INTRODUCTION:
MAPPING THE MEDIA SPORTS CULTURAL COMPLEX

The functions of the Reader

This Reader has two main functions. First, it can operate as a ‘stand-alone’ introduction to the research and scholarship addressing the relationships between sport, culture and the media from the perspective of Cultural and Media Studies. This is a growing field of inquiry, and the Reader can operate as a useful point of entry into it through its selection of ‘classic’ and contemporary work in various countries. Once acquainted with the nature, scope and direction of work in the area, readers new to the field will be able to use the collection as a reference point for their own investigations and inquiries into what I believe, without a hint of editorial bias, to be a dynamic, fascinating subject of underestimated sociological significance.

The second intended function of this Reader is to operate as a companion volume to either or both editions of my book Sport, Culture and the Media: The Unruly Trinity (Rowe 1999, 2004). The necessary restrictions of length and scope for a monograph inevitably mean that many aspects of sport, culture and the media can often only be covered in a synoptic way. The publication of an accompanying Reader enables several topics to be treated more intensively and in greater detail. It should also be acknowledged, without disingenuous modesty, that any single author has their only-too-obvious limitations, and that it is sometimes better to allow the ‘original’ work to speak for itself than to gloss it. An edited companion collection can broaden understanding of the subject through exposure to different perspectives and styles
of analysis. In addition, it enables students, teachers, scholars and researchers to become directly acquainted with a mixture of ‘canonical’ works and new insights that convey a strong sense of a field of study with its own history and intellectual trajectory.

Choosing a small selection of works from a large, growing and diverse body of literature is a humbling activity and, as noted in the Acknowledgments, I make no strict claim to formal comprehensiveness and representativeness. The primary aim of this book is to provide readers with a grasp of how the relationships between sport, culture and the media have been approached by former and current scholars broadly located within the interdisciplinary field of Cultural and Media Studies, and to give an indication of new research directions. Non- or limited availability of some works imposed unavoidable constraints on the shaping of the text, as did any lacunae in the editor’s knowledge (a failing of which, ipso facto, he is blissfully unaware). But these limitations still leave a vast potential reservoir of fine work that could just as easily have occupied this restricted book space. I have also adopted a different approach to many other Readers by including mostly longer, substantial contributions rather than a large selection of brief ‘tasters’. Only works that have not been previously anthologized have been included here. I believe that the result will be to satisfy scholarly appetites better (the difference between a snack and a full meal) so that these works, once digested, will stimulate new ventures in the kitchen of socio-cultural inquiry. Inevitably, given such intellectual riches, many editorial choices must be arbitrary in some respects.

Nonetheless, all the contributions to this volume are of obvious intellectual merit and reflect the editor’s assessment of the quality and importance of the works reproduced here. Each illuminates a range of significant aspects of the production, circulation and consumption of media sport, and its immediate and enduring cultural ramifications. These are the concerns that have animated a field of study of considerable current vitality that, as is discussed below, took some time to emerge and prosper.

**Coming to terms with media sport**

We are all, willingly or otherwise, daily confronted by the ‘media sports cultural complex’. This concept ‘embraces all the media and sports organizations, processes, personnel, services, products and texts
which combine in the creation of the broad and dynamic field of contemporary sports culture’ (Rowe 2004: xx). The sheer scope and scale of this complex and its culture means that, in advanced capitalist societies at least (and, increasingly, in many more besides), it can only be escaped with certainty in such sensorily deprived environments as hyperbaric chambers and deep space. Or by ‘sleeping the big sleep’, as crime writer Raymond Chandler (1939: 220) describes the state of death wherein ‘you were not bothered by things like that’. Chandler may have been writing about the fictional gangster world, but the point can also be applied to media sport.

The popular 1989 film *Field of Dreams* proposes that even death may have no dominion over sport, as an Iowa corn field is mysteriously transformed into a nostalgic theme park where the paying public can watch reincarnated baseballers in action (Rowe 1998). A Marxist analysis would suggest that this is an ideal instance of the capitalist exploitation in perpetuity of the labour power of professional sports personnel and of its consumption by sport spectators. But this point need not be taken too literally – *Field of Dreams* is, of course, fiction, and Marxists don’t believe that workers, even sportsmen, can return after compulsory retirement by death. What it reveals is the capacity of media sport to enable an endless trading of myths and images that doesn’t have to rely on athlete reincarnation or cryogenic restoration. Through such media texts as sports books, statistical databases, television and radio documentaries, video and DVD sports highlight features, photo-essays, and films of both a fictional and non-fictional nature, sport can be kept alive across the generations, always offering new opportunities for representation and commercialization. The media, in other words, capture, record and ‘memorialize’ sport for everyone.

