

Dead and Alive?: Sports History in the Late Capitalist Moment

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Rather than specifically commenting upon the future of sports history as a domain of intellectual inquiry, a theme well interrogated elsewhere in this special issue, this article explores the historical trajectory of sport within, and the abundant allusions to, historical sporting events and moments that pervade the late capitalist moment. According to Jameson, the end of the twentieth century has been marked by an 'inverted millenarianism', within which a pervasive sense of discontinuation has engulfed all spheres of human existence.¹ As evidence of this observation, intellectual discourse has been punctuated by deliberations pertaining to the end of ideology, the individual, fandom, free states, and time, to cite just a few examples. Most pertinent to this discussion, some commentators have signalled the death of history itself.² Within the context of this terminal historicism, the rampant resuscitation of sporting images, icons, and ideologies from pasts dim and distant, distinct and recent, would appear as a discernible cultural incongruity. On the contrary, this article offers an explanation of sports history as being both conclusively dead (announced by the discontinuation of sporting evolution) and most definitively alive (confirmed by late capitalism's indiscriminate mining of the sporting past).

In November 1989 Francis Fukuyama's article 'The End of History?' appeared in *The National Review* and ignited the smouldering debate pertaining to the nature of contemporary existence. According to Fukuyama, the solidifying global hegemony of Western liberalism, ushering the protracted conclusion to the Cold War, foretold the 'total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives', and hence predicted the 'end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalisation of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government'.³ As with any such grand assertions, Fukuyama received a welter of criticism, specifically directed at the perceived totalistic Americocentrism implicit in his argument. While the

third way centrism of subsequent Clinton, Blair, and Schröder's 'Neue Mitte' administrations appears to mark a shift in the political landscape and thereby challenge Fukuyama's position, some commentators, particularly those from the intellectual left, tacitly endorsed the 'end of history' thesis by chiding Clinton and Blair as the torchbearers of the 1980s New Right project. In muted Fukuyama-esque tones, Stuart Hall observed that rather than reinventing the left, Blairism was disappointingly faithful to the tenets of Thatcherism, prompting him to parody New Labour as the 'Great Moving Nowhere Show'.⁴ Far from being incontrovertible, Fukuyama's position nevertheless offers a starting point for interpreting the relationships between politics, economics and culture at the end of the twentieth century: something particularly germane to those interested in deciphering the corporate sports order that, for all intents and purposes, dominates contemporary sporting culture.

Prefigured on an economic system shorn of overt government intervention that regulates itself according to the *natural* rhythms of the marketplace (as neo-liberal *invisible hand* apologists would have us believe), the complementary relationship between laissez-faire, free market economics, and ideologically individualist governments is self-evident.⁵ Despite numerous catastrophes resulting from the unfettered adoption of economic deregulation and privatisation — most notably the human and ecological tragedies unfolding in the states of the former Soviet Union and in Indonesia — throughout core and peripheral spaces of the global economy, there persists a largely unquestioned acceptance of neo-liberalism as the acknowledged economic *modus operandi*. Hence, Fukuyama's notion of a globalising liberal democracy simultaneously proclaims the end of economic (as well as political) history, and the market as 'the final form of human history itself'.⁶

During this time of global 'free-market triumphalism',⁷ sporting culture has been appropriated by the avaricious dictates of oligopolistic transnational conglomerates. Indeed, the sports industry is a vivid exemplar of Ernest Mandel's third, multinational phase in the evolution of capitalism.⁸ This prognosis is substantiated by even a cursory examination of the contemporary sporting universe: sports franchises and/or leagues commandeered by — or indeed turned into — transnational corporations seeking to add multiple revenue streams derived from the all important entertainment economy; sports spectacles manipulated by commercial media outlets pursuing the audience

demographic most palatable to their corporate advertisers; and, sports stars as *de facto* embodied advertisements acting on behalf of their coterie of endorsement affiliations. From Los Angeles to London, Sydney to Sao Paolo, Tokyo to Turin, such is the uniformity of the corporatised sport economy that the assemblage of players (corporations, networks, athletes) may change, but the product (media-entertainment experiences) and purpose (profit maximisation) remain unerringly similar. While distinctions between the NFL's Super Bowl and FIFA's World Cup Final may have been palpable during the formative stages in the evolution of the global sport economy,⁹ today it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between the constitution and experience of these and other major sports spectacles (e.g. the U-Bix Super 12 Final, the AXA Football Association Cup Final, or NASCAR's Pepsi 400). Hypercommercial organisation, formulaic production, and trite hagiography combine to create an ubiquitous late capitalist 'structure of [sporting] feeling' that goes beyond traditional sporting, and indeed national, boundaries.¹⁰ These 'prolympic'¹¹ sports are less contexts for the expression of national cultural difference, and more indicative of pervasive political, economic, and cultural processes shaping the global sport system.

