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## **Living by numbers: media representations of sports stars' careers**

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## **Living by numbers: media representations of sports stars' careers**

### **Abstract**

This article will address the making and unmaking of elite sporting careers, by focusing on the media reporting of the rise and fall of two elite sport stars, Roger Federer and Lance Armstrong. Sport stars are not simply the raw, unmediated products of innate or mysterious physical ability. Their physical capital is constituted through techniques – physical and discursive – which reflect wider social and cultural values. In this paper we report on the role played by numbers (objective time, chronological age and physiological biomarkers) to construct but also regulate athletic careers. Numbers will be shown to have normative power which reinforce understandings of age and ageing within a narrative of decline. The athletes' ability to challenge their subjection as old will also be explored.

### **Keywords**

Ageing, discourse, decline, numbers, sport

### **Introduction**

This article will address the making and unmaking of elite sporting careers, by focusing on the media reporting of the rise and fall of two elite sport stars, Roger Federer and Lance Armstrong, at what appears to be a turning point in these athletes' performance and futures: when talk of retirement becomes ubiquitous. Retirement from competitive sport can take several forms: it can be gradual, sudden or happen in fits and starts. In some cases, retirement from elite competition shifts to participation in Master competitions or to ancillary sport activities such as commentating, coaching or the development of business interests. Thus we all understand that our sporting heroes will some day fall out of the public eye. However mostly this disappearing act, unless it is sudden or part of a dramatic fall from grace, is left unquestioned: it is accepted as normal, as is its timing.

I would argue that we need to give greater visibility to the issue of retirement from sport. Indeed whilst training techniques have transformed the physical capital of athletes, there has so far not been much examination of wider attitudes

toward ageing in sport and its aftermath. Crucially, at a time when talk of age is poised on a knife edge between alarmist pronouncements about population ageing (Katz, 1992) and attempts in ageing studies to rescue old age from powerful narratives of decline, it is incumbent on sociology to turn its attention to spheres of social life where narratives of decline still prevail. Sport is one such field (Bourdieu, 1978). Indeed the ageing of sport stars holds tremendous interest as it takes place in the public eye. If sporting celebrities exist in cultural interconnectedness (Giardina, 2001), their experiences will have widespread resonance. Their ageing thus provides an opportunity to make explicit the narrative strategies that are used to make sense of it, to examine how these might potentially affect the athletes themselves, that is how the narratives themselves shape the field of possibilities in which they might imagine their futures. In sum, elite athletes are a propitious terrain in which to interrogate cultures of ageing.

### **Understanding sport stars**

There exists an extensive literature which analyses the conditions which have made possible the emergence of the phenomenon of the sport star and sought to understand its significance. (Smart, 2005) argues that sport is an industry driven by the urge to make money. Propelled by globalized consumer capitalism (Andrews and Jackson, 2001), the media play a crucial role in fostering the process of sport star making. Media actors generate compelling narratives and images which transform athletes into sport stars, heroes and celebrities. Sport stars are shown to embody a range of values which resonate widely (e.g. the natural athlete displaying effortless grace) and transcend national and cultural barriers. Sports stars become transnational (Giardina, 2001: 206) and flexible, penetrating local identities and fostering 'new forms of belonging'. Sporting heroes also transcend the mundane of everyday life (Archetti, 2001), by offering their audiences a spectacle, in some cases a melodrama, crystallising 'ideologies and offering contextually grounded maps for private individuals as they navigate contemporary conditions of existence' (Marshall, 1997: xi). Here Marshall places emphasis on the role played by celebrity-making in legitimating capitalist ideology, and he proposes conceptualizing it as a system which, via culture,

serves to disseminate dominant values and therefore power into the wider population.

At this stage it is worth noting that Marshall's analysis gives less attention to the fleshy anchor on which sport stars might rise to prominence and capture our imagination. Indeed one particularly distinctive but fundamental constituent of sport stardom is the possession and maintenance of exceptional levels of physical capital (Bourdieu, 1978; Smart, 2005), a consequence of exceptional ability and dedicated training. Their distinctive physical competence makes the athletes' bodies worthy of consideration.