Media sport is closely interwoven into the everyday lives of sports fans and the uncommitted alike. It occupies vast tracts of electronic, print and cyber media space; directly and indirectly generates a diverse range of goods and services produced by large numbers of companies and workers; absorbs substantial public resources in the form of programmes, subsidies and tax exemptions, and is strategically used by the political apparatus in the name of the people. The Olympic Games and the soccer World Cup are only two of the most spectacular examples where sport garners saturation media coverage, is responsible for the production and consumption of everything from soft drink to clothing, and is heavily subsidized by governments (Roche 2000). It is almost a civil duty, therefore, to try to come to terms with
media sport by understanding, probing and criticizing it in order to be in a position to intervene in its operations, where necessary, in the name of cultural citizenship (Murdock and Golding 1989; Murdock 1992). This concept has developed to extend the traditional concern with the rights and duties of political citizenship to cultural entitlements and responsibilities under conditions where equitable access to cultural resources has become crucial to full participation in contemporary society (Stevenson 1995; Murdock 1997). Media sport is particularly important to contemporary cultural citizenship because there are no more culturally and economically prized texts, with correspondingly high rewards for controlling them, than ‘live’ televised media sports texts (Rowe 2003).

The collective public stake in media sport, then, is now of such significance that it demands a greater level of education about it and the recognition of substantial rights of public ownership over it and access to it. These principles apply to such obviously political issues as, for example, a commercial pay TV broadcaster attempting to ‘siphon off’ sports programming from free-to-air television or to buy a sports team like Manchester United (Rowe 2000), or a government underwriting a bid to host a mega-media sports event like the Olympics (Roche 2000), and allowing special legislative exemptions for tobacco advertising for televised sports like motor racing (Boyle and Haynes 2000). They are equally relevant to negotiating the politics of everyday life embedded in the task of being constantly presented with media sports texts such as live broadcasts and banner headlines, and simply trying to understand their origins and meanings. Citizens need, then, to be equipped with a working knowledge of the ‘power lines’ (Birrell and McDonald 2000) crisscrossing the media sports cultural complex.

This Introduction outlines the importance of studying sport for the field of Cultural and Media Studies. It provides a brief survey of the range of approaches and contributions to the understanding of media sports culture, laying the foundation for the following chapters selected for this Reader. The different theoretical currents and methodological techniques represent the overall framework for analysing the various dimensions of this conspicuous yet elusive analytical object. In addressing the construction of media sport (including its labour process, and the shaping of the relationship between culture and economics) and then deconstructing what has been produced by offering critical readings of media sports texts, Cultural and Media Studies is shown to be very well placed to provide a critically reflexive means of coming to terms with media sport.
Sport in Cultural and Media Studies

Cultural and Media Studies is an interdisciplinary field that has developed since the early 1970s in response to major changes in society and culture. Among these trends, the twin processes of culturalization and mediatization are of particular importance. Culturalization can be described as the infiltration of culture, broadly conceived as the ensemble of institutions, practices and texts that turns simple existence into meaningful experience, into the heart of all dimensions of contemporary life, ranging from lifestyles and identities to political debates and economic decision-making. This is not to suggest, of course, that culture was unimportant in earlier epochs, but that there has been a vast expansion in the range of competing symbols, images, identities and values available to human subjects in most societies, and access to and command over them is crucial to human survival and prosperity in them. A key explanation for the daunting geographical and historical sweep of this change lies in a second and linked process – mediatization. This term is used to describe how developments in the channels and techniques of communication, including newspapers, radio, television, popular music and the internet, act as astonishingly efficient vectors of culture, conveying a dazzling array of symbols and their associated meanings to widely dispersed audiences.

Cultural and Media Studies (which for the sake of ease of argument I am conceptually combining) developed as an engaged intellectual response to this heightened importance of culture and media since the mid-twentieth century. What distinguishes this approach is its interdisciplinary nature – none of the established theories and paradigms in social sciences and the humanities seemed adequate to the task of comprehensively understanding and explaining the social world on their own (Barker 2000). The unconventional nature of this academic activity also reflects an urge to go beyond the ‘canon’ of key approaches and works that shaped the field of study into a hierarchy of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ culture (Appadurai 1996). Indeed, it sought to break down the boundaries between the detached world of academe and the world that it was trying to understand. This was because culture was viewed now as a key site of power relations in its own right, so demanding a politicized engagement with what was being studied in a critically self-reflexive manner (Rojek and Turner 2000). The increasing visibility of popular culture, and the appreciation of its ‘politics of pleasure’ (Rowe 1995) took scholars into areas that had been previously neglected. One of the most obvious and most
academically marginalized of these was sport which, with its emphasis on the body, spectatorship and competitive performance, was for traditional scholars the antithesis of the approved, refined culture that they wished to cultivate in the wider population (Tomlinson 1999).

