Villains, fools or heroes? Sports stars as role models for young people

GILL LINES
University of Brighton, Chelsea School, Trevin Towers, Eastbourne East Sussex BN20 7SP, UK

Sporting texts are designed to prioritize, personalize and sensationalize characters in an attempt to capture audience attention. The sporting hero has traditionally been perceived of as epitomizing social ideals and masculine virtues, and as embodying values that learnt on the playing fields will readily transfer into everyday life. However, growing media intrusion signifies the contemporary sports star as a ‘damaged hero’ - the male sports celebrity exemplifying contemporary laddishness, drunken exploits, wife and girlfriend beatings and gay relationships, all of which influence the image of the modern day sports hero. In contrast, female sport stars are well documented as marginalized, trivialized and objectified, to the extent which sports heroines are both invisible and questionable as role models for young girls.

This article discusses ways in which sport stars are constructed as role models for young people. It cites instancing examples from the sports calendar of the ‘Summer of sport’ 1996, in its discussion of the media construction of sports stars as villains, fools or heroes. It identifies the gender differentiated readings of sports stars as heroes and heroines and concludes that the ways in which media critics accord hero and role model status does not necessarily reflect the opinions of young people.

Introduction

This paper offers a critical discussion of the ways in which contemporary sports stars are constructed as villains, fools and heroes, and the subsequent controversies this creates in the promotion of sport stars as role models for young people. It considers social expectations surrounding the behaviour of sport stars and identifies how a lack of sustained research has failed to confirm the actual impact of sport stars as role models for young people. It cites instancing examples of textual analysis from the sports calendar of the ‘Summer of Sport’ 1996, focusing on Euro 96, Wimbledon 1996 and the Atlanta Olympics, and draws particularly on examples from case studies on Paul Gascoigne and Tim Henman.

The methodology employs content and discourse analysis across a range of quality and tabloid UK newspapers. This comprised part of a wider investigation of media sport narratives and audience analysis around national identity, gendered identity and tales of heroism and villainy (Lines, 1999; Lines, 2000b). In respect of sport stars, content analysis of newspaper headlines and photographs revealed those who received amplified attention. The frequency and nature of specific themes within the discourse identified
the contradictory and gendered constructions of sport stars as villains, fools and heroes.

The characterization of sport stars affords a central focus across both sports spectacle and narrative and celebrity sport stars images are communicated through a vast array of media products (Connell, 1992; Rowe, 1995; Whannel, 1992, 1998b and Whannel and Wellard, 1995). As their celebrity status grows, for some, the audience knows as much, if not more, about their personal lives as their sporting endeavours. Footballers, especially, are now famed beyond the playing fields with lucrative transfer and sponsorship deals, relationships with famous female pop stars (David Beckham and his wife, Victoria (‘Posh Spice’) and Jamie Redknapp and Louise for example) and their own television shows such as the footballer, Ian Wright in *Friday Nights All Wright*. This ensures that their images are multi-dimensional, highly visible and enduring.

The sporting hero has traditionally been perceived as epitomizing social ideals and masculine virtues, and as embodying values which learnt on the playing fields will readily transfer into everyday life (McIntosh, 1979; Mangan, 1981; Whannel, 1995). This has typically generated gendered cultural expectations, despite the fact that not all boys like sport, that every English schoolboy would want, and should, have their own sporting hero to emulate. For as Salisbury and Jackson (1996, p. 209) suggest:

*Both on the television and the football terrace, sport offers boys’ images, models and fantasies of what it is to be a ‘proper’ man today.*

It is questionable whether modern day sports stars can be perceived as heroic in the traditional sense, for few can live up to ‘Muscular Christian’ imagery of the Victorian era, where male sporting heroes were admired for high morals and exemplary sporting behaviour, displaying courage, loyalty and bravery (cf. McIntosh, 1979; Mangan, 1981; Whannel, 1995, 1998b; Horne *et al.*, 1999). However such lingering values of sporting heroes continue suggesting sport stars should maintain traditional social standards both on and off the pitch.

Growing media intrusion providing information about sports stars lives beyond the sporting context signifies the contemporary sports star as ‘a flawed or damaged hero’ (Harris, 1994; Rowe, 1995, Vande Berg, 1998; Whannel, 1999; Boyle and Haynes, 2000), with contradictory readings of the villain, fool or both. The male sports celebrity images exemplify contemporary laddishness, drunken exploits, wife and girlfriend beatings and gay relationships, all of which blemish the image of the modern day sports hero. In contrast, female sport stars are marginalized, trivialized and objectified (Creedon, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Kinkema and Harris, 1998; Duncan and Messner, 2000) to the extent that feminine sports heroines are both invisible and questionable as sporting role models for young girls.

This article discusses ways in which sports stars function in media narratives and the contrasting roles that they are signified to play as sporting heroes, villains and fools. The continued pre-eminence of patriarchal discourse and imagery around mediated sporting heroes during the ‘Summer
of Sport 1996’ prioritizes discussion around the male sport star. However the relative neglect of female sports stars representation, together with the gender differentiated nature of sports stars as role models for young people is highlighted as a key point for consideration. Finally, it questions the ways in which young people interpret media constructions, and highlights the need for continued in depth work on the sports audience to determine long term trends in gendered choices and interpretations of sport stars.

