

Exposing Celebrity Sport_λ

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“Get fit, get hot, start sooner, last longer, look cool, be loved. It’s summer, so strip down!” Incitements to invigilate the body are everywhere, brokered through sporting heroes and heroines who function as models of desire. Sport_λ and celebrity jumble together. They cannot be kept apart because they live cheek by cheek, torso by torso, boot by boot.

The paradox at the heart of sport_λ, its simultaneously transcendent and imprisoning qualities and its astonishing capacity to allegorize, is most obvious and perhaps most transformative in the field of celebrity culture. With the advent of consumer capitalism and postmodern culture, the body has become an increasingly visible *locus* of desire. The manipulation of appearance through fashion codes, bodily adornment, calculated nutrition, and physical conditioning has changed the clothes we wear, the desires we feel, the exercises we do, and the images we consume.

Sporting bodies are powerful symbols because they are embossed with signs of free will, self-control, health, productivity, and transcendence. Hence the almost inevitable code-switching between good and bad conduct among athletes: high-performance dietary supplements versus illegal drugs, sexual display in advertisements as opposed to extramarital affairs in private, club loyalty and disloyalty, or any other oscillation between and within written and unwritten rules that classify the good and the bad. The body is the currency of sport_λ, and its passions and its unreliability mark it out for disappointment and excess as much as fulfillment and success. That ontology connects the concerns of this book to wider issues of celebrity.

Cultural Celebrity

The idea of cultural celebrity has been with us since the first portraits of writers and painters in 12th century Europe, which marketed their subjects to potential sponsors—a precapitalist commodification of authorship. In the 17th century, portraits became methods of instruction. Depictions of the daily life

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of royalty modeled rituals for courtiers. Some time later (this is my hyper-abbreviated history of European art and society) democracy and capitalism invented the idea of publicity as a means of transferring esteem and legitimacy from the court and religion to upwardly mobile businessmen, whose legitimacy did not derive from their family backgrounds or from superstition (cf. Briggs & Burke 2003, pp. 11, 41; Elias, 1994; Gamson, 1994; Marshall, 1997).

Hence contemporary debates over celebrities and authenticity: their transhistorical as opposed to ephemeral value, their authentic versus manufactured qualities, and their public and private lives—in other words, the full catastrophe (and pleasure) of a *nouveau riche* that promotes itself and instructs others. Sport stars are part of the pantheon of celebrities who are constituted as models for emulation, displacing the traditional role of sovereign royalty as symbols of higher conduct. They form a labor aristocracy.

Sport Celebrity

The major sporting star is a stranger who is paradoxically part of daily life, a key myth and symbol of gender, race, and happiness, reified by capitalistic, sexual, and cultural processes that fabricate personal qualities and social signs as resources for commerce, art, and fantasy. Athletes are perfect celebrities. We know almost too much about them, most notably what they look like *in extremis*: dirty, sweaty, teary, demoralized, undressed, furious, joyous, unguarded, unconscious, and otherwise injured. Like ourselves when vomiting or coming. Our assumption of omniscience flows from their visibility, “liveness,” repetition, and discourse. Athletes’ vulnerabilities and victories grow all too apparent, magnified with each replay and diagnosis.

At the same time, we know less about stars than we imagine. Who is the real Wayne Rooney? Is he the diminished footballer who visits prostitutes, pays a hundred pounds for a packet of cigarettes, and watches his hair float down the plughole, never to return, while sex workers are calling him Shrek behind his back? Or is he the dynamic player and dedicated post-hair graft husband of Coleen? Who is Michael Vick? Is he the gormless gambler who derives pleasure from public brutality towards animals? Or is he misunderstood? We are told by the head of the Southeastern Virginia Arts Association that “[p]eople talk about Michael Vick as a convicted felon, well so was Jesus Christ yet . . . we all recognize him today as lord and savior” (dEstries, 2011, para. 1).

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The Value of Sport Celebrity

Despite these contradictions, because celebrities lead their lives in the public eye, it is fondly assumed that the public knows who they really are. This tendency is subsidized and commodified—even governed—by a tabloid media joy that derives in seemingly equal measure from celebration and condemnation, as photo shoots of big weddings are supplanted by paparazzi shots of big waistlines. It is a coefficient of the desire of sponsors to pay sizeable sums to associate their products with sporting stars, based on a deal about lifestyle that contractually favors reliability and decency but finds those qualities hard to separate from headlines and excess. By 2005, U.S. celebrity endorsements were said to amount to over a billion dollars in corporate expenditure, based on the assumption that audiences hope to transfer qualities from stars onto themselves by purchasing commodities. Marketing mavens call this “associative learning” (Thrall et al., 2008; Till, 2008) in their adoption of psy-function *clichés* for corporate ends.

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Again, this has profound historical precedents. Consider the nexus between male athletes and leadership in premodern Greece. Xenophon, Socrates, and Diogenes believed that triumph in sex and sport could lead to failure unless accompanied by regular examination of one’s conscience and physical training. Carefully modulated desire in both spheres became a sign of the ability to govern, so Aristotle and Plato favored regular flirtations with excess, as tests as well as pleasures. The capacity of young men to move into positions of social responsibility was judged by charioteering and man-management, because their ability to win sporting dramas was akin to dealing with sexually predatory older males. Each success showed fitness not only physically, but managerially (Miller, 2001).

