When Terrorists Play Ball

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Abstract
Public discourse often forwards Muslim athletes as examples of “exceptional” Muslims who are “moderate.” This signals that engaging in discourse about sports can allow U.S. Muslims to tap into the nationalism and respectability necessary for demonstrating citizenship, and combat increased scrutiny and charges of radicalization. This article examines the discursive ripples that result when this connection between sports, nationalism and respectability, and “moderate Muslims” is disrupted. I take up the case study of the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing mastermind, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, who was also an accomplished boxer. First, I describe how discourse about sports emerges in conversations about “moderate Muslims”, and second, I examine how Tsarnaev’s athletic accomplishments mediate his terrorist persona in the news coverage. I draw on respectability politics and Jasbir Puar’s concept of the hypertrophied heterosexual in my analysis. In doing so, I establish how discourse about sports mediates conversations about U.S. Muslim identity and furthers U.S. exceptionalism.

Keywords
sports, masculinity, respectability, anti-Muslim sentiment, exceptionalism

With anti-Muslim sentiment on the rise in the United States, a parallel narrative about “moderate Muslims” has emerged, framing particular Muslims as ideal American citizens “opposed” to terrorism. I argue that, increasingly, sports has become a conduit for Muslims to demonstrate the respectability required to be framed

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“moderate.” When former U.S. President Barack Obama visited the Islamic Society of Baltimore just two months after the San Bernardino shooting, he stressed that mosques were community spaces where “kids play[ed] baseball and football and basketball,” and that Muslims are “our neighbors, teachers, doctors . . . [and the] sports heroes we cheer for” (The White House Archives, 2016). When Donald Trump alleged that these Muslim sports heroes did not exist (despite Obama naming several in his speech), scores of Twitter users corrected him to demonstrate that Muslims are, in fact, part of the sport landscape and therefore U.S. citizenry. Indeed, sporting does occupy an important role in Islam and, as I discuss later, the Prophet Muhammad was a skilled archer and encouraged sporting. However, Obama’s mention of sports heroes likely attempted to invoke the nationalism that scholars recognize has become associated with sports (Bairner, 2001; Hargreaves, 2002; Vinokur, 1988). With anti-Muslim sentiment on the rise in the United States, aligning Muslims with such nationalism is particularly important and an efficient way to highlight “moderate Muslims”: sports is tied to nationalism and, ostensibly, nationalism is a statement against terrorism (Heath & O’Hair, 2008, p. 24). Additionally, sports is broadly constructed as containing moral value, often compared to religion (Hoffman, 1992), and is a site where ideology—particularly gender ideology and masculinity—is imprinted (Anderson, 2005; Nylund, 2007). It is this nationalism, associated with morality and particular performances of gender, that Obama taps into when he brings up sports to intervene in U.S. anti-Muslim sentiment. Sports heroes become examples of “good” Muslims, and Muslim Americans avow team loyalties to construct themselves as moderates.

The idea is that Islam and sports are inherently incompatible, so it takes an “exceptional” Muslim, a moderate, to reconcile the two (even though, as I describe later, Islamic doctrine actually encourages sporting). For instance, The Washington Post declared, “Muslim female athletes find sport so essential they compete while covered” (Culpepper, 2016), thus suggesting that being both an observant Muslim and athlete is remarkable. As U.S. Muslims face increased scrutiny for radicalization, engaging discourse about sports has become a means to make a statement against terrorism and demonstrate “moderate Muslim” values. I use the term “discourse about sports” to include any discussion of sports in the media or in private or public sporting circles as well as any discussions by athletes and/or private individuals. Discourse about sports mediates U.S. Muslim identity because it presents a relationship between nationalism and U.S. exceptionalism, which in turn provides a template for U.S. Muslims to demonstrate their credentials as “citizens.” I explore how discourse about sports mediates U.S. Muslim identity by examining how news media construct Tamerlan Tsarnaev, the mastermind of the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombing. As both a terrorist and an accomplished boxer, Tamerlan disrupted the link between sports and nationalism. However, the news narratives attempt to recuperate sporting by presenting it as a pathway away from terrorism, which fails due to Tsarnaev’s own poor sportsmanship and personal failings. Through this analysis, I hope to articulate how sports itself is rescued from discourse
about terrorism, and how it furthers the “moderate Muslim” trope that bolsters U.S. exceptionalism.

**American, Muslim, and Rooting for the Spurs**

Before I examine my case study, I want to describe the thread of discourse about sports visible in conversations by, and about, U.S. Muslims. In mid-2016, boxing legend Muhammad Ali passed away, and his death received enormous attention from liberal and conservative media alike—most notably from ESPN (Entertainment and Sports Programming Network), which played four hours of uninterrupted coverage of his legacy. In the wake of his death, many U.S. Muslims were heartened that Islam was finally receiving positive coverage (Burke, 2016; Howard, 2016). At a time when anti-Muslim sentiment had peaked since 9/11, Ali’s death provided an opportunity to showcase the patriotism and talent of an American Muslim. The goodwill was short-lived, however, as it was followed just nine days later by the Orlando nightclub massacre, where nearly 50 individuals were murdered by an ostensibly “radicalized Muslim.”

