



## Review article

### Football, Cultural Identities and the Media: A Research Agenda

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### Abstract

With the eyes of the world on the soccer World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea, a massive media event consumed in record numbers by television audiences and newspaper readers, analysis of the media coverage of football shows that it often goes beyond reporting the outcomes of matches. Sports media discourse plays a rôle in representing cultural identities. For example, newspaper coverage of England at the World Cup might take the form of sports reporting but its content is linked to wider cultural processes providing information about Englishness itself. This study's aims are to explore how the sports media, especially the 'quality' press, perpetuate a recognisably English cultural identity by examining how other cultures are depicted in England considering Spain and Africa as examples and to outline a possible research agenda for 'Japorea 2002'. Media representations of Englishness perpetuate notions of patriotism and heroism comprising the traditional English virtues of bravery, honesty and endeavour. The World Cup presents an opportunity to gauge how far newer cultural attributes of style and sophistication are accepted as necessary social and sporting values by the English-based media. Regarding sports media portrayals of Spain, it remains to be seen if football journalists can offer anything significantly different from the familiar stereotypical portrayals of tough but temperamental Spaniards outlined during previous international competitions. Finally, simplistic portraits of African footballers inherited from colonial times focus on physical power, indiscipline and naïvety with underlying lingering assumptions of European superiority over Africa. Will Japorea 2002 finally see the stereotype of the naturally athletic, aggressive, unpredictable black African consigned to history?

### Introduction

In this, the early summer of 2002, the eyes of the sport and leisure world are trained on Japan and South Korea as, for the first time ever in their seventy-two years of history, soccer's World Cup finals are played in Asia and co-hosted by two countries. 'Japorea 2002' is evidently a huge organizational and administrative operation with some thirty-two nations' football teams playing sixty-four matches in ten Japanese and ten Korean cities in the space of little more than a month with the final scheduled for Yokohama on 30 June. The tournament also has a vast promotional side, too, with marketing and merchandizing, spearheaded by the somewhat bizarre mascots, Ato, Nik and Kaz, expected to be an extensive and highly profitable exercise particularly for the sports and leisure wear companies involved. Most importantly though, from the perspective of the present study, the 2002 World Cup finals will be a massive media event. When the finals were last staged, in France in 1998, the cumulative television audience world-wide was estimated at nearly 40 billion, with some 1.7 billion watching the final itself, and the world's press sent over eleven thousand journalists to cover the tournament reporting in over one hundred and fifty different languages. Radio, too, played a big rôle as did, for the first time, the new communications technology of the Internet. There is every reason to believe that the audience and readership figures set by France 98 will be surpassed by the 2002 event.

One of the most noteworthy features of the growth in media coverage of football in general and of the World Cup in particular has been the rapid expansion of coverage offered by the daily press throughout Europe and especially by the 'quality' or broadsheet press in Great Britain. The 1980s and

1990s confirmed the pre-eminent position occupied by football in the 'quality' press which had previously taken so long to embrace it. Indeed, it could be argued that the most significant development of the last fifteen years or so in this area has precisely been the growth of the sports pages in broadsheet newspapers with football occupying a now fully secure and central place in that significantly expanded coverage. During France 98, for instance, many newspapers carried daily supplements devoted to the World Cup finals and football now not only dominates the broadsheets' sports pages but also appears at times as front page news, too. The 'quality' British press, it would seem, has caught up with the tabloids in realizing the importance of sport in driving sales figures and has also responded to changing trends in its own readership which is less interested in politics and current affairs and more concerned with lifestyle issues, leisure activities and sport.

When the press reports on football, however, it does more than simply cover the technicalities of the sport and much more than merely report the outcome of football matches. Print media discourse on football may also be said to play a significant part in the representation of national cultural identities. International football match reports in particular often take on the characteristics of literary narratives in which the characters (players and national teams) are pitted against each other in moments of crisis and conflict (football matches and international competitions) that form the central plot and they may be read, therefore, partly at least, as weaving a story about how representatives of different cultures interact with each other and how they reflect upon their own national and cultural identities. The typically imaginative metaphors and emotive vocabulary which are, as we shall see, so prevalent in newspapers' coverage of football are, then, not merely stylistic devices lending attractive literary qualities to the writing in question. Sport in general and football in particular is a major economic, cultural and political phenomenon that is increasingly consumed through the media. As such, media sport communicates information not just about itself but about culture as a whole. Consequently, a newspaper report of an international football match involving the England national team at the 2002 World Cup finals, for instance, might take the form of an article on the world of international sport but its content is inextricably linked with wider psychological, cultural and ideological processes that provide information about notions of Englishness itself. Football is in this way frequently appropriated to communicate information about national and cultural identities. It is said to be indexical in that it is used to represent perceived national characteristics about which it apparently presents direct evidence. As Blain and Boyle (1998: 370) note: 'The way in which sport is written about ... becomes a source of information about our beliefs, opinions and attitudes as cultures.' An integral element of these beliefs is, of course, a sense of our own collective national identity and an awareness of other nations' supposed characteristics. Indeed, the rôle played by media representations of football in the construction of national identities should not be overestimated and it is hoped to demonstrate here that the press contributes considerably to the maintenance of shared cultural values which serve to reinforce consensual perceptions of national unity. One of the ways in which football writing achieves this is by a distinctive use of language that provides shorthand definitions of certain nations inwardly in terms of their own history, society and indigenous cultural values as well as outwardly offering an insight into how they may be perceived as different from other nations. As we shall see in the following study, football offers a particularly rich source of material for the analysis of the rôle of the press in these processes of definition and transmission of shared notions of cultural identity. For all of the conventional and reductionist qualities of the shorthand definitions employed, however, it must be remembered that they are usually grounded in objective realities and it is, therefore, always useful to highlight their origins in political, cultural and economic developments outside football in society as a whole. Much can be learned, then, about notions of cultural identity by examining how this interface between football, society and the print media operates.

