Sports, Sports Idols and Idolatry

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Abstract: Nowadays, world is characterized by a turbulent social life and total dependence on the new technologies. For this reason, an individual, that is, a man with the lost soul, is a good consumer of everything that is offered on the market. Sport is not spared, either. This is true not just for its elite and professional segment, but it applies equally so to an amateur and recreational sport. According to the rules of the New Age, in which an idea prevails that everything is permitted (to us), a special group of athletes has been created, who have been assigned the role of an idol. Thus, they become the object of worship and the images of the neopagan deities. These sports idols have (at least) two important roles: (1) to assist the achievement of (too) large profits for sports clubs and sports associations, and (2) to blur the image of the real world we live in. This applies both to the region in which we live, and to all the other parts of the world. Sports idolatry is everywhere, and it acts similarly.

Key words: Individual, personality, divinity.

1. Introduction

In a world without borders and morality, sport occupies a very important place. All governing structures use sport for their multiple political and utilitarian purposes.

Sport seeks to align with the age in which it lives and takes maximum advantage. The turbulent world we live in totally depends on the new technologies and creates individuals who are good massive consumers. Thus, sport consuming, because of its political and economic utilitarianism, draws great attention.

This is not a new phenomenon. From the ancient times to the present day, sport has been adapting to the given social circumstances, and has always been used for the political and economic objectives. Of course, profit and prevailing ideologies are most often intertwined to the point of unrecognition. An example of the Summer Olympic Games, and recently the Winter Olympics, firmly confirms this fact. We can discern the pattern of the political and economic exploitation of sport in the first and in the last held Olympics as well. The Sochi, London 2012 Olympics

and the World Cup in Brazil confirm that sport and politics go together like a horse and carriage, and those who argue otherwise are at best illiterate or more likely ideological global and regional (continental) sports championships are not an exception.

Marketing experts engaged to promote sport as an indispensable “product”, use many ways to “change the awareness” and think of those who follow sport competitions, but also of those who are “tied” to TV screens. Here comes especially useful, so called ambush marketing. It creates a distorted picture of reality and numerous simulations depicting a virtual image that needs to permeate the individual. And when this is achieved through the persistent advertising, one gets an individual, a viewer who is really a consumer of the ideological messages and economic supply. By changing the consciousness of the individual in the ideological and economic terms, it is very easy to change the image of a (smaller or larger) entity. Therefore, not only the continental and world sports competitions, but also various regional leagues are multiplied and invented every day, primarily, in team sports. In doing so, one must make “televised” sports. In other words, these must be specifically sports that can be greatly “covered” by the television cameras.

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And so one image, through television broadcasts is sent to the new world of the lost souls.

If one takes this into account, it is clear that pursuant to the rules of the New Age, in which the prevailing idea is, that everything is allowed (to me); a special group of athletes is created who have been assigned the role of an idol. Thus, they become the object of worship and the images of the neopagan deities. They are in the foreground and all the information related to their professional sports work, including their privacy, is at any given time, available to the curious, that is, their fans: what their weekly earnings is (in the hundreds of thousands of Euros), what kind of sports equipment they wear, what they ate for lunch, who they live with, etc. [1].

Great marketing teams, consisting of the experts in various fields and specialties, engage in the presentation of the selected young athletes. One also does not forget the New Age in which we live and the idea that everything is permitted. And when everything is allowed, all means are allowed. This “freedom” is quite enough to turn a chosen athlete into a top media celebrity. This is of course, done all the time. First of all, from the base of the pyramid of the interesting young athletes, usable both in the political and economic purposes, young athletes are selected. From it, gradually (and rapidly, too if circumstances require it), an allocated group is given an extra attention. And when the political and economic requirements coincide, or come close enough, the “top ten” young people are selected, and they make sports idols, neopagan sports gods.

Thus, year after year, month after month, there is a procession of always new and fresh athletes coming out of the marketing (production) line.

