



Threats Without and Within: The Limits of Riskless Risk in the Neoliberal Sports Novel

Tommaso Villa, Independent Scholar, UK, tommaso.villa.ac@outlook.com

This article examines two 2020 novels (*The Cactus League* by Emily Nemens and *A Short Move* by Katherine Hill) through the lens of riskless risk, a notion developed by Nicky Marsh by drawing on the work of Slavoj Žižek. My contention is that these texts depict athletes as symbols of increasing precarity for neoliberal subjects. At first, they depict a seeming separation between wealthy athletes and general society, a separation enacted by the structure constituted by sports leagues. However, I show that the peculiarities of sports entail significantly different iterations of riskless risk for athletes: firstly, because the league turns them into assets in the eyes of the league and the fans; secondly, because the physical nature of sports naturally leads to constant threats to the body (like CTE, Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy) and shortens the athletes' careers. Through these two differences, Hill and Nemens show the precarious condition of the athletes and extend it to the other characters, whose lives are marked by a condition of overreliance on the athletes themselves and on the sports league despite not being part of it. I also use this last point to address the authors' polyphonic choice.



Released to record-breaking numbers in 2020, the Netflix series *The Last Dance* details Michael Jordan's last season with the Chicago Bulls, with a camera crew following him nonstop on his way to winning his sixth NBA title. The show does not just address the 1997–98 Bulls, though, but also provides historical background on Jordan and the franchise. It is through this exploration that some central motifs of this article emerge: in 1993, Jordan retired after his father's murder but also in the wake of revelations about his oft-exaggerated penchant for gambling. Ever since, conspiracy theories have circulated on the protection that NBA commissioner David Stern would have provided him, to the point of allegedly asking him to briefly retire (Jordan unretired after 18 months) to let the media frenzy abate. This rumour is denied in the series, and there is no proof that such shielding of Jordan ever took place, but what *The Last Dance* irrefutably conveys is the perception that leagues and franchise create a structure that separates star players from general society to facilitate their best performance. Throughout the show, Jordan moves between gyms, arenas, hotels, and media/endorsement events, always surrounded by security. This is coupled with Jordan's legendary work ethic and competitiveness: his preparation is punctuated by cuts to the present day when Jordan and his teammates talk about building a championship team, implying that the regimented, protective life given them by the Bulls was the best way to focus on winning – the structure of the professional athlete's life, then, appears to feed into the requirements of success.

This leads to the main subject of this article, which looks at two 2020 novels that fictionalise sports professionalism in contemporary America, Emily Nemens' *The Cactus League* and Katherine Hill's *A Short Move*. My central argument is that the reality of neoliberalism translates into an enclosing structure that protects professional athletes from external interference and risk to abet performance; however, I show that this structure is ultimately unable to protect the athletes because it fosters the very drives it purports to contain. This leads to relevant considerations about the impact of neoliberal policies on American life vis-à-vis the theme of precarity. Like Jordan, the protagonists of the two novels, Jason Goodyear and Mitch Wilkins, are star athletes whose lives are completely engulfed by their professional career, both existing in an environment that protects them from their worst instincts (Goodyear has gambling issues, whereas Wilkins is a serial womanizer) while simultaneously encouraging them to push their competitive drives to the limit.

The idea of the protective structure is rooted in Nicky Marsh's notion (informed by Slavoj Žižek's work) of “riskless risk” or “[t]he perverse logic that accepts failure but denies its consequences [that] found its fullest form in the ubiquitous language of ‘too big to fail’” (Marsh 2013: 179). According to Marsh, the wealthiest spheres of society

have become so financially important for the rest of society that their members can behave inappropriately or criminally without fearing retribution – as sports leagues' revenues increase, so does the separation of the athlete from general society. Similarly, both protagonists are shielded from their own mistakes by the structure they have entered, a structure whose layers start with the locker room and extend to agents, front offices, ownership, and the league itself. These entities, along with athletes' family members and other individuals in their orbit, have a vested interest in guaranteeing their success as a source of economic benefit, turning athletes themselves into assets and their stewards into stakeholders protecting their investment. The sole exceptions are the people who also rely on athletes but profit more from exploiting their name through scandal. *The Cactus League* and *A Short Move* then show the athlete as seen through the prism of interested parties.

However, some relevant differences require unpacking to frame the concept of riskless risk in sports. Firstly, I show that, because of their untouchability and separation, athletes can engage in moral hazard but also easily become quantifiable assets. Secondly, I demonstrate that, while athletes can be protected from most risks, they do not entirely fit within the category of riskless risk because sports entail constant bodily threats; while it is true that sports leagues are becoming more conscious towards these risks, full protection cannot be provided because physical danger and a competitive drive underlie every sport. Moreover, I highlight that riskless risk for most athletes is temporary, since many are always at risk of being cut by their teams and all retire at some point, with only a few remaining at the forefront of their respective sports. Thirdly, and more importantly, I demonstrate that these limits to riskless risk becomes the gateway for a broader discussion of precarity that results in a state of overreliance on the successful athlete, causing disruption of social and familial dynamics. Finally, I argue that, despite their narratives revolving around Jason and Mitch, the authors use a multitude of viewpoints precisely to highlight the precarity of neoliberal subjects.