Although sport is becoming ever more homogenised by the globalising forces of the media-entertainment industrial complex, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the varying degrees to which particular sports have been engulfed by the tentacles of late capitalism. According to Fukuyama, histories are expressed in, and through, localised struggles over forms of governance. From this assertion, he made the distinction between states 'still in history' and those 'at the end of history': essentially a separation between developing (historical) and developed (post-historical) political economies.¹² This mode of differentiation is applicable to the contemporary sporting arena, wherein certain sporting forms are 'still in history', while others are perceptibly 'at the end of history'. Up until recently it would have been possible to cite a slew of sports 'still in history', as indicated by ongoing struggles for survival against the perceived threat of corporate capitalism (e.g. ultimate frisbee, rugby union, and mountaineering). However, these and other onetime harbingers of traditional (i.e. non-commercial) sporting values are in the midst of capitulating to the late capitalist marketplace. For example, US Track and Field, England's Test and County Cricket Board, and AMF Bowling Worldwide, are presently involved in aggressive structural and cultural reformations motivated by

the need to become more appealing to the denizens of the sport-media-entertainment complex. While these sporting bodies may still be 'in history' (i.e. in the process of evolving), they aspire to a post-historical inertia that would signal membership of the new sporting establishment.

Sport practices positioned at 'the end of history' are those that have already successfully succumbed, either willingly or otherwise, to the advances of transnational corporate capitalism. The Australian Football League, the National Basketball Association, and even the Olympic Games (until relatively recently perceived as a sacrosanct bastion of anti-commercialism), are all examples of brazenly commercial enterprises that make no effort to disguise their cardinal objective of delivering entertaining products designed to maximise profit margins. The domineering cultural and economic presence of these hypercommercial spectacles effectively nullifies the perceived viability of alternatives to the corporate sports model. Thus, competing elements within the contemporary sporting universe are either firmly entrenched in post-historical mode, are actively seeking its realisation, or are rapidly disappearing from popular sporting consciousness. In a Fukuyamian sense, the end of sports history would appear to be upon us.

Although the hegemonic positioning of late capitalist corporate sport proclaims the endpoint of sports history, we are nevertheless bombarded by historical sporting referents in product designs, advertising, television broadcasting, the celebrity economy, and the built environment. Close examination reveals that this seeming 'historical' contradiction is anything but. The prevailing sporting historicism is propagated by the very conditions responsible for the end of sporting evolution. In Jameson's terms, contemporary sporting culture can thus be characterised by a 'return of history in the midst of the prognosis of the demise of historical telos'.¹³ What, then, is it about late capitalism that has spawned this 'return' to (sports) history, and what is the nature of the (sports) history to which we are returning?

The demise of alternatives to free market neo-liberalism (socialism, communism, welfare capitalism) in the last third of the twentieth century, coupled with the stagnation of Fordist production and post-war advances in mass communication and manufacturing (particularly those related to television and computer technologies), advanced an era of flexible specialisation and accumulation wherein economies of scale (mass output) have been replaced by economies of scope (varied output). Within this

post-Fordist regime of economic production, consumers are bombarded with an ever expanding array of new items across, and seemingly endless differentiation within, product lines: the goal being to fragment the traditional mass market into more compelling and lucrative consumer niches that would, in aggregate, increase market share.¹⁴ Evidently, the transition to post-Fordist production was contingent on the intensification of what Poster described as the 'mode of information',¹⁵ particularly as it related to the rapid dissemination of knowledge concerning new products and changing product styles. Facilitating such transformations in the capitalist system, the new culture industries (media, advertising, marketing), and their core product (information), assumed primacy in the production process over more traditional modes of industrial manufacture (much of which has been relocated to the industrialising peripheries of the global economic system). Since carefully manufactured symbolic or sign values (product meanings) stimulate the flow of capital within the contemporary economy, the commodity has been usurped by the commodity-sign as the core of capitalist exchange. As a consequence, the unrelenting output of the new culture industries has facilitated the ascension of symbolic value (over the use and exchange values that dominated earlier stages in capitalist evolution) within the late capitalist economy. This has led to the advent of a postmodern 'civilization of the image', characterised by cultural artifice, depthlessness, and discontinuity of culture.¹⁶