2. More than a Game

Depending on the viewing angle, sport consideration can point to its similarities and differences with the image one has about it, at the particular moment. However, nobody can dispute sport's generic feature of

agon, or a wish to compete. This competition can mean competing with yourself, or with the other(s). And hence the message: “You should strive to always be the best and excellent among all the others” uttered more than two thousand years ago. It still resounds in the hearts of many honorable people.

It is not something trivial. To honorably fight and be the best among the best is still something that is a (sports) dream of many young people. However, as the attributes of the sport are completely aligned with the New age and its new requirements that rely on their axiom—all is allowed to us, it is getting easier to give up all these lofty messages. In doing so, certainly one thought helps: all for the result, the result for nothing, (and) all for profit, profit for nothing! It is a guideline in sport, but also in all other social activities. A world without morality is deeply moving into the world of sports as well.

Doping and stimulants of every shape and size, more and more obviously take their “toll in blood” among athletes, but nobody cares. Sports idols blur the reality of life and the harsh reality. Rudeness among athletes (arising from its crude utilitarianism) is all the more obvious. On the acting skills of athletes, which are also practiced in training sessions, is not necessary to waste words. On the issue of morality, either.

The image of sport can be completed by one of the many definitions [2]. But no matter which definition one chooses, our image of sport will, in most cases relate to the elite (top) and professional sports. Other segments of sport are considered only occasionally [3]. It is quite “normal”, because on television screens and in the daily and weekly newspapers, almost exclusively, one talks about the successes and failures of the elite and professional athletes. Bottom line of such an attitude towards sport is that there are those who take care of, especially their financial interests. And when it comes to the forefront, (their) code of conduct must be respected.

Occasionally, when the interest of the manufacturers of sports equipment and accessories requires, the media

fit in also short stories about the importance of the recreational sports. Of course, these stories feature quite obviously, beautiful and young people who practice wearing proper sports equipment and utilizing appropriate sports equipment. This word proper implies that these are the appropriate products of those companies that have the (economic) status and can financially meet the strict rules of the game.

This game is actually more than just a game, relying on the idea that all is allowed to me and it exploits, to the maximum, a political and economic utilitarianism of sport. Thus, *agon*, *kleaos*, *glory*, *honor* and *arete-virtue*, are completely lost [2, 4].

The restoration of the ancient Olympics epitomizes the very ancient notion of *agon*. Humanistic and Neohumanist enthusiasm, which has slowly been developing, finally awaited its time in 1896, in Athens, confirming the worldwide stress on the virtuousness, honor and fair play [5].

However, the honor of sports participation has been fading out since the 20th century.

At the time of the liberal concept boom, primarily of the economy, where success is measured by the amount of money earned (obtained), (and therefore imposed idea of the goods and capital mobility), rules and viewpoints of the sport are constantly changing. It is no longer important to participate and honorably fight for the glory and virtuosity, now it is only important to win. This is so because only victory brings money and fame that are marketing orchestrated. Therefore, the role of sports idols is vital also in a neo-liberal approach to this (political and economic) activity, which is still called sport.

3. The Role of Sports Idols

Hyman et al. [6] claims that mass media have helped perpetuate the public's infatuations with sport celebrities. For example, sport biographies for children remain popular. Written biographies depict professional athletes as role models through uplifting tales of 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; Electronic Arts (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 further aggrandizes personal accomplishments over team success.

Unlike other heroes, idols that stem from the world of sports are popular not only for their athletic built or impressive statistics but also because of their inspiring life stories. They are the heroes who have accomplished this by their own merits and who have become popular because of their performance and invested efforts. The status of a sporting hero is something that cannot be inherited or purchased. It must be earned.

Actuality of the results achieved and the type of sport have the most important role in the selection of the sports idols among the senior age professional athletes, as well as the media coverage, international career and longer sports experience in top sport, but also in adopting the model of conduct and internal values that these models contain [7].

As for professional athletes, stories of their exaggerated performances are created by their fans and they have great influence on young people (their behavior and their life as a whole) [8]. Although sport idols are primarily idols due to the results achieved, they also become idols due to, at the present time, the high media exposure which is why the word idol and “star” may be viewed as synonymous [9]. The

reactions of fans on the life and success of their idols are expressed through their admiration, infatuation and idolatry [10].

