

Hero Formation and the Myth of Australian National Identity in Australian Football

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Abstract

Australia has a complex history but constructions of national identity have been particularly significant for the majority of its (White) population. While many nations go through a period of inventing national identity, Australia has long supported a whole industry devoted to informing Australians of who they are. Sporting success has been a significant part of this identity and the top sportspeople have risen to venerated status as a result.

This chapter discusses sports hero formation in relation to national identity in Australia, arguing that it can be a critical component of the development of a hero. A netnographic approach, encompassing a number of virtual spaces and methods of analyses, was utilised to examine the formation of sports heroes within the setting of a new professional Australian rules football team in Greater Western Sydney. Australian football can be a site for the construction of local, regional, and national identities. It is frequently subject to negotiations and struggles for power and acceptance, particularly with regards to who and what is considered Australian and the place of Aboriginal Australians. This chapter argues that the formation of sports heroes is shaped by established notions of national identity and longstanding mythological archetypes rather than heroes' personal traits or deeds. Universal hero myths, furthermore, provide recognised narratives that frame the emergence of new heroes in otherwise very different societies.

Introduction

Australia has a cultural identity that has been shaped to greater or lesser degrees by its British settler heritage, waves of European and non-Anglo migration, exposure to American culture, its geographical location near to Asia, and its Indigenous history. However, the dominant constructions of Australianness (i.e., what it means to be Australian) are typically associated with masculine, Anglo-Celtic ideals. These are largely nineteenth-century ideals that have been hard to dislodge. As such, constructions of Australian national identity are based on earlier, rural ideals so that themes of masculinity, ethnicity, and the Australian countryside (known as the bush) are intertwined with discussions of Australianness.

Eddy (1991, p. 17) states that national identity is often based on meretricious 'myths' which may be 'invented', consciously or unconsciously". In Australia, these myths have also been embodied through a series of archetypal figures that are embedded within Australian culture (Butler, 2009). The first of these was the bushman – a nomadic character who inhabited the bush and who was able to survive in a landscape that city-dwelling European arrivals saw as hostile and inhospitable, despite the ability of the country's Aboriginal peoples to successfully inhabit the land for thousands of years. Subsequently, following the Gallipoli campaign during the First World War, the 'digger' emerged as a national hero (White, 1981). These soldiers were portrayed as having "vigour, independence, courage, disrespect for authority, reliability, inventiveness and mateship of 'the best fighting men in the world'" (Sandercock & Turner, 1981, p. 79). Then, by the late 1930s, the surf lifesaver emerged as a new national type (Evers, 2008). These figures, who again battled the natural environment, were once again identified as inherently masculine and upholding the mateship tradition (Saunders, 1998). White (1981, p. 83) emphasises that women have historically been excluded from these Australian 'types' and that the "emphasis was on masculinity and on masculine friendships and team-work, or 'mateship'". Most recently, sport has been the source for many Australian heroes, epitomised by the cricketer Sir Donald Bradman, 'The Don' (see later in this chapter for a discussion of this figure). In all of these cases there are underlying similarities: all are associated with the outdoors, masculine mateship plays a significant role, there can be a tendency towards larrikin behaviour that shows a disregard for authority or convention, they frequently battle against some form of adversity, and all have been viewed as Anglo-Celtic in appearance.

For many Australians it is a way of escaping the rigours and stresses that are associated with modern life. However, it is also more than just source of amusement and it has been described as a 'national necessity' or even a 'super religion' (Stewart, 1990). Kell (2000) claims that sessions of state in Australia are disrupted for only two reasons – matters of national / international importance and updates on the top sporting events. Indeed, national sporting triumphs may be one of the few occasions that mobilise the majority of the population around a specific image of national identity (Carter, 2000). Therefore, it is one of the rare occasions, alongside voting, travelling overseas, and military conflicts that cause people to consider their Australianness. Thus, in the twenty-first century sport is integral in Australian society while also being central to the creation and maintenance of myths about Australia and Australianness (Henderson, 2000).

Heroes

Heroes facilitate cultural identification for large numbers of the population, emphasising the values and norms of the dominant social classes, and acting as agents of social control by encouraging the emulation of their pro-societal behaviours (Klapp, 1954; Parry, 2009). As a result, they are deeply tied to national and/or regional identity, speaking to the documented myths of a particular culture. This reinforcement of norms and ideals often takes place through the mythologising of the deeds and stories associated with historical figures. Studies of historical heroes have identified common groups or types of heroes. Some of the subjects of these studies may be of mythical characters, but it is also important to recognise that the stories built up around factual individuals can be altered to fit with existing mythological narratives of heroes. These archetypes are significant as they may be "modified to suit new needs" (Burke, 2009, p. 202), so they may offer useful patterns for analysing modern athletes and potential heroes.

