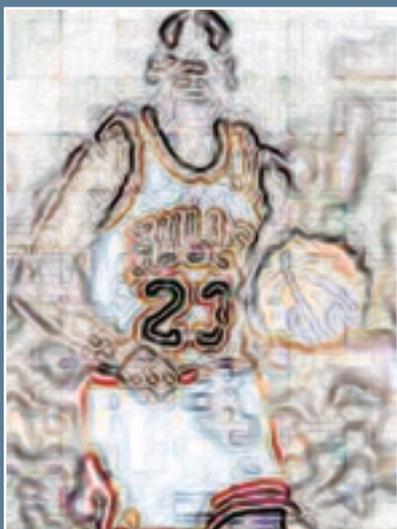


Barry Smart



# The Sport Star

Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy  
of Sporting Celebrity

# The Sport Star

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# Heroism, Fame and Celebrity in the World of Sport

## The popularity of sport

Sport is now at the heart of contemporary culture and in the words of one commercially interested observer seems destined to 'define the culture of the world' (Phil Knight, founder and chairman of *Nike* corporation, cited in Katz 1994: 199). The importance of sport has long been recognised. Early in the twentieth century, Walter Camp, widely acknowledged to be the father of American football, is reputed to have described sport as "the broad folk highway" of the nation' (Pope 1997: 3). Sport is recognised to be one of the key cultural institutions involved in the constitution of national identity. It is also of vital economic importance, sport-related economic activity in England being identified by Mass Observation in 1939 as 'the biggest English industry' and by the Henley Centre in 1985 as 'the sixth largest employment sector' (Mason 1989: 10; Kuper 2003: 147–148).

Sport is exceptionally popular around the world and sporting figures, sport teams and sport events are particularly prominent in the media. As one analyst has observed, sport is located in a 'deep area of the collective sensibility' (Eco 1987: 160), it is an activity whose popularity and appeal cuts across all manner of social and political divisions. High profile sporting figures are generally well known and popular across the social spectrum. Sportsmen and to a lesser extent sportswomen appear regularly on television, in magazines, and in the press, not solely because of their sporting prowess, but in addition because of their acquired fame, achieved 'star' quality and/or attributed 'celebrity' status.

The popularity and prominence of sporting figures is by no means a recent phenomenon. From the beginning of modern sport in the nineteenth century there have been numerous sporting heroes. A wide range of individuals by virtue of their skill, the quality of their technique and the manner of their performance in sporting competition have been accorded special recognition by both the public and the media (Huntington-Whitely 1999). Acknowledgement of the distinctiveness of individual players, of specific sportsmen and sportswomen, as well as of particular feats or performances, has been virtually synonymous with the emergence and development of modern sport. In 1865 in England a very young W. G. Grace (1848–1915) played cricket for the Gentlemen for the first time. In a subsequent series of matches against the Players beginning in 1871 he achieved totals of 217,

77, 112, 163, 158 and 70 in consecutive innings. Through his performances W. G. Grace transformed the game of cricket.

Reflecting on W. G. Grace's contribution to the game as a whole the historian C. L. R. James observes that the 'whole imposing structure and organisation of first-class cricket' can be traced to him. He was a very popular figure, crowds of people went to see him play, 'they cheered him on the field [and] they walked behind him in the street' (James 1969: 180). W. G. Grace held a special place in the lives of people in Victorian England, he was a great popular hero who received 'the spontaneous, unqualified ... enthusiasm and goodwill of a whole community' (James 1969: 182). Recalling the celebrations that followed W. G. Grace's hundredth hundred, celebrations that exemplified the wider cultural significance of sport, James asks what other occasion could produce 'such enthusiasm, such an unforced sense of community, of the universal merged in an individual?' (1969: 182). W. G. Grace was not just a great cricket player he was also an historic figure, an individual who helped establish the game of cricket as a national institution in England. In short he was a British sporting hero (Holt 1999).

The achievement of popularity through sporting prowess was not peculiar to cricket or confined to W. G. Grace as the comments of an observer of late-nineteenth-century 'football mania' in England reveal. Charles Edwardes writing in 1892 describes how professional football players in the North of England became 'the objects of adoration' in their neighbourhoods. Supporters regularly went to train stations to see their teams leave for away matches as well as to welcome them back on their return. They expressed their adoration by being ready to 'cheer them with affectionate heartiness, or condole with them and solace them with as much beer as ... their trainer will allow them to accommodate' (Edwardes 1992: 8). At the close of the nineteenth century, professional footballers were already better known than local MPs, their photographs were displayed in shops, and it was said that 'they cannot move in their native streets without receiving ovations enough to turn the head of a Prime Minister' (1992: 8). Even at this relatively early stage in the development of the professional game it was recognised that professional footballers were becoming 'marketable goods', that their wages would rise 'much higher than they are at present' (1992: 9) and that there would be increasing scope for agents to act as mediators between players and club committees.

