

SPORT

Once formally codified and standardised the social practice we now term ‘modern’ sport was destined to form part of consumer culture. In the 21st century we now find ourselves in a position where sport—both in terms of an activity that is participated in globally by billions from elite to recreational levels, and also as a spectacle watched by billions more—can be regarded as a commodity that is bought and sold within an increasingly global marketplace. Arguably the most global of spectator sports—Association football (commonly referred to as soccer)—best represents the interdependent relationship between sport and consumer culture. Of particular significance are global sports events; the television-sport relationship; endorsements and sponsorship; commercialisation of sports stadia; and, consumption of sports celebrities.

A Brief History of Sport

A brief history of sport can provide an insight into how it came to form a significant part of consumer culture. Sports participants, be they novice or expert, and sports spectators, all from a plethora of socio-cultural backgrounds (not just the elites of society), now consume sport in a variety of interrelated ways within a colossal business enterprise. Yet this was not always the case. Various sporting pastimes, which are very different from the modern sports of today, have been consumed by different cultures that have defined a number of pivotal epochs throughout history, including Ancient Greece, The Roman Empire, Middle Ages, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. It is during the latter of these, and in 18th- and 19th-century Britain in particular, that the most popular modern global sports, such as boxing, cricket, soccer, rugby, tennis, golf and many others that dominate our television screens today, were first formally standardised, codified and eventually spread to the masses. National governing bodies

for sports such as those listed above were first formed in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries. An example is the Football Association (FA) which was formed for the sport of soccer in 1863.

Although originally codified by amateurs of the upper and middle classes, throughout the late 19th century and early 20th century working-class members of society began to take hold of modern sports and transform them into professional businesses. For instance, the charging of spectators was already common at soccer grounds in England by the 1870s and the payment of working-class players for time out of work ('broken-time' payments) was becoming common too. This led to the FA being forced to formally legalize professionalism in the sport in 1885 and the first 'Football League' was established in England in April 1888. This was significant as far as the commercialisation of soccer is concerned as it provided regular matches (rather than cups and knock-out competitions alone) and thus took advantage of the taste for competition and local rivalries amongst spectators. Commercial considerations were clear in the setting up of the league as it initially only allowed one club per city in most cases meaning clubs now represented towns and cities nationally for the first time. This engendered large rises in spectator attendance figures as it also coincided with the growth of working-class political rights involving reforms that led to an increase in wages among the working-class population especially in the 1890s; the introduction of the Saturday half-day for workers; and, the rise of railways built for industry that could be used by fans to travel to away games (before the popularisation of cars). Therefore, as David Russell notes, the popularity of soccer amongst the working classes eventually resulted in the domination of the professional game and the definitive end of the hegemony of amateurism.

According to Giulianotti and Robertson the globalization of soccer in its modern codified form really began to take off between the 1870s and the mid-1920s when it was diffused from Britain at grassroots level via a combination of the following: expanding global business and industry emanating from Britain; as part of education in overseas British schools; and, through the organization of sports clubs by locals through their interactions with British military, educators or industry workers. During this period soccer became embedded in many parts of the

world including Europe, South America, and the Europeanized parts of Africa, Asia and North America.

Global Sports Events

The rapid growth of global interest in spectator sport throughout the 20th century was largely assisted by Baron Pierre De Coubertin's first modern Summer Olympic Games hosted by Athens in 1896 and subsequently held on a quadrennial basis thereafter up to the present day (with exceptions only around the First and Second World Wars). Soon after this, from the early 20th century global bodies for individual sports began to spread rapidly, such as Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) founded in 1904. FIFA created its own global sports event in the form of the World Cup competition. The first soccer World Cup Finals tournament was hosted by Uruguay in 1930 and has also been held quadrennially ever since (the only break being between 1938 and 1950 due to the Second World War).

The 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games was the first global sporting event to make a profit largely from private corporate company sponsorship. This stimulated massive competition between cities vying to host future international sporting events in order to maximise revenue from selling broadcasting rights and advertising space. For this reason events like the Olympics or World Cup competitions are now what John Horne and Wolfram Manzenreiter refer to as sports mega-events. Such global sports events not only epitomize the global reach of sports through including national teams from around the world, but they also demonstrate how sport has become a gigantic business enterprise with stakeholders including the media and many corporate sponsors.

The Television-Sport Relationship

Attendance figures at sports events have always been large, but the consumption of them became

truly global in scope with the invention of television and its rapid spread from the 1960s.

American cultural historian Christopher Lasch suggested that television has negatively impacted the intrinsic values inherent in sport by transforming it into entertainment. This is a moot point and it would be relatively easy to argue that television has been essential for the globalization of many sports and the reason why they have become so popular. To support Lasch's point, however, to fit into the tightly scheduled world of television programming, whose primary function is to reach as wide an audience as possible, many aspects of sport have been altered. This includes the start times of matches and events accommodating television schedules and prime-time viewing irrespective of whether it is convenient for the athletes involved. Advertising breaks for commercial channels throughout the world often take precedent over traditional sports formats. For instance, American football's Super Bowl runs for far longer than any other game of American football simply due to the breaks in play to accommodate advertisements.

