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SCANDALS AND SPORT

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Introduction: the sport of scandal

Scandals relating to sport are highly variable in nature, frequent and occupy extraordinary prominence in the media. They have in common with all other scandals elements of normative transgression, but also possess specific properties that are related to the socio-cultural positioning of sport in the multiple spaces between bounded local communities and seemingly boundless global cyberspace. A small sample of sport scandals during this century includes: French captain Zinedine Zidane head-butting Italian player Marco Materazzi and being sent off during the 2006 Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup final in Berlin; American golfer Tiger Woods’s exposure as a serial adulterer in 2009; confirmation in 2013 of cyclist Lance Armstrong’s systematic, clandestine use of performance-enhancing drugs; the 2014 trial and jailing of Olympic and Paralympic runner Oscar Pistorius for the murder of his girlfriend Reeva Steenkamp; arrests for corruption of senior officials attending the 2015 FIFA Congress in Zurich; and the 2016 revelation of Russia’s state-sponsored doping in Olympic and other sports.

These scandals range from the tragic to the ethically dubious to the relatively trivial, but are united by their capacity to garner enormous media coverage. They have this degree of prominence because of the popularity of sport and the celebrity status of the sportspeople involved or implicated. Their relationship to sport is diverse and uneven, but the various associations with it invariably evoke or play on sport’s institutional structures, practices, myths and symbols. It is necessary to understand this socio-cultural context in order to explain how a transgression involving sport becomes, indisputably, a sport scandal. For it to be deemed as such, the relationship with sport must be more than an incidental one. Instead, sport must be a crucial factor in either causing or interpreting what has occurred and the reactions to it, and the media – both institutional and social – integral to its scandalous magnification.

The literature on sport scandals is now quite extensive, although the media dimensions may not necessarily be central. If the essence of scandal lies in the nature of the transgressive act, then the role of the media can be reduced to that of the vector carrying information and analysis to the wider world. But, in a variation of old epistemological and ontological questions about the relationship between an event and its apprehension, a full-blown scandal requires substantial media attention for it to acquire that status. Professional sport provides an instant connection to
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the media, not least because the convergence of the two institutions has produced the synthetic phenomenon of ‘MediaSport’ (Wenner 1998) set within a vast ‘media sports cultural complex’ (Rowe 2004). However, the media do more than merely relay elements of scandal to large, dispersed and heterogeneous audiences (the conventional definition of mass communication – McQuail 1997), but help determine its trajectory and fate in such a way that it may be called a ‘media scandal’, which is defined by Lull and Hinerman (1997, 3) as follows:

A media scandal occurs when private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media, producing a range of effects from ideological and cultural retrenchment to disruption and change.

From this analytical perspective, a ‘media sport scandal’ is a private transgression involving a sportsperson or organisation that becomes common knowledge via mediation, and then is ‘mediatised’ (Skey et al. 2017) in the sense that the extensive involvement of the media crucially affects the meaning and nature of the scandal and its implications beyond the MediaSport world. A curious paradox here, though, is that, as in the abovementioned case of Zidane, some of the largest global media audiences ever assembled may be watching an apparently spontaneous transgression in real or slightly delayed time. But such acts are never only played out in public and consigned to history. Instead, once they transpire the imperatives of explanation and elaboration take the media audience away from the stadium and into the private sphere; in this case to the protagonist’s origins (North Africa and Mediterranean France in the case of Zidane), the complicity of others (what did Zidane’s victim say to provoke the assault?) and into other aspects of personal and social history that led to the pivotal moment, such as the incidence of racism in world football (Rowe 2010). They also take the collective gaze into other public and private spaces – streets, night clubs, locker rooms, hotels, motor vehicles, car parks, private homes and so on.

Sport scandals, therefore, always play in two directions, with conduct that is mostly out of sight suddenly and spectacularly brought into the media spotlight, while conduct that is available for all to see (usually on the field of play) is scrutinised for hidden meanings that, in turn, are compulsively connected to what happens outside the live media frame. In order to understand the specific nature of the sport scandal, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of sport culture, and especially its entwinement with media, in constantly producing scandalous transgressions which, in turn, spill out well beyond the sport world that seeks to suppress or contain it.

