Pre-Competition Rituals in Men’s Professional Soccer: A Performance of Everyday Life

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Theathletic performance is the costume for the role he performs on the field. Featuring the team's logo along with the player's last name and number, the athlete's jersey aligns his identity even more closely with that of his team's identity. The soccer player is representing his team when he puts on his uniform, implying to the audience that all of the effort he puts out is for his team, that he is loyal to the team's mission of success and is confident in the abilities of his squad. The player's skin guards and ideas are the props necessary to prepare him for the demands of the competitive performance, which implies the expectation of violence. The expectation of violence is part of the reason the fans' desire enjoyment from the spectacle, as athletic competition is a socially permissible situation for violence. Since aggression is an innate human impulse that is generally socialized away, it provides an acceptable outlet for these desires which is felt both directly by the athlete and indirectly by the fans.

Physical Warmup

“Muscle, however precious, is never anything more than raw material. It is not muscle that wins. Wins is a certain idea of man and of the world, of man in the world.”

Roland Barthes, What Is Sport?

The physical warm-up is the ritual which prepares the soccer players' bodies for their performance. There are both general and skill-specific warm-up routines, with different objectives though they are both geared toward priming the body for dramatic performance. Much like how machines are tuned for maximum efficiency, the success of the team is measured through wins, the aesthetic form of capital that conveys the cultural values of modern American society. The managed heart is a capitalist practice of Fordism, separating the team members to train their singular roles within the overall team's performance is a process designed to enhance efficiency by dividing the labor into parts, which maximizes the abilities of each player though it also alienates them from another.

The Athlete

roles: the performer and the laborer
symbol: the American hero
attributes: masculine, strong, tough, fearless, aggressive, brave, stoic, violent at times
advantages of role: glory, wealth, fame, high social status, awarded professional benefits from leisurely activity
disadvantages of role: held to high moral standards, unidimensional identity, constantly observed by the media, overworked, hubris

The Fan

roles: the spectator and the consumer
symbol: the American masses
attributes: loyal, supportive, rowdy, enthusiastic, potentially violent
advantages of role: vicariously participates in the athlete's glory, group identity gives a sense of belonging, enhances self-esteem, fulfills desire for entertainment
disadvantages of role: self-esteem dependent on success of team, conforming, internalizes impossible standards of perfection

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

-Roland Barthes, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

The fan is the spectator and the consumer in the sport. The fan represents the American masses, a group of elite, superhuman athletes.

Physical Warmup

“Sport is the entire trajectory separating a combat from a riot.”

Roland Barthes, What Is Sport?

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Coin Toss

“...any member of the team has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct.”

-Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

The coin toss is the pre-competition ritual conducted by the referee that determines which team will begin the game with possession of the ball and which will pick the side of the field to start the game on. The referee, the enforcing authority of the game's laws, initiates the ritual by having the captains of the opposing teams shake hands and introduce themselves. By meeting with the captains prior to kick-off, the referee makes his presence known and reminds the players of the rules that must be followed in competition. The rules of soccer function to preserve the integrity of the game as a competition, promoting civility and setting boundaries to aggression despite the inherently violent nature of sport. Nevertheless, the combat that occurs in soccer, however violent, is not about man vs. man. The ball, a material object, is the object to be possessed and the source of conflict. Just as men fight for achievement in a capitalist society, the struggle to maintain possession of an object is the reason for competition amongst men in sport.

Announcement of Starters

“Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him.”

-Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

The announcement of starters signals to the audience that the competition is about to begin while also providing a ritual involving the dominant competitors of the match. The teams line up on the sideline, and the starters temporarily break away from their team as they are individually introduced, honored, and glorified over the stadium's speakers. The social status of each player is conveyed through the information offered, which includes the player's hometown, height, weight, age, and position. The emphasis placed on such qualities reflects a society that values attributes of masculinity and group solidarity, as the player represents his hometown in the contest. In being announced as a starter, the soccer player is identified to the fans as part of an in-group of elite athletes. Furthermore, through the fans' recognition of the player, the fans themselves come to identify with the in-group, conveyed through their support of the team.

Coach's Pregame Speech

“We must dwell on what it is that we want to feel and on what we must do to induce the feeling.”

-Arie Hochschild, The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling

Moments prior to kick-off, the coach of the soccer team delivers a speech that is intended to inspire the players for competition. The speech contains both informational and emotional cues which prepare the athletes to assume their roles on the field more deeply, as the coach reveals tactical information and offers verbal motivation. The mood that the coach wishes to inspire in his team is a manipulation of feeling that causes his players to expend emotional labor, a form of labor in which the emotions appropriate to the situation are conjured as a direct result of working on feeling. To get pumped-up, or in a state of high competitive arousal, the coach gathers the team into a huddle to speak to them deeply, while the players are expected to display emotion appropriate to competition. Emotional labor, though invisible, costs energy to put forward, especially when the expected state differs from the actual internal state of the individual.