There are many other examples of individual sports men and women receiving wide public acclaim for their performances in sports competition. In American sport in the 1920s a number of individuals came to the fore. 'Babe' Ruth (1895–1948) was enthusiastically acclaimed for his baseball feats, Red Grange (1904–1991), an American footballer, was hailed as the 'Galloping Ghost of the Grid-iron', and Jack Dempsey (1895–1983) acquired a heroic status for his fighting skills in the boxing ring (Rader 1983a). In Europe and America a young French female tennis player, Suzanne Lenglen (1899–1938), became a celebrated figure, but not only for ability expressed on the court, which allowed her to dominate the

Wimbledon tournament from 1919 to 1926. She was reputed to hit the ball very hard, 'like a man', and was regarded as very fit. It was also alleged that she was 'high-strung, hot-tempered and imperial in manner' and that she led a 'racy private life' (Bouchier and Findling 1983: 230–231). But there was something else, an early trace of the baggage associated with appearance that subsequently many women in sport have had to carry with them. Suzanne Lenglen was considered to be the first female tennis player to wear a tennis costume that was not full in length and her clothing has been described as 'colorful and sensual' (Bouchier and Findling 1983). Being French, wearing a skirt that ended just below the knee, and achieving success in tennis by playing the game in a manner that set her apart from most other women of the time ensured that she would be a well-known, if controversial figure (Inglis 1977; Cashmore 2000).

### Heroism in sport

In a number of respects another tennis player of the era, the American Helen Wills (1905–98), represents a comparable figure to Suzanne Lenglen. Wills based her game on hard serves and powerful ground strokes. Her preference was to practice by playing against male players. Her reputation and stature soared when at the age of seventeen she won her first US women's singles title (1923) and began to be regarded by sport writers as the 'great American hope', the one who might 'dethrone Suzanne Lenglen' (Bouchier and Findling (1983: 230). In 1926 Lenglen played Wills in a winter tennis tournament held on the French Riviera. In the match Lenglen won 6–3, 8–6 and then later in the year turned professional leaving Wills to become the 'unchallenged champion' of the women's game for a number of years (1927–33). Helen Wills has been described as an 'authentic American sports heroine', an individual who was not only a winner but a player with style, someone who came to prominence in an era in which organised sports were coming to the fore in America (Bouchier and Findling 1983: 233).

In the period following the First World War there was an unusually high level of hero-worship in America. It has been suggested that this reflected not only the celebrity-fabricating impact of the new media of popular culture (film, radio and mass-circulation magazines) but also the responses of people seeking escape from the forms of disillusionment and disorganisation that followed the end of the war. American soldiers returning from the First World War were disillusioned with the people and culture of Europe and there was a marked increase in nationalistic fervour. Heroic figures, seemingly representing simpler virtues, provided solace for a people whose faith had been shaken by the passage of events and whose lives had been disturbed by rapid economic and technological changes. In this period organised sport became a significant cultural phenomenon. During the First World War increased emphasis was placed on the military benefits of sport. There was also a significant growth in college sports and in the aftermath

of the war there was a marked increase in leisure activities and the pursuit of pleasure. These changes coupled with a commensurate expansion of sport journalism led inexorably to unprecedented attention being devoted to sport personalities. This was the context in which Helen Wills came to prominence as a cultural hero and leading sporting figures as a whole grew in stature and cultural significance.

Between 1923 and 1938 Helen Wills won eight Wimbledon singles and three doubles titles, seven US National singles and four doubles championships, as well as four French National tournaments, plus numerous other less prestigious tournament titles, as well as gold medals for singles and doubles at the 1924 Olympics. On court Wills dressed modestly, played a 'power game', displayed intense concentration, and appeared impassive and imperturbable, hence her nickname, 'Little Miss Poker Face'. Off court she was described as 'pleasant, articulate and interested in the world around her' and as 'unostentatious' (Bouchier and Findling 1983). In the 1920s tennis was the most international of organised sports and the successes achieved by Wills were major events in America. By 1938, when she retired, Wills' fame had begun to decline, her 'star qualities had faded' and she became a forgotten hero (Bouchier and Findling 1983: 239).

In discussions of heroism in sport and the respects in which sport may replenish the moral spirit, without which community risks becoming merely a hollow abstraction, the contribution of American golfer Bobby Jones (1902–71), 'the immortal amateur', is frequently acknowledged to be of significance (Ford 1977: 51; Porter 1983). In an obituary broadcast in one of his *Letters from America* in 1972 Alistair Cooke remarked that 'the twenties were the last decade when the idea of style was essential to the conception of a sporting hero' (quoted in Inglis 1977: 83). For Cooke 'style' was exemplified by the 'effortless grace' of the golfer Bobby Jones who won the British and American Open Championships as well as the British and American Amateur tournaments in the same year (1930) and then retired from tournament play. Cooke comments that long before his 'Grand Slam' achievement Bobby Jones was well known in America and Britain, not simply for his golfing ability but for the way in which he conducted himself. Describing Jones as an easy-going and modest individual, who had 'great grace and ... remained an amateur' throughout his career, Cooke adds that he was one of the few sporting heroes who became 'famous even to people who knew and cared little about golf' (quoted in Inglis 1977: 84–85).

