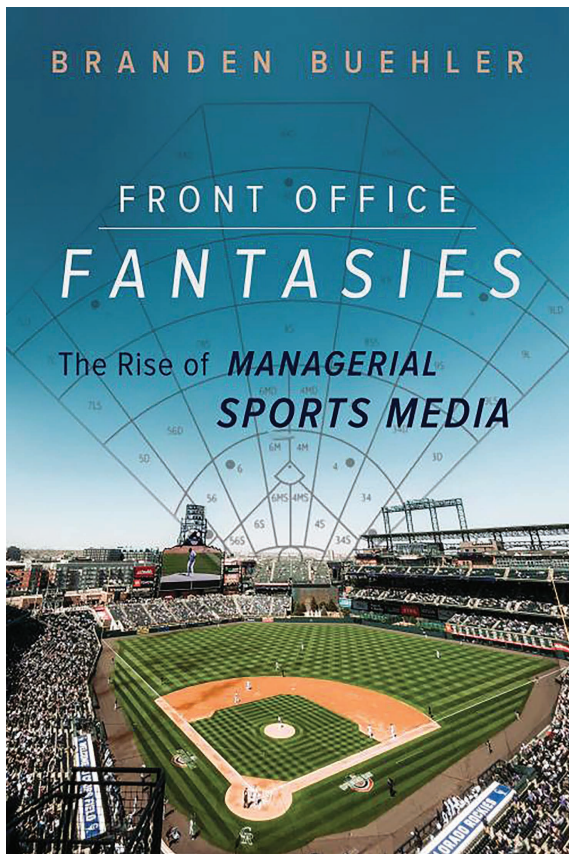


## Book Review:

# Buehler, Branden. *Front Office Fantasies: The Rise of Managerial Sports Media* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2023)

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In his most recent book, *Front Office Fantasies: The Rise of Managerial Sports Media*, Branden Buehler highlights a growing pattern across sports media environments. This trend, what Buehler calls the “managerial fantasy,” describes the emerging circumstances that have inspired fans, content creators, managers, and the like to place the role of managing on an elevated pedestal. Buehler contextualizes how the managerial fantasy relates to larger phenomena, such as the ubiquity of managerialist approaches to labor and work, the financialization of everyday life, and the fetishization of data and analytics. Sports media outlets such as talk radio, podcasts, narrative film, sports television, and gaming culture proliferate imagery and representation of the sports manager as living in a kind of “white collar paradise.”<sup>2</sup> In his clear and well-developed introduction, Buehler describes the intricate and complex web of media content and production that has made the role of front-office executive “in a sense, the new glamor positions of the sports medial world.”<sup>3</sup>

This construction and circulation of front-office fantasies does not only spread from media industry realms but also speaks to a larger set of societal shifts across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Buehler notes that not only

does the managerial fantasy relate to these practices of larger neoliberal and post-industrial societies, but the fantasy also deeply relates to a contemporary crisis of hegemonic, white masculinity. “Managerial sports texts,” Buehler argues, “reflect the hegemonic masculinity stretching . . . beyond the athleticism associated with the playing surface to incorporate the technical competence increasingly associated with the front office.”<sup>4</sup> Reflecting cultural anxieties regarding white masculinity, Buehler suggests that the managerial sports text often works to remasculinize white men who fear loss of privileges and power in the twenty-first century. *Front Office Fantasies* examines this pattern across many industry sites.

Buehler’s extensive analysis begins in chapter 1, examining the “Managerial American Dream” in narrative sports films. As a part of a new wave of sports films, starting in the mid-1990s, there has been a reorientation in focus from athlete to sports world administrators. Buehler situates this new wave of films within the generic and ideological conventions of classic American sports film. In this new wave, protagonists remain admirable, hard-working underdogs striving for success and attempting to live the American Dream. In these films, such as *Jerry Maguire* (1996), *Moneyball* (2011), and *Draft Day* (2014), a particular form of white masculinity is glorified through the manager role, presenting a picture of white masculinity that responds to concerns and anxieties that have permeated white-collar work. The manager-focused sports film presents an idealized representation of white masculinity that contends “white men, rather than flagging in the face of the new demands of postindustrial work, are instead able to uniquely adapt and thrive in this environment.”<sup>5</sup> While this new form of the sports narrative film generally has upheld this particular vision of masculinity, capital, and race—Buehler does suggest that the managerial sports film might also contain the capacity to generate a critique of contemporary capitalism. Here, Buehler highlights Steven Soderbergh’s 2019 film, *High Flying Bird*, as an example of a potential “anti-managerial sports film.”<sup>6</sup> *High Flying Bird*, Buehler asserts, centers the managerial figure while critiquing many facets of the Managerial American Dream. The film emphasizes the front-office worker not as a savvy charismatic hero but rather as part of a parasitic, oppressive sports industry that relies on the labor of Black athletes to support itself.

