

Reading 3.1 Richard Holt and Tony Mason, 'Sensationalism and the popular press'

Inside stories and breathless hyperbole were hardly a post-war invention. The inter-war years had seen the mass press take up sport, forcing the closure of the old *Athletic News* and devoting several pages to sport each day. The popular Sundays like the *People* and the *News of the World* had four to six pages of sports reporting. In the summer the quality press had cricket to write about and the *Manchester Guardian* had Neville Cardus, whose career spanned the war and gave a new literary respectability to serious sports writing. The sports pages of the popular daily papers were still largely concerned with news-gathering, though with an increasingly gossipy and speculative twist via football columnists like Alan Hoby 'The Man Who Knows'. However, what he and others like him really knew and what their papers were prepared to print remained quite different things.

The Wolfenden Committee took evidence of the effect of the press on top-level performers in 1958. Denis Compton thought no more than 10 per cent of journalists knew much about the sport they were reporting. Judy Grinham, the Olympic swimmer, said 'she was "knocked for six" when she had a bad report in a newspaper and some swimmers, especially young ones, were absolutely broken hearted'. But now she was a reporter herself 'she saw the journalist's point of view': the editors wanted a story more than constructive criticism and factual reporting. Discussing football, Bill Slater, who had played as an amateur for Blackpool and as a professional in the great Wolves team under Stan Cullis, noted the 'tremendous range of reporting ability' and stressed that 'people had to choose their newspaper according to the type of

reporting they wanted'. Slater, who worked as a university lecturer in physical education, 'did not think journalists were particularly cruel to young players' and 'on the whole he felt the press did a good job'. Compton agreed and added that good publicity for a top player meant increased earnings outside the game.

The newspapers were anxious to present a respectable image of the country, covering up sexual scandal as avidly as later generations would expose it. Good behaviour was all-important and sportsmanship had to be seen to extend from the individual to the national level. National pride had to stay within the limits of decent partisanship. Patriotism rather than nationalism was the norm. Consider, for example, England's notorious football defeat at the hands of the United States in 1950. The press was very disappointed but their tone was surprisingly measured by contemporary standards. Imagine what a later generation of journalists would have done to an England team manager who was beaten by 500–1 outsiders. Walter Winterbottom did not have to face the wrath of the *Sun* and managed to stay in the job for another twelve years. Press reaction to the 6–3 defeat at home by Hungary in 1953 were mixed, 'There can be no complaints, we were outplayed ... by a great Hungarian side,' wrote Charles Buchan in the *News Chronicle*. The press debated whether England had been beaten by a new 'collective' football before deciding that the 'Merry Magyars' had learned the game from an Englishman, and so their victory was also ours.

There were, of course, some complaints. John Barrett 'deplored destructive and sensational writing' about tennis, which he put down to editors 'making mountains out of molehills'. Gordon Pirie thought top athletes were caught between their governing body, which wanted to vet everything, and the press looking for exciting stories. 'A top athlete must be most careful with his words at all times, especially just before or after a race.' It was a case of damned if you do and damned if you don't; if you refused to talk you were surly, if you said too much you were a 'big mouth'. All this has an oddly contemporary feel, although the press was not seen as too much of a problem by most sportsmen and women in the 1950s.

Popular sports coverage changed significantly in the sixties and has moved in a more sensational direction ever since. Coverage reached new heights. By 1980 both the *Sun* and the *Star* gave over 20 per cent of their space to sport with the *Mirror* and the *Express* not far behind with 17.36 per cent and 16.45 per cent respectively. Banner headlines, colour photographs, and coverage of every major game produced a paper where the back pages stretched to the centre and sports stories, especially scandal, often got onto the front page. The tone was increasingly strident and chauvinist. When the *Daily Herald* closed

in 1964 to be replaced by the *Sun*, the new tabloid announced it would have 'four rows of teeth' and would settle for nothing less than complete success. Victory at home in the 1966 World Cup fuelled vast expectations and nationalist rhetoric, driving a succession of managers out of the job under a torrent of abuse. Bobby Robson was England manager in the Thatcher years when the tide of popular chauvinism reached its height: 'ON YER BIKE ROBSON'; 'BEAT 'EM OR BEAT IT, BOBBY'; 'SENSELESS! SPINELESS! HOPELESS!' or just 'PLONKER'. If England won, the rhetoric instantly went the other way with 'BOBBY'S BEAUTIES' or 'BRING ON THE ARGIES' in a self-conscious reference to the victorious Falklands War which set the tone of the decade.