The construction of sport stars as heroes

The extent to which sport stars today are perceived to be heroes is problematic, for changing media functions of the star have led to the decline of the ‘hero’ in the traditional sense. The term ‘hero’ is used in a number of different ways. Vande Berg (1998, p. 134) suggests that although the term hero originates from the Greek word meaning ‘person distinguished for courage, fortitude or deeds’, its meaning is adaptable between cultures and through time. Harris argues (1994) that true heroes have moral and social responsibilities. Holt (1999, p. 12) suggests that sporting heroes:

... resemble each other and they differ from each other. They have common qualities like courage and willpower but they also have specific national and social characteristics.

Birrell and Hart (1981, p. 374) argue that,

The names of sport heroes may soon be forgotten, perhaps are never known, but the substance of the achievement has served its purpose by providing one of an endless number of affirmations of cultural values.

Synonyms such as celebrity, conqueror, exemplar, great man, heartthrob, man of the hour, idol, star, superstar are used for the term ‘hero’. Far fewer synonyms are offered for the term ‘heroine’ – goddess, ideal, celebrity and woman of the hour (Collins Thesaurus, 1988). The use of ‘goddess’ and ‘ideal’ as synonyms for heroine are pertinent in this analysis of media representations. For it seems female sport stars are often compared to the feminine ideal, and those that receive amplified coverage are constructed as (sex) goddesses. By comparison, male definitions carry a wider range of meanings, with the notion of exemplars and conquerors frequently represented in media coverage of male sport stars.

Across sporting texts, entertainment value, drama and focus are enhanced by the amplification of sport stars. As Holt et al. (1996, p. 5) suggest, ‘a sport without a hero is like Hamlet without the Prince’. Indeed, it is difficult to identify high profile media sports without prominent stars. Sports stars are real in the sense that they perform live under unpredictable sporting conditions over which apparently the media has little control. Yet, the nature of what the reader gets to see, hear and read about is determined and amplified by camera angles, replays, gossip columns, photographic images, chat shows and other such professional practices which ensure that the sport star image develops through selected constructions of reality.
The male sport star as ‘hero’ provides one dimension of the sporting narratives, and stories are compared with tales of villainy, foolhardiness and atonement (Rowe, 1995; Horne et al., 1999; Lines, 2000b, Boyle and Haynes, 2000). The construction of the sporting hero reflects legacies of past heroic ideals interwoven with contemporary reflections on the ‘celebrity’ and commercial sport. In contrast with other media stars, sports stars embody traditional values held about sport, eternalized in stories of the past, as well as functioning to provide wider constructions of contemporary values and beliefs, and social roles (Vande Berg, 1998).

Gledhill (1991, p. xiii) suggests that stars are a signifying element in media texts:

a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which express the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism yet a site of contest by marginalized groups; a figure consumed for his or her personal life, who competes for allegiance with statesmen and politicians.

Holt (1999, p. 12) suggests the lives of sports stars are ‘woven into stories we tell ourselves about ourselves’.

The rhetoric of nineteenth century Public Schools ideological legacy promoting character development and the making of ‘the man’ through participation on the playing fields, still resound in sporting narrative. The construction of the sports star ‘as hero’ thus embodies traditional and idealized values and ethics of the ‘gentleman and amateur’:

It was the rise of the gentleman amateur and the cult of fair play that turned sport into a form of moral education and set up the batsman as a kind of idealized Englishman, striding to the wicket in his whites, wearing the colours of his county or country, to do battle as knights of a new kind of chivalry. (Holt et al., 1996, pp. 49–50)

The ‘Summer of Sport’ 1996 revealed a number of examples where sports stars were identified as central characters and heroic figures in the events. During Wimbledon 1996, Tim Henman emerged as a potential star whose background and character epitomized the combined notion of the ‘traditional’ national sporting hero and an English Gentleman:

In tennis terms Henman is a pedigree prospect, from privileged surroundings of Oxford’s elite Dragon School, to boarding at Reed’s Public School, Surrey. (The Independent, 1996, 29 June, p. 3)

Players like Henman hark back to a golden era in sport when sport stars seemed to appreciate their status as role models. (On Track, 1997, spring edition, pp. 13–14)

Advantage, Mr Nice Guy . . . (You Magazine, Mail on Sunday, 1997, 1 June, pp. 38–39)

Sports heroes are clearly promoted by the media as a source of national pride and function to represent national qualities, traditions and distinctions
Sports stars as role models

(Whannel, 1992). The Euro 96 football tournament opening-ceremony used images of knights and the legend of St George that evoked mythical qualities about heroes and equated past and present soccer stars with similar characteristics. It was represented by a medieval pageant which reminded us of past role models and the traditional history of, firstly football, and secondly, legendary soccer stars. Following the medieval heroic exploits of St George the ITV commentator reminded the audience that there were English heroes, even before the development of football. Wembley was referred to as the ‘venue of legends’ and the ceremony proceeded from St George with the arrival of 11 ‘of this country’s greatest ambassadors’. The mixture of past English footballers including Sir Stanley Matthews and Sir Bobby Charlton, signified their importance and status, synonymous with the images of the heroic medieval knights.

