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# Sports Literature for Struggling Secondary Readers

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## Chapter One

### INTRODUCTION

It's no secret that middle school and high school age boys tend to struggle with literacy, more so than girls of the same age. It has been referred to as "the boy problem" (Sax) and the "boys and reading problem" (McKechnie). Numerous studies have been conducted and papers written on how to increase engagement in the English Language Arts (ELA) classroom for boys. But perhaps the answer isn't to be found within the ELA class itself, but in another, more specialized class for boys (and girls) that offers them an opportunity to get hooked on reading through literature they can better relate to: namely, sports literature.

#### *Problem Statement*

"When it comes to reading, teen and preteen boys are the most difficult students" is a quote from the abstract of William G. Brozo's book, *To Be a Boy, To Be a Reader: Engaging Teen and Preteen Boys in Active Literacy*. It succinctly encapsulates the problem in which this thesis project is to unravel. Authors and researchers alike have studied the lack of engagement boys have for reading, and the solutions are numerous. One such solution, creating a class that is geared specifically toward the reading interests of boys, aims to curb such problems.

Think of the most recent pieces of popular literature for young adult readers in the last several years. From *Twilight* to *The Hunger Games* and even *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, all three of these books and their sequels have one thing in common: They all feature a strong, female heroine as the lead. It's not that there aren't books out there that feature a strong male in a leading role. So why have these three become so popular? Is it because teen girls are the ones who enjoy this brand of fictional storytelling, while boys are more geared toward non-fiction? If the authors and publishers know that

girls tend to read more fiction than boys, it stands to reason that inserting a female as the lead, thus being relatable to your audience, will allow them easier access to the material. Yet, it once again leaves boys behind.

### *Significance of the Problem*

The significance of such a problem is great. If we as educators continue the path we're on, more and more boys will be left behind in the ELA classroom. Not every generation of learners are the same, yet we expect students today to read and be engaged in the same material our parents read when they were in high school. With so many outside factors causing teens to act and think differently than in previous generations, we must challenge ourselves in what and how we teach to keep up with those changes.

Gender imbalance in reading is not a myth; it is a fact. According to a study by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 15 year-old boys across 65 countries were outperformed by their female counterparts by 32 points in 2000. In 2009, that number shot up to 39 points (White). In the article, Brozo was quoted as saying, "...a 32-point difference means that boys are a year and-a-half behind girls in reading skills" (White). PISA research found that in the United States in particular, the number that separates boys from girls is 25 points.

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this project is to close that gap in reading skills between girls and boys. To do that, one must start at the root of the problem, that being getting boys interested in reading. Once that hook is baited, we can get the boys to bite. It is very difficult to teach reading skills if the interest in what is being read is not present.

Granted, the issue of getting boys interested in reading is certainly a macro issue, as evidenced by the data in the previous section, and this project is dealing with a micro issue. But from this micro issue, if successful, other schools could conceivably develop a similar curriculum, with tweaks depending on the literary interests within the school. Any curriculum or unit that is designed to get boys more interested in reading should be attempted. What is there to lose?

### *Rationale*

In theory, sports literature should open that window for reluctant readers. The goal of this project is to make reading more accessible to boys through sports, and the aim is to continue that into their regular education ELA classroom. Once their eyes are opened to reading about sports, they may stay opened for reading about fiction and the traditional canon that is taught by most schools. That appetite for reading is to be cultivated, but not satiated, in this sports literature class.

Numerous studies and anecdotal evidence from real classroom teachers have led to the decision to create a specific class featuring sports literature. Linda Carter Purdy shared her experience in teaching an elective sports literature course, writing that it "...confirmed my belief that sports literature provides invaluable life lessons for adolescents..." (Carter, 309). Another teacher, Sue Minchew, relayed a few student responses to her sports literature class that summarize students' feelings on the subject: "I love sports, I hate literature. I like sports literature" (Minchew, 138). That is the student this class aims to help.

In this case, a sports literature curriculum is not revolutionary; it is provided by many universities at the college level, and even taught in some high-schools (as evidenced above). While sports literature curriculums may be rare, some teachers do attempt to incorporate such readings into the traditional ELA classrooms. The beauty of a sports literature course is that it can and will meet all state standards for ELA and electives.

### *Definition of Terms*

canon: a list of literary works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality (Oxford)

curriculum: the content of a course being taught

elective: optional course students can take if interested in the subject matter

engagement: the state of being interested or invested in something.

