitting in a locker room, gloves and helmet off, both thinking. Both use a flash, taken on film, from a slight distance to get most of the body, taken from slightly above the subject, even the framing is the same with both players in the center hunched over. Bettmann’s photo is more a capturing of a raw moment, where Paterson is trying

to replicate the same moment as Bettmann has captured. Context does have an impact on an image, however. The girl in her photo is not being interviewed, not playing in the National Hockey League or being paid, and probably is not even out of high school; it does not carry the same weight or importance as Bettmann's, but that does not make it less of an artistic photo. Although these moments are not the same both with and without context, they still feel similar because of the artistic choices Paterson has made (by using film or flash photography).

Another important distinction to make about both of these photos is the fact that they are taken in the locker room, making the moment and the photo feel more personal, more intimate. A lot of a player's identity can be hidden out on the ice or field especially in sports where players have to wear helmets/head protection that covers their faces, obscures their identities. Taking photographs of the *person* and not the athlete carries a lot of emotional weight, and allows for more complexity within the meaning (and the composition of) the photograph. But not every sports photograph is of a person. Some photos are more focused on where the sport is played, not who is playing. It is also important to note that the focus of Paterson's project is women's sports portrayed and represented in the same way that men's sports have been traditionally. The "surprise" of seeing women's sports photographed and valued in the same ways as men's sports draws attention to the differences in how they are treated, and allows for awareness of these issues and can possibly lead to changes through her visual advocacy.

Architecture

Architecture is also massively important to sports, in both function and appearance. A stadium, arena, track, etc., are the settings and backdrops for these subjects. It inspires athletes, fans, and workers. It is foundational to the culture of an organization, its brand, and how it is

represented and perceived. They are places to experience sports, to become immersed with other fans and share a love and passion with like minded individuals.

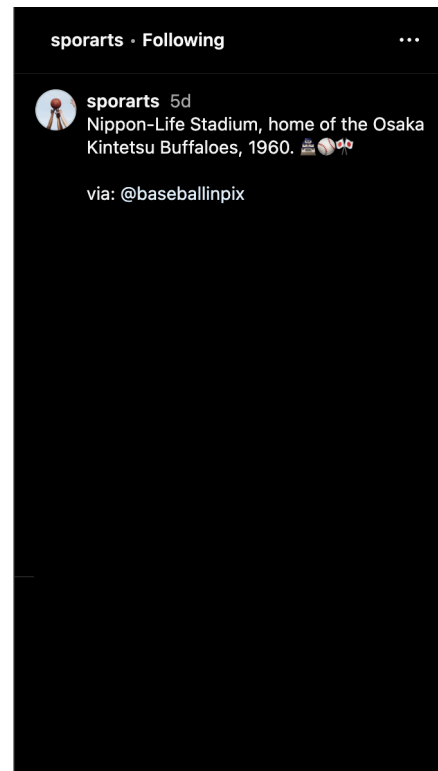


Fig. 3: @Sporarts. *Nippon-Life Stadium*, 7 Nov. 2023

The Nippon-Life Stadium in Osaka, Japan, was home to the Osaka Kintetsu Buffaloes from 1958-1983. Situated in the backdrop of the stadium is the Osaka Castle, which overlooks the stadium. This provides character to the stadium, allows for more unique and artistic photographs, and even connects with the local culture and people. This photograph is taken from almost dead-centerfield, and seems to be in one of the residential buildings, as outfield seating was very limited and did not exist from this perspective. This allows the spectator to view the stadium from a different perspective than what they are used to seeing, and allows for a deeper appreciation of the architecture. There is also a very appealing visual composition of the Osaka Castle being lit above the stadium, surrounded by darkness which makes it seem like it is levitating. It allows the castle to be interpreted like it is looming over or protecting the stadium.