As well as common hero types, it is also possible to identify patterns to the careers of heroes. In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (first published in 1949), Campbell (2004, p. 28) details the standard path for the "mythological adventure of the hero". By studying the myths and legends in early and modern societies, he constructed the heroic journey, which he termed 'the monomyth'. He argued that the hero's adventure follows three stages: separation or departure, trials and victories by way of initiation, and a return to be integrated. These heroes were said to possess exceptional gifts and are capable of achieving triumphs that can have local or global impacts. Campbell proposes that while the returning hero can assume a number of archetypes, no matter the culture or context, the hero's journey varies little and essentially follows the standard or archetypal path.

In the late twentieth century, Boorstin (1992) argued that warfare was the only source of heroes. However, sport, famously described as 'war minus the shooting' by George Orwell, is likely to be another suitable source of heroes. So, while it can be questioned whether athletes should be considered heroic (Wagg, 2007), they are frequently 'selected' as heroes by many societies (Parry, 2009). Key to this process is the mass media. Sport is increasingly consumed via the media and this media coverage increases the 'wellknownness' of the athletes. As the media reproduces repeatedly the feats of top athletes it makes them seem increasingly spectacular and miraculous, to be explained by the presence of sporting genius. It positions them as candidates for heroisation.

In the Australian context, sporting heroes represent a number of the important attributes of national identity. Given that Australian society and sport are principally masculine domains, the country's sporting heroes have largely been the epitome of masculinity and have also been tied to Anglo-Celtic ideals (Parry et al, 2021; Parry, 2021). Don Bradman is viewed as the quintessential Australian sports hero – Rowe and Lawrence (1990) term him the ultimate Australian hero – and exemplifies myths of Australian identity. He was frequently portrayed as being an underdog from the bush who made it against the odds, which hence romanticised the Australian bush and the 'Aussie battler' (Hutchins, 2005). Mythologised as having little formal training, he had an unassuming rural upbringing but would go on to become the statistically best batter ever. Bradman was regularly equated with Australian notions of 'the boy from the bush' or the 'country boy'. However, these concepts can be linked to wider pre-existing hero myths such as the unpromising or Cinderella hero and can be equated with many elements from the hero's journey (Campbell, 2004).

Within the Australian context, the achievements of a small number of female athletes such as Dawn Fraser and Cathy Freeman are noteworthy because they have also been identified as heroes. In the case of swimmer Fraser, her larrikin nature may contribute to reducing the threat she poses to hegemonic masculinity and, therefore, making her more acceptable as a representation of Australian identity. However, Freeman, an Aboriginal runner who, being both Aboriginal and a woman, suffered from a 'double discrimination'. During her victory lap after winning the 400m event at the 1994 Commonwealth Games, Freeman sported the Australian Aboriginal flag before subsequently raising the Australian national flag. She was viewed as an advocate for reconciliation between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities in Australia. For these actions, as much as her sporting successes, she has been heroised (Knight et al., 2007). She also played a key role in the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, lighting the cauldron at the Opening Ceremony and then winning a "historic 400m race before a record Olympic crowd" (White, 2012, p. 154). She became the unofficial 'face' of the Games but despite this veneration, she was also the subject of much hostility due to her Aboriginal heritage, particularly because she highlighted that her grandmother had been part of the 'Stolen Generation' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were forcibly removed from their families (Elder & Moore, 2012).

Heroes are "emotional icons whose qualities match ideals embedded in the culture" (Holden, 2012, p. 19). Therefore, any study of sports heroes is also a study of the society within which they exist and to gain a deep understanding of the process by which fans form their

sporting heroes, a strong understanding of the context within which heroisation takes place is needed.

Context

Greater Western Sydney (GWS) is a large region within the metropolitan area of Sydney in the eastern Australian state of New South Wales (NSW). It is diverse geographically and in terms of its population, which includes over half of the world's nationalities. With an estimated population of 2.62 million (.id, 2023) it is home to one in ten Australians and it is forecast that the population will grow to over 3 million inhabitants by 2036 (Parramatta City Council, 2012). Not only is this population larger than the current combined populations of the states/territories of South Australia, Tasmania, the Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory (Department of Premier and Cabinet NSW, 2012) it also includes the largest Indigenous population in Australia.