### *Summary*

Boys are lagging behind girls in reading and literacy, and there is no end in sight. If we keep feeding students the same instruction and curriculum, nothing will change. It will take a new way of looking at the problem, and new solutions, in order to stem the tide. One such corrective measure is the institution of a sports literature class, to allow boys (and any girls interested) to read and dissect literature that is of interest to them.

The literature on the subject suggests many ways to nudge boys toward an interest in reading, showing that there is in fact a problem in this area. Opinions may differ on the “what,” but the “how” is pretty clear: Boys are not being reached because what their interests are does not generally match up to what is being taught in the traditional ELA classroom. A class to supplement that instruction, and to flip the reading switch inside the head of boys, is therefore needed.

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A class examining sports literature, in truth, deals with more than just sports. For many high-school students, sports are a relatable subject matter, more so than the more “traditional” texts taught in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms. Teachers can use that “in” of sports to teach the same concepts they teach from the canon, such as character, theme, point-of-view, man vs. nature, man vs. himself, etc. Many pieces of literature have been written advocating the inclusion of sports literature or a sports literature class into the educational system.

In addition to a class of this nature benefiting students who are interested in sports, it can also be an attractive option for at-risk students. Saul Bachner, in his article, “Sports literature for the at-risk student,” examined an ELA elective for ninth-graders. Included in his article was the literature used, and themes discussed. The class was expected to read the sports section of the daily newspapers, and the class itself also featured guest speakers. Bachner argued for using athletics and sports as a background for these students to understand ELA literature concepts that may transcend what they’re reading.

This document from Bachner is important because it profiles a similar class to the one proposed here, one that was successful. It takes this idea beyond theory and into implementation. The success attained by the students described in Bachner’s article may be anecdotal, but it goes to show that a class dissecting sports literature can work.

Four letters from students were attached to the end of Bachner’s article. These letters were addressed to the teacher of this class, and each student explained why they enjoyed the class. There are few arguments for such a class to exist that are better than hearing (or reading) it from the students themselves.

Ira Berkow profiled writer James T. Farrell in his article, “Farrell and Sports.” As a writer, Farrell was able to discuss why he included sports themes in many of his books, and how a specific sports book shaped his own life growing up. Farrell discussed his writing style and how other famous writers have used sports, or aped sportswriting style, in their own writing. This kind of information would be valuable

in teaching both reading and writing in the sports literature class. Allowing students to get into the mind of a writer of sports could certainly help them understand how sports themes can be related to other themes in life and literature.

An eighth grade teacher, Mike Roberts, wrote about “Teaching young adult literature.” Roberts mentioned the need to teach this kind of literature because of the challenges teens face today, and how different their lives are from the era many of the books from the canon are written. Many of the sports books that would encompass such a class as the one proposed here would be from the young adult literature genre.

In his article, Roberts proposed three different young adult novels that could be taught to students, and how each is relatable to students of today. He also provided examples of the different kinds of activities that could be done with a class using these books. One of the novels, *The Hunger Games*, could be taught in a sports literature class. The book isn’t about what we may think of as traditional sports, like baseball or football, yet the entire premise of the novel is about the protagonist surviving what is considered a sport by those living in the dystopian society of the novel. This book is an example of thinking outside the box when it comes to a sports literature class, and because *The Hunger Games* is already being taught in some ELA classes today, including it in a sports literature class may make teachers and administration more amenable to approving such a class if it can be proved that it truly is more than just learning about sports.

While Tracy J.R. Collins’s journal article, “Reflections on Teaching Sports Literature in the Academy” dealt with instructing literature to college-age students, there were many facts provided within that would persuade one to look favorably upon sports literature when teaching a younger group of students. Collins discussed how sport is key because “young people search for a personal identity through it” (281). Collins noted in her article that while the base story may focus on athletes or athletics,

oftentimes, the themes and literary elements in those writings can be identified in the same way they are identified in traditional middle or high school reading material.

Collins explained what books she taught and why she taught them, and each focused on a different angle, from gender differences (*In These Girls*), to inner-city life (*The Basketball Diaries*), to racism (*On Boxing*). All of these elements are ones we teach through other books in Language Arts classes. While these may be college-level works, it shouldn't be a stretch to find grade-level books that address the same issues.

How do we know that students have such an interest in sports that a Sports Literature class would be worthwhile? In an article in the *English Journal* titled, "Creative And Critical Engagement: Constructing A Teen Vision Of The World," Language Arts teachers Eric DiMarzio and Ryan Dippre wrote about their experience teaching a writing unit that fulfilled the needs of the students. Through the process of journaling, students were allowed to basically "free write"; that is, write about whatever they saw fit.