Sport came to be of greater interest to Cultural and Media Studies (and to allied fields like Sociology, Leisure and Communication Studies) because it is a socio-cultural institution that is deeply connected to the politics of everyday life. In barely a century, sport has made the transition from the regulated physical play of English villagers and schoolchildren to a global cultural phenomenon attracting massive investment, both material and symbolic, from business, government and the ‘common people’ (Sugden and Tomlinson 2002). The institution more responsible than any other for this spectacular rise of sport is the media, to the extent that these formerly separate institutions have interpenetrated to the point of merger (Rowe 2004). The symbiotic relationship of sport and media involves an exchange of visibility and capital for interest and audiences in a classic exemplification of the aforementioned processes of culturalization and mediatization.

Thus, there is unprecedented interest in the study of sport as the media have inexorably carried it into sundry cultural spaces, so prompting active debates concerning its socio-economic power and cultural influence. This realization has revivified the field of Sport Studies, which was formerly preoccupied, to summarize it rather crudely, with sports training techniques, athlete physiology, physical-moral education of the young, narrative sports history, and uncritical functionalist celebrations of the institution’s contribution to social cohesion and consensus. These concerns and approaches have not gone away, and in the case of sport science are prospering as governments devote more public resources to high-performance international sport in search of national prestige. Sport Studies, nonetheless, has become a more diverse, critical and relevant field of study as the star of its object of analysis has risen.

Media sport is probably now the most vibrant area of study connecting orthodox academic concerns in social science and the humanities with the politics of everyday life. In the United Kingdom, for example, there has been a boom in association football since the early 1990s that can at least partially be explained by intensive media coverage, marketing and promotion. While this development is not without its disadvantages for other sports and for non-sports fans, it has helped create conditions where researchers and scholars can
harness football’s fashionability and popularity to academically productive effect (for example, King 1998; Giulianotti 1999). Sport’s media visibility has also enabled scholars to tap into debates concerning important social, political and ethical issues. The perennial eruption of sport controversies over, for example, bribing International Olympic Committee delegates to host Olympic events; ‘fixing’ cricket, soccer and boxing matches; sexual, gender and racial discrimination; taking performance-enhancing drugs and secretly administering performance-damaging ones; and pressures to boycott international sports events like the 2003 cricket World Cup and the 2008 Beijing Olympics, are just some of the rich veins of analytical inquiry that take the researcher well beyond the sports arena itself. This research, if publicly communicated through the general media, draws on high levels of interest in such subjects and in the issues that they raise, and generates in turn more research material in what could be described as a virtuous intellectual circle created out of the more disreputable aspects of sport.

The development of the study of media sport echoes the expansion of the study of popular culture in universities across the world and the aforementioned unmistakeable growth and visibility of sport in the wider culture and society. But it was delayed by some resistance to the study of sport among intellectuals tending to construct their professional worlds around a hierarchy of mind over body, with sport’s corporeality, and its association with aggressive masculinity, retarding its development as a field of research and scholarship (Rowe 1995; Tomlinson 1999; Miller 2001). Furthermore, sport’s omnipresence, the sheer volume of sports texts, and the potential claim of any citizen to be an ‘expert’ on a form of popular culture that daily surrounds them, also made it paradoxically difficult to study. In this area of research, attempts to assert the ‘authority’ of the serious scholar were likely to be met with bemusement at best and derision at worst.