The present examination has a threefold aim: first, based on the assumption that a recognisable English cultural identity is fashioned and perpetuated by the sports media and in particular, but not exclusively, by the 'quality' press through its coverage of the national football team competing against other nations, to examine some of the mechanisms at work in depicting English cultural identity as distinct from that of the opposition; second, to compare how the British media portray established soccer powers in Europe (such as Spain) with emerging footballing nations in Africa; and third to highlight throughout

possible avenues of further study.

Over the ensuing pages, it will be interesting to gauge the extent to which the 'quality' press has reinforced or challenged popular constructions of the foreign or 'other' in the cases examined. Given the significant growth in coverage of football in Britain's 'quality' press, which is itself intrinsically worthy of examination, most of the data researched for this study are drawn from the football match reports and related articles appearing in *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Observer* during the European Championships of 1996 and 2000 and the World Cup of 1998. Also, given the aim of comparing broadsheet interpretations of foreign cultures with those of the tabloids, examples from several tabloid newspapers, including *The Daily Mirror* and *The Sun*, are also included where appropriate.

## **Sports Media Portrayals of English Cultural Identities**

Because football is mediated as an extension of social values, the discourse employed by newspapers – and, indeed, by other branches of the media – as they report the exploits of the England national football team during World Cup and European Championship tournaments connects with a wider view of Englishness which is based on a relatively limited set of beliefs. The picture of Englishness painted in the football coverage under consideration tends to perpetuate an idealized portrait of the patriotic, determined and battling English people. Indeed, the dominant themes of the press reports of English football studied are those of patriotism and combat with the supposedly typical English sporting virtues of commitment, courage and, above all, fighting spirit being highly prized by the print media discourse examined. The brief overview of English identity that follows is extracted from a much broader and more detailed study into representations of the collective cultural identities of Europe's most dominant football countries in the sports media of England, France and Spain (see Crolley and Hand 2002).

Regarding a football match as an arena for the affirmation of combative patriotism is a feature of British society which has been noted on many occasions. As Critcher (1991: 81) notes, 'it is difficult to specify anything, other than war and royalty, which articulates national identity quite so powerfully as the England team competing in the latter stages of a World Cup' and these patriotic sentiments are both reflected and fuelled by the media in their coverage of such events. The principal characteristics of England's cultural identity are, indeed, often communicated metaphorically by the media's drawing upon the language of war and royal motifs. A television news broadcast during the 1998 World Cup finals held in France, for example, began its report of England's victory over Tunisia in the opening group game with: 'The players entered the arena like gladiators. They sang the national anthem with pride. The coach led from the front.' (ITN 15 June 1998). So, the England team represent the country as a whole and 'fight gladiatorially' on its behalf. This bond is also firmly anchored by the discourse of print media football match reports and articles. Referring to striker Alan Shearer's return for a pre-World Cup friendly against Portugal, *The Times* stressed the link between team and nation in the following way: 'The most comforting gift a *nation* can be granted this close to the World Cup finals is confirmation that *its leader* is back, sound in mind and body and spirit' (23 April 1998, my italics). Similarly, the report of the defeat at the hands of Argentina at France 98 included the following enjoinder: 'Let us take pride in the collective bravery and the discipline shown by the depleted side. They did the country proud' (*The Times* 1 July 1998). Typically, then, the media will communicate national identity through images of cohesion and unity. The entire English nation is implicated in the activities of its representatives on the football pitch with the all inclusive discourse used here being characteristic of this patriotic process.

Kelly (1996: 8) notes that 'Patriotism has always been a hallmark of Fleet Street, whether describing war, diplomatic negotiations or sport' and that 'There ... remains an assumption that Britain - or England - is the best.' Indeed, on occasions, patriotism turns to chauvinism as footballers from other nations are denigrated in less than subtle ways by the language used in the broadsheet press as well as in the tabloids. Returning to the defeat by Argentina in the 1998 World Cup, we note that England forward Michael Owen won a penalty in the game by demonstrating what *The Times* called 'the artfulness of a Latin rather than an English footballer' (2 July 1998). The implication is clear: typically, Latin players resort to trickery and deception whilst English players do not (usually) as they are expected to be honest in their demonstration of the superior values of fair play. By the same token, non-English opponents are often demonized in the

press especially when they display superior technique. For example, Roa, the Argentinian goalkeeper who saved Paul Ince's spot kick in the penalty shoot out in the France 98 encounter is described in less than complimentary fashion as 'a lank-haired Latin who could easily play one of the bad guys in a spaghetti western' (*ibid.*).