While the authors noted that the subject matter of the journals featured a wide array of interests, "Many chose to write about their sports and extracurricular interests..." (27). This proves that not only would reading literature possibly improve the reading levels of students in middle or high school, but the class would be able to support a writing aspect as well. Reading and writing should go hand-in-hand in the Language Arts classrooms, and in a Sports Literature class, it would be no different.

Could teaching and focusing on sports increase student activity and decrease the obesity problem that is affecting a record-number of young people in America? Much the same way Language Arts and Social Studies can share cross-curricular activities and content, a Sports Literature class could conduct cross-curricular activities with Physical Education classes.

Krista Jones provided ideas for English Language Arts classes that integrated technology and sport in the lesson/unit. In her article, "Ideas for Integrating Technology Education into Everyday

Learning,” Jones’s first bullet point began with, “Kids love sports!” (21). If this is true, then why aren’t we doing more in schools to either cultivate that love, or tie that in with what students are learning, to make it more personal to them?

The actual lesson she suggested was for students to research equipment used in their favorite sports, come up with a redesign, and possibly “market” it to the class. This would be an upper-level lesson that would require research (and reading), writing (to establish what you’re redesigning and why), and a performance aspect to model or advertise the product (authentic assessment/physical activity). Each one of these steps is a requirement that is stressed in regular Language Arts classes.

Another literary element that is taught in every English Language Arts class is “character.” In many schools, the struggle is to find novels in which the main character or characters are relatable to an ever-evolving population of students. Students with multicultural backgrounds are becoming the norm; can books and characters from the canon truly reach them, no matter the age?

Sue Minchew discussed teaching character in her undergraduate course in “Teaching Character through Sports Literature.” She noted that authors who have written about sports include familiar names such as Ernest Hemingway, John Updike, James Thurber, and William Faulkner. These are all names that could be recognizable to high school students because of their other works; so it isn’t as if the novels that would be read in a sports literature class would be written by hacks. Many of the classical authors that we associate with the canon have dabbled in writing about sports, even if it is on the periphery of the actual story.

Despite teaching her class at the university setting, Minchew considered the value of teaching sports literature in middle and high schools. She wrote: “...the intensity and passion on the court or field or arena may more completely engage some students than traditional literature does” (138).

In one school, students were kept focused on goals via the Stephen Covey book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. In her article, Minchew provided examples from sports literature to

support each of the seven habits. We can assume then, if we want to teach students not only what they will be tested on but to also become a better and more highly effective person, sports literature can be a vehicle to do just that.

In her article, "Put Reading in Shape with Sports," Kathy Everts Danielson cut right to the chase by noting that acquiring the motivation to read can be easier when the material lines up to student interests. Citing previous research, Danielson said that young boys prefer to read about sports and texts that are informational.

Danielson proceeded to claim the need to provide boys with more texts that contain sports themes. While classroom libraries often have an abundance of books that deal with sports (often randomly assembled by teachers), rarely are sports novels or books actually taught to students within the curriculum. Why would we as teachers provide one kind of book in our classroom library, in an effort to appeal to what students want to read about, yet teach a completely other different kind of book and count it toward a student's grade?

The article continued by giving examples of ways to meet state standards through teaching sports literature. Included were the unique vocabulary associated with sports (as well as idioms, the teaching of which has taken on a greater importance with the rising number of students who speak English as a second language), reading, writing, listening, and speaking activities. Danielson even listed some possible books for middle and high school teachers to teach.

For Linda Purdy Carter, sports literature classes provide a way for the reluctant reader to embrace reading. "I found that sports literature provides an effective means for combating negative attitudes toward reading," she wrote (309). She took the steps in developing such a curriculum from a colleague, who suggested high-interest reading material such as magazines or newspapers, anything to find that opening in the reluctant reader.

She also introduced the idea of covering current events in sports into the class as well. This could be where reading newspapers or magazines would come into play, in addition to whatever novel or book is being read. Carter gave the example of Jackie Robinson and his breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball. It would be something relevant to students, and there has been much written about the topic to the point that it shouldn't be difficult to find something written for whatever age group you're teaching. Carter ended her article with a refrain written often by proponents of this way of teaching: "It is imperative that we recognize the value of capitalizing on students' passionate interest in sports so that we may transform their curiosity into a deeper understanding of themselves and a stronger sense of their connection to society at large" (311).

