

MATTHEW ENGEL



www.matthewengel.co.uk

THE FIRST OXFORD LECTURE

"Life and death? No, much more important than that".

HOW SPORT TURNED INTO BIG BUSINESS, BIG NEWS - AND A GLOBAL OBSESSION.

Delivered on Tuesday 25 January 2011, St Anne's College.

In a way it was obvious that I might make a professor one day. My hair is often ruffled, my clothes a bit askew, my jacket a bit shabby. I have a taste for obscure lines of enquiry. I am hopelessly absent-minded. I am secretly addicted to pointless political intrigues, which I'm told would make me feel at home in any senior common room in Oxford.

And most of the time, nobody knows what on earth I'm talking about.

Looked at another way, it is wholly improbable. When I graduated, I became a journalist, having sensed – years before – that it was the only career for a young man with a butterfly mind, a facility with words that my English master described, with some contempt, as "meretricious" and an aversion to overbearing hierarchies.

I had been at boarding school in the days before they turned into five-star hotels. In contrast, newspapers in the early 1970s could be gloriously anarchic institutions.

I also hated being cooped up indoors, especially on summer afternoons. And that led me, within weeks of my arrival in the filthy offices of the Northampton Chronicle and Echo in the summer of 1972, to gravitate towards the sports desk. At that moment, by happy chance, the sports editor was in urgent need of a keen young man to help cover Northamptonshire county cricket club, who I spent my spare summer afternoons watching anyway.

And so, over the past – God help me – *four* decades, I have been paid to watch sport from Northampton to New Zealand (a place that remains remarkably reminiscent of Northampton circa 1972) and most places in between.

And, though my life has brought me sadness as well as joy, I consider myself immensely blessed to have had a career that has given me a ringside seat at fascinating events, plus camaraderie, laughter, fun and, at least in the good old days, enough expenses for a reasonable supply of sauvignon blanc.

I think my one great asset as a journalist is my short attention span. Since I get bored easily, I'm conscious that readers do too. And audiences at lectures. Sport has never given me all the stimulation I craved. And I also feel lucky to have been able to report many of the great non-sporting events of the era: war, political earthquakes, real earthquakes. Those things the world considers less trivial than sport.

Or the things the world USED to consider less trivial than sport. When I started in the business, the more pompous kind of journalists would refer to the sports desk as "the toy department". The Chronicle and Echo had a single broadsheet page of sport. The Guardian, when I made it there seven years later, had – most days – just two. In 1979 Britain had three TV channels. None of them showed live league football.

Things have changed.

If you go to Liverpool by train, walk out of Lime Street station and look uphill, you will see the local equivalent of Nelson's Column. It's the Wellington Column, 40 metres tall, with a bronze statue of the Duke of Wellington on the top.

On two sides of the plinth are lists of European placenames: Talavera, Fuentes de Onoro, Ciudad Rodrigo, Oporto, Badajoz, Salamanca, Toulouse, Nivelle, Quatre Bras. When I first studied them, I was writing a book about railways, so it was easy to imagine them as a list of stations on some exotic train journey across the continent - the more so as the terminus is, of course, Waterloo.

But it's the wrong analogy. When I was last in Liverpool, in May last year, I gravitated back to the monument. At that time the Empire Theatre, just over the road, was showing a play called *One Night in Istanbul*, based on Liverpool Football Club's improbable victory in the final of the Champions League in 2005.

It was Wellington himself who allegedly said that the Battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton, meaning that the healthy organised games of the English public school were crucial to the creation of a fit, spirited and motivated officer class.

It's not clear that Wellington ever did say this, or could have done, since the only sporting activities he said he remembered from Eton were jumping across a brook and the odd punch-up. But now it is an unthinkable remark.

It is unthinkable also that we would erect a 40-metre high tribute to a general. This is not because we have given up wars. Britain has been at war continuously for nearly 10 years now. Since the start of the 20th century there has only been one year – oddly, that year of global upheaval, 1968 – in which British soldiers have not been killed in action.