Sport and the culture of scandal

Sport is a form of popular culture that is extraordinarily susceptible to scandal of many kinds. As competitive, rule-governed physical activity, it offers manifold possibilities for transgression, which may involve breaking the rules (in some sports called ‘laws’) that govern it. This conduct may be surreptitious – for example, ingesting performance-enhancing drugs or fixing the outcome of sport contests by bribing athletes and officials in the service of betting ‘stings’. It may also be overt, such as through media-captured illegitimate physical violence. Such unethical actions can only lead to full-blown scandals because of the industrial scale of modern professional sport, with its vast, emotionally invested audiences, active support by national governments and transnational private corporations and, above all, its saturation presence in the media. This combination means that even relatively trivial transgressions, such as the extra-marital dalliances or illicit recreational drug use of prominent sportspersons (usually men), may take on
the appearance of scandal because of the reach and intensity of the attendant media coverage and of reactions to it. Contrastingly, sport can become a vibrant, significant theatre of collective discourse and debate around social issues involving legitimate scandals that have been historically submerged, such as spousal abuse or discrimination based on ‘race’, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. This compulsive generation of scandal in sport needs to be analysed and understood, not only to learn more about the social institution of sport, but to grasp how the phenomenon can come to consume so much prominent media space and, in some cases, become the lead global or national news story of the day (Rowe 2011).

Scandals in sport, while much deplored, are nonetheless integral elements of a mediated sports culture that noisily demands constant attention in a crowded popular cultural marketplace. They have held considerable interest in the sociological, cultural and communication literature of sport for a range of reasons. First and most obviously, they are imbued with the negative news values that make for more dramatic, attention-grabbing news than most orthodox ‘good’ news stories. During the twentieth century, in particular, when newspapers tended to contain much of the sport news on the back pages and news broadcasts confined most of the sports reporting to a dedicated segment towards the end of bulletins (just before the weather), a major sport scandal involving famous people could break out into what print journalists call ‘the front end of the book’ and might lead broadcast bulletins. The advantage of this discursive mobility is that sport is able to resonate beyond the important but still limited world of athletes, clubs, associations and fans, meaning that a sports scandal becomes something of far greater consequence – for example, bad behaviour by an athlete, team or sport body may be regarded as a crisis of national character or as an indictment of contemporary society.

Although it is possible to exaggerate the social and cultural importance of sport – even in so-called ‘sports mad’ countries like Australia only one in five adults plays any organised sport at all, and less than half go to stadia to watch it – sporting mythologies pervade the national social imaginary. This is because sport has derived much of its affective force from its founding mythology in the Ancient Games of Greece, although what is recognised today as sport is mainly an invention of the nineteenth century and was first established in Britain. Early forms of physical culture that mutated into the institution of sport bore only a passing resemblance to its modern forms. It was intermittent, loosely controlled and usually had little concern with keeping score, and was closer to carnivalesque rituals than to regulated encounters (Guttmann 2004). The opportunities for an expansive scandal, given the relatively unlicensed violence of the likes of ‘folk football’ and the lack of a media apparatus to project them beyond the local, were limited to the everyday grudges within what Tonnies (Harris 2001) calls ‘gemeinschaft’ (community). As sport industrialised and professionalised, especially at the end of the nineteenth century, it became more rationalised and governed, thereby magnifying the opportunities for transgression in the wider ‘gesellschaft’ (society). At the same time, it was placed under greater surveillance by the media which, by the second half of the twentieth century, could besiege sporting encounters with a vast battery of cameras with increasing capabilities to get close to the action, playing and replaying it at many speeds and from multiple angles. Later, the mobile camera phone was possessed by most citizens in many societies. This combination of strict rules, intense scrutiny and media technology created perfect conditions for scandal.

Formed mainly out of these unruly forms of folk physical play, sports such as cricket and rugby union emerged that made much of following appropriate rules and respecting one’s opponent as part of the ‘civilising process’ in which ‘sportisation’ was a key constituent (Elias and Dunning 1986). Good conduct was celebrated at the expense of winning, and playing sport in the right way became a mark of class distinction. As it was progressively insinuated into the educational system (to the point of being compulsory), sport became something of an
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ethical classroom where leadership, hierarchy, cooperation, organisation, preparedness, flexibility, competition and the division of labour were promoted and learnt. Elite private schools found in sport the means of symbolically training the officer class and other anointed leadership strata, imbuing them with approved masculine traits (Hargreaves 1986). Inimical to such nobility was what was seen as the repugnant practice of being paid to play. Amateurism in sport was, therefore, viewed as a sign of aristocratic gentlemanliness that could be distinguished from the petty bourgeoisie, proletariat and peasantry, who mostly lacked the independent means to sustain themselves as fully committed sporting amateurs. When French aristocrat Baron Pierre de Coubertin agitated to revive the Olympics in the late nineteenth century, he grafted selected elements of the Ancient Games onto this nascent British sport culture shaped by Dr William Penny Brookes (Young 2002).

