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Pilgrimage to Fallen Gods from Olympia: The Cult of Sport Celebrities

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Abstract

Contemporary Western society has an abundant variety of role models, with celebrities from all walks of life replacing yesteryear's role models of military heroes and political leaders. However, sport has long provided religious and secular role models dating back to the ancient Olympic Games, and today every two years with the celebration of the summer and winter Olympics, more names are added to the Olympic pantheon of heroes. There is already a discrete acknowledged body of literature investigating celebrity sports men and women. This article draws on this literature specifically examining modern secular pilgrimage to sport celebrities, focusing on those who achieve fame and glory on the Olympic victory dais, but also those whose behaviour has led to their expulsion from Olympia. We suggest that because of the Olympic Movement's philosophy of Olympism, it is different from other non-Olympic affiliated sporting organisations, and the price for transgression on and off the playing field can be higher.

Keywords

Secular pilgrimage, Olympic Games, sport celebrities

Introduction

This article examines the links between religion, sport and celebrity, specifically using the Olympic Games (the Games) as an exemplar, and is based upon literature reviews and secondary data. We examine how athletes shift in the hero–celebrity continuum depending on how their fortunes wax and wane both on and off the playing field. We particularly highlight the singularity of a sport pilgrims' focus, namely following one sport star who has achieved heroic and/or celebrity status as a member of a national team competing at the Games. All three elements of sport,

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religion and celebrity are then brought together from the perspective of the Games and its philosophy of Olympism to form the major discussion of the article. It is suggested in this discussion that whilst sport, celebrity and Olympism share many of the hallmarks of secular religion, winning an Olympic gold medal adds a new dimension to our perceptions of the sacred.

Andy Warhol's oft-cited view that our lifetime aliquot is fifteen minutes of fame (Kurzman et al. 2007: 354) illustrates how many of us expect and venerate celebrity status. 'Celetoids', a term coined by Rojek (2001: 20) to describe individuals who achieve 'any form of compressed, concentrated, attributed celebrity', are becoming increasing ubiquitous. This growth is especially applicable to the sporting arena where, in the past, only a chosen few achieved celebrity status as a result of their on-field endeavours. In the last 25 years, due to the increased global televised and new media reach, sport has truly become a professional industry far removed from its classical beginnings of military training or physical exercise. The sport world of yesteryear is mythologised as being one where winning was certainly prized, but not at the expense of fair play. This is especially so in relation to the Games. Today, even in the Olympic Movement it is accepted that elite sportsmen and women are urged to win, whilst providing attention-grabbing entertainment where meeting administrator, sponsor and fan expectations can often outweigh athletic prowess (Toohey and Veal 2007). Cashman (2006: 3) notes that the Games inspire the emotional attachment and identity of 'individuals, including athletes, volunteers, spectators as well as power elites'. As evinced by this quote, there are numerous stakeholders in the sport industry, but the focus in this article falls upon only two, specifically within the context of the Games: the individual athlete (or celetoid) and the sport fan (or pilgrim). From the perspective of the former, our discussion looks at athletes who are worshipped as heroes and/or celebrities. The latter is discussed in terms of how the general public at large practises or displays its loyalty/affection for an athlete via secular pilgrimage. Athletes and sport fans then interface at the Games through the self-perpetuated religious association the Olympic authorities have fostered (namely, by the International Olympic Committee [the IOC] who is the guardian of the faith, generally known as 'Olympism'). This article examines the nexus of the celetoid and pilgrim, and how this association can be affected by the IOC, which can completely expunge an athlete from their records if the athlete's transgression of Olympism is severe. Other sport organisations do not necessarily go this far. For instance, the examples of bad behaviour cited by Masters (2010) involved non-Olympic sport stars such as Tiger Woods, Ben Cousins and Shane Warne, who all resumed their playing careers after a period of exile.

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The Games began as a small religious celebration in ancient Greece but today provide a potent example of the global tentacles of sporting empires through sponsorship, or in Olympic terminology, 'The Olympic Partners'. In the twenty-first century, the Games represent a juggernaut of sport contest and entertainment, with religious undertones where celebrities are created and eulogised, often through the spectacle of the Opening and Closing Ceremonies that form an integral part of the Games and are the most watched Games broadcasts (Tomlinson 1996: 601). However, one of the criticisms of Olympism as a form of civil religion is that its official history has been written as a hagiography instead of presenting an impartial historical record. Modern Olympism was conceived by the founder of the modern Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin. The IOC's Olympic Charter defines Olympism as 'a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy of effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles' (IOC 2010: 11).