The castle itself is visually appealing in its own right, but adds to the stadium because not many stadiums worldwide are accompanied by other such visually appealing backdrops. The stadium itself features a traditional baseball field without a grass infield, and seats that not only wrap around the sides of the field, but seem to ascend for rows and rows into the sky. Such juxtaposition between the structures and contrast in lighting is reminiscent of traditional paintings, which is what most people are reminded of when they think of “art.” Sports photography is seen as “less” compared to more traditional subjects and types of photography, which is an example of the halo effect in action. But that does not mean it is true, and does not make it any less of a type of art.

Traditionalism and Experimentation

Some people will argue that sports hold no artistic value or significance. Paul Ziff states in his work, *Antiaesthetics: An Appreciation of the Cow with the Subtile Nose*, that “[i]f one is concerned with the aesthetics of a certain class of things then the members of that class must characteristically have certain aesthetic aspects... Some sports happen to have aesthetic aspects. Most sports do not” (qtd. in Carlson, 928). Allen Carlson, critiquing Ziff’s writing, argues that sports with less aesthetic values are still worthy and capable of having aesthetic value (Carlson, 928). The fundamental action of viewing art is that not every viewer will interpret the same piece in the same way as another. Why would something so subjective have such a definitive and restrictive perspective? There is ugly art. There is attractive art. There is art that evokes emotions, and art that bores people. But there is no correct answer about what a piece can be, only what type it can be.

Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life, and I feel sure that if you think seriously about it you will find that it is true. Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realises in fact what has been dreamed in fiction. Scientifically speaking, the basis of life--the energy of life, as Aristotle would call it--is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained. (Wilde)

Sports can be argued to be an art, an expression of athleticism and poetry in a physical manner. Life imitates art, especially in the case of @ArtButSports. That entire account takes a recent moment in sports and then matches it (with the memory of one man) to a painting or work of art.



Fig. 4: @ArtButSports. *The Presentation of Her Portrait to Henry IV*, by Peter Paul Rubens, 1622-25, 28 Jan. 2023

“There was one...when Pat Bev got the camera from the crowd and showed it to the ref. I knew this obscure painting—that I don't even know the name of—that I saw at the Louvre. When I saw it, I was like, ‘This is going to be something at some point’” (Hill). The photo of Patrick Beverley and the painting by Peter Paul Rubens mimic each other both in composition but also in meaning. They both present a man showing a different man (with more power and authority over them) a piece of media to prove something, in Beverley’s case it was to show the referee that he missed an important call. There

are other posts similar to this on that account, which range from matching in color and composition to meaning and historical importance. Both types of work displayed on this page document moments in history.



Fig. 5: Joe Kraus, *Australian Ice Hockey*, 4 Mar. 2023.

