



A different side of sports at St. John's University

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by **Christopher Barca, Associate Editor**

The Roman gladiators who fought, and often died, at the Coliseum weren't seen by the audience as human beings.

No one thought of them as men with hopes, dreams, families and friends. They were simply objects of entertainment — robots who lived only to battle.

Our society and our sports themselves are much more advanced and much less bloodthirsty than in centuries past, but how Americans view collegiate and professional athletes has yet to considerably evolve.

When you walk out of your favorite NCAA basketball team's gym after a tough win, have you ever noticed the players' parents waiting to give their children a hug?

When you're walking through Stop & Shop on a Tuesday, looking for that two-for-one sale on orange juice for your Tropicana-loving kids, do you ever wonder if your favorite NFL player is doing the same?

Ask those questions of a million sports fans and more times than not, you'll get "no" for an answer.

As the popularity of college athletics grows to that of the professional variety, it can be easy to forget that the men and women who don uniforms are like the rest of us — red-blooded, imperfect humans with fears, opinions and vulnerabilities.

And that's exactly what Yulia Tikhonova, the new director of St. John's University's Dr. M. T. Geoffrey Yeh Art Gallery, wants you to remember every time you turn on ESPN from now on.

Itself a school with an incredibly rich tradition of athletics, St. John's is home through Nov. 17 to "Diamonds, Rings and Courts," a striking look at sports through a symbolic and stripped-down lens.

The contents of a trio of glass cases in the hallway outside the Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall gallery serve as the exhibit's starting point, and a familiar one at that for a school as successful as St. John's — banners and trophies.

But instead of words of triumph, they have much more introspective phrases, such as "I'm not good at being vulnerable," gathered by artist Cheryl Pope from Kenyon College student-athletes in Ohio.

"Banners are celebrations of victory, but these quotes come more from the hearts of athletes," Tikhonova told the Chronicle. "It's an interesting juxtaposition between athletes being strong, being fast and victorious. But here, we see their vulnerability."

The theme of athletes as humans instead of just players on a screen, field or court is a common one throughout the exhibit, which features numerous works highlighting the humanity, and mortality, of even our most beloved sportsmen and women.

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Queens artist Shaun Leonardo's two charcoal drawings of famed boxer Sonny Liston are stark examples of the latter.

The former world heavyweight champion was a deeply unpopular figure throughout his career — a common nickname of his was "Bad Negro" — and America's disdain for Liston only grew after Muhammad Ali famously knocked him out in 1965 in a fight many thought was fixed.

Just five years after Ali sent him to the canvas — as depicted in the first of Leonardo's two pieces — Liston was mysteriously found dead in his Nevada home.

The official cause of death was listed as a heroin overdose, but many believe Liston's ties to organized crime and drug dealing played a role in his untimely demise.

And just as suspicious as the boxer's death is his appearance in Leonardo's second drawing, right next to the first.

Instead of a downed fighter, as previously depicted, the once-iconic Liston is reduced to a mysterious, wispy shadow.

"It's two different stages of him," Tikhonova said. "You could see how the crowd is just waiting for his fall."

The exhibit doesn't just tackle the vulnerabilities of our beloved athletes, it also takes on our sports-loving culture's gender bias.

One stunning example is Andrea Katz's "Swooshed," a 7-foot-tall dress made solely from male sports attire — including everything from Nike shirts to Golden State Warriors NBA championship gear.

But underneath the train of the dress are sobering statistics detailing just how much women — both athletes and garment workers who make such clothes — are ignored and unrewarded.

For example, women's sports in America receive 2 percent of the television airtime men's games do and female garment factory workers in Asia, in addition to being paid poorly, are not given maternity leave.

"Fashion can be very political and on the front lines of history," the curator said.

Speaking of politics, the exhibit also covers arguably the greatest upset in sports history — the U.S. men's national hockey team's defeat of the Soviets at the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, NY — and its overlooked geopolitical equivalent.

Artist Leah Modigliani's piece, titled "Miracle" after the hockey game's nickname, is made up of eight rugs — including two featuring American and Soviet players facing off and two depicting the brutal Soviet-Afghan War of 1979 to 1989.

And just as the USSR's defeat at the hands of the Americans brought about the end of its sporting dominance, the quagmire that was the conflict in Afghanistan is seen as one of the biggest factors in the collapse of the Soviet Union.

'Diamonds, Rings and Courts'

When: Through Nov. 17

Where: St. John's University, 8000 Utopia Pkwy., Jamaica

Entry: Free. (718) 990-7476,

stjohns.edu