Garry Whannel, in the *Handbook of Sports Studies*, observes that television is the dominant partner in its relationship with sport. It is the financial sponsor of sport that outbids all others. Television has the capacity to create drama out of sport where the final outcome of an event is uncertain and in many cases the game itself is actually rather dull to watch. Whannel raises a number of issues for further analysis, such as the ongoing impact of television coverage on spectator attendance figures as well as participation in sports themselves, and that television does not merely provide coverage of a sports event but that producers construct a 'package' for spectator consumption. Slow-motion replays, multiple camera angles and commentary/punditry turn 'live' televised sports events into soap operas where Gill Lines suggests players/athletes are cast as heroes, villains or fools in order to maintain audience interest.

Dedicated pay-per-view, cable, satellite and digital sports channels have also helped globalize sports for spectator consumption. Examples include television networks such as HBO (Home Box Office) in the United States and BSkyB (British Sky Broadcasting, often abbreviated to 'Sky') in the United Kingdom which charge viewers annual subscriptions for packages of

sports channels and/or one-off pay-per-view prices for individual sports events such as professional boxing world title fights. Such packages are marketed beyond national borders to viewers around the world. For instance, Entertainment Sports Programming Network (ESPN) is an American pay-per-view channel showing live National Basketball Association (NBA) games as well as English Premier League soccer matches for an annual fee. Whilst vastly cheaper than the cost of purchasing tickets to attend such events in person, the collective subscriptions generated across the world from paying customers, coupled with the vast amounts paid by advertisers to air commercials on such channels, means broadcasters do not fail to maximize revenues.

Endorsements and Sponsorship

Globally televised sports events have become prime targets for transnational corporations to advertise their brands to sports spectators. Opportunities for endorsements and sponsorship relating to branded sports equipment, paraphernalia and merchandise associated with athletes, clubs and events all play integral parts in the appeal of sport to global conglomerates. Such brands as Visa, Coca-Cola and McDonald's, despite not even being directly related to sports themselves, have managed to effectively market their names globally via many sports events and leagues. The globalizing process of sport through television has generated a creative platform for marketing in a variety of ways. Sports stars are in effect on display for potential purchasers of their talents but also for sponsorship. Global corporations also compete to sponsor domestic sports leagues and teams. John Horne explains in intricate detail Nike's use of American basketball star Michael Jordan in the 1990s as the classical example of a sports star becoming a commodity and endorsing a particular sports clothing brand. This reciprocal endorsement and sponsorship massively increased the actual earning power of Michael Jordan himself as well as creating huge potential in the branding of future sports stars. It established Nike's dominance in the sportswear market at that time. As commodities sports stars can gain leverage into a position

in the market and consolidate a foothold for sponsors. In essence an attractive-looking sports star in a global sport has the potential to earn astronomical figures for themselves as well as for their sponsor.

Commercialisation of Sports Stadia

Sports stadia themselves provide pitch/field/court/rink/course/circuit/track side spaces for commercial exposure. Electronic advances mean that old hoardings have now been replaced with digital screens running the full length of pitches that change constantly throughout a game to advertise a plethora of products for consumption. Olympic/Paralympic Games, World Cup tournaments, world championships and world tours provide marketing opportunities that are virtually incomparable in any other context. Understandably, the television rights for such events in the 21st century are enormous with Olympic Games generating ten figure sums according to Horne and Manzenreiter Attending a sports event has long gone beyond paying to watch a match or game and an understanding of the development of marketing has changed the experience considerably.

American sports stadia management led the way in the marketing of sports events as an experience, with pre-match and other peripheral entertainment being included in the price. Soccer has been very slow to catch up with this mindset. Clubs in the top-two divisions of English professional soccer were forced to update their stadia throughout the 1990s following the Hillsborough disaster of 1989, in which 96 football fans lost their lives, after overcrowding led to their being crushed against a metal fence erected to prevent pitch invasions. Lord Justice Taylor led an inquest into the disaster and ordered a complete end to the dangerous old terraced standing-only features of previous soccer stadia in favour of safe all-seated stands. These newly rebuilt multi-purpose stadia also provided more opportunities for consumption as they were not only designed to incorporate executive suites for selling corporate hospitality packages, but many, such as Manchester United's Old Trafford stadium, also include retail shops, bars,

conference facilities and even hotels.