Chris Crowe wrote about how sports "permeates almost every aspect of contemporary society" (129) in his article, "Young Adult Literature: Sports Literature for Young Adults." If we are to take his above statement as true, then we as teachers and districts are doing a disservice to students by not providing them the materials and the subject matter that they deal with on a daily basis, in this case sports, and can thus relate to better than most of the literature read in class. While it's true that reading about a wide array of subjects, including subjects the students might not know anything about, can expand their knowledge base, for struggling or unwilling readers, they first need to establish a base in a text they feel comfortable interacting with. This is where sports literature comes into focus.

There may be a hesitance to include sports literature in the canon because of the perceived idea that sports literature is all about the actual sport, or game action. Crowe argues that since the 1980s, sports literature aimed at young adults has gotten away from purely game action and has become more focused on characters. In other words, they have become just like every other novel, only with a sports twist. In many novels listed by Crowe, "...the main character is an athlete, but the central issues of the stories are only tangentially connected to sports" (130).

One of Crowe's observations of the changing sports literature scene over the years included a note that "Sports novels are generally accepted to be particularly useful in reaching reluctant readers" (131). In essence, reluctant readers do not find most novels read in the Language Arts classroom to be germane to their life. When sports literature is offered, students can become more willing to engage in the text, because it describes something they are interested in.

A sports literature class should not take the place of a regular English Language Arts, but instead should be offered as a supplement to it. Struggling readers should be given the opportunity to seek alternate pathways to reach the pinnacle, or to become a fluent reader. For most boys (and some girls), sports literature can open a whole world of reading that was previously closed off to them. Once that bond with reading is established, and they feel comfortable in that environment, then they can find greater success in the general ELA classroom.

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UNIT ONE: THE THRILL OF VICTORY, THE AGONY OF DEFEAT

**WEEK ONE**

Essential Question: Why do people play sports?

Readings: "Michael Jordan Has Not Left the Building," ESPN the Magazine

Begin reading *Pinned* by Alfred C. Martino

"A Life after Wide Right," Sports Illustrated

Language Arts Lessons: -Vocabulary (through the readings)

-Author's Purpose (what is the purpose for the author to cover Jordan and Norwood?)

-Identifying parts of speech throughout readings

Writing Prompt: (Persuasive) Choose a school sport. Write an essay that will appear in your school paper in which you try to convince students to try out for this sport.

- Alternate options to an essay would include an advertisement that would be placed in the school paper. Student must include visuals as well as the written advertisement.

Modifications for Students with Special Needs: Expand definition of "sports" to include such games as chess, checkers, etc. for students who may have physical disabilities.

**WEEK TWO**

Essential Question: What makes someone strive for perfection?

Readings: Continue *Pinned*

"Finally, Miami Heat's LeBron James Can Rejoice in Victory," The Miami Herald

"Woods's Downfall is as Gripping as his Reign," New York Times

Video: “Rise and Fall of Tiger Woods,” biography.com

Language Arts Lessons: -Vocabulary (through the readings)

-Cause & Effect (for LeBron and Tiger readings)

-Characters and setting (for *Pinned*)

Writing Prompt: (Narrative) Describe the most successful or “perfect” moment you’ve experienced playing sports.

-Alternate options to the most successful or “perfect” moment would be interviewing a relative and describing their perfect moment playing sports. Quotes from the relative should be used in the writing.

### **WEEK THREE**

Essential Question: Is the risk of cheating worth the reward?

Readings: Continue *Pinned*

“Lance Armstrong’s Demise: How an All-American Hero Fell to Earth,” CNN.com

“The Truth about Barry Bonds and Steroids,” Sports Illustrated

Language Arts Lessons: -Vocabulary (through the readings)

-Compare & Contrast (Armstrong and Bonds)

-Idioms and Figurative Language

Writing Prompt: (Expository) Would you vote for Barry Bonds or any other known steroid users for the Hall-of-Fame? Why or why not?

### **WEEK FOUR**

Essential Question: What makes the human confrontation of sports so intriguing?

Readings: Continue *Pinned*

“Notre Dame Marathon Win Had Magic,” ESPN.com

“Wimbledon 2011: John Isner v Nicolas Mahut – the Story of an Epic Clash,” U.K. Telegraph

Video: Highlights of drama in Louisville vs. Notre Dame game

Language Arts Lessons: - Vocabulary (through the readings)

-Point of View

-Inferences

Writing Prompt: (Creative) Write a short story that briefly details someone experiencing the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat.

## *UNIT TWO: SHORT STORIES, POETRY, AND SPORTS*

### **WEEK ONE**

Essential Question: How are sports expressed in poetry?

