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BODIES OF DISCOURSE

The title 'BODIES OF DISCOURSE' is displayed in large, white, sans-serif capital letters against a dark teal background. Three circular cutouts within the title reveal silhouettes of athletes in action: a soccer player in the 'B', a baseball player in the 'O', and a basketball player in the 'F'. To the right of the 'F', a blue silhouette of a person holding a ball is partially visible. The background is filled with the dark silhouettes of many other people, suggesting a crowd of spectators.

Sports Stars, Media, AND THE Global Public



1 *Introduction*

The Politics of Transnational Sports Stardom

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The team representing the English Football Association's bid for the 2018 World Cup had arrived with great panache and even greater confidence at FIFA head quarters in Zurich in December 2010. The troika leading the presentation on behalf of the FA perfectly reflected the interconnected nature of sport, celebrity and politics at the beginning of the second decade of the twenty-first century: David Beckham, not the most successful England player in recent decades but most certainly the most famous, was flanked by the eventual heir to the British throne and commonly perceived most presentable face of the British monarchy, Prince William, and newly elected British Prime Minister David Cameron. In the event England's World Cup bid secured one less vote than its three man strong team leading the bid, crashing out in the first round of voting, but the degree to which sports and politics have become intertwined was highlighted in the wide-spread complaint in the British media that the tournament had been awarded to Russia despite the absence of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir

Putin at the presentations in Zurich. No longer, it seems, is it that the interventions of politicians in sporting matters are lamented, but the absence of such intervention.

However, high profile events such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup should not divert our attention from the quotidian interplay of sports and politics in which the language and rhetoric of the former come to shape the latter as much as the latter penetrates and attributes meaning to the former. Five years before David Cameron's ill-fated mission to Zurich, his predecessor Tony Blair made rather more successful use of the borderlands between sports and politics. It had been one of the most difficult weeks of Tony Blair's 10-year tenure as prime minister in the univocal assessment of political commentators. For the second time within a year, his closest ally in the cabinet, David Blunkett, had been forced to resign over breaches of the ministerial code. Labour's once commanding House of Commons' majority had been reduced to a single vote on controversial anti-terrorism legislation curtailing civil liberties. The chances of Blair being forced from office seemed as high as during any time of his 10-year tenure in this first week of November 2005.

At this most difficult moment in his political career, Blair went on a public relations offensive to regain political control. However, he did not face the crowd of Westminster journalists waiting to quiz him over Blunkett's departure, nor did he set out new policy directions in Parliament or deliver one of his carefully orchestrated speeches. Instead, he made his sole media appearance of the week on BBC television's *Football Focus*, a traditional warmup to the weekend's action on the pitches across England's Premier League and lower divisions, usually featuring former professional footballers as pundits, and format familiar to sports fans around the world, from the American game day "football" panels to similar in-studio panels around major sports in countries across the globe.

Seated on a sofa with sports commentator John Motson and BBC panelist Mark Lawrenson, Blair was immediately quizzed by presenter Manish Bhasin with a question that set the tone for his 25-minute appearance on the program: "Prime Minister, let's get the serious stuff out of the way first. Michael Owen—good signing, bad signing?"¹¹ In a relaxed atmosphere, Blair spread out over the *Football Focus* couch wearing casual clothing and a deep-buttoned shirt—that in a breach of the day's choreography, fellow panelist Lawrenson remarked to still "have the crease" of being unpacked the same morning. In this convivial freewheeling setting, Blair relished the chance to project an image of a down-to-earth, committed football fan, someone just like you and me. He seized the opportunity with a plethora of sports analogies and metaphors aimed at representing his political actions in the light of sporting heroics, from having to be "able to stand the heat" and "perform under pressure" to references to work ethics and trustworthiness. He was countering the sorest of charges in the public's condemnation of Blair's perceived role as the rash and untrustworthy chief architect of British participation in the Iraq war.

Connecting the Worlds of Sports and Politics

Blair's appearance on the program in the midst of a political crisis is a powerful illustration of everyday life media consumption, and the consumption of spectator sports in particular, as key sites of political struggle and discourse. It exemplifies the degree to which not only scholars of popular culture but political office holders and their advisers believe that the realm of political discourse and discussion has expanded far beyond the narrow confines of parliamentary and public speeches and traditional news media. It also serves as another reminder that in today's mediated world the boundaries and forms of participation within the public sphere need to be traced outside the realm of traditional political discourse. John Hartley (1996, 1997, 1999), in his reflections on the public sphere and the popular across his work in the 1990s, proposed a model of political discourse in contemporary mediated societies that departs from the strict normative division between the private and public in a Habermasian normative vision of political discourse. Instead Hartley emphasizes the interconnectedness and inclusiveness of public discourses spanning the spectrum of mediated communication, including both traditional realms of political communication such as news program and popular entertainment. He writes: "The public sphere can be rethought not as a category binarily contrasted with its implied opposite, the private sphere, but as a Russian doll enclosed within a larger media sphere, itself too enclosed within the semiosphere" (Hartley 1999: 218).

