Sport Celebrity Idolatry: A Problem?

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Mass media has helped to perpetuate the public's infatuations with sport celebrities. For example, sport biographies for children remain popular. Written biographies tout professional athletes as role models through uplifting tales aboutof triumph over adversity,; the importance of a positive outlook,; and the value of a virtuous character. Classic Hollywood biopics about sport legends—such as Babe Ruth (starring William Bendix), Lou Gehrig (starring Gary Cooper), and Jim Thorpe (starring Burt Lancaster)—follow similar storylines.

For children and adults, sport celebrities often are depicted as *bigger than life*. General Mills celebrates esteemed athletes on its Wheaties boxes; Fat Head sells life-size decals of famous athletes; EA Sports ads and video games depict professional athletes as transcendent; news organizations refer to star athletes by a single name or nickname (Ichiro, Kobe, KG);, and star players represent entire leagues. Among adults, the continued proliferation of fantasy sports wagering further aggrandizes personal accomplishments over team success.

All sport constituents (e.g., players, owners, businesses, and media) benefit from professional athletes. Sport business is an estimated $213 billion industry; of this figure,

advertising is 14.1 percent, spectator spending is 13.4 percent, gambling is 9.7 percent, media broadcasting rights is 3.6 percent, and endorsements is 1 percent (Adams 2009). Sport organizations benefit from sport celebrities' visibility in the mass media (Bush, Martin, and Bush 2004; Jones and Schumann 2000; Stevens, Lathrop, and Bradish 2003). Sport icons are interviewed before, during, and after broadcasted sporting events. Internet sites and sports news cable channels report on professional athletes' contracts, legal issues, and personal successes. Magazine and newspaper articles offer intimate details about sport celebrities' lives (Lines 2001).

Sport celebrities are more than entertainers; they are expected to uphold their culture's values and morals (Jones and Schumann 2000). When the moral legacies of sport celebrities are compromised by drug and spousal abuse (Darryl Strawberry), cheating (steroid use by Manny Ramirez),; illegal behavior (tax evasion by Pete Rose),; inhumane activity (Michael Vick sponsoring dog fights),; and ill-advised off-the-field behavior (Michael Phelps smoking marijuana from a water pipe), young fans may come to accept and emulate aberrant behaviors. Notwithstanding Charles Barkley's well-known protestations, sport role models can shape young admirers' attitudes and behaviors. Adolescents' demeanor, fashion, language, and mindset may be influenced by the analogous traits of favored sport celebrities (Lines 2001).

Adolescents view sport celebrities as the most heroic celebrities (Stevens, Lathrop, and Bradish 2003). Later as adults, they idolize sport celebrities more intensely than other celebrities (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran 2002). Unfortunately, the seemingly innocuous infatuation of pre-adults with media-hyped sport celebrities may herald a psychopathological condition in adults. Unlike benign fandom, *sport celebrity worship*, which is evident across a wide range of sport-related venues, can lead to negative parasocial relationships and psychological instability (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran 2002). It can detract from the team focus of sports, glorify the wrong people as role models, and make people into commodities (Maltby et al. 2004). Thus, socially responsible sport organizations should discourage adolescents' *star player idolatry*—a likely precursor of adults' *sport celebrity worship*—despite the resulting temporary economic turmoil and resistance from entrenched beneficiaries. In this sense, the obligation (i.e., to develop a mutually beneficial relationship) that sport organizations have to fans, via a social contract, takes precedence (Donaldson 1982); it should be honored rather than shunned for the sake of profit goals.

Adolescent Hero Worship and Celebrity Worship

Through repeated media exposure, adolescents often grow fond of a sport celebrity and want to be like him or her. The appealing athletic skills, pro-social behaviors, and traits of a star player can contribute to adolescents' identity construction (Stevens, Lathrop, and Bradish 2003). Such identity-forming attachments can become parasocial relationships (i.e., non-reciprocated relationships in which one person is densely knowledgeable about another person). As adolescents share, via mass media, in their idols' supposed triumphs and defeats, these fantasized romantic or identity-molding bonds strengthen (Greene and Adams-Price 1990).

Through identifying with athletes, adolescents' seemingly innocuous hero worship may evolve into celebrity worship, a type of parasocial relationship in which people develop an unhealthy obsession with one or more celebrities. Such celebrity fixations may lead to excessive fantasy proneness and a *loss of self* (Maltby et al. 2006), and may cause fans to substitute artificial interactions with liked celebrities for face-to-face interactions with friends and acquaintances; that is, fans exposed to celebrities via mass media may descend mentally from the genuine social world to a world of artificial experience. Unfortunately, psychopathic intentions and behaviors may result when the line between genuine and artificial worlds blurs (Caughey 1978).

Celebrity worship *can* damage fans' psychological and emotional well-being (Maltby 2004). For example, high-level celebrity worship can lead to anxiety, depression, poor mental health, and negative affect; even low-level celebrity worship can lead to social dysfunction and depression (Maltby et al. 2004). Celebrity worship hinders self-understanding and interpersonal relations, while creating impressions of foolishness, irresponsibility, and submissiveness (McCutcheon and Maltby 2002). Through over-identification with sport idols, celebrity worship can cause a *loss of self* (McCutcheon, Lange, and Houran 2002).