Discourses of heroism revolve around positive images of sporting physical prowess with references to style, skill, excellence in performance and entertainment value. Television programmes such as Sports Personality of the Year, National Portrait Gallery Sporting Heroes Exhibition and the Queens Honours awarded to sport stars all suggest that the sporting prowess of performers is socially valued. As Inside Sport (1998, January, p. 15) suggests:

Sport stars are fashion items, in favour when they win, out when they lose. They have skills worthy of admiration, but they are basically entertainers and their primary task is to enthrall.

Secondly, sport stars function to represent heroic images of men and masculinity. Rowe (1992, p. 153) supports this point, ‘It is through the mass media that sports stars function as celebrity advertisements for masculinity’. Whannel (1992, p. 124) develops this further:

The ideal star is young, male and successful. The maleness of the concept becomes clearer when the qualities evoked and offered for admiration are analysed. There is a stress on a set of qualities traditionally associated with masculinity – toughness, aggression, commitment, power, competitiveness, courage and ability to stand up to pressure . . .

The sporting hero then is seen to embody valued masculine characteristics, such as strong, brave, tough, and powerful, all of which are evident in the sporting discourse. These reflect courage, integrity, competitiveness and success, all traditionally perceived to develop through sporting endeavours.

In the British press, connections are frequently drawn between sport stars and past military war heroes. Holt (1999) explains how the ‘ideal’ of the British hero evolved with the British Empire. The playing field is seen to resemble the battleground as the sport star leads his team out to conquer the opposition.

The ancient concept of heroes as warriors in combat was evident in discourses of Euro 96, promoting social values and ideals of masculinity alongside references to qualities required on the battlefield. This created
tensions alongside ‘laddish’ images of contemporary celebrity footballers (Whannel, 1995). The characteristics of the footballers as sporting heroes reiterate notions of character, courage and bravery:

The best since 1996 – valiant Shearer . . . defiant Seaman . . . Sturdy Pearce, creative Redknapp and Shearer . . . he led the line with the robust conviction of the authentic sporting warrior . . . (Daily Mail, 1996, 17 June, p. 61)

‘Character, Integrity and Honour’ – Pearce showed all of these qualities . . . by surviving a Spanish Inquisition which demanded every inch of courage. (Daily Mail, 1996, 24 June, p. 59)

In years to come students will be schooled in the precise moment Scottish forces were so heroically repelled by Lord Admiral David Seaman at Wembley on June 15th. Seaman stood strong a mere 12 yards from the massed Caledonian cannons – and emerged with no greater injury than a tiny ball on his left elbow. (The Sun, 1996, 17 June, p. 35)

If football matches are narrated as contests of combat, then inevitably footballers acquire the status of warriors and leaders of men – hence Alan Shearer as the sporting warrior leading the line and David Seaman as the Lord Admiral standing firm in facing the onslaught during the penalty shoot-out. That saving or scoring a goal in a penalty shoot-out can be paralleled with a famous victory in battle says much about the ways in which hero status in contemporary culture is so readily accorded, and reflects the long-standing relationship between sporting rhetoric and military discourse.

Much of this discussion affirms the notion of the sporting hero as inherently male. As Horne et al. (1999, p. 173) confirm, ‘masculine imagery has been at the heart of sporting discourse’. The under-representation and marginalization of females across a range of sports media has been well documented (Duncan and Hasbrook, 1988; Halbert and Latimer, 1994; Hargreaves, 1994; Horne et al., 1999 and Lumpkins and Williams, 1991) and raises questions about the extent to which sports women are, or can be seen to be heroines. If the sporting discourse focuses on powerful, heroic men how this positions sports women is debatable.

Two main constructions of female athletes are seen to signify the heroine. These both offer heterosexual feminine appropriate images for as Creedon (1998, p. 95) suggests ‘sex and sweethearts’ provide key marketing potential. These reflect clear distinctions from heroic male characteristics. Firstly, sweet, ‘girl next door’ images, such as the highly profiled gymnasts at the Atlanta Olympics. During the Atlanta Olympics the American gymnast, Kerrie Strugg received accolade for her ‘brave and courageous’ performance in the team competition, which was accredited by the media as one of the defining and heroic moments of the 1996 Games:

picked herself up off the floor after a botched first vault . . . and her second effort left her crumbled in pain, but a hero to the nation. (The Independent, 1996, 25 July, p. 27)

US gymnast, Kerrie Strugg’s completion of her 2nd vault despite a badly strained ankle was the defining moment of the first half of the 1996 Olympic’s . . . she
added another word to the Olympic credo . . . faster, higher, stronger, braver. (Wulf, 1996, p. 32)

Secondly, sports women are likely to receive recognition when they are perceived to be sex goddesses, reflecting traditional heterosexual feminine stereotypes. It could be suggested that such imagery merely act to detract away from the sporting success of women (Hargreaves, 1994; Creedon, 1994). For some female sports women are more illustrious for their sexualized images (such as the tennis player, Anna Kournikova whose image is frequently seen on the front cover of men’s magazines), or for ‘taking off their kit’ (such as the athlete, Denise Lewis who posed in body paint for Total Sport magazine) rather than the sporting success they achieve wearing it.

