European Heroes. Myth, Identity, Sport


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A book about heroes, myths, and identity in sport seems very timely. This book, however, is more than a result of current academic needs or demand for this kind of historical research. The editors also stress, in a perhaps surprisingly open manner, the political importance of such research: “Arguably, Europe now needs such unifying heroes and it is perhaps preferable that they come from future gamesfields rather than past battlefields” (inside cover text). The problem of such an openly political project, as the editors recognise of course, is that sporting heroes, at least in Europe, so often are deeply linked with their national identities.

European Heroes is, interestingly enough, a spin-off product of a European Union-sponsored seminar held in Florence, Italy, in the early 1990s. It is a compilation of ten different articles plus a prologue and an epilogue by the two main editors, Richard Holt and James Anthony Mangan. The articles may be familiar to eager journal readers, as they constituted a special issue of the International Journal of the History of Sport (vol. 13, no. 1, 1996), which Mangan edits. All the articles have renowned European researchers as authors, some of whom come (positively enough) from outside the traditional English-language area, which much too often represents a barrier as well as a bridge towards cultural understanding. The editors deserve praise for this selection. Nevertheless, the authors represent the main EU countries, and thus the cultural hegemony in Europe. Of the ten articles, French and British (mostly English) material constitutes the subjects of three essays each. German sporting heroes—as different as Friedrich Ludwig Jahn and Max Schmeling—are depicted in two contributions. The remaining two deal with Italian and Austrian examples.

What these contributions have in common is the perspective of the hero as a carrier of virtues: special virtues with a certain cultural compatibility and a certain social representation, making them into something more than ordinary role models. This is especially evident in the British contributions, whether in Mangan’s relatively familiar representations of the ideals transmitted through sport (or, in his words, “The British middle-class
hero as a moral messenger”) or in Tony Mason’s more narrative piece on two local heroes of early twentieth-century English Football history, Stephen Bloomer and Harold Fleming. Though not one of Mason’s most profound contributions to sports history, this piece still offers good stuff, such as the description of the local heroes: “Bloomer and Fleming were essentially decent, steady, long-lasting and respectable, ordinary men with one extraordinary talent. [They] helped their teams to win and by their special skills made winning even more enjoyable.”

Of the articles in the collection, the French contributions seem to demonstrate the most outspoken interest in cross-cultural matters, like the interesting piece on “The Immigrant as Hero” by Pierre Lanfranchi and Alfred Wahl. Here the two authors depict the football lives of two great French players of the 1950s and 60s, who differ markedly in their social integration. The hero of the 1958 World Cup, Raymond Kopa, who had changed his name from his family’s Polish name Kopaszewski, easily fits the role of the well-integrated immigrant, while another gifted player, Rachid Mekloufi, with his Algerian background, took quite a different way in the late 1950s and 1960s. Mekloufi, according to Lanfranchi, embodied the contradiction and conflict between sport and politics, serving as a symbol of the revolution in Algeria while being a professional player in France. These were two interesting stories put together well.

The Italian cyclists Bartali and Coppi are the focus of Stefano Pivato’s piece. They came to represent two distinct ideologies, Catholicism and communism, less from their convictions than because they were available for mythmakers. Pivato’s piece is an intriguing story about Italian politics in the 1940s and 1950s and the way sporting heroes can be exploited. All contributions cannot be mentioned here; let it be said, however, that most of them provide, at least in European sports history, new insights and new perspectives. Some articles also provide nicely written history, like Richard Holt’s presentation on the various hero-functions of English cricketers.

Although the Austrian football players Josef Uridil and Matthias Zindelar receive fair and interesting attention, the selection of articles from the hegemony of European culture (France, German, and partly Italy—to which Britain belongs mostly because of the English language and the country’s role in sport’s history) can be criticised. This approach leaves out vital areas, such as the Iberian peninsula, clearly a missing link (especially since the editors themselves recognise football as “the European sport par excellence” [p. 172]). It also leaves out examples from the Benelux countries, which is unfortunate because these countries stand out officially as the most pro-unionist in today’s Europe. An investigation of the role of sporting heroes in such environs clearly would have benefited this collection. Neither Eastern-Central Europe nor Scandinavia or the Nordic countries are included. The editors quite sensibly hold forth the Tour de France