

BECKS AND POSH AND ALL THAT: REFLECTIONS ON SPORTING CELEBRITY

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Two recent books dealing with sports stars and what being famous as a sportsperson involves raise questions about celebrity and stardom in the sporting world. They are David Andrews' and Steven Jackson's *Sport Stars: the cultural politics of sporting celebrity* (2001); and a whole book by one of the contributors to Andrews & Jackson, Garry Whannel, called *Media Sports stars: masculinities and moralities*, published in 2002. Both books come from Routledge, and it is hard to say whether we are in for lots of this research or whether it is Routledge having got interested in celebrity.

Some of the matters they raise offer ideas to sports historians for research topics. Andrews and Jackson are non-historical, dealing with prominent sportspersons of today, whereas Whannel sets his celebrities within a historical framework, though not in a detailed way.

Andrews and Jackson have chapters on athletes American and Canadian, Australian and Kenyan, British and West Indian. Jackson and another author are from New Zealand. The book is designed, as you will gather, to sell in the USA and throughout the phantom British Empire, which is dead but won't lie down. Whannel, who has a chapter on David Beckham in Andrews and Jackson, in his own book develops some biographical sketches but is more interested in themes like heroism, masculinity and narrativity. But he has a section of four chapters on sports celebrity in history, where he examines individuals chosen as typifying his four periods; e.g. Stanley Matthews illustrates the 1950s. These are intelligent books and suggest more studies to come, and even more sophisticated ones, in the next decade.

All celebrity ends; stars fade; but sports stars fade earlier than others because their achievements are premised on youth. Lawn bowls was perhaps the only sport where oldsters could star and now youngsters of thirty-five and forty have muscled in. No wonder so many bowling greens around Australia are pushing up dandelions. Fashion models are the stars most quickly disposed of; sometimes the look they embody lasts only a season or two. Stars models are meteors. After a sports career you can only turn round to the management side, become a coach or referee whatever, host a talk-show, or else eke out a shadowy existence in advertising, trading on your reputation until the day comes when people ask who that old guy in the project-home ads is supposed to be. Otherwise you retreat to some quite ordinary job. This is unlike film stars who can make movies till they are in their nineties, like Lilian Gish, unlike singers and dancers who like Ginger Rogers can perform their acts in Las Vegas into their eighties, with help. Whereas sportspeople cannot recreate themselves, entertainers can. All of which goes to say that Becks is going to fade from the scene than Posh; even though his talents are far greater than hers, she could be lip-synching long after he has ceased to play football.

One of the themes that comes through strongly in the literature about sporting celebrity is the power of advertising, the investment which commercial firms make in athletes. It is suggested that Michael Jordan only became famous because of Nike. Martina Hingis endorses Omega watches and Adidas at the same time: these labels are one for the rich and the other for the masses (but not, of course, for the masses in the Third World where they are manufactured). It is the firms which decide to go with a campaign featuring Michael Jordan, which decide his photo will appear in this range of publications, or that. And whether Jordan makes the cover of *Time* magazine is itself perhaps not entirely the result of his basketball merits. Supposedly the back of his head is more widely recognised throughout the world than is Brad Pitt's face; though how this finding was arrived at eludes me.

I take celebrity to be a species of fame. It has to do with time, with being famous at the present moment. Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great have been famous for two thousand years. They were celebrities in their day, and people went out to see them. If we want to see ancient celebrity, actually there is no better example than the victorious Olympic athlete, with his statue at Olympia itself and another in his hometown, free meals for life, and the rest of the perks. Whereas it is permitted to doubt that many of today's celebrities will be famous sixty or four hundred years from now, let alone two thousand. But we should have learned by now never to underestimate Madonna.