The significant popularity of women’s beach volleyball and its high media profile during the Atlanta and Sydney Olympics indicate that female sports stars, scantily clad in Lycra are likely to be afforded high status and visibility because of sex appeal rather than sporting prowess (Lines, 2000a). Beach Volleyball in the Olympics for the first time attracted sell out live crowds at Atlanta, and English tabloid newspapers amplified sexualized female images of the sport.

In both these cases the sporting ‘heroine’ is constructed for the male gaze, with men positioned as the dominant audience of mediated sport. If the contemporary sports hero represents a contradiction in terms within the sporting discourse, this suggests that the sporting heroine is even more contentious and offers further contradictory constructions of sporting heroism. Gender oppositions highlighted here are central features in the discourse of sport stars – this analysis reaffirms the sporting hero embodying contradictions in traditional and contemporary masculinity and the sporting heroine most clearly media visible and applauded when she is perceived to portray characteristics of heterosexual femininity.

Heroes or villains?

Contemporary stars offer a complexity of images revealing celebrity lifestyles, the acquisition of immense wealth and varying moral attitudes:

the contemporary sports hero is the hero of the consumer culture; a conscious, hedonistic consumer par excellence, exploring with equal fervour the world of brand name products and testing the subtle differences in food, clothes, perfume and women. (Holt et al., 1996, p. 6)

The lingering legacy of sport as promoting fair play, courage and bravery is contrasted with tales of drug taking, rule breaking, commercial profit and ‘win at all costs’ within the field of play. As Connell suggests (1992, p. 78), stars function as privileged members of society yet, ‘there is more than a hint in all such stories and asides that the personalities are unworthy of the privilege they enjoy’. Moral story-lines, contrasting distinctions between sport stars as heroic or villainous characters are evident within the sporting text. As Horne et al. (1999, p. 185) suggest:
Once they are established further celebration becomes of low news value, whereas any whiff of sensation or scandal has a greatly enhanced news value... so star players have an inbuilt tendency to lurch between positive and negative roles.

The dichotomy of heroes and heroines as ‘celebrity’ creates the current dilemma as to whether sport stars can, or should be worthy role models for young people (Rowe, 1995; Whannel, 1995). For the media informs its readers about, and celebrates the nature of, the fame, fortune and good looks of the celebrity. Yet the nature of media intrusion reflects too, images of many of the social problems of everyday life. Aspects of male sport stars personal lives reveal the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol (England rugby international, Lawrence Dallaglio and footballers, Paul Merson and Tony Adams), wife and girlfriend beatings (footballers Paul Gascoigne and Stan Collymore) and highly profiled extra-marital affairs (ex-England rugby player, Will Carling and sports commentator, Desmond Lynham), all of which are amplified by the media.

These question the idea of individual ‘exemplar’ and the widely held beliefs about the social and moral benefits of sporting participation. If elite sportsmen can no longer embody this, then legitimation of such values come under threat. Similarly, beliefs that sport is an important activity for developing masculine characteristics and asserting male domination are debatable when top male stars confirm their homosexuality, and successful female athletes assert their rights to compete equally across all sporting spaces.

On field behaviour of male football stars, such as reactions to crowd intimidation (the Cantona kick and David Beckham’s Euro 2000 sign) and unsporting behaviour to fellow players (such as the Fowler and Le Saux homosexuality incident), gain amplified media attention. The replaying of such incidents, and the coverage of them beyond the sports pages of the daily newspapers are likely to guarantee that attention is drawn to such accounts.

References to sport stars financial situations also confirm the privilege and benefits they accrue as representatives of the elite group of sport stars. This further reinforces gender distinctions in sporting status and financial success. In 1999, the wealth of Britain’s top 50 highest paid sports celebrities (predominately male) added up to £242.7 million. Nick Faldo topped the table with £41 million in his bank account. Michael Owen aged 19, following his 1998 World Cup success, became the fourth richest football player with £7 million (Daily Mail, 1999, 5 February). Whilst these two examples display relatively positive sporting images, the way in which some male sport stars use and abuse this financial wealth becomes a focus of media attention, eroding the lingering sporting gentleman and amateur ideal.

Much of the early media coverage of Euro 96 focused on the notion of ‘fallen heroes’. This was provoked by the ‘dentist chair incident’ in Hong Kong where English players were seen pouring tequila down each others’ throats, the reported damage to Cathay Pacific flight CX251, on which the England team returned prior to the event, and the three England players seen
in an Essex nightclub in the early hours after the England–Switzerland opening match. Photographs of these scenes were front page news and published throughout the British press.

