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Abstract

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Keywords: Lorem; Ipsum; keyword.

1. Introduction

Diego Armando Maradona represents a sports myth (Mitra & Naha, 2017; Massarelli & Terret, 2011) in the eyes of the Western world, full of nuances and contradictions that have made the man a legend. Maradona perhaps represented the first truly global phenomenon in the world of football and sport in general, reflected in the circulation of Maradona's name in even the remotest corners of the globe after winning the 1986 World Cup (Bavassi et al., 2019; Bifulco & Tirino, 2018; Bifulco & Dini, 2014; Hughson & Moore, 2012). As Bridle accurately described in *The soccer book*:

You could almost say that soccer is the universal language. If you found yourself in the middle of a strange country with no knowledge of the local tongue, you would still be able to

strike up a conversation by using a few hand gestures accompanied by the names of some prominent players. Place one hand at chest level while saying “Pelé” then raise it with the word “Maradona”, and you’ll quickly start making friends (Bridle et al., 2018, p. 10).

But how was Maradona perceived in the Far East, in the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which began to open up in the 1980s during the presidency of Deng Xiaoping? What was Maradona’s relationship with China and the Chinese, and how did Maradona represent the emergence of China in international football? Finally, what were the reactions to the death of Argentina’s world champion last November, and what does this social phenomenon tell us about modern Chinese perceptions of international football and its icons? In order to answer these research questions, an analysis of documentary and historical sources was carried out.

2. The historical context: sport, society and the development of the “one-athlete brand”

Prior to the 1980s, football was from the beginning a *sui generis* world where political instrumentalisation was always present and very strong. In Europe, Benito Mussolini’s fascist propaganda drew heavily on Vittorio Pozzo’s Italy as successive world champions in 1934 and 1938, and Spanish dictator Francisco Franco instrumentally used football and especially the images of Alfredo Di Stéfano and Ferenc Puskás’ Real Madrid in the post-war period. On this point we can speak of a “before” and an “after” that distinguishes two moments that characterise the history of “Western sport”: a first one in which politics was the protagonist, and a second one in which sponsors became protagonists. While pre-1980s sports development featured public support and funds, the next era showcased a shift to privatisation and commercialisation. This is the case in China, which joined this phenomenon with its reopening in the 1980s. The following takes place in two main phases: from 1984/1986 to 2001, when globalisation had not yet pervasively connected the world; and 2001-2019, when global commercialisation took root in sport (Billings et al., 2017; Coakley & Pike, 2009; Cashmore, 2006; 2000; Horne, 2005;).

We identify the first phase from the Olympic Games in Los Angeles in 1984 and the World Cup in Mexico in 1986 (and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989) to September 11, 2001. Following the instrumentalisation of sport by fascism and Nazism (amongst others) during the two World Wars, armed conflict effectively shifted to the sports arena, constructing strong post-war Olympic rhetoric and transforming athletics into an important weapon of the Cold War. The Olympic Games and Olympic medal count determined the dominance and cultural hegemony of one bloc over the other and served as manifestations of the ideological militancy and nationalism between “red” and “blue” allegiances. The Cold War era, symbolised by the fall of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall and the Soviet bloc, also signalled a destruction and rebuilding of the narrative around sport.

Despite the prevalence of sport in Cold War politics, becoming a global social phenomenon nonetheless proved extremely difficult amidst the political implications of a world divided into the two opposing ideological blocs. Nonetheless, a few athletes managed to rise to international prominence, creating the basis for the “one-athlete brand” (Smart, 2005). The term

“one-athlete brand” signifies the athletes that became global sports phenomena through a combination of individual characteristics and the external factors of good timing and media exposure. While one-athlete brands enjoy international notoriety and have or had access to the homes of a large part of the world’s population, they do not always draw universal adoration; much depends on the attitude of the character, the athlete and the showman.

1984 and 1986 are the watershed years of our timeline considering the development of strong brand recognition in the 1980s, marked by sporting mega-events and in the commodification of athletic stardom. In 1984, the Los Angeles Summer Olympic Games took place in the United States, representing the first truly “branded” Olympic Games after the much more sober edition of the Moscow Games in 1980 in the USSR. 1984 is also the year in which Michael Jordan signed his first commercial contract with Nike, creating the “Air Jordan” brand, and Apple bought TV rights to the commercial breaks to Super Bowl XVIII to launch the first Mac. Two years later, the 1986 World Cup in Mexico became the first sporting event to be broadcast on TV channels of many nations that had never been reached before, including China. In line with these mega-events, sport transformed into a more global enterprise, featuring big sponsors, big-budget advertising campaigns and new narratives around great athletes. These included Nike with Jordan and Carl Lewis (the American hero of the Los Angeles Olympics) and Maradona’s “Puma King Maradona Super 1986” football boots, becoming the most coveted sports objects among children and young people all over the world.

