

More than Just the Media: Considering the role of public relations in the creation of sporting celebrity and the management of fan expectations.

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Abstract

This article considers the complex nature of sporting celebrity and the role of media and public relations in the creation of both sports celebrity and the fan expectations associated with that celebrity. While public relations literature has traditionally considered PR as a promotion and communication tool, this article acknowledges that in the cultural and ideological world of sport, PR has a much more sophisticated role to play. In the event of either positive or negative media attention, a sporting celebrity is subjected to unprecedented scrutiny and the increasingly high expectations of fans. However, the expectations of fans are not based on the simple notion of hero worship and role models, and this exploratory study suggests that fans are capable of very complex reactions to the

behaviours and marketing personas of sporting celebrities. The use of PR in sport deserves close examination and the reactive spin doctoring techniques of the past should give way to the strategic integration of public relations and media planning in both the creation of the sporting celebrity, balancing the sport versus private sides of that celebrity, and the varying fan expectations associated with each.

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Introduction

The amount of money invested in and made by professional sport today and the complexity of those revenue sources has forged an important symbiotic relationship between the media, global PR activity, professional sport and the players and spectators of sport. Each needs the other to sustain an existence far beyond simply providing televised coverage of a sport. Players earnings increase, the cost of global competition rises, sponsors seek exposure to large audiences and fans thrive on the media and PR generated about sports people. This constant demand and supply of information, competition and excitement breeds heroes, villains, celebrities and superstars. Indeed, intrinsic to this commercialization of sport is the creation of the ‘sport celebrity’ as a product in their own right (L’Etang, 2006).

Along with the escalation of the emotive power of sport, there has been a shift in power from publicists and PR agents to the demanding public and the media generally. No longer content with planned interviews and game related poses, fans rely on the glorification and behind the scenes snapshots that the media provide of their sporting favourites (Mnookin, 2004). This shift in power has not disenfranchised PR professionals but rather redefined the skills they need. The contemporary sporting PR professional requires a less technical and traditional approach to the generation of publicity and a

more holistic creation and management of celebrity personality encompassing a more socially responsible approach to both the sporting and private lives of their athlete clients.

In short without the input and exposure provided by the modern media, the phenomena of the sports celebrity would not even exist (Rowe, 2005). As part of this phenomenon, it has long been thought that this heightened level of interest brings with it unfettered hero worship and idolisation of sporting stars by their fans. Certainly this is part of the reason the media and sports commentators are so quick to criticise and vilify sports stars when their behaviour does not live up to our social ideals and sports stars are expected to be bastions of exemplary sporting behaviour, courage, loyalty and bravery (Whannel, 1998; Lines, 2001).

Celebrities in 'trouble' are high interest stories and as news coverage has evolved into a global medium far beyond the archaic notion of the nightly half-hour broadcast, news managers struggle to balance the need to fill time with the journalistic rules and fact checking of the past (Hall, 2004). This coupled with the global technical production of news in an unprecedented range of formats and immediacy has changed the relationship between the media, PR professionals and consumers. The internet and digital media has allowed fans to actually publish their own 'news' to a global audience and they have become as much a part of the production cycle as the consumption.

This study 'talks' to contemporary sports fans and finds that they are far more complex and sophisticated than previous research has suggested. When it comes to expectations

of and reactions to the behaviours and marketing personas of sporting celebrities we propose that whilst some fans do idolise and hero worship their sporting heroes, the impact of bad behaviour and/or negative media depends on the general celebrity profile of the athlete and whether or not the event was sport related. In short, this study takes up the call for more insight through conversations with sport audiences about their perceptions of the role of sports celebrities and in particular focusing on the role of public relations and the media in the creation of those expectations and viewpoints.

Method

For this research, primary qualitative data was collected using a multi-method approach of focus groups, phone-in public opinion talk-back sessions and public internet blogs. The data was collected in a sequential manner commencing with three focus groups. These groups consisted of 5 – 12 people and were conducted over two days with adults interested in sport in Australia.

Both males and females were included in the focus groups with 74% of the sample being male. All indicated an interest in sport to varying degrees with some playing sport regularly and others just interested as spectators. The discussions in these focus groups were taped with consent from participants and later transcribed for content analysis based on three emergent themes: 1) the role of PR in the construction of sporting celebrities; 2) PR as a tool in managing fan expectations of sport celebrities; and 3) the role of PR in the separation of on-field vs off-field image and expectations.

Table 1 provides the demographic profile of focus group respondents (no demographic information was available for talk-back respondents or internet blog participants).