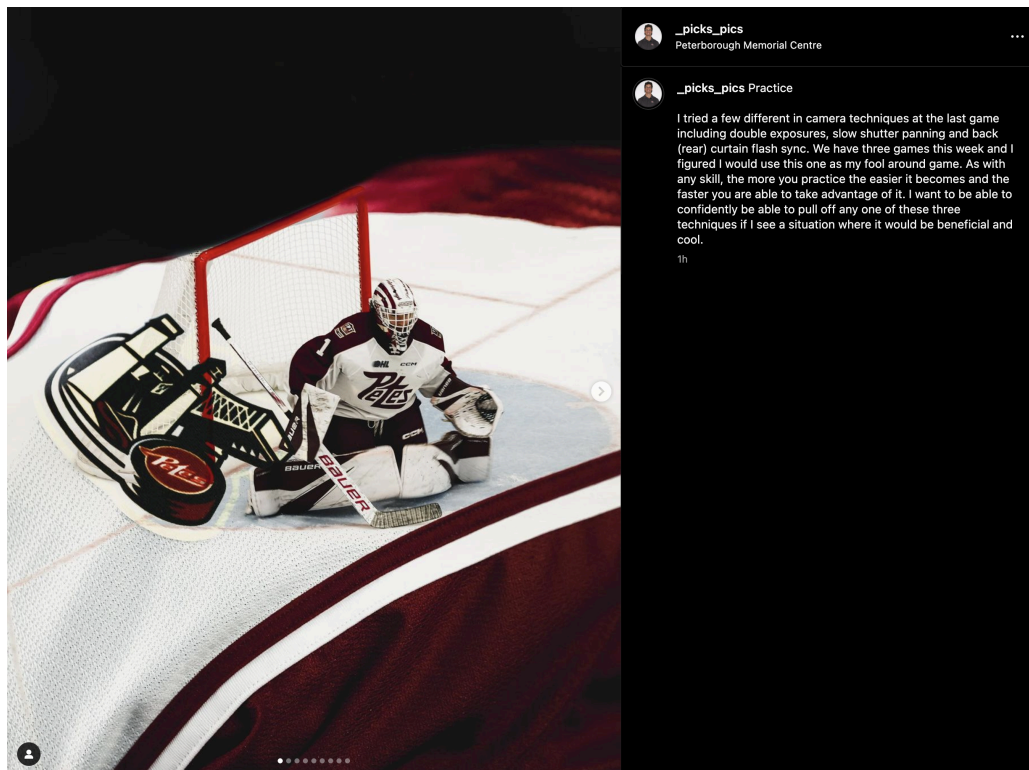


Fig. 6: Joe Kraus, *Arcadia Men's Basketball*, 18 Nov. 2023.

A lot of sports photography is documentative in the way that it captures moments in their raw form, not distorted or changed. There is not a lot of experimentation, it looks similar to other photographs, looks nice on the front page of a newspaper or for a trading card. The moment makes the photograph, the moment is the focus, the moment is what makes it important. The main point of this style is that the picture is easy to understand visually, to make understanding sports and its action more accessible to fans. And this photography is important for those reasons, some moments could be ruined or missed if the photographer is using too slow of a shutter speed, is not physically positioned in a spot to capture that moment or is using the wrong lens. But that does not mean that every photograph should be taken that way. Documentative photography has its own purpose, but so does experimental and non-traditional photography. Non-traditional styles allow for the photographer to express themselves in a way words cannot, with a subject that others can understand. It also allows for the photographer to be more creative

by using composition and other methods to stand out from others, and perhaps capture a moment that would otherwise not be as impactful, interesting, or important.

Double (or multiple) exposures are a style of photography where two or more photographs are captured on the same frame (or in digital photography, the same file), combining together to create one unique image. These types of images can be made in post-production with editing software, but a lot of photographers prefer the traditional method of doing it in-camera either for authenticity and/or ease. The traditional method comes from the times of film photography, where photographers would take one exposure on a specific cell on the film reel, then re-expose it again, creating an overlaying one image over another in the same cell. These types of exposures could have differences in their traits, like composition, shutter speed, as well as meaning. They create visually complex and compelling images, which, especially in sports,



can lead to
amazing
results.

Fig. 7: David
Pickering,
Practice, 1
Dec, 2023.

One of my
favorite double

exposures has been taken by David Pickering (@_picks_pics), which was taken in-camera. The

first shot was a close-up of a fan's jersey, showing the shoulder patch of the team, while his second shot of the exposure was a further, zoomed-in shot of the goalie on the ice. When I first saw it, I genuinely thought it had to be edited in post-production because of how complex yet clean it looked. It is so visually appealing with the goalie fitting between the lines, vibrant colors, a good balance of exposure and shadows, while also making a deeper and complex connection to the fans and the players. Images like this show how intertwined fans and players are, even if they are separate. I asked Pickering about why he was experimenting with double exposure (as well as other non-traditional styles of photography in the same post), and he said his reasoning was:

I get very bored with taking the same or close to the same photos every time I'm at the rink. This is my third year with the [Peterborough Petes hockey] team and my personal goal for the year is to be as creative and experimental as possible and I want to be one of the better photographers in the league. I try at least one new thing a game just to see what looks cool and what doesn't and to kind of build my all around photography skills...I'm also really fortunate that the team is cool with me doing these kind of things and it helps with the confidence and makes it more enjoyable to do (D. Pickering, personal communication, December 1, 2023)