Bobby Jones was certainly a famous figure and his fame has endured. However, while Jones's achievements on the golf course and his reputation for 'unfailing sportsmanship' are legendary, Cooke's celebration of Jones's sporting style and prowess omits any mention of the fact that Jones was also 'known for being a racist' (Billings 2000: 418). It is now acknowledged that until relatively recently overt racism has been a prominent feature of golf in America (Sinnette 1998). Indeed from 1934 to 1961 the constitution of the Professional Golfers Association 'explicitly limited that organization's membership to "Professional golfers of the Caucasian race"' (Owen 2001: 179).

It took the emergence of golfing phenomenon Tiger Woods and in particular a *Nike* advertising campaign in 1996 that deliberately emphasised the issue of race to draw public attention to the history of discrimination in the sport (Goldman and Papson 1998; Sinnette 1998; Rosaforte 2002).

There is a strong sense in Alastair Cooke's remarks about Bobby Jones that sport, for a time at least, has constituted a repository of concepts and ideas 'which have been central to our morality' (Inglis 1977: 85). Sport has been accorded a special moral quality, has been credited with a potential capacity for nurturing 'the natural impulses of generosity, elation, heroism, grace, [and] decorum' (Inglis 1977: 35). However the impression has also been conveyed that the influences to which sport and sporting figures became increasingly subject in the course of the twentieth century eroded, if they did not undermine completely, the moral value of sport and the prospect of genuine sporting 'heroism' (Hoch 1972). Certainly the mythology of the sporting hero exemplified by Neville Cardus's narratives on early-twentieth-century cricket and the heroic feats of aristocratic gentlemen and yeoman peasants seem to have little relevance to the professional, media-savvy world of contemporary sport. The 'casual' heroism considered to be exemplified by Bobby Jones and his achievement of the Grand Slam are described by Alistair Cooke as unlikely to be repeated 'because today golf ... has turned into a money-making industry and the smart young amateurs go at it like navvies' (quoted in Inglis 1977: 84).

Questioning whether there can be any place for 'effortless grace' in a world of sport that has been radically transformed by increasing professionalism, heightened competition and a dramatic rise in the level of direct and indirect financial reward is justified. Contemporary sportsmen and sportswomen do need to apply themselves to their increasingly competitive sporting endeavours with diligence, maximum effort and unremitting discipline. While there may still be elegance and beauty of movement or expression in sport, as competition has increased in intensity there has been a marked reduction in goodwill shown towards opponents. Displays of propriety and consideration for others are now more the exception than the rule. With increasing professionalism and growing commercialism sport has indeed become more serious (Huizinga 1949). It has become an industry, a business, and sportsmen and sportswomen are in consequence required to be more businesslike in their approach to preparation, practice and performance. Making money is now an important part of sport and professional participants have to work hard at their games because it is their job to do so.

However, the idea that epic sporting achievements are unlikely to be repeated is very controversial and in respect of golf, as well as a number of other popular sports such as basketball, football and tennis, contemporary evidence suggests the contrary may well be the case. Certainly there are a good many analysts who consider the feats in 2000/2001 of the American professional golfer Tiger Woods to be 'heroic' and more than comparable to the achievements of Bobby Jones in 1930. Winning the US Open, the US

Amateur, the British Open and the British Amateur tournaments in 1930 Bobby Jones achieved the 'Grand Slam', golf's 'Impregnable Quadrilateral' (Rosaforte 2002: 167). In 2001 Woods became the first ever to hold all four professional major championships at the same time. Woods won the PGA, as well as the US and British Open Championships in 2000 and while still holding these he won the Masters tournament in 2001, achieving what has been called the 'Tiger Slam'. Comparison of the achievements of the two players is made difficult by the fact that the four major golf championships won by Jones in 1930 are 'not the same four that are considered to be the majors today' (Owen 2001: 197). Nevertheless, comparisons have been made and *Sports Illustrated* has described Tiger Woods's feat as 'the greatest stretch of dominance in golf history' (Rosaforte 2002: 369).

Making comparisons over time between competitors from different eras, who are in many respects playing a different game, if developments in technique, technology and terrain, not to mention increased pressure of competition are taken into account, has been described as a potentially 'treacherous' yet 'irresistible' practice (Owen 2001). Is it appropriate to make comparisons that cannot effectively take historical and cultural differences into account? How would Bobby Jones have fared in match play with Tiger Woods? As one analyst has noted,

Equipment evolves, playing conditions change, and the ambitions and expectations of the players themselves cannot be extricated from the times in which they live. In Jones's day, no golfer made a living from tournament purses; all the great players, whether amateurs ... or professionals ... necessarily spent most of their time and energy doing something else – going to school and practising law in Jones's case. (Owen 2001: 197)

Had Jones been born later he might, as Owen suggests, have applied himself exclusively to the game and reached even greater heights, then again he might have 'been overwhelmed by the depth of talent in the modern professional tour and given up' (Owen 2001: 197). We will never know.

