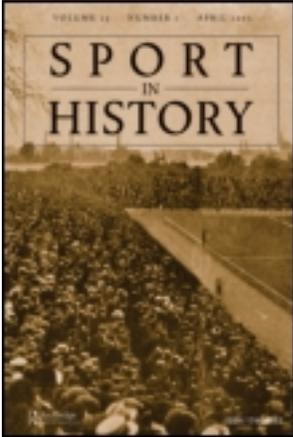


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Introduction: What makes a Sporting Icon?

David Hassan

Introduction

Sport has long been a powerful constituent of collective identity and a source of national pride and efficacy. It remains a central component in the making of nations (and their imagining) and is pertinent to the redefinition of shared identities around the world. Crucial in this regard are exceptional individuals, many but not all human,¹ who become iconic figures and in many ways ‘speak for’ a collective, and who can represent and even embody it.² In other ways sporting icons, that is to say individuals that epitomize something truly outstanding through their sporting prominence and successes, exist in the vanguard of evolution and can, through their embodied practices, often blaze a trail for others to follow.

It might be expected in the field of academic sports scholarship that significant coverage would already have been afforded such individuals. However, beyond the burgeoning growth of sporting autobiographies, many of varying quality, there is in fact precious little research dealing specifically with the impact athletes and others have exercised upon the collective psyche of a nation or distinct community in performing their roles as sporting icons. Thus the purpose of the ensuing collection of articles is to begin to address this void through an examination of a small number of exceptional figures who, often in quite different ways, recast the sporting mould and whose lived experiences retain resonance for a broader mass of scholars, commentators and fans alike.

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Sport and its icons

In the opening address to *The Soul of Popular Culture*, an examination of the place of contemporary icons, Kittleson claims that

Our usual kind of hero is one who fights evil as 'other'. He or she thus remains youthful – *too* strong, in a way – naïve about himself or herself. But nowadays we seem to be seeing a more soulful kind of hero, whose concerns are not only winning in the world, but more appropriately, leading a life of depth, walking a path of spiritual wisdom. This is a figure who can navigate what Jungians call the 'second half of life', or undertake a journey of soul. Here, you do not only or always overcome evil. This kind of hero must know enough of evil in her or his inner self and also in the outside world. Naïve purity and muscles do not suffice. Neither does mere cleverness. Humility matters, and a sense of perspective.³

Holt and Mangan confirm that heroic sports figures need to be viewed in their cultural context in order to make sense of their social meaning and to understand the impact they have upon a community.⁴ Indeed Mangan's later work, which he penned with Hong, offers just such an analysis of a range of female athletes who devoted their lives to the cause of women's physical liberation. In so doing they shared the same ambition: to leverage freedom for women's bodies through sport.⁵ A more contemporary example of such personal agency may be seen through a focused examination of the career of NCAA coach Pat Summitt, whose achievements extend beyond her unparalleled success in US college basketball (she has won more games than any other coach in NCAA history) to encompass the remarkable rise in coverage of female sport generally across the USA and further afield over the past four decades through the implementation of specific legislation safeguarding access to sporting participation for women.

Archetti defines a sports icon as any person admired for given qualities or achievements and regarded as ideal or model. He claims:

A sports hero is an idol and an icon who belongs to a specific time: the time of heroes. The time of heroes, opposed to other times which encapsulate daily routines or scheduled rituals, represents in the mind of the adoring public a glorious dream-like time during which the daily mediocrity of normal life is suddenly transcended.⁶

Similar sentiments are expressed by Saunders in her work on lifesavers as national icons in Australia, whom she describes as 'specimens of superb manhood'.⁷ At other times icons are often in the vanguard of sporting

revolution or at the forefront of profound societal change. A modern-day example of this can be understood through an examination of the career of the Swiss athlete Roger Federer, who effectively pioneered the transformation of world tennis and who, at the same time, achieved a reputation for embodying the qualities of fair play, grace under pressure and respect for his opponent, which, while extremely desirable, are very often absent in the contemporary professional sportscape.