Double exposures are very hard to compose because of how complex they are and the difficulty of combining two images into one. This creates an identity for the photographer because each photographer has their own unique style, composition, coloring, experience, and timing and tendencies. Complex shots highlight these differences and allow photographers to stand out as an individual, even if you never see them on the other side of the camera. It also allows a unique brand identity for the teams and athletes captured, standing out from other traditional styles of media and photography. Multiple exposures are not the only type of non-traditional styles of

photography. There is also slow shutter speed photography, which involves tracking the subject to keep it in focus while the background becomes streaked/blurry. These types of photographs draw the viewer's attention to the subject in focus while minimizing the distractions in the background. These photos may not be the best to document a moment clearly, but they are great for photographers to express themselves and have deeper and more complex meanings and motivations. Some of these meanings could be completely unrelated to sports, but are most accurately expressed through them, similar to a visual metaphor. The blur represents chaos and disorder, a lack of structure, a burst of action, tension, anxiously awaiting what could happen. It also shows motion in something so static, progression, change, a glimpse of clarity in a sea of confusion.



Fig. 8: Joe Kraus, *Arcadia University Men's Soccer*, 24 Oct. 2023.

Slow shutter speed shots are good in many instances: night lighting, light painting, astrophotography, and capturing motion in different types of sports (especially motorsports). It allows motion to be captured in a format that is so static. The only thing in focus and static in my picture is the soccer ball. The players, the field, the background, everything is blurry and

moving. The symbolism behind this is the ball is the only constant focus in soccer, it is the one thing both teams are fighting to have. Although not intentional, meaning can come from a lot of places. Perhaps the best art is the art created by chance or accident. I had an art teacher in elementary school who told me “there are never mistakes in art,” and I have let these few words guide me as a photographer and artist.

Remote photography is another type of non-traditional photography. It is when a photographer controls a camera and its shutter from a different device, instead of using the controls on the camera itself to take a photograph. In sports, this usually involves placing cameras in specific locations where a photographer would not physically fit, could not easily reach, or be allowed to be (like in the net during an ice hockey game). These types of setups can usually be found on catwalks or rafters above the playing surfaces, or in/behind the netting of goals, or backboards of basketball hoops. These are set up hours before games and events, making these shots harder to achieve because of how much luck is involved. These shots are very adventurous, risky, and must be pre-planned. Execution on these types of shots is crucial, and is left to the talent of the photographer and the access they are allowed.