We can focus on the spectacle of athletic display (and its production as magical) and in some cases of mercurial personality to explain why some athletes become constructed as stars. Here the star-making process appropriates 'performative excellence' (Andrew and Jackson 2001:8). Good examples are what Whannel (1999) called maverick sport stars, such as Gascoigne and Maradona, whose athletic mastery was expressed in their ability to display creative genius, apparently unhindered by discipline or a traditional work ethic in training, a well known stereotype documented by O'Donnell (1994).

Another approach is to focus on the social and cultural factors which give expression to athletic prowess. Here we can seek inspiration from Woodward's (2013) recent book in which she identifies time as the component which, in sport, makes excitement possible for audiences, especially during large sporting events. Woodward shows that athletes have literally enfolded time, by subjecting themselves to rigorous training predicated on the time-bound development and management of bodily resources, organizing their lives around the timing of competitions, accepting time measurement to authenticate their performance and literally displaying their athletic competence in time – being fastest, moving most precisely and in time, etc. By drawing attention to the process of enfleshment, Woodward (2013) makes a necessary bridge between two dimensions of sport, the discursive and the experiential, bringing into one vision the internal functioning of sport as an institution or a machine (Brohm,

2001), its regulatory potential and its ability to create and change dispositions (Escriva, 2008). Thus sport stars are not simply the raw, unmediated products of innate or mysterious physical ability. Their physical capital is constituted through techniques – physical and discursive – which reflect wider social and cultural values.

The literature also gives some consideration to the unmaking of sport stars. Woodward (2013) draws attention to the passage of time which will unravel athletic performance but she does not go any further. Sport mavericks apparently capture our imagination because they are unpredictable and vulnerable to downfall, the result of moral and physical decadence in equal measures (Archetti, 2001). Retirement has also been given some attention, for instance by considering the catastrophic implications of injury for the continued viability of athletic careers and for identity (Roderick, 2006), or by exploring the lived experience of retirement as a consequence of waning physical capital. What has not received much attention is the timing of, and transition to, retirement as a by-product of ageing. My contention here is that how ageing is understood in sport can be shown to reflect widely-held apprehensions of ageing and can propel athletes to lose control over their futures. It might also reinforce normative constructions of athletic careers, with non-compliance with this model being seen as deviant.

### **Discourse and sport**

In the course of conducting the research presented later, I was struck by two issues: 1. Athletes rarely control narratives about their careers and 2. These narratives rely on a range of tropes to affirm the exceptional status of these athletes, tropes which can then be turned against them when they experience an apparent loss of form. Time, and more generally numbers, emerged as key components in these processes and will therefore be a key focus of my analysis. This is especially pertinent as, in various contexts, the construction of time as linear, of chronological age as a biomarker of decline, of biometric signs as symbols of competence attest to the salience of particular configurations of regulation in the production of subjectivity, undergirded by particular discourses

which yield the truth of a situation. In this article, the discourse of decline, given the status of the truth of ageing by biological science, will be of particular interest.