So celebrity is not a new phenomenon; but it took a new turn 140 years ago because of two inventions. The first was the reproducible photograph, after a couple of decades where photos could exist only in a single copy. The other was the linotype press which put cheap illustrated publications into circulation. These two came together when half-tone printing was invented, and photographs could be printed in newspapers. The first half-tone pictures appeared in the late 1880s, though it seems to have been cheaper to hire sketchers and print their drawings until into the 20th century. *The Sydney Referee*, the sporting weekly, was still using drawings in 1905, fifteen years after the *Dead Bird*, another Sydney sporty paper, used half-tone for almost the first time in Australia; incidentally, for a photo of a naked athlete (a back shot, of course).

In the matter of celebrity the image or likeness of the star is essential. There has been no celebrity, it seems, since 1880, without pictures of the famous person. Bill Gates is not a celebrity: famous, very famous, with more money than Switzerland, but who could recognise him so as to mob him in the streets and beg his autograph? Even if you could get past his gorillas? Andrews and Jackson are entirely concerned with the present day, but Whannel has a chapter on the rise of the image and the frenzy of the visible, as Linda Williams called it. There were radio stars but they were not celebrities, because they were invisible to their audiences.

Along with the image, interviews are the crucial link between stars and their public. In the interview the stars tell the reporter or the talk-show host things that are consumed by their fans. It is a confession: yes, I used to bite my nails as a child, and I don't like rhubarb; confessions which are added by

fans to their image of the star. These are things one would tell only to one's friends – in fact one's friends wouldn't be interested in such trivia – but here is the star telling the whole world and amazingly the whole world is engrossed.

From what I can make out, the interview with sportsmen developed in the 1870s. This had to do with the new journalism, which was embryonic then; it meant reporters should be pro-active, not just record what happened today; in effect should go out and make news. When an athlete came to town, the papers began to interview him and to print, not just a resume of his exploits, and not just accounts of his training regimen, but his ideas, his views on events, his hopes and fears, things that had to be extracted from him by means of an interview. And if the material from interviews in the 1880s seems slight and conventional, that is because interviewing was new and reporters had no skill in cutting to the chase. But facts were extracted: this sportsman likes driving in the country, this one plays chess, this one has a lucky silver dollar, and so on. Such details humanise the star, interviews create intimacy with the fans. A false intimacy if you like, because it is all one-way, for the star does not learn about fans' food preferences.

Essentially, the interview shows fans that the star has not lost the common touch. He is just like us, in so many respects...a regular guy...even Denis Rodwell gives interviews that prove he is just like the boy next door only with different hair or whatever it is this week. One study says of Becks that: 'As he and his wife have soared into the celebrity stratosphere, they have been careful to remain anchored to their roots'. The mixed metaphors can be forgiven; the image is that of a blimp; the sentiment is what counts. Again, on the next page: 'Their very normality is a cause for celebration. Posh and Beck's appeal is that they are just like you and me . . . richer perhaps, but they still watch *EastEnders* and have beans on toast with mum'. Posh herself says, 'we go home, put on our pyjamas, get an Indian takeaway and watch *Friends*'. This is no doubt while wearing the fabulous string of black diamonds. Richer, perhaps.

Now this personal material is uncommon with male sports stars. The coverage given to Beckham's wife and Beckham's children and Beckham's home life is quite extraordinary. Only occasionally, as in the Wayne Carey scandal last year, does a sportsman's private life concern the media; and it is doubtful whether that would have been publicly noticed if the woman involved had not been the wife of Carey's vice captain. Although the media screamed that adulterers were not wanted in sport, throw adulterers out, there were rather too many sportsmen who looked down embarrassed, coughed and changed the subject. However there are lots of articles about women sports stars' private lives, about how they raise their two children alone or have settled on an April wedding or make terrific pecan pies: these articles presumably show that they are feminine in spite of everything.