But there was a slowly progressing engagement from the 1970s onwards with the phenomenon that occupied so much media space and so much of the waking lives of vast sections of the population, among them academics who entertained the ‘secret vice’ of avid sports fandom (Sugden and Tomlinson 1998). The serious study of media sport from within the social sciences and humanities is, indeed, now flourishing, but it was only relatively recently that the importance of the subject was matched by academic attention to it. While there were pioneering works in the 1970s on sports television (such as Buscombe 1975) and in the early 1980s on the historical development of the
commercial sports media (such as Cashman and McKernan 1981), it was not until the late 1980s that the momentum of media sport studies began to gather in book publishing. These first works were mostly concerned with television (for example, Goldlust 1987; Chandler 1988 [both represented in this collection]; Klatell and Marcus 1989; Real 1989; Wenner 1989), with these concerns mirrored in such key periodicals as the Journal of Sport & Social Issues and the Sociology of Sport Journal. In the wake of these influential works a steady stream of books on sport, culture and the media appeared in the first half of the 1990s, focusing on such issues as the changing public and private sports broadcasting environment and the gender politics of sports journalism (for example, Barnett 1990; Whannel 1992; Birrell and Cole 1994; Creedon 1994), with such work also finding outlets in a wider range of journals, such as Media, Culture & Society, Cultural Studies and the International Review for the Sociology of Sport. This corpus of works represents the solid foundation on which a somewhat belated boom in publishing on sport and media has occurred in books (for example, de Moragas Spà et al. 1995; Baker and Boyd 1997; Wenner 1998; Martin and Miller 1999; Birrell and McDonald 2000; Boyle and Haynes 2000; Andrews and Jackson 2001; Whannel 2001; Brookes 2002) and in journals (in both the growing roster of dedicated sport journals like Culture, Sport, Society, International Sports Studies and Sport, Education and Society, and in more generalist social science and communications journals such as Sociology, Television & New Media, and Body & Society. These works constitute more than just a numerical expansion in the field, with the scope of the subject matter continuing to widen as, for example, the sports media’s involvement in racial ideologies and the media construction of sports stars and celebrities have been subjected to closer critical scrutiny. A notable characteristic of these works in Cultural and Media Studies has been their dedication to linking media sport to the wider social and cultural formation, with few that could be described as internalist or atomized analyses of the field. The explanation for this analytical expansiveness lies partly in the intellectual orientation of the scholars and researchers drawn to media sport. However, even were they not so inclined, the subject almost compels a widescreen approach, with each media sports text almost effortlessly harnessed to a rich range of significations and mythologies. This semiotic facility is responsible for both the excitement generated by researching media sport and a corresponding need to temper that intellectual exuberance in the interests of academic integrity. We turn next, therefore, to a consideration
of how media sport has been approached within Cultural and Media Studies.

Ways of analysing sport, culture and the media: theory and method

Media sport, as previously observed, comes in great profusion and variety. It ranges from live television broadcasts watched by billions of people and radio broadcasts heard by millions to specialist sports magazines read by a few thousand and personal websites accessed only by friends and family. It includes Hollywood feature films and paperback novels in which sport is a pretext for a story to daily newspapers in which sport is covered not just in the regular sports pages, but also in the general news, features, business and gossip pages. How can these diverse cultural phenomena be classified and understood? A good starting point is to consider the ‘lifespan’ of any media sports text. It has to be made by someone or something – be they multinational corporations or amateur fan groups. In being manufactured, the text acquires form and content that is now available for inspection. For it to exist in any significant social sense (like the proverbial tree falling in the forest) the text has to be ‘read’ by a sentient being, whether by billions of TV viewers or a solitary reader of a photocopied sports fanzine or webzine. In the activity of reading the media sports text, the reader will interpret it and derive direct (denotative) and indirect (connotative) meanings from it. In the hands of the reader, the text may change character from that originally intended by the producer, or it may be used for a different purpose. The television tribute to a sports star intended to be moving may to many be laughable, and the airbrushed, cheesecake image of an athlete intended to be alluring may find itself pinned to a dartboard. In other words, the reception and use of the produced text must also be taken into account. Acquiring greater knowledge of how media sport is made and its texts ‘unmade’ through theoretically, conceptually and empirically informed analysis enables a critical understanding of the institutional context within which media sport is produced that can, in turn, inform readings of media sports texts in their many forms and uses. By locating these texts within a wider cultural framework, the analyst can gain some understanding of media sport’s contribution to the way of life of particular societies and to the relationships between societies, and can also use that insight as a way of understanding better whole societies
and their cultures. This is an ambitious claim, but the best work on sport in Cultural and Media Studies, some of which is reproduced in this collection, performs this dual task with distinction.

The tripartite analytical structure of production, text and audience is at the heart of the study of media sport. In their historical survey of the field of ‘MediaSport Studies’, Kathleen Kinkema and Janet Harris note that:

Work on sport and the mass media concerns three major topics: production of mediated sport texts, messages or content of mediated sport texts, and audience interaction with mediated sports texts . . . but at the outset it is important to acknowledge the lack of clear demarcation between them. Considerable overlap exists, and certainly it is difficult and somewhat artificial to discuss them separately, although efforts are made to explore linkages.