Thus we are influenced by the work of Michel Foucault on government and its intersection with on the one hand sports science and on the other time and measurement. For Foucault (1997) government relates to the conduct of conduct, that is the apparatus of technologies and expert knowledge which makes the control of populations at a distance feasible. This takes place not by the top down imposition of power but by the dispersion of the urge to govern others as well as oneself. We are in effect all complicit in our own government through the unreflective adoption of forms of knowledge and behaviour consistent with the discursive context in which we are located, and through which we recognize ourselves as subjects. Government therefore has three dimensions or effects: 1, power is dispersed, 2. It leads to truth-making and 3. It creates identity qua subjectivity.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1995), Foucault described the role played by numbers in the microphysics of government. He showed how numbers aid in the decomposition of gestures and movements; they adjust the body to temporal imperatives. This temporal dimension is worth highlighting. Experiential time has, since industrialization, been superseded by industrial time (Adams, 1990) and what Muldoon (2006) referred to as the temporalisation of time. These transformations have given primacy to time as objective, as chronology and as a commodity. Numbers and objective time are part of a spatio-temporal framework which standardizes, masks complexity and acts as an apparatus of social ordering and surveillance (Hacking, 1991; Rose, 1999). Thus 'almost no domain of human enquiry is left untouched by [...] the avalanche of numbers [...] and the taming of chance' (Hacking, 1991: 189). This is nowhere better manifested than in modern sport, sustained by sports medicine and sport science. After WW2, sports medicine became an instrument of athletic production, placing scientific knowledge at the service of physical enhancement and the maximization of physiological processes. Thus it was instrumental in

transforming training, the dispositions and expectations of athletes, their coaches and by extension the audiences. Whilst the making of athletic competence has not entirely displaced the narrative of the gifted athlete, endowed with natural aptitude, nevertheless athletic performance is now viewed as almost predictable in ways which must be observable and importantly measurable.

Pronger (2002: xiii) has gone further and argued that sport science has turned the body into 'a biophysical object whose functions can be maximized by instrumental programs of training and diet'. He asserts that via sport science the body is made to appear through description, inscription in textual practices and prescription. In other words, sport science is part of the larger discursive apparatus (biological science) which serves to produce the truth of bodies and ultimately of lives (Rose, 2001). Numbers and the standardization of time act in support of techniques of government of bodies and of the self, yielding in this instance the elite athlete or sports star as subject position. Being a modern athlete entails developing a hyper-instrumental orientation to the body, born out of evidence-based training. The body, made predictable, powerful and impressive by the training regimen, is encased in a narrative of performance (Carless and Douglas, 2009).

But what happens when athletes appear to lose time? In biological science ageing is defined as 'significant decreases in physiological function' (Lepers and Cattagni, 2012:953), a clear illustration of the decline narrative which continues to constitute the dominant construction of ageing in contemporary Western culture. However, the scientific literature is also equivocal about how and when ageing happens (see for instance Bernard et al., 2009; Knechtle et al., 2012 on age-related changes in performance in ultra-marathon and the triathlon respectively). When change does happen, it will have a significant impact on athletes – forcing them to consider the fragility of their bodies and, perhaps, take the decision to retire.



Little research has been carried out on the phenomenology of ageing among sport stars. Their ageing is merely noted, regretted but ultimately accepted as unavoidable. What is also missing is an exploration of what prompts elite athletes to convert any signs of ageing as they are drawn to their attention into the decision to retire and in particular how this process might be mediated by wider discursive expectations of (self) regulation as found in media representations.

### **Research questions**

To sum up so far, we have established that media representations of elite athletes evoke qualities which transcend cultural and national boundaries. These qualities are rooted in their physical competence in ways which appeal to our (Western) imagination. Sport more broadly has cultural and political resonance, as a space in which government (understood as the conduct of conduct) is played out through a set of techniques which find their legitimacy in a range of key discourses, most notably medical and (sport) science. The deployment of numbers and objective time has been identified as a technique of control but also of truth-making of the social and physical body. For instance this is the way whereby we know the truth of ageing as inevitable decline (Katz, 1996). But this is also how modern athletic careers are made and unmade. In what follows I will explore how this control apparatus contributes to the truth of ageing among sport stars and therefore the unmaking of their careers, and how the athletes themselves might resist the urge to be aged by numbers.

### **Methods**

Whannel (1999), Smart (2005), Andrews and Jackson (2001), Giulianotti (1999) have identified the role played by the media, and in particular sports reporting, in the making of sport stars and the conferment of heroic status. Thus it is timely to interrogate how sports reporting engages with the wider discursive frames in which the making and unmaking of athletes is undertaken. This concern is informed by the recognition that there is a collusive relationship between the media and sport (Andrews and Jackson, 2001; Whannel, 1999) and that this

produces narratives with regulatory effects. These narratives therefore must be identified and subjected to critical scrutiny.