The actual domination of amateurism was greatly exaggerated and the longstanding practice of remunerating or generously compensating athletes was submerged in this carefully confected mythology. A fully fledged sport industry, tied closely to the developing media industry, increasingly matched the rise of paying spectatorship with paid players and commercial sport organisations. But the traces of amateurism’s relatively brief hegemony remain in the nostalgia and fantasy that still permeate much of what is said about professional sport, as opposed to its actual practice. The belief that sport is a haven from the wider, crueller world that surrounds it still periodically surfaces and, most importantly, attends the eruption of scandal. It is here that there are anguished complaints of ‘loss of innocence’, ‘disillusion’ and ‘shock’. In other words, professional sport, which has developed as a ruthlessly capitalistic global industry through its close alliance with the equally commercially hard-nosed media industry, unavoidably manufactures scandal out of the cleavage between its idealised past and its prosaic present.

This unstable mix has attracted a substantial literature because almost any transgression in sport can be construed as an affront to its historically nurtured sense of ethical nobility. Such work has focused variably on the sport-society nexus, with some contributions working inwards from the society that creates scandals in sport, and others using a specific sport scandal to critique the institution of sport and/or the society that shaped it. An example of the former, taking inspiration from the approach adopted in works like Critcher’s (2003) Moral Panics and the Media and the classic sociology of Max Weber, is McDermott’s (2016) book The War on Drugs in Sport: Moral Panics and Organisational Legitimacy, which sees in the ongoing scandals surrounding performance and image-enhancing drugs a crisis of order and legitimacy among elites, rather than a social problem that merits such stringent, bodily invasive policies and procedures (Critcher 2013 addresses sport directly in this context). A similar perspective, but here enlisting Foucauldian and post-structuralist theory, is deployed by Pappa (2013), in advancing the position that drugs in sport scandals at the 2004 and 2008 Olympics were emotive media constructions that enabled the imposition of policies of surveillance and control that extended well beyond sport and athletes. Another conspicuous area where moral panic theory has been used in the sport scandal literature relates to spectator violence in sport, especially hooliganism in association football in the United Kingdom (Poulton 2005; Spaaij 2011; Whannel 1979). Here again, it is argued that the phenomenon that produces a string of scandals in the media – threatening or violent conduct before, during and after football matches by young, mainly working-class men supporting opposing teams – is exaggerated by a range of ‘moral entrepreneurs’. Although the problem is not treated as a complete invention, it is argued that, following the pioneering work of Stanley Cohen (2002), it is used to create ‘folk devils’ who symbolise a contemporary malaise, which must be countered by the police with additional powers, and by the judiciary with demographically targeted sentencing of escalating severity, urged on by a complicit media that benefits from such drama-infused bad news in terms of influence and/or profit (Rowe 2009).
Sport scandals manifesting as moral panics tend to varying degrees to underplay the seriousness of what has prompted them and to challenge the explanatory accounts provided by authority figures, especially those who use the institution of sport as a laboratory for exerting greater power across whole societies. Other approaches work mainly in another direction, treating scandalous transgressions as an institutional failure of sport, with some going further in presenting sport as the bearer of socially damaging ideologies and practices that are drawn from the society at large, and then reproducing and reinforcing these social pathologies. For example, sport has long been critiqued as male-dominated and as a bastion of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (English 2017). This situation is thrown into stark relief during sport scandals that revolve around sexism directed at women and also homophobia (often towards men, whose masculinity is inconsistent with sporting machismo). Thus, for example, Toffoletti (2007, 435) has used the scandals involving sexual assault allegations in Australian rules football to advance a critique of both sport and media culture:

Some common themes emerged in the reporting of sexual assault and the Australian Football League in sport sections of the Herald-Sun and The Age. Over the course of a year, it was found that there were stories in both papers that favoured narratives of individualism to explain how sexual assault occurs. These reports relied on gender stereotypes to depict female ‘groupies’ as transgressors of proper femininity that expects women to be (hetero)sexually available, yet passive. At the same time, errant male players were constructed as ‘wayward’ individuals, and solely responsible for their actions. In these articles, very little attention was given to a consideration of the gender power relations that play out in Australian football culture and the systems of value that inform how women and men are differently positioned in the Australian sporting landscape.