The jingoistic denigration of foreigners in football writing became a major issue, of course, during the 1996 European Championships held in England. Much controversy was triggered by newspaper headlines such as *The Daily Mirror's* 'Achtung Surrender! For you, Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over' (24 June 1996) before England's semi-final meeting with Germany. This headline was also accompanied by photographs of England players Stuart Pearce and Paul Gascoigne sporting superimposed army helmets. The whole, full of crude references to the Second World War, prompted widespread criticism of its apparently hostile approach to the Germans in the context of what was supposed to be, after all, an amicable sporting contest. This incident, which has almost passed into legend in the field of sports media studies, is discussed in much greater detail by Garland and Rowe (1997) and Poulton (1999) who make the point that it exemplifies a certain English attitude of insecurity when faced with the significant European 'Other' within a more general climate of British Euro-scepticism towards the increasing integration favoured by most in the European Union.

In this respect, Anderson and Weymouth's notion of the 'dominant interpretation' of print media discourse is invaluable (1999: 176). Commercial considerations might dictate that the press deals with a certain range of topics including football but these are generally 'underpinned by clear and recurring ideological boundaries indicating and delineating only a limited range of possible interpretations'. When sports media discourse refers to 'frogs' or 'krauts' (e.g. *The Daily Star* 2 March 1998 and *The Sun* 26 April 1996 respectively), the interpretations generated by it must include sentiments of xenophobia despite the protestations of newspaper editors to the contrary. Even in British broadsheets such dominant interpretations do underpin many football match reports and related articles and serve to perpetuate what Carrington (1999: 85) calls 'The notion of the hard-working, industrious and "honest" Englishman [who] is contrasted with the skilful foreigner who only ever beats the English by luck - penalties, unfair dismissals - or cheating - hands of God, play-acting - thus leaving England with the perennial "we would have won but for ..."' Foreigners are quite simply portrayed in a negative light throughout the British press as the inferiors of the superior, honest, upright and brave English.

The favoured virtues of the English sporting stereotype are not only conveyed explicitly in the press; football writing also communicates them metaphorically, most notably through imagery relating to one of England's national symbols, the lion, and to one of the country's almost perennial activities, warfare.

The use of the lion as a national symbol dates back to Richard I (the Lion-Heart, 1157-1199). His military exploits on the Crusades made him a mediæval legend which his death in battle against the French did much to enhance. He was the prototype brave, courageous English lionheart who, as we shall see, provides the implicit model for football journalists reporting on the England team's exploits. Given its origins as well as its current use on the monarch's arms, the English lion must also be read politically as connotative of royalty in addition to its more overt communication of the qualities of bravery, power and courage. In a sporting context, too, the king of the beasts is often associated with English football. It is the emblem of the Football Association, for instance, and, as such, appears in triplicate on the shirts of the England national team. Similarly, the commercial mascot of the 1966 World Cup held in England was a lion, World Cup Willie. The lion symbol was thrown into further prominence at Euro 96 when the song 'Three Lions (Football's Coming Home)', performed by David Baddiel, Ian Broudie and Frank Skinner, was adopted by supporters as the tournament's unofficial anthem. It is not altogether surprising, then, that the patriotic, royalist symbol of the lion should be so extensively employed as a metaphor by football journalists reporting on the England team. Following England's defeat of Scotland in the first leg of the Euro 2000 qualifier play off, for instance, the entire team were described as 'lion-hearted stars' (*The Sunday People* 14 November 1999). Use of this metaphor is not restricted solely to the tabloids, however, but is also widespread in broadsheets. This familiar image was used extensively during the 1998 World Cup finals where, for example, Paul Ince's performances in the group games were said to represent 'the England of the roaring lion, the acceptable, admirable face of English pride and aggression' (*The Times* 20 June

1998). Similarly, following the celebrated 'heroic' defeat against Argentina, manager Glenn Hoddle was quoted as saying of his team, 'They defended like lions' (*The Times* 2 July 1998) while one report of the game itself carried the headline 'England's lions keep fighting to the bitter end' and began: 'A lion-hearted England team plunged out of the World Cup in Saint-Etienne last night' (*The Times* 1 July 1998). It is in this context that the furore surrounding David Beckham's sending off can be viewed, for he was perceived as letting the side down by displaying un-English traits such as bad sportsmanship and a lack of regard for his team mates.