Given the expanding population of GWS, three of the main professional sporting competitions in Australia, the A-League (association football), the Big Bash League (cricket), and the Australian Football League (Australian football) have established teams in the region since 2011. In two of these cases, the new teams that have been established in GWS have been clearly labelled as representing Sydney's West. As with the focus of this chapter, the Greater Western Sydney Giants, the first new association football team was named the *Western Sydney Wanderers* (my italics), and the second, Macarthur FC is based in the City of Campbelltown, in the South Western Sydney region of Macarthur. The second of Sydney's Big Bash teams – the Sydney Thunder – is not linked to the region by name but the club has aligned itself with it and "the people of Western Sydney" (Sydney Thunder, 2013). The wider Sydney metropolitan region is awash with sports teams that compete with each other for fans and prominence. It now has nine of the seventeen National Rugby League (NRL) teams (three with corresponding women's teams with a further two to follow in 2023); three A-League teams; two teams in each of the men's and women's Big Bash Leagues; two of the eight teams in the Australian national Super Netball league (one of which is linked to the GWS Giants); one Super Rugby (rugby union) team; a team in both the National Basketball League and the Australian Baseball League; two AFL teams; and, from 2022, two corresponding teams in the AFL Women's competition.

Historically, the Sydney region has been associated with rugby league to the extent that the region is considered the heartland of rugby league (Rosenberg, 2009). This link is apparent

from the dominance in the number of teams in the NRL. Yet in terms of average match and weekly attendance figures, the AFL is the best supported sport competition in Australia and it has been described as Australia's 'premier sports competition' (Stewart, 2005). Although there has been a recent push to establish Australian football in the Sydney region, the first professional team, the Sydney Swans was not set up until 1982, when a team was transplanted from Melbourne. The introduction of a second professional Australian football team in the Sydney region was in part due to a desire by the governing body of Australian football to increase the presence in the most populous Australian state and this growing economic region. However, as I have argued previously, these expansion attempts have been met with some hostility by those who, parochially, feel that AFL has no place in NSW (Parry, 2013). The GWS Giants entered the AFL as its 18th team in 2012. The AFL was from the outset keen for the new GWS team to reflect the needs and values of the local population, even though it represented an extremely diverse community (Cullen, 2009). In addition, adding a second Sydney-based team would 'theoretically' mean that there would be an AFL game in the region each week during the league season. As the home games of these two teams are broadcasted on free-to-air television within the region it also increased the visibility of the league.

In their early years the GWS team was predominantly made up of young, relatively unknown and inexperienced players. So, when the Giants entered the elite professional league they struggled to adapt. As was widely predicted by most commentators in the media, they finished their first season in last place, winning only two games. In their second season, they won only one game and again finished last. With the addition of several seasoned players, their results improved, and the Giants ended the 2014 season with a total of six wins, in sixteenth place. By their fourth year in 2015, GWS reached 11th place and won half of their regular season games. They are now an established team, typically challenging for honours but in their formative years there were fewer significant individual performances.

Australian rules football

Australian rules football was developed in Melbourne in the nineteenth century and maintains associations with the city and the state of Victoria. Nineteenth-century migrants, primarily British, had brought their sporting traditions from their homelands along with their "social, political, ideological and educational discourse" to Australia (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 863). These migrants had arrived in Australian cities with a number of different forms of the emerging sport of football and a new version was developed that drew from the melting pot of

codes. Melbourne had the greatest population growth in the early years of the colony in part due to the gold rushes. It had dry, mild winters with longer days (in comparison to the United Kingdom), a wealthy, young population, and large open spaces. These factors were all conducive to the formation of its own form of football that had different characteristics from other football codes such as innovative rules including the abolition of an offside concept. It was played on large spaces, typically cricket pitches, and with a greater number of players – 18 on each team. It can appear chaotic and with few rules but it also has an aesthetic beauty, displaying both the agility of its players and their physicality, particularly due to the short cut of the playing shorts and sleeveless shirts.

