Sports Journalism: A new 'Golden Age'?

By Raymond Boyle

THE 'GOLDEN AGE' of any cultural form tends to always be in the past. We can live through these times and be blissfully unaware that some future generation will ascribe this title to a moment in history, that for those who lived through it, may have felt very much less than golden. In the middle of a maelstrom it's often difficult to chart a course or to see the true direction of travel you may be undertaking. For some, the golden age of sports journalism, and journalism per se, lies in the past. In a supposedly simpler, less complex time, where narratives were unambiguous, and the role and place of organisations and individuals were well defined.

However, if we examine this through another lens we can reframe this golden age as a time of collusion, between journalists and players; a time where journalistic and supporter knowledge of sports (with some notable exceptions) beyond Britain was patchy at best, and where organisations could carve up the sporting world often for commercial gain, broadly free from the prying eyes of a largely uninterested sports media, whose eyes were firmly focused on events on the pitch or field of play.

This was the age of supply-led media. Newspapers and strictly limited television and radio outlets provided sports journalism and sports broadcasting to an audience underpinned by the notion of sport existing in its own specific world, away from tawdry areas such as news and current affairs. The exception were often national sporting events, that became part of a wider discourse around national identity and helped provide a symbolic expression of what it meant to be for example, Scottish, English or British.

In the UK, the 1980s and 1990s witness a change in the relationship between sport, media and journalism and create new rules of engagement between journalists and sports stars in which collusion is replaced by mistrust and suspicion. The increasingly commercially driven tabloid newspaper wars intensify during these decades and sports coverage and its on-field stars become embroiled in this battle as celebrity (not of course a recent invention or even one created by sport) becomes an increasingly valuable media commodity in an age that

moves from supply-led media to a more demand-led media culture. Sport, and football in particular, moves out of its clearly delineated and limited media space as new media players extend the profile and coverage of sport in a deregulating broadcasting era, and newspapers extend coverage of sport through colour, through supplements and through cross-media promotion with the then new kid on the block, Rupert Murdoch's Sky, soon to be BSkyB and eventually become the Comcast-owned Sky UK.

In so doing, sport is transformed and liberated from its often ghetto scheduling or absence on television into a ubiquitous entertainment 'product' to be used as a 'battering ram' to reshape the media landscape and television consumption habits of a new generation of sporting audiences. The 1980s remain the decade where if I wanted to watch live football on television in a non-World Cup year, then my choice usually extended to the European Cup final, the Scotland v England Home Championship game (remember that tournament), and (for viewers in Scotland) the Scottish Cup final and the Junior Scottish Cup final. Such is the pace of change in this demand-led (if you can afford to pay) sports media culture, that over Christmas 2019 I watched as many matches in one day through an OTT streaming service that around a decade or so ago used to be an online book store.

One unanticipated outcome of this more plentiful supply of sports journalism and broadcasting related content - that has grown from the analogue 1980s and early 1990s and been further enhanced in the contemporary digital platform age – is that the audience(s) now know much more about sport and its wider political and commercial hinterland than it did previously. From sporting scandals and corruption, to knowledge and access to sporting events beyond these shores, the sports journalist and broadcaster has had to up their game, as access to information and coverage of international sport have facilitated a more knowledgeable section of the audience.

The cricket writer and broadcaster (and former news journalist) Richie Benaud, who made his name on the field as captain of Australia, would often recommend that any new broadcaster refrain from telling their television audience 'as you can see', his argument being that of course they could see what was on the screen, your job was to tell them about something they couldn't see or couldn't know. While some modern-day presenters (many lacking journalistic training) remain immune to Benaud's words of wisdom, the dominant trend in an era that sees sports journalism and media coverage of sport become more and

more prominent across all media platforms, from print to online, is that it's becoming harder for journalists to tell their audience something they don't already know. Reporting what happened in a football or rugby match they have already seen, has become more redundant, so added news value or analysis becomes more important. In an age of always-on sports coverage, looking for other journalistic paths to follow to engage the audience should be a more common practice than it is.

Investigative journalism in sport, traditionally, was driven, on the occasions that it happened, by non-sports journalists. Paradoxically, in an age when sections of the sports audience (not all of it by any means) is more likely to appreciate investigative material that gets below the surface and takes us backstage, this type of journalism in the newspaper sector remains rare. *The Guardian*'s David Conn is a notable exception and in many ways his sporting role echoes with the wider investigative culture that has become an important part of that newspaper's brand. The stumbling block in today's media market is usually money and time. Carrying out investigative journalism can be costly (often requiring legal support) and time-consuming at a moment where journalists are producing more copy than any of their generational predecessors.

It is no accident that the popularity in the rise of the sports documentary, ironically driven not (as you might imagine) by public service media, but rather by the commercial, subscription-funded pay-TV and OTT sports channels with schedules to fill, offer sports fans and more general viewers a behind-the-scenes access that journalism used to promise it was giving. From BT Sport Films to Amazon Prime exclusives such as the *All or Nothing* series or *Resurfaced*, the story of Andy Murray's battle to return to tennis, a new kind of sports journalist, one at home in both understanding the importance of constructing visual content and having an ability to identify sporting news values, is coming to the fore.

These highly visually driven documentaries, of course, juggle that fine line between being driven by journalistic access all areas and becoming a sanitised promotional video for a club or individual. Yet they provide some form of visual long-form journalism at a time when the written equivalent, while still around, appears to be becoming more and more niche. Yes, it's out there if you want to hunt for it and pay extra for it, yet for younger supporters of sport, brought up in a more visual age than my print-hungry generation of supporters, the new

sports film and documentaries are becoming an increasingly important part of the wider journalistic landscape that engages, mediates and makes sense of the complex world of sport.

Sports journalism in all its differing forms and practices will continue to play a role in mediating and making sense of our relationship with sport. It matters because sport matters of course. But sport, in its modern configuration, matters in part because the media think it matters. In the age of the television box set, the commercial value of televised sport lies in its *liveness* and *immediacy*, hence its value to certain media platforms. You don't pay a subscription to watch a box set of the UEFA Champions League. However, the value of sport has also been in its ability to touch us emotionally and connect us as individuals through shared fandom, and this, in part, is achieved in the telling and re-telling of the stories that surround the events that take place on the pitch or in the stadium. Enter journalism.

Through social media, that post and pre-sports event chatter may have become more accessible (if at times less restrained), yet journalists writing about sport and the events and circumstances it creates and represents will remain important cultural intermediaries in the process of creating the myths, values and narratives that make sport such an important cultural form. The difference nowadays, is that the journalist no longer has the exclusive rights to these narratives that they once enjoyed. Don't be surprised if future generations look back at this moment and reach for the label 'golden age'.