In every sport, there are young people suitable for the role of sports idols. Whether they will obtain that role, depends on many factors. One of them, perhaps most important one, is an athlete's success in sports competitions. Only then comes the assessment whether he is narcissistic enough to assume his (possible) role, and whether his physique is interesting enough for further marketing processing. Everything else will be processed according to the marketing principles and aligned with the market requirements. When such an assessment is performed, the momentum towards sports idol can begin, as it happened with Ronaldo as a bench reserve. Leading sports stars, depending on the sport they take up, are always in the limelight. This has to be at all costs. In the absence of the sporting success to cover, one can always design another story: how much money they earn per week, with whom they associate, what their private life is like. When it is estimated that this is not enough one invents, or fabricates affairs, more or less irritating and blasphemous. This goes on until the moment one can once again come to the fore with the cult story of a sporting success. If that is lacking for an extended period of time, a substitute for the existing sports idol is gradually being introduced into the public arena. And the show goes on.

In tennis, a globally interesting sport, where a marketing operation is brought to the perfection, fans want to know everything about their idols: how much they earn, how they train, what they eat, who they sleep with, etc. They have their fan groups organized; social networks are bombarded with all sorts of information; and debate clubs get opened. All this is done to keep certain athletes in the focus of the world public as long as possible. In doing so, it does not matter whether someone likes tennis, but it is important to put into the focus constant talk about tennis. This is an important prerequisite for the realization of the economic and

political utilitarianism of sport. Thus sports stars become unprecedented idols.

The fight for a place on the top ten world players list, the women's and men's competition, although harsh beyond the limits, does not provide a safe place for sports stars and, especially, for a sports idol. As we have noted, their sports skill is only the first step towards building a path to these heights. The rest is in the hands of others, or those who assess and evaluate who will take such an important place. An illustrative example is the relationship to the best player in the world at the moment. Novak Djokovic is the best ranking player in the world tennis association, but he is not yet the tennis star and sports idol, who attracts the attention, as other tennis stars do. Worse ranked tennis players at the moment (Federer and Nadal) enjoy more privileges and greater media attention. This is in accordance with the programmed relationship to the sports stars and sports idols. Ranking of the best is no guarantee that he will be a sports star of the first order. It depends, as we have noted earlier, on the assessment of those who design sports stars and sports idols.

Tennis has, for example, served as a brief reminder of the arduous climbing of the athletes to sports heroes and sports stardom. This phenomenon seems to be almost identical in all sports. The rules of using economic and political utility of the sport are the same. Sporting idols are used to achieve these goals. In order to achieve these objectives, new cults are built, and sports idols, above all, have been assigned a role of their promoters. The body cult, the cult of sports results and the cult of (sports) profits are fully in line with the philosophy of the New Age. This is because the sports idols, as the object of a blind worship, fit quite well in encouraging the excessive admiration and adoration of the newly formed and highly elevated cults. All together, sports idols and sports cults are in the function of such a programmed business task.

Such cults boomed in mid-eighties of the 20th century. It was the time of the absolute dominance of the liberal concept of the economy and the overall

development of social relations. Due to the promotion of these ideas and development of the liberal concept, sports cults were given the opportunity, in their own way and from the perspective of the sport, to encourage the development of this concept.

Sports idols and icons are permeating all spheres of life.

They are not only in the function of a further expansion of economic and political utilitarianism of sport, but they are also a very useful lever for spreading the New Age ideas.

Instrumental, and together with it, “expository” relation to the body, a sort of the “cult of the body” includes contemporary sport in a wide range of the preparation and exposure of the ideal body process, becoming thus an integral part of the major project of education of modern man involved in the overall program “Art Nouveau” [11].

The body cult is built on the idea of a narcissistic desire of the individual to be forever young and beautiful. Hereby, it is assumed that this is the beauty of the body, designed according to the prescribed canons of today. The basis for these canons is the ancient notion of the body beauty presented (available to us) by the numerous statues of their athletes and warriors. This pagan relation to the body, dominant throughout the period of Humanism and Renaissance, is the heritage now exclusively taken in the desire to build an individual, an atomized man, who would be self-sufficient. In accordance with this idea, sports idols have a role to high rise this sports cult.