But we are not very interested in the subject. I have spent several days at the Chilcot Inquiry on Iraq and, I can tell you, even the politicians who start these wars are not much interested.

We venerate the names of the dead soldiers, momentarily anyway, which never happened in Wellington's time. We turn away from the wounded, as we always have done. But in Britain our leading warriors neither die in battle, like Nelson, nor become prime minister and get a state funeral, as Wellington did.

Graduates of this university become prime minister after gaining experience in the law courts, in laboratories finding ways of making ice cream less tasty and more profitable – that was Margaret Thatcher. Or, in the case of the present incumbent, being a public relations officer for a television company. We hear of generals largely for their role in Whitehall infighting.

As far as the public is concerned, sport is not a preparation for life or death. It is an end in itself. It is not an enjoyable diversion, it has become central to our lives, individually and collectively.

It is not possible to follow accurately the progress of the war in Afghanistan, even if we could be bothered to do so, because the Ministry of Defence's public relations officers control access to the frontline even for the press. Especially for the press.

The main lesson learned from Vietnam was not, as you might think, to avoid foreign entanglements unless they have clarity of purpose and an assured outcome – but to keep proper control of the information stream. At the Battle of Manassas, the opening

contest of the US Civil War, “hundreds of Washington civilians rode out to join the advancing army, hoping to see a real battle. Some brought binoculars, picnic baskets, bottles of champagne¹”. There are no picnickers in Helmand Province.

On the other hand, if you were sleepless at 4am this morning, knowing you could catch up by having a zizz at this lecture, you could – without getting dressed - have watched any one of the following:

Watersports World,

A rerun of the 1997 Greater Milwaukee golf pen at Brown Deer Park.

The unceasing drumbeat of up-to-date information from either Sky Sports News or Eurosport News,

World Wrestling Late Night Raw introduced by CM Punk, featuring Randy Orton, The Nexus and The Miz.

Coverage of the All-American Bass Fishing Championship from De Gray Lakes, Arkansas. First prize: \$120,000 and a coveted place in the Forrest Wood Cup. [Just what I’ve always coveted]

The Australian Open tennis, live.

Australian racing from Taree and Townsville

Big opinions and heated debate on all things football on ESPN

The FIM MX2 World Championship, presumably also coveted by someone

Cage Wars 8: hosting fighters from around the world in a spectacular night of Mixed Martial Arts action

Highlights of the 1995 Ireland v England rugby match

Highlights of the 1996-97 Premiership season,

Live ice hockey: the LA Kings v the Boston Bruins

And archive footage of the 1991 All Ireland Gaelic football final².

A round-up of yesterday's racing from Kempton and Wetherby

The IBF super-middleweight title contest between Lucian Bute and Jesse Brinkley

Four am, this very morning. Nessun dorma. None shall sleep. It was only the onset of boring middle age that prevented me still being up at 5 am the other Saturday and sufficiently drunk or stoned to watch on Channel 419, Extreme Sports: Girl Racers – “eight gorgeous girls behind the wheel in a high-octane competition to determine which of them is the ultimate girl racer”.

In all, thanks to the ingenuity of Sky TV – controlled but not yet wholly owned by News International, sponsors of this series of lectures - I have access to 29 TV channels wholly devoted to sport. And though I hardly dare mention it in front of our sponsors' representatives, this does not include all the websites whereby you can, so I am told, get a great deal of this stuff without paying Sky anything.

There is perhaps nowhere more appropriate than the base of the Wellington Column than to consider this astonishing change in society.

Liverpool has one recent statue to a former manager of Liverpool FC, Bill Shankly. There is pressure to have another, to his successor Bob Paisley. And it occurred to me that the modern equivalent of the Wellington plinth would list the recent battlegrounds, the places where Liverpool won their European trophies: Rome, Wembley, Paris, Rome again, Moenchengladbach, Bruges, Dortmund, Istanbul.

Perhaps, in the great tradition of military history, we would gloss over Brussels, home of the Heysel Stadium, scene of Liverpool's most disgraceful defeat on a night when sport and war merged. 39 people died, mostly Juventus supporters.