Indeed as the work of Novak and others confirm, sporting icons very often stand alone against a world of opponents, something all too apparent in the life of the Irish boxer Barry McGuigan.⁸ Yet it was this aspect of isolation, essentially derived from the nature of his chosen career, which somehow served to aid McGuigan's path towards sporting heroism in the eyes of the Irish people. Indeed, as Stewart suggests, 'The majority of stories told in our culture feature boys or men as protagonists and present human dilemmas through the masculine ethic.'⁹ No sport, it appears, offers a greater opportunity for the expression of one's masculinity than boxing, with its reliance upon raw, warrior-like qualities. Mention of McGuigan and it is timely to point to the critical interrogation sporting icons often undergo in terms of their appropriateness as representatives of a broader collective identity. In a polarized Northern Ireland, McGuigan, emerging as he did from a Catholic, Irish nationalist background in the Republic of Ireland, initially encountered resistance from sections of society in Northern Ireland, but through the manner in which he secured his successes ultimately managed to negotiate the ethno-sectarian divide that for too long besmirched his adopted home.

Interestingly the writings of Yoseloff, and in particular his portrayal of the famed baseball star Joe DiMaggio, present remarkable echoes of the experiences of McGuigan as someone who was championed by certain sections of society and looked upon sceptically by others. Earlier in his career, DiMaggio was often derided by the media in the USA as lazy, even careless, with his Italian heritage typically accentuated as a means of emphasizing his failure to make the most of his undoubted talents. Nonetheless DiMaggio reached the pinnacle of his sporting prowess at precisely the same time that the USA was due to join forces against, among other adversaries, the New York Yankees star's ancestral home nation of Italy. It would prove problematical for America to have a hero affiliated with a country with which it was about to go to war, so reference to DiMaggio's heritage was either conveniently overlooked or severely downplayed by the US media. As such, his sporting image underwent something of a dramatic transformation – from ethnic sporting hero to all-American mainstream cultural icon.¹⁰

Indeed, the interplay between sport and war has often been crucial in the making of certain sporting icons. When the Arizona Cardinals' Pat Tillman, at the very height of his NFL career, took the decision to set aside his sporting pursuits in favour of joining the US Army, as part of its Operation Enduring Freedom campaign in Afghanistan, it represented a remarkable act of patriotism on the part of a professional athlete. The campaign was launched in the wake of the 11 September 2001 attack on New York City and Washington by Al Qaida militants that claimed the lives of more than 3,000 people. Tillman was himself subsequently killed in action, and his death brought into sharp contrast the often privileged existence enjoyed by successful modern-day athletes. With his remarkable sacrifice, Tillman remains an iconic figure in American sporting history.

As crude as it may appear however, and as Tännsjö confirms, where entities such as flags, emblems, even the idea of the 'nation' itself are celebrated the individuals involved in this process tend, all too often, to become replaceable. In his analysis of sporting icons Tännsjö goes further to question whether it is in fact fascistoid to admire sports heroes.¹¹ In advocating a fascist interpretation of our relationship with such sporting stars, he claims that our support for their activities 'springs from the very core of fascist ideology: admiration for strength and contempt for weakness'.¹² He further asserts that 'when we give up nationalism ... when we give up our view of individual sportsmen and teams as representatives of "our" nation – we move from something that is only contingently associated with Nazism (nationalism) to something that is really at the core of Nazism (contempt for weakness)'.¹³ Yet this assertion, that to express admiration for the winner automatically suggests contempt for the loser, can be contested on a number of levels. For example, admiration for Barry McGuigan, both as a boxer and a liberal, enlightened and progressive individual, was largely confined to recognition of his personal achievements, as distinct from any judgement surrounding the merits of his opponents. Likewise the sporting success of former NHL star Wayne Gretzky was garnered without recourse to some of the more deviant aspects of modern sport, with which onlookers have now become all too familiar. Instead Gretzky was universally admired for his adherence to the spirit as well as the letter of the sporting law, which gained him universal acclaim, even in the eyes of his erstwhile opponents. The fact that his no. 99 jersey has been retired by every team in the NHL is a reminder of the profound impact he exercised on the sport of ice hockey, not least on account of the remarkable level of skill and competitive endeavour that he typically displayed.