(Kinkema and Harris 1998: 27)

Having noted these theoretically interconnected areas of focus, the authors go on to call for a ‘more holistic research’ that examines the detailed links between production, text, and reception in greater detail in order to articulate ‘institutional, textual, and audience study’ (p. 52). Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes (2000: 14), in their book-length study Power Play: Sport, Media and Popular Culture, similarly map the field using the coordinates of political economy (products and institutions), representations of identity-formations (readings of media sports texts), and audience consumption (engagements by readers, listeners and viewers with media sports institutions and texts). These major features of the media sport landscape, Haynes and Boyle note, cannot be effectively isolated, requiring the placement of ‘both sporting and media institutions within a larger frame of reference – a field of play which recognizes that sporting forms and mediated versions of these forms are continually being shaped by and in turn shaping culture as a whole’ (p. 15).

The above-quoted authors, in surveying the subject from their vantage points in the key media sport sites of the USA and UK, also reveal its elusiveness and unruliness. In common with other areas of popular culture, such as rock and pop music (Rowe 1995), where media sport is broken down into defined analytical units in the interests of clarity and manageability, it is at some cost to the understanding of their inter-relatedness and complexity. For example, the mediation of the Olympic Games or the soccer World Cup can be analysed by
concentrating on their production, a systematic knowledge of which is crucial to the understanding of any communicated text (Golding and Murdock 2000). This will demand a deep understanding of how sport is organized and governed, the relationship between peak sports bodies like the International Olympic Committee (IOC) or the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) and corporate media organizations (like CBS, NBC and Fox), sponsors (McDonalds and Coca Cola), sports clothing companies (Nike and adidas), supra-state bodies (the United Nations and the European Union), national governments (China and Zimbabwe), non-government organizations (Amnesty International and the Global Anti-Golf Movement), and so on. Here the political and economic stakes are very high, and decisions taken at this level have very important ramifications, including economic collapse and political boycotts.

But there are many other levels of structure and process that have a bearing on media sport production, including the development of new audiovisual technologies and newspaper formats, the professional ideologies and practices of media sport personnel such as journalists and photographers, the emergence of new forms of sport and decline of older ones, and levels of support and subsidy from sub-national governments and businesses such as local councils and small traders. All these economic and institutional processes and exchanges are taking place in the context of much larger trends in which media sport is clearly implicated, such as the enhanced flows of people, capital, ideas, and technologies around the world that we commonly describe as globalization, as well as geo-political rivalries and conflicts, some of which are expressed, like the ‘war on terrorism’ in the wake of the 11 September 2001 destruction of the World Trade Centre, in various forms of diplomacy and military action. The complexity and, perhaps, unpredictability of these trends can be symbolized by the curious fact that, under the isolationist Taliban, Afghanistan joined the International Cricket Council (ICC) in 2001 shortly before the regime was toppled (Miller et al. 2003). As Alina Bernstein and Neil Blain (2003: 23–4) observe in surveying the research field of media and sport, this ‘sense of complexity and ambiguity’ is produced in a world where there are ‘more and more connections across a variety of boundaries, accompanied by a growing sense of struggle between the local and the global’.

The myriad forces that combine in the production of media sport should not, however, deter those seeking to analyse it. Without a multi-layered knowledge of the political economic factors (large,
medium-scale and small) that, first, make media sports texts possible, and then exert a profound influence on who is exposed to them and in which contexts, only a part of the picture has been completed. When trying to analyse live sports television broadcasts or sports reports or action photographs, it is essential to be equipped with a foundational understanding of their position in sport’s cultural economy (Roche 2000). In the area of sports television, for example, it is important to understand how commercial development in the USA first transformed sport in that country, and subsequently influenced (without completely determining) the development of media sport in an international and, now, a global context (Guttmann 1994; Maguire 1999; Bairner 2001; Miller et al. 2001). To achieve this awareness it is necessary to undertake a deep examination of the ways in which media corporations struggle strenuously for the rights to broadcast sport, and sports compete to sell those rights to the highest bidder, while sponsors and advertisers seek the most visible and favourable brand association, and governments try to exert some influence to protect the rights of citizens. These exchanges are subject to constant change, with, for example, a sharp decline in the media sports market in the early twenty-first century, and a renewed interest by governments in its regulation (Rowe 2004). However, it is possible to become so preoccupied with economic issues of ownership, control and profit maximization that the specific characteristics of media sport disappear from view. Knowing how media sport is produced is not the same thing as understanding how it works qua popular culture.