Recognition of the different historical and cultural circumstances in which sporting figures performed and the impossibility of determining the effect of differences on performances has not brought an end to comparisons. To the contrary the growing cultural prominence of sport has led to a proliferation of comparative narratives on sporting performances and sporting heroes. Undoubtedly an important part of the appeal of sport, a significant part of its cultural popularity, is that it licenses nostalgic narratives recalling heroes of the past and outstanding performances. Sport is a powerful source of vivid images and compelling narratives about heroes and heroic deeds that provide a 'scrapbook of memories that define a life' (Inglis 1977: 2) and constitute a history that contributes to our sense community. If heroes are 'the products of their period' (Holt and Mangan 1996: 5), the narratives on heroic sporting figures are no less products of their time.

Undoubtedly a great deal has changed in the world of sport as professionalism, commerce, sponsorship and the increasing prominence of the media, and television in particular, have made a significant impact on sporting

figures and events. The ways in which sport is played, and its social and cultural status and significance have been dramatically transformed. The profile of sport has been raised considerably. Sport is now an increasingly prominent feature on the news agenda. No longer confined to the back pages of the press, sport-related stories appear throughout newspapers and in special inserts and magazines devoted entirely to the subject and associated issues. On radio and television sport occupies a prominent, in some instances pivotal position in programming schedules. Sport is now a business and in many respects it is almost indistinguishable from show business. Sport has become an integral part of the entertainment industry and high profile sporting figures have acquired fame and are accorded the status of stars and celebrities.

### **On fame and its acquisition**

The state of being widely known was very different before the twentieth century and the development of mass circulation means of communication. The advent of mass circulation newspapers followed by radio and then, perhaps most significantly, television had a major impact on the acquisition and attribution of fame. Before the 'graphic revolution', that is the 'ability to make, preserve, transmit and disseminate precise images' (Boorstin 1963: 24), to become well known it was generally necessary to have demonstrated greatness in deed or action. With the development of mechanical means of image production and dissemination fame began to be manufactured as the media fabricated 'well-knownness'. The 'electronic revolution' (McLuhan 1973) and the development of television in particular led to a marked increase in the speed of image production and dissemination and to the emergence of a new kind of eminence, 'celebrity'. Where do heroes now stand? What has become of the hero in an age of celebrity? Does the rise of the celebrity signify the demise of the hero?

The capacity to make and present vivid images of events developed rapidly from the late nineteenth century. The ability to make and transmit news and images of greater precision and with increasing rapidity gathered momentum following the development of dry-plate photography in the 1870s, roll film in 1884, radio transmission from 1900 and the commercial development of television from the 1940s (Boorstin 1963). The development of television in the decades following the Second World War led to communications media being 'restructured and reorganised in a system' (Castells 1996: 330) at the cultural epicentre of which was television. In America in 1947 there were around 14,000 sets; in 1948, 172,000; and by 1950, 4 million. By 1954 there were 32 million sets and before the end of that decade 90 per cent of American homes had a television (Gamson 1992: 20 n8). Now it is a question of how many televisions each household possesses.

With the development and growing influence of television a culture of 'entertainment' has become increasingly prominent. The predominant assumption

is that whatever the programme, whatever the content, if it is on television 'it is there for our amusement and pleasure' (Postman 1985: 87). Increasingly television sets the agenda and influences the terms in which events and processes, 'from politics to business, including sport and art' (Castells 1996: 336), are communicated within contemporary society. The impact of the information technology revolution on media and communications has further enhanced the capacity to deliver vivid images of individuals and events in real-time around the globe. Satellite and digital television, computer technology and the Internet have developed and considerably extended the capacity to make, transmit and disseminate images. Sports and sporting teams now have their own websites and there are a growing number of sites related to individual sportsmen and sportswomen.

Considering the impact of a quantitatively increased and qualitatively enhanced media capacity to manufacture and disseminate images Boorstin remarks that 'Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God's purpose in him; *today we look for his ... agent*' (1963: 55, emphasis added). In the past fame, or being famous, tended to be associated with greatness, but this no longer may be the case. Actions and deeds may continue to be so regarded, but now fame may be acquired in other ways. There is no shortage of well-known individuals, of figures who are perceived, and who would claim, to be famous, for whom 'greatness' seems to be an entirely absent quality. Fame may still reside in greatness of deed or achievement, but it has also become a product or creation of media representation. In a culture dominated by media-image dissemination,

The household names, the famous men who populate our consciousness are with few exceptions not heroes at all, but an artificial product ... We can fabricate fame, we can at will ... make a man or woman well known; but we cannot make him great. We can make a celebrity, but we can never make a hero. (Boorstin 1963: 58)

The implication is that celebrity-worship may be mistaken for hero-worship and that in so far as this is the case we risk 'depriving ourselves of all real models' (Boorstin 1963: 58).