Around this time, Ibtihaj Muhammad was gaining recognition as the first hijabi athlete representing the U.S. fencing team in the Summer Olympics. Muhammad received some media attention in March 2016 when she was asked to remove her head covering for an ID photograph at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas. When Muhammad described her experience on Twitter, news and social media responded with outrage at the discrimination the “history-making Olympian” experienced. The Washington Post wrote “Meet Ibtihaj Muhammad, the history-making Olympian who called out SXSW for telling her to remove her hijab” (Kaplan, 2016). The Guardian wrote, “SXSW apologizes after asking U.S. Rio 2016 Olympian to remove hijab” (Bowles, 2016). The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, and USA Today all carried variations of these headlines, each mentioning Muhammad’s hijab and describing her as an “Olympian” or “U.S. fencer.” These news stories marked her as exceptional—exceptional because of her athleticism, exceptional for “overcoming” the restrictions that Islam allegedly places on women, and exceptional because she is Black and thus an example of exceptional blackness. These factors converge to construct her as an exceptional Muslim who is also a testament to U.S. exceptionalism. It also did not hurt that Muhammad was attending a large music and media festival, which is another element that helped mediate her Islamic identity by constructing her as a “moderate Muslim.” In an interview with Ellen DeGeneres, Muhammad joked that her mother encouraged her to go into fencing because fencers were clothed from neck to toe. Thus, her Islamic background was not necessarily reconciled with her sportswomanship, and Islam was not necessarily presented as compatible with sporting. Rather, her athletic background served to moderate her visible practice of Islam. Jennifer Hargreaves makes a similar observation about the perceived incompatibility of Islam and sports in her study of the “Muslim female heroic” in sports (2000). Hargreaves describes how Moroccan
Olympian Nawal El Moutawakel was hailed as heroic by the American media for “triumph[ing] over a unified, restricted ‘way of life’ that normally exclude[d] women from sport” (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 47). Hargreaves also draws attention to the significance of intersectionality when it comes to sports and Islam, as Muslim female athletes are celebrated very differently than Muslim male athletes; the former become symbols of strength who overcame the alleged Islamic subjugation of women, while the latter demonstrate an exceptional, moderate practice of Islam.

However, there is clearly a massive difference between athletes like Muhammad Ali, Ibtihaj Muhammad, and the many American Muslim athletes who identify as Muslim, versus the terrorist Tamerlan Tsarnaev who also happened to be an athlete. My goal is not to compare them but rather to highlight how U.S. narratives about Muslim identity engage discourse about sports and how frequently U.S. Muslim athletes are named and recognized in discussions of “moderate Muslim”. In this article, I focus on how Tamerlan Tsarnaev’s identity as an athlete must be discursively treated in order to construct him as the “opposite” of a “moderate Muslim”, that is, a terrorist.

Everyday U.S. Muslims themselves have recognized that sports taps into a form of nationalism that makes a clear statement against terrorism and may consequently choose to front their investment in sports to construct themselves as moderates. Discussions of sports emerge even in narratives about Muslim Americans who are not athletes but are anxious to demonstrate their citizenship. Imam Suhaib Webb, the leader of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center, is a noted “moderate Muslim” (Marsh, 2011) who frequently forwards his interest in sport to consolidate his Muslim American identity. Sports metaphors appear in his sermons, for example, “you have to think ahead of the game bro” (Webb, 2015), and he occasionally tweets pictures of Celtics jerseys. In an interview about religion in America, Webb stated that he believed in the concept of an American-style Islam, and to drive the point home, said that he “love[d] the Sooners, hate[d] the Longhorns, you know, the whole nine yards . . . [and was] a Celtics fan” (CBS, 2013). In this way, Webb establishes his credentials to preach an “American-style” Islam. Of course, this shifts attention away from the fact that Islam has, historically, always been a religion with strong roots in the United States and even had some impact on the founding of the nation (Denise Spellberg’s Thomas Jefferson’s Qur’an, 2013, is a particularly compelling study of how Islam influenced the Founding Fathers). Furthermore, the sports language glides over the more complex parts of Webb’s identity to forward a palatable American Muslim identity that even conservative U.S. Muslims might find acceptable, since (as I discuss in the next section) sports is actually encouraged in Islam.

There are many other examples of everyday Muslims who engage discourse about sports to frame themselves. A photo of one of the victims in the 2015 Chapel Hill shooting, Deah Barakah, dressed as National Basketball Association (NBA) player Steph Curry was widely circulated and the Triangle Muslims named a basketball championship in his honor. The Council of American–Islamic Relations, Oklahoma, launched their #TheMuslimNextDoor campaign, promoting it with a picture
of a Muslim family where the son is holding a basketball. NorthJersey.com ran an article about a Clifton Muslim family responding to anti-Muslim sentiment, the article beginning “[n]eighbors knew Salaheddin Mustafa of Clifton as a die-hard Giants fan . . .” alongside a picture of the family of five, four of whom are in sports jerseys (Adely, 2016). There is a clear pattern where everyday U.S. Muslims engage discourse about sports, instinctively or purposefully, to tap into mainstream nationalism.

However, this is not to say that U.S. Muslims are pretending a love for sports or that sports-loving Muslims are always recognized as moderate. Rather, I am arguing that it is likely that sports-loving Muslims recognize the link between nationalism and sports and seek to highlight that to shield themselves from anti-Muslim sentiment. As I mentioned earlier, nationalism is a statement against terrorism, and using sports as a conduit to make a statement against terrorism is a rhetorical strategy that U.S. Muslims can employ. Furthermore, since sporting is actually encouraged by Islam (as I discuss in the next section), such a rhetorical maneuver is particularly satisfying because it does not undermine Muslim ethos.

Undoubtedly, discourse about sports runs stealthily but persistently through conversations about U.S. “moderate Muslim”, and both Muslims and the status quo use it to describe “ideal” U.S. Muslim identity. This overlap in rhetorical strategies is remarkable because Muslims so rarely have the opportunity to frame themselves in a particular way in the U.S. public sphere, much less in the same way the status quo frames them. In the next section, I establish how the “moderate Muslim” trope and discourse about sports impact respectability, gender, and exceptionalism ideology in the United States, and why this overlapping impact is significant for U.S. Muslim identity.

**Respectably Moderate**

Let us first consider the term “moderate Muslim”—an offensive term due to its implication that Islam in inherently extreme. The “moderate Muslim” in the United States is ostensibly a foil to “radicalized” Muslims, and, as I discuss in the next section, simultaneously reflects what is exceptional about U.S. values. In *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the roots of terror*, Mahmood Mamdani points out that Islam is constructed as resistant to modernity, a religion that must inherently clash with “Western civilization” (Mamdani, 2005), thus obligating Muslims to prove their “credentials” and join the battle against “bad Muslims.” This, Mamdani argues, makes the distinction between good and “bad” Muslims political rather than cultural or religious (2005, p. 15). Since the burden of performing “moderation” falls on U.S. Muslims, they often engage in essentialism of their own identities (Kahani-Hopkins & Hopkins, 2002) and conform to align with the perceived values of liberal democracy (Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004). U.S. Muslims have developed a form of “moderate Muslim-speak” to forward their American identities and show their presence is compatible with Western social life (McGinty,
2012), thus making the moderate not a religious but a political product that performs good citizenship. This constitutes assimilation at best and erasure at worst.