And now the theatre has been roped in too. One Night in Istanbul's run last May was a return engagement. The drama critic of the Liverpool Daily Post said: “This is not theatre, this is an exploitation³”. He was excoriated by irate readers on the paper's website. They loved it.

This is a world, you might think, that has changed a great deal since the Duke of Wellington's day. It has changed far, far quicker than that. These grey hairs and my

infirmities notwithstanding, I am not that old. I don't yet qualify for free prescriptions or a Senior Railcard that would have enabled me to travel here 30% cheaper.

So it's no more than half a century since I was at prep school – at Wallingford, not far from here – where I won a prize two years running for what was mysteriously known as “general proficiency”. The first time I was given a book called *Folk Tales of Greece and Rome*, which is I think is still somewhere on my shelves but has never been opened from that day to this.

The second time, the school had an uncharacteristic fit of liberalism and laid a selection of books on a couple of tables so the prizewinners could choose their own. I spotted, right at the back, something called the *Encyclopedia of Sport*, and snaffled it.

The reaction from my classmates, all male, was instructive. They were furious, not because they wanted it themselves, though jealousy might have been a factor, but out of the peculiar censoriousness to which small boys are prone. I had offended against the code. Work was work, and sport was sport. And who was I to start mixing them up? I should have chosen a *proper* book.

Games and PE were part of the curriculum, for sure, but following sport was something not exactly improper but just a little outré. Edgy, we might say, now. It was boys' business, not school's. We listened to the football results on our transistors and mocked each other when appropriate, which meant I got teased a lot – since I supported Northampton Town and still do, heaven help me. (Last Saturday, though: Northampton 2 Oxford 1).

But I would have had no idea, for instance, which football club – if any – a teacher might have supported. That wasn't something that was ever discussed, even in the lighter moments of a lesson.

My prize had two long-lasting consequences. I devoured every word of that book, with its lists of FA Cup and Grand National winners, which is a partial explanation for the fact that the Dog Inn, Ewyas Harold, were once again Herefordshire pub quiz champions last year. On the other hand, I never did win another school prize. And until a few months ago, you could have got 1000 to 1 with any bookmaker against me ever becoming a professor at Oxford University.

The point I am making is that sport, not just in the 1950s and 1960s but – I would say – into the 1990s, did not occupy the central, obsessive place in society that it does now.

This is a vital change in the history of sport; it's a vital change in the history of the media. And it's a vital change in the history of society as a whole.

There is of course a different attitude towards participation. If you had said to my generation of schoolboys, as we flogged our way through compulsory cross-countries in 1966, that the smelly old plimsolls we wore on our feet were about to mutate into the hottest of all fashion items, we would never have believed you.

Such an object of desire that kids might be shot on the street because they were wearing a desirable pair of sneakers. Insane. And the idea that people would run cross-countries for fun, not just ordinary cross-countries but *marathons*. Incredible. Especially when you put it together with the fact that the general fitness level of the population is worse than ever.

I was 15 when England won the World Cup in 1966. And my memory is that it was quite a big deal. There was national rejoicing somewhat greater than would now occur if a plucky lass from Doncaster wins a bronze medal in the Olympic women's under-63 kilogram judo.

Memory suggests that the rejoicing was actually less than greeted England's victory in the final of the 2003 rugby World Cup, a competition which – take away the British Isles – only has four other countries in serious contention. Or indeed, the victory in the 2005 Ashes, contested by only one other country.

My memory isn't false. Last year, Tim de Lisle went through the old newspaper files for an article in *Intelligent Life* magazine⁴, and looked at the reports on the Monday morning after the 1966 final, the match having finished too late on the Saturday afternoon for the early editions of the Sunday papers to do it much justice. The lead story in Monday's *Daily Mirror*, then Britain's biggest-selling paper, was A BOUNCING BABY GIRL FOR PRINCESS ALEX.

"Winning the World Cup," de Lisle noted, "was not as big as the birth of Marina Ogilvy, the Queen's first cousin once removed". The final was reported on two of the *Mirror's* tabloid sports pages, inside – not even the back.