Readings: “Casey at the Bat,” by Ernest Thayer

“Alumnus Football,” by Grantland Rice

Language Arts Lessons: Figurative Language

Denotative and Connotative Language

Vocabulary

Poetry (Stanza, meter, etc.)

Writing Prompt: Write a poem (four stanzas minimum) about sports

-Alternate options include the various types of poems, in which the four-stanza minimum would be waived.

## **WEEK TWO**

Essential Question: How are sports expressed in short stories?

Readings: "A Piece of Steak," by Jack London

"The Curious Case of Sidd Finch," by George Plimpton

Language Arts Lessons: Hyperbole

Synonyms and Antonyms

Vocabulary

Writing Prompt: You are a sports agent. Use hyperbole to hype up a client of yours. Two paragraphs minimum.

Modifications for Students with Special Needs: For writing prompt, one paragraph minimum.

## **WEEK THREE**

Essential Question: What is the difference between poetry and written songs?

Readings: "Glory Days," by Bruce Springsteen (song)

"Centerfield" by John Fogerty (song)

Language Arts Lessons: Vocabulary

Personification

Sensory details

Writing Prompt: (Descriptive) Sit down at a park, at the mall, or somewhere relatively busy, for 10 minutes. Use sensory details to describe what goes on around you during that time.

-Alternate options include listening to a recording or watching a television program and describing the sensory details from it. Must include detailed description of what is being listened to/watched.

## WEEK FOUR

Essential Question: Can athletes also be accomplished verse writers?

Readings: "Para Rumbiar," by Fernando Perez, *Poetry Magazine*

"Hip Hop," by Etan Thomas

Language Arts Lessons: Vocabulary

Similes and Metaphors

Multiple Meaning Words

Writing Prompt: (Journalism) Pick a song, short story, or poem written by an athlete. Write a review of it.

### CHAPTER THREE – NARRATIVE

As with any curriculum, I have broken up this class by unit. The units are not traditional language arts units (main idea, compare and contrast, etc.), however, they incorporate all language arts benchmarks and content within them. I decided to split up the units based on concepts that are unique to sports. Hence, the first unit was titled, “The Thrill of Victory, the Agony of Defeat.”

In this unit, students will learn about the thin line between winning and losing, and the emotion that those results carry with them. As a whole, this is more of a life lesson than a language arts-specific lesson, but it goes to show that it is not a feeling that only occurs in the sports world. We will look at a number of athletes and teams who came close to victory but fell short; dominated their sport or era; and those who are perennial losers.

In the two units I’ve presented, each will last four weeks. Within each week, I’ve provided an essential question that will encompass the learning for the week; several readings that will be done in class or as homework if necessary; language arts lessons that will be the focus of that week and will be woven throughout; and a writing prompt. While this class’s main goal is to improve the reading levels and interests of unwilling readers, I feel that writing cannot be left out. After all, my goal is to make this not a substitute for the general education language arts class, but a supplement to it. Similar to the point made by Tracy J.R. Collins, sports literature classes need to still include the base of what is taught in language arts classes.

For week one, I’ve chosen the essential question, “why do people play sports?” For a class that is focused on reading about sports, I think it is an important question to answer early on in the class. Students may initially respond by saying, “I’m good at a particular sport,” or, “I enjoy playing it.” By the end of the week, like with all essential questions, I would hope that they would revisit their answer and fine-tune it a little bit given what they’d learned during the week.

The readings I've selected are two magazine articles and a book, *Pinned* by Alfred C. Martino. While most classes don't delve into the reading of magazine articles, some of the best pieces of sports writing come from that venue. I feel it is an avenue that is woefully underexplored in language arts classes, and I believe students can learn a lot from them. However, I also wanted to include a book into the curriculum, since there are many excellent books about sports geared toward children. Reading a variety of texts is supported in much of the literature gathered on utilizing sports literature in ELA classes.

*Pinned* tells the story of two boys who meet in the state wrestling finals. Students may relate to either of the boys, yet only one can be the victor in the finals. This concept fits right in with this particular unit. The articles are focused on Michael Jordan and Scott Norwood. Jordan, of course, is the greatest basketball player of all-time and will be where the "thrill of victory" is discussed. Norwood is known for his last-second missed field goal in Super Bowl XXV that would've given the Buffalo Bills a win over the New York Giants. That would be "the agony of defeat."

Throughout each lesson and each reading, new vocabulary will be charted and discussed. There are bound to be words students are unfamiliar with in the readings, and we will create a list and work with the vocabulary when we encounter it. Author's purpose is another lesson for the week, looking at the purpose for writing about Jordan and Norwood: What can be gained by profiling these men? Why does the public take such interest in the extremes of sports, that being a dominating champion or someone who cost their team a game, or in this case, a championship? Parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective, etc.) will also be tracked through the readings.