Increasingly frequent nudity of the sports idols, expressed in different occasions during athletic competitions (taking off jerseys when celebrating a scored goal, during a break between games, at the end of the match and during the exchange of jerseys), and increasingly placing such everyday life photographs on the social networks, have at least two functions: (1) to show the canon of the body beauty and (2) encourage (in both sexes) lascivious images. The message is: (1) if you want to be trendy and young as we are, you should

do all to build up your body to the mold that we give you. You have at your disposal fitness centers and gyms, stimulants, aesthetic surgery. Of course, the financial resources are taken for granted, because, for beauty (body beauty), one should sacrifice all. And (2) the second function has an interesting message also: if you have such a body like we do, hedonistic lust is guaranteed. So come to the stadium to watch us, or watch the TV when we play and “enjoy” watching our body, or be active on the social networks and you will indulge in our body. You must be active!

This imperative, which is implied, is equally valid for all ages and sexes. Age is not important and a sex is not important, just practice and be beautiful (physically) and stay young. That is why fitness centers are full of lonely individuals facing straight their physicality.

And so we come to the imperative: All for the body, the body for nothing.

The cult of sports results, as noted, was built in mid-eighties of the 20th century, with the idea that it is not important to participate, but to win. Promotion of capital and goods mobility as the foundation of the liberal concept in economics pushed to the forefront a Darwinian competition type. Sport is by its very being, favoring competition in the sense that the best man wins. Therefore, it was necessary to change the previous paradigms and considerations of sport and its attributes.

Now, sports results achieved are in the focus of our attention, reflecting the New Age cults.

“Win or Die” is the message that is sent to all the athletes of the world, and all age categories. It is a philosophy faced by young people at the very beginning of their sports development.

Victory as the final outcome of the sports competitions is the most important pillar of the political and economic utilitarianism of sport.

Political utilitarianism of sport relies on the achieved sports results. Behind the reports on the number of (our) medals won at the Olympic Games, or World and regional (continental) championships, (our) real

intention hides: (1) our victories (medals won) show the quality of our social system and our ideology; (2) medals and sporting victories of (our) athletes cover up the problems of (our) society. Hence, the ferocity of emphasizing the number of medals won and victories in the print and electronic media. Of course, marketing experts, skilled in the spinning of the social reality, lead to perfection, a designed game of seduction. Thus, sports result achieved is a good opportunity not to be missed.

The economic utility of sport is very difficult to achieve without good sports results. And with them, it is in a direct proportion. Powerful sports associations,

International Olympic Committee (IOC), Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) builds their sports empire on the results achieved by many athletes and sports teams. To achieve this they have, each in its own domain, to build sports stars and sports idols that are the prerequisite to any success. Therefore, their financial accounts should be well filled.

Public is thus constantly informed of the athletes' earnings and their lives day in day out.

And so raises the new imperative: All for the result, the result for nothing!

The sport profit cult is undoubtedly the aggregate cult. It comprises hedonism without any restrictions and it implies sport aiming at results as the imperative goal and allowing the use of all means to the final end-winning, not for the sake of winning but for money making.

Here also the political and economic utilitarianism is highly valued. Within the political utilitarianism of sport, a lot of money is invested not only in athletes and appropriate sports associations, but also in sports infrastructure. Regardless of the political system of the countries, their government, if they want to take advantage of sport in favor of their political goals, will invest money (from private or state funds). When it comes to the economic utilitarianism, one should remember that sport, especially its elite and professional segment, is a lucrative business. This

business, like any high profit industry, has its own rules and its philosophy of development. And these rules must be respected and obeyed by all.

Profits of the leading sports clubs and sports associations are amounting to hundreds of millions and billions of dollars. Such huge profits should be accompanied by seriously organized system of business. This industry, like any other, takes care of the entire production process: providing raw materials, processing of these raw materials, providing finished product and organizing its sales.