Jennings and Sambrook (2000), two of the more vocal critics of the Olympic movement *per se*, see Olympism's dogmatic creed as requiring unquestioning acceptance of the litanies postulated by the Olympic hierarchy. Whilst some Olympic athlete-celebrities live up to the public's expectations, others are later found to have cheated in order to achieve their fifteen minutes in the 'sportlight'. The Games have a close connection to both religion and pilgrimage, from the humble origins of the ancient Games to today's mega extravaganzas where cities bid for the Games based partly on the economic returns they hope (somewhat naively) to garner from international tourism benefits.

Religion, Sport and Celebrity

Any discussion on religion in Western society today necessarily involves reference to the decline in the significance of the established organised, traditional religions and the increase in the secularisation of society (the secularisation paradigm). Citing both Bruce (2002) and Demerath (2000), Cusack (2009) notes that the sacred migrated in part from its locale in traditional religion to be repackaged and commodified in more worldly realms where Western consumerism reigns supreme: Gordon Gekko's famous quip in the movie *Wall Street* that 'greed is good' arguably might still be seen as appropriate in many societies today, both in the more developed and less developed world. In an interview on Australia's ABC Televisions' *Lateline* program in May 2010, Reza Aslan added to the

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debate on the changing role of religion in twenty-first century society by stating:

> The truth is that people are beginning to identify themselves in religious terms in greater numbers than we've seen in, well any time since maybe the nineteenth century… Part of it has to do with globalisation. The fact that our national identities have been assaulted by globalisation and that nationalism no longer has that primary place in our identities that it used to have has allowed for other, more primal forms of identity like tribe, ethnicity, but especially religion to rise to the surface.

This quote does not diminish the tensions between nationalism and localisation, exacerbated by globalisation. Rather, it highlights the changes in religious identification that have occurred in recent times.

In the literature on sport, celebrity and Olympism it is not unusual to find each being credited with attributes commonly ascribed to religion. At this point it is pertinent for our discussion that we proffer definitions for two terms which we use in this article: secular religion and civil religion. By secular religion, we mean the process whereby 'everyday secular practice [is transformed] into something that takes on sacralised meanings' (Jennings, Brown and Sparkes 2010: 551), and civil religion as offering 'a means of investing a particular set of political and social arrangements with an aura of the sacred, thereby elevating their stature and enhancing their stability' (McClay 2004: 12). In her discussion on sacred and profane ritual in contemporary sport, specifically drawing on the Christian heritage from the West, Cusack (2010: 936) opines that 'sport and religion in the twenty-first century are closer than they have ever been previously'. Magdalinski and Chandler (2002: 1), whilst not so definitive, still argue that 'Sport and religion, whilst possessing disparate philosophical foundations, appear to share a similar structure. Each offers its respective adherents a ritualistic tradition, a complement of suitable deities and a dedicated time and space for worship.' Prebish (1993) dissected each of the thirteen essential features that Harry Edwards (1973) believed religion shares with sport. Whilst acknowledging the equivalence of the two, Edwards (1973) stopped short of stating that sport was exactly the same as religion. Michael Novak (1976) suggests that, in the United States, sport functions as secular or civil religion. However, he acknowledges that sport still serves a religious function even though corrupted through its association with entertainment and professionalism. But at this point Prebish (1993: 63) parts company with Edward's and Novak's middle path, stating that 'for many, sport religion has become a more appropriate expression of personal religiosity than Christianity, Judaism or any of the traditional religions'. For example, he cites use of ritual; the generation of 'festive communion and sense of solidarity between the

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players and fans' (*communitas*); sport fans bearing witness (pilgrims); and actualisation and transformation by experiencing ultimate reality (1993: 65). He certainly nails his views to the masthead by later stating 'religious experience avails itself to those who participate, even if this participation does not involve competitive activity…it is, in the full sense of the word, *hierophany*' (1993: 70). In her discussion of visitorship to Michael Jordan's larger-than-life bronze statue in Chicago, Syndor (2000: 235) finds *liminality* between the nexus of sport-star and celebrity, describing Jordan's 'statue tear[ing] a liminal space into everyday space'. She also suggests that playing or watching the game has been replaced by peripheral liminal activities, such as collecting and/or shopping for sport-related paraphernalia, and that eating and socialising at sporting events have become the primary motivator to attend (2000: 224).