To this end, I undertook a case study of media reports and biographical material relating to two sport stars: Roger Federer, a Swiss tennis player, and Lance Armstrong, an American cyclist. I set data collection points at what were presented as key turning points in these athletes' careers. I chose Federer's defence in 2011, just before his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, of his Wimbledon title. Earlier that year, Federer had been in the top three male players in the world for 10 years. At the time of writing he still held a range of records, including the most Grand Slam tournaments won. However by 2010 his winning tally appeared to be slowing down and thus his ranking was under threat. Therefore I followed – live – press reports of his 2011 Wimbledon campaign. He went on to lose the 2011 title to Rafael Nadal (Bowers, 2011), a defeat which was widely perceived as significant. Armstrong had, at age 33, exceeded expectations by winning the Tour de France (TdF) a 6<sup>th</sup> time in July 2004, thus breaking a famous record. In 2005, the year of his 34<sup>th</sup> birthday, he announced that he would attempt to win the TdF a record 7<sup>th</sup> time, a feat of athletic performance and achievement beyond the reach of any other cyclist before him. Thus I examined media reports in the period ranging from February to the conclusion of the TdF at the end of July 2005, coinciding with press interest turning towards his preparation, associated chances of winning the race, the significance of his 7<sup>th</sup> win and his retirement (all vying for attention with his survival from cancer treatment and doping accusations).

Data were collected from two broad sources: newspapers and biographical material. I selected three English-language and three French-language<sup>1</sup> quality newspapers. The Anglophone newspapers were: *The Guardian*, a UK quality daily, and its sister Sunday newspaper, *The Observer*; *The Daily* and *Sunday Telegraphs*, also UK broadsheets; the *New York Times* to monitor the reporting of LA's progress up to and during the TdF. The Francophone newspapers were: *L'Equipe*, a well respected French sports daily newspaper, *Le Monde*, a French daily and *Le Matin*, a Swiss daily, to monitor the reporting of RF's Wimbledon campaign in his home country. The biographical material consisted of Chris

Bowers' (2011) and Roger Jaunin's (2007) biographies of Federer, in English and French respectively and Armstrong's (2004) ghosted autobiography, *Every Second Counts*.

I subjected this material to interpretive analysis (Silverman, 2013), approaching the written material not as the truth of the situation but as the production and reproduction of regimes of truth. Therefore I went beyond surface meaning firstly to identify the techniques used in press and biographical texts to construct the truth of the stars' exceptional status and secondly to expose how these were translated into recognizable cultural scripts or narratives. The power effects of these scripts can then be articulated (Fairclough, 2010), by exploring their effects on the athletes' own narrative in fora where their voices were given prominence. As the initial impetus for the research was ageing, I noted whether each newspaper article dealt directly with age, by mentioning either the ages of the athletes (or other key protagonists) or making the athletes' ages the focus of the account. I then selected sections of articles in which age or age-related comments were mentioned, paying attention to the whole context in which these were made. In other words what interested me were not the articles as presenting the truth of the athletes' performance but a version in which age formed the crux of the story. As will become clear chronological age and other numbers emerged as prominent techniques in the making, threatening and protection of careers. The analysis gave rise to the identification of three themes: 1. The confirmation of the importance of numbers to evaluate and interpret the athletes' performances over time, 2. narrative of retirement and 3. counter-narratives.