The majority of media commentaries branded footballers as irresponsible ‘traitors’, unworthy of representing the nation. Sports journalists, Members of Parliament, sports doctors and past players were all provided with media space to voice public concern. Headlines such as ‘England aces back on the booze. Night clubbing until 2.20am’ (The Sun, 1996, 11 June, p. 1) and ‘Alcohol versus abstinence may be the decisive encounter of Euro 96’ (The Daily Telegraph, 1996, 11 June, p. 6) were elaborated by other equally condemning comments:

We’ve been betrayed by Venables’ fallen idols . . . at a time when the nation is desperate to throw itself behind its football team, . . . it finds itself repelled by conduct unbecoming in a group of athletes. The real fact is we should like a side who did not instantly evoke images of the China Jump Club and the premier nightspot in Ilford. You see, football’s coming home and the nation would dearly love to take a pride in its footballers. If only they could take a pride in themselves. (Collins, 1996, 16 June, p. 99)

Other countries demand heroism and a defence of national pride from their players . . . In the US, as in many nations, sporting excellence is an expression and celebration of moral character. The culture of Post-Modern Laddery is no match for moral seriousness. Think of Gazza and then think of Jordan. It’s a joke, right? Jordan is from another planet; Gazza is human, all too human. (The Independent, 1996, 11 June, p. 13)

Tory MP, David Evans believes ‘England players need to rediscover the old English virtues of discipline, modesty and common sense’. (The Independent, 1996, 8 June, p. 6)

The stupid FA can dismiss it as harmless fun for healthy young men but that’s not how the fans see it. Professional sportsmen given the chance of a lifetime to play in a tournament like Euro 96 should be tucked up in bed early with a glass of milk not downing beers at a nightclub. (The Sun, 1996, 11 June, p. 6)

According to Whannel (1998b, p. 24), an article in The Guardian (1998, 30 August) questioned why sports stars have a moral responsibility that is not deemed a requisite in other celebrities. Clearly the belief that moral and social values learnt on the playing field are readily transferred into everyday life is still a commonly held assumption. Images of the England footballers from Euro 96 shattered that illusion, and reflected on going contradictions in the ‘star’ narratives between heroism and villainy (Whannel, 1999).

In the current commercial and moral climate, scandal, sex and violence sells media products, and all three clearly intrude in some ways into sport. Even when they do not appear appropriate features for particular sporting events, somehow the readers’ attention may be drawn towards them. The objectification of looks and commodification of bodies are regularly used as a targeting and marketing strategy of sport stars by the media. Beach volleyball is a clear example of this. Stars are selected and used for their looks to market and sell a whole range of products (examples include David
Beckham and Brylcreem, Gary Lineker and Walkers Crisps and Anna Kournikova and the Berlei Sports bra). Illustrative of the marketing of Kournikova, the sexual image of females often supersedes their sporting image.

Pete Sampras, the world number one during Wimbledon 1996, exemplifies the fact that success alone does not ensure celebrity or ‘hero’ status in the eyes of the media. Acknowledged by fellow professionals and coaches as the greatest player of modern times, he has failed to capture the imagination and amplified attention of the media, and consequently we are led to believe the general public.

The Sun headline (1996, 28 June, p. 45) reiterates the point: ‘I just wanna be loved, says Pete’. The short article reports Sampras’ desire to be loved by Wimbledon as much as he wants to win it. The journalist’s statement that the American ground out a (my italics) 7-6, 6-4, 6-4 victory, implied that his style and way of playing could be the reason for his lack of spectator appeal. The scarcity of tantrums, lack of trendy good looks and dearth of details indicating a wild social life, reflecting a man dedicated to success and tennis, does not provide for scandalous and sensational coverage that will sell newspapers.

Henman too, has come under scrutiny for being ‘rather dull’:

Of course he’s a brilliant tennis player, and yes, he’s just the right age to appeal to the kids who buy sports gear . . . But his public image is so clean cut, so vice free, so damn dull that the only thing he’s in danger of attracting is a crowd of Jehovah’s Witnesses. (Daily Mail, 1997, 18 October, p. 18)

Henman is routinely describe in interviews as a ‘nice chap’ – more of a Steve Davis than an Alex Higgins, an Alan Shearer not a George Best . . . I start to think that there might be more to Henman than King Dull. (The Guardian, 1997, 14 April, p. 10)

They cry out for a tennis player and you give them a tennis player and they say he’s got no character. What do they want, Paul Gascoigne? (You Magazine, Mail on Sunday, 1997, 1 June, pp. 38–39)

Real (1996, p. 143), suggests that characteristics such as flamboyance, self-promotion, consumption, fame and extravagance are rewarded in the ‘post-modern culture of excess’. Images of Henman, hardly seem to embody such values, thus identifying the dilemma that begins to emerge in developing media narratives. Whilst condemning bad behaviour in sports stars, the media actually thrives on exposing it in order to ensure its commercial success and interest to its readers.