With each week's writing prompts, I will attempt to make them a different kind of writing. By high-school, students will have hopefully encountered the different types of writing, which would limit the amount of time needed to teach specifics. The first week's prompt will be persuasive, and will directly relate to the essential question: I will ask students to pretend to write an article for the school

paper in which they are trying to convince the student body to try out for a sport. Not only does this help them in their persuasive writing, it also exposes them to sports journalism and the expectations in writing for a newspaper. As described by Ira Berkow in his profile of sportswriter James T. Farrell, writing about sports is not exclusive to those who cover sports for a living. It can be peppered throughout any kind of writing, by any kind of writer.

Week two's essential question, "what makes someone strive for perfection?" is one that again, ties in sports with other parts of life. People may strive for perfection in sports, but one can strive for perfection no matter what job or career they hold. *Pinned* will continue to be read in class, and we will read an article on LeBron James finally winning a championship with the Miami Heat, and Tiger Woods and his spectacular fall from grace. Like Jordan and Norwood, both are on opposite ends of the spectrum of the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Both Woods and James could also be considered perfectionists, a trait that dovetails with the week's essential question.

I don't find showing videos is always necessary, but it's an undeniable truth that today's demographic of students are used to learning while looking at a screen or a video, be it on television, computers, phones, or reading tablets. Thus, it would be silly to not allow them to interact with such media in the classroom. This week's lesson would incorporate a short video from a reputable source (biography.com) on the rise and fall of Tiger Woods. When using video, I believe it should be used to supplement a reading or a lesson, rather than being used to replace it.

As with every week, vocabulary will be a key point that will be focused on. In addition, cause and effect will be discussed through the lens of LeBron and Tiger: What were the causes and effects of their actions? Through *Pinned*, characters and setting will be reviewed. I'd like to have the students focus at least one lesson per week on the book, so that it does not get overshadowed by the other readings and essential questions (though the essential questions should and will have some relevance to the book, too).

The writing prompt for the week will be narrative. The students will be asked to describe the most successful or “perfect” moment they’ve experienced while playing sports. If the students enjoy sports but don’t really have experience playing, they can answer the question based on a perfect or most successful moment in life. It will get them thinking about that moment and everything that went into it, hopefully, to allow them to understand how such a moment can be repeated.

The essential question of unit one, week three, is, “Is the risk of cheating worth the reward?” Sports has been rife with cheating, and not just recently. In an attempt to experience the thrill of victory, athletes and teams have set aside their morals and done irreparable harm to themselves and their sports, whether it be using illegal substances or conspiring to throw a game.

In addition to *Pinned*, the class will read about Lance Armstrong and his transgressions, as well as Barry Bonds and the accusations of steroid use while he played baseball. In this case, both men were caught, which may skew the opinion students have when thinking about the essential question, but they will be assured that many people have found ways around drug testing or whatever an athlete’s choice of cheat may be.

The language arts lessons will cover vocabulary, compare and contrast, and idioms and figurative language. Compare and contrast will be done not only with Bonds and Armstrong, but the two boys who are the main characters in *Pinned*. Students will run into idioms and figurative language in many of their readings, and it is a type of language they need to become familiar with whether they read a book, a journal article, a newspaper column, or any other piece of writing.

Expository writing is the type of writing prompt students will work with. They will explain why or why they wouldn’t vote for Bonds or any other known steroid user for the Major League Baseball Hall-of-Fame. It is a complicated answer, one that students need to really think about and back up their reasoning. They should have many reasons why or why not, given the week’s lessons.

Sports are all about the human confrontation. Whether it's a shooter vs. goalie in soccer or hockey, tackler vs. running back in football, or pitcher vs. batter in baseball, the human confrontation is what makes games great. Week four's essential question (and the final essential question of the unit) is, "what makes the human confrontation of sports so intriguing?" It gets students to look beyond playing a Madden video game or playing fantasy football and to look at the actual people, the participants, in the games.

*Pinned* will continue to be read. It may bleed over into the next unit if necessary, but the ideal situation would be to finish it as we're finishing the current unit. The two readings I chose to work with this week include a reading about Notre Dame's marathon college basketball win over Louisville in 2013; and a tennis match from 2010 featuring John Isner vs. Nicolas Mahut, the longest match in tennis history. With these readings throughout the unit, I tried to cover a different sport with each one, or at least, give students a wide array of sports to read about.