## Findings

### Numbers and athletes' performance over time

Numbers emerged as a noticeable technique to lend credence to the exceptional status of athletes. Particular kinds of numbers therefore were the visible manifestation of athletic competence. Federer's status as an elite athlete was produced in Jaunin's book (2007) in which he listed for each year from 1998 to July 2007 the key tournaments, the playing surface, results in each encounter

and a summary of the ratio of matches won to those lost, earnings and ATP ranking achieved by Federer. I have extracted data for four years (at two year intervals) in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 here

Jaunin's summarizing of Federer's athletic career in this way smoothed out the peaks and troughs which might provide a more textured account of the developing supremacy of the athlete. For instance in 2004, in his first year as No 1 player, Federer lost in the early stages of the Miami, Rome and Cincinnati Masters tournaments, and the Athens Olympic Games.

The numbers deployed in this book reinforce the construction of the elite career as linear, incremental, inexorably trending towards a peak. We will return to the implications of this model for making sense of success and future prospects in elite careers.

Having introduced the centrality of numbers for the making of athletic careers and elite status, it is appropriate to address modalities of engagement with the measurable body and its transformation into physical capital. This was manifested through the listing of physiological characteristics and in descriptions of how physical resources are harnessed, both expressed through the use of numbers.

This is most acutely manifested in writings about Armstrong. Kolata (2005) in *The New York Times* sought to understand what makes Armstrong perform at apparently exceptional levels. Although the exercise physiologist whom this journalist quotes dampened the urge to rely on physiological markers only, arguing that the physiology of all top athletes is probably very similar, the article went on to note that this physiologist 'has the true figures and they are impressive [...]. [Armstrong's] numbers may not be so much different from other elite racers, but he has the average cyclist beaten by a mile.' Kolata uses the machine metaphor to distinguish Armstrong's body from that of others, and

although unable to demonstrate 'superhuman' physiology', nevertheless used hyperbolic language to spin a story, supported by comparisons of a set of numerical physiological markers, pitting Armstrong against the 'average man' and the 'recreational cyclist' to showcase this particular elite cyclist's exceptional characteristics. For instance  $VO_2$  max, the ability to bring oxygen to the muscles efficiently, is presented as follows:

AVG Man (Age 32; 5'10") = 42 ml/kg/min

Recreational cyclist = 60 ml/kg/min

Lance Armstrong (Age 33; 5'10") = 85 ml/kg/min

What is emerging from the analysis so far is that numbers play a crucial role in the practice of maintaining and developing sport star status. They make manifest the correct type and level of physical capital needed to justify the high levels of distinction the athletes have been attributed with. However numbers can also represent a threat to the athletes' social and cultural location. Reports of Federer's performance at the Wimbledon Open in 2011 can be used to illustrate this. Age, chronology and the passage of time can trigger a process of cultural ageing, which will bring forth discussions of retirement.

#### Narratives of retirement

Over the course of Federer's progress at the 2011 Wimbledon Open, age became a constant presence in media reports of his matches. Of the 30 newspaper articles surveyed, from 18<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> June, 13 had age as a key theme. While he was winning and progressing through the rounds, his age, which was mentioned in eight out of 20 articles, was used to reflect on what motivated him to continue playing at this level. His performance was framed as longevity, a numerical concept, and described using hyperbolic language of superhuman qualities: apparent effortless, quiet artistry, genius, maestro or maître, Olympian calm. On 26<sup>th</sup> June he lost in the quarter finals to the French player, Jo-Wilfried Tsonga, in five sets, despite winning the first two. As the match progressed and in its aftermath, age morphed into the variable which explained his defeat and led to predictions about his future. In other words, this defeat signalled the start of his

decline and numbers were deployed to substantiate this, as these examples show:

Although Federer is the owner of a record 16 grand slam titles, the last of them came almost a year and a half ago, when he beat Andy Murray in the final of the Australian Open. Six tournaments have gone by without a success for the player who won 12 of 18 between 2003 and 2007. A year ago this month, after 285 weeks at No1, he dropped a place in the world rankings, shortly before going out in the Wimbledon quarter-finals to Tomas Berdych. Now he stands at No3 in the world, and the decline may not be reversible. However, he was disinclined to entertain the notion that we may be witnessing the end of an era. (Richard Williams, *The Guardian* 30/06/11)