The media construct celebrity individuals and effectively place them on a pedestal in the course of attempting to accord them something akin to heroic status. After an indeterminate period, in which such celebrity individuals tend to be excessively feted, it is frequently the case that the media machine turns its attention to reports on the shortcomings and misdemeanours of the very same celebrities. In short, the celebrity as role model is both made and undone by press and television coverage. These newly elevated individuals, in whom greatness is a noticeably absent quality, have been described as 'marketable human models – modern "heroes" – ... mass-produced to satisfy the market' (Boorstin 1963: 58). Such figures, while achieving the status of 'nationally advertised brand', are argued to represent 'a new category of human emptiness', they are at best little more than hollow heroes (Boorstin 1963: 58).

The diversity of media available to people and the proliferation of narratives outlining the acts and achievements of individuals means that accounts of exceptional endeavours and of potential claims to greatness have to vie for attention with a plethora of competing texts. Exposed to a range of communications media we are continually confronted by representations of numerous individuals, their names and their faces, as well as the actions and events with which they are reported to be associated. In consequence the potentially truly exceptional figure is inclined to get lost in a sea of mediocrity, to be obscured from view by the deluge of celebrity images and narratives to which routinely we find ourselves exposed.

Sport represents one of the most significant remaining institutional sites for popular cultural recognition and acclaim of exceptional performance and prowess, if not the most prominent context in which the deeds of participants continue to retain authenticity. In the case of sport it is evident that it is not so much that there are no more heroes, but that historic heroic figures and their later modern equivalents are now in the shadow of a new and far more vivid species, the celebrity.

## Celebrity

As the twentieth century unfolded, a new kind of eminence known as 'celebrity' emerged. In a critical study of the process of celebrity formation Chris Rojek (2001) argues that the emergence of celebrity is a consequence of three inter-connected historical processes:

- 1 the democratisation of society
- 2 the decline of organised religion
- 3 the commodification of everyday life

There has been a relative shift of emphasis from the reverence and deference shown to traditional establishment institutional figures (court society, monarchy and aristocracy) to a public display of interest in, identification with and expression of awe towards a new species, 'celebrities'. The quality of being 'sacred' is no longer confined to organised religion and in a secular society reverence and awe are 'attached to mass-media celebrities who become objects of cult worship' (Rojek 2001: 53). Lastly, the formation of a culture of celebrity is closely articulated with the development of a culture of commodity consumption.

The implication is that we both consume celebrities and are reconstituted as subjects of consumption by them. Celebrities are commodities to which consumers are drawn as they engage in the process of commodity consumption. Consumers are encouraged in various ways to identify with celebrities and the images and life-styles with which they are associated in press, magazine and television reports and advertising. A graphic illustration is provided by *Gatorade's* advertising campaign featuring the American

basketball legend Michael Jordan, which exhorted the consumer to 'Be like Mike' by drinking their sport beverage.

Sport stars are increasingly being employed to endorse, help promote and market consumer commodities. For example, American golfer Tiger Woods has been a spokesperson for the *American Express* brand and has appeared in commercials for the Japanese company *Asahi's* canned coffee drink, *Wonda*. Woods has also featured in promotional campaigns for everything from breakfast cereals (*Wheaties*) and cars (*Buick*) to watches (*TAGHeuer*) and laser eye surgery (*TLC Laser Eye Centers*). English footballer David Beckham has a range of commercial commitments including modelling *Police* sunglasses, designing clothing for the *adidas* 'DB' range and appearing in commercials for the soft drink manufacturer *Pepsi* and razor company *Gillette*. The highly successful American tennis player Venus Williams is contracted to promote *Reebok* clothing and sports goods. Less successful on the court, Russian tennis star Anna Kournikova has been very much a winner off of it by being awarded very lucrative commercial contracts with a variety of companies, including *adidas*, *Berlei*, *Yonex*, *Omega* and *Lycos*.

'Michael Jordan', not the biological being, but the social and cultural signifier that has become a brand, most clearly exemplifies the way in which within sport 'celebrity culture is irrevocably bound up with commodity culture' (Rojek 2001: 14). Without doubt Jordan has demonstrated extraordinary skill as a basketball player and his exceptional performances not only transformed the game of basketball but in addition 'catapulted Nike to branded heaven' (Klein 2001: 52). In turn, however, Jordan gained enormously from being associated with *Nike* and not simply in financial terms. In 1984 *Nike* put all their advertising resources into one basket and made Jordan their 'signature athlete'. The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Reflecting a few years later on the success of the association Jordan commented that what 'Nike has done ... is to turn me into a dream' (quoted in Halberstam 2001: 183). The various *Nike* advertising campaigns from the 1985 'Jordan Flight' commercials onwards contributed significantly to the process by which Jordan was transformed from a major basketball talent into a global superstar, celebrity figure and commercial brand (Goldman and Papsen 1998). Comparable commercial contracts and portfolios of product endorsements have in a broadly comparable manner contributed to the elevation of a number of other sporting figures, including Tiger Woods, David Beckham and Anna Kournikova, each of whom now has the status of global superstar.

