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KEY TERMS

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INTRODUCTION

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The issue of whether or not sport stars should be seen as role models in wider society is one which has been debated for some time. For many, the wealth, power and adulation that sport grants its biggest stars confers a degree of responsibility on those individuals to act as role models, especially to young people. So when Wayne Rooney swears at a television camera after scoring a vital goal [Ref: [Guardian](#)], or Jack Wilshere is pictured smoking after a night out with friends [Ref: [Independent](#)], they are seen as setting a bad example, most notably to children, and failing to live up to their status as role models. For others though, this behaviour is irrelevant and, as one commentator notes, regarding Wilshere's transgression: "His job is to kick a football, not to set an example to our kids. He should be judged solely on his performances on the pitch" [Ref: [spiked](#)]. When viewed alongside the high profile fall from grace of Tiger Woods, the admissions of doping by cyclist Lance Armstrong, and the recent incidents involving footballers Luis Suarez, and one time England captain John Terry, the role of sports stars as role models has come under increasing scrutiny. Is this fair? Should we expect our sporting heroes to be paragons of virtue on and off the field? Or is this too idealistic, and simply expecting too much of individuals who are just as fallible as the rest of us? Should sportspeople be seen as role models?



Responsibility to set an example?

Many believe that sport stars should expect to be seen as role models whether they like it or not, with one observer arguing that: “There is nothing in a player’s contract that says they have to be a role model, but there is no doubt they have to assume that role, especially as children look up to them” [Ref: [Herald](#)]. In that light, Uruguay’s Luis Suarez, at this year’s World Cup, was banned from football for four months for biting an opponent [Ref: [Independent](#)], an incident which incensed some commentators, who felt that he had once again failed to be a role model [Ref: [Daily Star](#)]. How should we view this episode? Is it a case of society over moralising football as some suggest [Ref: [spiked](#)], or should we be concerned about the example that this sets for children? Many argue that society’s expectations of footballers based on their status and what they earn completely misses the point, and instead argue that: “...any parent who is genuinely concerned that their child’s worldview might be hopelessly altered by the unruly behaviour of a footballer has failed as a parent” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. From this point of view, the role of the sportsperson is to be a sportsperson, and nothing more, and they should certainly not be expected to fulfil any deeper, more profound societal role.

Lance Armstrong: A God in ruins?

Last year, cyclist Lance Armstrong admitted to using performance enhancing drugs, having been stripped of his seven Tour de France victories in 2012 [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. For many, Armstrong embodied the essence of a sporting hero; determination,

excellence, and hard work, and as such, the majority of his fans, young and old felt let down by his admission of cheating [Ref: [The Times](#)]. However, Armstrong had successfully overcome cancer against the odds, and subsequently set up a charity; Livestrong, which continues to raise money for cancer victims worldwide [Ref: [Livestrong.org](#)]. So how are we to view him? Opinions differ markedly, with some questioning whether his cheating within sport diminished in any way the inspiration that some cancer sufferers still get from his tale of triumph through illness and adversity [Ref: [CNN](#)]. Others though argue that he is simply a drugs cheat, who brought the integrity of his sport into disrepute, and used his image as a role model to enrich himself [Ref: [New Yorker](#)]. As a result, Armstrong presents us with a dilemma [Ref: [ESPN](#)]; can an athlete still be a role model, and inspire people, even if they are found wanting within the sporting arena?

Public and private personas

In recent times, there have been a series of embarrassing and salacious stories involving the private lives of sports stars such as John Terry [Ref: [Independent](#)], Ryan Giggs [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] and most famously, Tiger Woods [Ref: [New York Post](#)]. But does an athlete’s behaviour outside of the sporting arena impact on their ability to be a role model? For some, the answer is yes and they argue that: “...athletes have both an incredible opportunity and responsibility to use their power for good” [Ref: [Forbes](#)]. To a lesser extent, columnist Simon Barnes agrees with these sentiments, and suggests that it is because: “We like, expect,



need our sporting heroes to be virtuous” [Ref: [The Times](#)], that the private transgressions of our role models are of such importance. Opponents however dismiss these arguments and note that ultimately, it doesn’t matter what a sports star does in their private life, as long as they perform in their given field. Referring to Tiger Woods, one writer asserts that: “What he does in his bedroom should not be our business. Our business is what he does on the golf course” [Ref: [Fox News](#)], supporting the idea that sporting excellence is all that matters.

Play up, play up, and play the game: winning at all costs?

Another aspect of the role model discussion centres on the nature of fair play and sportsmanship. Last summer, England cricketer Stuart Broad caused controversy by refusing to admit that he was out, when television replays showed that he had hit the ball and been caught by a fielder, but in error he was not been given ‘out’ by the umpire [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. After the match, Broad admitted that he was out, but defended his actions by saying that they were part of a: “...win at all costs mentality”, which he saw as a positive thing in sport [Ref: [The Times](#)]. But is this a good example to set? Some observers thought not, and lamented a loss of basic sportsmanship and fair play, suggesting that unfortunately, to admit that he was out would have been: “...an affront to a fully paid up modern sportsman” [Ref: [Independent](#)]. For others however, a winning mentality is to be admired, and they observe that in other countries sportsmen who are prepared to go the extra mile to win are lauded as