I've also included a video of highlights from the Notre Dame vs. Louisville game where the drama was on display. The game went into five overtimes, neither team wanting to cede control to the other. The students will be able to see the pain on the players' faces, the sweat, the agony and the thrill, all throughout this brief video. I believe by seeing the faces of those athletes, students will better understand what they went through.

Vocabulary, point-of-view, and inferences will be language arts lesson focuses for the week. Point-of-view will involve reading the two stories and *Pinned* and determining the point-of-view the author is writing from, as well as what the stories might look like if they were written from a different point-of-view. Many writings contain inferences, so that will be explored as well through the three pieces of reading.

The final writing prompt of the unit will allow students to show their creativity. It will also be an assessment to see how much they learned from the unit and what they were able to take from it. They

will write a short story that briefly describes someone experiencing the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat. I think that is a good way to bring it back around to the actual title of the unit.

The second unit I outlined does not necessarily have to follow the first unit, but it can. The title of this unit is, “Short Stories, Poetry, and Sports.” Again, students are learning and engaged in language arts core content of short stories and poetry, but it is combined with the subject of sports in order to entice the unwilling reader.

The first week seeks to answer a question I would expect many students to have coming into this unit: “How are sports expressed in poetry?” In week one, we’ll look at perhaps the most famous sports poem of all-time, “Casey at the Bat,” and also “Alumnus Football” by Grantland Rice. I made sure to once again pick poems from two different sports in an effort to reach as many students as possible: Even though these kids ostensibly like sports, they may like some more than others, therefore, I want to give them a taste of each.

The language arts lessons will focus on figurative and denotative and connotative language, as well as vocabulary, as always. The language of poetry can be different than the language students are used to encountering in reading other forms of writing, so it’s important to get them used to figurative, denotative, and connotative language immediately. I’ll also mix in some poetry-specific vocabulary, such as stanzas and meter. The writing prompt is an easy one to fit into this lesson and it asks students to write a poem (four stanzas minimum) about sports. Some students find poetry difficult, so I tried not to ask a lot of them on their first time out.

The second week asks nearly the same question as the first, substituting “short stories” for “poetry.” We’ll look at two short stories dealing with sports, “A Piece of Steak” by Jack London, and “The Curious Case of Sidd Finch,” by George Plimpton. Hyperbole, synonyms and antonyms, and vocabulary will be the language arts lessons for the week. Hyperbole will come into play during the Sidd Finch article. Synonyms and antonyms aren’t necessarily specific to either of the readings or to short stories in

general, but you can still use the readings to figure out what synonyms and antonyms could take the place of other words.

Like the first unit's first week writing assignment, I will be asking students to put themselves in the shoes of someone associated with sports in this writing prompt. But instead of a sportswriter, I will ask the students to pretend to be sports agents, and to use hyperbole to hype up a client. It will need to be two paragraphs, minimum.

Week three delves into the differences (if there are any) between poetry and songs. Since songs are considered a form of poetry, I thought the students might enjoy learning about songs with a sports twist in them. After all, when the lyrics of songs are written on paper, they tend to look an awful lot like poetry.

The readings will be the songs themselves, while the students will also get a chance to listen to them. The first song will be "Glory Days" by Bruce Springsteen. The second: "Centerfield" by John Fogerty. Students may also brainstorm some sports songs of any genre they may have heard, and share them with the class.

In addition to vocabulary, personification and sensory details will be discussed in the language arts lesson. Both are used quite a bit in songs and for sensory details, I'll ask students to close their eyes and just listen to the songs, and then to write down what sensory details they could feel, see, smell, taste or touch and what lines of the song allowed them to do so.

The writing prompt will be a descriptive piece of writing. It will have to be done outside of class, as I'll ask the students to go to a busy spot at some point during the day (a mall, the park), sit for ten minutes, and record what takes place. They are to use sensory details in their writing to describe what is going on.

Week four, the last week, takes a look at poetry from another angle. The essential question is, "can athletes also be accomplished verse writers?" I wanted to address this because many kids (and

some adults) see athletes as only good at sports and nothing else. I wanted to show them that most athletes have interests outside the world of sports as well.

The readings will consist of a poem by former Major League Baseball Player Fernando Perez, and a poem by former NBA star Etan Thomas. The poems are very different as the two men come from a dissimilar background, yet both have found fame and recognition outside of their chosen sport.

The language arts lessons will include similes and metaphors, and multiple meaning words, as well as vocabulary. Similes and metaphors can also be included under the umbrella of figurative language, but they are used often enough to where I wanted to give them their own lesson. Multiple meaning words are an important concept to students who do not speak English as their first language.