The incessant production of commercially-based images associated with the postmodern 'implosive socius of signs' has created a 'vast synthesis of fictions and realities into which traditional reference points collapse', including the modern metanarratives of universal knowledge, progress, evolution, and thereby history.¹⁷ Confounding the ability to think of the present in *traditionally* historical terms — as part of an evolving age, epoch, or conjuncture — some writers have charged the postmodern cultural logic of ontological flux and indeterminacy with weakening modern linear and evolutionary historicism. With the endless cycle of product and stylistic innovation associated with post-Fordist regimes of flexible accumulation, the material and symbolic world is 'changing constantly and arbitrarily' primarily in order to increase sales. Hence, the 'value of the new and innovative is lost in this steady stream of variation that goes nowhere'.¹⁸ The present thus becomes a random moment which may, or may not, bear any relationship to the past, or

indeed to the future. Ironically, with this crisis of the present, 'producers of [postmodern] culture have nowhere to turn but to the past', in their attempts to design angst-assuaging representations of contemporary existence.¹⁹

Postmodernism's turn to the past is most evident in the work of architects Michael Graves (Public Services Building, Portland), Charles Moore (Piazza d'Italia, New Orleans), and the later work of Philip Johnson (AT&T Building, New York), all of who mined and amalgamated cultural referents from various historical periods into an eclectic contemporary aesthetic. As well as architecture, the 'random cannibalisation' of the past as a means of constituting the present in times of ontological crisis, is discernible in film, television, art, advertising, and commercial design.²⁰ It also exudes from retail outlets that satiate (indeed their marketing and promotion strategies help to stimulate) the nostalgic yearnings of many historically uncertain consumers:

Restoration Hardware is unabashedly nostalgic. But wander around one of their stores and you begin to realise it's a strange kind of nostalgia that's being promoted. It's totally amorphous. The focus isn't on any particular time period, but rather on the past in general. The store sells a type of furniture wax inspired by a formula dating back to the 1700s, turn-of-the-century lamps, and schoolroom clocks from the 1950s. Also, the store is no stickler for authenticity. Furniture is designed to suit modern shoppers accustomed to modern conveniences.²¹

History endures, but only in the form of historical simulations:²² stylistic expressions of the past that 'have no understanding of history in depth, but instead are offered a contemporary creation, more costume drama and re-enactment than critical discourse'.²³ In this way, postmodern culture fosters a pseudo-authentic historical sensibility, as opposed to a genuinely historically grounded understanding of the past, or indeed the present. By rendering history a vast, yet random, archive of events, styles, and icons that can be appropriated in any combination or sequence, commercial culture has fatally disrupted traditional chronology, leading to the compression of time.²⁴ As a consequence, we are ensconced in a culture of the present tense that has propagated a 'historical amnesia' among the consuming populace.²⁵ Surrounded by historical simulations, signs of 'pastness' are widely revered, but precise provenances are little

known and little cared about: a piece of 'Mission style' furniture may be an obligatory feature of today's suburban American home — at least of those belonging to people who aspire to the latest Sunday supplement chic — but there exists little widespread knowledge of, or interest in, the genealogy of the 'Mission' aesthetic. What matters is that it is *the* latest, approved lifestyle signifier. In other words, history has become little more than a design element, a 'superficial decoration' used to differentiate products (and by association consumers) in the late capitalist marketplace.²⁶

The comprehensive appropriation of sport by the tentacles of late capitalism means that today's corporatised sport environment is replete with examples of the *random cannibalisation* of the sporting past. The remainder of this article comprises three vignettes of the superficial historicism through which products, celebrities, and spectacles are differentiated within the crowded sports marketplace. The Reebok 'Ryan Giggs' television commercial, aired in the United Kingdom in the early 1990s, exemplifies the commercial manufacture of history as a pure simulation, and the attendant attenuation of conventional chronology. In 30 seconds Ryan Giggs — the Manchester United and Wales forward, and burgeoning football idol of the moment — was anointed with an instant Manchester United pedigree that linked him with a simulated expression of the club's heritage. The commercial opens with nostalgic images of youthful football supporters *circa* 1950, bedecked in red and white scarves and enthusiastically waving football rattles. Setting the scene, the familiar voice of (Sir) Bobby Charlton (a revered symbol of Manchester United's past triumphs and tragedies) encourages the audience to 'just imagine their greatest side'. Charlton's call to historical reflection is subsequently curtailed by the unfolding televisual narrative, which effectively selects Manchester United's transhistorical XI for the audience. Through computer generated composition — accompanied by the voice of Kenneth Wolstenhome (a renowned commentator on the history of English football) and the strains of an emotive orchestral backdrop (ironically, an arrangement of the American Civil War song 'Marching through Georgia') — Giggs is seamlessly inserted into a televisual pastiche of noted players drawn from various periods in the team's post-war history. Dismantling historical boundaries, Giggs is depicted as the orchestrator and finisher of a flowing move designed to trigger the embodied memories residing within English football's