Finally in this respect, defeat in a football match can be honourable, heroic even, so long as the defeated players can be said to have proved their qualities of tenacity and defiance by fighting to the last. When it is the England national team which is involved in 'heroic failure', the vocabulary and imagery employed by press articles and match reports are frequently overtly militaristic. The term 'gallant', usually used to describe soldiers, of course, is often found in this context. Against Argentina at France 98, for example, the team 'held out gallantly' after Beckham's sending off, only to suffer a 'gallant and unlucky exit' from the tournament (*The Times* 2 July 1998). Moreover, the same article further reported on the now legendary encounter in Saint-Etienne by speaking of English supporters' 'gathering pride tinged with astonishment, as the England defence ... held out against the odds' and remarked that this game was 'surely one of the finest rearguard actions in the long history of the England team' (*ibid.*) which further implicitly connects English football with military history in that memories of famous 'rearguard actions' from Rorke's Drift in 1879 (during the Zulu War) to Dunkirk in 1940 live on in the country's psyche as defining features of a national identity which has as a major characteristic the ability to transform a disappointing defeat into a cause for a celebration of patriotic defiance and a heroic refusal to surrender to a potentially overwhelming opponent. 'Heroism' on the football field, then, is portrayed as ranking alongside 'great' events from military history. Furthermore, the former is described in terms of the latter thereby discursively binding the two in an almost symbiotic relationship. The media analysis reveals that a certain English preoccupation with past military conflicts is readily apparent. The (military) past is here projected into the (footballing) present by the discourse employed as football itself is appropriated as a site upon which to revive visions of England's former supremacy over its continental neighbours.

National identity is, however, not necessarily static; even if the nation of which it is an expression is fixed spatially in that territorial expansion or contraction no longer occur, its characteristics can and do change over time in relation to changes in the social, political and cultural contexts in which it operates. The England teams participating in the major international tournaments of the late 1990s (the 1996 European Championships, the 1997 *Tournoi de France* and the 1998 World Cup finals), successively managed by Terry Venables and Glenn Hoddle, were, for a while, regarded as personifying a modification of the typical English game which might be felt to connect with wider developments in British culture at the time. The accession to political power of 'New Labour' (1 May 1997) coincided with the 'Cool Britannia' fad in fashion, design and the arts. Similarly, the England football team, almost always mediated as an extension of the nation's dominant values, was said to have come out of 'the dark ages' as a result of 'English football ... becoming more and more sophisticated' with 'Venables and Hoddle ... successfully [adapting] the traditional qualities of the English game - passion, pace and power - to the more refined needs of the international stage' (*The Times* 1 June 1998).

That resolve, courage and fighting spirit are essential English qualities is clearly never doubted by sports media journalists. However, the press coverage of Euro 2000 suggests that England's elimination from the tournament at the group stage prompted something of a re-evaluation of those qualities and a realization that although they are the right stuff of (English) heroes, alone they are no longer sufficient for success. The then manager, Kevin Keegan, now at Manchester City, was widely quoted as saying after the defeat against Romania which precipitated England's exit: 'If it was about endeavour and honesty, we would have won the tournament' (e.g. *The Guardian* 21 June 2000) echoing the press viewpoint that something important was missing from the typical English game. Even before the championships had begun, *The Daily Express* issued a warning that was to prove prophetic: 'But there is the little matter of dealing with the sophisticated side of the game. The days of relying on pride and passion, bulldog spirit, the Three Lions or the words, for that matter, of Henry V, are long gone. Yes, those *traditional English*

qualities can be an asset, but there has to be finesse' (12 June 2000, my italics; Shakespeare's patriotic play, 'Henry V', was England captain Tony Adams's favourite pre-match read, apparently). When that finesse was not forthcoming and England were sent home, this time without glory, there was much soul-searching in the national press. England remains 'synonymous with failure in major international tournaments' lamented *The Guardian* (21 June 2000) while another piece in the same paper reflected that 'In terms of technique and tactics [English football] is still stuck in a deadly time warp' (*ibid.*).

The early elimination from Euro 2000 and subsequent poor performances in World Cup 2002 qualifiers were, in fact, the catalyst for the passing of a crucial milestone in English football: the appointment of England's first ever foreign manager, the Swede Sven-Göran Eriksson. Initial press reaction to the appointment was mixed with many writers believing it was inappropriate for a foreigner to be given charge of the national team and their views were illustrated with predictable and unflattering references to Eriksson's Scandinavian or 'Viking' ancestry. *The Daily Mail*, for instance, showing no concern to distinguish between the Swedish and the Norwegian stereotypes, claimed that 'We've sold our birthright down the fjord to a nation of seven million skiers who spend half their lives in darkness' (cited by *The Daily Telegraph* 3 September 2001). There was also scepticism regarding Eriksson's ability, as a Swede, to cope with the traditionally passionate nature of English football. As long ago as the 1960s, Swedish coaches had the reputation of being talented but also cool and 'scientific' (*The Times* 13 March 1969) and Eriksson was, therefore, expected by many to flounder in the hotbed atmosphere of the English game. Improved performances and results on the pitch, not least of all the 5-1 defeat of Germany away in 2001, along with Eriksson's endearing and knowledgeable style of management have, however, served to convert many sceptics and, according to *The Daily Telegraph*, have got 'the masses and the media believing again' (3 September 2001). The 2002 World Cup finals present, therefore, a major opportunity for researchers to examine Eriksson's contribution to the re-evaluation of traditional English sporting values that had already begun in the mid-1990s. Will the new approach of the intellectual Eriksson lead to the more mainstream continental European virtues of style, refinement and sophistication being added to the list of those valued alongside or even above the traditional English sporting qualities of commitment, hard work and physical effort? To what extent has the English football mind, fed by and represented in the media, truly opened up and swapped the insular for the continental?

