During the last two decades there has been a marked increase in publications, events and practical initiatives surrounding sports and the Christian faith. Within this corpus of work there has been limited explorations of the theology of disability sport, in particular, scholarship that specifically addresses bodily fragility and vulnerability. Therefore, Sean O’Neil’s book is a welcome and timely contribution to the literature, especially because of its rich and provocative content rooted in popular culture, which makes it ideal for classroom discussion and study—the author himself teaches a sport and religion class from which some of the book’s content emerged.

This book’s content is provocative (in a good way). The book comprises six thematic chapters, a conclusion and afterword. Chapter titles such as, Eunuchs and Suicidal Athletes: Co-Creating Meaning in Times of Despair (Ch. 2), Pilgrimage, Prozac, and Pentecostals: Synchronicity on God’s Path (Ch. 3) and Cowboys and Soul Surfers: Gender, Disability, and Nature from Bethany Hamilton to The Rider (Ch. 6), reflect the provocative, challenging and engaging content of the text. An auto-ethnographic approach is adopted by the author—a hospital chaplain, bishop and pastor—who carefully weaves parts of his own life story into the book’s narrative. One methodological reason to deploy an auto-ethnographic approach in scholarly writing or empirical research, is that the author/researcher has an in-depth and experiential understanding of some, or all, of the subject matter. The following excerpt from the Preface, which was written by the author, demonstrates how the use of autoethnography organically emerged during the book project:

When I began this project, I did not plan to use personal details. I did not anticipate that body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), a personal antagonist that I thought had weakened over the years would revive
with such overwhelming force in my life. My mental health struggles became so acute when I worked as a hospital chaplain during the pandemic that I wondered tearfully at times whether my wife would ultimately end up completing this book in my post-humous absence. . . . Something happened, though, even before that grueling emotional stretch, that made me determined to include aspects of my personal life in this book. As is the case for so many of the meaningful events I describe in this book, the turning point was the result of a coincidence [at] a Christian writer’s conference. (p. xiii)

Vulnerability, coincidence (some would say God-incidence), God’s providence and what the psychoanalyst Carl Jung called synchronicity, are frequent themes in the book, both in the description of the author’s life and of those athletes whose stories of bodily vulnerability and fragility are included within the narrative—Bethany Hamilton, Oscar Pistorius and Steve Gleason, for instance. Other strong themes in the book are the secular-sacred dyad, depression and anxiety, race, pilgrimage, brain trauma from participation in violent sports, intersectionality, platform ministry-evangelism, embodiment, human limitations and the American dream (and the myth of individual opportunity), the Great Sports Myth (the widespread belief that sports are always intrinsically good) and the use of fictional accounts of the sport-religion relationship, for example, A Prayer for Owen Meany. And so, this book is truly interdisciplinary, broad in its scope and in some ways polemic in that it provides a critique of the dominant big-business American sports model and ableist attitudes in wider US culture.

Given the diversity of themes presented in the book it is challenging to know which to highlight and discuss in a brief review essay, so to best represent the book’s overall content and merits (and limitations). Arguably, chapter four—The Perils of Black Athletic Success: What ‘Get Out’ Gets Right about Inspiration Porn—is an important one, if one measures importance by the number of people across America that its content may impinge upon. The chapter juxtaposes the story of the medical examiner Bennet Omalu, who became famous in the US for exposing the extent of Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE) among American football players in Pittsburgh, and the story of the former NFL player Steve Gleason (who was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, ALS, in
2011) and became a hero of post-Hurricane Katrina New Orleans. In different ways both Omalu and Gleason integrated religious faith in their engagement with the oftentimes violent sport of American football. O’Neil starts this chapter by exploring the history of the commodification and stigmatization of the ‘black American body’ within American sports—as is typical in histories of the US sport-race story, Jackie Robinson (baseball), Jack Johnson (boxing), Jesse Owens (track and field) and Muhammad Ali (boxing) all receive attention. In the context of this book, however, the following quote is possibly the most demonstrative in conveying how human fragility, suffering and interesting religious reasoning is never far away from sporting glory:

The aftermath of Ali’s reinstatement in professional boxing included three grueling fights with Frazier, none more physically devastating than the last one in the Philippines. At the time of the Thrilla’s release [a documentary film telling the story of the fight—the Thriller in Manilla], Ali’s image had softened with the slowing speech and lumbering gait he acquired from Parkinson’s Disease . . . Even before their final fight, Frazier warned of divine punishment for Ali’s taunting, “I think God gonna slap the hell out of him one of these days.” Interviewed years later for the documentary, Frazier sees Ali’s disabled body as confirmation for the prediction he made decades before. Ali also considered that God might have chosen to give him the disease for redemptive rather than punitive purposes. “I think maybe my Parkinson’s is God’s way of reminding me of what is important: for example, how we treat each other. It slowed me down and caused me to listen rather than talk.” (p. 93–94)

Honest words from the late boxing and sporting legend, Muhammad Ali. It is fascinating and provocative content like that provided above which makes this text such a helpful resource for classroom discussion within sport-religion, theology, religious studies, cultural studies, ethics and sociology classes. I would certainly use this book with students if I still taught in a university.