Risklessness

Risk and risk management are important aspects of neoliberalism, a doctrine that posits the shift from risk management as “once a collective responsibility in the welfare state” to an individual responsibility. Consequently, risk management becomes a token of “productive citizenship,” with a failure to produce becoming the greatest risk to be avoided. Risk assessment and management are ways to quantify risk through numbers, and they are generally “privatized” via the creation of new specialties and industries (Sanderson and Baerg 2018: 76–8).

This concept leads to riskless risk. While he never uses the term, riskless risk stems from Slavoj Žižek, who claims that the contemporary financial system has seen the advent of a “new global class” of the uber-wealthy marked by a constant privatization of social life (Žižek 2009: 4). He uses the 2008 bail-out as a prime example of riskless risk (or “golden parachutes”) in that, owing to the economic notion of ‘moral hazard’, protection from the law or other forms of insurance allow a person or entity to behave immorally. The term “riskless risk” was actually coined by Nicky Marsh, who draws directly from Žižek to surmise that, while risk should be “a calculated balancing of failure against success which necessarily leaves open the possibility of both,” this definition is not applicable to events such as the 2008 financial crash, after which the language used by many authorities (like Alan Greenspan) suggested “neither accountability nor the need for greater oversight.” This translates into a “failure of failure” that denies failure’s consequences (2013: 179–80). Marsh further argues that riskless risk is part of a broader neoliberal celebration of risk as “a masculinised fantasy;” this is part of a narrative of inevitable and yet “tautological” success that ignores the contingency of failure because its logic of success is built on theories formulated by those already in power (2013: 185 and 192). From the same perspective, Claire Westall stresses how sports can be used to “encode the world-system” in which neoliberalism glorifies riskless risk by creating narratives of cyclical rebirth that does not allude to “any potential future fall-out” (Westall 2016: 289 and 293). In the sports context, riskless risk can be noticed in the apparent impunity (or unequal punishment) that athletes experience when caught in illicit activities and violent crime. This is frequently true for high-revenue sports leagues in which “a [league-based] fine for criminal conduct pales in comparison to the millions of dollars the athlete receives in compensation” (McKelvey 2001: 92), promoting the idea of athletes as removed from general society.

In *A Short Move*, the main failure to attain riskless risk is represented by Mitch suffering from Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) because of the injuries endured throughout his career. CTE is “a progressive neurodegenerative disease usually caused by repetitive head trauma” that can only be diagnosed posthumously (VanItallie 2019: 3); a consequence of repeated Traumatic Brain Injuries, it entails shorter lifespans, chronic migraines, depression, addiction, and progressive loss of brain functions often leading to amnesia/dementia (2). After years of accusations of having downplayed the phenomenon, the NFL admitted the relation between head injuries and the disease, implementing the NFL Game Day Concussion Protocol, a list of “safety principles” for treatment following gameplay injuries that has nonetheless been accused of not addressing “the underlying problem – a game and its rules that allow for and perhaps even promote injury-inducing play” (Brenson 2017: 594–600). As I show, teams are

unable to protect their athletes because the physical danger they incur is the essence of the league's revenue.

Ultimately, Nemens and Hill use sports to highlight the struggles of the characters surrounding and depending on the athletes. Here, my thinking stems from Judith Butler's notion of precarity, defined as a "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2009: 25). From this perspective, I underline how most characters rely on the athletes and the leagues for their survival and demonstrate that neoliberal overreliance disrupts familial relations and overarching American mythologies, as per Lauren Berlant's claim that precarity is "more than economic" in its structural and affective bearings (Berlant 2011: 192).

More broadly, insecurity and precarity are key topics in the neoliberal era. Jacob Hacker traces the history of a new economic insecurity, a term he defines as "a psychological response to the possibility of hardship-causing economic loss" (Hacker 2008: 28). Hacker writes that the "threat level" of middle-class and blue-collar insecurity has been rising since the 1970s, "eroding the confidence of middle-class Americans that they'd have stable jobs, generous benefits, and smooth upward mobility, and that their children would enjoy greater economic security" (22). The reason behind this change was a new wave of anti-government movements that prized "economic efficiency" and rejected all forms of welfare, an ideology culminating in Reagan's election (54-6). Here, Hacker notes that the amount of Americans who have filed for bankruptcy since the beginning of the neoliberal era has increased dramatically "from fewer than 290,000 in 1980 to more than two million in 2005," a statistic that mainly pertains to the middle class (23). More broadly, he maps an increased level of instability in every aspect of American life, from job security to healthcare, from housing to retirement benefits, showing that the real downward spiral of risk in contemporary American society is "how far people slip down the ladder when they lose their financial footing" (24). As a result, risk is both "at the heart of some of capitalism's greatest successes" and "the source of untold misery," with each story of economic success punctuated by many of disaster (28). In his later work, particularly in *Let Them Eat Tweets: How the Right Rules in an Age of Extreme Inequality* (2020), Hacker acknowledges the key role of rising income and wealth inequality in the United States, a factor that he initially downplayed as reflecting "transitory shifts of family income [rather than] permanent differences" (32). According to the 2022 World Economic Forum, though, wealth inequality has grown massively in the US, leading to further insecurity for large swaths of the population (Ackert & Ramirez 2025: 72). In the American job market, this is attributed to two main factors: increased competition for executive talent and

fiscal policies that have “benefited the extremely wealthy” (81). Consequently, wealth distribution has significantly shifted from the bottom 99% of the population towards the top 1% that controls entities such as these two novels’ franchises (76).