The secularisation paradigm also founds the notion of sport as a form of civil religion because, according to Jarvie (2006: 261), it is 'controlled through hierarchical structures of authority, a celebration that seeks to reproduce certain sets of power relations, a sacred form of activity that lifts the human spirit and, like religion, is dependent upon rituals before, during and after major sports events'. Civil religion's academic lineage dates back to classical antiquity and Plato, through to the eighteenth-century French philosopher Rousseau and then into the twentieth century when Bellah (1967) claimed that civil religion was indeed alive and well in America. Viewed from a political perspective, nationalism, national identity and the concept of civil religion are all inextricably connected and nowhere is this more evident than the Games where medal ceremonies are replete with ritual, specifically the flag raising and the playing of the winner's national anthem. Although the IOC plays down its links to nationalism, the media promote the winner's victory as a source of national pride that represents national qualities and traditions. The Games also have other ceremonial religious trappings: hymn-like anthems, prayers and torch relays which begin with the lighting of the 'sacred' Olympic Flame on the Altar of Hera in ancient Olympia.

The IOC determines these rituals (representing an Order of Service) and their observance signifies to all the authenticity of the event. Not only the main stadium, but each and every event venue is consecrated as sacred ground by the use of Olympic rituals, investing all of those who compete with an aura of sacredness extending back in time to ancient Olympia. The main stadium, which houses the cauldron where the Olympic flame is lit at the Opening Ceremony and is then extinguished in the Closing Ceremony some fourteen days later, remains a sacred site in perpetuity for sport pilgrim tourists coming to relive the moments of yesterday long after the Games have concluded. Sometimes referred to

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as 'cathedrals of sport' or 'sporting shrines' by researchers wishing to ascribe a religiosity to sport stadia *per se*, Gammon (2004: 41) sees such visitors as falling betwixt-the-between in the religious–secular continuum. Pilgrim tourists are also drawn to these select sites by their association with athletes who competed at the Games and whose achievements led to their status as celetoids. Thus Olympic museums collect athlete paraphernalia to exhibit to these pilgrims as reliquary; in traditional religions miracles are expected by seeing, praying to and/or even touching the relics but in sport museums their role is manyfold, such as to educate, to create a sense of nostalgia, as well as to seek the adulation of Olympic victors.

Not surprisingly, not all athletes who achieve celebrity status by winning at the Games comprehend why they have achieved this status, nor do they understand the affect it has on their lifestyle thence forward. For example, it is interesting that in his reflections on the personal importance of his only Wimbledon win in the summer of 1992, former tennis great Andre Agassi (gold medallist in the Men's Singles at the 1996 Atlanta Games) does not use the word 'celebrity', instead electing to use 'fame' as a synonym:

> Wimbledon has made me famous…Wimbledon has legitimized me, broadened and deepened my appeal, at least according to the agents and managers and marketing experts with whom I now regularly meet. People want to get closer to me; they feel they have that right. I understand that there's a tax on everything in America. Now I discover that this is the tax on success in sports—fifteen seconds of time with every fan… But fame is a force. It's unstoppable…I turn around one day and discover that I have dozens of famous friends and I don't even know how I met half of them… I marvel at how unexciting it is to be famous, how mundane famous people are (Agassi 2009: 167-68).

Along similar lines Rojek (2001: 57) notes that religion and consumer culture (in this case, celebrity culture) have converged in that both share a collective effervescence: 'they replicate clear principles of inclusion and exclusion, they are faithful to transcendent spiritual beliefs and principles, and they identify sacred and profane values'. One of the time-honoured ways that individuals are able to venerate these principles is by undertaking a secular pilgrimage.