1986 is also the year of Maradona, who became one of the most famous and admired sports icons in the world. Lacerda and Mumford argue “the genius is one who is able to break out from the existing chains of convention” (Lacerda & Mumford, 2010, p. 192). Maradona meets this criterion, “demonstrate[ing] a vision and awareness in football that was unsurpassed. He was able to negotiate his way, seemingly effortlessly, past opposition players while continuing to keep control of the ball” (Ryall, 2018, p. 41). Compared to other equally popular sports such as cycling or tennis, football is a team sport in which, on the one hand, the individuality of the “star player” stands out and, on the other, distinct styles of play have been identified over time with particular national identities (Kittleson, 2014). These identities even combine with those “national characters” in Immanuel Kant’s memory (Kant, 2006; Martinelli, 2020) that have often been summed up by journalists, intellectuals and commentators in the concept of the “national spirit” introduced by da Johann Gottfried Herder (1871). Zanoni explains these phenomena through the term “Maradollar”. According to Zanoni (2007), Maradona represents one of Argentina’s most lucrative companies, whose extraordinary revenues are comparable to those of the biggest names in global business. This company has no logo, which means that it is not recognisable as a simple symbol but as a series of visual representations: the Argentine and Boca Juniors colours, and the jersey with the number 10. Maradona’s ubiquity is not based on the industrial repetition of a singular appearance. His star quality depends on diversifying and adapting to changes in the markets where his symbolic capital is exchanged (Zanoni, 2007, p. 16; Salazar-Sutil, 2008, p. 443). This more abstract commodification was nonetheless accompanied by specific sponsors such as Puma, who in 1996 signed a \$7.2 million dollar deal with “the injury-ravaged Diego Maradona [...] to use their footwear for two years” (Giulianotti,

1999, p. 117). This solidified the growing trend of the commercialisation of athletes and the development of “one-athlete brands” as a standard of the sports industry¹.

Maradona’s media influence was thus a social phenomenon with global impact, affecting the social body of populations that had previously been excluded from this kind of experience. Maradona as a global icon serves as an early embodiment of this political and commercial representation of athletes. Both can be seen clearly through his relationship with China, where Maradona was hailed for his sporting talent along with his communist ideological leanings. Italian footballer Roberto Baggio followed in Maradona’s footsteps in this way, gaining followers in East Asia not only with his skills on the pitch but with his conversion to Buddhism. Outside of football, basketball superstar Michael Jordan began to proliferate across China, setting the stage for Yao Ming’s future superstardom. Maradona’s rise to international fame and brand image as a single athlete, however, is a far cry from the modern evolution of popular one-athlete brands. The likes of Maradona and Baggio embodied the ideal type of Argentine footballer known as “*el pibe*” (the boy), “who possesses a small body, high skills levels, a character filled with cunning, creativity and vulnerability, and a disorderly, risk-taking, carnivalesque lifestyle” (Archetti, 1998, pp. 182-184; Giulianotti, 2015b). In fact, “despite their far-from ideal bodies the partially lame Brazilian Garrincha and the stocky Argentinean Maradona dazzled soccer fans around the globe with their artistry” (Tomlinson, 1999, p. 14). As a result, Maradona and Baggio’s short and stocky physical appearances were very much secondary to their style of play and ideological beliefs (Hughson & Moore, 2012). This contrasts starkly with “the violent, aggressive forms of hegemonic masculinity that are highlighted by Connell and others, particularly in the context of Australian and American sport” (Archetti, 1998, pp. 182-184; Giulianotti, 2015b).

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¹ The multi-million-dollar sponsorship deal between Puma and Maradona marked a turning point in the commercialisation of the sports figure: “Before the First World War, top footballers were supplementing their wages by endorsing products and having press articles ghost written. As the UK’s post-war austerity came to an end with the consumer culture of the 1960s, so the players sign value (in sterling and status) multiplied constantly. In 1951 Stanley Matthew received around £1,000 per year in boot sponsorship” (Walvin, 1994, p. 177).

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