The writing prompt asks students to pick a song, short story, or poem written by an athlete and to write a review of it. This ties back into journalism, a home to many kinds of reviews (movies, food, TV, etc.). Students should not have difficulty procuring one of these to review, as a simple Internet search should give them an ample amount of choices.

As a teacher of special education, I'm also aware of modifications and accommodations that must be taken into account for students with special needs. These lessons may be modified depending on the specific disability of the students in class. In the outline, two specific modifications have been given. Assignments may be shortened for students with learning disabilities, while others may be given extra time to complete in-class work out-of-class homework.

These are just two sample units to encompass a class in which reading and writing about sports is the focus. I believe that following these steps that I've outlined will encourage more unwilling readers to find something they are interested in, and read about it. As Kathy Everts Danielson noted, student engagement increases when presented with material they are likely to be interested in. Getting to read and talk about sports is a wonderful incentive for students to be well-informed.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Summary*

Research shows that students who struggle to read are attracted to stories that interest them. Historically, boys have been much slower to come around to reading than their opposite-sex counterparts. Most school-age boys are interested in sports of some type; why then are we not doing more to hook them into reading by appealing to what they actually want to read about?

The Sports Literature class I've proposed solves this issue. Boys who struggle to embrace reading would be assigned this class in addition to their regular Language Arts class. This class would be specifically geared toward students who enjoy sports and enjoy reading about sports, but still are not strong readers overall. Not only will this help some students improve their reading skills, it will also offer reluctant readers the opportunity to get better and accept reading by reading about something they enjoy.

As a first-year teacher, I've seen first-hand what young boys like to read about. I have one student who, every time we go to the library, takes out a book about soccer. He could not care less about the novel we are reading in class. I have other students who have an ongoing debate about who is the better quarterback: Russell Wilson of the Seattle Seahawks, or Robert Griffin III of the Washington Redskins. I have young men who eat and sleep the Miami Heat. But if you asked most of them, they'd say they don't like reading. Then again, when what is offered in class doesn't match up to their interests, they have no reason to be engaged.

This proposed class will contain all aspects of a regular Language Arts class. With so many states going to the Common Core Standards, it would make the class easier to implement in any state, as standards will be the same across the board. Specific lessons could also be tailored to local sports teams,

or some readings could be changed out for readings of sports that may be more popular in a certain area or among a certain demographic that is being taught.

When it comes to students who struggle to read, there is no easy answer. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; no magic wand that can be waved to ensure students do well on state tests and improve their reading skills as they pass grade levels. However, education must be constantly moving forward, adapting with the changing times. Too often, we don't see that in the classrooms.

Education in America needs to offer students variety. We need to offer them something different. We need to do everything in our power to help students become better readers, a skill they will need for the rest of their lives. It's not good enough to pass a student on to the next grade when they are not a good enough reader to survive that next step. This Sports Literature class doesn't solve every problem, but it's a start. And if a class like this becomes acceptable and successful, it could open the door for other specialized Language Arts classes to develop and prosper. Our students deserve everything we can give them. This is a step in that direction.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research and Study*

Research into education is an ever-evolving process. As more data comes in, schools attempt to tailor lessons, units, and curriculum to what the latest research shows. Sometimes it is helpful, but often, it is a confusing mess for students and teachers to wade through. Curriculum and ideas that are novel one year are tossed aside the next for the newest education model (backed up by the latest research, of course).

Research into reading is no exception. There seems to be conflicting research on whether or not boys are "behind" girls in that all-important skill. There is no one correct research model that will get to the bottom of that question. Simply looking at standardized test scores is not enough, and surveying

students does not always guarantee honest answers from participants. Hopefully, as research is refined, we will be able to truly figure out what the divide is in this country between the sexes, if one exists at all.

There is little hard data in using a class like this to improve the reading skills of students, boys or girls. One could refer to this as a “leap of faith” based on the lack of research; however, anecdotal evidence exists suggesting classes featuring specialized material can engage students who may not embrace reading. A longitudinal study that follows students in such a class for several years after may give us the answer as to the effectiveness of such curriculum.

Research into reading in general is a sticky situation. Much like differentiating between the reading ability in boys and girls, research is ongoing into the most effective way to measure reading skills overall. With states going to Common Core, it will be easier to compare the scores of students across states and use one method as a baseline for research, rather than relying on and interpreting each state’s test data and invariably trying to compare apples to oranges. With common core, it should be more like comparing apples to apples.