Sport Athletes: Pilgrimage to Heroes and/or Celebrities

Juan Antonio Samaranch, the former IOC Honorary President for Life, noted 'The pilgrimage to Olympia, where the heart of our founder, Pierre de Coubertin, rests and where, every two years, the Olympic Flame is lit, is not for us just a return to our roots, but an opportunity to communicate with the "Olympian" citizens of this ancient city' (International Olympic

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Academy 2010). Over the past two decades, research on pilgrimage has embraced a post-modernist stance, with traditional religious and modern secular pilgrimage bifurcating into two separate streams, and recontextualised within the emergent research area of 'mobilities' because undertaking a journey (physical and/or intellectual) is usually a core tenet (Collins-Kreiner 2010). Digance (2006) has suggested that the only distinction between traditional religious and modern secular pilgrimage is that traditional religious pilgrimage mandates the journey as an 'act of faith'; however, both have a commonality in that they involve journeys that are redolent with meaning for the individual pilgrim. At sacred places, be they religious or secular, one may also encounter *communitas* and *liminality* (Turner 1969). From a sporting perspective, discussions concerning pilgrimage usually revolve around visiting sites where events are staged (for example, sport stadia and named sporting sites where special tours may be available), museums and Halls of Fame. Sport events equate with former sacred festivals of earlier times and generate collective identity and *communitas* (Demerath 2000). Nonetheless, it must be said that all event attendees are not necessarily secular pilgrims but attending perhaps just to be entertained, to support a particular team/event/country and/or as a social networking exercise. Sport pilgrimage can also encompass many other forms, such as visiting websites (individual, team or organisational), buying memorabilia (clothing, cards, stamps etc.), collecting autographs and/or swap cards and belonging to fan clubs.

A more active and partisan relationship between an individual and their favoured individual sporting star or team is sometimes referred to as 'fandom', a term which has emerged in the late twentieth century denoting 'a social expression of social identity, belonging, place and community, which encompasses wider and more varied forms of sports and sports fandom' (Wagg et al. 2009: 77). A good example from an Anglo-Australian perspective is the 'Barmy Army', a group of English supporters who follow English teams (primarily cricket) on overseas tours. The group was christened 'Barmy Army' by the Australian media during the 1994–1995 test cricket series, reportedly for travelling to Australia despite the overwhelming and accurate predictions that their team would lose the Ashes series.

Until the post-World War One Hollywood era, generally regarded as ushering in the era of the celebrity celluloid hero, sport fans could be expected to describe their following of sport stars as hero worship. References to heroes in the literature are extensive, names which most of us recognise as positively contributing to the development of human culture. Their contributions are revered through the ages, their names immortalised in perpetuity in a myriad of ways, be it in print, statues

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and/or via dedicated public spaces. Pre-industrial heroes usually acquired their extraordinary powers by divine intervention in that they were either born a hero or a demi-god, or by the hero earning such powers by enduring harsh trials and tribulations (such as Ulysses or Hercules) (Possamai 2006: 57). Similarly, 'the ancient Greeks believed that a hero was a half god and half mortal who performed admirably in given situations' (Delaney and Madigan 2009: 74). Up until the advent of the celebrity cult phenomenon in the early twentieth century, heroes have tended to be drawn from a military or political background, exhibiting 'exceptionally strong social supportiveness, quite strong personal competence and almost no celebrity shallowness' (Harris 1994: 107). Drawing on earlier works by both Birrell (1981) and Loy and Hesketh (1984), Harris emphasises that athletic heroes sprung from the agonal system in ancient Greece whereby honour was earned by 'demonstrating excellence in competition' (1994: 8). Certainly, in the postmodern period many have been accorded that honour as various sport Halls of Fame attest. However, it should be noted that sporting heroes (such as the English cricketing legend W.C. Grace) have been honoured since the beginning of modern sport in the nineteenth century (Smart 2005: 1).