heroes, and seen as role models [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. They note that ultimately, winning is all that matters in sport, and we should revere and look up to those who make the sacrifices necessary to achieve victory. Critics of a win at all cost mentality disagree, and referring to Luis Suarez’s famous handball at the World Cup in 2010 against Ghana [Ref: [BBC News](#)], one writer declares that: “Any young impressionable mind...will conclude that it is ok to cheat; that gamesmanship and deliberately breaking the rules is ok; and that any act of cheating can be seen as a sacrifice for the team” [Ref: [Liverpool-Kop](#)]. Ultimately, how should we view sportspeople? Should we see them as role models who should set an example on and off the field of play, and do they have a responsibility to do so? Is it fair that: “...there is still – perhaps always will be, that confusion of sporting excellence with morality” [Ref: [The Times](#)], or should we simply concentrate on the athletic prowess of our sports stars, and nothing more?



ESSENTIAL READING

Ruthless people can still play by the rules

Matthew Sayer *The Times* 16 July 2014

The biggest lie in sports is the one we tell ourselves

Brian Janosch *Huffington Post* 17 January 2013

FOR

Athletes are human, not role models

Darren Kane *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 July 2014

Fags, football and role models

Duleep Allirajah *spiked* 11 October 2013

Barking pundits are worse than Suarez' bite

David Aaronovitch *The Times* 23 April 2013

Tiger Woods is a golfer, not a role model

Gary Lawless *Winnipeg Free Press* 13 April 2013

AGAINST

Disgraceful Suarez awaits his punishment

Jeremy Cross *Daily Star* 26 June 2014

Born again Tiger Woods

Simon Barnes *The Times* 8 April 2013

Why do we make sportsmen role models?

Leigh Steinberg *Forbes* 20 January 2013

John Terry: a scandal to shame us all

Anthony Horowitz *Telegraph* 10 February 2010

IN DEPTH

Armstrong in purgatory: the afterlife

John H. Richardson *Esquire* 7 July 2014

The dangerous myth of the role model athlete

Simon Kuper *Financial Times* 5 February 2013

Tiger Woods: The Strange life of sporting heroes

Brendan Gallagher *Telegraph* 4 October 2009

ORGANISATIONS

FIFA

International Cricket Council

LiveStrong

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BACKGROUNDEERS

Jack Wilshere: smoking a cigarette is irrelevant

Matt Law *Telegraph* 15 July 2014

Suarez plays the Uruguayan way: winning is all that counts

Martin Aguirre *Guardian* 26 June 2014

Disgrace role model Suarez is unrepentant cheat

Liverpool Kop 17 June 2014

Hypocrites who mock us are destined for hell

Simon Barnes *The Times* 15 November 2013

Stuart Broad shows that the spirit of cricket is dead

James Lawton *Independent* 12 July 2013

What should we do about Luis Suarez? Laugh

Duleep Allirajah *spiked* 25 April 2013

Tiger Woods and the rise of the cheater

Diane Falzone *Fox News* 15 April 2013

Admit it: you've enjoyed this immorality tale

Matthew Sayed *The Times* 19 January 2013

The winner who made us all into losers

Simon Barnes *The Times* 19 January 2013

What Lance Armstrong did

Michael Spector *New Yorker* 15 January 2013

Why do we insist on treating footballers as role models?

Scott Thompson *Huffington Post* 27 November 2012

What to make of Lance Armstrong

Darren Rovell *ESPN* 24 August 2012

Why Jessie Owens is my hero on and off the track

Michael Johnson *The Times* 26 September 2011

Why Idolise footballers?

Charlie Brooker *Guardian* 30 May 2011

If swearing makes Wayne Rooney brilliant, he can swear as much as he likes

Simon Burnton *Guardian* 4 April 2011

Why are footballers expected to be role models?

Fraser Wishart *Herald Scotland* 11 February 2010

Its ludicrous to punish someone at work for their private failings

Ruth Sutherland *Guardian* 7 February 2010

John Terry: being a captain means being a moral leader

Simon Hattenstone *Guardian* 2 February 2010

Let down by a Tiger we never knew

Alex Altman *Time Magazine* 7 December 2009

Tiger Woods: role model?

April Daniels Hussar *Huffington Post* 12 April 2009

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IN THE NEWS

Wilshere regrets smoking 'mistake'

BBC News 27 July 2014

Armstrong Tour victories should stand say former winners

Telegraph 16 July 2014

FIFA charge Suarez with biting Chiellini

Independent 25 June 2014

The night Tiger Woods was exposed as a serial cheater

New York Post 24 November 2013

Jack Wilshere pictured smoking

Independent 7 October 2013

Broad points to Australians who refused to walk

The Times 20 August 2013

Broad says not walking made England unpleasant to play against

Guardian 19 August 2013

Cancer survivors; mixed feelings about Lance Armstrong

CNN 18 January 2013

Armstrong stripped of Tour de France victories

BBC News 24 August 2012

Ryan Giggs had third affair

Telegraph 8 June 2011

Ryan Giggs could become UK's Tiger Woods

Telegraph 7 June 2011

Uruguay's Suarez given one match ban

BBC News 10 July 2010

Jermain Defoe says footballers are role models and should behave

Mirror 28 February 2010

John Terry's affair with mate's girlfriend revealed

Independent 30 January 2010

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NOTES



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