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“Ballyhoo” and Social Capital: The Olympic Games of 1928 and American Culture

One year after Charles Lindbergh piloted the Spirit of St. Louis across the Atlantic and became an instantaneous global media star, the American media transformed another group of Americans who traveled to Europe into icons. Print and electronic communication systems marketed the 1928 American Olympic team as the heroes and heroines of a thoroughly modern American republic.

Just as Lindbergh's flight provided comfort to a conflicted nation by bridging the chasm between traditional and modern mythologies of American culture, so too were American Olympians cast as the exemplars of the best of traditional and modern civilization. The public was told how these athletes, who the media metamorphosed into American archetypes, set out to conquer the world at the 1928 Olympics by merging ideals such as the Puritan work ethic and frontier grit with athletic science and state-of-the-art coaching techniques.

The stories that the media crafted about Linbergh and the Olympians concentrated on the idea that sport created what modern political theorists label "social capital," the glue that binds together liberal democracies. Sport was supposed to invigorate the nation and Olympic victory was supposed to demonstrate the nation's vigor. At another level, sport also served the interest of American consumer culture's insatiable appetite for sporting entertainment, for in addition to serving as a mechanism for making social capital, it was an important commodity in stock productions of national drama. All of the Olympic stories were encased in "ballyhoo," a 1920s term coined to describe the hyperbole surrounding the promotion of athletic events by *New York Herald* sports editor W.O. McGeehan.

The connections between ballyhoo and social capital in American interpretations of the 1928 Olympics are clearly discernible in the print media accounts upon which this paper is largely based. These show that sport played a central role in shaping American ideas about nationhood, political culture, and social conflicts during the 1920s. The paper also argues that sport was a key element in the development of the rapidly burgeoning consumer culture during the same period and that the 1928 Olympics played an especially important role in enmeshing sport in the entertainment industry. Interpretations of these Olympics also created new attitudes about the connection between sport and social capital. Finally, the American media focus on the 1928 Games prefigured even greater interest and more elaborate spectacle at the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics and the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

The paper attempts to open new windows on the relation between sport and American culture during the 1920s—a period which contemporaries labeled the "golden age" of American sport. It is part of a larger study of American culture and the Olympic Games of the 1920s and 1930s.