Insert table 1 about here

After the analysis of the focus groups was completed a number of questions still remained in the minds of the researchers, particularly in relation to sport fans' ability to separate their expectations of and their perceptions of the responsibilities of sport celebrities in their on-field and off-field roles. The option to conduct an open public forum to encourage further commentary and discussion on these research issues became available in the form of both a morning radio talk back session on an urban regional Australian radio station and through the monitoring of a public discussion forum, or internet blog, hosted by an Australian comment and discussion site, Philosophy Forum ([www. forum.darwinawards.com](http://www.forum.darwinawards.com), 2005).

The radio sessions were taped and later transcribed, and the internet blog discussions were copied from the internet site to facilitate analysis. The conversations and discussions from the radio and blogs were also content analysed in relation to the three main themes as outlined earlier. Each of these themes will now be discussed commencing with the use of PR in the construction of a sporting celebrity.

Theme 1 – PR in the construction of sport celebrities

It is well known that the sport media relies on entertainment, drama, gossip and great pictures for its survival. Sport celebrities provide the essential elements for the media machine through their regular live performances on the sporting field where the outcome of their efforts is largely uncontrollable and therefore exciting to the everyday consumer (Jones & Schumann, 2000). Sport media then use selected imagery, information and the public interest as tools in their public relations activities to construct an image of sports stars that many believe to be a reality. This construction reflects nostalgic legacies of the past, entwined with contemporary values, beliefs and ideals about social roles and commercial sport (Vande Berg, 1998). It also has little to do with reality or even basic human nature.

In turn, sport celebrities are well paid for their part in this process with many making large salaries from activities not related to their sporting abilities. Globally, successful sporting celebrities have been able to generate and sustain a massive PR machine whose fundamental role is to maintain the marketability and high profile of these stars both from a corporate investment perspective and from a personal athlete perspective. Most high profile athletes employ media and PR agencies to manage and to develop their image and their profile quite apart from the PR activity generated by corporate investors using the sport celebrity for their own strategic goals. Whether a sports star plays the game or wins the match is sometimes far less relevant to how they look and how much public interest and media attention they can generate (for example David Beckham who now earns more from his product endorsements and his looks than from his skill as a soccer player).

Our research findings suggest that fans are very sophisticated in their understanding of this construction and that many view this process as very commercial and often unrealistic. Extracts from focus groups and talk-back sessions reflect public opinion on this issue.

‘The media loves to sensationalise these sports people and let’s face it... that’s what sells their papers and gets people to watch their shows..’ (Female respondent focus group 1).

‘Sometimes I think that it is unfair in how some athletes, particularly women, are represented. You rarely see stories about fantastic exploits of women athletes and if they aren’t the most attractive like Petria Thomas [Australian Swimmer] then they barely get any coverage at all... and that means they don’t get the money that others get’ (Female talk-back radio respondent).

‘There is always a lot of attention on the bad boys of sport who play really well, but who can’t seem to get their act together off the field... these are the ones that everyone has an opinion on and likes to read about.. and let’s face it, they sell papers and magazines’ (Male respondent focus group 3).

‘Some athletes seem to be better at controlling their public image and it almost seems that no matter what they do they are portrayed as being ok – like Shane Warne – whereas others can’t do anything right even when they win – like Marc Philippoussis [Australian Tennis Player]. Poor bloke can’t get a break, if he wins he’s arrogant and if he loses he didn’t try hard enough! It’s a tough for these athletes and a fine line they have to walk’ (Male respondent focus group 2).

The celebrity lifestyle brings with it a degree of removal (both financially and socially) from the traditional sport fan and the sport, corporate investors and the sport stars themselves attempt to bridge this gap through the provision of

information, gossip, photos and statistics in order to keep sports fans interested and emotionally and financially connected to the sport.

The sporting celebrity who complains about media and fan attention hasn't fully appreciated that a well designed PR and image campaign is as important to their future as regular training and skills sessions relating to their sport. Whether they like it or not, sporting celebrities are seen as role models for youth, icons of national pride and heroes to their fans.

Theme 2 – PR as a tool in managing fan expectations of sport celebrities

For most fans in our research it was reasonably clear that there is a clear demarcation point for sports fans in their expectations of athletes and how they are viewed once an athlete became a “sports celebrity” (in that they were paid large sums of money, were professional in their sport and had a well known public image) as opposed to those who are seen as “local” or “amateur”.

‘For me there’s a big difference between amateur sports people and professionals. The professionals are just like entertainers and that’s what they’re paid for. Amateurs are playing sport because they want to be fit, or for a sense of community or for fun and the pressure to perform and to behave is not as great for them’ (Female respondent focus group 3).