Some personality traits may predispose people to celebrity worship. For example, the tension, concern, feeling of awkwardness, and discomfort induced by shyness cause some people to avoid strangers and acquaintances; as a result, they may pursue safe parasocial relationships (Ashe and McCutcheon 2001). Lonely people who use mass media to fulfill their social interaction needs may become parasocially attracted to media-based personalities (Rubin, Perse, and Powell 1985).

Sport celebrities may inspire stalking behaviors in some fans, which may lead to hostile and violent situations (e.g., in 1993, tennis star Monica Seles was stabbed by an obsessed fan) requiring legal intervention (Zona, Sharma, and Lane 1993). Because celebrity worship may lead to violence, fans who seek contact with their favorite celebrities are often viewed as dubious, disturbed, and hostile (Ferris 2001).

Possible Promotional Changes

- Sensitize the public to the dangers of *sport celebrity worship*.

If (1) idolization of celebrities by adolescents can be a gateway to celebrity worship by adults, (2) some adults have pathological celebrity worship tendencies, and (3) sport-celebrity-related promotional efforts can trigger (1) and (2), then *socially responsible* sport organizations —both professional and collegiate—may want to reconsider now-accepted promotional efforts. To maximize revenues, yet discourage celebrity worship, teams and leagues/conferences could adopt one or more of the following promotional changes.

F--For Sport-Related and Non-Sport-Related Products

- Sensitize the public to the dangers of *sport celebrity worship*.

To inform fans about the dangers of *sport celebrity worship*, sport organizations could create public service announcements (PSAs) about the damaging effects of parasocial relationships. These PSAs could stress team success over individual triumphs and suggest better alternatives than celebrity idolatry for adolescent identity formation.

- Require a warning statement about the dangers of *sport celebrity worship* in all celebrity-based ads.

Many recent sport-themed ad campaigns, such as Nike's "Be like Mike" campaign with Michael Jordan and "Witness" campaign with LeBron James, encouraged adolescent identity development based on sport celebrities. To promote celebrity-independent identity formation, ads could include warnings about the harm caused by *sport celebrity worship*.

- Discourage star athletes from exploiting their fame in product testimonials.

Ad campaigns with sport-celebrity endorsers frequently depict their exciting lifestyles. For example, Nike's ads with LeBron James show him enjoying the benefits of his stardom: residing in a luxurious home, relaxing by a lavish pool, and wearing glitzy diamond jewelry. To minimize celebrity worship inspired by opulent lifestyles, teams and leagues/conferences could dissuade star players from using personal backdrops in product testimonials.

- Focus player-centric ads on the player's positive traits, such as loyalty, determination, perseverance, sacrifice, and a positive attitude.

By focusing on star players' positive traits, viewers and younger fans are more likely to focus on the traits that made the athlete successful rather than the perks of success. For example, United Way ads that depict NFL athletes donating their time to after-school programs for youths and mentoring programs for teens focus on volunteers' character rather than celebrity status.

- Discourage sport-celebrity brands, such as Derek Jeter's Driven line for Avon, meant to borrow from a star player's celebrity status. In contrast, encourage official team brands.

Each professional sport league could mandate, as part of the players' union agreement, that it controls the commercial use of any player's image. In turn, leagues

and their respective teams could recoup additional salary costs by selling team endorsements to advertisers (e.g., the official toothpaste of the New York Yankees). Ultimately, endorsement monies would funnel indirectly to players via more lucrative team contracts.

--For Teams and Leagues/Conferences

- Focus promotional campaigns on teams rather than star players.

Professional leagues now focus much of their promotional efforts on star players; for example, specific athletes—like Peyton Manning and Derek Jeter—serve as the face of their league. Rather than player-centric marketing efforts, leagues could rely onuse team-centric marketing efforts, such as using multiple spokespersons or endorsers to encourage team support. Such tactics would be analogous to *Sports Illustrated* offering team and league memorabilia to new subscribers (e.g., a clock with a team or league logo), or celebrating team championships by offering customers and fans team-related merchandise (e.g., a basketball signed by all members of a newly crowned championship team).

- Use a team mascot—such as the New York Mets' Mr. Met or the Philadelphia Phillies' Philly Phanatic—rather than star players, to symbolize team support.

Using fictional characters to represent sport teams, such as the Phoenix Sun's Gorilla mascot, can encourage team support while avoiding the damaging effects of a suddenly disgraced player on fans' psyches. Analogous to cartoon '"spokescharacters'" in print ads leading to favorable advertising outcomes (Heiser, Sierra, and Torres, 2008), promoting team mascots may boost adolescent fan loyalty without inducing harmful *sport celebrity worship*.

Conclusion

Although firms often profit by using sport stars as endorsers, *sport celebrity worship* can damage fans and society. Studies on celebrity worship reveal harmful consequences for fans (e.g., declining psychological well-being), celebrities (e.g., being stalked), and society (e.g., blurring the line between reality and fantasy). To mitigate such negative effects, sport organizations could adopt promotional efforts that discourage celebrity worship.

Given the powerful incentives to maintain the status quo, some sport teams and advertisers may resist our recommendations. However, these entities could be persuaded by enlightened fans—who could threaten to divert their entertainment dollars elsewhere or boycott irresponsibly advertised products—to adopt one or more of our proposed promotional changes; h. Hence, our desire to alert sports fans to this problem.

Sport teams and advertisers piggyback on journalists, who popularize star athletes as a byproduct of their published work. We do not mean to challenge journalists' right to free speech; rather, we mean to discourage the exploitation of this byproduct.

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