The focus here is on scandal in sport – ‘Australian football culture’ – while other gender critiques make a clearer linkage between sexism in sport and in wider society (e.g., Birrell and McDonald 2000). This dialectical relationship plays across a range of domains of male athlete misbehaviour (including homophobia – Osborne, Sherry and Nicholson 2016). Along with sex, gender and sexuality, sport scandals involving race and ethnicity have also been a key entry point into the critical analysis of the two-way flow of ideologies and practices of dominance into and out of the sport field (Cashmore and Cleland 2014).

The most prominent and well-remembered sport scandals often combine the ‘liveness’ of sport television and the substantial ‘back stories’ that touch on major social issues. A famous example is Canadian sprinter Ben Johnson, who won the 100 metres final at the 1988 Seoul Olympics in world record time only to be found guilty of taking steroids. In seeking to explain this misdemeanour (parodied two decades later by Johnson in later-banned advertisements for an online sports betting company – Meade 2017), attention turned to his origins in Jamaica and to the murky world of athlete doping. Similarly, when US boxer Mike Tyson (who was convicted of rape in 1992 and served a jail sentence) bit off part of Evander Holyfield’s ear in the ring in 1997, much attention was given to his upbringing in a New York ‘project’, to the treatment of women and to the ‘crisis’ of African American masculinity. In this way, sport scandals prompt high-profile debates about the ethics of sport and the window that it holds up to the society that sustains and glamourises it. The visibility of celebrity sportspeople means that scandals involving them become news almost automatically (Whannel 2002), not least among people with little interest in sport. But the less ‘spectacular scandals’ in which sport organisations are implicated are no less important – and probably more so. Journalists and academics who have long worked in this area with little mainstream interest may, in some circumstances, be propelled into the spotlight by an institutional sport scandal that in some respects echoes
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dramatised media treatments of organised crime. This narrative frame dominated in, for example, the aforementioned FIFA scandal (Mersiades 2018), just as it has in the case of a peak body of comparable scale – the International Olympic Committee (Jennings and Sambrook 2000).

There are, then, many types of sport scandal, each of which has a different aetiology and trajectory, receiving attention at different levels and sometimes remaining in the memory for decades. It is useful, finally, to take a recent example that exposes the mechanics of scandal formation, revealing elements common to all media sport scandals as well as others that have special resonance in particular sports.

Cricket’s lost spirit

In March 2018, during a test cricket match between South Africa and Australia in Cape Town, the Australian cricketer Cameron Bancroft was observed by cameras at the ground engaging in the forbidden practice of ‘ball tampering’ (interfering with the surface of the cricket ball in order to give advantage to the bowling side) by using a rough surface – sandpaper. Aware that he had been caught, Bancroft placed the offending article inside his trousers (leading to ribald jokes in tabloid and social media). At an ensuing media conference, Steven Smith, the Australian captain, admitted that the plan to interfere with the condition of the ball was taken by the team’s leadership group during the prior luncheon interval. Over the following hours, the news was released and debated across time zones, and in Australia the scandal dominated the news cycle for over a week. This was not treated as a straightforward technical case of rule breaking, but was widely regarded as a moral affront – in other words a full-blown media sport scandal. Smith, Bancroft and vice-captain David Warner were banned for a period, and appeared in highly emotional, ‘confession-style’ media conferences. Later media coverage of the inevitably named ‘sandpapergate’ included Warner’s wife Candice’s interview with Australian Women’s Weekly, and constant references to the stigma now attached to Australian sport (not just to cricket) (Clarke 2018). The classic constituents of the media sport scandal are exposed in this instance.