‘..as soon as you get paid top dollars you are an ambassador for the sport and you lose your privileges in just doing the things us normal people might get away with’ (Respondent Internet Blog).

The “celebrity” title almost removes any obligation to treat sports stars with the same degree of privacy that we would impart to our fellow workmates or colleagues and definitely brings with it high expectations of on and off field behaviour and image.

‘I think that athletes should be role models both on the field and in their private lives. They are just like any other public figure and they owe their status to the adulation of the public – just like politicians. Sportspeople would not be celebrities if people didn’t care...in a sense they are working for us’ (Female respondent focus group 3).

‘When athletes get to a celebrity status then they are essentially working for me and everyone else who pays money to watch them play. I expect to get value for my money and ‘I want to know that they [sporting celebrities] will earn their salary through playing really well and hopefully winning. If their off-field behaviour impacts their playing then I get p***sed because it’s my money they are throwing away – this is their job and just like me, if I screw up I expect to get into trouble and get the boot – so should they! If that means the media is on them 24/7 so be it. That’s part of the deal when you become famous’ (Male respondent focus group 3).

Great athletes are immortalised in the minds of adults and children alike for their superior skills and abilities and the question that many are asking in the modern age is, Does this then mean they are good people with correspondingly admirable values, ethics and moral code of conduct? (Jones & Schumann, 2000). The answer is a resounding no.

In many cases we not only expect our sporting heroes to excel in their chosen field of endeavour, but we also expect them to demonstrate consistently high standards of behaviour and moral conduct. These expectations are not based on reality and often are

even greater than that we expect from ourselves or our own children. Interestingly, though these tough ideals are not necessarily required or expected of other types of celebrities such as actors, singers and models. In fact other types of celebrities are almost expected to lead glamorous and controversial lives.

Modern sport, particularly commercial televised sport, is generally accepted as being a platform for voyeuristic aggression for sports followers (Whannel, 1999). Sporting enthusiasts regale in the heightened emotions, struggle and adrenaline pumping rush that combative sporting performances bring whilst paradoxically paying lip service to the values of sportsmanship and conformity to rules.

It is this paradox that is at the heart of the issue of our expectations and reactions to sporting celebrities and their behaviour both on and off the sporting field. When we acknowledge that high profile sports are based on aggressive competition, where physical contact, foul language and trickery (commonly known as tactics) are an expected part of the performance, why then are we surprised and even outraged when those who play sport at the elite level are caught behaving in similar ways off the field (Joyner & Mummery, 2005).

‘There are very few sporting celebrities around at the moment that I would be proud of or would want to associate with’ (Female respondent focus group 3).

‘I get the impression that many of our high profile footballers are surly, ambitious and self-centred and who only care about their next pay cheque and they don’t even seem to care much about the game (Male talkback respondent).’

Theme 3 – The role of PR in the separation of on-field vs off-field image and expectations

This heightened interest from fans and the need to develop a public profile for successful sporting celebrities means that often we are also privy to many aspects of their lives that otherwise may not have been our business to know. Indeed, the more popular and high profile the sporting celebrity often the more we see evidence of socially unacceptable behaviour ranging from general “laddishness” to drunken exploits, domestic abuse, infidelity, drug abuse and violence (Lines, 2001).

Some say that this is a symptom of sports stars blurring the boundaries between being idolised for their on field skill and the real world and in many cases it is a symptom of a PR profile and campaign that is unsophisticated and ill advised. The old fashioned, “any news is good news” approach is certainly not mindful of the complexities of the sport domain nor the sophistication of its consumers.

The problem with this approach is that it can also lead to situations where the public, begins to treat these sportspeople as though they are special, and that they have an almost intimate relationship with them because they know them so personally. In turn these celebrities come to believe that they are above social norms and in some cases even

above the law (Coomber, 2006) and as a consequence we experience recalcitrant, unlawful and unethical behaviour.

‘I get the impression that many of our high profile footballers are surly, ambitious and self-centred and who only care about their next pay cheque and they don’t even seem to care much about the game (Male talkback respondent).’

‘It seems that professional sport is a bit vulgar and commercial now and the standards we expect don’t really seem to be there anymore – it’s all a bit shallow really’ (Female respondent focus group 2)

Our research also supports the view that sports fans generally can separate the on and off field behaviours of sports fans and further that they are willing to differentiate and moderate their expectations accordingly. In these cases off-field transgressions are seen (and should possibly be portrayed by PR tactics) as being the result of mitigating circumstances often resulting from naïve and vulnerable young sports stars who are simply acting as any young male would and as long as they play their sport well we shouldn’t be too harsh.