Where female sport stars are portrayed as villains they appear to contravene feminine appropriate roles or contest traditionally male dominated ‘sporting terrain’. For example, the media debate over women’s boxing has focused on the unsuitability of physical and biological female characteristics, whilst deriding the notion of female boxers as either courageous or brave. As such, female boxers are unlikely to be represented as heroines, and attention has been deflected away from more pertinent issues concerning the risk of injury and equity across the sexes.
Issues of sexuality and a perceived lack of femininity ensured that Martina Navratilova, for example, rarely received positive media coverage or sponsorship deals in comparison to Chris Evert, despite her comparable success (Blue, 1988). The recent emergence of the French female tennis player Amelie Mauresimo has also met with similar constructions of the ‘villain’:

Watching her in action, biceps taut and huge shoulder muscles rippling you can see how she simply overpowers more feminine opponents. Amelie Mauresimo is the new sensation of women’s tennis – but her game is bereft of the artistry and grace seen in so many champions of the past. Her style built around brute force and ferocity . . . (Daily Mail, 1999, 30 January, p. 3)

Much of the attention around Mauresimo has focused on her being gay and the media has drawn attention to the direct contrasts between herself and the ‘more feminine and heterosexual’ Martina Hingis, who is alleged to have called the French player ‘half man’. Such powerful qualities would be much admired in a male tennis star, yet confirm the ways in which sporting narratives seek to identify distinctions between femininity and masculinity, and can condemn the female sport star striving to cross boundaries, to the role of villain rather than heroine.

The triad – heroes, villains and fools

Paul Gascoigne is probably one of the most highly profiled English sport stars of the last decade. He provides the ultimate sporting narrative – for he is hero, villain and fool in one, and as such, can provide an ongoing narrative without dependence on other contrasting characters. Gascoigne provides an array of images – from the goal scoring genius, drunken wife beater through to the tearful clown (Whannel, 1992; Horne et al., 1999; Lines, 1999).

Interpretation of his role as a sport star and role model can rest anywhere along this continuum, and this was clearly evident during Euro 96. As a national hero:

It’s Gazza, the great. (News of the World, 1996, 16 June, p. 72)
Gazza carves his name in history. (The Sun, 1996, 17 June, p. 35)
He’s a genius capable of doing things with his feet which lift the spirits of his followers out of their dreary norm . . . a glorious cavalier grating against puritanical killjoys . . . a living example to the rest of the world of Englishness . . . (Media Guardian, 1996, 30 September, p. 2)

As a villain, embodying contemporary values of the ‘New Lad’:

Party time Gascoigne leads the revellers. (The Sunday Telegraph, 1996, 16 June, p. 1)
The Guzzler dries up. (Daily Mail, 1996, 10 June, p. 64)
He’s the nation’s biggest Lad . . . the prat with the gob who represents the triumph of the yob . . . he’s the crass example of the society with values inverted . . . he has
everything that is supposed to matter in this society; wealth, celebrity, a chesty bird. Yet he still behaves like a kid (Media Guardian, 1996, 30 September, p. 2)

As a fool:

In his lumpy shorts, the idiot savant who won us all over. (Germaine Greer, The Independent, 1996, 28 June, p. 1)

Increasingly narratives surrounding Gascoigne embody contemporary concerns about masculinity, and the focus on his playing expertise is superseded by information about his personal and social life.

Female sportswomen in contrast, through representations of vulnerability and dependence on others often have their sporting successes trivialized. The amplification of their injuries and traumas act as a warning of their ‘foolhardy’ attempt to tread across traditionally male sporting terrain for during the ‘Summer of Sport’ 1996 there was evidence for readings of female sports stars as vulnerable ‘fools’. Coverage of the women’s final in The Sun (1996, 6 July, p. 39) reflected how Steffi’s Graf’s ‘over’ commitment to sport had resulted in pain and injury; ‘...and at just 27 she has time on her hand if her body stands up to it’. The former theme develops further in reports the following day:

the odds were stacked against ailing Graf, father in jail, nagging knee injury and suffering from a heavy cold. Asked if her Dad would be watching, Graf fought back the tears... (The Sun, 1996, 7 July, p. 78)

Steffi Graf also received coverage in the Sunday magazine from The News of the World (1996, 23 June, pp. 16–17) in a two page spread entitled ‘Pain, Set and Match!’ it listed the details and dates of her 14 illnesses and injuries since 1989 and the concern at seeing her father sent to jail for tax evasion over her business affairs:

At the tender age of 26 she has pushed her body to the limits through years of torturous court work. Her grim determination to reach the top is taking its toll.

Whilst it could be argued that this is simply a case of reporting over conformity to the sports ethic, this is a more typical media representation of female rather than male sport stars, signifying a warning about the vulnerability of female bodies in the pursuit of sporting success.

The media in its quest for ever-changing headlines and consumer appeal can easily transform sport stars from hero to villain to fool. Whether young people are as transient and critical as the media in their appraisal and appropriation of sport stars as models worthy of admiration is an issue for further discussion.

Sport stars as role models for young people

The nature and positioning of worthy role models for young people is controversial, in light of the continuum of heroism and villainy evident in the
sporting narratives. The idea of role models for young people consistently resurfaces as an issue for public debate and concern. A headline in *The Times* (1999, 16 January, p. 18) ‘Are role models the answer for feckless youth?’ identified the part that role models might play in the behaviour and attitudes of those by whom they are admired.