The *Daily Mirror*, the *Star* and the other tabloids adopted the same style and couldn't resist the chance to rake over the past affairs of 'ROMEO ROBBY'. No wonder Robson, after coming so close to the World Cup final in 1990, decided to leave the England job for a managerial career on the continent. His successor, Graham Taylor, who was thought to be 'good with the press', fared far worse. Dubbed 'Turnip' by the *Sun*, he was mercilessly ridiculed and quickly forced out after England failed to qualify for the World Cup in 1994. Glen Hoddle was a different kind of press victim, sacked for a combination of unconventional beliefs, insensitive comments about disability and, it should be said, increasingly, erratic results. Hoddle's successor, Kevin Keegan, has all the cheerful populism and national enthusiasm the tabloids expect. But they are unlikely to be any more generous should he fail to produce a winning team.

The growing internationalism of sport, especially football, has proved a blessing for sports journalists in search of a story. The papers increasingly picked up the international angle in the 1990s as European players took advantage of the Bosman ruling on the free movement of players. This was perhaps the most striking change in English football as teams like Chelsea and Arsenal fielded some of the best Italian, Dutch or French stars, all of whom had stories to tell about settling in, British football, rumours of return and so forth. This flood of foreign stars had started as a trickle of British players going abroad. Such was the smug insularity of the British that they scarcely thought of buying foreign players, even after the Hungarians and the Brazilians had shown how much better they could play the game. Scotland, in particular, was inward looking, not even recruiting from England and reluctant to recognise the achievements of the 'Anglos' – those Scots, often star players, who went to play in England. Alternately adored and reviled by the press in his native land, Denis Law was 'The King' at Old Trafford. But amongst a 'tartan' press riding the new wave of Scottish nationalism, his gifts were less fully appreciated. From the 1960s

England exported some of its best players, usually to Italy and usually not for long. They missed the beer, the English language, even British food. Now the pattern has been reversed with a vengeance with the press riding a ceaseless wave of speculation about new signings.

Famous foreign sportsmen and women seemed to fascinate and dismay the British press in equal measure. Tennis players, in particular, who were only in Britain for a few weeks a year became temporary celebrities as the appetite for drama and sensationalism grew. Maria Bueno and Margaret Smith had been one thing, Billy Jean demanding equal prize money and Martina Navratilova as a lesbian icon were another. In the men's game it was not so much the robotic consistency of Borg which caught the headlines as the arrogant gamesmanship of McEnroe and his refusal to 'play the game'. John McEnroe took up a lot of space in the tabloids and the quality press in the 1980s. 'A brat' he may have been but a brat that made good copy.

The nineties saw a new development in serious sports writing. Sport and culture would no longer be treated as antithetical. Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch*, a Cambridge graduate's account of his obsession with Arsenal, proved to be one of the books of the decade. There had always been intellectuals who liked sport but now it became commonplace, even fashionable, to say so. There was a steady expansion in the space given to sport in the broadsheet press, more serious discussion and features – and more tabloid-style gossip as well. Women began to break into the male bastion of sports reporting just as girls and women more generally were drawn to 'the new football'. The quality Sunday papers were always on the lookout for a new angle. The *Observer* packed off Booker Prize-winning novelist, literary critic and self-confessed football virgin, A. S. Byatt, to Euro 96. The *Independent* did the same to Germaine Greer, who, 'bathed in testosterone', was much taken with Gazza's inclination to run after a ball 'with the unflagging enthusiasm of a puppy'.