The moral affront is necessarily accentuated. Cricket is particularly susceptible to scandal (along with the Olympics, which has a formal charter, and baseball, with its heavily mythologised, nostalgic ethos of lost American innocence) because of its historically cultivated reputation as a ‘gentleman’s game’. Much is made, therefore, of the ‘spirit of cricket’, including protocols such as not dissenting from the rulings of umpires and avoiding direct physical contact between batters and bowlers. Although this behavioural ideal is often not realised in practice, especially as the game has progressively turned into a year-round transnational sport (including shorter, spectacular forms of the game like the Twenty20 format of the Indian Premier League, with its franchise system and player auctions), it is routinely evoked. Thus, for example, The Sydney Morning Herald (2018), the oldest still-published newspaper in Australia, immediately produced an editorial which opened with the statement ‘The Australian Test side is our oldest, best known and most widely followed national team’ and closed with the lament that ‘For a nation so proud of its sporting prowess, this is a shameful episode. It is no overstatement to describe this as one of the darkest days in Australian sport’. On a day when the story led all broadcast news bulletins, newspaper front pages and news website pages in Australia, the then current Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, complained on television that:

We all woke up this morning shocked and bitterly disappointed by the news from South Africa.

It seemed completely beyond belief that the Australian cricket team had been involved in cheating.
After all, our cricketers are role models and cricket is synonymous with fair play [. . .]
I have to say that [to] the whole nation, who holds those who wear the Baggy Green up on a pedestal, about as high as you can get in Australia.

(Cricket Network 2018)

At that same time the Australian Sport Commission (ASC) (2018), the peak federal sporting body (now known as Sport Australia), issued a media statement declaring:

The ASC condemns cheating of any form in sport. The ASC expects and requires that Australian teams and athletes demonstrate unimpeachable integrity in representing our country.

The Australian cricket team are iconic representatives of our country. The example they set matters a great deal to Australia and to the thousands of young Australians playing or enjoying the sport of cricket and who look up to the national team as role models.

These are the quintessential elements of one major sport scandal form – national shame, defective role models to the young, unfair and unethical play, and so on – that is produced out of the symbolic alignment of sport and national identity upon which international sport relies for its affective potency. The saturation institutional media coverage was accompanied by enormous social media activity on platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, and spread well beyond South Africa and Australia. In the United Kingdom, for example, major broadcasters like the BBC and Sky UK, the ‘qualities’ such as The Telegraph and The Guardian, and tabloids including The Sun and The Daily Mail/Mail Online, all featured the story heavily, with many print articles adopting a condemnatory nationalistic stance, including making allegations about previous cases of ‘cheating’ (Davies, Leclere and Moore 2018; Hayward 2018).

The elevated ethical tone evident in the torrent of interventions that transformed a story of unethical sporting conduct into a sprawling media scandal contained constituents of ‘moral panic’ as previously elaborated. The degree of moral entrepreneurship evident in the media, much of which was elegiac in nature, relied on a sharp contrast between the spirit of cricket and its abjuration. Yet, as in the case of most such scandals, the ‘loss of innocence’ that was described could only be maintained by underplaying – indeed, in some sense, forgetting – previous transgressions and scandals in cricket and in other sports (Ferguson 2016), and by neglecting to recognise and analyse the structural forces that had created the conditions that induced the unethical conduct that was almost universally condemned.

**Future scandals**

It has been proposed in this chapter that scandals in sport are not controversies arising from unpredictably aberrant behaviour. They are the products of its structural dynamics as commercialised, mediatised, popular culture fashioned out of folk life and heroic amateur mythology. This may be criticised as an overly functionalist position, but it does not deny the myriad ways in which such scandals play out. For example, the efflorescence of social media in the twenty-first century has exacerbated the proliferation and acceleration of scandal cycles – in Cohen’s (2002) terms, the result is constant, rapid ‘amplification’ and ‘de-amplification’ of moral panics in sport. At the same time, the digital record means that earlier sport scandals are always, already available for evocation and recirculation across institutional and social media. Scandals may also
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be deliberately manufactured as a way of generating and distributing capital within the ‘attention economy’ (Hutchins and Rowe 2012) – the logic that, for example, turned ‘bad boy’ athletes like basketballers Dennis Rodman and Charles Barkley into media celebrities (Baker and Boyd 1997).

Future intellectual work on media sport scandals needs to be critically reflexive about its position in the cultural economy, and to be appropriately sceptical of deployments of the concept of moral panic that critique media processes while underemphasising the substantive social issues to which they are intimately linked. Sport scandals are never just about sport, and sometimes have a very direct bearing on matters ranging from institutional governance to domestic violence. The communicative hyperactivity that they generate in a febrile media environment should not distract the critical gaze from sport’s role as a major social institution that is deeply implicated in both progressive social currents and their stubborn obstruction through an exceptionalist ideological appeal to sport’s foundational Corinthian mythology.

References


