Practices

Kicking

Jules Boykoff

Kicking

Practices

A series edited by Margret Grebowicz

Climbing by Hil Malatino
Doing Nothing by James Currie
Fly-Fishing by Christopher Schaberg
Going to the Moon by Sally Ashton
Juggling by Stewart Lawrence Sinclair
Kicking by Jules Boykoff
Raving by McKenzie Wark
Riding by Pardis Mahdavi
Running by Lindsey A. Freeman
Star Charting by Bess Matassa
Taking Leave by Deborah Kapchan
Tomorrowing by Terry Bisson
Winnowing by Suzanne Matson

Kicking

Jules Boykoff

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London
2026

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Lisa Lawley
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher
Typeset in Untitled Serif and General Sans
by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Boykoff, Jules author
Title: Kicking / Jules Boykoff.
Other titles: Practices
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2026. |
Series: Practices | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifiers: LCCN 2025033896 (print)
LCCN 2025033897 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478038900 paperback
ISBN 9781478033882 hardcover
ISBN 9781478062394 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Boykoff, Jules | Soccer players—Biography |
Soccer—Social aspects | Soccer—Political aspects | Masculinity
in sports | Sports—Social aspects | Sports—Political aspects |
LCGFT: Autobiographies
Classification: LCC GV942.7.B63725 A3 2026 (print) |
LCC GV942.7.B63725 (ebook) |
DDC 796.334092 [B]—dc23/eng/20251119
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025033896
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2025033897

Cover text handwritten by Jules Boykoff.

publication supported by a grant from

The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven

as part of the URBAN HAVEN PROJECT

For Kaia Sand and Jessi Wahnetah

And for Susan Schoenbeck

Attachments
Such wild, precious, unruly things

—**Ximena Keogh Serrano**, "O Loveland"

let's tear up obligation in the way we pay attention

—**Fred Moten,** *Perennial Fashion Presence Falling*

It's the smudges on the window that hold
onto the light

—**Hari Alluri,** *Our Echo of Sudden Mercy*

CONTENTS

Ghostface

"HE'S A KICKER," exclaimed Dr. J. L. Dean, the veteran obstetrician who finally managed to yank me into earthly existence using forceps and flair. "Can't keep the blankets on your boy." Perhaps I was just happy to be free. I had spent a full ten months in the womb, due for delivery on August 11, 1970, but not emerging until September 11 (paging Dr. Freud on line two!). This was precisely three years before Salvador Allende was killed in a United States–approved coup in Chile and seventeen years before reggae great Peter Tosh was gunned down in a Kingston suburb. On my thirty-first birthday I was living in Washington, DC, when terrorists slammed an airplane into the Pentagon. I guess I was destined for one of those cursed days of history. Politics have long been etched into my own private demography.

Since I came out kicking, I suppose it was no surprise that I ended up playing soccer. In a way, it all started when my mom needed some rest. From the beginning I was someone who

stretched for the go-go register, my inner engine thrumming toward full throttle, even when it created mayhem. I hadn't yet hit my fifth birthday—the minimum age to play under-eight soccer—but my mom was a survivor of poliomyelitis and she would not be stopped by a technicality. She just kept showing up to practice, limping up to the sideline with her tiny four-year-old in tow, until the coach finally relented and let me join the team. She somehow fudged the numbers and plopped me on the field, instructing me to run and have fun. It was not the last time her perseverance prevailed.

There was something visibly different about my mom. Her gait was unmistakably lopsided. Merely trying to kick a soccer ball would risk catastrophic injury. And yet, she has an athlete locked in her body. It's just that her legs failed her. Or really science did, at least before it saved her. The polio virus damaged my mom's leg and arm muscles. My legs, born from hers, wouldn't fail me, they'd widen horizons that a small kid from Madison, Wisconsin, would otherwise never see. Thanks to her, it began. Soccer helped me live at the extreme fringe of my capabilities, of my very existence, or at what writer Devin Kelly described as "being as far along the edge of yourself as possible."[1]

But I was a diminutive human and there was no way around it. On the pitch I was getting mauled, crushed, and otherwise pummeled. I was never the best player on the field. Ever. But I loved the action, and fortunately, kids' bodies can be freakishly elastic. What perhaps differentiated me from my friends was my unwavering dedication to practice. During daylight hours, my family could often find me in the side yard absorbed in a football fugue state, juggling the ball. Up the ladder, down the ladder:

foot, thigh, shoulder, head, shoulder, thigh, foot. I wouldn't allow myself to go indoors until I did one hundred juggles with the right foot and then one hundred more with the left. Turns out monomaniacal behavior can sometimes have upsides.