His physicality which, the day before the defeat, had been held up as a resource, now becomes a liability and the mark of his age-related decline:

From two sets to love, Roger Federer froze for the third time in his career, one century after a Masters final against David Nalbandian (but he was injured) and a Davis Cup semi-final against Lleyton Hewitt (but he was young). **Will we say of this fateful day, in a few years, that Roger Federer was old** [my emphasis]? (Christian Despont, *Le Matin* 29/06/11)

Here, the author played with chronology and time, in the sentence shown in bold characters, using prospective retrospection to introduce a new truth: that Federer may now be old.

What these quotes reflect is that the media reporting of Federer's defeat constitutes narrative foreclosure and cultural ageing, with the relationship between age and decline given the imprimatur of truth by the deployment of key numbers. A defeat, which in other circumstances would be normalized as part of the peaks and troughs of athletic careers, by age 30 takes on

significance. Federer's future is mapped out for him. This was presented in *L'Equipe* on 08/08/11 in an inset entitled 'Life after Thirty' providing apparently incontrovertible evidence in numbers confirming that age 30 is the decline threshold. Notably, figures are given only for male athletes who have won five Grand Slams or more in the Open era detailing their ranking on their 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, the number of Grand Slam wins before and after their 30<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Table 2 reproduces the figures found in the inset, to which I have added Federer's record up to August 2011:

Insert Table 2 here

In contrast, winning his 7<sup>th</sup> TdF appears to have protected Armstrong from such narrative foreclosure. Announcing his retirement at the start of 2005 exposed him to different narratives: retirement as a new beginning or as rebirth and succession planning. His retirement was expressed as:

a quiet third act, devoid of grandiosity. [...] He said he might dabble in triathlons, marathons, cyclocross events, for the pure jock pleasure of them. And he said he would spend time with his three children, who were by his side this weekend, the last of his career. (George Vecsey, *The New York Times*, 25/07/05)

Here numbers do not figure. Retiring after a favourable set of numbers thus leaves Armstrong with his status as a star enhanced. In fact in some reports he is described in regal terms, at the head of a family empire which has its own ethical code, with a young successor (*dauphin* in French) waiting in the wings to be anointed by Armstrong:

The Armstrong Empire: [...] Yaroslav Popovych<sup>2</sup>, anointed as his successor [...]. (*L'Equipe*, 21/07/05)

We have focused in this section on the narratives used by others to capture the performance and ageing of these two elite athletes. Two apparently divergent

narratives have emerged: of decline and of active retirement. Now we turn to the ways in which these athletes respond to these narratives.

### Counter-Narratives

How do Federer and Armstrong negotiate the future? As we have already seen, numbers construct physical capital and reputation in such a way as to give rise to divergent narratives. Federer is now known within a narrative of decline, whereas Armstrong was in 2005 positioned in a narrative of rebirth and active retirement. In their respective engagement with their futures, the two athletes also rely on divergent narratives, Federer appearing to welcome ageing and Armstrong eliding it completely from his accounts.

A few interviews were conducted with Federer in the summer of 2011 to coincide with his 30<sup>th</sup> birthday in early August. In these he claimed not to be afraid of growing old. Ageing was a process of maturing, a progression towards a greater sum of experiences, rationality and self-confidence (for instance on how to deal with celebrity). What was reported was a strong desire to dispel any notions that he was in terminal decline (see the previous quote by Williams in the 30/06/2011 *Guardian* in which he fleetingly acknowledges the presence of Federer's counter-narrative). This is reinforced by the deployment of Federer's own set of numbers. The example below shows how he is reported to account for the low numbers of 30-year-old athletes among the top 10:

One, winning a Grand Slam after the age of 30 has already been done, so that's quite reassuring; two, there's a number of super champions who retired early. If they'd continued competing they'd have improved the statistics. (Pascal Colville, *L'Equipe*, 08/08/11)

He argues that the basis on which rankings are calculated (adding up points accumulated over one year, which he contrasts with golf where ranking is achieved over two years' results) is too sensitive to short-term dips in performance and thus leaves the door open to unfounded and premature decline interpretations by the media.