Interrogating and interpreting media sports texts, and understanding both their formal properties and the ways in which they construct ideologies and mythologies of class (Hargreaves 1986), sexuality (Pronger 1990), race (Carrington and McDonald 2001), nation (Duke and Crolley 1996; Cronin and Mayall 1998), celebrity (Cashmore 2002) and so on, is also an important task. Much of this work in Media and Cultural Studies, Sociology and Sport Studies has involved the critique of the ways in which media sport has reproduced and promoted gender inequalities, with media sports texts consciously or unconsciously emphasizing male supremacy and reducing women to sexualized, subordinate and maternal roles in the language of sports commentators and journalists, the composition of sports photographs, public discussions of sport funding policies, and so on (for example, Creedon 1994; Hargreaves 1994; Thompson 1999; McKay et al. 2000; Hemphill and Symons 2002).

By such means media sport texts are read, inferences made and
conclusions advanced about what they mean and how they will affect those exposed to them. These textual readings are often highly persuasive and acutely observed, and are sometimes supported with content analysis that provides quantitative evidence of, for example, the neglect of women’s sport by the electronic and print media, or the differential ways of representing sportsmen and sportswomen to the detriment of the latter. They are also often informed by a knowledge and critique of the conditions of media sport production. But textual readings are vulnerable to the accusation that they reveal more about the reader than the texts themselves, with their decoding a product of the particular ideology or social positioning of the interpreter (Critcher 1993). Some ‘decodings’ of media sports texts might be described, following Stuart Hall (1980), as ‘aberrant’ because the meanings attributed to them might differ from the intentions of their producers, who do not in any case have ‘divine rights’ over the interpretation of culture. They might be read and used quite differently by other ‘receivers’, so vitiating claims of the meanings and effects of texts criticized on the grounds of being patriarchal, violent, sexist, and so on.

The point is not that these texts are inherently meaningless, and that they are not heavily scored with prevailing discourses and ideologies. Brief television exposure to the American patriotism of gridiron’s Super Bowl or to the sexism of a male boxing bout (where lightly clothed female models parade around the ring informing innumerate patrons of the round number to a chorus of catcalls and whistles) would quickly disabuse viewers of that opinion. It is that there can be no final reading of any text, no singular, ultimate meaning that can be fixed forever for everybody without contestation. The same text is available to multiple readings across readers, time and space. Appreciating the theoretical impossibility of ‘closing the book’ of possible meanings is, then, as important for media sports texts as for any other type. Thus, in the introduction to Susan Birrell’s and Mary McDonald’s (2000: 6) collection Reading Sport: Critical Essays on Power and Representation, the editors adumbrate their commitment to ‘critical cultural studies’ and their concern with the intersecting ‘power lines’ of ‘race, class, gender, and sexuality’ that cross the field of sport. At the same time, they are aware that:

An awareness that multiple readings of events and celebrities are always available precedes all critical analyses. We never want to become so confident that we cast our own particular readings
as the only authorized version and foreclose the possibility of other contradictory or complementary readings. All texts are polysemic, and the site of contested meanings, whether they are seen as dominant, subversive, resistant, transformative, or appropriative. Reading sport critically can be used as a methodology for uncovering, foregrounding, and producing counternarratives, that is, alternative accounts of particular events and celebrities that have been decentered, obscured, and dismissed by hegemonic forces.

(Birrell and McDonald 2000: 11)

This is a reasonable and increasingly orthodox theoretical stance within Cultural and Media Studies, but as a method it cannot satisfy all the requirements of media sport analysis. Not only does its emphasis on reading texts lead, inevitably, to a lesser concern with the context in which they are produced, but it leaves open the question of how to assess and adjudicate between competing readings of media sport texts. Rules of logic and evidence might be evoked, but these are in various ways as contestable as the texts they address are ‘polysemic’.

In order to evade the implication that one reading of a media sports text is as good as any other, texts are usually embedded within coherent analytical narratives generated by the ‘hegemonic forces’ mentioned above that require to be countered. However, as Toby Miller (2001: 50) has argued with regard to the common claim (also made by Birrell and McDonald and, it should be acknowledged, on occasion by this author) that sport’s gender order is characterized by ‘hegemonic masculinity’, there is a certain circularity in such arguments, and a tendency to explain away untidy phenomena ‘inconsistent with standard political or textual moves’ as ‘symptoms of politics from elsewhere, and this “elsewhere” is the given of whoever currently rules’. Miller argues that readings of sports texts within a straightforward framework of hegemonic masculinity in sport have been ‘destabilized’ by political economic forces – namely the ‘commodification of male beauty’ (p. 52) that has made sportsmen much more objectified, subjected to surveillance, and vulnerable.