Consumption of Sports Celebrities

The consumption of sport goes further still when the vast market for sports celebrities is considered. Spectators may not be able to grace the basketball court or soccer field along with their heroes, but they can look like them or at least make an attempt to. Varying customs such as rules and symbols that French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to have transcended the ephemeral nature of clothing and other accessories and become firmly established in something rather more permanent in the form of copycat body and facial piercings and lavish tattoos. The mass consumption of sports celebrities is seen clearly among fans who celebrate the achievements of their heroes and strongly buy into sport as a commodity by bearing copycat expressions on their own bodies. There are varying degrees as to the extent celebrities are prepared to go in developing their own personal brand but Michael Jordan and Dennis Rodman (both US, Basketball) as well as David Beckham (UK, Soccer) have arguably been trend setters and are celebrities beyond the boundary lines of their chosen sports.

The celebrity sports star ‘sells’ a way of life that fans buy into as they often identify with the meritocratic ideal—the rags-to-riches or American Dream—that many sport stars epitomise. Although starting from humble beginnings, David Beckham and Michael Jordan became multi-millionaires, not simply from their natural talents within their respective sports, but with the successful global marketing of merchandise bearing their names. Brand Beckham was created by Simon Fuller, the manager of the former globally successful pop group The Spice Girls in which David’s wife Victoria was a member. From the United Kingdom to Europe to the global market, positioning of the Beckham brand has been managed effectively and has stretched beyond the confines of soccer and more importantly beyond the playing career of Beckham himself. His playing career with English Premier League team Manchester United established him as a household name. Sky TV’s sponsorship of the English Premier League again increased his profile

worldwide. His subsequent transfers to Real Madrid in Spain, LA Galaxy in the United States and AC Milan in Italy have benefitted those teams' finances massively through allowing them to market the Beckham brand alongside their own club brands.

Key Points and Future Lines of Research

Although many like Lasch argue that the increasing commercialization of sport has ruined its inherent virtues, others such as Whannel have accepted that increased exposure on the global medium of television has increased the popularity of sports beyond belief. Soccer, perhaps the most global of spectator sports, is now so firmly embedded within consumer culture that it is almost impossible to imagine it without thinking about its business connotations. The professionalism of soccer quickly led to its globalization and commercialization soon followed. The latter shows little signs of decreasing as the appetite for watching professional sport increases in more and more areas of the world, the wages and sponsorship deals for players/athletes increase alongside the cost of ticket prices to attend live events and the subscription fees charged by television companies to view them also grow considerably. The fans are ultimately the ones who lose out in the global business of sport and the wealthy sponsors, broadcasters and governing bodies/league owners go on increasing their revenues regardless.

This unhealthy imbalance within professional sports has led to new areas of research into how billions of fans and less privileged players/athletes throughout the world are being exploited. English soccer fans have revolted against takeovers of their clubs by wealthy businessmen purely involved in sport for capital accumulation. Perhaps one of the best examples is Manchester United fans' campaign against the takeover of their cherished club by the American Glazer family. This led to a large proportion of fans setting up their own independent club FC United of Manchester in opposition. However, such local campaigns provide little opposition for the global reach of transnational corporations like Manchester United, considering

the majority of supporters are not British, let alone from Manchester, and many will have never even visited the club's home stadium at Old Trafford.

Other new lines of research are concerned with how fans are consuming sports like soccer via utilizing non-traditional practices and/or new media such as the Internet, digital and mobile communications technology. Garry Crawford highlights the diversity of fandom opportunities that now exist in our media saturated world—from attending matches in person, to watching live streams of events on the Internet, to digital gaming, to interacting via fan forum message boards, to purchasing merchandise and even downloading ring tones or wallpapers for mobile phones. Although everyday and banal for many in wider society, for sports fans such consumption practices often inform their social networks and identities and are significant and meaningful parts of their lives. As Crawford (2004: 160) himself puts it: “if we are to understand the social significance of sport, then it is essential that we understand the multitude of meanings that this can have in people's everyday lives.”

Tom Gibbons and Stuart Braye

See also Commercialization; Commodification; Community and Belonging; Fans; Globalization; Leisure; Leisure Studies; Recreation; Spectacles

FURTHER READINGS

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge, 1984.

Cashmore, Ellis. *Beckham*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.

Crawford, Garry. *Consuming Sport: Fans, Sport and Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Giulianotti, Richard. *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

Giulianotti, Richard, and Roland Robertson. *Globalization & Football*. London: Sage, 2009.

Guttman, Allen. "The Development of Modern Sports" in *Handbook of Sports Studies*, edited by J. J. Coakley and E. Dunning, 248–259. London: Sage, 2000.

Horne, John. *Sport in Consumer Society*. London: Palgrave, 2006.

Horne, John, and Wolfram Manzenreiter, eds. *Sports Mega-Events*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2006.

Lasch, Christopher. *The Degradation of Sport, The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979.

Lines, Gill. "Villains, fools or heroes? Sports stars as role models for young people". *Leisure Studies* 20 (2006): 285-303.

Rowe, David. *Sport, Culture and the Media* (Second Edition). Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2004.

Russell, David. *Football and the English: A Social History of Association Football, 1863–1995*. Preston: Carnegie, 1997.

Whannel, Garry. *Media Sports Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*. London, Routledge, 2002.