While by no means a critical component in the creation of sporting icons, when success, notoriety and impact are achieved by relatively young athletes it does appear to present the opportunity for added agency. When the Australian swimmer Michael Phelps claimed an unprecedented eight gold medals at the 2008 summer Olympics in Beijing, he became the most decorated Olympic athlete of all time at the tender age of 24. It is this theme of exceptionality that is undoubtedly crucial to our appreciation of the impact of sporting icons. Similarly Wilt Chamberlain's record as the only player ever to score 100 points in one game ensures that long after his career has ceased to be recalled in detail, he is remembered as an exceptional NBA star and as someone whose achievement, much like that of Phelps, sets the record of success so high it is likely to be some time (if ever) that his accomplishment will be surpassed.

As such, in almost every aspect of their careers, sporting icons embody the characteristics of the quintessential sporting 'hero', as distinct from the modern-day sporting 'celebrity'. In an interesting analysis, Boorstin identifies this subtle distinction by claiming:

The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness. The hero was distinguished by his achievement; the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media. The hero is a big man [*sic*]; the celebrity is a big name.¹⁴

Of course it is conceivable that an individual could transcend both disciplines, or at least move from one realm, heroism, into another, celebrity. Indeed, to some extent, this is what has happened in the case of the golfer Tiger Woods. Not only regarded as one of the finest exponents of the game over its long history, Woods has also successfully transcended the cultural norms associated with golf in a manner few other athletes could hope to achieve. In a detailed examination of the 'Icon Tiger', Barwick argues it is the universal appeal of Woods (from sponsors, to broadcasters and golf fans) that sets his career apart. One could conclude that this is still the case even in the light of Woods's recent personal and professional problems that, temporarily at least, opened the field for others to assume his mantle as the very best golfer in the world.¹⁵

However in reviewing the remarkable successes of Woods and others against a sporting landscape in which achieving celebrity status seemingly overshadows, and in some cases is accepted as a replacement for, genuine talent, little doubt remains over his heroic credentials. In this regard the impact of Jackie Robinson, from an earlier generation of black American athletes, echoes (in some respects even eclipses) much of the profile enjoyed by Tiger Woods. Not only was he arguably one of the greatest

players ever to take to the field, Robinson was also the first African American to break the so-called 'colour barrier' that existed in baseball and many other sports throughout early twentieth-century America. Similar to the acclaim afforded Gretzy, Robinson's no. 42 shirt has now been retired by Major League Baseball, while the league continues to celebrate his accomplishments with Jackie Robinson Day on 15 April each year.

The creation of the sporting icon

The imagery of sporting heroism is all the more compelling because such individuals are very often products of the most economically and socially deprived regions of the world. Indeed, in some ways sporting icons are best understood as 'one of us', men and women who through their triumphs and failures remind us of our own humanity. Yet for some, the decisive points in their careers are all too often sad affairs, even if in many cases their sporting achievements retain resonance well beyond the narrow confines of the sport itself. They can offer guidance to a community that at times lacks moral and social direction. To cite the case of Barry McGuigan once more, his heroic physicality stood in marked contrast to the boundless violence evident on the streets of Belfast and beyond throughout much of his boxing career. His motto of 'Leave the fighting to McGuigan' was an attempt to highlight the senseless sectarian strife all too evident within his homeland and accentuate the desirable attributes of real 'hard men' who were revered because of their ability to resolve disputes in a morally 'fair' manner. Like a lot of iconic sporting figures, what McGuigan achieved he did alone. He did not rely on the support of his teammates, nor did he have a sophisticated support mechanism in place. His climb to greatness, and ultimately to the pinnacle of his sport, was often a lonely experience. Not only was he isolated in the ring, he endured the trauma of being disliked by sections of his own community for adopting an opportunistic stance around the issue of sporting identity, which, as has been made clear, led to ritual animosity and occasional death threats against him.