collective consciousness (George Best's hip swerve, Steve Coppel's scuttling runs, Bobby Charlton's passing etc.). Having curled the ball with the outside of his left foot into the top right hand corner of the net (a move thus thrust into collective consciousness as a sign of *Giggsness*), he is then flanked in celebration by the talismanic Best and Charlton, as Charlton himself proclaims 'their greatest ever side. Giggs would be in it, and he'd be wearing Reebok boots'. Herein, Reebok erased historically-bounded differences in playing personnel, style, team success, and even corporate sponsor, as it grafted Giggs — and by association Reebok — into the eternal present of Manchester United's lucrative heritage industry: something which sets it apart from equally historical, yet less successfully marketed, professional football clubs.

Preying on the *historical amnesia* instantiated through the outpourings of postmodern culture, the renaissance of Muhammad Ali's imaged identity in America in the 1990s speaks to an even more cynical form of superficial historical revisionism. During the 1970s, an outwardly Muslim, Pan-Africanist, anti-colonial, and anti-American imperialist, Ali reached the nadir of his popularity within the United States. Yet according to Barry Frank, his agent with International Management Group (IMG), by the late 1990s Ali has become 'universally loved'.²⁷ Some may credit Ali's evolution from pariah to deity, to the advent of a more accepting of difference and progressive American civic consciousness.²⁸ More skeptical commentators attribute this meta-morphosis to the workings of Ali's promotional entourage — including the nine IMG employees that comprise 'Team Ali' — that shaped his mediated identity into one that positively engages the mainstream sensibilities of America's consuming populace. Through carefully and consistently choreographed advertising campaigns for Apple, Wheaties, Morton's steakhouses, Rockport shoes, and judiciously chosen public appearances (most notably as the igniter of the Olympic flame at the 1996 Atlanta games), Ali corroborated his status as a cultural icon of historical proportions, while simultaneously erasing his threatening political stridency. Vague allusions to his controversial and outspoken past, coupled with the public sympathy derived from his apparent physical decline due to the ravages of Parkinson's disease, proffered Ali an aura of authentic individuality: a prized commodity in the culturally and politically myopic 1990s. As a result, Ali became a culturally resonant exemplar of postmodern American individualism, and was thereby symbolically severed from his role as a torchbearer for

collective struggle against various forms of American oppression. Ali has in fact become an embodied example of what the novelist E. L. Doctorow described as the 'disappearance of the American radical past':²⁹ a potentially progressive figure whose insurgent history has been creatively revised, and by that means neutered, in the name of commercial avarice.

Finally, and returning to architecture — the aforementioned crucible of postmodern cultural innovation — the built sporting environment is replete with examples of what John Bale refers to as architectural 'repositories of history', which consciously draw on particular structural and symbolic elements as a means of engaging the collective memory.³⁰ Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum Sports Facilities Group (HOK) is perhaps most renowned for advancing historicised sporting architecture. HOK is particularly noted for the 'retro' ballparks it has designed for numerous American Major League Baseball organisations (e.g. the Baltimore Orioles' Orioles Park at Camden Yards, the Cleveland Indians' Jacobs Field, and the Colorado Rockies' Coors Field). These 'new-old'³¹ structures incorporate technologically advanced structures and internal systems, while simultaneously fostering a 'look and feel like what fans think the old-time fields must have looked and felt like'.³² A similar synthesis of faux historical authenticity (in this case centered on the reproduction of a classic New York school gymnasium) and technological innovation dominates the interior design concept of the recently opened Manhattan Nike Town at 57th and Madison in New York. According to John Hoke, Nike Image Design Creative Director, 'We looked to classical examples of historic buildings with contemporary interiors to reflect the contrasts of Nike's sports heritage and product innovation'.³³ Likewise, plans for the £55 million redevelopment of Fulham Football Club's Craven Cottage ground in London 'embodied Fulham's 100-year history at the ground into the design and have also included modern features to take the club into the 21st century'. Notably, Fulham's Stevenage Road stand and turnstiles, designed by the noted architect Archibald Leitch and built in 1905 (under government protection due to its status as a historically significant Grade II listed building), is to be integrated within a neo-Roman-style arcade — incorporating a restaurant, cafe, gym, and hospitality suites — that 'echoes the designs of some of the oldest and greatest stadiums in the world, such as the Coliseum'.³⁴ Evidently, these examples of 'high-tech nostalgia'³⁵ are pure architectural simulations: highly stylised and impressionistic renderings of traditional elements

drawn from across historical periods and melded with state-of-the-art technology. As such, they graphically exemplify the historical artifice, depthlessness, and discontinuity of postmodern culture.