It is therefore not surprising that ongoing debate exists in the scholarly community about whether or not sport stars should be rightly called heroes or celebrities (or whether, perhaps, both terms can be used interchangeably). In the early twentieth century, sport heroes 'were symbols of athletic excellence and represented the ideals of a growing sport culture' (Stevens et al. 2003: 103, citing Pitts and Stotlar 1996; Rader 1999). These commentators, however, question whether or not the concept of 'sport heroes' has been replaced by 'sport celebrities' in the public consciousness. On one hand, they cite Boorstin's (1961) view that sport heroes and sport celebrities are dissimilar (for example, North et al. 2005), with the distinction resting on the former achieving greatness whereas the latter is predicated on fame. Nonetheless, Stevens et al. (2003: 104) also note Chalip's (1996) argument 'that the sport athlete was "uniquely positioned" to bridge the concepts of heroism and celebrity recognition'. One of the findings of Stevens et al.'s study on Generation Y Canadian High School students was that 'hero and sport hero qualities are most strongly associated with personal traits and pro-social characteristics, and less identified with the celebrity indicators of popularity and media image' (2003: 109), and furthermore, that those surveyed still venerated sport heroes. As well as the notions of fame and greatness differentiating heroes from celebrities, Harris (1994: 105) saw shallowness, as distinguished from the substantiveness and/or longevity of heroic achievements, as being a defining characteristic of celebrity.

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Rojek and Turner go further by distinguishing sporting celebrities from 'other celebrities'. Rojek does this on the basis that sport celebrity pre-eminence is founded on 'self-discipline, training and material success [which provides] examples to us all' (2001: 37) or as a result of their 'talent, training and determination' (2006: 685). Turner (2004: 20) bases his views on the fact that 'their cultural prominence can be regarded as deserved [because they] perform unequivocally as themselves'. Some exceptional individuals, such as Johnny Weissmuller, make the transition from Olympian (winning five gold medals in swimming at the 1924 Paris and 1928 Amsterdam Games) to celluloid hero (by portraying Tarzan in the many Tarzan movies). Buster Crabbe, who won the 400 metres freestyle at the 1932 Los Angeles Games also starred as Tarzan and Flash Gordon (http://en.wikpedia.org/). Nonetheless, research by McCutcheon et al. (2002) indicates that our attachment to sport celebrities decreases as we mature and our preference progresses to 'other' celebrities not connected with sport, music or acting.

Four common themes emerge from the literature on the cult of postmodern celebrity: global sale and distribution of the individual as a commodity in today's consumerist capitalist society; the media (in its many disparate forms) and associated 'spin-doctors' as the drivers behind the dichotomy of the rise and fall of the celebrity persona; the appropriation of the celebrity persona by fans which in the extreme can lead to stalking and violence (for example, the courtside attack on tennis player Monica Seles in 1993); and finally the role of new technology (specifically the Internet and Web 2.0 applications such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter in both perpetuating and disseminating the celebrity persona). Rojek (2001) suggests that there are three categories of celebrity: ascribed, achieved and attributed. *Achieved* celebrity is important for this discussion because individuals achieve acclaim in the sporting arena largely due to their physical prowess. The presence of media scrutiny on their private lives (or Rojek's 'veridical' self) indicates that they have been transformed from a public figure to a celebrity (Turner 2004). Unfortunately for the individual concerned, any transgressions and consequent fall from the pedestal of fame is often hastened by media and/or the *paparazzi*, together with fan reactions to their misdemeanours posted on the Internet.

Besides competing in the sporting arena, sport celebrities are commodified by sponsors to endorse products, often earning more for their promotional activities than their earned prize money. In his discussion on sport celebrities, Rojek (2001) suggests that there are parallels to traditional religion in that both involve ceremonies of ascent and descent, and the opportunity for redemption when a discontinuity

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(usually revealed by the media) arises between their public and veridical self. A good example of this is the rehabilitation of golfing demi-God Tiger Woods in April 2010, evinced after his fall from public grace because his extra-marital peccadilloes became public knowledge. In late 2009 Tiger's sordid private life became the source of media frenzy. Whilst many sponsors and golf administrators turned their back on him because his off-field conduct had brought the game into disrepute, his sport agent company IMG did much to rehabilitate his public persona in the eyes of his fans and the general public. The Tiger Woods episode also raises the question of whether or not unrealistic expectations are placed on sporting celebrities to maintain saintly existences in order to be role models and sell more consumer goods to an ever-eager army of fans with purchasing power.

