Media Sport Stars
Masculinities and moralities

Garry Whannel
Media Sport Stars considers how masculinity and male identity are represented through images of sport and sport stars. From the pre-radio era to today’s specialist TV channels, newspaper supplements and websites, Garry Whannel traces the growing cultural importance of sport and sportsmen, showing how the very practices of sport are still bound up with the production of masculinities.

Through a series of case studies of British and American sportsmen, Whannel traces the emergence of the sporting ‘hero’ and ‘star’, and considers the ways in which the lives of sport stars are narrated through the media. Focusing on figures like Muhammad Ali and David Beckham, whose fame has spread well beyond the world of sport, he shows how growing media coverage has helped produce a sporting star system, and examines how modern celebrity addresses issues of race and nation, performance and identity, morality and violence.

From Babe Ruth to Mike Tyson, Media Sport Stars demonstrates that, in an era in which both morality and masculinity are perceived to be ‘in crisis’, sport holds a central place in contemporary culture, and sport stars become the focal point for discourses of masculinity and morality.

Garry Whannel is Professor of Media Cultures and Director of the Centre for International Media Analysis at the University of Luton. He is the author of Fields in Vision (Routledge 1992) and co-editor of Understanding Television (Routledge 1990).
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For Sam and Kate
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This book has grown out of a lifelong interest in sport, and a considerable period spent analysing media sport, and trying to understand its wider significances. The concern with sport stars developed from my earlier work, in which the central place of stardom in media sport was all too evident. The original research grew out of a bid for Leverhulme funding in the course of which Alan Tomlinson and myself spent considerable time discussing the ways in which it was asserted that sport stars functioned as moral exemplars or as bad examples to the young. We sought a more sophisticated model for understanding the ways in which such stars were represented. In developing research into the representation of sport stars in the early 1990s, the relevance of considering discourses of morality and of masculinity soon became evident. Research began when John Major was still Prime Minister, and as I write these words the 2001 election campaign is underway. During this decade the economic scale of the football industry has been transformed by the growth of satellite television and consequent dramatic escalation in the scale of rights payments. Sport has assumed a greater cultural centrality, with most major newspapers launching dedicated sports supplements, a substantial increase in hours devoted to television sport, and a proliferation of sport related websites. Yet interest in sport is still notably gender specific. It is not simply that interest in sport is far more common among men, and hostility to sport more common among women, but rather that the very practices of sport are still distinctly bound up with the production of masculinities. The relationship between sport, masculinity and the media became the core of the project.

In the context of sport, globalisation presents us with a paradox. On the one hand, sport organisations such as the IOC and FIFA were some of the first globalised institutions, and the Olympic Games and soccer’s World Cup have become two of the cultural forms consumed most widely across the planet. On the other hand, there is still a substantial resistance to the media-promoted importation of sport. North America remains largely disinterested in soccer, and almost totally disinterested in cricket, rugby and other British-origin sports. The major sports of North America – American football, baseball, ice hockey and basketball – remain of relatively minor appeal in the rest of the world. Consequently, while there are a few global stars, many sport stars remain within
specific cultural contexts. There is also a problem of ephemerality to compound that of localism. Sport stars come and go. When research for this book began Alex Higgins, Ian Botham, and Paul Gascoigne were contemporary figures, whereas in the writing of the book they have, of necessity, been constituted as historical examples.