So the interview is crucial, and if the star sweeps past reporters at the airport, stays secluded in her hotel, communicates through her PR persons, then those PR persons are going to have the devil of a time because the fans see the refusal to be interviewed as a betrayal of faith unless the PR men can

create a myth to cover this, the myth of shyness, or aloofness or grandeur, whatever. There are few sportspeople who can use the myth of grandeur; Don Bradman tried. The myth most convenient is 'too busy', important appointments in New York, or a star appearance for Gatorade in Bangla Desh, or an audience with the Pope. There is nothing for it but to photograph them opening their hotel window; that will have to do instead. But even if the paparazzi film such moments, it cannot be the same as the interview, where the democracy of the star-fan relationship most powerfully exists.

Because much star charisma is feelings that this woman is just like me if only I had got the break I deserve. Stars are just ordinary people who got lucky, they had a talent and someone recognised it and they became a star but, hey, they are still the same little battler, inside. This conception goes along with the other one, that the star is a big battler now working extremely hard and earning every cent they get. In sports there is almost always a ladder to climb and the star can be credited with having climbed it. Everything is on record. We are not in that magic Hollywood where a girl can be found sitting at a drugstore soda-fountain and become a star of the first magnitude, we are not in la-la land where an unknown can cut a single and send it to a big record company and be contracted to rap with Eminem.

But, anyway, the marriage of David Beckham to Victoria Adams brought together two spheres of celebrity: a star from sport and a star from pop music. These people, however, are not really from separate spheres; they are part of that world of people who get talked about, who are written about in magazines and have hundreds of web pages dedicated to them and whose pictures and names we recognise. Their celebrity is no different from Princess Diana's, in the sphere of royalty, or Mother Teresa's, in the religious sphere. They are all talked about, they are the objects of global gossip, they are what unites the world culturally, they are the cultural equivalents of Starbucks and Nike and Ikea that unite the world economically. The enthusiasm for Ricky Martin and Anna Kournikova was universal, in Shanghai, Sydney, and Sao Paulo; and after *Titanic* at least a dozen books came out on Leonardo di Caprio, in English; let alone in Spanish and Chinese. In *Zoolander*, starring Ben Stiller, a 2001 comedy about the NYC modelling scene, you would have seen another set of stars, the models: but they are connected with the others. In *Zoolander* David Bowie was there along with Tyson Beckford, Claudia Schiffer along with Cuba Gooding . . . and Victoria Beckham was in it (though uncredited). Only our own Elle didn't get to make it into *Zoolander*, maybe she was busy visiting the Pope.

You may want to disagree on this: but is there any difference between the rubbish on Elvis Presley's grandchildren, or the rubbish about poor little Brooklyn and Romeo Beckham? These people are talked about, written about, photographed and interviewed. The machine that makes them celebrities grinds on and doesn't care who is fed in at the start and who turned out at the end. When Becks wooed and won Posh, pop fans suddenly found themselves reading soccer gossip and soccer fans found themselves gossiping about pop groups. Was there any difference?

If you want to know who are the real celebrities, and not just the wannabes, you can look on the web. On 4 March 2003 there were 450,001 websites for David Beckham. For Victoria Beckham there were 55,400 websites and for Posh Spice 32,703 without checking for overlap. Brad Pitt had 263,001 and Ricky Martin 395,001. Would you believe Michael Jordan had 917,001 websites? But Jordan pales into insignificance alongside the tally for Michael Jackson of 1,410,001. It really doesn't matter if there is only trash on particular websites; this is a useful celebrity index, more useful than some phone survey with percentages. Checked out last December, Beckham had only 215,000 websites, so he doubled in popularity in three months, whereas Victoria/Posh had 108,000 in mid-December, and therefore has been losing it a bit lately.