So many umbrellas over his head: conflicting stakeholders in *The Cactus League*

Emily Nemens’ debut novel *The Cactus League* follows the quick decline of Jason Goodyear, a top left fielder for the fictional Los Angeles Lions, as seen through the eyes of a spiteful reporter who is trying to revive his own career by finding a gossip bombshell. Throughout the novel, this journalist dramatizes Jason’s financial ruin (provoked by a gambling addiction) by connecting his story to those of other characters in Scottsdale, Arizona, site of the team’s pre-season. Jason’s deterioration is chronicled, mostly through gossip, by individuals who have a utilitarian interest in keeping him afloat, such as a coach, a gold-digger, his agent, the team’s owner, two middling reserves, a teammate’s wife, and a vendor. However, it is the narrating journalist himself who reconstructs the star’s misfortunes and filters each viewpoint, and so it is him who frames Jason’s relationship with riskless risk:

[...] as Jason’s debts continue to tumble down the mountain, the threats against him increase: of physical injury, of insurmountable indignity. Jason knows that if his lender goes public, all his endorsement contracts [...] will go the way of his Nike shoe. [...] Maybe he’s more likely to get a suspension and a dozen league-mandated appointments with a shrink [...] but still – what would happen if Twitter got a hold of this? [...] Why should the Lions be loyal to him when he’s [...] sleepwalking in left field and skipping out on games for a round or three of blackjack? (Nemens 2020: 199)

The progression of Jason’s thoughts clarifies what is at stake in the wake of his off-field problems, providing a good insight into riskless risk. His first concern is with potential bodily harm perpetrated by one of his creditors, but this is soon replaced by fear of the public’s reaction if his addiction were revealed. Subsequently, the latter gets concretely translated into a potential financial loss (he lost a Nike shoe deal after a trespassing charge) and finally into a suspicion that the Lions might not protect him as his performance worsens. This turns out to be no reason for concern: Jason is fully aware of his status as a star and knows that no career-threatening punishment will come, but rather some anodyne provision such as “a suspension and a dozen league-mandated appointments with a shrink,” hardly scary prospects for a multimillionaire athlete. As for the Lions’ potential lack of fealty, this threat never materializes: North American sports teams are league franchises, and therefore the promotion of the best

athletes is a shared endeavour that generates equal benefits for leagues and clubs. Both are therefore aligned in their interests, so Goodyear gets scolded behind closed doors but is never punished while his problems become increasingly known in Scottsdale. Because of this convergence of interests, Jason is evaluated solely through his world-class talent, a lens that closely resembles the language of human capital. According to this theory, developed by Nobel Prize winner Gary Becker, the individual should be “regarded as a machine” whose productivity “is substantially increased” in direct proportion to the resources allocated to them (Matache 2023: 370). Because his impact as a player carries such a financial value for his stakeholders in terms of investment and revenue, then, Jason’s skills become the only deciding factor in how to respond to his behaviour. Consequently, his off-ballpark actions take a backseat to his performance.

As an almost untouchable entity, the corollary is that Jason starts to practice ‘moral hazard’, a term Žižek reprises from economic theory, defined as “the risk that somebody will behave immorally because insurance, the law, or some other agency will protect them against any loss that his or her behavior might cause” (Žižek 2009: 12). Ironically, moral hazard was initially weaponised by “influential critics of government” who claimed that a guarantee of social security would prompt Americans to rely solely on the government (Hacker 2008: 51 and 54). What we see here, though, is the exact opposite, as absolute protection from repercussions (a protection dictated by financial privilege) results in unethical behaviour. Indeed, Jason’s actions show a moral decline that contradicts his status as a “lead-by-example player” (Nemens 2020: 168): he practically lives at the casino, is arrested for trespassing, and leverages his position to extort money from two young players who idolize him and earn far less – he exploits them because they will be cut by the team and are thus unlikely to speak up lest they will not find any more pro opportunities (146 and 226–7). Aware of the protection that his team and league will provide him, Jason would not have an incentive to repent even if he wanted to.

However, moral hazard and riskless risk do not stem solely from structural protection, but also from the precarity of local workers who effectively become external stakeholders, namely outside individuals who still rely on the league for financial survival. This point is evidenced by the fact that the Scottsdale working class has a vested interest in Jason’s success too. As his gambling increases, the casino workers do not tell the press because they are “jittery [...] about their jobs,” but at the same time because they are aware that “one of Jason’s million-dollar nights could net a dealer a \$100K tip” (168). While his status makes anybody potentially fireable for revealing his problem, the problem itself is a consistent source of revenue for many workers who in turn create a net of riskless risk by concealing his issues even as they happen in the

public space of the casino. Here, the geographical placement of the novel is significant for both Jason and his stakeholders: Nemens depicts a much more vulnerable athlete by putting him in a situation when he is not playing to win, as the novel takes place in pre-season Arizona rather than under the limelight of MLB games in Los Angeles. In this way, she displaces even further the importance of the game itself to focus on the neoliberal power structures that tether most characters to a handful of wealthy powerbrokers, showing the all-encompassing reliance of peripheral communities on modern sports franchises.

