



DO TEAM SPORTS UNIFY PEOPLE ?

As social researchers we can usefully think of a number of ways in which professional team sport 'works' today for those who watch and play it. Sport can operate: simply as a kind of employment, entertainment or leisure for those involved; as a focal point for local and national community solidarities and as an expression of 'belonging' in a changing world; as a site for the expression of 'honour contests', ones which allow the testing of (mainly) masculine identities in a relatively safe environment – or at least one that falls some way short of war (Armstrong, 1998); and, finally, as a kind of 'deep play'; more tellingly, as a type of story that the world's peoples 'tell about themselves' (Geertz, 1973).

In three of these examples sport acts, crucially, as a focal point for the construction of identities. This can operate at local, regional or national levels. In this sense, and perhaps especially in these more uncertain, globalised times of trans-national exchange and complex multi-cultural societies, we might also expect professional team sport to act as a kind of 'social glue': it might be presumed to bind people together and to offer a collective sense of stability and continuity at local community, national and supra-national levels.

In some respects, of course, all of this is true. We need only refer to the visible national and international effects of major sporting events to prove the point. But Larrain's (1994: 142) observation is also important here: that the construction of cultural identities, such as ones produced in sporting competition, invariably: 'presuppose the notion of the "other"; the definition of the cultural self always involves a distinction from the values, characteristics and ways of life of others.' This means that sport routinely and necessarily distinguishes strongly between 'us' and 'them': it, often profoundly, excludes at the very same moment that it draws peoples and communities together. Sport provides a powerful representation of who we are – or who we think we are. But it can also offer reductive ideas about the 'other', and about how others see us.

Take the recent football World Cup finals in Germany in the summer of 2006. The near universalism of football as a cultural practice means a football World Cup is regarded as an opportunity par excellence to celebrate global connectedness – though its governing body Fifa often exaggerates, for marketing purposes, the size of the global TV audience involved. We saw much of that 'connectedness' during the finals in Germany last year, as rival fans from across the globe interacted and even 'experimented' in German cities with cultural 'exchanges' of national identities at the event, usually peacefully. But for the majority of fans who accessed the finals mainly via television and the internet or via their own national press, national representations through sport were liable to be rather less nuanced and less fluid than this.

(Source : John Williams, PhD, Senior lecturer – University of Leicester - 2009
<http://www.irsv.org/>)