In Chad Harbach’s 2011 novel, The Art of Fielding, the previously errorless, virtually automatic college baseball shortstop Henry Skrimshander comes down with a case of “the yips.”

The throw from short to first base, an action that he worked his whole life to render intuitive, becomes unreliable and, eventually, unperformable. At the height of Henry’s college career, just as he is about to tie the record for most consecutive errorless games with his idol, the fictional Major League shortstop Aparicio Rodriguez, Henry launches a wild throw that misses its intended first base target, lands in their team dugout, and knocks his teammate unconscious. As the season progresses, Henry becomes unable to move past the physical and mental block that he has developed when throwing from short to first. The comparisons to non-fictional famous major leaguers who were similarly struck with the yips begin. Multiple characters rattle off the litany of baseball’s most heartbreaking figures who inexplicably lost their ability to make routine plays—Rick Ankiel, Chuck Knoblauch, Mackey Sasser, Steve Sax, and Steve Blass—the last two even becoming synonymous with the yips in baseball. Fielders like Henry have been diagnosed with “Steve Sax syndrome,” named after the Los Angeles Dodgers’ second baseman who temporarily lost the ability to make the throw to first. Pitchers like Rick Ankiel have been diagnosed with “Steve Blass disease,” named after the great Pittsburgh Pirates’ pitcher who permanently lost pitch control after a number of strong seasons. Getting the yips is, thus, equated
with acquiring a tragic disease, one that will mark you for life and many times end your career. Henry Skrimshander in *The Art of Fielding* comes down with a bad case. Even after only having the yips for part of a season, Henry enters a deep period of depression, stops eating, and loses contact with the outside world. As with other athletes who get the yips, Henry’s body persists regardless of his loss of ability, and it continues to persist in spite of his anorexia and inaction. However, Henry’s inspiration to persist not only as an athlete, but in all areas of his life, expires and he finds it an un“comforting” thought to have “his whole life ahead of him” (Harbach 347).

While suddenly losing an ability that you have anchored your identity to can understandably be difficult to cope with and might have ramifications for your livelihood, the narrative of tragedy surrounding the loss of ability from acquiring the yips betrays a deeply ableist myth at the core of a Western conception of athleticism and ability—that such high levels of ability are to be treasured and revered and that the loss of them is the most devastating thing that could happen to an athlete and a human. Portraying the yips as tragedy holds ability in such high esteem as to call it an art, as evidenced in Harbach’s title, *The Art of Fielding*, where ability transcends mechanical skill and becomes valued as something higher. Such language exposes the idea that athletes, especially the most elite, are supposed to be so mechanically proficient that their ability is supremely beautiful. When the focus of an athlete’s identity becomes just their mechanics, they are marked as lesser than the most elite players who have so thoroughly integrated mechanized motions, equipment, and substances into their bodily compositions that they extend beyond their mechanics. Not only does this hierarchy create a false distinction between different kinds of mechanical ability, but there is a significant danger in doing so. When athletic movements are distanced from mechanics and equipment and instead characterized in artistic terms—like describing a movement as poetry in motion, balletic, or genius—they are also
distanced from other bodies that rely upon such equipment to complete various tasks or even live. The myth that elite athletes are beautiful beyond mechanics erases what I will mark as the cyborg nature of athleticism and, in turn, severs a potential connection between elite athletes, those commonly thought to be at the height of superability, and some physically disabled people who use assistive technology, those often cast in opposition to elite athletes.

In “The Cyborg and the Crip: Critical Encounters,” feminist disability theorist Alison Kafer revisits Donna Haraway’s foundational concept of the cyborg and discusses how the figure of the cyborg can be crucial for the future of disability studies. However, rather than automatically considering people with physical disabilities to be “exemplary” and “self-evidence” of cyborg existence, Kafer argues that the figure of the cyborg needs to attend to the “material realities of disabled people’s interactions with technology” (105). Technologies are not simply available, desired, or effective for all people with disabilities, so any narratives that ignore the cost, pain, and normalization associated with assistive technology do not account for the particularities of different disabilities or people with them (108). Rather than assume that physically disabled people are cyborgs because of their bodies, Kafer works toward a non-ableist, crip understanding of cyborgs that shows “disabled people as cyborgs not because of our bodies (e.g., our use of prosthetics, ventilators, or attendants), but because of our political practices” (120). These political practices include a bold confrontation of “ableist assumptions” we have about disabled and abled bodies (120).