Publishing is not immune from globalising processes and books are expected to be accessible to audiences around the world. Yet books also explore the specifics of cultural context. While I have endeavoured to explore examples from both Britain and North America, I am aware that my own perceptions of British examples are rendered more elaborate by virtue of my own positioning within the culture – we read the nuances of our own culture with a greater grasp of the historical formation of that culture and its distinctive elements. At the same time, I would hope that the generalisation, the abstraction and the conceptual frame utilised in analysing these situated examples have a pertinence and relevance to other cultural contexts. In short, I have tried to come up with a productive relationship between the particular and the general, the abstract and the concrete.
I would like to thank Alan Tomlinson without whom the project would never have started, and while our active collaboration on it ceased at an early stage, I would hope that he can still detect the roots of that work in the end product. Particular thanks are due to Ian Wellard, who, in addition to working as a research assistant for a year, gathering material on sport stars, also collaborated on several conference presentations and acted as a sounding board and discussant for the ideas as they developed. His contribution and ideas were of relevance throughout, but particularly valuable for the chapters on moralities and on identities, where some of our earlier conference presentation work has been incorporated. My thanks also to Carlton Brick, Rachel Cutler, Ellis Badillo, Lee Kattenhorn and Chris Wragg, who all, at various times, worked on research related to this book. My research was sustained by the interest and encouragement of colleagues at Roehampton Institute, particularly Jennifer Hargreaves, but also Eileen Kennedy, Ian McDonald, Steve Wagg, Peter Wesson and Belinda Wheaton. The final phase of writing has been made easier thanks to the supportive interest of my current colleagues in the Department of Media Arts at the University of Luton, especially Luke Hockley, Manuel Alvarado and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith.

I am highly grateful to friends who have discussed the project, or parts of it, with me, and those who nobly agreed to read and comment on draft chapters or, in some cases, the whole manuscript – Manuel Alvarado, David Andrews, Raymond Boyle, Ben Carrington, Christine Geraghty, John Horne, Joe Maguire, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, Deborah Philips, David Rowe, Alan Tomlinson and Belinda Wheaton. While I didn’t accept all their advice, I certainly utilised most of it, and the book benefited greatly from their input. Work on issues related to sport and representation, especially that of David Andrews, Ben Carrington, Joe Maguire and David Rowe, has been a challenging and thought provoking resource. Huge thanks are due to Deborah Philips, not simply for love and support, but also for a sharp intellectual insight and an unerring ability to spot the significances within the ephemera of popular culture that constituted an immense contribution to this project.

Much of the research and background reading for this book has been undertaken in the British Library and made pleasant by the unfailing courtesy and
helpfulness of the staff. Occasional tea breaks with Frank Mort and Sean Nixon have provided welcome relief from the slog. The final drafts of this book were written in the British Library, on the Midland Mainline train to Luton, in my office at Luton, and not least, sitting peacefully and undisturbed, in an idyllic country garden amidst the scent of flowers, and the sounds of blackbirds, woodpeckers, cuckoos, sheep and cows, and for this I am very grateful to Ursula Philips.


My children, Sam and Kate, to whom the book is dedicated, grew up during the research and writing of this book, and I am relieved to have finished it while they are still in their teens. Their lively and intelligent responses to the media that surround us have served as a constant reminder to me of the conceptual inadequacy and patronising tone of much ‘role-model’-based research on young people and the media. They ask of me only that our fellow television viewer, their pet rat Trotsky, also gets a mention. I owe a thank-you to Mary Warren for excellent sub-editing. Finally, my thanks to Alistair Daniel and Rebecca Barden at Routledge, who never once gave me the impression that they had given up hope of ever seeing a manuscript. They might have got the book earlier, but I stopped to talk to Huckleberry Finn.
The increase in the number of children becoming uncontrollable at school is very disconcerting. I think the problem could lie partly in their role models. Many of their heroes, like famous footballers, are loud-mouthed and swaggering. Of course, some people in public life do present a good image, but its a pity that those who don’t aren’t more aware of the damage they do. Today’s heroes should be giving their young fans more to live up to.

(Letter of the week in Woman’s Realm 6 February 1997)

The image of sport stars, questions of morality, of youth and of masculinity are all bound up together – to consider one is to consider the others. This book offers a study of discourses of masculinities and moralities and the ways in which they are condensed in images of sport stars.\(^1\) It will focus on representation of those male sport stars whose fame spread well beyond the world of sport and its followers – Jack Johnson, Babe Ruth, Stanley Matthews, Muhammad Ali, George Best, Mike Tyson, David Beckham.\(^2\) In particular, it is argued that, as the intensity of media coverage of sport has increased, and as the sporting star system has become central to the media sport industry, the images of sport stars become the point of convergence of social anxieties over morality and masculinity. Analysing representations of sport stars provides a means of examining the processes of social contestation around ideas of morality and concepts of how men should behave. This book is designed to be of interest to those engaged in the study of the media, those interested in sport from a social and historical perspective, and, more broadly, those concerned to understand the political and cultural environment, and how popular culture constitutes a key interface between everyday commonsense and more organised political discourse.