Let's return to the 2005 Ashes win for a moment. When I attended the post-election press conference given by David Cameron and Nick Clegg in the Downing Street garden last May, someone very proudly pointed out the bush behind which a rat-arsed

Freddie Flintoff urinated during the prime minister's reception following their open-top bus tour and hysterical reception in Trafalgar Square the day after the final Test.

Flintoff, you may remember, was not disgraced. Indeed, every member of the squad was named in the next Honours List, including Paul Collingwood, who played in one Test, scored 17 runs in his two innings, bowled four wicketless overs and was rewarded by Tony Blair's government with the most ridiculous MBE in history.

Now return to 1966. The footballers were invited to some kind of official dinner. It was a fairly pointless occasion, and their wives were confined to an upstairs room. Jack Charlton, England's centre-half, then went out drinking with his journalist mate Jim Mossop. They ended up being invited to a party in Walthamstow and sleeping on the floor⁵. Others just drifted off to nightclubs or went home.

My favourite story from the 1966 final was of Geoff Hurst, whose hat-trick won England the World Cup, saying his farewells to the famously lugubrious manager, Alf Ramsey. "See you next game, Alf." Ramsey was not going to commit himself. "Perhaps, Geoffrey," he replied, "perhaps."

The prime minister of the day, Harold Wilson, was not averse to the odd populist gesture and Ramsey was indeed knighted the following year. Hurst did not even get an MBE until 1977, 11 years later, and his knighthood came in 1998, for no discernible reason except that Tony Blair was in search of a headline.

By then football's place in society was very, very different. In 1996 England hosted its first major football tournament since 1966, the European Championship. This time they did not win. And, personally I was as pleased as I had been when they did win. Because by now the madness had wholly taken over.

This was the tournament when the Daily Mirror, then edited by one Piers Morgan, carried the front page headline on the day of England's semi-final: "Achtung! Surrender! For You Fritz, ze Euro 96 Championship is over". This prediction was not wholly accurate. Germany beat England on penalties and beat the Czechs in the final.

The loss of proportion in that tournament extended well beyond the down-market tabloids. I worked for The Guardian for 25 years, and in that time I was lucky enough to write very few pieces that failed to make it into the paper. Only once was I censored, and told that my proposed subject matter was unwelcome on grounds of taste. That was during that tournament when I suggested writing an article saying why I wanted

England to lose because everything had got out of hand. The nation was not ready for seditious sentiments, apparently.

My reporting career has included one brief, not especially heroic, stint as a war reporter, in the first Gulf War. It was while being driven across a minefield on the Kuwait-Saudi border by a crazed Irish photographer that I swore never again to moan at a county cricket match.

But even this short excursion into combat put me ahead of the five most recent British prime ministers, all of whom have sent soldiers to die without having any experience of war themselves.

There are subsidiary explanations for the differences in attitude between 1966 and 1996, and we will come to those that relate directly to the media later in these lectures. But the most important is this. In 1966, everyone then over the age of 25 would have had some kind of memory of the Second World War. Everyone over about 52 would have remembered the First World War too. I knew an old bloke in my village who when he talked about "Before the war" might easily have been referring to the Boer War.

Most males over 40 would have *fought* in the war. I knew people who fought in both the First and the Second. The memory of combat - the comradeship, the hardship and the horror - ran through every section of society. Or as my father, Flight-Lieutenant Max Engel, summed up 1939-1945: "about ten minutes of blind terror and six years of sheer effing boredom".

No one who lived through that time could regard sport as war. No one who lived through it could regard the result of a football match as a matter of life and death. They could not have allowed a headline that began "Achtung, Surrender". Nor this: "You Let Your Country Down". The Sun, June 28 2010, the day after England's most recent World Cup defeat.

I believe, as someone who has loved sport all my life, that once we over-rate its importance, we lose everything that makes it worthwhile. But we should never under-rate its importance either.

The urge for human beings to compete with each other seems to be innate and sport represents its earliest manifestation. However inept we might be, it provides moments of the most intense delight and satisfaction. I saw it all afresh last year with my three-year-old great nephew, who lives at North Hinksey, when we put up his first goal on

the back lawn on a warm summer's afternoon and I let the ball trickle through my legs the first time for him to score.