## **Sports Media Portrayals of European Identities: Spain**

Studying the language used by sports media texts in their coverage of international football competitions can also provide valuable insights into perceptions of the national identities of Britain's European neighbours. By way of example, the present study will focus on Spain and is based on material presented to the Sporting Cultures conference at the University of Sheffield, England in January 2002.

The denigration of foreigners in sporting contexts by the British tabloids has been briefly considered above and is well documented elsewhere (Blain *et al.*, 1993; Crolley and Hand, 2002; Garland and Rowe, 1997; Poulton, 1999 and Roche, 1998). As Poulton (1999: 122), in particular, notes: 'Preconceived notions of what [certain] nations and nationalities are like are stored deep within the national memory bank alongside our shared histories of success and defeat ... In the run up to internationals, old stereotypes are brought out, dusted up and displayed'. Predictably, then, disparaging portraits of the Spanish in the tabloid section of the press are full of references to castanets, paella and bull fighting (Garland and Rowe, 1997: 16-17). Furthermore, here the war imagery so frequently used by football writers draws its inspiration from familiar historical conflicts involving England and Spain. Drake and the armada, the Spanish fleet sent to invade England in 1588, are never too far away. 'Drake Says Sink The Señors' screamed one headline in advance of what turned out to be England's victorious European Championship quarter-final encounter with Spain (alongside a picture of the national hero himself) while the text commented that 'the battleground is Wembley – and all England is willing [manager] Terry Venables' warriors to sink the opposition' (*The Sun* 20 June 1996). More recent Anglo-Spanish conflicts are also invoked. 'For the nation that nicked our fish, there will be no place in the semi-finals' blared the *News of the World* (23 June 1996) with the punning style that is typical of the tabloids. Sporting contests are, in this way, often framed by the media in terms of the wider historical military or diplomatic rivalries of the countries involved.

What is less well appreciated is the fact that broadsheets also engage in the recycling of simplistic national stereotypes by drawing upon similar images as the tabloids. The only difference here is that the vocabulary is, perhaps, less blunt and the images, therefore, are more subtly drawn. Ultimately, though, even if the rhetoric is not so crude, the portrait tends in the same direction.

Historically, Spain was, indeed, a powerful diplomatic and colonial rival of Britain's and, more recently, the suspicion with which she was viewed during the Franco years has given way to acknowledgement of her rôle as a full partner in the European Union. Given the strong presence of Spain on the international stage, then, and, of course, in the football context given the successes of Spanish club sides, such as Real Madrid's winning the European Champions League in 1998, 2000 and 2002, it is expected that the national team will be successful in international tournaments. Consequently, the Spanish team's apparent strength and power do feature in the print media articles analysed. Clemente, the manager at the last World Cup, rarely missed an opportunity to publicize his own belief in his team's qualities in this respect and was quoted in *The Times* as saying: 'I'll never let anybody say we don't play our guts out on the field' (24 June 1998). Football writers at France 98 agreed that Spain was 'As powerful a nation as any in Europe, with the addition of some grit from their Basque coach' (*The Times* 8 June 1998). Frequently the physical strength of Clemente's teams was portrayed as harsh and negative, though, reflecting a certain suspicion in the way in which Spain is viewed: the Spanish were 'uncompromisingly tough', 'tenacious in their negative objectives' and 'England's most difficult hurdle' at the European Championships (*The Times* 22 June 1996), for instance.

Similarly, Spanish players have been portrayed as demonstrating 'the cut and thrust ... found in a bull ring' (*The Times* 24 June 1996) which, although clearly a cliché, is a further reminder that Spain is often perceived in Britain as a cruel country, a theme that underpins descriptions of Spanish footballers as 'violent' (Abelardo, *The Times* 19 June 1996), 'ferocious' (Nadal, *The Times* 21 June 1996), a 'hit man' (Nadal, *The Times* 22 June 1996), 'the personification of his team in sheer physical presence and power' (Hierro, *The Times* 19 June 1996). Moreover, describing 'Spanish defences [as] always hard' (*ibid.*) and Spaniards standing 'shoulder to shoulder in a powerful midfield buttress' (*The Times* 15 June 1998) might be felt to connect with events from military and diplomatic history outside football in which the Spanish have demonstrated their power and, as with the tabloids, there are, indeed, frequent references in the 'quality' press to the 'Spanish armada' (e.g. *The Times* 19 June 1996, *The Observer* 24 June 1996) with one headline in particular playing on the surname of the England goalkeeper in the match against Spain at Euro 96 to evoke past conflicts outside the realm of sport: 'Spain still can't beat an English Seaman' (*The Sunday Telegraph* 23 June 1996). Moreover, the vocabulary used in phrases such as 'The Spaniards put up an almighty blockade' (*The Times* 24 June 1996) also conjures up images of Spanish power and obstinacy in more recent Anglo-Spanish disputes involving fishing rights and the sovereignty of Gibraltar.