The world of advertising illustrates clearly the inter-relationship between celebrity culture and commodity culture. Advertising demonstrates the respects in which celebrity culture might be regarded as a 'tool of commodification' (Rojek 2001: 187). But the process of product endorsement by celebrities in advertising campaigns not only 'uses celebrities; it helps to make them' and as a well-known name becomes better known celebrity status is enhanced (Boorstin 1963: 68). In the case of sporting figures it is in good part their participation in endorsement activities and advertising that extends their profiles beyond a specific sporting field and leads them to

become identified as celebrities. It leads to them becoming famous beyond their respective fields of play, well known even to those who know little or nothing, and care even less, about sport and their specific sporting abilities.

Celebrity originally referred to a condition; its roots are in the Latin terms *celebritas* meaning 'multitude' or 'fame' and *celeber* which means 'frequented', 'populous', or 'famous' (Boorstin 1963: 66). Celebrity now refers to a person, someone who is known for being well known. The process of being well known for something or another is now dependent upon media representation. In short celebrity status is a direct product of media coverage and the elevation to public attention it provides. As a result a celebrity might be described as 'a person who is known by people whom he does not know', or even as 'a name which, once made by news, now makes news by itself' (Rein et al. 1997: 14). Without doubt celebrity is subject to management and is recognised to be in many significant respects a product of a complex industry. What has been termed the 'celebrity industry' includes a multiplicity of individuals who are responsible for negotiating on behalf of clients (agents, personnel managers, promoters), handling publicity (public relations firms), managing media profile and image, as well as legal and business aspects and 'tools-of-the-trade' and 'non-tool' endorsements (Rein et al. 1997).

If some individuals are in some respects 'naturals', already possessing, or appearing to possess qualities that audiences find appealing and of value, then high public visibility or celebrity may come without much effort. However, for many individuals such visibility has to be actively sought or worked for through strategic marketing. It has been suggested that celebrity is increasingly 'fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness' (Boorstin 1963: 67), but whether it is to meet people's exaggerated expectations of greatness, or it is to be accounted for in other ways, celebrity is very much subject to production.

### *Idols of production and consumption*

In the course of the twentieth century an historical process of transformation took place which led to a relative shift of emphasis away from 'celebration' of political, business and professional subjects and towards the increasing prominence of figures from the fields of entertainment and sport. At the close of the twentieth century celebrities were being drawn primarily from film, television and popular music, but increasingly also from sport. The relative shift of emphasis marked a significant change in social and cultural priorities away from the world of production and towards the dream-world of consumption (Lowenthal 1961). The growing prominence of the entertainment industry, the steadily increasing popularity of sport and the accelerating development of communications media coincided with a gradual decline of manufacturing industry and a steady growth of diverse service industries.

In a series of analyses of popular culture conducted in the 1940s Leo Lowenthal identified a growing fascination with and interest in 'individuals'

and described the increasing number of biographical articles in various publications as constituting a 'kind of mass gossip' (1961: 110). A significant change was found in the period 1901–41 in both the frequency with which biographies were appearing in publications and in the professions of the subjects of such biographical features. By 1941 there were almost four times as many biographical features as there were at the beginning of the century. In the first two decades of the twentieth century it was political figures that predominated and there was a roughly 'equal distribution of business and professional men, on the one hand, and of entertainers on the other' (Lowenthal 1961: 111). At the same time there was not a 'single hero from the world of sports' (Lowenthal 1961: 110–111) and relatively few from the sphere of popular entertainment. By the end of the period under consideration there had been a significant reduction in biographical features on figures from politics, business and other related professions and a marked increase in the number of biographies of individuals from entertainment in general and sporting fields in particular. Whereas the heroes of the past were 'idols of production' the new emerging heroes were in contrast 'idols of consumption' (Lowenthal 1961: 115). The individuals who were increasingly attracting attention in biographical features were 'active in the consumers' world', they were drawn from the sphere of leisure and represented 'the heroes of the world of entertainment and sport' (Lowenthal 1961: 115).

The 'idols of the masses' in the 1940s were increasingly being drawn not from politics or production but from different spheres of consumption and figures from sport were coming 'close to the top of favorite selections' (Lowenthal 1961: 115). A detailed content analysis of the period 1940–41 revealed a significant number of sport biographies in the publications studied. These included biographical features on baseball managers, coaches, umpires, players and pitchers; boxers (e.g. Jack Johnson); tennis players (e.g. Bill Tilden); a football coach and a football player; a golfer (Bobby Jones); a hockey coach; a ski champion; a softball player; and a sailor. With the exception of two features, one on a tennis player (Helen Bernhard) and another on a sailor (D'Arcy Grant) the biographies were exclusively of sportsmen (Lowenthal 1961). Evidence of an under-representation of female sport figures has continued to be a notable feature of narratives on sport. As confirmed by analyses of feature articles in *Sports Illustrated* (Lumpkin and Williams 1991), ESPN's list of the top 100 athletes of the twentieth century (Billings 2000) and sport reporting in the press and on television (Eastman and Billings 2000; Kennedy 2001) qualitative and quantitative gender differences remain a prominent feature of sport.