However, while it is a uniquely Australian sport it has not establish a country-wide sporting supremacy. For many years, Australian football failed to take off in Sydney. This lack of appeal was in spite of investment in the sport in NSW and the early formation of the New South Wales (Australian) Football Association (Sandercock & Turner, 1981). Australia has frequently been 'divided' in terms of the football code that is played in its states. NSW has been classified as a rugby league state (alongside Queensland), while the traditional Australian football states have been Western Australia, South Australia, and Victoria (Kelly & Hickey, 2008). Large scale post-war migration into Australia from southern Europe has also given rise to the popularity of Association football. As a result, the term football (or footy) can be used to describe a number of different sporting codes in Australia (Hynes, Kiernan & Parry, 2013). In the south-eastern NSW the term has most likely been used to refer to rugby league, but in Victoria it will most likely mean Australian Rules football –this sport is often called Aussie Rules. Elsewhere in Australia football can also refer to rugby union. Association football has not, traditionally, been known widely as football in Australia but was referred to as 'soccer'. Recent pushes from the sport's governing bodies have sought to change this terminology, with football now more commonly used in official communication at least. Therefore, for the purpose of this chapter, Australian Rules football will be referred to as Australian football; association football will be used for 'the World Game', and the two rugby codes will be referred to as rugby league and rugby union.

In addition to not being adopted across the country, Australian football has also been associated with the dominant White Australian values and has not always been adopted by all communities. The involvement and acceptance of non-British migrants from Europe was a gradual process, but it is now common to find players with European heritage playing in the AFL. However, there is evidence for a long involvement by Aboriginal peoples (Gorman et al. 2015) with the AFL brand frequently attempting to align itself with the politics of Aboriginal

reconciliation (Judd & Butcher, 2016). However, Hallinan and Judd (2009a, p. 2360) argue that the Victorian Football League (the precursor of the AFL) was an "institutional signpost of White Australian national identity". In the early years of the Federation, Australian politicians such as Prime Minister Alfred Deakin believed that Australian football could be used to maintain the White national values of Australianness that were pervasive at that time and promoted the sport as the national game of White Australia (Judd & Butcher, 2016). Conversely, Association football has historically been identified as the sport of 'wogs' (an Australian slang term referring to most non-British European migrants) (Hay, 2011). It has also been associated as effeminate as highlighted by the title of former Australian Association football player Johnny Warren's 2003 autobiography – *Sheilas, Wogs, and Poofers*.

Methodology

In their initial stages, the Giants' players were homogeneous in appearance and profile, with little playing experience, and were 'on the end' of some very one-sided scorelines. These factors were not conducive to individual players standing out from their peers and then being heroised. The crowds at their games were also low initially so there was a lack of interaction between fans and players during games. The paucity of fans would result in little recounting of the heroic deeds of players and ultimately slowed the process of heroisation. Therefore, an unobtrusive netnographic analysis was adopted to examine heroisation. A total of 1,254 threads across the two most popular online fan forums were analysed and revealed a level of detail on, and insight into, the formation of heroes by fans. 204 emails from the Giants to their members and content from the club's website were similarly analysed to understand the top-down presentation of heroes from the club.

In addition, to gain further top-down perspectives of the formation of heroes, textual analysis was conducted on media discourses. This analysis focussed on the two best-selling Sydney-based daily newspapers (AMAA 2015), *The Daily Telegraph* (a tabloid) and *The Sydney Morning Herald* (a 'quality' broadsheet now in tabloid format). 350 articles were identified via search engines on these newspapers' websites and a university library search engine. Semiotic and discourse analyses were utilised to identify the presentation of these heroes in the newspapers. Roland Barthes (1968) contends that many objects can be treated as a system of signs and so, by extension, can be read as a 'text'. In their examination of Australian popular culture, Fiske, Hodge, and Turner (1987) utilised a semiotic method, and it has also been used in a limited number of studies of sport (for example, Osmond and Phillips 2011).

Discourse analysis has previously been used within a sport setting to examine a number of areas (such as media coverage of sport and the sporting experiences of children) and is an established method within the field of the sociology of sport. As advocated by Corbin and Strauss (2008), analysis began after the first stage of data collection, and thereafter a constant process of data collection, coding, and analysis was used. Initial themes were refined and developed as this process of analysis progressed (Rapley, 2011).

From this combination of sources, three key figures – Israel Folau, Jeremy Cameron, and Kevin Sheedy – stood out in this period as prominent individuals. Folau, a former rugby league player of Tongan heritage, was 'headhunted' to be a hero and was utilised in marketing and promotional material before he left the club at the end of the 2012 season. Cameron was a young player who emerged as the leading performer for the team, featuring frequently in the media. His on-field performances were recognised as significant by his peers, the media, and the wider AFL community. Finally, Sheedy was the club's first coach and is one of Australian football's best-known figures. He is often divisive and was, at times, controversial. Findings on the three key heroes will be detailed in the following section, identifying the role of mythology in each of these narratives and the implications beyond these three individuals.