Youth, media, sport

The three terms ‘youth’, ‘media’, ‘sport’ are all associated, in public discussion, with concern, with fears and with discourses of moral decline. The state of youth has, of course, been a cause of perennial anxiety. Traditional authority is always, inevitably, challenged by youth, which represents newness, change,
threat and transformation. Socrates, and other Greek philosophers, were apt to pronounce upon the lack of respect young people had for their elders. In Ancient Rome, medieval Europe, Tudor England, eighteenth-century France and in the nineteenth-century English public schools such fears have been present. So, more recent concerns are nothing new, and clearly there is an aspect of the structural relations between young and old that will, persistently, produce such fears.

However, ‘youth’ is not an eternal trans-historic concept. Indeed the notion that between childhood and adulthood is a distinct significant phase, denoted by such labels as ‘teenage’ and ‘youth’, is relatively recent as a social feature. The ‘teenager’ is very much a construction of the 1950s, that period when, for the first time, a distinct world of cultural consumption associated with youth began to emerge, rock and roll being a central cohesive factor. In recent decades such fears have tended to be crystallised around youth subcultures and the moral panics triggered by them. In the 1950s it was teddy boys and rock and roll; in the 1960s mods and rockers and pills, and then hippies, dope, LSD and free love. In the 1970s it was punks, violence and sexuality, and in the 1980s and 1990s travellers, eco-warriors, raves and ecstasy.

During the 1970s, according to Hall et al. (1978), such moral panics increasingly became mapped together within the terms of a generalised discourse about law and order, that in turn provided part of the ideological substructure for the emerging discourse that became known as Thatcherism. During the 1980s, the ideological and political successes of Thatcherism fostered a culture of enterprise and consumption, produced a series of political defeats for the left, and gradually defused the 1970s climate of dissent and opposition. Affluent youth became increasingly focused on style, identity and conspicuous consumption (Tomlinson 1990), whilst the poorer strata of youth supposedly became disaffected but apathetic, dubbed by some Generation X – the blank generation, with no ambition, low self-esteem and no self-discipline. It is certainly the case that the alternative and oppositional character of subcultures was much less in evidence in 1980s youth subcultures like the new romantics and the goths, who were far more narcissistic and inward looking. Only with the emergence of the rave scene, the new anarchism and the increasing militancy of the new travellers, towards the end of the 1980s, did this oppositional character begin to resurface. More recently, this oppositional trajectory has taken greater coherence in the activities of eco-warriors and the anti-capitalist movement.

During the 1990s the aspirational character of youth has also been notable. The dress codes of clubbing impose a narcissistic discipline, mobile phones and the internet epitomise a ‘plugged-in’ and ‘wired-up’ ethos, and the casualisation of workplaces a heightened emphasis on skills of self-presentation. Two polarisations seem notable. The first is that between the aspirational, socially mobile, employed youth, and the young underclass who lack educational achievement, cultural capital, social skills and life opportunities. The second is that between girls – seen as optimistic and aspirational; and boys – seen as unambitious,
pessimistic and under-achieving (see Wilkinson 1994). The fears that adult culture expresses about youth have generally crystallised around boys and their behaviour, but the 1990s have featured a heightened concern about the ‘problem with boys’.