If overreliance can be a further layer of protection for Jason, though, it is also the means through which Nemens shows the limits of his riskless risk. This is proved by his encounter with Tamara, a divorced kleptomaniac who left school to marry a very promising pitcher until his career was derailed by injury (55–6). Tamara is another example of the precarity of this new type of stakeholder: by becoming too dependent on the financial prospects of a professional sports career, she does not have the tools to provide for herself – consequently, her objective in life is to marry another baseball player. Living for free in a former lover’s flat, she embodies the financial vulnerability of the Scottsdale community, whose fortunes are determined by the presence of the league even as a mere pre-season hub. Tamara’s journey intersects with that of a drunkenly Jason well into the champion’s crisis. Trying to seduce him, she drives him to Frank Lloyd Wright’s old home in the desert, prompting an arrest for trespassing. This is when Jason comes closest to public disgrace, but his agent Herb Allison immediately intervenes and the same does the Public Relations team of the Lions “a whole bevy of folks [...] holding up so many umbrellas over his head” (113). Jason’s charges are subsequently dropped and downplayed in the press thanks to the cooperation of team officials who keep refusing to comment publicly on the situation, once again enforcing a successful strategy of “damage control” around the team’s star, letting him get away with a crime while protecting their investment (113). Still, the role played by Tamara creates a relevant juxtaposition between the league’s internal and external stakeholders. While the former generate revenue via the athletes’ competitive performance, the latter still gravitate around the league and its employees but are prompted to obtain some sort of gain that is not necessarily related to continued athletic success, thus puncturing the protective structure of riskless risk.

The roles of Tamara and other external stakeholders who see Jason as a source of profit are in line with how sports members of the public view the athlete in the neoliberal era. Drawing from Bourdieu, Kellen Hoxworth uses fantasy football as an example of how sports fans have been “habituated [...] to the relational and evaluative practices of neoliberal thinking” by viewing athletes as numbers and investments whose

performance has been fully commodified (Hoxworth 2020: 156–7). While fantasy sports are not part of *The Cactus League*, its characters enact a similar worldview when trying to profit from Jason’s fame and problems, displaying a system that often forces them to look at sports not as a centre of communitarian intensities but as a source of gain and dependence. In short, Hoxworth shows a cultural milieu that habituates fans to think this way about their favourite athletes and turns them into stakeholders, rehearsing a “rational, calculative [system of] governance” in their everyday life (159). Similarly, Nemens underlines a broader ethos that views athletes as investments for the spectator and not just for the sports league. Here, again, a break determined by the neoliberal slant towards human capital is noticeable: while previous economic theories posited that human beings “cannot be considered as a property or a tradable good,” the theory of human capital makes this productivity-based ethos into a “habit” (Matache 2023: 366). However, this element of exploitation is complicated by the external stakeholders’ overreliance, with many depicted not as simply greedy but rather as struggling economically, viewing Jason and the Lions more broadly as the only option that will enable them to stay afloat.

Nemens makes this point through the structure of the text, as the narrator is trying to exploit the star’s name to jumpstart his own career. Having performed for a long time at a high level, Jason is such a household name that his name is enough to generate revenue, and this means that scandal can be a productive means of profit wholly separate from his on-field performance, extremizing his status as an asset in yet another direction. Furthermore, the narrator himself highlights another limit to Jason’s untouchability when he submits that “competitiveness isn’t something you can turn on and off like a light switch. [...] And that same competitive drive that got him the Triple Crown in 2009 has taken him to the table more times than anyone can count” (Nemens 2020: 168). Here, the link between risk and athletic mindset is explained by drawing an overt connection between Jason’s proficiency and his off-field issues. This point also hints at why the league and the team cannot, but also will not, intervene to help him: if his success (and that of his stakeholders) is rooted in competitiveness that cannot be mitigated, the corollary is that the stakeholders have no actual interest in abating it. For Jason to produce, conversely, it is almost necessary to abet his tendencies. Thus, athletes cannot be fully shielded from the ways that his drive and competitive streak translate in his life.

It follows that, while Jason appears shielded by countless layers of protection, his reality is not too dissimilar from that of the community that precariously depends on him. Indeed, the instability of the novel’s characters reflects Lauren Berlant’s notion of the “precariat”. In her seminal work *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Berlant affirms that

precarity is “structural” rather than just economic for the neoliberal denizen, calling it the dominant “experience” of the present, so much so that she posits the advent of a new social class, the precariat, which encompasses “everyone whose bodies and lives are saturated by capitalist forces and rhythms,” from part-time workers to university students, from the traditional working class to managers (Berlant 2011: 191–2). While conceding that capitalism is intrinsically unstable, though, Berlant shows that “neoliberal economic practices mobilize this instability in unprecedented ways” because most of their profits stem from the shrinking of welfare and social safety nets (192). Consequently, precarity has by now “saturated the consciousness and economic life of subjects” all over the globe, a condition detested by most of those who used to enjoy higher degrees of protection and security because of how it complicates one’s sense of social “belonging,” increasing a perception of dependence, powerlessness, instability, and marginalisation (193–5). Along these lines, the characters orbiting around the players become their own socio-professional category, and as members of the precariat they exist in a dimension of constant insecurity due to their complete dependence.