We experience it every time – about once every 36 holes in my case – when we connect with a golf ball just right and it sails straight down the middle of the fairway. When we just clip the line with a forehand passing shot. Or take a miraculous catch on the boundary. The endeavour does not even have to be athletic. Personally, I get a kick out of vanquishing the bookmakers by backing a 10 -1 winner or just by putting down a 7-letter word playing the computer on my iPhone Scrabble app.

It can work for the very old as well as the very young. I have seen a 95-year-old woman, housebound and fading, become re-engaged by life because there is a Test series on telly. And I don't believe anyone has ever decided life is not worth living when they have a promising ante-post betting voucher in their pocket.

We seem always to be looking for someone to cheer, a tribe to belong to. That's a more complex process for those of us in these islands than anywhere else because our identity is so confused. Do we support England, Scotland, Wales, the whole of Ireland (as in rugby), Northern Ireland (as in football), the Republic of Ireland, Britain, Team GB (as at the Olympics), the UK or the British Isles (as on Lions rugby tours)? Or are we, most improbably of all, as in the chant that went up from the stands at the sodden Ryder Cup last October: "YOO-ROP" "YOO-ROP".

Do you think those who endured the war were above all this? The very reverse. On Whit Monday 1944, the week before D-Day, there was a cricket match at Lord's between England and Australia. Not official teams nor full-strength, of course, but there were a lot of Australian airmen in the UK and both teams fielded famous names lightly camouflaged for wartime purposes: Squadron Leader W.J. Edrich, Flight Lieutenant W.R. Hammond, Lieutenant Colonel G. O. Allen, Flight Sergeant K. R. Miller. An irrelevance given the greater game afoot? Not so.

It was a blazing hot day. "The attendance," reported *Wisden*, "with thousands left outside when the gates were closed at quarter past twelve, numbered about 28,000⁶."

Such scenes were repeated even more spectacularly a year later when England and Australia played a series of unofficial Victory Tests, and throughout the rest of the 1940s when crowds even at routine county cricket matches and lower division football fixtures attained peaks never matched before or since.

The great cricketing heroes of that era were the Australian, the aforesaid Keith Miller, and his English opponent and chum, Denis Compton. Both of them played cricket with a rare exuberance and *joie de vivre* that enchanted spectators. Both men led what there were then known as gay lives i.e. enthusiastically heterosexual.

Miller was a fighter pilot in the war, flying Mosquitos in raids over occupied Denmark. He came close to death, his biographer reckoned, in six separate wartime incidents⁷. Later, so the story goes, someone mentioned the word “pressure” in the context of cricket. “Pressure,” Miller replied, “is a Messerschmitt up your arse⁸.”

It is easy to over-sentimentalise the past, especially in sport. Do we resent the fact that Wayne Rooney earns as much in a week than an average football supporter earns in seven years – and has armies of accountants ensuring that he pays the minimum possible tax on that? Well, yes, we bloody well do, actually. We’re British.

But remember that when Nat Lofthouse was the idol of Bolton and England, he was being paid £20 a week rather than Rooney’s £180,000. £20 was the maximum – the MAXIMUM – for any footballer in England until 1961, fifty years ago this week actually. Allowing for price inflation that’s worth about £350 today; wage inflation would make it equivalent to about £800. So in practice Rooney is only earning about 200 times as much as Lofthouse.

And this would always be accompanied by staggering meanness on the part of the employers. This was perhaps most acute in rugby union, notionally an amateur sport of course, but one with an ingrained habit of making sure its players, if they weren’t getting backhanders, actually earned *less* than zero. The most staggering anecdote concerns the Scottish international Jock Wemyss [WEEMZ] who requested a new jersey when he was picked to play England in 1920. He was asked what had happened to the jersey he was given for his previous match. Six years earlier.

In the intervening, fairly eventful years, Wemyss hadn’t just lost a jersey, he’d lost an eye. Which was not, in the peculiar circumstances of 1920, necessarily a disqualification from international rugby. Though the loss of a jersey might have been.