This article has painted a disheartening vision of a contemporary sport culture dominated by an unquestioned adherence to the tenets of corporate capitalism (evidencing the demise of sporting evolution), and a concomitant emergence of a commercially motivated, essentially superficial, and politically neutered historicism (signalling a re-animation of historical sporting signifiers). In this seemingly contradictory moment, the sub-discipline of sports history is one of the few remaining avenues through which it may be possible to disrupt the creeping politico-economic inertia and cultural banality of postmodern sport. Whether we recognise it or not, the practice of sports history offers the promise of nurturing a truly contextual and critical historical consciousness, through which the consuming populace can begin to make sense of 'the totality of its world'. Moreover — and unashamedly reverting to prematurely forsaken neo-Marxist reflection — a failure to acknowledge late capitalism's 'abandonment of any history founded in historical time' will consign the neo-liberal economic masses to a 'false consciousness of time' every bit as debilitating as other more traditional forms of ideological oppression.³⁶ In particular, we should be wary of recent curricular drifts toward the banalities of sports management and sports marketing — themselves corollaries of late capitalism's invasive influence. First and foremost, we should all be sports historians now.

Notes

- 1 F. Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1991, p. 1.
- 2 For example: J. Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, Semiotext(e), New York, 1987;
- 3 E. Canetti, *The Human Province*, Andre Deutsch, London, 1985; F. Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest*, November 1989; C. Hitchens, 'Goodbye to All That: Why Americans are not Taught History', *Harper's Magazine*, November, 1998.
- 4 Fukuyama, 'History', p. 3.
- 5 S. Hall, 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show', *Marxism Today*, December, 1998, pp. 9-14.
- 6 E. Hobsbawm. 'The Big Picture: The Death of Neo-Liberalism', *Marxism Today*, November/December, 1998,4-8.
- 7 F. Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998*, Verso, London, 1998, p. 88.
- 8 Hobsbawm, 'Big Picture', p. 6.
- 9 E. Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1999.
- 10 M. R. Real, 'Super Bowl Football Versus World Cup Soccer: A Cultural-Structural Comparison', in L. A. Wenner, ed., *Media, Sports, and Society*, Sage, Newbury

- Park, pp. 180-203.
- 10 R. Williams, 'The Analysis of Culture', in T. Bennett, G. Martin, C. Mercer and J. Woollacott, eds., *Culture, Ideology and Social Process*, Open University, Milton Keynes, 1981, pp. 43-52.
 - 11 P. Donnelly, 'The Local and the Global: Globalisation in the Sociology of Sport', *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1996, pp. 239-257.
 - 12 Fukuyama, *History*.
 - 13 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. xii.
 - 14 See: A. Amin, ed., *Post-Fordism: A Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994; D. Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1989.
 - 15 M. Poster, *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1990.
 - 16 R. Kearney, *The Wake of the Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989.
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 - 18 D. Gartman, 'Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Post-Fordism', *Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1998, pp. 119-137.
 - 19 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp 6, 17-18.
 - 20 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 18.
 - 21 H. Chaplin, 'Past? Perfect!: Nervous Boomers Take Restoration Cure', *American Demographics*, May, 1999, p. 69.
 - 22 Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*.
 - 23 J. Hewison, 1987, quoted in Harvey, *Postmodernity*, p. 87.
 - 24 Harvey, *Postmodernity*, p. 85.
 - 25 Jameson, *Cultural Turn*, p. 90.
 - 26 Gartman, *Postmodernism*, p. 125.
 - 27 B. Horovitz, 'IMG's 'Team Ali' has single mission', *USA Today*, 8 June, p. 2A.
 - 28 B. Horovitz, 'Authentic Ali: Marketers catching up to his appeal', *USA Today*, 8 June, pp. 1A-2A.
 - 29 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 24.
 - 30 J. Bale, *Landscapes of Modern Sport*, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 1994, p. 170.
 - 31 Bale, *Landscapes*, p. 170.
 - 32 E. Epstein, 'Giants' stadium architects sell high-tech nostalgia: Designs go for comfort, native flair', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 March, 1996, p. A13.
 - 33 http://info.nike.com/retail/info_newyork.html.
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