This Is Your New Life

Overreliance extends to familial realities too. Crucially, the engulfment of the player within the team structure means that his whole entourage becomes a privatized item in pro baseball’s orbit. The novel shows a family structure utterly subordinate to the player’s career and determined by the temporal cadence of the season, dramatizing the process of onboarding. This subordination is depicted in the chapter devoted to Melissa Moyers, wife of the aging star pitcher of the team and self-appointed leader of the players’ wives:

It’s a sacrifice what the wives do, uprooting their lives [...], leaving their kids [...] for a few days, a few weeks, a month or two. And in this sacrifice they need one another, and so they make their own support network of domestic partners [...]. Imagine, getting plucked out of a crowded bar or chosen through a professional sports match-making service, being picked up on the beach in Puerto Rico or selected from the Los Angeles Lakers’ Laker Girls lineup. Imagine, some handsome – or at least talented – man saying, *Now, here, this is your new life*. It is strange, indeed, and theirs is a necessary sorority (172).

A mother of three, Melissa is cognizant of the “sacrifice” that being the wife of an athlete entails, having to change homes once every few months and barely seeing her

children. Importantly, she is the wife of a franchise legend but still needs to accept that her life's rhythm must be subsumed to that of the baseball season, alternating between Arizona and Los Angeles. Perhaps owing to her longer stint in the role, she also has a clear idea of why the wives' group needs to be cohesive and supportive. Despite its artificiality and fungibility, the "sorority" (a clear hint that they have been ingrained this structuring since school) is necessary for their livelihood and that of the athletes. Moreover, by referring to the matchmaking service as well as to other glamorous and sexualising situations (such as exhibiting one's own body in the Caribbean or working as a cheerleader), she acknowledges both her own objectification and the competitive nature of accessing this kind of wealthy life as an adjunct.

Later, Melissa expands on the requirements of her role, which downplays typical familial and relational elements. Physical shape plays a key role for the wives, who use the gatherings to "[watch] one another, to see who had puffed up or slimmed down, who had surgery or dye jobs" (182). The women orbit around athletes and are therefore very self-conscious about their own aging – plastic surgery is often a concern, indicating the body as another disposable item (100–1). The focus on looks plays a central part within the wives' circle and starts with the need to remain appealing for their husbands, who receive frequent advances from other women and are sure to retain their physique well into their 30s. This aspect is linked with the fungibility of the post-friendship wives' sorority which, in Melissa's words, is almost exclusively composed of women who stole someone else's boyfriend/husband and are consequently aware of the risk of suffering the same fate. Melissa herself acknowledges her husband's cheating but does not consider it a reason to leave him, contenting herself with finding out and making him temporarily stop; subsequently, she also admits to herself that he will leave her soon enough (178 and 196). Due to the engineered obsolescence of these dynamics, there is a continuous turnover within the group, not just because the husbands get traded to a different team, but also because the wives are 'cut' in favour of someone else. Being an athlete's wife is thus a practice that entails highly regulated patterns and activities (like parties and brunches) but with a different cast of disposable women every time, extending precarity even to a group that has a direct, affective link to the team.

Yet, the temporal structure of the baseball season does not give the wives much time to appeal to their husbands. This is why the group of women focuses on ways to entice them: most of Melissa's chapter is dominated by a lingerie party that is appropriately placed "near enough the end of the spring season," which means that "the wives stand a fair chance of seeing their husbands relatively soon, and the lingerie could be useful. Even if it's just for an hour or two between the end of spring training and the start of the regular season: they want to be prepared" (188). Noticeably, the sacrifices described

by Melissa involve the necessity to be able to regulate her sexual life beyond the end of training or games, giving a biopolitical edge to the sports league's policy. The obvious corollary is that children are not a welcome part of this vestigial family environment. As mentioned, Melissa purportedly left her children "in a nanny's arms at nine months and a day" and "so programmed in their extracurriculars she's lucky to get two meals with them all week," making it clear that they need to fit within the structure inhabited by their parents (184 and 177). The disappearance of nuclear families is an essential component of contemporary sports leagues as represented by Nemens, and the inevitability of their inner workings is fully engrained in all its subjects. By extending a performance-dictated regimen to the affective and biopolitical spheres of family life, moreover, the league becomes the emblem of the way neoliberal tenets "mobilize this instability in unprecedented ways," tethering the wives to a precarity that not even playing by the league's rules might shield them from (Berlant 2011: 192–3). Ostensibly, the players' wives also become part of the precariat despite their theoretically familial attachment to the players, a dependence exacerbated by the decreasingly important role of children and families in the neoliberal sports league.

Said reshaping of family structures subverts a trope of sports fiction. This subgenre has often been noted as a milieu for the development of citizenship and the genealogical transmission of team sports from parents to children. Baseball, specifically, has often been associated with strong family traditions as a game that reconnects fathers and sons, a theme to be found in novels like *Shoeless Joe* (1982) by Joe Kinsella and *Battle Creek* (1999) by Scott Lasser. As Connie Anne Kirk notes, baseball is frequently linked to "quality time spent with fathers," underlining a key familial element in its tradition (2014: 167). This aspect has also been singled out by Daniel Nathan, who highlights the "faux [...] pastoralism" of baseball, a game that according to its own myth "links the generations" and evokes constructed nostalgia (2014: 96). However, this novel goes against this motif in a significant manner: in *The Cactus League*, domestic life is subordinated to the transience of sports careers, both in terms of duration and income stability.