Here the journalist allows Federer to show that the debate about his age stems not from any significant loss of form but from imperfect data or the selection of the wrong numbers. When pressed by Colville in a later article (*L'Equipe* 11/08/11) about having peaked, his retort is that he *can still walk*, ironizing a more catastrophic narrative of ageing – of the aged body as abject (Gilleard and Higgs, 2013) – to keep assessments of his form and future in perspective.

The prospect of ageing is articulated apparently differently by Armstrong. Chronological age as the trigger for decline seems absent from his assessment of his own future as a pro cyclist. In the last chapter of *Every Second Counts*, Armstrong (2003: 205) makes the following statements:

I can't ride in the Tour de France forever, and eventually, I'll have to find something else to do [...]. The inevitable cooling of my career. [...]  
When it's my time to stop.

The language that he uses here, and elsewhere on this age, e.g. 'lingering too long' and 'hanging on at the back of the peloton', no longer able to dominate a race, indicates that he means ageing. However there is no *explicit* reference to a specific age as the threshold towards decline. Armstrong uses a technique that I observed among Master runners who, rather than name ageing, describe the carnal, felt, experience of a physical state (Tulle 2008). What is significant about this approach is that the carnal is associated directly with the loss of status, which poses problems for identity. A few pages later, he is more explicit about the power of numbers:

In sport, you're always on record for what you've done [...].  
Everything is measured, either by a clock or by a camera [...]. [T]he data is there for all to see. (p. 209)

In other words accounting for oneself when approaching retirement cannot be avoided unless one exits *in time* to avoid uncomfortable comparisons and finds alternative sources of capital and identity, in the field but also beyond.

## Discussion

The analysis presented above contributes to continuing debates about how we understand ageing and the impact this has on the social and cultural positioning of the old in contemporary society. The focus on elite athletes, and sport stars in particular, enables us to bring to light specific modalities of cultural ageing. Contemporary elite athletes are by definition exceptional: their identities, everyday lives and immediate futures are dedicated to the development and management of their bodies to generate enough physical capital to win and capture media attention and perhaps our imagination. Their physical capital gives substance to these athletes' celebrity status. However this does not appear to protect them from discursive regulation. Public representations of and by these athletes show that they themselves owe their star status to processes which they do not control, especially as they become older. The analysis of these representations reveals the use of three related and mutually reinforcing techniques resonating with broader discourses to make and unmake careers.

The first and fundamental technique was the deployment of numbers. The interpenetration of sport and science has opened the way to the manufacturing of exceptional and sustained performance and a hyper-instrumental orientation to existence, centred primarily on the body. Numbers, like the clock in Fordist production, have, to adapt Gotaas' (2009:143) description of changes in constructions of running over time, become 'the mighty arbiter of working life'. They structure training, make visible improvements (or otherwise) in performance as measured in key physiological outcomes. The reliance on numbers to make manifest the athletes' physical capital reproduces several stories in which a multi-layered definition of performance prevails. Performance is first and foremost about winning, year after year, and breaking records. Secondly it is about the attainment of exceptional physiology which marks a

clear boundary between the athlete and the rest. Thirdly performance reinforces a very specific model of the athletic lifecourse – development, peak and decline. Thus numbers become part of what Rose (2007: 3) called a vital politics which he defines as ‘our growing capacity to control, manage, engineer, reshape and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures.’ We witnessed the role played by the media in (re)producing ways of knowing bodies and persons which ultimately simplify the complexities of life and reduce it to calculable criteria, in line with the rationalities of government prevalent in sport. This then turns the athletes into calculable persons. The effortless grace or mastery of the athlete cannot be judged on its own terms – for instance in aesthetic terms. It must be substantiated by numbers.

