

DIDAKED: CELEBRITY, PRIVACY AND PLAYER BEHAVIOUR IN THE AFL

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ABSTRACT

At the start of the 21st century elite male team sports assume a high profile presence in the commodified spaces of a globalised *hyperreality*. When games are sports entertainment businesses many elite performers are celebrities: they exist as brands whose every thought and action is commodified and consumed.

In these spaces the *misbehaviours* of a relatively small number of Australian Rules Football (AFL) players continue to make the news. A high profile recent incident involving Collingwood footballer Alan Didak is the subject of this paper. Given the levels of media attention devoted to such events we ask: *Do AFL footballers have a right to privacy?* We also question whether AFL players really understand what it means to be a sports celebrity.

The elevation of the sport star to the status of celebrity means that the idea that an elite performer has a *private life* and a *public life* that are separate is one that is problematic. Drawing on Foucault's later work on the care of the self, our analysis will focus on a variety of processes which seek to develop and manage a professional identity for elite performers – and the risks that attach to these identities.

1 INTRODUCTION

An AFL Player is entitled to have his privacy including that of his family and friends respected and the Code is not intended to apply to activities engaged in by a Player of a private nature, which may include activities with family, friends and/or other AFL Players. (Australian Football League, Players' Code of Conduct)

At the start of the 21st century elite level, competitive, physical contact, male team sports, particularly the variety of football codes, assume a high profile presence in the commodified spaces of a globalised *hyperreality* (Baudrillard 1992, 1993, Giulianotti 2004). The various football codes have long ceased to be *mere* games, and have developed into sports entertainment businesses with varying profiles in global and regional media markets. In an era when games at the elite level are sports entertainment businesses many of the elite performers in different industries have evolved into celebrities: they exist as images, icons and brands whose every thought, action, change of style or partner is commodified and consumed (Smart 2005, Cashmore 2004, Miller 2001).

In these commodified spaces the *misbehaviours* of a relatively small number of Australian Rules Football (AFL) players, and other elite sports celebrities, continue to make the news. A high profile recent incident involving Collingwood footballer Alan Didak

– in which Didak was alleged to be involved in a late night/early morning drinking spree at a number of night clubs with a Hells Angel member who was accused of shooting 3 people in a Melbourne street on June 18, 2007 - is the subject of this paper. Given the levels of media attention devoted to these events we might ask: *Do AFL footballers have a right to privacy?* Alternatively, we could ask whether AFL players really understand what it means to be a sports celebrity? Indeed, has the industry really grasped the nature of the Faustian pact that it has entered into with various commercial interests in the transition from a suburban, State based game, to a national, mass mediated, multi-million dollar, celebrity obsessed, sports entertainment industry?

The elevation of the sport star to the status of celebrity and Club or League to iconic brand, means that the idea that an elite performer has a *private life* and a *public life* that are separate – an idea embedded in the AFL *Players' Code of Conduct* – is one that is increasingly problematic. Drawing on Foucault's later work on the care of the self, our analysis will focus on a variety of processes which, together, seek to develop and manage a professional identity for elite performers – and the risks that circulate around, and attach to, these identities.

2 DISCUSSION

2.1 DIDAKED: THE AFL AND SPORTS CELEBRITY

We hope to facilitate long-term change for 'Dids' that makes him a better person, it makes him a better product for us, and the fact is if he does achieve that, the club will be better off. (Nathan Buckley, Collingwood Captain, cited in Barrett 2007)

Early in the morning of June 18, 2007 two men – a 43 year old father of two (Brendan Keilar) and a 25 year old Dutch backpacker (Paul De Waard) – were shot as they went to the aid of a young woman (Kaera Douglas) who was being assaulted and dragged from a taxi in Flinders Lane Melbourne. Tragically, Keilar died on the scene. The other two suffered serious trauma but survived their wounds. A subsequent police manhunt, driven in a very public sense by a media frenzy related to the incident, resulted in the surrender a week later by a member of the Hells Angels MCC who was alleged to be the gunman responsible for the attack.

A little over a week later another story broke. And this story, which had, as we will see, bizarre connections to the shooting incident, involved Collingwood FC star Alan Didak. A full accounting and discussion of the many and varied allegations, claims and details of what Didak apparently did on the night of the Queen's Birthday Monday (and possibly in the month's prior to this night) are beyond the scope of this present discussion. In brief, Didak and a number of fellow AFL footballers had been on a drinking binge in a number of suburban and city centre nightclubs after the Melbourne/Collingwood clash on the Queen's Birthday Monday of June 11, 2007. Collingwood had given its players some time off after this game prior to flying as a group to Queensland for a training camp during the break of the AFL's mid-season split round. Late in this drinking session Didak supposedly met and drank with a person who he later realised was Christopher Hudson the person who a week later would allegedly shoot the three people in Flinders Lane. Early on Tuesday morning Didak apparently accepted an offer of a ride home from Hudson; a drive that allegedly would take him to the HQ of the Hells Angels MC; to an industrial estate in outer suburban Thomastown where shots were fired; and to a close encounter with a police patrol in which further shots were fired. At a press conference when the story broke it was claimed that Didak feared for his safety/life during this adventure and felt trapped in circumstances he did not choose.