Nemens does not just deconstruct family myths, though. Since baseball is the "national pastime", she uses the athlete to undermine American myths at large: when Jason visits Frank Lloyd Wright's home, he starts destroying the adjoining streetlamps in response to a challenge to test his aim (78). Ironically, though, the architect himself disapproved of the use of artificial lights, having picked Arizona precisely for its abundant sunshine, indicating that Wright's own legend has already been defiled by tourist-driven preoccupations (McKay 2010). Using sports as a lens to dissect both granular (familial dynamics) and canonical (Wright) narratives, Nemens underlines a broader

disposability of American mythologies in the neoliberal era. As these mythologies abate, only the financial imperatives of the present remain for the Scottsdale enclave. Being the only reality that matters to them, these imperatives become naturalised as inherent to human existence. The novel then centres around characters who are satellites of the Lions, depicting each as disposable and desperately clinging onto their fleeting investments. In this context, Paulo Freire claims that neoliberal subjects “accept themselves as mere objects because they consider this to be inevitable” (Freire 2015: 39). Similarly, the league-dependent characters find themselves in a precarious, transient situation dictated by the disposability of all adjoints to the game. Yet, they appear to think that the current structure of their lives is inescapable and endless, replacing the autonomy myth with dependence, isolation, and precarity.

These themes and this multiplicity of narrators contribute to the creation of a poetics of obsolescence that exposes the realities of contemporary precarity. Ultimately, Nemens’ work becomes a rebuttal of what Bayan AlAmmouri and Dina Salman call the *geschäftsroman*, a novel that celebrates entrepreneurial and business success over the individual (AlAmmouri and Salman 2021: 225). Through the commodification of the public and private sphere, AlAmmouri and Salman state that neoliberal culture engenders a “hyper-individual” who thinks only in market terms of winning and losing, devising a new rationality that objectifies and decentres novelistic characters so that the “market economy” and “hyper individualism” can come to the forefront as the real core of contemporary fiction (226). In short, their contention is that these types of novels (such as Mohsin Hamid’s *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia*, published in 2013) are written “to responsabilize characters and readers alike, through forcefully persuasive narration, in order to ensure [...] the proliferation of human capital” and more generally the victory of the *homo oeconomicus* (227–9 and 235). Conversely, Nemens depicts protagonists who reason in the same way but find themselves in the throes of entities that overtly fetishise market logics as the ultimate individual success philosophy but actually foster a network of expendability and overreliance with no alternatives.

I knew the risks, even though I didn’t: A Short Move

The Cactus League deals with the limited riskless risk enveloping fictional sportspeople. Still, it never deals with bodily harm, the more obvious threat for the athlete, possibly because its subject sport is baseball, which involves only marginal contact. A football novel is then a better milieu to look at physical risk. This is the case with Katherine Hill’s second novel, *A Short Move*, which charts Mitch Wilkins’ career as he becomes a gravitational centre for everyone around him: the narration starts before his birth and

ends after his death, touching on his childhood, college career, pro career, and later life. By mixing Mitch's voice with those of several other characters (his parents, his uncle, his first wife, a teammate, his daughter, and a neuroscientist), Hill shows the structure created by "the almighty League," as Mitch's first wife Caryn calls the NFL (Hill 2020: 116). Such structure gives Mitch wealth and fame while protecting him from external interference, ensuring that one of its best players keeps producing revenue for the league itself – in particular, Mitch is always shielded from Caryn finding out definitively about his cheating. On the other hand, the novel also shows the shortcomings of such protections when it comes to bodily threats. Professional football has seen a rise in the awareness towards the neurological damage inflicted by the sport: specifically, Mitch is a linebacker, a role now associated with CTE. Bodily vulnerability is a theme that the end of the narration explores by looking at his post-career life, during which he suffers from ailments like photophobia and migraines. What is interesting about this revelation, though, is Mitch's complete lack of surprise vis-à-vis his problem:

He'd suffered headaches and mood swings and the occasional bout of explosivity. But that, he insisted in his 2025 assessment, just made him a football player; that was who he'd always been. Which is not to say the elevated biomarkers surprised him. "Play football, get CTE [...]. I knew the risks, even though I didn't." (Hill 2020: 324)

As Butler writes, the body does not fully belong to the individual but is rather "exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings" (Butler 2004: 17–8), a claim that Julia Kuznetski associates with vulnerability "in the most physical sense" (Kuznetski 2021: 294). Here, Butler's distinction between precariousness and precarity is crucial. The former owes to the body's inevitably public dimension, a condition that effectively functions as a form of dispossession (Butler 2004: 21). This condition puts the individual in a constant form of dependence from their social surroundings, what Butler terms a "social network of hands" needed for support (Butler 2009: 14). Precariousness is the basis on which Butler posits the moral roots of equality and social obligation (22); in an era that marks the erasure of such networks, however, the body's precariousness gives way to precarity, a "politically and socially produced state in which some lives have to 'beg' more – and more often – not to be exposed to injury, violence and death," an "induced state" of "inequality and destitution" (Zaharijevic 2023: 43–4). Such vulnerability reaches its extremes in the jeopardization of Mitch's body, as he sacrifices his own health with a certain degree of wilfulness by admitting knowledge of the risk he was incurring into for the sake of his career and earnings, a necessary exposure to harm that highlights the realities of an always public body which "implies mortality, vulnerability, agency,"

as “the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence” (39). For the athlete, the precariousness of the body is never renounceable, lest he succumbs to the financial precarity of remaining without a team.

