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The malignancy of sport

Ellis Cashmore argues that, for all its apparent innocuousness, sport is a harmful presence in society



Grandiloquent displays of national pride will be plentiful this year when London hosts the Olympic Games. As usual, the overwrought, pompous, quadrennial spectacular will bring triumphs, tears, heartbreaking moments and stirring exhibitions of jingoism. Inconsequential yet heartwarming dramas of hope and disappointment will play out amid nationalistic self-congratulation.

Sport, it will be deafeningly reaffirmed, embodies all that is morally right. Its benefits are practically unqualified. Who could question the righteousness of a pursuit that has entranced us for at almost 3,000 years (the ancient Greek festival was first held in 776 BC)?

Pernicious biosphere

Let me try. Sport is a pernicious biosphere where human effort is squandered in the futile pursuit of artificial objectives that have no benefit, material or otherwise, on the real world. The competition is trivial and purposeless, its only point being to satisfy individuals' self-serving desire to surpass others. The more successful are egotistical plutocrats whose money derives from the financial reserves of media behemoths owned by the likes of Rupert Murdoch, of News Corporation, and Robert Iger of Disney.

What was once an innocent test of physical proficiency in a number of set challenges has morphed into an industry analogous to, if not contiguous with show business. It has

become part of a culture that creates new demands and new discontents that can be assuaged only by the consumption of commodities.

Where is the harm? Obviously, the physical injuries are commonplace and an expected by-product of intense training and competition. And the damage to the health of athletes and fans alike is an unfortunate, if inevitable, consequence of rivalries that might once have been friendly but are now warlike.

Traditional citadels

Disability, brain damage, and sometimes death are unintended consequences of competition or training for activities that were designed to test the limits of human capability, but have become the means by which to extend those limits. Cyclists, swimmers, and track and field athletes habitually ingest substances in their efforts to enhance their competitive performance. Athletes from practically every other known sport to some degree use licit or illicit pharmaceuticals in their efforts to maximize their physical potential. Sport's injunction

to give one's best appears quaint and unworldly: win-at-all-costs is more congruent with today's ethos.

Sport's harmful effects extend beyond the physical: at a cultural level, its fierce and destructive onslaught on traditional citadels has been unsparing. Here the less visible, yet arguably more profound consequences of sport have turned every one of us into sport fans of

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some hue. Even those who consciously oppose sport can hardly fail to escape it: sport's symbols penetrate as well as surround us. Sport has insinuated itself into our consciousness. Is this an exaggeration? Answer this on July 27, when the opening ceremony of the Games takes place.

Fairplay or advertising?

Celebrity athletes are attributed with the kind of moral authority once vested in the holders of political or religious office. Their accomplishments are acknowledged as greater than those of military leaders or adventurers of yore. Their private lives are the stuff of public discourse. And, of course, their status is reflected in their earnings. It is not unusual for golfers and F1 drivers and even practitioners of the once working-class sport of association football to earn eight-figure salaries. The vacuous term 'role model' is invoked, usually without irony, to describe barely literate young men (and occasionally women) whose repertoire of interests rarely stretches beyond sport, cars and Xboxes. And these are supposed to be people looked up to by others as examples to be imitated.

Football in particular strikes many as the most direct pathway to the kind of good life for which celebrities have become ambulant advertisements. It is a good life narrowly conceived as limitless glamour, novelty, change and a superabundance of every conceivable commodity. In a genuine sense, the sports stars of today have turned themselves into commodities that can be bought and sold on the marketplace. Well, perhaps not them: but cologne, underwear, cars, DVDs and the cornucopia of other products they endorse in advertisements.

The *ne plus ultra* of this is, of course, David Beckham, a figure who has not so much transcended

sport as emblematised its transformation into what Mary Dejevsky (2012) describes as a cultural fetish – alluding, I presume, to our collective worship. Even consumers with no obvious interest in sport exhibit an excessive and irrational commitment to the all-purpose icon who was once known for playing football, but is now known for ... well, just *known*.

Jolting recognition

Countless young men and women pay obeisance to Beckham and other simple-minded yet conspicuously affluent characters with dexterous skills but little else – apart from the capacity to sell commodities. What should stop us from dismissing this as harmless is the jolting recognition that some of the objects of adulation are racists, rapists and, less malevolently, philanderers.

In a sense, the adoration of young people is not new: sporting icons populate the twentieth century. But the admiration, respect and doting approval have been replaced by a near-worshipful adoration. In itself hero-worship is not harmful, especially when moderated by respectfulness. A fixation with sporting celebrities at the expense of interests in other pursuits is.

We are now witnessing the maturation of a generation of young people in a landscape where the main cultural coordinates are *Big Brother*, *The X Factor* and Premier League football. The Millennial Generation, sometimes known as Generation Y, have an ‘anything-is-possible’ attitude, an attention-seeking impulse and a craving for fame – not necessarily fame earned through accomplishments; just fame in itself (Jayson, 2007). Realistically achievable goals are being displaced by dreams. Education is undermined. Endeavour is rendered irrelevant. Dreaming encourages passivity.

Success in sports – any sport – is never about just good luck: perseverance, steadfastness and sheer hard work are the staples of any successful career. Yet the outward representations of sport figures promote, perhaps inadvertently, hedonism, impulse and consumption. Sport, in this sense, makes a comfortable bedfellow with entertainment: it represents another form of advertising. Ask yourself: when you watch a televised football match, are you witnessing sport or being held captive for two hours while advertisers go to work on your sensibilities?

Culture of commodities

In the 1990s Christopher Lasch (1991) observed ‘a never-ending redefinition of luxuries as necessities, continual incorporation of new groups into the culture of consumption, and ultimately the creation of a global market that embraces populations formerly excluded from any reasonable expectation of affluence’. Lasch didn’t realise the extent to which organised sport would both contribute to and hasten the advance of this culture. The global circulation of

commodities, as well as information and, of course, human populations is, in a perverse way, reflected in the globalisation of sport. It is difficult to imagine any nation that remains unaffected by sport and, by implication, the culture of commodities of which it is part.

Some argue the London Olympics presents an opportunity to restore the traditional values of sport. The notion of honest competition, like most other features of sport, has changed dramatically over the decades. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, competition was understood as an activity to bring rivals to their mettle. An individual’s ability to cope with difficulties or face a demanding

situation in a spirited and resilient way was best tested by pitching him (usually not her) against others who were trying their utmost to beat him. The gratification lay not in winning, but in participating. There was no shame in losing; the only shame was in not giving 100 per cent. Money changed all this. As sports professionalised the motivation to succeed became more pronounced and winning took on paramountcy.

The money wasn’t magicked into being, of course: it came from consumers, like you and me. We pay the admission prices, the TV subscriptions and consent passively to paying extra for products that align themselves via advertising and sponsorships to sports personalities and organisations.

It is purposeless

Sport is not going to end famine, deliver peace on earth, save the planet from environmental disaster, or assist the discovery of a cure for cancer. It is purposeless. Think about this next time you watch eleven grown men trying to advance a ball in the opposite direction of another eleven grown men, or eight women running 100 meters as fast as they can, or two sentient humans with no obvious grievances attacking each other with the fury of Achilles.

The time and energy we put into watching and playing sport could be more profitably deployed. Sport is not only futile, arbitrary and wasteful: it is a malign presence that, it was once thought, would serve as a source of moral inspiration, but which has merely become part of an apparatus that buttresses consumer culture. ■

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