A group of boys suggested, ‘heavyweight boxer, Mike Tyson, footballer Paul Ince, Will Smith, the American rap singer, tennis player, Greg Rusedski and the American screen action hero, Wesley Snipes as amongst their favourites’. Girls it was claimed ‘tended to idolize the Spice Girls’ (*The Times*, 1999, 16 January). This reinforces the apparent gender differentiated influence of media sport stars and celebrities for boys and girls.

Whannel (1995, p. 127) develops the complexity of sports stars as role models. In the public domain young people are perceived to be gullible and undiscerning readers of the media texts:

> Youth are vulnerable to influence, whilst sport and the media can supposedly convey good or bad influences, concern over youth condense broad fears over the concept of a culture in decline. The desire for a good clean sporting hero is a symptom of the desire for magical resolutions.

Lynda Lee Porter (*Daily Mail*, 1998, 7 October, p. 11) following the English rugby international player Will Carling’s acrimonious split from his partner and child pursued the point further:

> . . . No-one has more powerful influence than sport stars. They are eulogized and emulated . . . teenagers don’t heed politicians but they ape their pop and sport heroes. They’ve learnt horrendous lessons about violence, vulgarity, promiscuity and obscene language from people like Gascoigne, Gallagher and Stan Collymore . . .

Tim Henman’s construction as the English sporting gentleman and tennis player, despite media quotations about his ‘dullness’, functions as a desirable solution:

> Henman is certainly preferable to Gazza as a role model . . . (*You Magazine, Mail on Sunday*, 1997, 1 June, p. 10)

> Petulant Beckham can learn a lesson from hero Henman . . . (*Sport First*, 1998, 5 July, p.10)

Yet there is little evidence to suggest that young people are either ‘Gazza Wannabes’ or ‘Henmaniacs’, for they may admire other less highly profiled sports stars.

The highly profiled escapades of the England players during Euro 96 coverage placed the relative worth of sport stars as role models for young people high on the news agenda. Media coverage, amplifies the impact of role models for young people and stresses the national significance of concern for the poor behaviour of our sport stars. Yet there is relatively little research that exists to support such common sense assumptions about the popularity of
certain stars, the ways in which individuals identify with certain characteristics and the interpretations that they make of the images that they receive.

However, there are a number of conjectures made about the nature of the relationship that young people might have with sport stars. Whereas they are seen to be significant for boys, sporting role models for girls are less apparent; ‘Given few role models in the world, women seek them on the screen and the glossy page’ (Wolf, 1991, p. 58). Yet the marginalization of sportswomen in television coverage and across women’s magazines indicates girls have limited access to either real or mediated sporting role models.

Harris (1994) highlights characteristics young people identify with in her work on American athletes as heroes, and Whannel (1995, 1998a) has questioned morality issues, youth and the impact of sport star behaviour. Tomlinson and Lines (1996) indicated that young people are not necessarily as cynical, gullible and vulnerable as they seem but make their own judgements about media stars. The Times Educational Supplement (1996, 12 July, p. 4) supported this idea:

The error of Gareth Southgate soon gave way to a remarkable empathy on the part of many young fans. Individuals wrote him sympathetic letters and otherwise offered support, despite seeing their hopes dashed. That generosity of spirit and comfort it gave the children to offer it, suggest youths have more capacity to ignore cynicism and negativity than it is often assumed.

In the days before the start of Euro 96, media attention focused on moral concerns about the behaviour of members of the England squad, as players were severely criticized for their drinking escapades, deemed unbecoming of sportsmen representing the nation. The significance of such behaviour to young people was echoed in the following discussion concerning Gazza’s part in the incidents:

As a footballer, we may never know just how great you could have become, but as a sporting hero and a role model for our youth I have to admit you are in a class of your own. (Philip, 1996, 21 June, p. 46)

Gazza, too, received a number of comments reflecting his fluctuating status as a National hero, suggesting that both the media and the general public can be quite fickle in their selection and rejection for application of ‘hero status’:

Paul’s party proves he’s our hero again. (The Sun, 1996, 17 June, pp. 4–5)

Gazza is loved by the football nation . . . Are we the critics too harsh of his drinking and loutish goings-on? But do the fans really care? (The Sun, 1996, 17 June, p. 5)

The media professionals seem to suggest that the reader might not be as disapproving of their favourite sport stars behaviour. Yet research suggests that young people may be just as discerning; disapproving of Paul Gascoigne’s off pitch exploits but able to accept the quality of his performance as the aspect that they would most like to emulate. They can also offer a sense of
realism about the role of sport stars (Lines, 2000b). This suggests that the heroic sporting qualities and contradictions of inappropriate behaviour stressed by media narratives, can be open to liberal readings by young people. Whether they are readily accepted and adopted as aspects to model their own behaviour and sporting performance on are debatable.