‘One of the main problems now is that a lot of our high profile sports people are only kids themselves and they are immature and make stupid decisions.. like all kids do at that age.. you can’t take a 20 year old, pay them heaps of money, treat them like a celebrity and then expect them to act in a mature way.’ (Female respondent group 2).

‘I think the bar is much higher now than it used to be for sports people. If you look back to the 50s and 60s sports people used to drink and smoke and weren’t as fit and committed as they are today. I think that the amount of money involved and the increased media attention and information has changed all that’ (Male respondent focus group 3).

‘I think that the media has a lot to answer for with sporting scandals. I mean these guys are just sports people and what they do with their lives off the field should be their own business. I don’t think any person would be squeaky clean if they were put under as much scrutiny as these guys. For me as long as they play well and are honest on the field and give it their all I don’t care if they get drunk or cheat on their wives – whose business is that anyway- they’re only human?’ (Male respondent focus group 1).

‘Being a sporting celebrity is just like any other job except we’re the ones paying the salary and part of that is the media attention. I mean if the media didn’t report what these guys did all the time we wouldn’t even know about it. The media is on these guys 24/7 and I don’t know anyone who doesn’t screw up at some time – imagine if everything we did was reported to everyone? The media is really to blame for all this. (Female respondent talk back radio).

Sport fans idealise that their sport of choice and therefore their sports stars epitomise and symbolise their cultural values. Qualities that are valued, but not often realistic, of being wholesome, honest and fair are all part of this conceptualisation of how we want our sports stars to behave and appear. These qualities that are the product of carefully homogenised and commodified cultural values generated by PR spin doctors who understand the nostalgic longing of people generally for a time when things were easier and life was simpler, are then used to make evaluations of the behaviours of sports celebrities.

The careful construction of an ideal sporting image through strategic PR tactics has led to expectations by sports fans that popular and successful sport celebrities will support

charities, to be interested in children who play the sport and love their families and their nation. Similarly, in addition to wanting them to be successful, we also want, and expect, our sports celebrities to have a personality that is likeable with a bit of spice, flamboyance and a sense that they care about the world and others in it (Real, 1996).

Simply winning, being successful, being clean living and focused on your chosen sport is not enough in our modern world of complex values. Sporting celebrities with these characteristics are paradoxically labelled as “boring” by the sporting media or “uninteresting”.

‘You can’t really call them sporting celebrities if they don’t occasionally do something outrageous or at least interesting. I mean look at Roger Federer he looks like a really nice guy and he certainly plays great tennis, and he’s cute, but [yawn] he seems a bit boring really!’ (Respondent Internet Blog).

So sport fans once again demonstrate the complex, and generally unrealistic, set of expectations they have of their sporting celebrities. They want them to win with humility and not petulance, to lose with dignity and not blame others, to be focused and driven in pursuit of their sport but not ambitiously self-cantered, to be considerate, show good manners and sportsmanship, to win without cheating through the use of drugs or deviousness, and most of all to look good exemplifying the ideal of sport being a healthy pursuit for the body (Stewart, 2006; Lines, 2001).

‘I get angry then sports people behave in a way that impacts their performance. I don’t think that’s fair on their team-mates or on the fans’ (Male respondent talk-back radio).

‘I can cope with all the human off field stuff generally, but if I find out a player has been taking drugs or has cheated or has hurt the game in some way, then I get really angry and disappointed’ (Female respondent focus group 2).

‘I can separate the off-field stuff from their on-field performances... I mean I don’t really care if David Beckham cheats on his wife, just that he plays great football!’ (Respondent Internet Blog).

So it would seem that we really do expect a lot from our sporting celebrities and we are largely intolerant of their mistakes. We expect sport celebrities’ performances to always be exceptional and we are unforgiving if they lose or don’t play well. We yell abuse from the sidelines and freely offer suggestions on how to improve their game and their lives. In short for many, the fact that these people are paid to play sport removes any obligation to treat them with the same degree of humanity that we would impart to our fellow workmates or colleagues. We are desperate to know all about them, and quick to judge them if they have personal failings or problems.

Supporting and encouraging this view is the global media and PR machines that surround these people. Their portrayal of sporting celebrities as “god like”, exciting, and glamorous stars confirms and encourages our high expectations and idealised views. Indeed, without the constant attention and interest of the international media and highly visible public profiles, we would most likely never know much about the personal lives and also human failings of our sport celebrities.