As such it is apparent that a collection, if by no means comprehensive, examining a select number of sporting icons, such as is presented here, is long overdue. The critical, academic assessment of their impact and legacy offers scholars the opportunity to reflect upon the degree to which one individual can reshape our understanding and appreciation of a community, or in many cases, a nation of people. It is hoped that this compendium may become the first of many such considered assessments of the individual power held and displayed by sporting icons past and present.

The collection

As has been outlined, a distinguishing feature of certain sporting icons is their willingness (and ability) to stand apart from popular opinion and express a view that may prove inconvenient for those governing the game or activity of which they are part. In capturing the exceptional contribution to association football in the Netherlands made by Johan Crujff, Ivo van Hilvoorde and Ruud Stokvis unpack what they see as a phased impact, from his time as a player with the Dutch national team, through to his managerial career with Ajax of Amsterdam and FC Barcelona and ultimately to his role as a commentator and advisor on Dutch and world football. Indeed the authors emphasize the almost commensurate impact made by Crujff following the end of his football career as when he was performing at the pinnacle of his sport as an elusive wingman in the 1970s. They conclude that even when sporting icons encounter failure, and with it a possible loss of credibility, their status remains undiminished not least in the eyes of their adoring followers.

Kevin Jefferys's contribution to this compendium focuses upon the largely untold story of one of Britain's most effective, if least appreciated, sports administrators, David Cecil, better known as Lord Burghley. Much like the story of Johan Crujff, Burghley's sporting life saw him rise to prominence first as an Olympian in his own right before establishing himself as a sports administrator with a reputation for upholding the importance of adherence to the amateur ideal. Despite often being dismissed as a product of a bygone era by more progressive elements within the governance of world athletics, especially towards the end of his distinguished career in the sport, Jefferys argues persuasively that Burghley's contribution to the development of athletics at all levels, from grassroots to elite level, is worthy of due recognition and respect.

An English sporting figure from an altogether different era is the focus of Neil Ewen's article, examining as he does the iconography associated with former England football captain John Terry. Through a detailed examination of media discourses surrounding the Chelsea FC player, Ewen argues that his iconicity captures multiple anxieties surrounding Englishness and English football on the part of those who yearn for a return to more 'traditional' values, including within the English Premier League, where the growth of neoliberalism has resulted in a footballing landscape that few long-standing supporters recognize or appreciate. That said, with echoes of the earlier comparison surrounding sporting celebrities and icons offered by Boorstin, Ewen also draws attention to the off-field behaviour of Terry, specifically his alleged moral

indiscretions, and asks whether the ‘celebrity culture’ surrounding Terry and his contemporaries represents a betrayal of a long and highly respected English football history.

In what might otherwise be considered an unusual departure for a collection examining sporting icons, where the assumption may reasonable be drawn that all those featured are human, Dashper and Fletcher’s detailed coverage of the steeplechase racehorse Kauto Star, is in fact entirely appropriate. Not only is there an absence of detailed work on an animal, in this case a thoroughbred racehorse, as an icon within the academic literature, but the story surrounding Kauto Star, and the place its exploits played in the life of its followers, retains all the essential elements required of a heroic storyline. Triumph over adversity, its unpredictable idiosyncrasies, and its undoubted place in a nation’s heart were just some of Kauto Star’s defining features. As such, Dashper and Fletcher’s analysis convincingly concludes that we can now credibly look beyond the equine star as a mere animal and instead refer to its elevated role as a sporting icon.

Thereafter Jonty Winch relays a valuable portrayal of Ebrahim Patel, secretary, spokesman and subsequently president of the non-racial South African Rugby Union throughout the latter part of the apartheid era in that country. Patel was often portrayed as the man who stood between South Africa’s return to international rugby respectability and the inconvenient reality of life for the majority black population in the country. However, as the possibility of a satisfactory resolution to years of discrimination drew near, Patel was also at the forefront of discussions with the rugby establishment in South Africa as the path towards unification became a reality. In due course he became the first black leader to serve on the International Rugby Board (IRB) in his capacity as the newly appointed president of a united governing body for rugby football in South Africa.