It is also important to recognize that the “moderate Muslim” is rendered and gendered male. Given that many stereotypes of “radical Muslims” are also gendered male—the subjugation of women, a tendency toward violence and barbarism, and so forth—it is no accident that “moderate Muslim” discourse targets Muslim males in the U.S. Jack Shaheen’s *Reel Bad Arabs: how Hollywood vilifies a people* examines how Arabs (a term sometimes used interchangeably with Muslims in U.S. discourse) are presented in mass media, pointing out that they are presented as the classic Orientalized Other—as “lazy, bearded heathen Arab Muslim[s]...[who were] cheating vendors and [held] exotic concubines...hostage in slave markets...subjugating harem maidens” (Shaheen, 2012, p. 10). In *Terrorist Assemblages* (2007), Jasbir Puar offers a focused critique of terrorist masculinity, explaining that it is constructed as sexually deviant in contrast to U.S. hegemonic masculinity, which is a site of nationalism. It is no coincidence, then, that the “moderate Muslim”, who is expected to stand apart from “terrorists,” is also gendered male. Recognizing this intersectionality helps explain why ostensibly “moderate Muslim” choose the sports arena (and discourse about sports), which are traditionally masculine domains, to demonstrate nationalism. This intersectionality is also the reason why the Tamerlan Tsarnaev case is so fascinating. The simultaneous presence of his terrorist and athletic identities, each of which engages a very different form of masculinity, presents an important case study of how sporting identity mediates Muslim identity in the United States.

Now, I want to turn to the relevance of respectability politics in the “moderate Muslim” construct as well as discourse about sports. Historically, respectability politics is a strategy marginalized individuals, particularly Black men in the United States, have employed to demonstrate compatibility with the “mainstream” (Smith, 2014) by actively disengaging from antagonistic or “disreputable” behavior that could incriminate oneself. This is not unlike the respectability demanded of “moderate Muslim” males who are more likely to be suspected of “terrorist” activity than Muslim women. Michelle Smith, however, points out that the signature of respectability politics is its disavowal of the legitimacy of black rage (Smith, 2014), thus dismissing Black pain while demanding conformity from Black communities. Significantly, a similar demonstration of respectability is expected of U.S. Muslims today who are expected to actively demonstrate citizenship while remaining passive in the face of discrimination. U.S. Muslims enact discourses of belonging and sameness, which range from “negating terrorist accusations...[to] emphasizing [the] individual humanity and the ordinariness of Muslim Americans” (McGinty, 2012, p. 2959). This expectation of passivity was evident when news stories praised Muslim worshippers in Phoenix, Arizona, for inviting armed “anti-Islam protestors” into their mosque to join in prayer (Wyloge, 2015). In other words, Muslim worshippers received approval for inviting armed individuals in profanity-laced T-shirts into their mosque. This frankly absurd act of conciliation is
emblematic of the inertia, passivity, and “respectability” expected of U.S. Muslims in the face of bigotry. Additionally, “moderate Muslim” must demonstrate a version of the “Talented Tenth” concept, which dictated Black respectability. The Talented Tenth philosophy states that Black elites were responsible for ridding the nine tenths of the Black population of undesirable traits and “lift them up,” thus demonstrating to White America that Blacks were worthy of full citizenship rights (Harris, 2014). This mirrors the idea that “moderate Muslim” are those who act as informers, who “turn in” suspected terrorists in their own communities. A prominent example is Senator Clinton was U.S. Senator Hillary Clinton’s call for American Muslims to be the “eyes and ears” on the “frontlines” of counterterrorism in response to an audience question about combatting anti-Muslim sentiment during the second 2016 presidential debate. This furthers the idea that American Muslims who are true moderates will join in rooting out the undesirable components of their own community to demonstrate their own respectability, patriotism, and worthiness of citizenship.

It is this respectability and demonstration of citizenship that U.S. Muslims are able to tap into through discourse about sports. And, it is important to consider that such a discursive move is possibly an empowering one that enables agency. As I mentioned earlier, it is challenging for U.S. Muslims to be able to frame themselves in a particular way and particularly in a way that overlaps with how the status quo discursively frames them. Engaging discourse about sports offers a pathway for U.S. Muslims to frame themselves in a way that demonstrates consistency with mainstream culture (and mainstream nationalism). This implies the assumption that U.S. Muslims are being compelled to adopt unfamiliar sporting cultural norms or engaging in sporting simply to construct a moderate identity. However, a third possibility is that Muslim individuals, and particularly Muslim men, are crafting unique sporting norms that bind Muslim communities. Stanley Thangaraj explores this possibility in Desi Hoop Dreams (2015), exploring how young South Asian Muslim men engage in sports, and thus American popular cultural forms, while also crafting a particular South Asian American identity. Such sporting communities, Thangaraj argues, allow young Muslim Americans to perform an “acceptable comportment of sporting masculinity . . . a version that is readable, palatable, and normative within their sporting space and the larger U.S. public” (2015, p. 15). It allows these men to present themselves as “strong, able-bodied, aggressive, respectable, and heterosexual men” (2015, p. 14) performing cultural citizenship. And so, we might see participation in sport(ing) as a disciplining mechanism for Muslims seeking to be framed as moderate, or an empowering strategy that enables Muslim Americans to perform various components of their identity in ways that are meaningful and authentic to them. One of the many reasons the Tamerlan Tsarnaev case is so significant is that his identity as both a terrorist and athlete ruptures the expectation of respectability associated with U.S. Muslims who participate in sporting. It is this rupturing, and the subsequent recovery of sports, nationalism, and exceptionalism that I explore in the Tsarnaev case study.
Gender, Exceptionalism, and Sports Intersect