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Exposing the Celebrity Athlete

Inevitably, however, things go wrong with a system based on tests of desire, flirtation, denial, and physicality. People fail and so do institutions. Perhaps the key precedent in the modern era that illustrates this inevitable tension is the U.S. case of *Burton v. Crowell Pub. Co.* from 1936, in which the Second Circuit Court of Appeals for the Southern District of New York heard a previously dismissed action. The plaintiff, Crawford Burton, complained that an image published by the defendant made him look “physically deformed and mentally perverted,” as well as “guilty of indecent exposure.” The Court found the defendant had a case of libel and slander to answer, even though

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the "trivial ridicule" that might descend on Burton was "patently an optical illusion" as part of an advertisement in which he had consented to appear (for US\$500, according to a rather disdainful *Harvard Crimson* student newspaper (Poo, 1937).

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 The image in question? Photographs of Burton in an advertisement (available at http://www.periodpaper.com/media/catalog/product/cache/1/image/8022f01105bea4edf676ba39d5976c14/S/E/SEP4_733_1.JPG) for Camel cigarettes had appeared in such periodicals as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Liberty Magazine*, *Collier's*, and *Popular Science*. Burton, a renowned jockey and stockbroker, was quoted as endorsing Camels for their calming, restorative effect after "a crowded business day." This annotation accompanied two images. The first, which did not excite legal action, depicted Burton post-race in his riding attire, holding cigarette, whip, and cap, with "Get a lift with a Camel" as the caption. It represented him after the little death, the race-finish when it is time for all good jockeys and horses to draw deep breaths. Problems arose with the other picture (captioned "When you feel 'all in'"). Burton is shown in the less dramatic, more regulatory ritual of the weigh-in. Carrying his saddle, he has one hand under the cantle and the other beneath the pommel. The seat is about a foot below his waist, and the line formed by a loose girth appears to connect him to it. Herein lies the problem: it looks like an exposed and available penis.

Time magazine ("Press: Camel Jockey," 1937) described the background to the case thus:

An advertising sensation of 1934 was the color photograph of Gentleman Jockey Crawford Burton, twice winner of the dangerous Maryland Hunt Cup, posing in his racing silks as an endorser of Camel cigarettes' [sic] recuperative power. By a horrible mischance, the photograph of Mr. Burton, holding his saddle and girth, reproduced in such a manner that to a prurient or imaginative eye it appeared to show Mr. Burton indecently exposed as only a man could be exposed.

When Crawford Burton, who is a stockbroker when not riding, showed up the next day at the New York Stock Exchange, he found that its notoriously prurient members had so chosen to interpret his picture. When Mr. Burton entered the Exchange smoking room, he said that scores of brokers began to brandish copies of *Collier's* (one of the first publications to receive and print the advertisement) and set up such a gibbering that he could execute no orders, went home to seclude himself for days.

In the terminology of Circuit Judge Learned Hand, ✓ the photograph becomes grotesque, monstrous, and obscene; and the legends, which without undue violence can be made to match, reinforce the ribald interpretation. That is the libel. ✓ He was struck by the picture's ✓ lewd deformity. ✓

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Burton had posed for the photographs^f but had not been shown the outcome. His counsel claimed that the image meant he could be regarded "as guilty of indecent exposure and as being a person physically deformed and mentally perverted" (*Burton v. Crowell*, 1936, p. 154). The case continues to be read today, and its arguments about the jockey losing legitimacy in the public eye still resonate. In a Bush-era Equal Opportunities Commission Case (*Oates v. Discovery Zone*, 1997, p. 1205) it was regrettable that the Commission believed the decision in the case turned on comparing the appellant Burton to a "gorilla."

The case has another side. Even before the judgment was handed down—and not because of the Camel-penis connection—the National Steeplechase and Hunt Association had announced that a ten-dollar fine would be levied on jockeys smoking in their silks. Once Burton's advertisement appeared, it was decided that the act of smoking itself should lead to a ban, as James Thurber noted in *The New Yorker* (Kinkead, Smith, & Thurber, 1934).

Conclusion: The Complexities of Celebrity Sport_λ

As per that case, the celebrity sport star is a complex mix of marketing methods, social signs, national emblems, products of capitalism and individualism, and objects of personal and collective consumption, with desire and control in a necessarily unsteady relationship. Each tendency imbricates the public with the private and publicity with intimacy. The space for errors is literally boundless, as wide as the distance between winners and nonstarters in a steeplechase.

Athletes become celebrities when their social and private lives grow more important than their professional qualities. They represent the times more generally because they provide stereotypes of success, power, and beauty. As figures of consumption and emulation, they incarnate dramatic roles and fashions. In addition, they show us the limitations and promises of an age. Above all, each celebrity "es una imagen; pero no una imagen natural" [is an image; but not a natural image]. What matters is: "la transformación del icono ideográfico en icono normativo" [the transformation of an ideographic icon into a normative one], a process whereby photographs and other reproductions become public historical documents about success and tragedy (Bueno, 2002, p. 2).

It is easy to mock a fascination with celebrity culture. Moving away from sport, consider the questions asked only a short while ago about U.S. obsessions with minor celebrities: should we care when "octomom" Nadya Suleman

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gives birth to a lot of children or a Mouseketeer (Britney Spears) gets a bad haircut? We could ridicule engagement with such topics and suggest it would be better to study Iran's nuclear warhead capability or Israel's theocratic racial state. Or we could list some of the issues that such tabloid tales represent: life as a single parent; the ethics and experience of fertility treatments; eating disorders; and romantic disappointment. Are these so unimportant? Thinking back to Rooney and Vick, the issues their stories raise—about masculinity, the sex industries, and animal cruelty—are also far from trivial.

It is easy to lament popular interest in the transgressions of sporting figures, to read them as symptoms of a culture of triviality that fails to address major questions of the day—or indeed to read the scandals themselves as symptoms. The history is more clouded and complex than such facile analyses will allow, and the value of investigating human life as a social sign infinitely more valuable. Hence the importance of the book you hold in your hands.

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