Through the lens of Butlerian precarity/precariousness, football is shown as inherently unable to fully protect its practitioners from the harm it entails, despite some significant steps forward represented by prevention and partial post-career investigations symbolized by the fictional 2030 future of the novel, wherein the NFL heeds to the players’ protests and endows in perpetuity a research centre into brain injuries – this is also depicted as a self-preserving decision, since the league wants to protect its revenue by showing that “football [...] would always take care of its own” (Hill 2020: 330). At the same time, Mitch’s lack of surprise indicates a potential impediment for change, since the way he learned the game inherently exposed him to risk as an integral part of it, highlighting the limits that the league encounters when trying to protect its investments (the players) from the very essence of what constitutes their revenue (the game’s physicality). Furthermore, the novel briefly alludes to another facet of this theme concerning the short career span of football players: D’Antonio Mars, Mitch’s fellow linebacker, gets angry when an opponent breaks his leg, thinking “*You can’t go for my head like a MAN?*” (186, italics and capitalization in the original). In sum, this passage shows how football players would rather suffer a deferred injury that will negatively impact their post-playing days rather than a more direct threat to the performing and revenue-generating body. Additionally, Mitch claims that “I knew the risks, even though I didn’t” (Hill 2020: 324), indicating that, despite an awareness of an eventual fallout, he still did not have proper knowledge of what his later life would turn out to be. This key point calls into play the delegation of agency that the athlete enacts by entering the league and subscribing to its policies. Playing in the 1990s, a time when CTE was an underreported phenomenon, Mitch relinquishes his most intimate safety to play in the NFL, effectively nullifying the protective structures erected around him.

Besides CTA, Hill hints at much broader post-career risks that the athlete runs into, with specific regards to psychological wellbeing and identity. Retirement in sports happens with different timelines, for different reasons, and with greater occupational challenges than for most people, a fact that is shown consistently in *A Short Move*, since a third of the novel takes place after Mitch stops playing. As he ages, Mitch starts to think about a front-office role, becoming more involved with management to get a “glimpse of the afterlife” (194), i.e. potential job offers to stay with the Eagles. After an initial phase of reciprocal interest, however the reality emerges: the owner and the general manager were dangling the offer so that he would feel motivated to play for one more season, which he successfully does; the GM, Eddie Hatchett, also asks

him how much time he thinks he has left in the NFL, with his true motive being that he wanted to have a clear timeline for moving the team's roster forward. Years later, Eddie is still the GM but never offers Mitch a job, leaving him feeling "duped" as he ends up becoming a car dealer with modest revenue (274–5). Research on post-career transition in sports indicates that the management of retirement wellbeing for pro athletes often suffers from logistical confusion, but something else appears to be at play here. Mitch's retirement is a "normative transition", since he stops due to age-related issues, but Hill highlights a certain degree of non-normativity as well, since his injuries are already piling up and making him consider retirement (Knights, et al. 2019: 518–9). In this sense, the role of the team is somewhat ambiguous, since the offered help is only theoretical, underscoring a strident contradiction in the managing of retirement. As Mitch is not helped in his transition, *A Short Move* shows that franchises have no interest in doing so because it would take away a player's focus on preparation, competition, and short-term achievement. Consequently, he is left stranded and struggles to find a new identity. Locked out of the structure that embodies the game he has devoted his whole life to, Mitch feels that only his bodily affliction ties him to his relatively short-lived career success, a universal experience for pretty much all former players, who are reduced to exchanging "tips on supplements and patches and pills" on the rare occasions they meet (280). Mitch then starts to suffer from depression, and the fact that it is unclear how much his neurological issues contribute to the decline of his mental health only functions as an effective summation of the double risk of the athlete, both corporeal and related to the abandonment he has experienced. Unlike in *The Cactus League*, then, here the outcomes of the athlete's expendability are explored in full.

He'd Had No Shortages of Coaches

Despite being subjected to a limited form of riskless risk, Mitch still creates dependence and precarity for the people who rely on his success for their own livelihood. Yet, while *The Cactus League* primarily surrounds Jason with opportunistic stakeholders, Mitch's own interested parties tend to be neatly divided between purely utilitarian agents (the team/league) and others who share an emotional investment in him, namely his family and fellow townsmen of Monacan, Virginia. Throughout the novel, the reader witnesses the sacrifices that several figures make to accommodate Mitch's ascent, starting with his mother Cindy and his uncle Tim, as Mitch notes himself: "You needed a coach, sure, and a mother to cook you mega-tons of ziti [...] But from Tim on up, he'd had no shortage of coaches. No shortage of ziti either" (60). Since his father left before his birth, Uncle Tim becomes Mitch's father figure as well as the person who

initiates him to football; realising his nephew's potential, he becomes the coach of the local youth team, effectively centring the whole roster around Mitch. In doing so, Monacan turns into a structure conducive to the athletic success of its most talented product. Still, Mitch notes without a hint of regret that Tim must be left behind as he develops into a better player necessitating better coaches. As for his mother Cindy, the young athlete immediately makes a utilitarian calculation about what she can provide him while working full-time. Her sacrifice does not end there, since she becomes part of her son's itinerant entourage after he turns professional, moving in with him and Caryn to provide stability. Therefore, Mitch's thoughts reveal an attitude that rejects the traditionally familial element of football. Sports stay in the family, but they do not reflect kinship anymore: learning the game from a relative is not enough to become a professional, and his mother's role is purely functional to his career by holding his first marriage together. Conversely, what emerges here is the disappearance of Butler's "social network of hands," as Mitch's support goes from a state of affection to one of vested interest and finally dependency, underscoring the advent of a state of neoliberal precarity that this time is spread to his family and the whole community (Butler 2009: 14). Evidently, then, Mitch's protective structures predate his arrival in the league but are constituted by people who forsake their whole lives to see him succeed. He too, however, clearly rates his family/entourage based on the material services they can provide, mirroring reciprocity of the principles of human capital.