Gender ideology runs through discourse about sports and less obviously through the “moderate Muslim” narrative within discourse about sports. Gender ideology manifests in the sports arena and also influences the construction of the “Muslim terrorist” versus the “moderate Muslim”, and this overlap makes a gender lens particularly useful in an analysis of Tamerlan Tsarnaev’s characterization as a terrorist with athletic ambitions. There is ample scholarship addressing how sports and sporting offer a site for the inscription and performance of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Trujillo, 1991), while others have noted that media discourse pertaining to sports furthers gender role socialization (Hardin & Greer, 2009). Billings, Butterworth, and Turman also point out that media text and images focus on hegemonically masculine traits in athletes such as strength and size, often overlooking traits like finesse and control (2015, p. 123). This is significant, given that the characterization of terrorist masculinity similarly attends primarily to the strength, barbarism, and violence of the Orientalized terrorist while only briefly acknowledging his tactical skill (Barkawi and Stanski’s Orientalism and War, 2012, offers a sustained analysis of this trope). Additionally, the news coverage scrutinizes various components of Tamerlan’s masculinity: His physical appearance, strength, and musculature; his casual violence toward women (particularly his then girlfriend, whom he abused); and his simultaneous arrogance and cowardice in the ring. Given this scrutiny of Tamerlan’s gender as it manifested in his boxing, a gendered approach is particularly useful to examine the coverage of his athletic pursuits.

Furthermore, the centrality of “terrorist sexuality” in constructing Muslim “terrorists” versus moderates makes a gendered approach particularly useful. Sunaina Maira posits that gender, religion, and nationalism are intertwined in state discourse about “terror” and how good and “bad” Muslim citizenship are interpreted (Maira, 2009, p. 632). In Terrorist Assemblages, Jasbir Puar argues that Muslim men are constructed as “hypertrophied heterosexuals,” which is a construction of perverse masculinity coupled with failed monogamy as well as disability (Puar, 2007, p. 38). The particular gendered construction of Muslim terrorists enforces “correct” gender performances, which becomes a conduit for patriotism. Puar (2007) writes:

Sexual deviancy is linked to the process of discerning, othering, and quarantining terrorist bodies, but these racially and sexually perverse figures also labor in the service of disciplining and normalizing subjects worthy of rehabilitation away from these bodies, in other words, signaling and enforcing the mandatory terms of patriotism. In this double-deployment, the emasculated terrorist is not merely an other, but also a barometer of ab/normality involved in disciplinary apparatuses. (p. 38)

In this way, gender ideology constructs the “Muslim terrorist” to enforce a particular gender performance as a prerequisite to patriotism. Puar gestures to the creation of the “moderate Muslim” when she mentions that the sexual deviancy aligned with the
terrorist serves as a “barometer” to discipline and normalize subjects “worthy of rehabilitation.” The “moderate Muslim” attempts to cast himself as precisely such a subject. This makes the engagement of discourse about sports in the “moderate Muslim” trope even more significant. Sports has historically been a locus for U.S. gender ideology indoctrination. However, as I argue (and Thangaraj implies in Desi Hoop Dreams), it is now also a locus for Muslim men to “safely” perform state-sanctioned forms of gender, which is a prerequisite for nationalism. Sports and nationalism have long been intertwined in the United States, as have sports and gender—which is unsurprising, since particular performances of gender are bound up in nationalism. And so it is rhetorically efficient for U.S. Muslims to demonstrate nationalism—and moderation, as it were—through discourse about sports, which functions as a statement against terrorism.

The “moderate Muslim” trope helps uphold U.S. exceptionalism, which is relevant here because—like discourse about sports—the “moderate Muslim” trope engages nationalism to present the nation as “exceptionally good.” U.S. exceptionalism frames the United States as a world moral leader based on “a pervasive faith in the uniqueness, immutability and superiority of the country’s founding liberal principles” (Patman, 2006, p. 964). For example, the “moderate Muslim” trope allows the United States to argue that it has the “best,” most “exceptional” Muslims in the world—exceptional because they are modernized and assimilated. Muslim athletes and everyday Muslims who engage in sports and sporting readily demonstrate this exceptional “Muslimhood” due to the positive attending connotations of sports.

U.S. exceptionalism discourse is a key piece in this study. First, it emerges in both the “moderate Muslim” trope and discourse about sports, which paves the way to insert “moderate Muslim” into the latter. Second, U.S. exceptionalism is contingent on sexual exceptionalism, what Jasbir Puar describes as “a narrative claiming the successful management of life in regard to a people . . . an exceptional form of national heteronormativity . . . joined by an exceptional form of national homonormativity” (2007, p. 2). Such sexual exceptionalism exacts support for heteronormativity from U.S. citizens, both heterosexual and otherwise, which stands in contrast to the deviant sexuality of “terrorists.” This makes U.S. exceptionalism inextricable from gender ideology, discourse about sports, and the “moderate Muslim” narrative. And so, the use of discourse about sports and the “moderate Muslim” trope—separately and together—to further U.S. exceptionalism helps rally citizens in the face of terror attacks.

At this point, I would be remiss not to briefly attend to the role of sports in Islam itself. Sporting and competitive games are generally encouraged in Islam, largely irrelevant of gender. In particular, the Prophet Muhammad extolled the virtues of archery and practiced archery himself. When I visited the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, I viewed a bow that was on display that was said to have belonged to the Prophet. Meanwhile, several ahadith, that is, compiled sayings and narratives of Muhammad, recount how the Prophet strongly encouraged others to engage in
archery (Sahih al Bukhari, Book 56, Hadith 113). Muhammad also strongly encouraged horse riding and swimming in addition to archery and actively encouraged racing horses (Sahih al Bukhari, Book 92, Hadith 436) and participating in games for entertainment (Sahih al Bukhari, Book 52, Hadith 150). Meanwhile, academic studies have also found that Muslim communities value sports. A study of a British Islamic school found that sporting was an opportunity for boys to dispel negative energy and learn discipline (Farooq & Parker, 2009). Meanwhile, Jennifer Hargreaves discusses the importance of women’s sports in Islamic teaching, including the emphasis on female health and equity between men and women in Islam in areas such as family, education, culture, work, and law (2000, p. 55). Hargreaves further describes women’s sports as being a popular feature of the Iranian reformist movement (2000, p. 56) and representing an important cultural reform (2000, p. 57), thus demonstrating the role of sports in mediating Muslim, and particularly female Muslim, identity. Furthermore, scholarship that looks at sports and Muslim women also locates sport as a site for gender empowerment and equity in Muslim-majority countries and beyond (Benn, Pfister, & Jawad, 2012). Meanwhile, Mahfoud Amara identifies sports as a measure to judge the degree of “integration” of Muslim athletes in France (Amara, 2013), which implies that sports is a Western measure of the “moderateness” of Muslims. However, as my earlier examples show, discourse about sports in the United States also furthers the “moderate Muslim” trope and provides a pathway for U.S. Muslims to demonstrate respectability, which offers a constrained form of agency to U.S. Muslims.

