Case Study

Are Elite Athletes Role Models?

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**Are Elite Athletes Role Models? Exploring the phenomenon in the context of role model theory**

Olympic athletes are often referred to as ‘sporting heroes’ or role models. Whilst it is true that Olympians can provide excellent role models to children – via their commitment to health, achievement, focus, self-discipline and self-motivation, it is also true that they can serve as negative examples (if one is, for example, to witness the misuse of steroids amongst athletes). Is the concept of an Olympian as a role model truth or fallacy?

A role model can be considered to be any individual who is “perceived as exemplary, or worthy of imitation” (Yancey, 1998, p. 254). Role models can derive from a multitude of environments, such as politics, entertainment, music, family, teachers and friends. However, one area that dominates discussions of role model status (including the potentially positive and negative ramifications associated with this status) is within the world of sport.

Athletes are considered to be role models by many sports fans who follow their competitive careers and professional success. Athletic role models can be found across all sports, both professional (for example Peyton Manning, NFL QuarterBack) and amateur (Tanni Grey-Thompson; Paralympic champion), both mainstream (Steve Redgrave, Team GB rowing champion x 5) and niche sport (Arnold Schwarzenegger; bodybuilder), real and fictional (Rocky Balboa). Whilst the potential for athletes to serve as positive role models is strong, many dispute their worth, citing examples such as Tiger Woods, Terrell Owens and Dwain Chambers as cautionary tales. Detractors may carry merit in their arguments when we consider some of the more negative headlines to grace the pages of the international media in recent times;

**Tiger Woods**

Tiger Woods was a sponsors dream, counting Tag Hauer, EA, Gatorade, Gillette, Accenture, Nike, and PepsiCo amongst his lucrative portfolio of corporate endorsements. Following the sex scandal that emerged in 2009, many were quick to cancel their contracts. In the days that followed the breaking of the scandal, stock market reports illustrated a drop in shares of all of the top 5 sponsors that had associated themselves with the golfing star.

**Michael Vick**

In 2007, Atlanta Falcons QuarterBack Michael Vick was deposed from his celebrity athletic status as a result of his involvement in a federal investigation of dog fighting. Vick was charged – and convicted - with conspiracy to travel in interstate commerce in aid of unlawful activities and to sponsor a dog in an animal fighting venture. The scandal greatly injured his image, sponsorship value, and career within the NFL.

**Oscar Pistorius**

However, many positive athletic role models exist. One might consider the case of Oscar Pistorius, who fought for his right to compete in the Olympic Games, despite a ban by the International Association of Athletic Federations. For one young athlete to take on the might of one of the most powerful federation in the world clearly requires courage, strength and self-belief (in addition to the athletic abilities required for Pistorius to achieve the world records and Gold medals that he has collected over his competitive career).

**Pat Tillman**

A promising young NFL superstar, Tillman turned down his place with the Arizona Cardinals to join the military and fight for his country in Afghanistan. Tillman was later killed in a friendly fire incident. His positive role model status was compounded by his achievements off the field, due to his willingness to place his beliefs in fighting for his country above the money and fame of the NFL. Regardless of the stance that individuals might adopt regarding the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, one can appreciate the admirable courage and strength of character that led him to take such a decision.

**Muhammad Ali**

 Ali is perhaps the most famous athlete in the world, revered for his achievements outside the ring as much as he was appreciated for his knockout blows within it. Ali took a hard moral stance against the Vietnam War, refusing to fight for a war that he felt was unjust and that contradicted his religious beliefs. As a follower of the Nation of Islam, and a conscientious objector,

Ali faced the wrath of the US justice system, and for 5 years was unable to fight as his court battle continued. During this period, Ali had his licence to box removed from him, yet was unwilling to revise his stance, Ali’s stance was particularly impressive, given that attitudes toward the war were not, at that stage, vociferous and largely unpopular. Ali’s voice stood out at a time when he faced a great deal of opposition, both from the Government, his fans, fellow boxers, the boxing board of control and the general public. It was only towards the end of the Vietnam War that protests escalated and the tide of public feeling turned against the Government. Ali’s stance gained him popularity and he was eventually to have the case against him dismissed and his boxing licence restored.