Spain's relative lack of success in international football competitions is, therefore, a source of some surprise and consternation in sports media texts which often seem obliged to qualify the Spanish as 'underachievers' (e.g. *The Times* 20 June 1998) and 'unpredictable mavericks' (*The Times* 22 June 2000). Spain's early elimination from the 1998 World Cup finals, for instance, was described as a 'bewildering eclipse' (*The Times* 21 June 1998). The article in question then went on to ask exasperatedly: 'How could it be that a side so rampant, so powerful, so full of scoring potential and who many believed had the capability of going all the way had been erased from this tournament?' (*ibid.*).

Spain's failure to live up to expectations is not quite an inexplicable mystery, though, as it can be attributed to the supposedly suspect temperament of Spaniards. The Spanish are represented in the English-based press as a temperamental, contrary and fearful team capable at times of being 'simply mesmerizing' (*The Times* 22 June 2000) as well as of playing with 'tremendous verve' and 'brio' (*The Times* 25 June 1998) but who always ultimately fail. In short, they are renowned for being 'technically deft' but 'woolly of purpose', and, with unflattering reference to the Spanish custom of taking siestas, 'sleepy' and all too often in need of a 'wake up call' (*The Times* 19 June 2000). Moreover, the Spanish often go into games suffering 'pre-match anxiety' and fearfulness is frequently attributed to Spanish footballers by sports media texts. Following a World Cup match against Paraguay, *The Times* recycled this notion focusing first on the Spanish goalkeeper and then on the team as a whole: 'The heat in Saint-Etienne ... ensured there was sweat

on the brow of Zubizarreta as the anthems played; or was it fear?’ (20 June 1998). Having initially set up the concept of Spanish fear, the article goes on to reinforce it: ‘In the 10th minute, Zubizarreta turned *with anxiety bordering on panic* when a corner from the right seemed to evade everyone in his goalmouth’ (*ibid.*, my italics). Throughout the game, which ended in a 0-0 draw, the article reports, ‘Spanish nerves continued to be taut’ (*ibid.*).

Coverage of Spain’s performance at Euro 2000 unfolds in a similar way and contributes further to the anchoring of the image of the ambitious but temperamental and ultimately unsuccessful Spaniard. Spain has ‘a reputation for falling apart’ notes *The Times* (13 June 2000), ‘never fails to excel in flattering to deceive’ (14 June 2000) and, ‘as usual’, caught the eye ‘by being the greatest disappointment of [the] tournament’ (17 June 2000). The final summary of the Spanish character comes in a familiar reference that even the most casual student of world literature would recognize: ‘Tilting at windmills has long been recognized as a Spanish obsession, never more so than where their football is concerned – all those pointless attacks, all that frustration’ (*The Times* 23 June 2000).

Images of Spanish national identity are, then, clearly delineated in British sports media texts. Earlier work (Blain *et al.*, 1993; Crolley *et al.*, 2000; Crolley and Hand, 2002; O’Donnell, 1994) has also demonstrated the existence of well-defined national cultural identities in media portrayals of France, Germany and Italy which revolve around traditional concepts of French flair and style, German belligerence and efficiency and Italian temperament and theatricality. Given that all four of Britain’s major European neighbours have qualified for Japorea 2002, the unfolding drama of the tournament presents an ideal research opportunity for further work to be conducted in this area. To what extent are the traditional stereotypical portraits of French, German, Italian and Spanish national identities still operative in the football match reports and related articles of the early twenty-first century? In particular, how will the ‘quality’ press, and especially the Euro-sceptic papers, contribute to this debate?

## **Sports Media Portrayals of African Cultural Identities**

For all of the importance of Europe’s big five - England, France, Germany, Italy and Spain - it is also important to look further afield when considering sports media portrayals of cultural identities, especially given that the majority of the world’s footballers are actually from developing countries. Subsequent studies will doubtless explore the impact that staging the first ever World Cup finals held in Asia will exert on the football cultures of the newly-emerging Asian countries and, indeed, on the perceptions of those countries held by others, but this study will focus on the emergence of African players and nations in world football as a significant feature of the sport’s development in the latter part of the twentieth century. African players represent the single biggest category of foreigners playing professional football in France, for example, while the progress made by African national teams on the pitch has led to some very creditable results epitomized by Cameroon’s beating of Argentina on the way to the 1990 World Cup quarter-finals and Nigeria’s defeats of both Spain and Bulgaria in the 1998 World Cup finals. The importance of Africa to the game globally is also being increasingly recognized. In 2000, South Africa, readmitted to international competition in 1992, failed by only the slimmest of margins to be awarded the 2006 World Cup finals and in 2002, in recognition of the growing interest in African football in the domestic television market, the BBC provided extensive coverage of the finals of the African Cup of Nations. African football is also the subject of study for academic researchers and Darby’s in-depth, empirical and interpretative account of Africa’s evolving relationship with football’s world governing body, FIFA (2001) represents ground-breaking work in this area. While the social, political and economic implications of the emergence of African football are quite rightly receiving attention, it is also important to place on the research agenda the detailed examination of sports media representations of African identities, particularly in the former colonial powers such as Britain and France. Sugden and Tomlinson (1998: 130) have made the point that the ‘newly independent African nations [have] discovered in football a medium through which to register their presence in the international arena both on and off the playing field’. It remains to be seen to what extent this presence is acknowledged in sports media representations of African cultural identities. With this in mind, the following analysis reports initial work in progress in this area that it is hoped to develop further in a subsequent study.