The second chapter of *Front Office Fantasies* highlights how managerial content permeates contemporary sports talk radio and television. Again, here Buehler stresses how sports media is not siloed on its own but is imbricated in larger societal logics of finance. This chapter focuses on how contemporary sports talk radio and television rely on a set of tendencies that center front-office administrators and the work they perform. Buehler demonstrates how through conversations focused on a range of topics such as free agency, trade deadlines, and player evaluations, the sport talk’s managerial trend has greatly focused on the transactions that make up the sporting world. But managerial sports talk is not solely defined by these topics—it is defined by “its values and rationalities; its ways of suggesting . . . how one should carry themselves in a sporting universe defined by its administrative operations.”<sup>7</sup> This fusing of sport and finance focuses on particular vocabularies of investment, market movement, and risk management that demonstrate “the rhetorical collapse of sport/finance.”<sup>8</sup> This finance logic that permeates sports talk radio and television also offers front-office workers “access to a newly fulfilling version of white-collar masculinity.”<sup>9</sup> This domain has developed largely as the realm of white men and their financial wisdom. Significantly, Buehler notes that these dynamics produce a discourse enmeshed in racialized acts of control where athletes, often

Black men, are regularly spoken about in a dehumanizing fashion. In this sense, the financial logics of managerial sports talk further broader power imbalances throughout the American sports landscapes.

In sports media, quantification has most directly been seen through the boom in sports analytics over the past few years, particularly through the use of data-rich graphics. These graphics have played a role in the drastic shift in sports television's appearances, aesthetics, and presentation. In his third chapter, Buehler focuses on an industrial phenomenon he terms datavisuality, a fixation on data in the realm of sports media presented through data-rich graphics. While the development of "datavisuality" has relied on more and more quantitative data, Buehler also highlights how this data has become more complex. Therefore, datavisuality has "entailed both increasing amounts of statistical information and increasingly intricate statistical information."<sup>10</sup> Buehler offers the example of how sports television networks have begun developing data-driven alternative programs for viewers. These alternatives, embraced by industry giants like ESPN and Fox, are described as being "driven largely by on-screen graphics, data, and information" from the league's tracking systems.<sup>11</sup> This data shapes how viewers and fans engage with athletes and sports media. Through the datafication and quantification of athletes, Buehler notes how this approach can teach people to see athletes as primarily data points, rather than individuals with agency. Datavisuality, then, is a particular way of seeing that offers an aura of legibility that often deceptively simplifies very complex algorithmic calculations and human choices.

Lastly, Buehler focuses on the digital sporting game world of managerial sports video games and fantasy sports leagues. For Buehler, this area of sports media most explicitly evidences the rise of managerial fixation. Here, Buehler analyzes the history and proliferation of such digital sports games that focus on administrative responsibilities. In this chapter, Buehler works to make sense of the "neoliberal fantasies" offered by managerial sports games" and how they relate to larger, everyday life within a neoliberal capitalist world.<sup>12</sup> Managerial sports games, promoting neoliberal values and ways of thinking, allow players to "playfully tease out the rules and processes of the game," but also importantly "explore what these rules and processes might indicate about the broader workings of modern sport amid neoliberal capitalism."<sup>13</sup> Buehler furthers this examination of managerial sports games by suggesting that such games deeply connect to the aesthetics, visuals, and paces of present-day digital work. Therefore, through the managerial games, players escape the specifics of their own work life and seek a sense of agency through the promise of managerial control inherent to the games. Buehler highlights the ways such games lure participants who perhaps experience a shortage of agency within their own careers or broader lives.

The various sites brought together in Buehler's text generate an impressive work of conjunctural analysis. Buehler integrates larger societal contexts with sports media contexts, not only demonstrating the rise of the managerial fantasy as a genre of content but also representing a broader, general mindset. *Front Office Fantasies* deeply contextualizes its site within extensive areas of literature such as game studies, media industries, race and gender studies, and the cultural studies of sports. Throughout the text, Buehler underscores the complexities of his initial research questions and never rests at a superficial answer. Most importantly, throughout his work, Buehler continuously returns to the issues of hegemonic

masculinity, whiteness, and capital that situate his text as an achievement in sports media studies, but also more broadly an important piece of scholarly work for media studies and cultural studies writ large. While Buehler's text offers many moments to consider resistance and critical thought occurring in managerial sports spaces, his conclusion suggests that the banality and ubiquity of managerial sports media should not be ignored or overlooked. Largely, these managerial sports artifacts insidiously obscure sources of power, hierarchical orderings, and the dehumanizing logics of datafication and datavisuality. Relying on a wide array of methods and areas of literature, *Front Office Fantasies* is a well-researched text, an impressive synthesis of widespread literatures, and a much-needed interruption in the onslaught of managerial sports media production.

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<sup>2</sup> Branden Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies: The Rise of Managerial Sports Media* (University of Illinois Press, 2023), xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 54.

<sup>6</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 69.

<sup>8</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 107.

<sup>11</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 116.

<sup>12</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 142.

<sup>13</sup> Buehler, *Front Office Fantasies*, 155.