'Gazza' had been of particular interest to intellectuals for some time. His tears in the 1990 World Cup were analysed by the leading social theorist Anthony Giddens whilst poet, biographer and football fan Ian Hamilton devoted most of an issue of the literary magazine *Granta* to him. Not much of this was likely to have touched Gazza himself whose Geordie philistinism was part of his fascination. Gazza, in fact, took up a great deal of the press in the 1990s from his injuries to his hair cuts, from drinking to domestic violence. *Hello* magazine paid a fortune for the exclusive rights to photograph his wedding reception, which included a picture of the man himself in a gold morning suit toasting the bride from a gleaming urinal. The tabloids were resentful about being excluded, which made their subsequent denunciations of his

wife-beating all the more vehement. Their collective indignation was instructive. Sensationalism had its constructive side. Journalists would no longer cover up for sportsmen, who had to take responsibility for their public and private lives. Those like Tony Adams, who succeeded in changing themselves, were the new media heroes: the prodigal sons and reformed sinners. A lesser player's battle with drugs or gambling made better copy than Alan Shearer painting the garden fence.

The new sensationalism, of course, was not confined to sport. It was part of a much wider shift in popular culture, which finally shrugged off the self-improving legacy of the past. The popular Sunday papers had long pandered to the public's fascination with sex and violence like the Victorian 'penny dreadfuls' before them. But from the 1960s the popular dailies went consciously downmarket and their sports coverage went with them. Sports journalism went in two directions: there was an impressive expansion of lively and serious writing about sport, mostly from the 'quality' press, and a headlong rush into scandal in the 'middle market' papers like the *Mail* and *Express* as well as the tabloids. Like the quality press they were no longer able to rely on match reports to sell papers. Sensing the enormous public interest in the people behind the performances, the mass press threw itself into a frenzy of speculation, gossip and sensationalism. Six or eight pages of sport, usually half on football, became the norm and this could expand to fill half the space in the tabloids for big events. A 'good guy' like Gary Lineker could grab the headlines as the nation gathered round to support their striker and his wife when their young son had a serious operation. But it was family break-up rather than family values that the public really wanted – or so the popular press believed. There was nothing like a deserted wife and child pictured alongside her ex-husband frolicking in the surf with a new bikini-clad 'companion' to sell papers.

Sports 'hacks' were a cynical bunch, notably dismissive of anything 'arty' or pretentious, both liberators and destroyers, pushing back the limits of what could and could not be said in public. It was a popular Sunday paper, the *People*, which exposed a gambling and match-fixing scandal in English football in 1965. Of course, there was a vast amount of ordinary reporting, too, especially in the regional and local press. *Match of the Day* only carried the highlights of a few games and even Sky can only cover a fraction of all the football being played. Plenty of fans still like a familiar journalist's account of a game to compare with their own impressions of how the team performed in televised highlights. The sensational and the mundane sit happily side by side. *The News of the World*, the biggest selling newspaper in Britain, cleverly packaged its sports coverage to put big national stories alongside factual

regional match reports, often written by former local stars. Jackie Milburn, the hero of post-war Tyneside, wrote a north-east football column for the *News of the World* for twenty years after his retirement. Geordies were less interested in what was said than who was saying it. Press columns, ghosted or not, were a powerful source of myth-making, mixing national stories with local legends.

Current sports coverage ranges from the probing literary article to be found in the weekend sports supplements of the broadsheets – a new feature of good sports writing prompted by the growing middle-class interest in football – to the ‘the lad done bad’ stories of sex, violence and scandal juxtaposed with ads for sex aids, chat-lines and pornography in the tabloids. The unreconstructed model of aggressive, promiscuous masculinity is alive and well and its most salacious outlet is simply called *‘The Daily Sport’*. However, this ‘socusoap’ with its ‘spot the brawl’ and unending tales of laddish nights on the town co-exists with a vast amount of serious comment and analysis. The upsurge in new sports magazines, bulging from the shelves, each more glossy than the last, cleverly blends the two angles, appealing to the fan and the man, from complex technical pieces in the picaresque life of a Robbie Fowler who ‘fancies any glamorous woman on telly long as they’ve got a fanny and breathe.’ Hymns to ‘clubbing’ and consumption – varieties of Ferrari, BMW or Jaguar are an important part of the story – now play a major part in writing about sport, not so much as a performance, more as a way of life.

Reading source

Holt and Mason, 2007, pp. 197–201