The power of the media has always been a source of concern, indeed literacy itself was historically seen as such a threat by dominant groups that for a long time its spread was rigorously controlled. Every new media innovation has served as the focal point of such fears. It always has to be noted then that fears of the power of the media are usually associated with a fear of the loss of power for some other institution, whether it is the ruling class, the state, the church or the family. The power and influence of the media has characteristically been linked to deviance and dissidence, whether political, cultural or sexual. Such fears are usually associated with influence on the young, and these fears usually attach themselves to the latest technology. Thus the spread of printing was seen as a threat to the control of the literate clerisy. Film was seen as dangerous because it reached the less literate lower orders and so needed censorship. Radio entered the home and so required policing. Television has been the focal point of endless debates about the degree of explicit violence and sexuality that should be permitted. Horror comics in the 1950s, pornographic magazines in the 1960s, video in the 1980s, satellite channels and live sex chat lines in the 1990s, have all been the focus of social concerns. Virtual pornography and the distribution of sexually explicit images on the internet are currently causing disquiet. It is noteworthy that one major issue triggered by the growth of the internet is that it enables exchanges between users that are hard for any power to monitor or control. Just as the issue of the power of the media is usually connected to the threat it poses to other possessors of power, it is also the case that the media offers an easy scapegoat that can be blamed for problems whose real causes are more deep-rooted, pervasive and harder to address. The rush to blame the media for violence, copy-cat killings, and moral decay, betrays an unwillingness to face up to the multi-factoral complexity of cause and effect in the social world.

Sport plays a significant role in cultural life. Its major traditional rituals, and broadcasts of them – in England, the Cup Final, the Derby, the Boat Race, the Grand National, Test matches and Wimbledon – are a significant part of the cultural history of the nation, and form part of the fabric of ‘Englishness’, contributing to a sense of national identity. Similarly, in the USA the Superbowl, World Series Baseball, the Indy 500 and the Kentucky Derby occupy a not dissimilar place in constructions of Americanness. Organised competitive sport has a long history, and has taken diverse forms. It has been part of a culture of self-development, as in Ancient Greece, a form of spectacular entertainment, as in Ancient Rome, part of a pattern of popular festivity, as in Medieval Europe, a form of moral education, as in the nineteenth-century public schools, a symbolic form of ideological contestation, as in the Cold War,
and a commodified global spectacle, as in the second half of the twentieth century. As such it has always been subject to contestation and transformation. Historically, sport has been seen as an area of culture rooted in principles of fair play. In the nineteenth century it was seen as a means of teaching moral values (see Mangan 1981). Despite the transformation of sport during the twentieth century (characterised by the growth of professionalism and decline in amateurism) it is still seen as an arena from which cheating should be outlawed; a cultural practice which at its best, still embodies the spirit of fairness (see McIntosh 1979). But now that culture is increasingly media-centred, concepts of sport are rooted more in representation than in any notion of the ‘lived’ experience of participation.

‘Sport’, like ‘youth’ and ‘the media’, has become the term for a set of troubling conditions. In such public discussion, sport at the elite level is seen as characterised by drug taking, corruption, cheating, and sharp practice. Much of this is attributed to the impact of the commercialisation of sport, corrupting and destroying amateurist Corinthian ideals. Too much money, too intensely nationalistic rivalries, and the collapse of a moral framework, mean that whereas sport has been expected to provide positive role models, it has now also become conceptualised as a fund of bad influences on the young.³

The social concerns over youth during the 1980s and 1990s increasingly highlighted fitness, with television and new media such as computer games constituted as a significant element in the threat to fitness.⁴ The phrase ‘couch potato’ served to denote the large number of hours devoted to television watching (ironically it is adults who watch most television). Computer games were believed to be replacing outdoor activities.