To begin, it is worth noting that British sports media discourse on Africa tends not to differentiate between the sub-Saharan African nations (in contrast to the ways in which separate European nations' identities are clearly delineated) but rather to focus on the qualities that black Africans are reputedly said to share. These shared attributes generally fall into three categories.

First, the strength and physical power of black African footballers are frequently commented upon with references to their physique being commonplace. During the last World Cup in 1998, for instance, footballer and sometime television pundit, David Ginola noted that 'African players are very strong, normally' (BBC1 Austria vs Cameroon 11 June 1998) and the theme is expounded at some length by the press as well. Descriptions in *The Times* of the Cameroon players who faced England in a pre-tournament friendly focused on their physique: they were 'powerful', 'big thighed', 'lithe of body', 'big', 'explosive' and like 'lightning', attributes that were to be contrasted with 'the know how that England possess' (17 November 1997). Above all, the shorthand term used to convey this accent on the body rather than the brain is 'athletic', an adjective that recurs very frequently in descriptions of black African footballers and which serves to recycle traditional notions of the congenitally athletic black male. Nigeria at France 98, for example, were said to have 'athletic power' (*The Times* 8 June 1998) and 'loose-limbed athleticism' (*The Times* 20 June 1998) while Cameroon were 'the athletic Africans' (*The Times* 12 June 1998), the team of Omam Biyik, 'scorer of [an] athletic header' against Argentina that now has in its ranks Pierre Njanka who, in the game against Austria, 'galloped the length of the pitch' to provide proof 'of the Africans' extraordinary athleticism' (*The Times* 13 June 1998). It is noteworthy how many times media sports texts alight and comment upon the physical prowess of black players. A clear research opportunity awaits to complete a thorough survey of the vocabulary used in the press to describe black African-Caribbean footballers. Such a study would complement the work of McCarthy *et al.* (1998) whose analysis of 100 hours of television coverage of football revealed that in commentators' descriptions of black players' performances, emphasis tends to be placed upon the concept of physicality. There is definitely an impression from the press material studied so far here that certain items of vocabulary, such as the catchword 'athletic', are, indeed, used far more frequently to qualify black players than white. Moreover, the constant reduction of the black subject to his or her body in this way also plays an important part in the maintenance of perceived 'natural' differences between 'races' and of the social power relations between them, emphasizing and playing on, as it does, the belief that blacks are closer to nature than the 'more intellectual' whites.

Notions of African players' strength and power are refined further by sports media discourse to encompass a decidedly negative note. African power is potentially dangerous. 3-0 down to Italy in a World Cup game, for instance, Cameroon 'almost inevitably reacted violently' according to one *Times* reporter (18 June 1998) suggesting that it is virtually expected that Africans will, at some stage, display a violent streak to their nature. Similarly, during the television coverage of the same game, commentator Clive Tyldesley noted that 'There's a fantastic aggression about Cameroon's play, not always well channelled' and remarked 'They can be brutal at times' (ITV Italy vs Cameroon 17 June 1998). 'Brutal' is a particularly unusual adjective to describe footballers and its use here might be felt to connect with outmoded European perceptions of the frightening and potentially dangerous black male that Orakwue (1998) has noted still circulate in British culture and which may be traced to the colonial era when media accounts and cultural representations of blacks portrayed them as aggressive, potentially savage and uncivilized, providing the spurious moral justification for the colonization of Africa.

The second element in sports media portrayals of African cultural identities focuses on perceptions of naïvety and indiscipline. Television pundit Ron Atkinson's summary during the last World Cup finals was blunt and to the point: 'The developing countries are naïve defensively' (ITV Italy vs Cameroon 17 June 1998). His colleague, Ruud Gullit, failed to take the chance to challenge the stereotype and lamely agreed: 'There's a lot of talk about Africans being indisciplined but it's good that they are' (*ibid.*). Print media discourse on African footballers follows suit and can speak, for instance, of 'the mixture of beguiling forward improvisation and defensive innocence *that still represents that continent*' (*The Times* 15 June 1998, my italics). In this respect, media discourse can be highly revealing of almost unconscious European attitudes towards Africans. During one match, a Cameroon player's shot that went wide received the

instant retort from the television commentator: 'They can't get that erratic streak out of their system' (BBC 1 Austria vs Cameroon 11 June 1998). In other words, a simple moment of poor technique from but one individual is extrapolated into a sign of one aspect of an entire continent's perceived cultural identity that is reckoned to be 'unpredictable' (*The Times* 8 June 1998), 'reckless' (ITV Italy vs Cameroon 17 June 1998) and 'unbridled' (*The Times* 24 June 1998).

