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John L. Sullivan and the Myth of the Self-Made Man

Many Americans of the nineteenth century, struggling to make sense of their lives in a changing world, looked to heroes as models of success in the new industrial world. These heroes were commodified for mass consumption by a newly emerging national media. Their attributes were embellished and glorified in the process by mythic proportions. Myth is not relegated to classic literature or ancient civilizations, but is alive and well within contemporary society. Popular media are instrumental in the reproduction of cultural myths. What is new to the late nineteenth century is a national media capable of influencing and uniting a consensus of belief throughout an entire nation. Certainly there was no more powerful force of influence over the common American than the popular press.

In an effort to explain popular cultural myth, this study uses attribution theories borrowed from the discipline of social psychology to explain one social myth common to sport, the self-made man. As an example of popular media, the *National Police*

Gazette was examined for the first year of the ten-year period of John L. Sullivan's reign as heavyweight champion, 1882-1892, as only the first phase of a larger project. Sullivan was chosen because he was the most heroic figure of nineteenth-century sport and America's first national sporting hero. The *National Police Gazette* was chosen because of its national influence among working class Americans. Looking for evidence of the myth, every article in 1882 covering the champion was analyzed for attributions and coded by four categories, internal or external, and stable or unstable. After the attributions were coded, they were analyzed and interpreted for the way they reflect the dominant ethos.

Although more data are required, analysis of attributions demonstrated that, as expected, internal attributions were more frequent than external attributions. These attributions are variables within the individual's control, and reflect the self-made image of the hero. Stable attributions occurred more frequently than unstable attributions, meaning attributes that are relatively fixed and unchanging. What we can definitively learn from this study in its present form is that people spontaneously engage in attributional thought, and it is expressed in the popular media. The study of attributions has great potential for cultural comparison as well as the ability to enhance our understanding of the creation of myth in popular culture.

What John L. Sullivan and numerous other sport heroes have in common is that they embody the myth of the self-made man. Although numerous self-made men existed in industrial America, there was a free flow of hero material in sport. The self-made man paradigm was not new to the sport hero, but it has continued to flourish within the sport subculture. From John L. Sullivan to Michael Jordan, the sport hero has been a pre-eminent cultural manifestation. One's belief in the democratic ideal of open accessibility to wealth and privilege is embodied in these self-made men. Understanding the ways in which these long-standing cultural myths are maintained and flourish gives one a clearer picture into the American social fabric.