This is a partial subversion of classic football narratives. Similarly to baseball, football is considered a pillar in community-building and familial relations: Michael Oriard describes the phenomenon of "Football Town", a series of magazine features from the 1940s/50s that reported on the development of young prospects in provincial white America, depicting a player-centric narrative in which "[m]oms, sisters, girlfriends, and cheerleaders baked cookies, painted posters, and hugged their heroes after the games [...]. Booster clubs raised money, sold tickets, met weekly with the coach, and presented awards [...] after the season" (2013: 73). By the 1940s, Football Town "designated an entire class of American communities, indistinguishable from each other but collectively unique to the United States" (73). Monacan is a Football Town, but the novel subverts the notion of the community symbol by showing Mitch's utilitarian mindset.

The figure that encapsulates the subsuming of familial dynamics to the structure of the league, however, is Caryn, Mitch's first wife. Her role is particularly significant because she initially appears to resemble the wives of *The Cactus League*, telling Mitch at their first date that she will be "a football player's wife," mirroring their pursuit of glamour and wealth (73). Caryn, though, is completely unprepared to manage her

ancillary role within the player-centric league structure. Indeed, she cannot cope with Mitch's constant cheating, cheating that is concealed (and embodied when he has an affair with the team's PR representative) by the NFL. Then, the progression of their relationship is a token for the exemplary growth that the athlete is required to undertake to play for longer. Her marriage with Mitch lasts precisely until the end of his prime, with his uncontrollable attraction for her mirroring his athletic peak. When his form starts to dip and he needs other means to remain a top player, however, Mitch divorces Caryn and weds Lori, who turns him into a devout Christian (238–9). Yet, as he had done earlier in life, Mitch admittedly uses religion as “a tool to get through football and marriage” because of the structure it provides him while his body declines – when injuries overwhelm him, he marries his new personal trainer (282). As Mitch ages, he needs less team supervision because he is more experienced; consequently, his marriages indicate a growing ability to self-regulate and become part of a mentoring trajectory that makes him a leader in the locker room, perpetuating the NFL's regulating ethos. The precarity of family members is thus the ultimate symbol of structural control, since their fungibility becomes another instrument that the league leverages to exploit every ounce of talent in Mitch's body.

Conclusion

The Cactus League and *A Short Move* depict athletes as standing halfway between riskless risk and the precarity experienced by the characters who rely on them for their economic future, albeit with some differences in how overreliance and exploitation are represented. While Mitch never gets exploited by his faceless and nameless conquests, in fact, Jason is constantly the object of utilitarian calculations. Still, the fact that both novels focus on a multitude of characters with analogous interests is key, as it points to the subtle subversion of a hallmark of the neoliberal novel. According to Rachel Greenwald Smith, this form privileges a cast of interconnected individuals, a structural strategy reflecting neoliberal values of an individualism built on personal associations that instrumentalise emotions as pragmatic “enrichment of the self” for ultimate economic growth through self-entrepreneurship (Smith 2015: 6). However, both novels move beyond the fictionalisation of this type of community. In the texts, and especially in *The Cactus League* with its continued obsolescence, none of the rotating subjects associates with others if not for personal gain and/or dependence, with the line between the two conditions getting consistently blurred as everyone orbits around Jason and Mitch.

Crucially, the athletes should be the only unifying realities for the other characters, and yet the authors efface their inner monologue, reducing them to pure objects of

profit and reliance – while Mitch has a few chapters, Jason’s thoughts never surface, with his crisis getting filtered through the lens of others. The reason behind this formal choice is to be found in the dynamic between the athletes’ training, their personal disposition, and the way leagues are structured to extract their value. As mentioned, Jason’s addiction cannot be addressed directly by the league because to do so would jeopardise his revenue-producing competitive drive. Similarly, Mitch notes: “You had to have superhuman willpower to tear yourself away from the facility, which had been built, ingeniously, to keep you. They would cut your hair here, do your laundry here, feed you” (195). This willpower is a clear hint to the regulating ethos of a league that provides services meant to manage the players’ lives as much as possible, reflecting the athletes’ transformation into assets whose sole value resides in their human capital, their temporary excellence. The ironic aspect, of course, is that the enclosing league also stimulates the least regulable drives of its investments by subjecting them to intense, violent training, something that results in the CTE-induced physical and psychological strife Mitch experiences.

Finding themselves in a system conceived to cater to their needs but also to foster their unmanageable drives, Jason and Mitch are unaware of both their privilege and their long-term expendability, only dwelling on them (in Mitch’s case) after leaving the league. As most other characters are significantly more cognizant of their condition of reliance, consequently, it only makes sense that Hill and Nemens would focus on their struggles as the narrative core of their novels. This structural approach leaves Jason and Mitch in a hybrid status as assets and creators of dependence, justifying the authors’ choice to decentre them. In so doing, Hill and Nemens can highlight their athletes’ status as both beneficiaries and victims of socio-economic structures perceived as unchangeable and conducive to solely exploitative dynamics.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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