### **The Golden Age of American Sport**

The growing prominence of sporting figures in America first became apparent during the 1920s, the so-called 'Golden Age of American Sport'. In virtually

every field of American sport there seemed to be heroic figures. The near simultaneous emergence of 'transcendent performers ... in almost every field' has subsequently been acknowledged to be quite exceptional (Danzig and Brandewein 1948: xi). What was it about the 1920s that led to sporting figures receiving what were at the time quite exceptional levels of public acclaim?

Two explanations of the emergence of 'magic names' across a range of popular sports that included baseball (Babe Ruth), boxing (Jack Dempsey), football (Red Grange), golf (Bobby Jones) and tennis (Bill Tilden) have been offered. One explanation is that 'cultural intermediaries' (Bourdieu 1984) were largely responsible for creating larger-than-life images of the feats and achievements of sporting figures. It has been suggested that in this period the same promotional skills that were employed to market consumer goods began to be employed to 'sell' sporting figures to the public. Professional pitch men, journalists and radio broadcasters 'created images of athletes which often overwhelmed the athlete's actual achievements' (Rader 1983a: 11). In short the level of public acclaim was deemed to be a product of something more than the quality of sporting performance alone. However, the cultural prominence accorded to sporting figures in the 1920s cannot be attributed solely to the promotional and representational skills of cultural intermediaries. On the contrary, the American public played a very significant part in the creation of heroic sporting figures who,

served a compensatory cultural function. They assisted the public in compensating for the passing of the traditional dream of success, the erosion of Victorian values and feelings of individual powerlessness. (Rader 1983a: 11)

With the development of a more formal bureaucratically structured society life appeared more complicated, the paths to success more difficult to discern and more problematic to negotiate. It was in this context that 'the need for heroes who leaped to fame and fortune outside the rules of the system seemed to grow' (Rader 1983a: 11) and film stars and sport heroes began to achieve a prominent cultural position.

The emergence of a popular culture of compensation was exemplified not only by the high profile of the sport hero in the 1920s, but also by the prominence of other popular cultural figures from the worlds of film and entertainment, examples include Charlie Chaplin, Douglas Fairbanks and Rudolph Valentino, actors who portrayed 'heroic' characters in various films. Figures from the world of entertainment, from the film industry and Hollywood in particular, as well as show business, have tended to predominate in accounts of fame, celebrity and stardom. This predominance is reflected in analyses of the social phenomenon of 'stars' (Dyer 1992) and the culture of celebrity (Gitlin 1998; Rojek 2001). The emphasis in such analyses has tended to fall disproportionately upon those who have achieved fame through appearances on screen or stage, rather than through performances on the pitch or in the stadium. However, increasing popular cultural appeal and media visibility, along with growing commercial value to corporations

around the world, has made sport stars an important focus of contemporary analytic reflection (Andrews and Jackson 2001; Whannel 2002).

### **Making sense of celebrity and stardom**

It has been argued that celebrity is distinguished by image or trademark rather than achievement – ‘the hero was a big man; the celebrity is a big name’ (Boorstin 1963: 70). Whereas heroes emerge with the passage of time, through a process of gestation in which their feats have to withstand the test of time, celebrity is forever ‘now’, by definition contemporary. Celebrity is forged through media attention, through the cultivation and projection of image. Celebrity needs the oxygen of publicity. It needs to be continually demonstrated, if not regenerated, by remaining in the public eye. Heroes may be temporarily forgotten, but they can and do endure in the collective psyche that is the memory of a people. Heroes can be recalled. The heroic quality of their feats can be remembered. In contrast the celebrity is destined to disappear and to be ‘quickly replaced’ (Boorstin 1963: 75).

Celebrity is superficial, trivial, bereft of distinction, in short insubstantial. When reference is made to celebrities the emphasis tends to be placed on ‘their marital relations and sexual habits, on their tastes in ... drinking, dress, sports cars, and interior decoration ... [in a] desperate effort to distinguish among the indistinguishable’ (Boorstin 1963: 74). The cultural pre-occupation with celebrity not only tends to overshadow heroism but to colonise and transform it. Heroes and their achievements are subject to a culture of celebrity that emphasises image, dissolves distance and forges familiarity. Such processes tend to diminish the aura associated with heroic figures and heroic performances.

Reflecting on the fate of the hero in mid-twentieth-century America Boorstin remarked that,

We have our Hall of fame for Great Americans, our Agricultural Hall of Fame, our Baseball Hall of Fame, our Rose Bowl Hall of Fame. We strain to reassure ourselves that we admire the admirable and honour the meritorious. But in the very act of straining we confuse and distract ourselves ... Despite our best intentions, our contrivance to provide substitute heroes finally produces nothing but celebrities. (1963: 84)

The clear implication of such remarks is that in the modern media age the only hero is the unsung hero, anonymity serving to protect the hero from ‘the flashy ephemeral celebrity life’ (Boorstin 1963: 85).