As late as the 1960s the huge lock forward Peter Stagg was reputedly unable to get a new pair of Scottish socks to replace ones that had developed holes, and so painted bits of his leg a socklike blue to match. And in the 1970s the Ulsterman Stewart McKinney fought a lengthy battle with the Irish Rugby Board who insisted it was 18 miles – not 20 - from Aldergrove Airport to his home in Jordanstown and that therefore he was

entitled to only £1.80 in mileage on return from international duty and not £2. McKinney won the argument just the once by claiming – it being the height of the Troubles – that an army roadblock had forced a diversion.

We also like to believe there was a time when sport was played hard but fair. That cricketers would walk when they knew they had nicked a catch to the wicket-keeper rather than waiting for the umpire's verdict.

One of Compton's England team-mates was especially famous for this, and is regularly cited by nostalgics for his devotion to the Spirit of Cricket. It is not churlish to mention that many of his contemporary opponents believed he would indeed walk in situations that did not matter, when he had scored 150 or the team had 400 on the board, thus building his reputation with the umpires for honesty, but was somewhat less inclined to go when the chips were down and the heat was on.

When he had the nearest cricketing equivalent to a Messerschmitt up his arse. It was thus a peculiarly subtle and insidious form of cheating.

And this sporting Arcadia did not necessarily exclude extreme violence. As David Lacey pointed out in *The Guardian* only last week when reminiscing about Nat Lofthouse, who had just died aged 85. "Back then, there was a more general acceptance of football's physical side, and players were less inclined to writhe in agony after a hard tackle. Or, as Lofthouse himself put it:

'There were plenty of fellers who would kick your bollocks off. The difference was that at the end they'd shake your hand and help you look for them⁹.'

In 1987 three England rugby players were banned after a punch-up against the Welsh at the Arms Park. The old Welsh curmudgeon, Wilf Wooller, reporting the match for the *Sunday Telegraph*, was appalled.

"I thought the whole point of rugby was to kick six bells out of each other for an hour and a half and then drink six pints with each other for six hours and a half." Only six pints? The game must have already been on the turn from its old convivial self to its unsmiling modern incarnation.

In 2009 Harlequins, a rugby club whose very name summed up the old spirit of that game, were involved in the Bloodgate scandal, in which their director of rugby, Dean Richards, arranged for the players to be given blood capsules to make it appear they

were cut, and could thus be substituted for tactical reasons. What shocked some people in rugby was not the trickery itself but that it was forced on them from above. In the old days, said the rugby writer Paul Rees, the game was for the players. "They did not need a Dean Richards figure to order a bending of the rules to gain an advantage¹⁰".

Just after that, came Crashgate, the revelation that the young racing driver Nelson Piquet junior had been ordered by his Renault team bosses to have an accident in the 2008 Singapore Grand Prix. This enabled his senior team-mate Fernando Alonso to take advantage of the safety rules and win a race he wouldn't have done. This, said Simon Barnes in *The Times*, was "the worst single piece of cheating in the history of sport... The Renault team's crime was not an act of cheating as mere fraudulence. Rather, it was cheating as a potentially lethal act; as potential murder¹¹."

I am an enthusiastic occasional watcher of US baseball but no kind of insider. And I knew in the 1980s that the use of steroids was widespread. I remember the crowd chanting "Ste-ROIDS, Ste-ROIDS" at the drug-fuelled slugger Jose Canseco. It is inconceivable that the officials of Major League Baseball did not know. It took almost two decades before they were forced to take action. Given the consequences of steroid use, believed by many experts to cause fatal heart damage, is that not also potential murder?

But we seem to have moved from instinctive cheating, the urge to gain an edge, perhaps connived at by authorities, to something more intense, more organised. At its most harmless end, we have seen in cricket how the umpire's decision has become not final but semi-final, perpetually second-guessed by technology that's really too sophisticated for the game between fallible humans they are actually playing.

Quite simply, sport matters more than it did. And more than it should.