The Olympic Games

We have chosen the Olympics as the context within which to explore religion, celebrity and pilgrimage due to its link with secular religion (ancient Greece) and because winning Olympic medals provides an extra cachet which money alone cannot. Whilst the ultimate prize is winning an Olympic medal (preferably gold), competing at the Olympics stamps the individual athlete as an Olympian for the remainder of his or her life: the Olympic athlete oath at the Opening Ceremony marks a *rite of passage* into the Olympic family for eternity, and competing at a consecrated site (i.e. an official Olympic venue) evinces the witnessing, acceptance and compliance with the IOC's liturgy. As Doug Kyle, a former Canadian Olympian who competed at the 1956 Melbourne Olympics, says 'It's like climbing Mount Everest. You may be a champion of something, and then someone else wins and you're the ex-champion. But you can never be an ex-Olympian. You are an Olympian forever' (MacIntyre 2010).

The ancient Olympics were one of the strongest unifying forces in the Pan-Hellenic world (Toohey and Veal 2007). Whilst the earliest remaining records of the Games indicate that they were held as early as 776 BCE, and celebrated once every four years during the second or third full moon after the summer solstice, their exact beginning is unclear and, as Golden (1998) notes, shrouded in religious legend. The earliest mention of their foundation is found in the writings of Pindar. He attributed their origin to Heracles who, on his return from victory over King Augeas of Elis, founded the Games at the tomb of Pelops (Mouratidis 1984). Other authors suggest that it was Pelops who was the founder, or Oenomaus, King of Pisa (Golden 1998). It was not until the 50th Olympiad that there is evidence that the Games honoured Zeus, to whom they are later

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undeniably linked (Mouratidis 1984). Regardless of the exact nature of their foundation, 'the Greeks located the origin of the Olympic Games squarely in the sphere of the divine; gods and heroes found and compete in them as well as simply receiving worship' (Toohey and Veal 2007: 14, citing Golden 1998).

Whilst over time the nature of the ancient Games changed, their religious basis also became their undoing. They reached their zenith in the fifth century BCE. As the Romans gained political power over the region, the nature of Olympic competition irrevocably changed, and as well, in 267 CE a tribe from southern Russia (the *Heruli*) invaded Olympia, destroying much of its infrastructure. Reduced to a few events, the Games lasted for a further century, probably until 393 CE when the Emperor Theodosius I abolished all pagan festivals. If the Games did continue past this point it is unlikely that they extended beyond 426 CE, when the Temple of Zeus was destroyed on the orders of Theodosius II. In the fourth century CE, earthquakes and floods covered the area. Ancient Olympia remained virtually undisturbed and unimportant until 1875 when excavations uncovered the site (Toohey and Veal 2007) and added to the renewed interest in their history and links to late nineteenth-century sporting life, which in Western nations was embedded in the amateur ethos and all it entailed, including a mythologised purity of ancient Olympians.

Yet, the quest for victory in the ancient Olympics was not always virtuous and sometimes resulted in instances of cheating. The first known example of Olympic cheating occurred in 388 BCE when the boxer, Eupolus of Thessaly, bribed three opponents to lose their fights against him (Perrottet 2004, cited in Toohey and Veal 2007). Penalties for those who were caught were harsh. Contestants and their trainers could be whipped by the *mastigophorai* (whip bearers) for failing to obey the rules of the officials. Additionally, heavy fines were meted out for cheating. 'As a warning to potential offenders, money from such fines was used to pay for bronze statues of Zeus (known as *Zanes*) which were set up along the terrace wall leading to the entrance of the stadium. According to Pausanias, there were sixteen of these in all' (Swaddling 1999: 41). The siting of the *zanes* is important as athletes had to walk past them on their way to compete in the stadium. This is in marked difference to the modern Games where athletes who have been caught cheating are expunged from the records and their association to the Games lessened as much as possible. In the modern Games, Olympic heroes such as Ben Johnson and Marion Jones have been forced to return their medals and the Official Olympic record does not indicate their presence as Olympic winners. Currently, the modern Games, like their ancient counterpart, are

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considered to be the pinnacle of athletic excellence. They capture the attention of the world and are prized by athletes, spectators, sport fans, sponsors and the media. The introduction of television, and especially the technology that provides real time global coverage 24/7, has only increased their popularity. It is not only the sport *per se* that interests the media. The ritual and ceremonial aspects of the Olympics have set them apart from other sport events and clothes the Games with their unique civil religiosity.