Discussion

Public relations and sports marketing literature agree that the concept of celebrity in sport is essential to drive the huge revenue streams required to fuel television broadcasts, sponsorship and event organization (Busch, Martin & Busch, 2004; Turner, Bonner & Marshall, 2000; L'Etang, 2006). However, while some attention has been given to the role of celebrity in attracting sponsorship, the larger cultural context of the roles of public relations and media in construction of celebrity and communication with fans and society generally has been ignored. Further the sporting organisation's social responsibility in this area has also historically been a process of adhoc action at best and naive ignorance at worst.

The sporting industry, like all others, needs to consider and embrace a business philosophy that recognises the social and cultural consequences of its actions (Pickton & Broderick 2005). For too long sporting organisations have operated outside the sphere of "standard" business practice because of the "special" nature of sport and many have suffered because of this. Modern sporting organisations are beginning to recognise the enormous impact they can and do have on their communities due to the strong emotional element of the sport product and the high levels of attachment and loyalty of their customers (Hopwood 2007). Sport Social Responsibility then (SSR), is the recognition of sporting organisations that their actions and strategies can and do have a long term social, cultural and ethical impact on their communities. This form of corporate

responsibility goes beyond the financial interests or legal requirements of the firm and applies to both the business decisions of the firm as well as the public relations actions.

In line with this is the understanding that the media industry globally has experienced a shift from hard news to soft news which has developed a celebrity industry where personality, image and behaviour are valuable both as news, and as products to be managed responsibly by the public relations industry (Carroll, 2002, Turner, Bonner & Marshall, 2000). The behaviour of sports celebrities both on and off the field is newsworthy and the media has become a place for public discourse and the expression of ideologies. This mandates that the public relations industry is prepared for the responsibility to manage who and what enters this public discourse. Also that public relations professionals embrace the complex sporting value chain and strategically manage communication and celebrity profile from creation to communication with fans.

The fans in this study were all able to separate the personal lives and often unacceptable behaviour of sports stars from their athletic ability and in most cases they were more pitying than angry or outraged by what they read, or saw. Given the volume of exposure and the inference of high levels of public outrage and moral indignation portrayed in the media in relation to these transgressions, researchers would expect to find a greater congruence of public feeling and reactionary behaviour when questioned about these issues. This research however, found that surprisingly few respondents indicated that the behaviour of individual sports stars would negatively impact their purchasing or their loyalty toward teams or the sport in general. Further the feelings of most was that these

sorts of transgressions were almost expected and certainly not always the fault of the celebrity.

At the end of the day it seems that the public is almost resigned to sports celebrities behaving badly, they are prepared to insulate their children from the impact of poor moral and value actions, all as long as that celebrity continues to do what they are paid for...to win and to ultimately entertain and give them value for their money.

Conclusion

This paper examined sports fans perceptions of celebrity behaviour and responsibilities, and the role of public relations and media in the construction of sporting celebrities, and the management of fan expectations in relation to those celebrities. It provided a triangulation of information from scholarly works, public opinion and popular press.

The results of this research clearly highlight the need for sporting organisations to consider their social and ethical responsibility in relation to the creation and ongoing management of management of sporting celebrities. Indeed sports PR professionals should be pro-active and deliberate in the creation of their sporting celebrities so that they can manage fan expectations and drive media attention in an appropriate and positive way that benefits both the organisation and the celebrity. Negative media and crisis situations in sport are inevitable it would seem, particularly among top athletes fuelled with dominant personalities and often radical personal life changes in terms of attention and financial gain. However, these situations would be better handled by a sports

celebrity who already has a strong positive image in the public arena and who is trained in how to avoid or subsequently handle negative media.

Future research in this area should aim to explore these issues among different stakeholder groups in sport. Public relations experts need to communicate with the fans that demand and consume sport celebrities and understand how this impacts on their choices in sports consumption and also their attitudes towards sports sponsors. Further, the investigation of the larger impact of public relations and in particular sport social responsibility in the development of successful and sustainable relationships between sport communities, sport celebrities and the media is essential in future research.

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Table 1 – Demographic profile of focus group respondents.

	<i>Number (n)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Gender		
Female	5	26.3
Male	14	73.7
Age		
25 and under	1	5.3
26 and under 35	6	31.6
36 and under 45	6	31.6
46 and under 55	2	10.5
56 and under 65	3	15.8
66 years and over	1	5.3
Income		
Under \$25,000	3	15.8
\$25,000 and under \$50,000	4	21.1
\$50,000 and under \$75,000	4	21.1
\$75,000 and under \$100,000	4	21.1
\$100,000 and over	4	21.1
Preference for watching sport		
Live	13	68.4
On TV	6	31.6