

**Play the Game Conference, Copenhagen, 9 November 2005**  
**Sports Journalism in the Promotional age**

Raymond Boyle  
Stirling Media Research Institute  
University of Stirling  
raymond.boyle@stir.ac.uk

*Everything has changed in the relationship between journalism and sport and often for the worst, such as the rise of PR. It's much harder to get decent access. I can't remember the last time I sat down with someone knowing you had an open-ended stretch of time. The other day I did a big interview with someone and I had twenty minutes, and he was ten minutes late. Not a lot of time to see into somebody's soul. And that's much more common*

Richard Williams, Sportswriter, *The Guardian*, Interview with author, 10 March, 2005.

*The plaything of corporate public relations experts and self-servers, modern journalism is found to be not so much a public service as a public health hazard.*

Ian Hargreaves (2003) *Journalism: Truth or Dare?*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, page 13.

**SLIDE**

**INTRODUCTION**

Modern sports journalism in the UK is significantly shaped and influenced by public relations. In this paper I want to briefly examine the increasingly complex relationship between sports, journalism and public relations. As the sports economy grows, fuelled by media interests, so to have the role of public relations and image management in sports. To what extent is this changing the relationship between journalists and the sports that they cover?

This paper comes out of research for a book on sports journalism which will be published next year and examines a number of ethical issues faced by sports journalists as access to particular forms of information becomes more difficult as the sports industry seeks to exercise greater control over their public media image.

(SLIDE)

**SPORTS JOURNALISM, ACCESS AND SOURCES**

A fundamental tension runs through sports journalism, and while it is not unique to this area of journalism, it shapes the landscape within which contemporary sports journalism is produced. At its core is a relationship between journalist and source with sports organizations wanting favourable media coverage and sports journalists need access to sources.

The growing commercialisation of sport and the growth of a more celebrity and television orientated sports culture has also hastened a change in this relationship, specifically for print media journalists.

For many years in the UK the sports industry was largely characterized by a distinct lack of formal public relations or news management practice. Rather personal relations between managers, journalists and players remained the key for the beat sports journalist.

It is worth noting that attempts to manipulate the media in order to set the news agenda are not new. There has always been an inherent tension between journalism and the sports and entertainment industry. The planting and leaking of stories through the sports press has long been a common feature of sports journalism. The significant difference these days is that it is agents who play a key role sourcing information about players and their desire to engineer moves from and to particular football clubs or provide inside information on the progress, or lack of it, of contract negotiations.

In the digital age, another change is the pace at which such information circulates as media outlets feed of each other, reproducing stories that are often unchecked.

However it is also clear that while such relationships have been unhealthy for sports journalism they are not unique to sports reporting. Indeed the relationships sketched out above are replicated in other areas of journalism such as politics, where the selective leaking of stories and the rise in PR have become commonplace in recent years.

(SLIDE)

#### **THE RISE IN SPORTS PR**

What has ratcheted up the tension in such relationships is the increased role of both the market and public relations in shaping news values and agendas. We also see a range of stakeholders other than the traditional newsgathering organizations attempting to exploit digital systems to deliver exclusive sporting content for primarily commercial return. Inevitably this has raised issues of control and access to players, images and information as clubs, players, their agents, sponsors and journalists attempt to mobilize media content for a range of often competing commercial ends.

As the media industries have become more complex and interrelated, so too have the networks of influences that help shape contemporary sports journalism. Allied with this is the rise of techniques now common practice in sports journalism that are more readily associated with other aspects of the entertainment industry. These include copy, picture and in some cases headline approval by agents working for sports stars that have sold stories to newspapers.

(SLIDE)

#### **THE RISE OF CELEBRITY AND THE IMPACT OF SPORTS PR**

While the sports industry has always had its pantheon of heroes and villains that have often been created by media coverage and sports journalism in particular, the explosion of media outlets and the related expansion of journalism associated with sports have helped both to feed and fuel the developing celebrity culture.

As money has flowed into the elite end of sport and the attendant commercial and corporate interest in associating brands with elite sports and sportstars has developed, this has been accompanied by the growth in the power and influence of agents, image consultants and public relations managers. These groups act as a buffer between the star and their public and attempt to manage the image of their client across the range of media platforms which have helped facilitate the pace, scale and shape of contemporary celebrity culture.

**(SLIDE)**

### **THE EASY LIFE: PRESS CONFERENCES AND PHOTO CALLS**

For some sports journalists, while they lament the passing of the more informal network of contacts –a theme which finds an echo among journalists in other areas such as politics and crime reporting - it has, in other ways made life easier for many journalists. As sports organizations have become more media and image aware the formalizing of press conferences, photo calls and such like have all helped to routinise and formalise a large part of the flow of information.

Allied with this is the realization that the print media cannot compete for immediacy with the broadcast, and online media. As a result they have to offer something different to that which can be found on 24/7 rolling news, so comment and opinion pieces become commonplace.

And sports like to try and control their image.

Formula 1 motor sport for example exerts an extensive stranglehold on the image of the sport through public relations and communications executives with the tacit acceptance of a core of journalists who cover the F1 circuit. While at other sports such as golf, a journalist does not need to leave the media centre where they are spoon fed material from which they can build their story

It would be wrong however to accuse sports journalists as being unique in becoming compromised by being too close to sources. It is an issue in political journalism and as the quote at the start of the paper suggested an endemic problem across journalism.