Yet, even if all textual readings were uniformly stable and fitted neatly within hegemonic narratives, their authority would still be in question where insufficient consideration has been given to how they are ‘activated’. That is, media sports texts only come truly alive at the point where they encounter publics or audiences, at which point it is possible to assess how they are interpreted, used, accepted, challenged
or adjusted. This is the third area of analysis previously identified by Kinkema and Harris, and by Boyle and Haynes. Close attention to audience reception and use helps overcome some of the speculative limitations of textual reading. Here, qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups and observation involving sports fans, in some cases supplemented by quantitative surveys of attitudes, attendance and viewing, can compile a profile of the patterns of media sports text uses and of their users. As Gill Lines (2002: 198) argues, it is necessary to supplement ‘textual analysis of media sport’ with ‘a more interpretative response incorporating audience voices in the research process’. Lines reports her methodological approach in a study of a group of young people’s responses to the sports stars who were being intensively covered in the media during the ‘Summer of Sport ’96’ (Euro ’96 association football, Wimbledon tennis and the Atlanta Olympics). Her research ‘combined quantitative and qualitative newspaper and television analysis’ with a ‘case study of twenty-five young people [aged fifteen who] completed daily diaries and group and individual interviews’ (p. 198). Lines was especially interested in gender relations in this study, finding both anticipated and surprising readings of media sport texts involving stars by young people, and concluding that:

Whilst there is evidence that gender relations are strategically mobilised and sustained through media representations and ongoing audience discourse, the precarious nature of the field of play remains as young people do negotiate the contradictions and acknowledge some elements of the power games being played.

(Lines 2002: 212)

Lines’s research links two of the elements – text and audience – that Kinkema and Harris believe constitute the main ‘domains’ of media sport research, but do not really incorporate the third – production. In fact, the only comprehensive study of this kind that they discovered in their survey of the field was reported in Laurel Davis’s (1997) research, a section of which is reproduced in this collection, which ‘Combined analysis of the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue with interviews of both producers and consumers to show how ideas about hegemonic masculinity are generated and reinforced’ (Kinkema and Harris 1998: 52). Nonetheless, Davis’s use of the concept of hegemonic masculinity sets limits to the ‘polysemy’ noted by Birrell and McDonald (2000), and is open to the kind of criticism advanced above by Miller (2001) and others (International Review for the Sociology of Sport 1998). In methodological terms it also should be noted that
there were only 39 subjects in the sample of consumers, that they were contacted on the basis of a combination of random and purposive sampling, and that as a result no statistical inferences could be drawn from the data.

The use of the case study method as represented in the above-cited work of Lines and Davis might meet the demands of audience researchers and reception theorists, but can still be criticized on the grounds that it cannot be generalized without further evidence. Of course, a case study of all media sport phenomena would be a practical impossibility, and there are constraints on how many comparative analyses can be performed between selected case studies (itself a process requiring a considerable degree of subjective decision-making). Large-scale studies of a ‘multi-method and internationally collaborative nature’ (de Moragas Spà et al. 1995: 6), like the one reported in Television in the Olympics (an excerpt from which is contained in this collection) involving 130 researchers in 25 countries, require the kind of long-term planning and resources that can rarely be achieved in the research field. Such studies would in any case be of limited value in the absence of a framework of theoretical explanation – the field of media sport research is rather more than the sum of ‘joined up’ analytical units. Research and scholarship on any subject involve elements of speculation, extrapolation, abstraction, selection and judgment, and media sport is no different in these regards. But there still remains a problem even if it were possible for production, text and audience and the relations between them in media sport to be fully accommodated in a wholly objective manner. This involves how the multifarious connections between media sport and the ‘culture as a whole’, as Boyle and Haynes (2000) described it above, can be tracked.