So far, I have presented a context for my study: how gender, respectability, and exceptionalism emerge in discourse about sports and “moderate Muslims”, and how sports can mediate Muslim identity. Now, I turn to my case study and describe the Boston Marathon Bombing and the subsequent coverage of Tamerlan Tsarnaev and his boxing background.

The Boston Marathon Bombing and Its Coverage

In the remainder of this article, I examine how the news media present the boxing background of the 2013 Boston Marathon Bomber mastermind Tamerlan Tsarnaev, which received sustained media focus. The bombing took place in the afternoon of April 15, 2013, at the annual Boston Marathon. Two homemade bombs detonated close to the finish line and killed three individuals (including one child) and injured hundreds of others. A few days after the bombing, the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) released images of the perpetrators, brothers Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. This was followed by a police shoot-out with the Tsarnaev brothers who fled in a hijacked car with a hostage. The police located the brothers, and Tamerlan was run over and killed by his brother during the confrontation. Dzhokhar fled, and after an intense manhunt he was found in a parked boat in Watertown, Massachusetts. He was found guilty on all charges and sentenced to death by lethal injection. At the time of writing, he is on death row.
While the coverage of Tamerlan’s boxing career is the focus of this research, there is one other point worth mentioning. The bombing itself took place against a backdrop of sports and nationalism, that is, the Boston Marathon, which takes place annually on Patriots’ Day. The fact that many of those injured, who lost their limbs, were athletes themselves compounded the hideousness of the attack. The injured were celebrated as heroes, their athleticism woven into narratives of patriotism.

While the initial coverage focused on the bombing and ensuing manhunt, the coverage began to pay close attention to Tamerlan Tsarnaev’s boxing career a few days after the attack. It is this coverage that is the focus of this study. News stories reported on several aspects of Tamerlan’s athletic career, including his boxing style and various fighters and coaches’ opinions of his skill and attitude. Journalists interviewed the patrons of the gym Tsarnaev trained in as well as fighters who faced off with him in the ring. News media reported that in 2009, Tsarnaev won the New England Golden Gloves heavyweight championship and aspired to represent the United States at the Olympics. In the wake of the bombing, the media minutely covered details of Tsarnaev’s training, his attitude in the ring, as well as his overall conduct as a sportsperson. The picture on Tsarnaev’s Wikipedia page is of him in boxing regalia, with a boxing bag and the U.S. flag in the background. Pictures of Tsarnaev sparring or training in the gym flooded the Internet, including a photo series chronicling his boxing in a student magazine at Boston University.

Tamerlan’s boxing accomplishments complicated the link between sports and nationalism. News outlets sought to examine why a “terrorist” could have athletic ambitions. A Fox News article described Tamerlan Tsarnaev as a Muslim who “had military training overseas . . . but the older brother, who was 26, also worked out in a gym and dreamed of making the U.S. Olympic boxing team” (Winter, Miller, & AP, 2013, emphases mine). The language in this quote frames Islam and sports as incongruent (if not opposing). When TIME published an article exploring the connection between boxing, brain injury, and terrorism (Kluger, 2013), Fox News roundly criticized the article (McKay, 2013), even though TIME concluded that boxing had nothing to do with Tsarnaev’s eventual actions. The coverage had to address the juxtaposition of Tsarnaev’s athletics with his terrorism, which was challenging given the role of sports in nationalism.

As I examined the coverage of Tamerlan Tsarnaev’s boxing background, I asked: how does his boxing background mediate his construction as a terrorist? I examined 35 digital texts, all of which were published within six months of the bombing, and performed a close reading and coded them for patterns. The texts came from 18 news websites and five major sports news outlets. While these texts appeared in a combination of local and national news outlets, all of them are digitally accessible and thus accessible nationwide. Five of the texts were videos, which I transcribed and coded with the others. The remaining 30 texts appeared in print. All 35 texts appeared on news platforms. I excluded any written texts that did not appear on a credible news platform (i.e., did not undergo an editorial review), and/or texts that only mentioned Tsarnaev’s
boxing in passing. In order to be included, an article needed to mention Tamerlan’s boxing background two or more times, in two or more sentences (I included boxing photos and/or captions in this count). In total, I examined approximately 1,600 lines of data (including the transcribed videos). While coding, I paid close attention to any mention of sports that helped construct Tsarnaev’s masculinity as well as his identity as a Muslim and terrorist. As mentioned earlier, I drew on Puar’s conception of the hypertrophied heterosexual as well as theories of respectability to inform my analysis. In doing so, I demonstrate how sports mediates terrorism discourse to recuperate both the “moderate Muslim” and sports itself from broader narratives about terrorism.

Boxing: A Path to Citizenship?

Mentions of sports and sporting emerged in the coverage of Tamerlan’s boxing in three clear ways, the first of which was citizenship and sports. In particular, the “American Dream” trope cropped up repeatedly in the texts, framing Tamerlan as a man desperate for his chance at the dream. A headline from The Telegraph reads “Tamerlan Tsarnaev’s hateful rage behind American Dream” (Foster, 2013), and an article in The Independent states “The Tsarneav family fled war-torn Chechnya in pursuit of the American dream. So how did their sons turn out to be America’s nightmare?” (Milmo, 2013). Tamerlan also appeared to echo this dream, when he was quoted as saying that, unlike Russia, “America has a lot of jobs” and “[one has] the chance to make money here if [one] is willing to work” (McKluskey, 2013). Several articles also reported Tamerlan’s aspiration to represent the United States (and not his native Chechnya) in the Olympics, a comment he initially made in an interview published in Boston University’s magazine The Comment. This widely quoted comment suggests a reluctant love for the United States that helps reinforce U.S. exceptionalism. Chechnya is a Muslim-majority nation in Eastern Europe that has struggled for separation from Russia since the 1990s. Although now a relatively stable republic, the majority religion and history of unrest in Chechnya present a contrast to the U.S secular ideals and relative stability of the United States, creating a foundation to bolster U.S. exceptionalism. However, the coverage also repeatedly stated that Tamerlan was not a U.S. citizen and was in fact denied citizenship because he was arrested for domestic violence in 2009 (Bain, 2013). As a result, he was barred from participating in the national Tournament of Champions, which allegedly exacerbated his frustration. A New York Times article (Sontag, Herszenhorn, & Kovaleski, 2013) reported:

It was a blow the immigrant boxer could not withstand: after capturing his second consecutive title as the Golden Gloves heavyweight champion of New English [sic] in 2010, Tamerlan Anzorovich Tsarnaev, 23, was barred from the national Tournament of Champions because he was not a United States citizen.
Much of the coverage portrays Tamerlan as an immigrant wistfully looking into the world of U.S. citizenship and boxing. Such language helps frame Tamerlan’s attempt to box for the U.S. Olympic team as a thwarted attempt toward respectability. This is especially evident when the coverage describes Tamerlan’s inability to compete as the impetus for his eventual violence. Several articles mentioned his desire to represent the United States in the Olympics, while others present boxing as his path to citizenship and assimilation. A New York Times article even suggested that when the tournament rules changed, disqualifying legal permanent residents, Tamerlan’s “aspirations [were] frustrated” and he “dropped out of boxing competition entirely, and his life veered in a completely different direction” (Sontag et al., 2013). The article suggests that his “frustrated aspirations” drove him toward terrorism; however, the implication is not that Tamerlan became a terrorist despite being an athlete, but rather because he failed to become an athlete. The implication is that boxing was a path toward respectability that Tamerlan failed to fully realize because he was always unable or unwilling to assimilate (as evident in his violence toward his then-girlfriend and general arrogance in the boxing ring). Furthermore, as I describe later, members of the boxing community described him as lacking the “discipline” to train properly and commented extensively on his poor attitude and cowardice. This contains clear strains of classic respectability politics, which states that hard work and discipline is enough to overcome structural inequality—and Tamerlan certainly carried the burden of structural inequality in the boxing ring, due to his limited English skills and being unaccustomed to crouched American-style boxing (Tamerlan was accustomed to the straight-legged European style of boxing). These widely reported critiques of Tamerlan’s discipline and “attitude” help cultivate what Michelle Smith describes as the familiar moral conditions for political progress (Smith, 2014). Therefore, the link between sports, respectability, and exceptionalism remains intact: not even sports could assimilate this clearly deviant Muslim.

The narrative of citizenship and the American Dream, which runs through the coverage of Tamerlan’s boxing aspirations, is made possible by the latent expectation of respectability that comes with sportsmanship. Consequently, the coverage constructs boxing as necessarily separate from terrorism, as the former is tied to nationalism in a way that the latter clearly rejects. In fact, one headline explicitly creates the binary between sports and terrorism: “Boston Marathon Bombing: Tamerlan Tsarnaev was a boxer. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was a Wrestler. Both were Terrorists” (Milmo, 2013). Other articles imply that an individual cannot be an athlete and terrorist without one component of this identity subjugating the other: “[t]hat speaks to a young man with a healthy sense of discipline and focus, and if he had a violent streak, it was violence well-channelled” (Hohler, 2013). Kraft and Brummet argue that sports are “major ways in which people form personal and social identity...[and also how] we construct difference, saying who we are not” (2009, p. 11). This is evident in the use of sports, specifically boxing, to gain citizenship and admittance to the American Dream and its underlying premise of
respectability, that is, that “decent,” respectable behavior can pave a pathway toward the American Dream and that sporting is a pathway to respectability. Therefore, not only is it impossible for sports to coexist with terrorism, the former actually offers a pathway away from the latter. Taken together, the implication is that boxing—or sports itself—offers a path toward respectability necessary for citizenship, in an exceptional nation that offers hope for an American Dream.

The coverage also offers an example of a respectable sportsman to contrast Tamerlan’s failed sportsmanship, failed respectability, and consequently failed citizenship. Several articles mention Edwin “La Bomba” Rodriguez, a pro-boxer who sparred with Tsarnaev in 2010. Rodriguez becomes the classic American hero who performs an idealized hegemonic masculinity and acts as a foil to Tsarnaev’s own terrorist masculinity. This is particularly significant given that Rodriguez, like Tamerlan, was not a U.S. citizen, and thus allows exceptionalism discourse to set store by the idea that “good” sportsmen and “good” immigrants have access to citizenship through sports. The coverage emphasizes Rodriguez’s strength and integrity, with quotes from him appearing in several articles. An article in The New York Daily News (Abramson, 2013) noted Rodriguez was able to beat up Tamerlan while sparring:

Rodriguez said that Tsarnaev talked a big game—vowing to give him at least six rounds of sparring that day. It didn’t happen. “First we went two rounds,” Rodriguez says. “I beat him up pretty badly. So he stepped out . . .”

Meanwhile, an article in Salon (Toledo, 2013a) similarly echoes Rodriguez’s anger and aggression toward Tamerlan:

“Today I find out he’s a terrorist and one of the Boston Marathon bombers,” [Rodriguez] posted on his Facebook page last Friday. “I’m glad I put a beating on him, but wish I’d known he was evil, because I wouldn’t have slowed down on him . . .”

These excerpts tacitly endorse Rodriguez’s aggressiveness in the ring and his performance of hegemonic masculinity. Meanwhile, Rodriguez is also constructed as a sharp judge of character, as he was quoted as describing Tsarnaev as “cocky,” “arrogant,” and a “coward” (Iole, 2013) who condescended to Rodriguez due to his smaller stature (Rodriguez beat Tsarnaev and broke his rib, the above Salon article reported). The Salon article also describes Rodriguez as a “gentleman,” that is, a fighter who could be counted on to take it easy on lesser opponents—unless he was provoked. Because Tamerlan provoked him, Rodriguez did not hold back, and the article tacitly commends him for it.