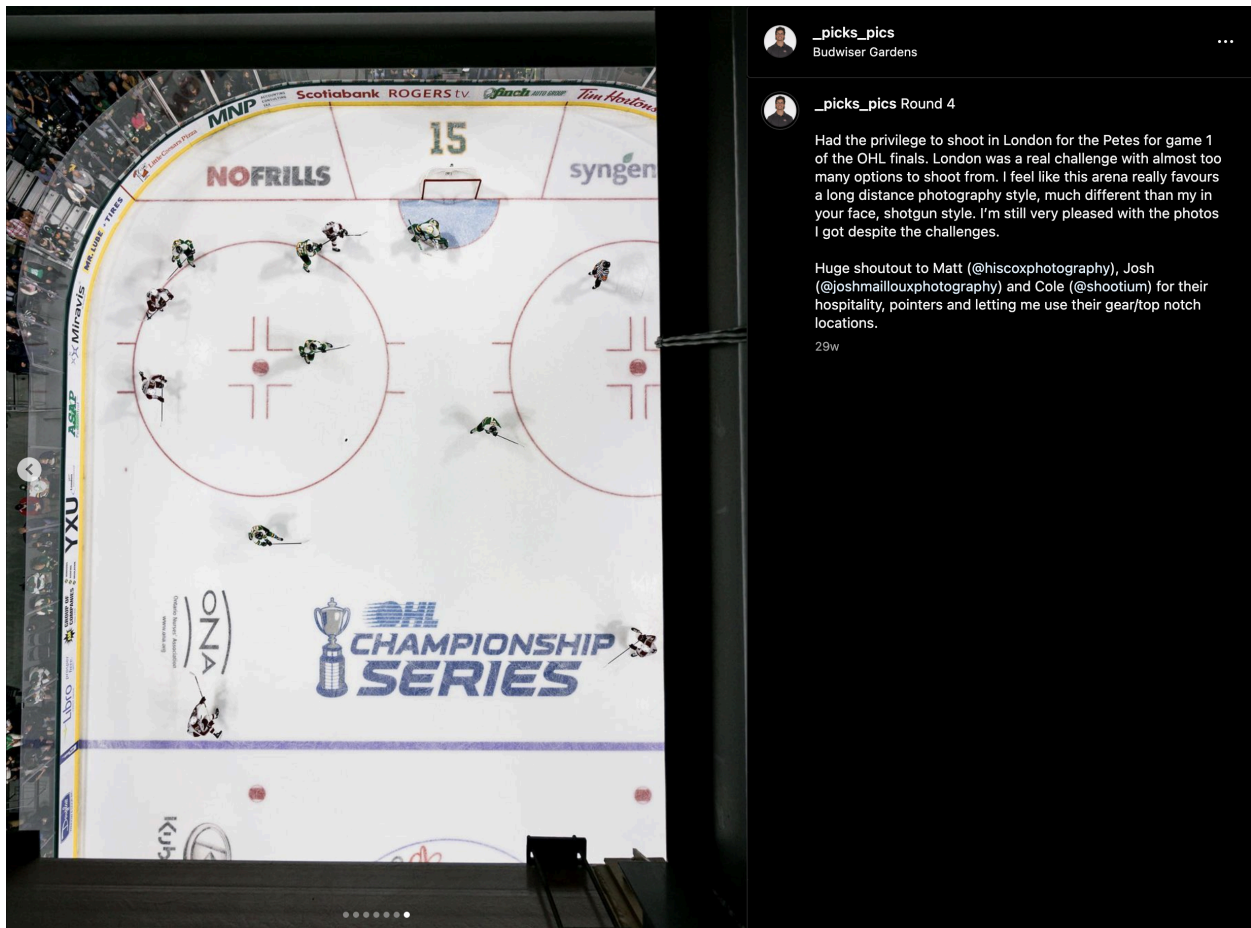


Fig. 9: David Pickering, *Round 4*, 13 May, 2023.

These types of angles provide a different perspective from what the average spectator will see. It is also a fresh perspective within sports photography, creating a diversified portfolio for the photographer. Perspective is foundational to composition, and remote photography requires a lot of precision with composition and timing. A bird's-eye perspective like the one in David Pickering's second photo, is reminiscent of a video game, like the spectator is controlling the game. It also shows how different the spacing of a playing surface looks compared to the traditional view of looking from the side. This difference in perspective and accessibility allows

a viewer to understand the movement of players and objects within a game, making it easier to track from above than the side.

The Halo Effect can make sports photography (and photographers) perceived as less important and artistic than other forms of photography. However,

[a] sports photographer captures the graceful, the intense, the emotional, and the unexpected. Shooting sports allows you to enter that magical nether land between the intensity on the playing field and the energy of the crowd... Whether it's in front of 90,000 Rose Bowl fans or a dozen Little League parents, you still feel a wave of excitement and passion wash over you following a big score or a great play. (Miller)

The connections between spectator and image, spectator and athlete, and athlete and image is undeniable. To say there is no artistic value in something so expressive and emotional is disingenuous to art as a whole. The entirety of art is subjective, it is supposed to be subjective. There is value in every piece and every form of art. There are different ways of seeing art, from a casual glance to scopophilia. There are different forms of each way of seeing, like gaze theory as a whole or breaking it down into the sporting gaze. There are different forms of photography, from portraits to sports, and even those have subtypes. Each type and subtype have their own purpose and meaning. To deny sports photography as artistic is like denying art as a whole.

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