Returning to the juxtaposed narrative featuring Bennet Omalu and Steve Gleason (and Tim Tebow in places), it was this section of the book that most captured my attention regarding its pedagogical usefulness. In one of Omalu’s books, he ties the ongoing CTE story and his associated
critique of violence in American football to economic disparities due to race. Realizing his revulsion at on-field collisions might make him sound weak, he states, “Yet, strength does not mean watching young men, primarily black young men, inflict possible lifetime mental and psychological problems upon themselves for the sake of entertainment of the thousands in the stands and millions watching on television” (cited in O’Neil, p. 102). Of course, there are others who discount or at least underplay Omalu’s research and that of other medical doctors, suggesting that it is nothing but a “pervasive national myth about head trauma” (p. 103). And yet, the cumulative empirical evidence indicating that violent sports such as American football cause CTE is significant and ever-increasing.

Questions for classroom discussion on just this section of the book are endless. For instance: why do people enjoy watching sports that have a violent dimension? Is the NFL doing enough to support the research surrounding CTE and protecting its players? Should American football be banned outright? Okay, the likelihood of this happening is slim given that football is one of the big-three American sports and the NFL, driven by market forces, makes billions of dollars every year. But, if a clear and undisputed correlation between involvement in the sport and CTE emerges (the medical community would argue this already exists) should it not be banned in all schools at a minimum?

In summary, this is a very useful and critical book for undergraduate and post-graduate students and researchers. It is original in the sense it has a focus on bodily fragility and religious and sociological embodiment within sporting locales. The author should also be commended for his honesty and vulnerability in sharing parts of his own biography (through autoethnography), which helps the reader understand better both where the book came from and its subject matter.

As with all projects there are some limitations. The discussion of the theology of disability, especially the theology of embodiment could have been enriched and deepened (Nancy Eiesland’s work, 1994, while ground-breaking and still relevant, has been developed significantly), by drawing on the significant existing literature in this area—some key thinkers are, John Swinton, Brian Brock, Pope JPII, Jean Vanier and Thomas Reynolds. I also think that perhaps fewer themes could have been introduced in the book (reducing complexity)—and within chapters—so to provide some more detailed and critical discussion of specific topics;
this links to my point above regarding drawing on more of the recent work on the theology of disability and embodiment.

Not wanting to end a largely positive review on a critical note, I heartily recommend this fascinating and engaging book.

Dr. Nick J. Watson, 28/01/23

Trammell, Aaron. *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology*. MIT Press, 2023.

Scholars interested in how sports influence society and are influenced by society often examine play. In *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology*, Aaron Trammell offers a critique of conventional definitions of play and suggests other ways of thinking about play that center the Black experience. Trammell seeks to accomplish this in a book that, according to the series editors’ introduction, is intentionally brief, pocket sized, and written in a way that is accessible to broad audiences and not just scholars. *Repairing Play* is bookended by an introduction and conclusion with five chapters sandwiched in between.

In the introduction, Trammell situates his work within what he calls the Black radical tradition. Readers may have appreciated a richer discussion about what constitutes the Black radical tradition for the author and engagement around why this particular tradition makes the most sense given what the author wants to argue. Trammell describes how central the slave ship is to the Black experience and draws upon notable Black scholars, such as Fred Moten, to define such key terms as Blackness. Greater engagement with the vast body of literature on what constitutes Blackness as well as the related strengths and limitations may have been useful here. What are some other ways to define Blackness and how might those ways of understanding Blackness inform our understanding of play? Trammell argues that being Black is about one’s complexion and history. He characterizes the Black experience with such terms as struggle, resistance, and survival. Trammel argues that torture is an important feature of the Black experience. It is a trauma that is communicated through generations in many forms, including play. Historically, scholarship about play, often conducted by philosophers and psychologists, has framed play as almost exclusively positive and centered around whiteness and whiteness