Underpinning many of the ceremonial aspects of the modern Games is the homage paid to their founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, and the philosophy of Olympism that he proposed. De Coubertin's ideal of Olympism, a fusion of supposed ancient Greek practices and nineteenth-century British sporting ideas, internationalism and peace, is still widely articulated in official documents and IOC rhetoric. As Durántez Corral (1994: 51) notes, de Coubertin 'created a whole series of emblems and ceremonies which have shaped the Olympic Movement within a terminological paradox, resulting in the formal creation of a secular religion'. This Olympic religious nexus has continued throughout the course of the modern Olympic Games (Toohey and Veal 2007). For example,

> Carl Diem, the main organizer of the 1936 Berlin Games, claimed that the Olympics had 'a holy purpose'. Even Coubertin proclaimed that Olympism was a religion with its own church, dogma, and service. His successors also spoke of the movement in terms of religion. Avery Brundage, for example, President of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) from 1952 to 1972, declared that he had been converted to the 'religion' of Coubertin. On the eve of the 1996 Games in Atlanta, Juan Antonio Samaranch proclaimed that the Olympics were more important than the Catholic religion. The cultural anthropologist, MacAloon, believes that the Olympics are close to a 'global ritual system'. Yet unlike their ancient counterparts, few present-day Olympians, however religious they may be, probably believe that they are competing in a sacred contest on holy ground (Crowther 2004: 446).

Perhaps this is why the modern Games have been littered with instances of athletes cheating to take advantage of the spoils of an Olympic victory. For example, on 24 September 1988 Ben Johnson won the 100 metres, but this victory was short-lived when it was discovered he was using the steroid *Stanozolol*. His excuses for using performance-enhancing drugs, and his consequent fall from grace, have been replayed in the media spotlight when other athletes have followed a similar downward spiral path, leading to criticism by some that the Olympics have become a vehicle for the pursuit of personal, material gain rather than for the celebration of sport (Toohey and Veal 2007). However, the Games are no different from other contemporary leisure activities in receiving criticism for their path to greed.

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Discussion: Banishment from the Sacred Temples of Olympia

The modern era has seen the commoditisation and commercialisation of numerous activities, including sport. Sport has been transformed from an amateur activity into a global business, bolstered by the advertising power of television and the vehicle of sponsorship. Alongside this transformation has been the development of sport as a popular cultural phenomenon, which celebrates sporting heroes alongside film stars and rock stars. The Games, as one of the most significant world sporting events, are therefore at the vortex of this dynamic economic and cultural phenomenon. The 'spirit' of Olympism is ostensibly non-materialist: the alliance between Olympism and celebrity is therefore arguably a fragile one.

A particular feature of the commercialisation of sport is the fame and celebritisation of athletes brought about by the increased flow of money into sport resulting in the enhanced market value of athletes. An athlete's celebrity ranking varies from sport to sport, and from country to country. Nevertheless, the value of an Olympic gold medal in terms of subsequent appearance money and endorsement income can amount to millions of dollars for some athletes. Understandably, the principles of the Olympian are placed under a certain amount of strain when the rewards for winning are so great. In particular, it is often suggested that the prospect of large financial rewards tempts athletes to take proscribed performance-enhancing drugs, ultimately leading to their banishment from the Olympic Movement because such behaviour contradicts the philosophies underpinning Olympism.

Although Canadian Ben Johnson is arguably the most famous Olympic fall from grace, he is not alone: other Olympic heroes both male and female have been found to have failings. One most recent of the mighty to fall is Marion Jones who was stripped of her five 2000 Sydney Games medals and her Olympic record expunged after she admitted to using steroids. Jones paid the ultimate price: excommunication from the Olympic family and banishment from Olympia's Hall of Record. She subsequently went to jail for lying to US Federal agents about her knowledge of the drug scandal that enveloped US track and field athletes in 2002/2003, as well as for operating a separate cheque fraud scheme. Recently she has returned to her original sport of basketball which indicates that whilst redemption is not offered by the Olympic family, transgressors can be rehabilitated back into the broader sporting community. These were not the first modern athletes to be caught. Others before them had also sinned by flouting the Olympic rules. For example, Fred Lorz, the first

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man home in the St Louis Olympic marathon in 1904, admitted he had hitched a ride in a car for half the race, rather than pounding the pavement. Stanislawa Walasiewicz, who won the women's 100 metres in Los Angeles in 1932, and who later became known as Stella Walsh, was found posthumously to have had primary male characteristics. Similar accusations were levelled against the Soviet athletes Tamara and Irina Press, who won five gold medals between them in 1960 and 1964 (Toohey and Veal 2007).