In 1966 Jack Charlton could go out after the World Cup final and get pissed with his journalist mate. Now the idea of even an exchange of pleasantries between a leading footballer and a reporter that is not controlled by a public relations officer or a sponsor's representative is almost unthinkable.

The 1966 final was shown in black-and-white at a time when Britain had only just acquired a third TV channel, BBC 2. Sport on TV was a rare treat, reserved for Saturday afternoons and special occasions. It was not possible to bet on racing from Queensland at 4 in the morning.

But that final also marked a kind of turning point. Nine of the England players agreed to wear Adidas boots and were paid £1000 each, which only five years earlier would have been a year's salary, just for wearing boots given to them for nothing. "I would have bought my own," marvelled Alan Ball¹². Suddenly, footballers were starting to realise just how valuable their feet might be.

There are two separate questions I want to consider over the next few weeks. One is strictly a media question. What role did the media – newspapers, radio, TV, the internet – play in getting us from the Duke of Wellington via a drunken night in Walthamstow to the intense, complex, money-driven sporting business of today?

The second is a little broader. Where do the media fit into the power structure that governs this business? Where does the power lie? Who makes the ultimate decisions? It is like a murder mystery with a wide range of suspects:

1. The formal governing bodies of the sports.
2. Their sponsors.
3. The peripheral businesses like plimsoll-makers.
4. The TV companies, competing for rights.
5. The rest of the media, commenting, promoting, exposing.
6. The professional sportsmen, and women, now so highly-paid.
7. Or is it perhaps, least likely of all, the public themselves.

I look on this all with a sceptical eye. I am aware that the past was not wholly unsullied. If today people over-rate the significance of sport, that may be a sign of society's success. "May you live in interesting times" was allegedly a Chinese curse. It may not seem that way to journalists. We thrive on conflict. But a generation that has no experience of war and can thus get over-concerned with the results of football match is, on the face of it, a lucky one.

And yet I find myself appalled by the sporting landscape I see around me.

The obsession with money.

The obsession with victory.

The cod-patriotism.

The sheer volume of imbecility.

Entire radio stations given over to sporting chitchat.

16-page football pullouts in The Times.

More space for sports reports in The Guardian than for home and foreign news combined.

So many different reports in the same paper on the same football or cricket match that no one outside a secure mental institution could ever possibly read all the stuff.

Next week we will start to discuss in detail how sport and the media developed together. I intend to unmask the biggest liar in the history of sports journalism. And, I promise you, he's very famous indeed. I also intend to consider the importance of masturbation. And if that doesn't build interest among an undergraduate audience, there's nothing more I can do.

In the meantime, we need both to understand sport's importance, and its unimportance. The quote that provides the title for this lecture is attributed to the great Liverpool manager Bill Shankly in various versions but went something like: "Some people think football's a matter of life and death. But they're wrong. It's much more important than that."

Shankly, who grew up in Scottish poverty and spent two years down the pit, was being at once playful and profound. Sport can be a source of delight to people whose lives are starved of delight. Whether they're playing it or watching it.

I would like to find amid all this something of the delight and glory in sport that I found as a child, that my son in turn found, and my great-nephew, Harris, is starting to find when he scores a goal in North Hinksey.

Outside back gardens, it becomes harder and harder to find as the simple business of kicking or hitting a ball is complicated by people who have far more complicated motives. That's why I have to ask the time-honoured question: "Please mister, can we have our ball back?"

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¹ *The Civil War* by Geoffrey C Ward (1990) p 64

² 4-5 am, August 3, 2010

³ May 18, 2010

⁴ *Intelligent Life*, Summer 2010

⁵ *British Journalism Review*, June 2010

⁶ *Wisden Cricketers' Almanack* 1945, pp 88-89

⁷ *Keith Miller* by Roland Perry (2005), p 100

⁸ Perry p. 129,

⁹ *The Guardian*, January 17 2011

¹⁰ *The Sports Blog*, Guardian.co.uk, September 14 2009

¹¹ *The Times*, September 17 2009

¹² *Pitch Invasion* by Barbara Smit (2006) p 89