Providing raw material includes a sufficient number of children who will be involved in the training process. Therefore, leading sports clubs have well organized sports camps—schools where children are prepared for the competition. They resemble, in particular in relation to the cruelty, the school in the ancient Sparta. Drill and harsh selection are its main features. Since usually there are not enough good children in the immediate environment, sports clubs send their scouts around the world to search for them. Most often, they buy them from the poor parents whom they promise a bright future that smiles to their children. When necessary, they buy the whole families.

Raw material processing means having an organized school of a particular sports club where children learn basic sports skills and techniques. In the framework of the organized training process, further selection of children is made, thus narrowing the circle of those who will continue their sports training. These children and young people who are removed from further training processes, pose the problem because their socialization and further life prospects are very uncertain and usually with a sad outcome.

When it comes to the final product, or a young athlete who can be involved in a competitive drive, the best of them are displayed at the sports fairs (youth and junior competitions of all levels—to the world ones), and sports marketing is tasked to sell them at the highest price.

Of course, in this organizational pyramid, there is

little room for those at the top and a little more below the top. Therefore, the vast majority, unfortunately, left on the street without any perspective, tries to find the way to continue their career. Most often, these are sad life stories. All for profit, profit for nothing.

With this exclamation: All for profit, profit for nothing the imperatives of the New Age are completed.

4. Fair or Unfair

Sport with its utilitarian values, political and economic, has built also its Utilitarians. They, according to their name, are actually searching for any type of benefit, provided by sport. In this vicious circle in which it is difficult to identify who is older—the utility that sport owns, or the Utilitarians who are an integral part of it, this Latin phrase nestled. In its message lies the explanation not only for changing the attributes and values of sport, but also for a self justification of what it has done.

Modeled after the old Latins, the Utilitarians of the New Age are trying to take advantage of the great possibilities of sport to achieve their goals. Therefore, the imperative that aggregates the New Age—all for profit, profit for nothing is so highly elevated.

Sport has thus been developing just one philosophy, that of money making.

Carefully insisting on sports idols cult the individualism gets lost, man's unique personality has been slowly erased.

Sports idols, as the basis for the construction and expansion of sport cults, also broaden a neo-paganist worldview. Thus, not only Christianity, but also all other monotheistic religions are questioned. Their continued existence is certain as well. New (neopagan) gods in the form of sports stars and sports idols, as well as new sports cults, offer people a new image of the world. In it, there is no room for the basic human values, such as morality, charity, freedom—in the sense of “self-restraint for the sake of the others. A New Era has fostered new values in which hedonism and self-sufficiency are at the very top.

Thus man is easily turned into self-sufficient individual following his sports idols, and in the course of time, his personality becomes diminished and deprived of being unique and unrepeatable.

Therefore, when he finds himself on the margins of a social life, he is happy when his sporting idols smile at him, and he sees that smile on the television screen. Idolatry, which has cozily embedded in his understanding of life, elevates him and makes him happy. When his sports idol wins—this is as if this was his victory, when his idol drives an expensive car—he feels as if he were driving such a car, when he sees him live in a huge villa, with a large swimming pool—this is as if he lived in such conditions and so on, not to list other numerous illusions. His cramped and poor apartment is not important, it is important that his sports idol, his neopagan divinity, is well off.

Fans do not discern changes in their sports idols' behaviors and their total ignorance of real life hardships.

In his individuality, which means loneliness, in “voluntarily” selected self isolation, fans as ordinary people, cannot register such a change. Yet, the production line producing sports idols and thus sports idolatry goes on, without stopping.

5. Conclusions

Therefore, the role of the sports idols is significant and multilayered. But on this occasion, let us recall the two most important ones: the first is to assist the achievement of (too) large a profit for sports clubs and sports associations, and the second is to blur the image of the real world, which we live in. This applies both to the region which we live in and to all the parts of the world.

This double significant role stems from the globally applicable utilitarian nature of the sport. And its very agon, known in every corner of the globe, makes sport so applicable in both listed directions—economic and political ones.

That is the indispensable role of the sports idols and

idolatry built on them.

Oh the times! Oh the customs!

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