

North American sport— Sexuality on stage!

By PAUL HOCH

Psychologists like Erich Fromm and Paul Goodman have noted that, in America, a large part of the military impetus for both war and for militarized sports like football, hockey, and boxing has always come from repressed, and hence diverted, sexual energy.

Repressed sexuality is one of the biggest things making big games so big. The homecoming game, the bowl game bashes, the big winter weekend football booze-up—all have been the officially recognized occasions when our sexually repressed collegians and alumni of former generations have gotten together to blow off a little steam. Alcohol has always flowed freely at the parties (and in the stands), and the conception of masculinity and health being pushed has always been of the hard-drinking, hard-fighting, hard-loving, womanizing 'brute.' Like New Year's Eve, the big gladiator festivals

battlefield, whose central arena, the space between the two enemy lines, is called 'the pit.' The overwhelmingly male audience in the stands and watching on television thereby also learns the socially correct and approved standards of 'masculinity' which they then seek to carry on in their own lives.

The cheerleader is absolutely crucial to the whole ritual. Not only does her beautiful body represent the ultimate goal and prize of all the intramale competition in society, as represented by the gridiron battle; but also, by worshipping this particular conception of masculinity in her assigned role as a cheerleader she thereby confers the most important possible legitimacy on it.

It would be impossible to elevate a certain standard of masculinity to a pedestal position without securing in advance the worshipful approval of

Basically, this is just the same sort of 'you're only as good as what you're putting out' criterion of performance that one is supposedly judged by in a factory, on a ball field, or, apparently, in a bedroom. The rat race to 'masculinity' never ends, and no matter how many games you 'win' (or how much you 'score'), each day the game begins anew. Which is probably why Mailer describes himself as *The Prisoner of Sex*.

The upper class, which by virtue of its privileged social position, never has to produce that much of anything, can easily afford to 'have other, more 'humanistic,' standards of manhood involving an emphasis on process rather than product, as well as vague ideals of what it calls human dignity. Working class men, and particularly the men of the so-called minority groups, however, are often stuck in such boring and

the correct virginal, girl-next-door image of American purity. Though the TV commentators are quick to comment on the well-roundedness of each cheerleader's sweater, the message is strictly: look, don't touch. The girls' drill teams strutting around at halftime in mock military uniforms above their tiny skirts, and parading in precision drill steps, provide a clear link-up between repressed sexuality and the militarism that surrounds all aspects of the big game gladiator battle.

Men who cannot be super-masculine gladiators end up as perpetual consumers of 'masculine' products, from the big game itself to 'manlier' beers to sports cars 'with drive' to the man after-shave lotion. Women whose face and figure do not fit the vestal virgin cheerleader ideal can then get their 'femininity' by consuming everything



have been established occasions when the barriers of sexual repression have been allowed to come down. At such times, sex is O.K. if enjoyed in the proper plastic spirit, that is—combined with alcohol, fraternity parties, and spending money. And the whole thing has been sold to the old grads who come back for the big game as 'tradition' and even 'Americanism.'

An important aspect of the ancient Roman gladiator spectacles was the sanctifying presence of scantily clad vestal virgins to bless the combatants and elevate the event into an almost religious celebration of the powers of brute male gladiator strength and dominance. Today the vestal virgin function at such modern day gladiator rituals as football bowl games has been taken over by the cheerleaders, girls' drill teams, drum majorettes, baton twirlers and the evening gown clad beauty contest winners.

The whole ritual can easily be compared to a primitive male puberty rite, which for the gladiators consists of a sort of ritualized battle for the laurels of the tribe's conception of 'manhood.' This is to be won by the gridiron gladiator's proofs of valor on the

those sex objects that this kind of masculinity will magically enchant. To him that society adjudges to the victor, or super-male, belong the spoils. Or to put it in a more modern way, "You've gotta be a football hero to get along with a bee-u-tee-ful gal...."

The conception of 'manhood' being pushed in our modern day gladiator rites consists essentially of a battle of each and every gladiator to 'prove his masculinity' through intramale competition, struggle for dominance (which transmits into a struggle for dominance over women), conquest and direct physical brutality, with a heavy emphasis being placed on brawn not brain and complete obedience to the team owners and coaches (representing our modern day economic caesars). Ideologically this view of manhood not only makes every man the 'competitor' (and, to some extent, the enemy) of every other, but forces every man to continuously 'prove' what is called his 'masculinity' by repeated proofs of potency and dominance. Thus, one gets through macho sport, the same sort of psychopathic performance-oriented criteria of manhood that one gets in the novels of Norman Mailer (and particularly in his essay 'The White Negro').

abrasive jobs that their main consolation all too often lies in this repressive definition of 'masculinity.' Particularly so, since this emphasis on machismo provides the ideological rationale for dominating one's women and identifying with one's own group's super-masculine sports heroes. These then become the main sops in a working-man's life, after his job and boss have robbed him of a large part of his potential for creativity, self-actualization and real involvement in his work.

For the fans, the gridiron gladiators are supposed to typify the ultimate in American 'manhood.' As one columnist put it, "football players represent the deep-seated desire of every red-blooded American male to be a Superman (with their shoulder pads the gridiron gladiators even look like Superman), all-powerful and immortal, the average fan's ultimate trip, the fulfillment of the American dream." On the other hand, the cheerleaders typify good, clean, virginal American 'womanhood,' brought up to passively worship their Supermen from the sidelines of a ritual they are never really allowed to be fully a part of. They provide the right degree of sexual tension (and hint of sexual rewards) for the battle, while preserving

from make-up to hair-spray to vaginal deodorants. It seems that this endless rat race to 'masculinity' and 'femininity' is one of the main things that keeps this kind of economy churning.

In summation, our mass public gladiator festivals have become one of the key national arenas in which we are taught our conception of 'masculinity' and 'femininity,' which we are then encouraged (especially during commercial breaks in the action) to translate into mass consumption of 'masculine' and 'feminine' products. Furthermore these mass gladiator spectacles are much more effective than any other kind of public entertainment or spectacle for inculcating these values because the male fans fully identify with the values displayed by their sports heroes to a far greater extent than they do with the values of movie stars or TV heroes. After all, though a man might allow himself to be put to sleep by a late night TV war movie, he does not normally jump up and down in his seat screaming "Kill the enemy"! On the other hand, at a football game he might do exactly that, and a lot more, to cheer on his heroes in the big game.

Not really much of a game.