Concern over the decline of school sport, and the impact of a diet of junk food, was heightened by the publicising of the research of Neil Armstrong, Professor of Health and Exercise Sciences at the University of Exeter. Briefly, Armstrong showed that children rarely exercised vigorously enough to improve and build adequate cardiovascular fitness.⁵ The low level of intense physical activity amongst children was in turn linked to the decline of school sport, both within school, and extra-curricular.⁶ The crystallisation of such fears was increasingly linked in public discourse to other concerns – the Americanisation of society, the weakening of marriage and the family, the declining strength of traditional morality. While John Major was Prime Minister, those seeking a regeneration of traditional school sport spoke out with renewed confidence. The then Sports Minister, Iain Sproat, called for the re-establishment of team games as the dominant form of physical education.⁷ We are dealing here with a beleaguered cultural condition, with a self-image of a culture at threat, and a discursive structure that links the youth problem, the influence of the media, the moral decline of elite sport, and the need for a return to traditional values.
Crisis may well be an imprecise, subjective and over-used term. It is, however, the contention of this book, that the deployment of the term ‘crisis’ in discourse is, in itself, significant. It is impossible to determine whether morality and masculinity are ‘in crisis’, but highly revealing that they should constantly be so described. The theme of a generalised decline in moral standards is neither new nor unfamiliar, but has been more to the fore in the 1990s. During the 1990s, there has been a prominent public discourse about the supposed crisis in morality. For the right, this has been associated with family break-up, the growth in single-parent families, rising crime rates and declining education standards. Moral panics have crystallised around such high profile events as the Jamie Bulger murder, and the Gloucester multiple murders. For the left, the decline of the welfare state and corruption in public life have been central themes.

This sense of ‘moral crisis’ is associated with two features supposedly characteristic of the contemporary world, relativism and the crisis of authority. From a conservative perspective, relativism has undermined not simply cultural values but the whole notion of cultural value. A once stable system of cultural hierarchisation, in which high culture – Beethoven, Keats, Rembrandt, Shakespeare and Jane Austen – was unproblematically ‘better’ than popular culture – Elvis Presley, Bob Dylan, Ian Fleming and Jackie Collins; has been disrupted. The rise of modern popular culture, the assault on traditional aesthetic judgements, the development of modes of theorising that question the high culture–popular culture distinction, the supposed process of ‘dumbing-down’, and the ‘post-modern turn’ have all combined to dislodge the dominance of a secure set of cultural judgements. The concept of cultural value itself is lost. In such a relativised world, it is no surprise that traditional moral values no longer command respect. From this perspective, then, moral decline is closely linked to the rise of cultural relativism.

The second feature of the contemporary world that has contributed to the sense of moral crisis is the supposed ‘collapse of authority’. Moral authority is in the end dependent upon the security of a set of power relations in which the force of pronouncements is consolidated by a set of social institutions and relations that construct positions of authority. The position of the Priest within the Church, the Teacher within the School, and the Father within the Family are all forms in which traditional moral authority is invested in a set of power relations. From a conservative perspective, the decline of religion, the loss of respect for educational authority, and the disintegration of the patriarchal family have all contributed to a weakening of forms of social authority through which moral values are transmitted. From this perspective then, it is logical that in the void created by the absence of such positions of social authority, the concept of role models – symbolic figures that can embody moral principles – should assume a greater importance. In a media-dominated world, the conservative perspective invests its hopes in the emergence of figures who will epitomise moral correctness.
Allied to the sense of a crisis of morality is the parallel sense of a crisis in masculinity. Frank Mort has commented that:

it has become fashionable to talk about a contemporary crisis of masculinity. While such an idea may appear overblown (often erroneously contrasting perceived present-day rapid change among men with past stability) it does pose the sharp end of questions about the shifting nature of gender relations and gendered power.

(Mort 1996: 10)

Mort suggests that this sense of crisis is specific rather than global, and relates particularly to the position and concerns of intellectual men and to the context of the ‘Northern European puritan diaspora’ (Mort 1994: 126). In recent years, indeed, the concept of a ‘crisis’ in masculinity has gained extensive public discussion in the affluent West. Whether or not there is a crisis, there is certainly a lot of talk of one. Suzanne Moore in the *Guardian* (29 February 1996) drew attention to the rash of media content relating to male problems, fears and worries, citing as recent television examples *The Men’s Ward*, *Bad Time to be a Man*, *Male Survival Guide*, *Women on Men*, Tony Parsons on *Without Walls*, and *Equal But Different*. Dave Hill (1997) speaks of a crisis of male identity in the West. Recent British films *Brassed Off*, *The Full Monty*, and *Billy Elliott* were all rooted in industrial communities hit hard by these changes, in which men were seen as troubled. In all three films the men eventually gain strength and solidarity from their adversity and triumph through a regained self-confidence; but all offer a magical resolution of real conflicts not so readily resolved. Several questions arise. Is masculinity in crisis? Where does this discourse come from? Isn’t masculinity always seen as in crisis? Isn’t this just a reconstruction of a group in dominance?

