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“Brylcreem Boy”: Denis Compton, Sport and Nature

Because he played two popular sports exceptionally well, and also fixed an enigmatic gaze on the viewers of countless advertisements for Brylcreem, Denis Compton became a household name in Britain in the 1940s and 1950s. His name was still recognized by millions when he died half a century later. His career provides a fascinating case of how sporting heroes are represented to their public. Through an ensemble of ideas and

images mediated through a variety of channels of communication Compton became a “text” in which a series of “meanings” were inscribed: notions of social class, gender, region, and nation were all present in the text. But what the paper will bring out is both a particular idea of masculinity that Compton was made to represent, and the contradictions present in this idea. Rather than hard work, self-discipline and success through dedication – the virtues conventionally associated with sporting heroism – Compton stood for intuition and the visceral thrill of uncertainty that accompanied the courting of danger. His was a text of “jouissance.” A dominant motif was the contest that occurred in sport between nature and the body. This made sport something to be enjoyed and marveled at by its participants and its spectators, rather than a process to be studied and explained. It provided an arena for the display of the sensuous and artless aspects of human endeavor. There was therefore a mystery about Compton’s skill, which the Brylcreem image of carefully coiffured and reified artifice severely contradicted.