Discussion

Israel Folau

It was clear that one of key aims of Israel Folau's move to the GWS Giants from the NRL was that he would offer a heroic figure for followers of the new club to attach to. He was utilised by the club and the sport as a leading promotional figure, featuring heavily in their marketing activities. This prominence ignored the fact that he had yet to play a single AFL game. In this way he was very much an imposed, top-down hero.

However, AFL fans heroised him initially because he had left a rival football code to sign for the Giants. There was much glee at the move as it was viewed as a success for Australian football. He, thus, became part of a wider discourse of a 'battle' between the rival codes that was seen to be taking place in Western Sydney. Media discourses in the pro-NRL press also identified that Folau had switched codes for a large financial reward and this financial gain was revealed as his primary motivation for making the switch. So, rather than being able to claim that he was a missionary or pioneer hero type, his migration to the AFL assumed a mercenary quality. Folau's heroisation was impaired by this presentation.

Unsurprisingly, rugby league fans villainised him for this switch and when his on-field performances were below standard and failed to justify his high salary, AFL fans also turned on him and subsequently villainised him too. They began to criticise his large salary and mercenary nature. His commitment to the club was questioned and when he left to ply his trade in a third sport his lack of passion for Australian football was laid bare. Clearly the top-down attempts to position Folau as a hero were based on "consumer's heroism" (Goodman, et al., 2002), which lacked the substance of a bottom-up heroisation process. It may be possible to class Folau's time at the Giants as a success based on the amount of media coverage the club gained but his move was unsuccessful in terms of his on-field performance and so, in sporting terms it was a failure. His failure to achieve heroic status while at the club was primarily due to his limited Australian football ability but the aforementioned negative narratives around him were also significant in him ultimately being classed as a villain.

Jeremy Cameron

There was a degree of consistency in the narratives that were built up around Jeremy Cameron. Although he was a young, unknown player initially, he had obvious talent. Quantifying sports performances, a key feature of modern sport (Guttmann, 2004), allows athletes to be ranked and compared. Fans, the media, and the club suggested that he had the potential to become one of the greatest players in AFL history. It was common for media reports to compare Cameron to past players, establishing his heroic status. In sport, competitors strive to show that they are better than their peers or players that have gone before, this is one of the defining characteristics of sport (Coakley et al., 2009). Cameron's talent was recognised through a number of awards from both the club and the wider AFL. Such "exceptional performances in competitive settings" (Smart, 2005, p. 195) can be viewed as a prerequisite for an athlete to become venerated as a hero so Cameron's athletic feats allow a narrative of heroic performance to be built up around him. Importantly, fans of the club also identify him as possessing heroic qualities on the online forums and his heroisation was, therefore, not solely the product of a top-down process.

These heroic narratives were based on two important elements, mythical constructions of heroism and myths of masculine Australian identity. The first element drew on historical/mythical heroic types and, in particular, on the unpromising or Cinderella hero (Klapp, 1948). Romanticised reconstructions of Cameron's unglamorous upbringing, combined with his humble and down-to-earth personality, are then contrasted with his superior ability. The initial struggles of his club further set up his feats as heroic, because he is shown

to be battling against superior opposition. but despite his eventual success he continued to be portrayed as a 'normal', humble, young man. In the context of Australian society, narratives around Cameron drew heavily on the 'boy from the bush' mythology, which is associated with an idealisation of Anglo-Celtic country life and which continues to resonate within Australian sport and society. Club and media narratives around him frequently mentioned his rural upbringing in a small country town and his love for 'country' activities such as fishing and shooting. Despite the importance of homosocial mateship to Cameron, he was keen to stress that he was not associated with metrosexual ideals; he remains linked to more traditional Australian masculine types. He also fits with the longstanding accepted image of an AFL player, which is connected with notions of Whiteness (Hallinan & Judd, 2009a).

During the period of study, Cameron was still emerging as a hero and had not then had a long-lasting career so he could not be considered as a 'great'. However, in their early years, the Giants had someone at the club who may be considered an AFL great, Kevin Sheedy, who forms the subject of the third heroisation case study. As with the case of Cameron, Sheedy has been associated with existing constructions of heroisation and also typified the White Australian national identity that has long been connected with Australian football.