The crisis is variously linked to work, education and the family, the media and feminism. For some, the decline of the old manufacturing base, the rise of the service sector, the growth of casualisation, part-time and flexi-time working, have all contributed to both male unemployment and a ‘feminisation’ of work; whilst, for men in work, greater pressures have exacerbated work–family conflicts. In popular newspaper discussion, boys have been constituted as a problem: they resist schooling, they get involved in crime and there is a breakdown of parental authority, due in part to absent fathers, single mothers and working mothers.

The education of boys is seen as undermined by the growth of an anti-swot culture, new ‘lad’ culture and dumbing down. Reading is regarded by boys as a feminine activity and studying is ‘uncool’. The optimism of girls about the future is contrasted with the pessimism of boys (see, for example, Wilkinson 1994). In the family, it is argued, a breakdown of parental authority, with absent fathers, single mothers or working mothers, has resulted in a failure to instil moral values. Working women neglect the parental function, and absent fathers weaken the disciplinary process.
In the media there is asserted to be a lack of male role models and masculinity is typically defined as a problem, with one of its symptoms being the male inability to display, explore or understand emotions. The effects of two decades of feminism is portrayed as contributing to male uncertainties, producing both responses, such as ‘new man’, and reactions, such as ‘new lad’. The ‘new lad’, emerging from the late 1980s and given sharper form by the emergence of *Loaded*, and its impact upon the rapidly growing men’s magazine market of the 1990s, marked a resurgence of sexism and misogyny, and a new acceptability of sexualised imagery, with the attempted justification of being cloaked in postmodern irony. The concept of a crisis in masculinity is examined in more detail in chapter 2.

Sport, with its ethical structure of fair play, its roots in Corinthian idealism and its separateness from the contestations of the political sphere, appeals to the moral entrepreneurs. Here is a symbolic arena in which heroes can parade, epitomising the finest, most noble values, and providing role models to which boys can aspire. These hopes are doomed to be dashed for three reasons. First, news is negative – and the actions of the good do not make big headlines; second, sport is no more free from the corruptions and temptations of the world than any other sphere; indeed there is some evidence that elite sport performers have less rigid moral principles than the average person; third, there is little convincing evidence that the relation between the young audience and stars in the public eye is as simple as the ‘role model’ concept implies. Top-level sport has indeed constituted one site on which these ‘crises’ of morality and masculinity have unfolded. John McEnroe’s tantrums and challenges to authority, the widespread use of performance-enhancing drugs epitomised by the Ben Johnson case, the alcohol-fuelled escapades of Paul Gascoigne and others, allegations of bungs and back-handers in football, ball-tampering and match-fixing in cricket, have all been mapped onto the more generalised moral crisis.

In contributing to the growth in popularity of sport, the media have helped produce a sporting star system. (Chapter 3 examines the social construction of sport stardom through a historical account of the development of media coverage of sport.) As a consequence of the development of a sporting-star system, top sport stars, being in the public eye, find themselves under pressure from sport organisations concerned with their public image. Much of this concern is expressed in moral terms. One theme consistently present in such stories is that stars, being in the public eye, are an influence on the young, and that consequently they must be expected to have higher moral standards than people in everyday life. Chapters 7 to 15 offer a series of case study examinations of representations of sport stars.

Sport stars have characteristically been portrayed by the media as role models. Either they are praised as a good example for the young or alternatively they are castigated as being a bad example. Whether they actually do function in this way is in some senses less significant than the fact that they are discussed