For a fidgety kid, I could somehow conjure the capacity to sit and watch soccer for long periods of time, immersing myself in the little things. When I was ten, I'd watch the television show *Soccer Made in Germany* at my coach's house. We all called him Mr. Kussow, though I learned way later that he was actually Dr. Kussow, an accomplished soil scientist at the University of Wisconsin. He stressed the bigger picture, planting tactical maps in my mind, while I tended to zero in on—and even obsess over—technique. Striking a ball with spin—we called them "banana kicks" back then—piqued my interest, catapulting me into hours of all-consuming practice long before *Bend It Like Beckham* was a thing. I was equally intrigued by how the weight of a pass—the pace and power behind it—could create vital advantages measured in microseconds, depending on whether the teammate receiving the pass needed to take a touch to control or could play straightaway. The fractional differences could have knock-on effects for the wider match. "There are a lot of things that don't matter," writes avant-garde poet Robert Fitterman, "and they add up."[2]

All this was well before US Youth Soccer created its Player Development Model in 2012 in an effort to standardize a training paradigm that would advance the level of the sport in the country.[3] This also preceded the expectation that the best players would get shunted into a hypercompetitive system of boutique club programs, high-fee travel teams, and pay-to-play tournaments. I was among the last generation of players

to arrive at competitive soccer in my teens. Although this is unfathomable today, I didn't join a travel team until I hit the U-14 level. I didn't funnel into the Olympic Development Program—the elite youth soccer system composed of the best players in each city, state, and region—until even later. This would never happen today, for a lot of reasons, some good and some not so good.

Although I was neither big nor fast, I had a secret weapon: my inner hippie. Once again, my mom was key. Although she was a nurse whose everyday life in the intensive-care unit was firmly grounded in hard science, she nurtured in me an appreciation of the occult. Once I started getting serious about soccer, she gave me a book that would change my life, Adelaide Bry's *Visualization: Directing the Movies of Your Mind*.[4] I latched onto visualization when I was fifteen years old, developing a daily practice whereby I stretched out on the hard carpet in our cool basement and watched myself performing magical soccer moves in my mind, viewing myself as if an observer, noting the tiny movements and gestures and pivots that led to success. Sometimes I'd broadcast myself on my interior brain-screen taking penalty kicks over and over—some with the right foot, some with the left—pinging the ball into different corners of the net while an imaginary goalkeeper flailed, failing to stop my shots. I began meditation to achieve the relaxed state that enabled visualization, kick-starting a lifelong practice.

I still have my dog-eared copy of the book. Some of the passages that I marked all those years ago make me cringe at my youthful exuberance for New Age ballyhoo. "As much as we might want instant aliveness," wrote Bry, "our prime responsibility to ourselves is to continue to grow and expand one step

at a time, strengthening our capacity for love and happiness, moving ever closer to a state of harmony within ourselves."[5] Now I can see how lionizing individualism was an ideological sign of the times, as neoliberal capitalism was ascendant, with its hyperindividualism, privatization, deregulation, scissoring of the social safety net, and mantra to "let the market decide." Exhibit A: US President Ronald Reagan's 1981 inaugural address when he declared, "Government is not the solution to our problem, government is the problem." Exhibit B: British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's stiff-lipped insistence that "there is no such thing as society." But back then, I was taken by Bry's conclusion that "the world of sport" was "a laboratory for the vast frontier of the New Age."[6] I became a visualization zealot. Visualization and meditation remain important to me today.

Only a few years after baking visualization into my daily life, I was suiting up for the US U-23 Men's National Team—also known in US soccer circles as the Olympic Team. I did not participate in the 1992 Olympics, so I am not an Olympian. But I did get to face off in international matches against Brazil and three countries that no longer exist: Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union. These matches were part of the 1990 Festival International de Football Espoirs de Toulon in France, which meant I needed to get a passport since this was my first time traveling outside the country. (In truth, I had barely traveled outside Wisconsin up to that point.) The tournament featured future global stars such as Alan Shearer (England), Cafu (Brazil), and Vladimir Jugović (Yugoslavia). I was in awe of the talent around me.