In the world of entertainment, especially in respect of music, film and television, celebrities are frequently described as ‘stars’. Culture industries work continually to nurture and enhance the institution of stardom, capitalising on ‘the star power that binds fans to their celebrities’ (Gitlin 1998: 81). A star system was well established by the 1920s and was largely bound up with the commercial world of film. The initial stimulus for the development

of a star system lay with a public that had grown tired of the anonymity of actors. Audiences 'demanded that their idols should be named ... made into celebrities ... with a definable publicizable personality' (Boorstin 1963: 162). This was made possible by innovations in the use of film as a medium, in particular close-ups that allowed a focus on the face, a magnification of emotion and establishment of intimacy between performers and audience. The close-up provided a means of 'establishing a performer's "unique" personality' (Walker 1970: 21). From the 1920s film stars became a vital part of the film industry, often carrying a film and frequently determining box office appeal. As stars were singled out and recognised to be vital to a film's success they received increasingly high salaries and these attracted additional publicity. This was the period in which a fully-fledged consumer culture began to develop (Gamson 1992). High salaries made extravagant life-styles possible and these in turn attracted media attention and further publicity. An escalating spiral of publicity raised the individual actor or actress to star status.

The star system quickly extended well beyond the film industry to encompass the world of entertainment as a whole. As well as a growing number of stars from stage and screen, authors became celebrities as their books were accorded 'best-seller' status. In turn figures from the worlds of music, painting and sculpture began to be transformed into stars. One field after another became subject to the star system. But discussions of fame, celebrity and stardom have continued to be focused disproportionately on film and entertainment (Morin 1960; Boorstin 1963; Monaco 1978; Dyer 1992). If considered at all sport and sporting figures have been at the periphery of discussion of the character and significance of the culture of celebrity and the star system in contemporary society. To a substantial degree this reflects the relatively marginal place accorded to sport in contemporary social and cultural inquiry, which is paradoxical, and analytically unacceptable, given the increasingly prominent, if not central, position occupied by sport in popular culture and everyday social life.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sport: image, media and authenticity**

The contemporary world is preoccupied with image, 'the language of images is everywhere' (Boorstin 1963: 188). An image is synthetic, in the sense that it is deliberately contrived. It is important that it is credible, that people believe in it, particularly in so far as in a consumer society images are designed to stimulate or promote consumer behaviour. To be effective an image needs to be *vivid* and simplified. Also to a degree it needs to be open-ended or ambiguous to allow it both to be believed in by as wide a range of people as possible and to be open to re-negotiation or development in an indeterminate future (Boorstin 1963: 190–199).

Images now abound, from corporation to commodity to consumer subject, a concern with the right 'image' is prevalent. This is particularly evident in

respect of sport and sporting figures. Increasingly corporations have sought to associate themselves with the imagery of sport through endorsement and sponsorship deals. Images of high profile sportsmen and sportswomen are employed to promote the corporation as a brand as well as particular product lines. In turn sportsmen and sportswomen have become increasingly aware of their 'image' value and the respects in which the right brand and product associations may enhance their image and magnify its value to potential future corporate clients.

It is now commonplace for leading sport figures not only to have agents who look after their commercial transactions but also for their 'image' to be handled by public relations companies. The new hyper-commercial reality of sport really began to take shape in the mid-1980s. It was in this era that American basketball legend Michael Jordan's agent David Falk changed 'the nature of sports representation' by turning an individual player in a team sport into a 'commercial superstar' (Halberstam 2001: 139–140). Initially the Jordan image served to promote the *Nike* brand as a whole, as well as particular lines of *Nike* sports goods, but with time 'Jordan' became a brand, if not a 'superbrand', in his own right.

The Real Madrid and England midfielder David Beckham's commercial career offers another good example of image management. SFX Sports Group (Europe) and the Outside Organisation represented Beckham for a substantial part of his career. When his contract with his former club Manchester United was being re-negotiated in 2002 SFX succeeded in obtaining recognition of the commercial merchandising value of Beckham's 'global image' to the club. The Outside Organisation had responsibility for taking care of Beckham's media-generated public profile, trying to ensure that he retained control of his 'public image' (Cashmore 2002). Unauthorised use of Beckham's image by *easyJet* in 2003 led SFX to threaten litigation unless the advertising copy concerned was withdrawn and the airline paid £10,000 to the NSPCC children's charity (Fresco 2003). A further example of image management is provided by the International Management Group (IMG) which has successfully represented the American golfer Tiger Woods, ensuring that the right image is presented to the world. Under IMG's tutelage Tiger Woods is recognised to have become 'more than just an athlete' and to have 'crossed over into the realm of icon' (Rosaforte 2001: 44).

From its complex development from folk recreational roots modern sport has made a significant contribution to 'collective sensibility', to the cohesiveness of community life. It has been very much the 'idiom of the people' (Inglis 1977), genuinely expressive of popular feelings and interests. The powerful and vivid imagery of sporting events and outstanding sport performers is firmly etched on people's memories. Sport has provided the possibility of fulfilling images 'which replenish the body and the spirit', but increasingly such images have become more and more highly mediated (Inglis 1977: 35). It is primarily through media narratives that sport performers become known as public figures and have qualities of 'personality'