A number of points are worth noting here in terms of the discussion that follows: Hudson apparently said he was a fan of Collingwood and Didak, so Didak's celebrity status was fundamental to him finding himself in this situation.

At the time of these mid season antics the gunman had not committed the alleged crimes. What happened on June 18 gave the Queen's Birthday Monday night binge new meanings and new points of entry into a media news cycle that is energised by celebrities behaving badly.

Amid a media frenzy that focused on the Queen's Birthday events a number of key issues emerged, including: Didak's apparent silence about them (even after the subsequent shootings) in the face of his fear of the Hells Angels; Collingwood's initial and subsequent responses; media and community commentary that included suggestions that Didak's silence had contributed to the death of Keilar.

Didak emerged from this media frenzy with a modified contract and series of limits and sanctions on his behaviour including an alcohol ban, a ban on visiting nightclubs, a 1.00am curfew, and alcohol related counselling processes.

At issue here are the nature and consequences of certain behaviours: behaviours that take on certain characteristics because Didak is a professional footballer and a sports celebrity, and because of events that unfold subsequent to these behaviours taking place. What can analysis of these issues contribute to more complex understandings of sports celebrity and the commodification and consumption of celebrity?

The AFL is an industry that is very much a provincial brand in a global sports entertainment environment. However, it is an industry that generates significant media and branding activity. Elite level performers in the AFL assume the character of heavily scrutinised sports celebrities whose performances, behaviours and dispositions - on and off the field, in public and private spaces - are the object of much scrutiny, speculation and regulation (Voss 2004). An indicator of the media interest generated by the AFL can be found in the fact that in 2005 nearly 750 journalists were accredited to provide coverage, commentary and speculation on an industry that had 640 registered players at the elite level (AFL 2006). As the AFL itself declared: 'Add in on-air broadcasters and production staff at three television networks plus staff at radio stations and internet providers, and the number of people either reporting, filming or photographing AFL football exceeds 1500 and ensures it is the most heavily reported sport in Australia' (AFL 2006, p.80).

Broadcast deals worth hundreds of millions of dollars, multi-million dollar sponsorships at the competition and club level, the flow on of these sums of money into player salaries of hundreds of thousands of dollars, the very idea that an elite performer is a full time professional - all these are based in the fact that various media want to carry AFL as content. And content here isn't just about game time. It's about all the add ons, the peripherals that add value to, indeed create, celebrity in an image obsessed, 24/7 global information economy. This is where we start to see why we are really talking about a Faustian pact. If you sell your soul - to the devil, to broadcast rights holders, to car makers, to banks, to brewers, to whomever - there has to be a reckoning at some point.

How do free-to-air and Pay TV stations, radio, print and digital media leverage their investments to drive ratings, circulation and downloads? They need to produce content that people want to consume. And the evidence is that we have an insatiable appetite for celebrity, and for celebrities behaving badly. Just ask Paris Hilton! This appetite probably says as much about us as consumers as it does about tabloid media or badly behaving celebrities. We like to watch. We like to read. We like to occupy positions that tend to the self righteous and the sanctimonious (Cashmore 2004).

For players this pact has a number of consequences. Many don't want to be seen as role models. This is probably, at one level, a reasonable response. As individuals who can run, jump, kick and tackle why should they provide models for behaviour for young people they don't even know, will likely never meet? Some commentators would respond that

this duty comes with the money and status as elite performers. This is a pretty big leap in terms of a job description as a professional footballer. So, while *role model* might sit uncomfortably as part of the job description for many AFL players, there is another role – sport celebrity - that they can't escape and, indeed, have to come to terms with. If media exposure and profile is the life force of any sports entertainment industry (just ask those sports that can't get any!), then its *evil twin* – the reckoning that inevitably comes from selling your soul – is media scrutiny.

Celebrity profile, however minor when compared to Paris or to the marquee player that leverages a club's brand, comes with the job. Here there are very few limits on what behaviours are considered to be beyond the scrutiny of the media, and the consumption of the viewing, listening, reading public.

2.2 PROFESSIONALISATION AND THE CARE OF THE SELF: BLURRING THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PRIVATE AND PUBLIC LIFE FOR SPORTS CELEBRITIES

In this context we are interested in the professionalisation of workplace identities. These identities take many forms but have in common an encouragement to develop certain capacities in a workplace/organisational environment (Kerfoot 2001). The emergence of the idea of the 'professional AFL footballer' – as a relatively recent phenomenon – is not without its problems or tensions. A professional identity as a footballer does not come naturally. It is, also, not fixed or stable. New expectations emerge all the time. It also means different things to different groups and individuals – to different individuals and groups within a team, to different individuals and groups within a club, to different authorities within the industry.