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**Carl Pendleton**

Carl Pendleton bypassed his final year of eligibility in college football, where he played for the Oklahoma Sooners (2005) so that he could adopt his stepbrother. He went on to graduate from Oklahoma after the adoption process had been successfully completed. He continues to travel around Oklahoma giving speeches at schools, churches and youth groups, and is an active member of the Church. The fact that Pendleton placed the needs of his brother higher than the potentially lucrative rewards of an NFL career make him an outstanding role model.

**Sean Porter**

Porter gained a level of fame when the film *Gridiron Gang* was released. The film chronicled the true story of Porter’s role as the coach of the Camp Kilpatrick Mustangs, an American football team that he started for the teenage inmate of the Kilpatrick Detention Centre in Los Angeles. Faced with an endemically high reoffending rate, and a worryingly high level of death of former inmates due to their re-involvement in gang activity, Porter’s vision was to use the sport to ac

**t as an** intervention for repeat offending and anti-social behaviour.

Porter’s goal was to instil confidence in the athletes, give them a positive character education through their engagement with the sport, and develop a sense of belongingness and self-worth in his athletes. The Mustangs won a number of their games, and many of the former Mustangs have been rehabilitated and have not re-offended since leaving Kilpatrick.

**Athletes as ‘heroes’**

Individuals often use the word ‘hero’ when discussing their athletic role model. A hero can be considered someone who is “*person distinguished for courage, fortitude or deeds, its meaning is adaptable between cultures and through time*” (Lines, 2001, p. 287).

Whilst the interchangeability of such terms can be positive and merited, it is important to refer to the danger of young people viewing sporting role models as heroes if they seek to emulate deviant behaviour exhibited by the athlete.

Children tend to first turn to their parents and family members to provide role model figures, from which they learn their behaviours, values and attitudes. Teachers also feature as role models during the early academic life of the child, a situation that perpetuates into early adolescence.

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As the child / adolescent ages, he is exposed to many other factors that influence his thinking, and sources of role models tend to expand to include athletes, coaches, entertainment personalities, film stars, and musicians. In particular, the role of athletes as role models has received notable attention in the academic literature (Biskup and Pfister, 1999; Ewens and Lashuk, 1999; Lines, 2001). Studies have found that young males are more likely to cite athletes as role models, whereas females are more likely to cite film and pop stars. This raises concerning questions about the lack of healthy, athletic role models for young females. It is possible that a pre-occupation with the social life and appearance of film and pop stars leads females to aspire to somewhat superficial goals as opposed to males who seek to emulate the competitive success, achievement and hard work ethic of their athletic heroes.

It is interesting that role model status can be inferred on to an athlete without the athletes’ consent. Some athletes believe that they are not necessarily role models, and should not be carry the responsibility of acting as a role model, but many others embrace the opportunity to set a positive example to their young fans. The endemic problem of doping that the Olympic federation continually seeks to stamp out at successive Olympic and Paralympic Games is a case in point of how role model status can be eroded or – even worse – how a revered athlete can desensitise young athletes and sports fans to the dangers of taking drugs.

It is clear that youngsters seek to emulate the actions of the sporting stars that they choose as heroes. Such emulation can be extremely positive and can lead to the youngster developing a healthy, disciplined and successful approach to the development of their own athletic (or other) goals. But such emulation can also carry negative connotations. Media stories abound of athletes who have committed various embarrassing transgressions in their personal and social lives (Wayne Rooney, Tiger Woods, Terrell Owens, Ryan Giggs, Rio Ferdinand) and the emulation of such behaviour by young fans can prove detrimental.

**THE COMMERCIAL BENEFITS OF ROLE MODELS**

Many corporations have sought to exploit the role model phenomenon by investing significant amounts of revenue in sponsorship campaigns. Sponsorship can be defined as *‘an investment in cash or kind, in an activity, in return for access to the exploitable commercial potential associated with that activity’* (p.36). The success of a sponsorship investment can be measured by the ROI (Return on Investment) and the ROO (Return on Objectives).