Kevin Sheedy

The basis for Sheedy's heroisation was largely his history in the AFL, as evidenced by his unprecedented achievement of being involved in 1000 games. His history and profile in the game meant that he was GWS's best-known figure, more so than any of the players. Given the club's lack of history, his associations with Australian football and Australian traditions were leveraged to provide the newly-formed GWS Giants with a degree of credibility and links to the traditions of the sport. Sheedy was often associated with historical images of Australia, such as the military (Curthoys, 1997) and working-class ideals (Leach 1997). As these ideals were also associated with both concepts of Australian national identity and Australian sport, they further offered potential fans in Western Sydney points of attachment. In addition to his coaching expertise, he was also signed to raise the profile of the club and presented as a hero for the Giants' fans, as with Folau. As such, he can also be considered a top-down, imposed hero. However, unlike Folau, a combination of his longstanding/great achievements in the game, charisma, and ability to generate local pride meant that he was accepted as a hero even though he failed to have on-field success.

The club and the media, as well as Sheedy himself, constructed narratives around him that focussed on his history and achievements. These narratives evoked feelings of nostalgia

and “collective memory” (Griggs et al., 2012, p. 90) amongst fans of AFL. However, a degree of this collective memory were selectively recalled (Kohe, 2010) and much of what is ‘known’ about Sheedy is, therefore, mythologised. Indeed, his biographer Prior (1995) states that many legends and suburban myths had been created around Sheedy. As a result, a mythologised legend was created, as is common in the case of heroes; a process called ‘legend building’ (Klapp, 1949).

Sheedy was shown as outspoken or controversial and conversely charismatic and confident. He was viewed as roguish and full of both cunning and tricks, which he employed for the benefit of his new club, as befitting a larrikin Australian. Sheedy’s cunning and his disrespect for his ‘social superiors’ or authority were used to create a discourse of him in the mould of the archetypal ‘clever hero’ who uses brains to overcome brawn. This universal type was combined with his working-class, Irish background and quintessential Australianness to position him as an Australian hero. In this way, there are similarities between the heroisation of Sheedy and Jeremy Cameron. The association with Australianness proved to be one of the most noticeable differences with Israel Folau. These differences are in part related to the degree of association with each subject’s perceived Australianness.

Conclusion

While Sheedy and Cameron are plausible heroic figures, Folau, during his time at the Giants, assumed the role of a villain. Clearly his lack of ability in a new sport and his perceived financial motivations were contributing factors in this process. However, it is difficult not to associate some of Folau’s lack of heroisation with his Polynesian heritage. In his appearance and even his accent, he did not fit the traditional models of Anglo-Celtic Australianness. Traditional ‘Australian’ sports are dominated by a White hegemony (Hallinan, and Judd 2009a; Parry et al., 2020), with Australian football in particular tied to White Australia. So, in contrast to Folau, Jeremy Cameron was much more palatable for fans to accept even with his lack of experience in the sport.

While these cases speak to Australian heroisation and reflect what at first appear to be distinctly Australian types, they can be equated with much older archetypes. Although stories relating to heroes form some of the key narratives in sport they are shaped by the collective beliefs of that particular society and are often reshaped to fit the familiar hero patterns present in each society, sedimented in the unconscious of that culture. Given sport’s strong associations with myth, it should not be surprising that mythical hero stories form the basis for modern hero

formation. Hero myths are deeply ingrained in Western society and depict a particular pattern that Lévi-Strauss (1955) describes as ‘everlasting’. They are so ingrained that they have become resistant to change (Eddy, 1991). Rather, the stories around players are adapted to fit these earlier constructions, particularly when the narratives are constructed top-down by the media or club. That is not to say that these narratives can be completely fabricated; some elements must exist and, as shown in the case of Folau, athletic ability remains a prerequisite.

Heroes do not emerge in a cultural vacuum but are created by cultural, political, and historical circumstances and are then further popularised through media coverage. With humans described as ‘homo narrans’ (the storytelling man) (Fisher 1984), we rely on stories and narratives to make sense of the world around us. While the media now assumed the ancient role of the storyteller in oral cultures, the centrality of this process remains. Therefore, hero formation not only draws upon ideals of national identity, but heroes are also positioned in the wider, universal narrative of global myths and ideologies found beyond the boundaries of particular countries and outside sport. These narratives become particularly salient if they are associated with the cultural core of the hero’s society and especially when they correspond to wider mythical constructions of heroism that members of the society will find familiar.

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