An analysis of these issues can be productively structured via a mobilisation of Foucault's later work on the care of the self (for example 2000a&b), and the social scientific literature that has engaged with Foucault's work. Of interest here are ideas about the ways in which we develop a sense of Self, and the ways in which Others seek to govern us in relation to ideas about the particular characteristics that this Self should exhibit. In this sort of analysis we can focus on the forms of regulation, types of knowledge, and the practices and processes developed and deployed at different levels of a sports entertainment industry, which, together, seek to develop and manage a professional identity for elite performers – and the risks that circulate around, and attach to, these identities.

In his later work on the care and technologies of the self Foucault's concern was to situate the 'imperative to "know oneself" – which to us appears so characteristic of our civilization – back in the much broader interrogation that serves as its explicit or implicit context: What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self? How should one "govern oneself"? (Foucault 2000b, p.87). Foucault's work has energised *governmentality* studies (Foucault 1991) in a variety of fields in the social sciences – work that has, as Rose (1999) indicates, concerned itself with the myriad 'endeavours to shape, guide, direct the conduct of others, whether these be the crew of a ship, the members of a household, the employees of a boss', or footballers in a professional competition. These analyses are further concerned with the ways in which 'one might be urged and educated to bridle one's own passions, to control one's own instincts, to govern oneself' (p.3, see also Barry et al 1996, Burchell et al 1991).

From this perspective we can ask how do rules, regulations, commercial partnerships and sponsorships, competition, club and team based codes of conduct, for example, illuminate the characteristics that constitute a professional identity for contemporary footballers? Importantly, in the context of this discussion, how do the varying, sometimes complimentary, sometimes contradictory, coaching and development practices and processes, endorsement contracts, conditions of employment, codes of conduct work to

make problematic any distinction between an elite footballer's public life and their private life?

In this analytical framework coaching and professional development can be understood as 'inventive, strategic, technical and artful' *assemblages* that are 'fashioned from diverse elements, put together in novel and specific ways, and rationalised in relation to specific governmental objectives and goals' (Dean & Hindess 1998, p.8). The contingent, technical, practical, but ultimately rational, nature of these endeavours to provoke and promote particular *ways of being* (a footballer) is made evident, and thus analysable, in what might be called the *everyday*, the *humble*, the *mundane* minutiae of modern organisational life.

While the AFL and AFL PA, and clubs and coaches and administrators might like to claim that a player has a right to a private life they misunderstand the nature of media celebrity in the 21st century. The concept of public and private parts to a celebrity's life is a contradiction in terms. Celebrity status means all behaviours and relationships are potentially public, or at least newsworthy.

This might seem unfair. But that is the nature of a Faustian pact we are talking about here. Media scrutiny goes with the media profile that goes with the \$400,000 salary package. This is in the heart of the issue. Of course, that shouldn't mean that the industry, or the consumer for that matter, need agree that everything the producer, the editor, the reporter sees as news worthy is indeed news worthy. But then again, these people keep their jobs on the basis of their ability to read the public mood, to know what we want to watch, or read, or listen to.

An elite career is inevitably a short term thing. It has its benefits (material and in terms of a sense of self). It also has its costs. A smart professional would come to recognise this, and if they wanted to maximise and prolong their career they'd learn to deal with the reality of media scrutiny. Why some don't is another story, and is the more complex question at the heart of some of the talent identification and risk management issues that the industry has to deal with as a consequence of its media profile.

3 CONCLUSIONS

The nature of 21st century sports celebrity is such that the behaviours and dispositions of elite level performers are objects of interest and concern to those that regulate them, employ them, sponsor them, watch them, consume them. The surveillance of these behaviours and dispositions occurs alongside their commodification. The motivations for, and consequences of, these various forms of surveillance are diverse, but are, in many respects, largely interconnected in a complex web of expectation, perception and action. When Alan Didak's story broke speculation and commentary, consumption and sponsorship, expectation and perception came together in ways that resembled a chain reaction: a chain reaction that always threatened to spiral beyond the control of those interested in managing and regulating the risks produced, perceived and associated with this mediated event. And this is a situation – of *event* or possible *event*, and the need to manage perception and actions related to, and resulting from, the *event* – that is repeated to varying degrees in the highest profile sports entertainment industries around the globe. The *event*, or its possibility, is a condition and product of the hyperreality that produces and commodifies the sport star as celebrity.

In the lives of these elite performers, events – on and off the field – can appear as banal, mundane, or of little interest to all but a few. Or the event can be spectacular and of interest to many. It can be of the order of the Didak event. The *spectre of the event* – as reality, as risk – impels AFL clubs, through practices and processes of surveillance, and risk identification and management to minimise potentially damaging, public circulation of players' private lives.

These questions of celebrity, risk management and *event* work to make the nature of professional identity, and a private life, problematic for contemporary sports stars. Our sense is that these tensions will not readily disappear. As a consequence these tensions will remain as issues of concern for the industry, for players, for the media, for consumers and – differently – for analyses of a celebrity obsessed hyperreality.

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