Reckoning with the reality of athletes being cyborgs can help accomplish what Kafer identifies as a productive cyborg political agenda and dismantle the boundary between able-bodied and disabled that Haraway’s cyborg figure previously reinforced. Kafer brings up the case of Oscar Pistorius, an Olympian and Paralympian sprinter with two below-the-knee
prosthetics, who was considered “almost a different species” than other runners as a “cyborg athlete” (108). Cast as unlike other athletes because of his prosthetics, Pistorius is taken to be a cyborg while nondisabled athletes are taken to be “natural, unmixed, unadulterated” non-cyborgs (108). Bringing the cyborgian aspects of athleticism to the forefront can help eradicate this mythical difference between disabled and able-bodied athletes that positions ability as pure and unassisted from the environment, equipment, and supplements. Discussions surrounding performance enhancing drugs and advanced training equipment abound in athletics, bringing nuance to simplified understandings of how bodies and which bodies can and should use technologies to accomplish tasks they otherwise wouldn’t be able to. The yips similarly impel audiences to grapple with the complex relationship between ability, disability, and the sudden inability to activate the same physical and mental capacities that enabled such an action moments before. Thus, identifying the athlete as cyborg helps do the work of pushing the figure of the cyborg to account more for the material realities of technologies as expensive, painful, and damaging. It also challenges the idea that physically disabled people are the only cyborgs, the most cyborgian, or qualitatively unlike other people—even elite athletes—because they use assistive technology.

Identifying cyborgian aspects of athleticism is not new. For instance, in his research on sports innovation, Rayvon Fouché argues that athletes are cyborgs due to their use of “technoscientific artifacts attached to the body or integrated into the body or a change in body mechanics” (282). Similarly, sports ethicist Kutte Jönsson argues that “we should consider the athletic body to be more like a ‘machine’ than a ‘human’ or ‘natural’ body” (252). However, the purpose of these and many other studies into the idea of athlete-as-cyborg is to dismantle the distinctions that have been created between men and women in sports. The feminist nature of
Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” calls for this significant work to be taken on, but this work does not center the ableist resistance to thinking about elite athletes as cyborgs. Ted Butryn’s work in sports psychology and sports sociology, while not working in the field of disability studies, reveals how deep and damaging the idea of able-bodied athletes as pure is. In conducting interviews with elite track and field athletes, Butryn notes the overwhelming belief that athletes who don’t dope and don’t have prosthetics think of themselves as “technological tabulae rasae” (18). Butryn deconstructs such a belief by demonstrating how athletes “have interacted with and been shaped by various technologies since birth” (18). Like Butryn, I push for the classification of athletes as cyborgs both because of the bodily technologies they have and continue to utilize but also because this classification forges an anti-ableist connection between ability and disability.

Because figuring athletes as cyborgs can help accomplish Kafer’s mission to crip the cyborg and see it as more of a political than a bodily identification, works like *The Art of Fielding* that use language to dissociate great athletes from the cyborg reinforces the ableist hierarchical binary of ability and disability. The yips should be an opportunity to reckon with the athlete’s cyborg identity because they strip even the most phenomenal athletes of the flash and elegance that enable them to transcend cyborgian associations. In *The Art of Fielding*, however, the loss of ability that comes with the yips ushers in a loss of persistence despite the fact that Henry’s body has not lost anything that would damage his body’s ability to persist. Henry getting the yips only further emphasizes the artistry of his ability that, at least at one point, allowed him to become so mechanically proficient that he was considered something above a cyborg. Anything mechanical, linking him to a cyborgian form of ability and discounting him from the realm of superior artistry, is not worth persisting for.
Mike Schwartz, Henry’s teammate and mentor on the Westish Harpooners, underscores this harmful idea of ability as art as he describes any athlete’s love of their sport because it’s “an art” that “seemed to communicate something true or even crucial about The Human Condition” (257). While this could seem to be an innocent claim to the beauty of athleticism, Schwartz defines “The Human Condition” as the idea that “we’re alive and have access to beauty, can even erratically create it, but will someday be dead and will not” (Harbach 257). In doing so, he directly links artistic ability to life and humanity and the lack of ability to death. The artistic language that makes claims to how elite ability draws someone closer to humanness distances elite ability from the mechanical, cyborgian aspects of ability that ground it. Schwartz does acknowledge the mechanical aspects of baseball, saying “baseball was an art, but to excel at it you had to become a machine” and develop a “repeatability” rather than only an ability to complete a task sometimes (257). However, the emphasis on Henry’s artistic genius, saying he is like “a virtuoso,” “a soloist,” and a “painting” that is “hanging in the ideal spot,” distracts from Henry’s cyborgian aspects in favor of casting him and his ability as artistic rather than mechanical (5, 258, 46).

Maintaining a falsely idealistic conception of superability as non-cyborg, as stemming from something outside of rigorous training or advanced supplemental tools, insists that it is something qualitatively separate from disability. Because of its ableist implications, athleticism and fielding shouldn’t be considered an “art,” insofar as the language of art separates athletic expression from the cyborgian elements that allow for the extension of physical abilities. While it isn’t a problem that some athletes are considered to be virtuosos or more skilled than other athletes, it’s a problem when this level of skill is considered to be predicated upon something disability is not or cannot be. It’s even more of a problem when the loss of such skill is
considered tragic or that someone should not persist in their life because the yips have rendered them unable to enact a particular ability. In that equation of elite ability and artistry, the loss of ability through the yips yields the loss of life’s significance, life’s beauty, and something that makes life worth living. Acknowledging the technologies and mechanics that constitute athletic prowess can upset this ableist binary, help to realize the anti-ableist potential of the cyborg, and encourage the persistence of body and mind despite the loss of an ability.
Works Cited