The means to make somebody a star is communication, words and pictures. Consider the barber's shop. All men go to one, unless we go to a hairstylist or have dreadlocks. The barber's shop is a masculine space, and has been for the past 200 years. Few women enter a barber's shop. I have seen some getting simple haircuts (and cheap by the women's hairdresser standard), but few. The barber's shop has seen nothing like the invasion of women into hotel space, after a century of being confined to the grotty Ladies' Lounge; it may be men's last own space left. And it always had two or three macho calendars on the wall: from the truck company, from the brewery and, in the country, from the sheep-dip company. Some calendars may feature a curvaceous cutie, but more likely a truck. Apart from the calendars there is a framed picture of a boxer (sometimes signed) or a racehorse (always unsigned). There are today's papers, more often the *Telegraph* than *The Age*, never *The Australian*, and men's magazines to read. This can be contrasted with the doctor's waiting room. My doctors, admittedly in a solid middle-class suburb, favour *Marie-Claire* and *Gourmet Traveller*. The barbershop talk is about racing, gambling, other sports, politics, money. This talk goes on between barber and customer, and between waiting customers, especially in a shop that serves a neighbourhood. It is a site for gossip.

In the early nineteenth century this is where you would find lithographed sporting prints, of racehorses and boxers and cricketers; later in the century photographs of footballers and football teams as well. In 1885 almost every barbershop in the United States displayed a picture of John L. Sullivan, the heavyweight champ; and not only in America. His image was estimated to be as familiar in 1890 as Queen Victoria's: they were the two best-known faces in the world. John L. was a celebrity; he addressed his fans from balconies! The *National Police Gazette* of New York put out big coloured posters for pinning up, as well as sold photos of sportsmen by mail order. In every issue it featured one hotelkeeper and one barber, each with an engraved portrait and a hundred words of text. It was their fifteen minutes fame for the two men that week; it was to reward them for getting the *Police Gazette* for their customers.

Around 1900 in every country town in Australia the barber was also the local agent for the sporting newspapers: in New South Wales and

Queensland the agent for *The Referee* from Sydney, and south of the Murray for *The Sportsman* from Melbourne. The barber not only had a copy on his table to be read, he sold copies that were read and talked about on outlying stations. The barber's shop is one means by which celebrity was promoted in the days before movies and television, and it could do with a social history if it hasn't one already. Print and talk, plus visuals, make celebrity.

It appears that, led on by Routledge, we are in for a whole cycle of research into sports stars. My last reflection is, that studies of sports stars are insensibly conformed to cultural myths and literary traditions. As Andrews and Jackson, and Whannel, describe the situation: there are good stars and bad stars, tragic stars and rebel stars, etc. Real humans fill these roles. Human individuals get wrapped up in star myths until they have difficulty disentangling themselves. Their lives are scripted for them, and those parts of their lives that do not suit the script are either excised, or are reworked until they do fit it.

A Commonwealth Bank advertisement aired on 1 February 2003 showed an outrageous rescripting of reality: 'With his trademark back to front baseball cap, and an inspiration spurred on by his love of the Sylvester Stallone *Rocky* films, this is one Australian who has proved that true Aussie grit and a never say die attitude can take you to the top and keep you there' It is our Lleyton Hewitt – Young Australian of the Year and the latest Sorbent Man! And he is scripted as dinky-di, even baseball and Sly being pressed into patriotic service; a strange Australian patriotism it seems. Presumably when Lleyton takes his Sorbent profits and retires to Aspen, Colorado, he will still be 'as dinky-di as Snowy Baker and Greg Norman'.

Whereas you will notice that Wayne Carey is now being scripted as one breed of bad star, the sexual maniac. The Sydney *Daily Telegraph* on 4 February 2003 gave half a page to a story which it headlined with Carey in Wild Spa Party, a story about fun in a hotel with a twenty-year old woman. *The Australian* ten days later gave a sentence to this matter: 'Wayne Carey wasn't half-naked during a party in Adelaide after all, says the teenager who started the story about the AFL star'; and *The Australian* accompanied that single sentence with a picture of Carey half-naked. Carey now has his own interactive website, to avoid what he or his minder calls 'the filter of the traditional media', but the guy cannot win; the script is writing his life as 'a bad star'. He was voted less popular than even Anthony Mundine. The script was doing the same to Russell Crowe, but he got married, so he is an OK star again. But our Russ had better watch it. As to Michael Jackson . . . As to Shane Warne . . .

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