

The New Zealand Herald

Toby Miller: Sex and performance, hit and myth

While scientific evidence is sparse, the obsession with the 'Wags' and off-field antics before games continues
Toby Miller



Russian model Irina Shayk, girlfriend of footballer Cristiano Ronaldo, is sure to be in the spotlight at the World Cup. Photo / AP

While watching their national teams play in the World Cup, spectators may have their attention drawn away from the "beautiful game" on the pitch to the beautiful people off it - the footballers' wives and girlfriends .

If they distract viewers, do they distract footballers too?

It would appear so. Over the past month or so, several national teams have put forth their policies surrounding sex during the 2014 World Cup:

- Mexico, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Chile have prohibited sex during the tournament.
- English players are allowed to fly their families over as long as they don't interfere with training.
- Brazil and Mexico warn against overly frisky "acrobatics".
- Spain demands no funny business the night before matches.
- Australia, France and the US are all allowing a bit of action during the competition, to varying degrees.

So why all this fuss over sex before sport?

English football agonises over its national team. The two principal competitions it enters -- the European Championships and the World Cup -- are perennial disasters. Each failure is marked by mishap. In recent decades, players have been sent from the field, suspended, robbed by refereeing, missed penalty kicks and cheated by Diego Maradona's "Hand of God" goal in the quarter-finals of the 1986 World Cup.

The 2006 World Cup finals in Germany offered a new explanation. The press constructed players' Wags as distractions from their partners' mission.

With the emergence of sexology and internationally competitive sport in the 20th century came scientific claims about sex and performance. Cyclists and swimmers ingested liquid extracts from bull testicles a century ago, and the last English FA Cup final before World War II was allegedly decided on the strength of which team took monkey gland tablets in training (the losers).

Today's story is a blend of mysticism, media gossip and minor scholarship. Indian wrestling requires men to forgo sex to capitalise on the semen they produce.

There are loads of great sporting achievements that followed nights of denial:

- Khalid Khannouchi's marathons.
- Muhammad Ali's fights.
- The 1996 Canadian Olympic swim team.

Mike Ditka's Chicago Bears.

These are contrasted with great performances that come hard on the heels of nocturnal indulgence:

Wilt Chamberlain's 100-point basketball game.

Bob Beamon's Olympic long jump.

Brazil's 1994 World Cup victory.

Kerrin-Lee Gartner's Olympic skiing gold.

Consider the mythology that swirls around the 1974 World Cup final between the Netherlands and the then Federal Republic of Germany.

The Dutch were supposedly instructed to have sex the night before. Having scored in the first minute, they flagged. The Germans, ordered to abstain, triumphed, courtesy of two late goals.

So the myth continues. The scientific evidence is sparse. This obsession stems from history and culture.

Sex and sport have a lengthy shared past. In Ancient Greece and Rome, the capacity to channel desire into athletics proved men's fitness to rule society.

The capacity of sport to incarnate such masculine hegemony is being destabilised as more women become spectators, journalists and athletes. Over the past 20 years, sports have sought them out as consumers, and increasing numbers participate as athletes.

But the political economy of women's spectatorship is not matched by the political economy of women's sport. Media attention and gossip consign elite sportswomen to a different sphere from elite men. And as spectators, their expertise and commitment are rarely foregrounded or respected.

So among hundreds of media stories that fetishise Wags (no one at the World Cup is overtly gay!), their bodies and romantic histories will be guides highlighting "selfies, shopping and skinny mojitos".

Clearly, as long as women are routinely valued for their looks and the men they accompany, and conventionally devalued for their other qualities, the Wags charade will come around every four years.

• **Toby Miller is professor of cultural policy studies at Murdoch University, Perth.**

5 comments

I'm not sure about sex before a game but am definitely opposed to sex during the game.

boutagy - New Zealand - 10:16 AM Tuesday, 17 Jun 2014

It's not a World Cup/Olympics without this old story being trotted out again.

By the way, I certainly wouldn't call England's World Cup performances "a disaster". Not getting out of a group that contains New Zealand and Slovakia (Italy 2010) or France's efforts in 2002 and 2010 might be considered disasters. Or Germany losing to Bulgaria in 1994. Or Italy losing to South Korea in 2002.

At least when England go out, it's usually against a big team, in the knock-out stages, and it's usually after they've drawn for 120 minutes.

YouKNOWItsTheTruth - New Zealand - 02:46 PM Tuesday, 17 Jun 2014

boutagy

"I'm not sure about sex before a game but am definitely opposed to sex during the game."

Haha it's like the old George Best anecdote...

Q: When was the closest time before a game you had sex?

A: Half-time.

Nick B - New Zealand - 02:46 PM Tuesday, 17 Jun 2014

If my girlfriend was Irina Shayk, I wouldn't have left home.

hercules - 02:46 PM Tuesday, 17 Jun 2014

Funny how big wallets attract good looking women isn't it?

The old sage - New Zealand - 02:46 PM Tuesday, 17 Jun 2014