Social scientists and cultural analysts are expected to take cognisance of questions of causality, which can be briefly described as the separation of independent variables (causes) from dependent variables (effects) so that the former can be established as determining the latter. How can it be established where sport is shaping the wider culture, and where it is the other way round, especially when there are examples of mutual, simultaneous effects and influences? For example, there is keen debate about whether media sport is an agent of globalization or an outcome of it, with a variety of qualified positions in between (Maguire 1999; Bairner 2001; Miller et al. 2001). Answers to such questions must always be provisional, as those seeking to come to terms with the media sports cultural complex are required
to chart and interpret the constant, multi-dimensional, multi-directional changes and continuities that they are not just looking at, but living in (Dandaneau 2001). This is a difficult balancing act, with various theoretical and methodological positions, including Marxism, feminism, Foucauldianism, and various ‘posts’ (including poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism), often in intricate blends, tracing explanatory patterns among sundry alternative explanations and counter-examples. Advancing macro-theoretical explanations of, for example, media sport and globalization while also documenting examples of nationally-based resistance to it, and also remaining sceptical about ideas of objectivity and value-free knowledge, can lead to accusations of wanting to ‘have it both ways’ (Hargreaves 2002: 37).

But this dynamic tension between grand theory and contingent explanation within Cultural and Media Studies is characteristic of a field that is self-referential. It fully appreciates the analysts’ embeddedness in the culture and society that they are trying to analyse and, it is hoped, improve. Some recent writing in Sport Studies, for example, has displayed a self-referential, postmodern sensibility in attending to the ‘craft’ of writing by blurring the lines between ‘realist’ academic analysis and fictional narrative (Denison and Markula 2003). The intention of this approach is to generate new accounts and analyses of sport that resonate at different levels of experience and thought, thereby providing fresh insights and alternative ‘truths’ to those that dominate both the academic and media spheres. John Sugden and Alan Tomlinson (2002: 18) address this problem of ‘truth’ in the study of sport’s ‘power games’ by recognizing that ‘multiple vantage points’ create ‘multiple truths’ with ‘particular networks of power’. The critical sociologist of sport, they argue, must appreciate these different vantage points – including that their own is only one among many – in honest pursuit not of ‘philosophical or absolute truth’ but of a ‘sociological truth’ that can only be an ‘impression’ of reality. These authors are describing an investigative, ethnographic method that they apply to sports organizations like FIFA (Sugden and Tomlinson 1998) and to particular contexts like Cuba, which would not necessarily be suitable for all inquiry into sport, culture and the media. Nonetheless, its openness to different perspectives and attentiveness to power relations offers a workable basis for the interconnected study of media sport production, texts and audiences in their socio-cultural context.
Conclusion: journeying with maps in media sport

In this chapter I have attempted a brief introduction to the study of media sport in Cultural and Media Studies that, it is hoped, will function as a useful springboard for the study of the subject and provide a context for the selected readings to follow. I have traced various approaches and debates, and attempted to show how a sceptical, reflexive and wide-ranging approach is required. It is important not to exaggerate the extent of some of the divisions and disputes in the field. As David Hesmondhalgh (2002: 42) has noted, there has been a rather debilitating and artificial split in the study of culture between a so-called ‘political economy’ approach primarily concerned with economic production and a so-called ‘cultural studies’ approach that is interested more in questions of textuality, identity, pleasure and so on. Hesmondhalgh (2002: 42) argues that, while there are genuine differences of emphasis, this division has exaggerated the cohesion of each side and the differences between them, and ‘the key issue is how to synthesise the best aspects of the various approaches’. The fine work on media sport in this collection represents quite a diverse range of former and current work in the field. Those who become acquainted with this material here are invited to consider them and to ‘synthesize’ their ‘best aspects’ according to their own critical analytical orientation.

Critical Readings: Sport, Culture and the Media is divided, like the monograph on which it is based, into two parts. The first, Media sport construction: history, labour, culture and economics, establishes the institutional context within which media sport is produced, and then informs the second, Media sport deconstruction: readings, forms, ideologies and futures, which contains examples of critical readings of media sports texts in their many forms, so enabling a fuller exploration, interrogation and analysis of the media sports cultural complex. This is a division of convenience designed to illuminate different dimensions of media sport, but placing ‘construction’ before ‘deconstruction’ clearly indicates that, before media texts and their reception can be analysed, it is imperative to be knowledgeable about their provenance and current institutional position. Nonetheless, mechanically ‘reading off’ the meaning of media sports texts solely on the basis of their conditions of production will leave a clear analytical gap where the understanding of their cultural efficacy should have been. The ‘trick’ is to sweep back and forth ceaselessly between construction and deconstruction. In combining samples of key texts that have shaped
the field of study with more recent works addressing media sport in Cultural and Media Studies, this Reader is intended to assist in the important task of making sense of a world that bears all the hallmarks of media sport saturation.

References


INTRODUCTION: MAPPING THE MEDIA SPORTS CULTURAL COMPLEX