As the England soccer team progressed through the tournament, Euro 96 coverage promoted the notion of the footballers as ‘Our Heroes’ (Mail on Sunday, 1996, 23 June, p. 104) and worked to convince the reader of the significance of sports stars as role models:

There will be a few English lads in their shirts this morning who will want to kick a ball like Gazza, score like Shearer, ping it about like Steve McManaman and dive to make a few saves like David Seaman. These are our heroes today. (Daily Mail, 1996, 19 June, p. 70)

Visual images showed the England team as schoolboys, and comments from the footballers’ former PE teachers or head teachers reaffirmed how the players as youngsters had worked towards achieving these goals, reinforcing how such exploits were within the capabilities of today’s schoolboys;

In school playgrounds across the land, their exploits were suddenly the only topic of conversation. Every boy wants to score goals like Alan Shearer, tackle like Stuart Pearce, curl free kicks like Paul Gascoigne and save penalties like David Seaman . . . for some of the fledgling footballers kitted out in their smart new replica England shirts it may be a serious ambition to follow in the stud marks of their heroes. So here, the Daily Mail gives a timely reminder that dreams can come true. (Daily Mail, 1996, 21 June, p. 3)

Just as the England soccer players represented contradictions between the hero/villain and inappropriate/good role models, so the successful rise of Tim Henman during Wimbledon too, is correlated with his potential as a role model for young people. Whilst this offers contradictions with media perceptions about his dull and unfashionable image for young people, he is also portrayed as the perfect role model:

Henman is a role model for youngsters. (The Times, Wimbledon pullout, 1997, 23 June, p. 5)

Several articles concerning the nature of tennis players Greg Rusedski and Tim Henman as role models (The Times, 1998, 25 February, p. 4) suggested that their followers split into two distinct groups, with the girls attracted to Henman and the boys admiring Rusedski because of his thundering service and nervous energy – ‘to the young and enthusiastic Tim is cute and Greg is cool’.

This reinforced media representations of stereotypical gender distinctions in the selection of sport stars as favourites. The notion of sporting role models consistently refers to boys, resisting the idea that girls too, might choose footballers as role models and copy aspects of their play as well. Generally, male sport stars are placed as objects of physical and sexual admiration, often
through pin-ups in magazines, for girls rather than as sporting role models. In view of the scarcity of media coverage portraying female footballers as role models for young girls and the fact that football is becoming one of the fastest growing sports for women around the world (Lopez, 1997) girls and women too may seek to emulate male footballers. In the same way, girls as well as boys should be encouraged to admire and copy Rusedski’s powerful serve and energy.

During the ‘Summer of Sport’ 1996, an article in *The Times Supplement for Young People* 1015, 1996, 20 July, p. 7 provided the most comprehensive and positive portrayal of a female Olympian observed in the daily press analysed during this time. The American basketballer, Sheryl Swoopes, identified as the first female athlete to have a Nike trainer named after her, was featured in written text accompanied by a number of great action shots, showing her physicality and skill:

> Young girls fanatical about basketball now have hoop heroes of the same gender. They want to be like Swoopes and her team mates, not Grant Hill and his.

Swoopes promoted the importance of sporting role models for females:

> We’ve shown young girls that if we can do it, so can you. Work hard and your dream can come true.

However there are relatively few examples like this of female sport stars portrayed in a positive and supportive vein as role models for girls. Of equal concern is the lack of informed research available about ways in which girls read the contradictions of gendered sporting images and are persuaded to accept or reject sporting role models because of issues surrounding sexuality, femininity and vulnerability.

**Conclusion**

This paper drew attention to the ways in which the social and cultural construction of heroes is determined by media coverage. It questions the naturalized rhetoric around the functions of sport stars as role models for young people. What the audience know about and identify with certain sports stars is closely associated with the information that the media professional has selected to bring to their attention.

The notion of the impeccable sporting hero becomes increasingly difficult to maintain in a media culture that thrives on scandal and sensationalism. This article indicates that the term ‘hero’ is used both liberally and transiently by the media. This creates tensions about the nature of acceptable characteristics for the ‘ideal’ hero of young people and the ways in which sports stars can function as role models for young people. On the one hand the media frown upon the antics of certain sports celebrities, demanding traditional sporting heroes displaying high standards of moral behaviour. Yet on the other hand the media can often reproach stars such as tennis players, Pete Sampras and Tim Henman for failing to attract controversy and for ‘being...
rather dull’. This analysis also highlighted gender differentiated readings of sports stars as villains, fools, heroes and heroines. The greater representation of male imagery and discourse reinforces patriarchal concepts of sporting heroism. Whilst successful sportsmen are highly visible as role models for boys, female sports stars are rarely explicitly recognized as such for young girls. The polysemic nature of sport star representations suggest that the relationship between the audience and text is crucial if the reality of the nature of sport stars as role models is to be identified.

For the way in which media critics and the general public accord heroic status to certain stars over others does not necessarily reflect the opinion of sports fans. Whilst this paper prioritizes textual analysis there are indications that young people can equally determine their own criteria for heroes, villains and fools across the sporting narratives and ascertain their own personal favourites (Lines, 2000b, p. 677). Further research, through in depth interpretative interviews and longitudinal studies of sport stars and their audience, may show that young people can make informed and articulate judgements about sport stars as villains, fools and heroes. It may also indicate that the textual positioning of young people is not fixed but open to wider readings of sport stars as ‘ideal’ role models than public opinion suggests.

References


G. Lines


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