Conclusion

This article examined the links between sport, celebrity and Olympism. If one accepts the premise that all of these are varietals of civil religion, and that pilgrimage to the idols or saints in their respective pantheons takes many forms via a plethora of altars and sacred sites, then we turn to the Introduction wherein twin foci were identified: the athlete and the pilgrim fan. However, before so doing, we need to revisit our suggestion at the beginning of this study where we argue that, whilst sharing similarities with the secular religions of sport and celebrity, victory at the Olympics in the twenty-first century elevates the individual to the pinnacle of demi-god or sport 'saint' status. The many and varied professional sporting codes have their specific penalty regimes which are enforced when the code's rules are broken (such as being sent off the soccer field via a red card, to being banned from competition for a certain period of time). It seems to be possible that athletes who fall from grace in the wider non-Olympic sporting arena and lose their status as celebrities may be offered the opportunity of redemption by their fan base as well as by sponsors and sport administrators. Whilst rehabilitation may occur to some extent in these circumstances (as examples cited earlier of Tiger Woods and Marion Jones attest), nonetheless their celebrity sporting hero status is tarnished forever.

On the ancient fields of Olympia, athletes were fined for lying, bribery and cheating, the bronze *zanes* statues leaving a permanent marker for all to witness their individual indiscretions. Currently the reverse happens because the IOC removes the athlete's name from the permanent Olympic record. Today's Olympic medallists who are found guilty of cheating in an event pay the price by handing back their medal to the IOC, the guardian of Olympic ideals, which excommunicates the winner from the Olympic family because their behaviour transgressed Olympism's norms. The offending athletes can no longer claim to be 'forever an Olympian' as Doug Kyle said earlier in this article—to be a disgraced Olympian is therefore worse than not being an Olympian at all. As noted

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in the opening to this article, other sports may ban or suspend athletes who have transgressed but not all amend their records and/or demand that an awarded medal be returned. A good example of this is Ben Cousins, a former Australian Rules Football player who won the competition's Fairest and Best player, the Brownlow Medal, in 2005. His off-field indiscretions (including a long history of drug abuse) since 2005 have adversely affected his playing career but not necessarily his celebrity status, with the documentary *Such is Life: The Troubled Times of Ben Cousins* being shown on prime time Australian television (Masters 2010). Cousins was not required to return his Brownlow Medal and his name still remains on the Brownlow Medal Honour Roll (Australian Football League 2011).

Celebrity worship for non-Olympians has no equivalent penalty regime other than the former celebrity being demoted from an 'A-list ranked celebrity' to one now being described by the once friendly media as 'washed up' and 'yesterday's man [*sic*]'. However, unlike the IOC, media moguls and *paparazzi* do not necessarily desert disgraced athletes but instead lay in wait in case fallen idols sin again: the media's prize is increased publication sales, television ratings and/or Internet posts/blogs. Today transnational media conglomerates perpetuate the cult of celebrity, and in many respects are omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent.

What does the faithful secular pilgrim do when their idol is found guilty of committing the cardinal sin of cheating on the sacred fields of Olympia? To learn that the object of their homage is after all human creates a dilemma for the pilgrim. Do they tear down the shrines on their bedroom walls, burn collections of sporting memorabilia or reliquary such as discarded clothing and/or articles which once belonged to their hero, and/or remove the athlete's homepage URL from their list of oft-visited websites? One can only speculate; however, we posit that these secular pilgrims are somewhat fickle. In the literature on another secular religion, the New Age movement, pilgrims adopt a 'supermarket approach' (Digance 2000) or 'spiritual smorgasbording' (McColl 1989) in choosing modalities in their search for the sacred. It is fair to state that most of us like to follow a winner, and worshipping a vanquished, excommunicated sporting hero does not necessarily elevate one's status in the eyes of family or friends. To err is human but to forgive is divine: Is the power of forgiveness incumbent within the civil religions of sport, celebrity and Olympism? Today's consumerist Western society seems to answer in the affirmative for the former two civil religions, but because it has the power to excommunicate athletes from the Olympic family, the IOC offers no hope of forgiveness for those former athletes who have been expelled forever from the hallowed groves of Olympia.

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