US U-23 Men's National Soccer Team, from the program for the 1990 Festival International de Football Espoirs de Toulon in France. I am hunched in the second row, second from the left.

I can thank soccer for nudging me toward what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow": a "state of mind when consciousness is harmoniously ordered" that allows us to plunge our psychic energy into pursuing goals.[7] *Flow* means stretching fully into the contours of the present. The disciplined concentration that flow requires can spur deep delight and even self-transcendence. "The action carries us forward as if by magic," writes Csikszentmihalyi.[8] Lindsey Freeman describes flow as "running completely within myself, coasting along in this base of good feeling."[9] To be clear, this is not some space-cake-laden, go-with-the-flow sort of thing but an active experience, grounded in total awareness of the highly

practiced body as it moves through space. The self and the action merge. Life's perils, pratfalls, and faux pas melt from consciousness.

For me, this would sometimes happen when I scored a goal—perhaps because it was such a rare occurrence; I was never known for goal-scoring prowess. Sometimes, as I began the scoring sequence, time would thicken, decelerating into slow motion. The autotelic zone opened, where the experience itself was the reward. When this happened, you could actually see it in my face. My visage would slip into blank equanimity while I felt all the feels of flow coursing through me. Kaia Sand, my longtime partner, called it "ghostface." Mind and body clicking in rhythm. The inverse of alienation. Bry might brand it "receptive stillness" or "relaxed attention."[10] A fully wired calm. To this day I have never experienced anything quite like it.

But let's be clear about something from the outset. This is not a book about my sporting glory days of yore. I take seriously E. P. Thompson's admonition that when measuring memory and memoir, we must be mindful of "the enormous condescension of posterity."[11]

And while we're at it, let's get another bugaboo out of the way: the notion that sports don't matter, or worse, that they are some spurious diversion from reality, a nefarious opioid that dulls our collective political vim. "Karl Marx once described religion as the opiate of the masses," wrote Richard F. Shepard in a 1974 *New York Times* essay. "Well, Marx went away too soon or he might have revised his dictum to make organized sports the villain of the piece. There is nothing that comes close to sports in the seizure of men's souls."[12] The sentiment hasn't dampened with time. More recently, French intellectual Marc

"Ghostface." I am embraced by my teammates after scoring a goal for the Portland Pride of the Continental Indoor Soccer League in 1995.

Perelman dubbed sport "the new opium of the people," much like fellow Frenchman Jean-Marie Brohm, who called it "a new type of opiate of the people."[13]

For me, rote solemnities about sport being a waste of time are unconvincing. In fact, Marx himself might take issue. After all, he imbued a great deal of empathy in his original "opium of the people" passage, nestling it within a wider critique of capitalist oppression. Marx wrote that "religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress." He noted, "The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual aroma." For him, "religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people."[14] So, in a way, Marx viewed religion somewhat sympathetically as "the heart of a heartless world." For many, the same can be said of sport and, in particular, of the world's most popular sport, soccer.

A thick thread of antisport sentiment weaves through the fabric of academia. The notion that sports like soccer are "the new opium of the people" permeates that space, and as a professor of political science, I have witnessed this dismissal firsthand. The American Political Science Association—which describes itself as "the leading professional organization for the study of political science [that] serves more than 11,000 members in more than 100 countries"—has fifty-five organized sections, and not one of them addresses the politics of sport. Nevertheless, my mentor in graduate school, Dr. William LeoGrande, instilled in me the belief that the exactitude of academic thinking can be used to leverage insight on any

topic, whether ratified by the discipline's flagship organization or not. LeoGrande's book *Our Own Backyard: The United States in Central America, 1977–1992*—a bracing catalog of US complicity in human-rights mayhem in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua—straddled the line between political science and history. He helped cultivate in me a conscientious intellect open to curiosity. He insisted on jargon-free interdisciplinary inquiry that bends us toward justice. I carry this with me today, as a scholar of sports politics who tries to use the firm foundation of my academic research to launch interventions in the public sphere. The more I study politics, and the more I marinate in the United States' political hyperpolarization, the more I wonder whether sport might in some ways be *more politically effective* by being *less explicitly political*.