Why were Rodriguez’s unworthy comments so widely reported? They cropped up in six texts from my data set. It is likely because Rodriguez offers a clear demonstration of respectability that comes with sportsmanship: integrity, gentlemanliness, and strength. His example also preserves the connection between
sports and respectability, and Rodriguez is framed as a successful sportsperson because he acts as a foil to Tsarnaev’s failed respectability. Kraft and Brummett argue that “[w]e construct difference within sport: we have heroes and villains on the court. We know which wrestlers are the good guys and which are not. But we also construct differences between ordinary mortals and prominent athletes” (2009, p. 15). Rodriguez fills this role of hero and sportsman who protects the integrity of sports while forwarding hegemonic masculinity. Meanwhile, Tsarnaev becomes the coward who lacks the power characterizing hegemonic masculinity.

**Style Without Substance in the Ring**

Tamerlan’s inability to achieve the respectability and claim to citizenship that comes with sporting is implied in the way the coverage characterizes his boxing style. His boxing style is constructed as both foreign and inadequate despite his many successes in the ring. Four articles describe his “European” boxing style, which is “straight legged” and “stand up” rather than the “crouched American form,” immediately marking him as “foreign” and thus a noncitizen. Additionally, Bob Russo, Tsarnaev’s coach during the Golden Gloves Tournament, described Tsarnaev as an “immigrant kid” who was probably quiet around other competitors because he “[didn’t] have a really good handle on the English language” (PBS News Hour, 2013). In these ways, Tamerlan is distanced from American norms of boxing. It was essential not just to construct Tsarnaev as foreign, but his boxing as foreign as well to retain the integrity of the sport. In fact, Russo mentioned in the same interview that Tsarnaev’s eventual actions “should be no reflection on boxing” (PBS News Hour, 2013), thus attempting to rescue the respectability associated with sport.

Furthermore, the coverage engages tropes from both gender and respectability politics through a disproportionate focus on Tamerlan’s appearance and attitude, both channeled through sports parlance. Initially there was a noticeable focus on, and even a sexualization of, Tamerlan’s appearance. His photos for Boston University’s student magazine *The Comment* were widely disseminated and showed him in boxing regalia, including a rare picture with his shirt off, and posing in fashionable clothing. Tamerlan’s mother was quoted as describing him as “handsome like Hercules,” broad shouldered, and a “masterpiece” (Sontag et al., 2013). However, this positive characterization made audiences vulnerable by narrowing the gap between everyday Americans and “terrorists.” However, elements of the coverage construct Tamerlan’s sexuality as dangerous but also regressive and disabled, thus presenting him as the hypertrophied heterosexual that reinstated the distance between Muslim terrorists and the American public. Several articles depicted Tsarnaev as animal-like and barbaric, thus engaging classic Orientalist stereotypes. BBC (The British Broadcasting Corporation) quoted a neighbor saying that he charged at her “with his chest out—you know how gorillas do [sic]” (McKelvey, 2013), while a CNN (Cable News Network) video segment quoted a former sparrer calling Tsarnaev “an animal in the ring” (CNN, 2013a). A boxing coach described Tsarnaev as
moving “like a gazelle” while being “strong like a horse” (Sontag et al., 2013). Such characterizations of bodies of color in the sports arena as animalistic, dangerous, and therefore Other are not uncommon. This is particularly visible in the characterizations of Serena Williams as a “beast” and the extensive discussion of her body when she wore a leather “catsuit” to the 2002 U.S. Open. This construction of Serena Williams’s is, of course, mediated by Blackness and idealized notions of femininity. As Jaime Schultz suggests, these factors converge to suggest she possesses a “deviant sexuality” (2005, p. 339). However, as a Caucasian Chechen, Tamerlan Tsarnaev had to be constructed as non-White. Salon’s Joan Walsh observes that this was especially necessary to protect national sentiment, which is bound up in Whiteness. Walsh writes, “[s]o why are the Tsarnaev brothers not white, at least to right-wingers? Is it only because they’re Muslim? Muslim immigrants? Or is it because they’re ‘bad,’ and whiteness must be surrendered when white people are bad?” (Walsh, 2013). In asking these questions, Walsh highlights the centrality of race in the production of Tamerlan’s terrorist identity, as his race also mediates his gender and terrorist masculinity. Engaging the Orientalist tropes of animalism, aggression, and strength, which fix the gaze on Tamerlan’s body, is one way to construct him as Other while reframing his athletic prowess and physical gifts.

Puar argues that discourses of modernity mark Muslims as “sexually conservative, modest, and fearful of nudity . . . ” (2007, p. 86) as well as “queer, animalistic, barbarian . . . ” (p. 86). This portrait of Tsarnaev’s sexuality is completed by the “fear of nudity” Puar mentions; *USA Today*, the *Huffington Post*, and sports website *The Big Lead* all mention that Tsarnaev refused to box with his shirt off because he was “religious” (Douglas, 2013; Elgot, 2013; Raasch, Keen, & Zoroya, 2013). While it is unsurprising that Tsarnaev’s “Muslim masculinity” becomes a means for Othering, it is discourse about sports that executes this Othering.

Meanwhile, the coverage returns repeatedly to Tsarnaev’s boxing demeanor, particularly his flamboyance and arrogance, once again reminding the audience of the necessity of respectable comportment in the sports arena. First, the coverage scrutinizes Tsarnaev’s attire and showiness, mentioning his “brilliant-white moccasins [and] black trousers” (Foster, 2013), or his “white silk scarf, black leather pants and mirrored sunglasses” (Sontag et al., 2013) or his “unbuttoned, tight jeans” (Toledo, 2013b). This focus on style attempts to present Tsarnaev as shallow and without substance, lacking the commitment—and respectability—of a true sportsman. Furthermore, the coverage focuses on Tsarnaev’s attitude in the boxing arena, which continues to frame him as a contrast to state-sanctioned hegemonic masculinity. He lacked the persistence and imagination of true fighters; Tom Lee, president of the South Boston Boxing Club, stated that Tsarnaev “was an underachiever because he did not dedicate himself to the proper training regimen” (Sontag et al., 2013). Meanwhile, outside the ring, Tsarnaev was “arrogant and disdainful” (Yoffe, 2013) and would breach fighting protocol to taunt fighters in the locker room (Sontag et al., 2013). *The Daily Beast* mentioned that he walked on the jujitsu mats in his street shoes to disrespect the gym’s patrons (Daly, 2013). In other words, despite winning several
competitions, Tsarnaev’s was presented as lacking in skill and dedication, and his attitude utterly contrary to the discipline required for boxing. This failure to behave respectably—to treat other fighters with respect, to follow gym rules, and to demonstrate humility—frames Tsarnaev as the antithesis of a “true” sportsperson.

