

The Sport Hero(ine): Lessons from the Social Sciences and Humanities

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History has been replete with the exploits of heroes, but has recorded relatively few of such achievements by heroines. It could be argued that a society needs its heroes and heroines as part of its growth and development process, as well as part of its pattern maintenance process. If these leaders do not appear in the normal (abnormal?) course of events, it could be hypothesized further that society will somehow create them in sometimes unexpected places as they fulfill unusual roles. (Keep in mind that a hero has been defined as “a man [or woman] of distinguished courage or ability admired for his [or her] brave deeds and qualities.” A culture hero appears to be a notch higher on the scale, however, and is explained as “a mythicized historical figure who embodies the aspirations or ideals of a society.”) Certain, quite specific societal conditions provide greater opportunity for the individual with heroic qualities to emerge (e.g., war, emergencies, crises). Nevertheless, we might agree that such a person might appear at any time or place if several conditions prevail in any of life’s recognized activities. In the realm of sport, there have been those who assert that “we have seen the last of the athletic hero” (e.g., London, 1978). Yet, if society *needs* heroes, and if they are still emerging in ongoing societal life, is that not reason enough to believe that a true hero could conceivably emerge in competitive sport? Admittedly, the right (i.e., correct or appropriate) conditions would have to be present (in some sequential order?) for the creation or establishment of such a person. Exactly what might these conditions be? What should they be? To obtain some tentative answers, I turned to the social sciences and humanities, especially the behavioral sciences. Here I received assistance in a form that may help us understand why there are very few genuine heroes in society today. The selected literature, with special reference to what has been written *historically* on the topic of heroes and sport heroes, was from history, sociology, economics, anthropology, psychiatry, and philosophy. I built on the work of Barney (1984) in which he established a consensual listing of the “basic qualities” required for the “development” of a hero. Following this, in the second stage of the investigation, I turned to Johnson’s (1969) analysis of Parsonian (sociological) theory on this subject. This also led me into the complexities of theory and verification in sociology (e.g., Zetterberg, 1966; Dubin, 1978). I asked such questions as (a) What steps must occur for the development of a hero or heroine? (b) Do heroes serve to maintain a desirable “moving equilibrium” in Parsons’ general action system? (c) If culture has a need for heroes to assist with “equilibrium maintenance,” how can sports serve to fulfill society’s need in this respect? and (d) What steps (stages) are required for a person to achieve (i.e., to be declared) a sport hero(ine), and (perhaps) even a folk or culture hero(ine)? The data I obtained was classified under such headings as (a) nineteenth and twentieth century historical analyses, (b) society’s values and norms, (c) personal situational factors or pressures, and (d) social situational factors and pressures. An early economist, Thorstein Veblen (1899), lent insight into the “economic advantages” accruing to the athlete. From the anthropologist, Henry (1963), I learned that society uses sport as a self-maximizing machine. Freud (Riesman, 1954) told us that the hero has few doubts internally and meets life’s conflicts head on. Hook envisioned a hero who deliberately sets out to change the course of events. Finally, I presented a model which describes how these four classifications of factors and influences (see immediately above) might explain how the social phenomenon of a sport hero(ine) occurs in a culture.