Poet Mark Yakich offers an alluring way of thinking through the merits of soccer: "*Football is everything and football is nothing*; the trick is to hold both notions in the mind simultaneously without feeling either one is more 'right' than the other."[15]

For my mom, living under chronic pain as a polio survivor, soccer was both everything and nothing. Soccer gave her a break before it provided me a path. Her disability made space for me to develop an ability. When you grow up alongside a parent with a disability, it changes you in ways big and small. A rug with a corner collicking up was a mortal danger. Handicapped parking spots were sacred spaces. Her childhood stories of local health officers in Milwaukee County posting quarantine notices were poignant tales of yesteryear, and perhaps even quaint, at least until the coronavirus spiraled and polio returned in the United

States, thanks to a troop of the duped who succumbed to vaccine avoidance—or, worse, disparagement.

In this book, soccer is both nothing and everything at once, a rollicking paradox of nil and possibility. Soccer can refract the problematics of a capitalist society and help us make sense of a cruel, whipsaw world that's so blatantly rigged for the rich. It can help us make meaning through togetherness, through rivalry, through drama, through trauma—Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci described football as "an open-air kingdom of human loyalty."[16] Soccer can be a cross-class conversation starter—it can wedge open space for serious political discussion, and sometimes for political action. Soccer might even be able to help flip US American exceptionalism on its ugly head: Writer David Goldblatt suggests that the sport's calling in the United States may be "to offer a conduit to the rest of the world; a sporting antidote to the excesses of isolationism, a prism for understanding the world that the United States may currently shape but will increasingly be shaped by."[17]

The verb *kick* crops up only around ten times per million words in modern written English, and yet that verb, and all that it entails, ended up permeating my life. The word *kick* has not traveled a long, winding journey of verbal derivation. *To kick* has long been whittled down to a physiological gesture at the individual level: striking an object with a foot. The word maintains a direct path of meaning from the 1380s through today. Its etymology is a clipped history of unknown origin, with the Welsh word *cicio* often credited as its linguistic font, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. I invested thousands of hours hewing to the individual act of kicking, whether it was juggling a ball in the side yard, smacking a size five plastic-paneled

football against a brick wall at the neighborhood elementary school, or lashing an opponent's shin. But it is the social, the collective, where soccer accrues meaning, where the mechanical act of kicking a soccer ball, grounded as it is in the prosaic, can slingshot us toward the sublime.

So, soccer is more than a mere opiate. We need not devote ourselves to the death of complexity. Let's get the ball rolling.

Ghostface

1 Kelly, "Running Towards My Father."
2 Fitterman, "Metropolis 17."
3 US Youth Soccer, "US Youth Soccer Debuts Player Development Model."
4 Bry, *Visualization*.
5 Bry, *Visualization*, 15–16.
6 Bry, *Visualization*, 55.
7 Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 6.
8 Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow*, 54.
9 Freeman, *Running*, 97.
10 Bry, *Visualization*, 32.
11 Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, 12.
12 Shepard, "Time to End Sports," 264.
13 Perelman, *Barbaric Sport*, 39; Brohm, *Sport*, 178.
14 Marx, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 174; emphasis in the original.

15 Yakich, *Football*, 161.

16 Quoted in Galeano, *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*, 37.

17 Goldblatt, *Ball Is Round*, xii.

"Més Que Un Club"

1 See Rose City Antifa, "About," https://rosecityantifa.org/about/.

2 Zirin and Boykoff, "Soccer Game Becomes an Anti-Fascist Demonstration."

3 Horn, "Classic Years of European Marxism."

4 Odom, "Portland Timbers Front Office Explains Stance."

5 Jeff Ball, "I was the one that he was yelling at and that is precisely what he yelled," Twitter (now X), August 24, 2019, https://x.com/papez107/status/1165139044436590592?s=20.

6 Wells, *Believers*, 189.

7 Carlisle, "MLS Suspends Ban on Iron Front Flag."

8 Linehan, "'This Guy Has a Pattern'."

9 Zirin and Boykoff, "Portland Timbers Deny a Cover-Up."

10 Zirin and Boykoff, "Portland Soccer Feels the Power of Protest."

11 Linehan, "Portland Thorns Complete $63 Million Sale."

12 Auden, *Another Time*, 94. I should note that politics and morality played sizable roles in Auden's poems. He was no purveyor of apoliticism.

13 Ingle, "Unanswered Questions Over Peng Shuai."

14 Booth, "Hitting Apartheid for Six?," 477.

15 J. Boykoff, *What Are the Olympics For*?

16 Klein, *Doppelganger*, 12.

17 For more information on CONIFA, see https://www.conifa.org/en/.

18 Auden, *Another Time*, 94.