If popular entertainment thus becomes a crucial site of public discourses—and such discourses, in turn, constitute an important site in the construction of political and cultural identities—then professional sports is clearly one of its most crucial arenas. Spectator sports and their natural visual and narrative foci—teams and sport stars—are an important aspect, to many the central aspect, of our popular media consumption. Moreover, media sport has long occupied a "quasi-news" status that has secured its significant presence, not only in newspapers but also in television and radio news bulletins. With the steady growth of entertainment and celebrity news, sports as a major component of mainstream news may seem less curious than a few decades ago. It illustrates the unique importance of sports in relation to those macrodiscourses normally at the heart of media news: events, especially national events, that impact directly on our everyday lives. Elsewhere, Sandvoss (2003, 2007) has documented the range of political discourses and themes that inform and are reflected in fans' consumption of spectator sports. On one level, these studies confirm both Hartley's and Alan McKee's claim that public discourses inside and outside realms of traditional political participation, inside the mass media, and on the outside among audiences are equally of political significance:

Although popular debates about the public sphere tend to use the term "the media" to describe what they're talking about, the public sphere in fact consists of more than just the mass media. For example, in the circulation of public ideas consumers of media speak back

to other consumers. To have a political conversation in a coffeeshop—or a hairdresser's [...]—is to contribute part of the public sphere. (McKee 2005: 199)

To these sites of everyday life, we can add both the territorial spaces of sports consumption, such as stadia, pubs, parks, and living rooms, and their accompanying textual spaces, such as television sport coverage, fanzines, and Internet message boards. Both everyday life and popular culture, however, are far from neutral spaces for any such discourses, whether they concern cultural or political identities, or the main realms in which they overlap, such as nationalism and racism. In the study of fans of popular music and television dramas in particular (see, e.g., Fiske 1989; Jenkins 1992), the ability of audience members to negotiate, appropriate, and validate popular texts and entertainment media has been celebrated and welcomed as a tactical intervention on behalf of consumers in the unsettling of hegemonic power positions of the media industry. In contrast, the realm of sports consumption often stands in stark contrast to such assessments of popular culture as a progressive realm of social change.

This reactionary potential is documented in Andy Ruddock's (2005) insightful study of the reactions of fans of the English Premier League football club, West Ham United, to the club's acquisition of former England midfielder Lee Bowyer. Ruddock highlights the way in which professional athletes both accommodate and facilitate conservative discourses of belonging. Prior to Bowyer's transfer to West Ham, which had already earned a reputation as a club marred by racist hooliganism in the 1980s, he was widely reported to have been involved in two racist incidents. He stood trial for the assault on an Asian student, Sarfraz Najeib, in Leeds in January 2000 but was acquitted following the dismissal of the trial's original jury. Some fans, particularly those of Asian origin, struggled with West Ham's acquisition of Bowyer yet often put their "love" of the club before their dislike or hatred of Bowyer. Other fans found his arrival at the club a welcome opportunity to assert racist positions and "anti-political correctness" complaints. As one fan asserted, "It has to be said again. Most Asians and Negroes are more racist than most White people. Can a White man [...] complain to [...] race relations? Is that fair?" (cited in Ruddock 2005: 383). As Ruddock concludes,

Looking for places where fans unpack hegemonic discourses means that cultural studies scholars have very little to say about racism in football despite manifest evidence showing that, one way or another, this is an issue that the public care about. Despite its limitations, I would argue that my data illustrate that the discourses and actions of well-meaning people cultivate an environment where bigotry is tolerated, if not encouraged. As such, it tells us something about how racism endures as ordinary, overdetermined material practice, warning us of pleasure's conservative potential. (Ruddock 2005: 383).

Ruddock's assessment echoes Sandvoss' (2007) claim that popular culture and sports are not neutral media or neutral spaces for public discourse; they instead frame and shape such discourses:

Among sport audiences rational discourses give way to participation in public debates through the prism of fandom. The intense psychological bond between fan and fan object

shapes and constrains the nature of possible discourses. As macro political and economic conditions change, the basis of oppositional discourses among sport audiences is at risk of suffocation [...]. While as McKee (2005: 196) argues “the consumption of culture is part of the political process,” this does not mean that it makes an unproblematic contribution to this process. (Sandvoss 2007: 69)

Thus, by acknowledging the role of fans and audiences in the consumption of mediated sport—and its political significance—our critical gaze inevitably gravitates back toward the mediated text and the athletes who so often serve as the focal points of sports’ mediated representations.

As we return to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair’s appearance on *Football Focus*, we see further evidence of Ruddock’s positioning of sports stars as textual fields through which a range of cultural and political discourses are communicated and shaped. The opening question about signing Michael Owen delighted Blair, allowing him to reflect on Newcastle’s improving midfield and increased attacking options rather than the increasing challenge to his premiership. The popular television sports program, however, accorded Blair yet better opportunities to utilize sporting discourses as masked vehicles of political communication. When asked to present his “cult hero eleven,” Blair chose instead to present a list of “unsung heroes,” ones whom “you don’t always get the concentration and focus on but who in their own way are incredibly good.” Blair’s co-opting of the question forcefully underlines how sport stars are negotiated by different participants in the public sphere to serve their own discursive aims as he discussed his selections with program host Manish Bhasin and panelist Mark Lawrenson:

Bhasin: Let’s start with what you have chosen. I think Steve Malbrac is one of those players?

Blair: Yeah, I think he is a really good player. [...] I saw him just recently, and I thought he was fantastic. So strong, never gives up and always causes trouble for the other team’s defense [...]

Bahsin: Another unsung hero [...] Arjan de Zeeuw of Wigan.

Blair: Yah, I could do with this guy in the whip’s office at the moment, actually. (laughs). He is, what I like about this guy is, he is really strong, never gives up at all [...], erm, he is one of those players.

Lawrenson: Remember when he was spat in the face last season, his reaction was absolutely fantastic.

Blair: Yeah.

[...]

Lawrenson: So you haven’t picked an English then...

Bhasin: He has actually...

Blair: No, I, I would have to pick an English, wouldn’t I? Erm, Teddy Sheringham. Teddy Sheringham—look, of course he is a sung hero by everyone, but the