By aligning their product or service with an athlete, a company seeks to gain, by association, the positive qualities inferred onto the athlete for themselves. Companies appreciate the way in which fans of a particular athlete seek to emulate their behaviour, which they seek to exploit by asking the athlete to promote their product or

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service If the athlete suggests to fans that they buy a certain watch, fragrance, or laptop, followers are

conceivably more likely to purchase that brand (or at least connect positively with it) over competing alternatives. Routes to sponsorship within the Olympic Games are well defined (via the development of the Olympic TOP Partner programme, launched at the 1984 LA Games), and in fact represent the most lucrative sponsorship programme in sport.

**Olympic Sponsorship**

The Olympic TOP Programme is the official sponsorship programme of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The objectives of the TOP Programme are identified as the following[[1]](#footnote-1):

* To ensure the independent financial stability of the Olympic Movement, and thereby to assist in the worldwide promotion of Olympism.
* To create and maintain long-term marketing programmes, and thereby to ensure the future of the Olympic Movement and the Olympic Games.
* To build on the successful activities developed by each Organising Committee for the Olympic Games, and thereby to eliminate the need to recreate the marketing structure with each Olympic Games.
* To ensure equitable revenue distribution throughout the entire Olympic Movement – including the Organising Committees, for the
* Olympic Games (OCOGs), the National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and their continental associations, the IFs, and other recognised international sports organisations – and to provide financial support for sport in emerging nations.
* To ensure that the Olympic Games can be experienced by the maximum number of people throughout the world, principally via television coverage.
* To control and limit the commercialisation of the Olympic Games.
* To protect the equity that is inherent in the Olympic image and ideal.
* To enlist the support of Olympic marketing partners in the promotion of the Olympic ideals.

Worldwide Top Partners are Coca-Cola, Acer, Atos, Dow, GE, McDonalds, Omega, Panasonic, Proctor & Gamble, Samsung & Visa. The objectives of the TOP Programme meet the needs of both the TOP Partners and the International Olympic Committee. Domestic TOP Partners are also enlisted at domestic level, and change with each Games. In the period 2001-2004, TOP sponsorship revenue earned the IOC £365,412,450 - 16% of total revenue for that period.

**FURTHER INFORMATION**

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**Sports Role Models and Their Impact on Participation in Physical Activity: A Literature Review**

http://fulltext.ausport.gov.au/fulltext/2002/vic/Role\_Model.pdf

**Sport Sponsorship Management:**

**Practices in Objective Setting and Measurement** http://wwwdocs.fce.unsw.edu.au/fce/Research/NHCPapers2007/MARK7\_Karg.pdf

**Olympic Marketing Fact File: TOPS Programme**

http://www.olympic.org/Documents/marketing\_fact\_file\_en.pdf

**Funding and Sponsorship; the Commercial Impact of the 2012 London Olympic Games – some considerations**

http://www.writenow.ac.uk/oldsite/QRSS/vol\_2/Paper%203%20Kenyon%20and%20Palmer%20Vol%202%202009.pdf

**DISCUSSION**

* What happened to the sponsorship deals associated with Tiger Woods when details of his personal transgressions came to light?
* Has he now recovered his sponsorship portfolio?
* It is possible that Dwain Chambers will contest the BOA’s decision. If granted the opportunity to run in the Olympic Games, do you think that this will make him more attractive to sponsors?
* With reference to the **Sports Role Models and Their Impact on Participation in Physical**

**Activity: A Literature Review** paper, identify the impact of sporting role models on the physical activity of people who follow them.

* Do you feel that athletes have a responsibility to act as role models? Please justify your answer.
* Why is ‘role model theory’ so important in the context of the Olympic and Paralympic Games?

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1. *Olympic Marketing Fact File: see ‘Further Information’ for full reference* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)