There is also the growing problem for journalists of elite sports stars using the media simply as a vehicle through which to promote their brand image and the commercial interests which they endorse. What this type of control and access produces is a neutered form of journalism, in which little is revealed.

**(SLIDE)**

### **THE SPORTS INDUSTRY AND IMAGE MANAGEMENT**

As sections of the sports industry have become rich with the flow of money from television and sponsors, so the issue of governance in sport has become more important. Often this means treating those in positions of power with the same journalistic rules of engagement that people in public life can now expect from the contemporary media. In a news hungry 24/7 media environment, sports related stories, in particular if they involve sexual scandal and high profile individuals, are firmly part of the mainstream news agenda, and will be pursued

in the same manner as political scandals, often broken by the tabloids and then commented upon by all sections of the media.

Thus public relations techniques often exacerbate the already corrosive relationship that exists between many sports and journalists.

Yet to what extent are parts of the sports industry, and its attendant sports journalism simply not an appropriate arena in which to simply transplant aspects of public relations practice or 'spin' that characterize, for example, political journalism and culture? The British and Irish Lions rugby tour of 2005 offers some insights.

**(SLIDE)**

### **SPORT, SPIN AND THE LIONS TOUR OF 2005**

One of the most obvious fusions of sport and public relations in recent times occurred with the appointment by Sir Clive Woodward of Alastair Campbell to act as a consultant on media and communications issues on the British and Irish Lions rugby tour of New Zealand in the summer of 2005. Campbell was the most famous political public relations co-ordinator in British politics, closely associated with the rise of 'spin', New Labour and Tony Blair in particular.

Woodward, The Lions manager felt that Campbell, with his experience in the political world of working in a high pressure environment would be ideal for the most high profile tour in the history of the Lions.

There is a crucial central element however that distinguishes sport from other areas of cultural and political life and thus makes much of the 'spin' that has developed round the sports industry obsolete. Sport is almost completely driven by results, often on a week by week basis. Winning matches, titles and trophies is a powerful panacea for many ills. Sustained success in sport makes you a powerful player with the media, while defeat (an inevitable part of sports culture) weakens the defensive shield around you.

Indeed much of the coverage of the Tour focused on the role of 'spin' and Campbell's role in this process. The fact that the Lions lost the series by 3 tests to nil and were outclassed in all of these matches added credence to the notion that in sport, winning and positive results overrides everything else.

As the Tour degenerated through injuries and poor results in the Test matches, there was an inevitability about the criticism leveled at Woodward and Campbell. The former for getting his tactics and priorities wrong, the latter for attempting to control and stage manage a Tour, and deflect attention from the poor decisions being made by Woodward.

In this instance the lesson was the extent to which that both Campbell and Woodward underestimated the breadth and range of rugby journalism that already existed in the British press. Clearly undertones of the 'toy department' mentality still informed both Woodward's and Campbell's thinking with regard to this section of the media, which included not only the dedicated rugby

journalists but also well respected No 1 sportswriters covering the Tests. The idea that these experienced journalists would welcome being told how they might improve their copy seems to suggest a serious misreading of the journalistic culture associated with this area of the trade.

They also misunderstood that promoting the game is not simply what sports journalism is about, and despite the increasing blurring of the line between PR and journalism and between editorial and advertising in sports journalism, its winning and success on the field of play that remains the most important driver in shaping journalistic opinion and comment, and the newspaper coverage of the dismal Lions tour of 2005 merely reaffirmed this.

(SLIDE)

### **CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE FOR JOURNALISM IN THE PROMOTIONAL AGE**

At the core of this paper is a debate about the location of sportswriting and reporting within the wider field of journalism. If sports themselves have become more commercialized and are increasingly part of what might be viewed as the entertainment industries, then one should not be surprised if aspects of journalistic practice evident in say the music or film industries, are reflected increasingly in sports journalism.

This however does not automatically mean that sports journalism is simply becoming an extension of the gossip and celebrity driven journalism that characterizes much of the heavily expanded media environment. The nature of sports performance differentiates itself from say the celebrity industry in a number of ways. Success and achievement based on a talent to play a particular sport to a high level remains, largely, an important attribute for entrance into the upper echelons of sports stardom.

Yet as the tentacles of sport reach out in a more explicit manner into other areas of political, economic and cultural life and in so doing encroach – and in turn are encroached upon - the journalistic terrain of other areas of the industry, so the nature of its reporting and the stories constructed around it will continue to change and develop.

In the UK broadsheet press the range of journalism associated with sport is unrecognisable to that which existed even ten years ago. There is more sports journalism and writing, a greater range and it is not confined simply to the sports sections, but can be found on news, features, business and comment pages.

In the age of promotion and media manipulation, the need to produce uncomplacent sports journalism, is, in many ways simply an extension of the challenge faced by journalists in other spheres of journalism. As attempts to control information and news management grow, as elite sport becomes increasingly politically, commercially and culturally important so sports journalists will have to work harder to get beyond the stories that to all intents and purposes simply drop into their laps.