Staying on the theme of revolutionary leaders, McGuire and Hassan pen a detailed assessment of the political and sporting life of Dick Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was an early star of the indigenous Irish sport of Gaelic football and won no fewer than five All-Ireland senior championship medals with his native Kerry. But it was his standing within Irish republicanism, his membership of the Irish volunteers and his internment at Frongoch prison camp in Wales following the Easter Rising of 1916 that made Fitzgerald’s life, as otherwise a sporting icon for legions of Gaelic football fans, exceptional. Not content with offering leadership within the fields of sport and politics, Fitzgerald also authored one of the first coaching manuals for Gaelic football, which helped to increase

awareness and proficiency in the sport throughout many parts of Ireland during the early part of the twentieth century.

It was during this era too that the tennis champion Bill Tilden was rising to the very peak of his sporting prowess. John Carvalho and Michael Milford offer a detailed coverage of Tilden's life, firstly as a champion tennis player and then, following the publication of his autobiography *My Story*, the fallout from revelations concerning Tilden's sexual identity. Tilden was a homosexual and was twice arrested between 1947 and 1949 for morals charges involving young men. In essence, notwithstanding the argument advanced by van Hilvoorde and Stokvis earlier regarding the unblemished longevity of many sporting icons, Tilden's story remains one of an iconic tennis champion who became somewhat marginalized within public opinion, on account of his sexual orientation, later in his life.

The final article in this collection is the product of detailed empirical research undertaken by Dean Allen, who returns to the issue of rugby in South Africa but broadens his focus somewhat to consider the evolution of the Springbok identity as a symbol of a wider South African identity. He examines in particular the historic 1906 Springbok tour to Britain and France – the first by a South African team overseas – and considers the role performed by its captain, Paul Roos, and the nature of his acclaimed legacy within South African rugby folklore.

Notes

1. See the work of Scott Crawford, 'Foxhunter and Red Rum as National Icons: Significant Equestrian Episodes in Post-Second World War British Sports History', *Sport in History* 27, no. 3 (2007): 487–505, for a detailed examination of the place of athletic horses in the historical landscape of athletics.
2. Mike Cronin, 'Sam Maguire: Forgotten Hero and National Icon', *Sport in History* 25, no. 2 (2005): 189–206.
3. Mary Lynn Kittelson (ed.), *The Soul of Popular Culture* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), 8.
4. Richard Holt and J.A. Mangan (eds), 'Prologue: Heroes of a European Past', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 13, no. 1 (1996): 1–13.
5. J.A. Mangan and F. Hong, *Freeing the Female Body: Inspirational Icons* (London: Frank Cass, 2001).
6. Eduardo Archetti, 'The Spectacle of a Heroic Life. The Case of Diego Maradona', in *Sports Stars*, eds David Andrews and Steven Jackson (London: Routledge, 2001), 153.
7. K. Saunders, "'Specimens of Superb Manhood": The Lifesaver as National Icon', *Journal of Australian Studies* 56 (1998): 96–105.
8. Michael Novak, 'The Joy of Sports', in *Religion and Sport: The Meeting of the Sacred and the Profane*, ed. C.S. Prebish (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1993).

9. Jane Alexander Stewart, 'The Feminine Hero of the Silence of the Lambs', in *The Soul of Popular Culture*, ed. Mary Lynn Kittelson (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 51.
10. A. Yoseloff, 'From Ethnic Hero to National Icon: The Americanization of Joe DiMaggio', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 16 (3) (1999), 1–20.
11. Torbjörn Tännsjö, 'Is it Fascistoid to Admire Sports Heroes?', in *Values in Sport*, eds Torbjörn Tännsjö and Caludio Tamburrini (London: E & FN Spon, 2000), 9–23.
12. *Ibid.*, 10.
13. *Ibid.*, 13.
14. Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America* (London: Random House, 1992), 57, 61.
15. R. Barwick, 'Icon Tiger Leaves the Field to Pray on Sunday', *Sports Business* 56 (2001): 12–24.