Locating African indiscipline as a given in sports media discourse on that continent's footballers further allows for the recycling of associated ideas that it is Europeans' duty to educate and civilize what is even in the football context still termed 'the dark continent' (*The Times* 18 May 1998). Pole Henryk Kasperczak's appointment as coach to Tunisia, for instance, was said to have been motivated by the need 'to blend organization into the African spirit' (*The Times* 15 June 1998) while Frenchman Claude Le Roy apparently brought 'European organization' to the Cameroon squad of which he took charge (*The Times* 13 June 1998, my italics). Similarly, certain players in the Nigeria team competing at the last World Cup finals were said to have acquired 'pragmatism that they have learnt from Europe. Taribo West', for instance, 'has been schooled at Inter [Milan]' (*The Times* 20 June 1998). The notion is taken to its conclusion in examples of the language used in the media to describe occasions when teams from Africa are defeated by Europeans. When Denmark beat Nigeria at France 98, for instance, television summarizer Kevin Keegan simply stated that 'They've given them a lesson in the best of European football' (ITV Nigeria vs Denmark 28 June 1998). In other words, it is the rôle of Europeans to educate Africans. Needless to say the teacher-pupil imagery is never used in reverse. In this respect, sport and its mediation act as a metaphor for residual beliefs deriving from the so-called civilizing mission of the colonial era through which 'naïve' and 'unbridled' Africans could be moulded and inculcated with European values and ideas.

European interest in Africa in colonial times was not only moral, of course, but, it might be argued, primarily economic and there is no doubt that the continent was exploited for its natural resources, raw materials and, indeed, its people many of whom served as workers and slaves for Europeans. Even such distasteful notions still linger in the third and final element of sports media portrayals of African footballers discussed here as one rather sinister example from *The Times* demonstrates: Cameroon's Njanka was described in one article as 'another unknown individual showing that we have not yet mined all the latent skills of that continent' (15 June 1998). The implication is that Njanka would be a useful addition to a European football club side's squad but the language used to communicate the idea is unapologetically resonant with images of European exploitation of African physical and human resources.

Given that a colonial shadow appears still to be looming over sports media discourse on Africa and bearing in mind that Cameroon, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa and Tunisia are all competing in the World Cup finals, Japorea 2002 represents a significant opportunity for researchers to study sports media text portrayals of African identities, especially after the high profile opening match of the tournament in which Senegal beat France, the reigning champions, and given that Nigeria and England have competed in the same opening group which has naturally been the main focus of the English-based media coverage. To what degree, then, are perceptions of African nations still coloured by antiquated and unacceptable yet lingering attitudes from the colonial era that regard Africa as the dark, unfathomable, indisciplined and dangerous continent that it was Europeans' duty to 'civilize' and privilege to exploit?

## Conclusion

To conclude, the representations of English national identity offered by the media in their reporting of the national football team tend to perpetuate notions of English patriotism and heroism which, themselves, comprise the supposedly traditional English virtues of bravery, combativeness, determination, tenacity, commitment, honesty and endeavour. Discursively, these values are communicated both explicitly in the vocabulary of sports media texts and metaphorically in imagery which typically draws upon the connotations of the national royal emblem, the lion, and military terminology and history for its inspiration. The 2002 World Cup finals in Japan and South Korea, however, present an ideal opportunity to gauge how far the new cultural attributes of style and sophistication, foregrounded by England's first ever foreign manager, Sven-Göran Eriksson, have been adopted and accepted as necessary social and sporting values by the English-based media which, in a sense, were calling for their introduction even before the

exit from Euro 2000.

Japorea 2002 will also provide researchers with further data on which to base conclusions about sports media portrayals of Britain's principal European neighbours. Stereotypical perceptions of the French, Germans, Italians and Spanish may well be seen to continue to flourish in the football context. In the case of the example quoted in the present study, that of Spain, it remains to be seen if sports writers and journalists can offer anything significantly different from the portrayals of tough but temperamental Spaniards outlined during France 98 and Euro 2000.

Finally, it is of equal importance to consider representations of African cultural identities in the sports media. As we have seen, simplistic portraits of African footballers already exist that primarily focus on notions of physical power, indiscipline and naïvety which themselves might be felt to be a legacy from the colonial era with the underlying assumptions that still linger of European superiority over the dark, unstable, unfathomable world of black Africa. The study poses a number of questions worthy of further investigation, including whether the 2002 World Cup finals will be the sporting event that finally sees the stereotype of the naturally athletic, strong, aggressive and unpredictable black African male consigned to history?

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