Terrorist-in-Training

While much of the coverage examines Tamerlan’s poor sportsmanship, it was still undeniable that he was an accomplished boxer and a terrorist, which creates some dissonance for audiences who recognize that nationalism and respectability are tied to sports. Perhaps to address this dissonance, one New York Times article (Sontag et al., 2013) suggested that Tamerlan gradually drifted away from boxing as his terrorist motives became more pronounced:

Mr. Tsarnaev portrayed his quitting as a reflection of the sport’s incompatibility with his growing devotion to Islam. But as dozens of interviews with friends, acquaintances and relatives from Cambridge, Mass., to Dagestan showed, that devotion, and the suspected radicalization that accompanied it, was a path he followed most avidly only after his more secular dreams were dashed in 2010 and he was left adrift.

Meanwhile, in several interviews, Tamerlan’s trainer and owner of Wai Kru Martial Arts Gym John Allan said that Tamerlan “absolutely” went down the “wrong path” once his citizenship and Olympic dreams were dashed (Entertainment Tonight, 2013; WGBH News, 2013) and maintained that after Tamerlan had been denied citizenship, his demeanor and attitude toward boxing changed as he began to flout gym rules and drew attention by praying in the gym.

Suggesting that Tamerlan was at his terrorist peak when he was distant from sports helps provide an explanation that retains the positive connotations associated with sports in the United States. However, the coverage was able to recuperate sports from the discourse of Tamerlan’s terrorism by arguing that his athletic pursuits weren’t sport at all but simply terrorism training. In a CNN segment, Paul Cruickshank, described as CNN’s Terror Analyst, stated, “[w]ith Western militants, wannabe jihadists, [there is] a real emphasis on physical training, physical fitness, to be prepared for jihad” (CNN, 2013b). The segment focuses on the surveillance videos from Wai Kru Martial Arts Gym in Boston, where the Tsarnaev brothers were videotaped training. Meanwhile, in a segment on ABC (The American Broadcasting Company), Diane Sawyer asked Tamerlan’s former coach if he knew whether the latter had done “any ballistics training of any kind” (Iole, 2013), thus continuing the idea that Tamerlan was not a sportsman at all but simply “training for jihad”. After all, as Kraft and Brummett argue, those who engage in sport or game “under obligation” are “neither sporting nor playing” (Kraft & Brummett, 2009, p. 10). Thus, framing Tsarnaev’s boxing background in this way extricates sports and sporting, and its attending nationalist connotations, from terrorism discourse.
Tamerlan is no longer framed as a boxer and a terrorist, but rather simply as a terrorist who was meticulous about his training. The audience is invited to view his entire sports background through the lens of terrorism, while sports and sporting are evacuated to safety.

The High Stakes of Sports for U.S. Muslims: Future Directions for Research

Early in this article, I demonstrated how discourse about sports emerges in discussions of “moderate Muslims”. It mediates these conversations due to the respectability, nationalism, and exceptionalism embedded in sports and its attending narratives. For this reason, sports must be disengaged from terrorism discourse. The news coverage of Tamerlan’s boxing background accomplishes this by constructing sports as a conduit for citizenship as well as state-sanctioned performances of hegemonic masculinity. It does so by presenting Tsarnaev’s attitude, skill, and style as an athlete as both ineffectual and representative of his “terrorist masculinity.” And finally, it does so by entirely dismissing his background as an athlete, framing it instead as “terrorism training.”

There is a clear limitation to this study, which also points to a potential for sustained future research. In this study, I only examine the coverage of one component of one terrorist attack, that is, the coverage of Tamerlan’s boxing career within the larger coverage of the Boston Marathon Bombing. However, the Boston Marathon Bombing was a distinctive, possibly unique case study that brings together sports, terrorism, and anti-Muslim sentiment in a way that demands scholarly attention. It is unlikely that there is another U.S. case study that engages these strands so completely while producing a sizable data set of articles to analyze. However, I made the case early in this article that discourse about sports consistently emerges in conversations by and about U.S. Muslims. It is worth examining more closely, then, how race mediates the identities of Black Muslim American athletes, and whether it shields them from broader anti-Muslim discourse in the United States. It would also be worthwhile to examine the rise of Islamic sports apparel for women, particularly sports hijabs and the “burkini” swimsuit, to understand how sports, gender, capitalism, and the “moderate Muslim” narrative converge. These are just a few areas where sports and Muslim identity interact in the U.S. public sphere, and where Muslims struggle to define themselves as—or struggle against being defined as—“moderate Muslims”.

There is a lot at stake when conversations about sports become entangled with terrorism discourse. Because it has long been used to affirm nationalism (and its attending gender and race ideologies), implicating sports in terrorism can seriously undermine national sentiment. While this is clearly a high stake for mainstream American audiences, the negative interplay of sports and terrorism is perhaps more significant for U.S. Muslims. Recognizing this incompatibility between sports and terrorism offers a safeguard for U.S. Muslims against accusations of being suspect
citizens, if citizens at all. But perhaps more importantly, it provides an empowering discursive strategy for U.S. Muslims to demonstrate integration and participate in how they are framed. The sports arena also offers a safe space for “moderate Muslims” to perform hegemonic masculinity and thus divest themselves of “Muslim sexuality” and “terrorist masculinity.” While this still serves to discipline U.S. Muslims by compelling them to frame themselves in a more palatable way for mainstream Americans, it is a reframing that can be authentic while also remaining compatible with Islamic doctrine. Ideally, this reframing of Muslims will eventually become obsolete as Muslim American identity becomes more visible and recognizably mainstream.

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