These numbers have real effects on the athletes’ lives. Federer has been subjected, via numbers, to the unmaking of his elite status in line with ageing as physiological decline. Numbers are used to confirm the salience of the relationship between chronological age as a *biomarker* of physiological change and decline. This relationship is established as the truth of ageing, with no other conceivable interpretation possible. It is not a question of ‘if Federer is too old but the fact that he is old. In other words Federer has become a subject of knowledge and truth about ageing in sport and has been subjectified as old.

Thus the second technique is to give the linear model of the athletic career normative power. Indeed the model is used not only to recognize key career stages but also to name them, mapping out expectations of success and making each stage predictable, allowing for little deviation.

The third technique therefore is the deployment of narratives to make each staging post in this career self-evident. In other words, these narratives, again given the imprimatur of truth by numbers, have regulatory effects, by predicting not only the reality of retirement but also its correct timing. With this technique, retirement as achieved is given primacy over *retiring* as a lengthy and complex process. The emotional dimension of retiring is elided.

The next aspect to consider is the potential for resistance to this process of regulation. We saw that Federer challenged the discourse of decline by welcoming age but also by attacking the way the numbers were put together and interpreted. In contrast, Armstrong opted for the avoidance of age. But how effective were these as counter-narratives?

Federer's effectiveness in countering narrative foreclosure cannot work until how the rankings (ie the numbers) are calculated is changed. But he is only delaying the process because he apparently plays the numbers game – in other words he remains within the discourse.

In contrast Armstrong's strategy, of not mentioning age directly at the time of his retirement, appears to forestall the tendency to age him prematurely. In this he is aided by his continuing success. However he still cites numbers as the final reckoning, recognizing their power. In this sense, the mystique of sporting achievement becomes reduced to a set of numbers and the dominant discourse of decline remains unchallenged. Thus, to conclude, numbers, far from prolonging elite careers, in fact potentially shorten them. What we also see is that to-date no effective counter-narratives have been effectively mobilized.

### **Notes**

1. I translated the material from the French into English.
2. Ukrainian cyclist recruited by the Discovery Channel team to prepare Lance Armstrong's succession.

### **Postscript**

In 2012, one year after the completion of the data collection, Federer won the Wimbledon Open for a 7<sup>th</sup> time. For the rest of 2012 Federer remained in the top five players on the Men's pro circuit. In 2008 Armstrong came out of self-imposed retirement to race in the 2009 and 2010 Tour de France. He did not win. In 2012, the allegations of doping against Armstrong were finally exposed as true and he was stripped of all his Tour de France wins.

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Table 1:

| Year | Ranking | Opens | Levels                | Ratio<br>won:lost | Earnings<br>\$ |
|------|---------|-------|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| 1999 | 64      | 2     | 1 <sup>st</sup> round | 29:23             | 225,139        |
| 2002 | 6       | 4     | Quarter Final         | 59:21             | 2m             |
| 2004 | 1       | 4     | Won 3                 | 74:6              | 6m             |
| 2006 | 1       | 4     | Won 3                 | 92:5              | 8.3m           |

(source: Jaunin, 2007)



Table 2:

|                | <b>Ranking on 30<sup>th</sup> birthday</b>     | <b>Number of wins - before 30</b> | <b>Number of wins - after 30</b> |
|----------------|--|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Federer</i> | 3  | 16                                | <i>N/A</i>                       |
| Sampras        | 12   | 13                                | 1, last at 31                    |
| Borg           | Retired  | 11                                | 0 [ <i>sic</i> ]                 |
| Lendl          | 1  | 8                                 | 0                                |
| Agassi         | 1  | 6                                 | 2, last at 32                    |
| Wilander       | 122  | 7                                 | 0                                |
| McEnroe        | 9  | 7                                 | 0                                |
| Connors        | 3 (regaining 1 <sup>st</sup> position in 1982) | 6                                 | 2, last at 31                    |
| Edberg         | 31   | 6                                 | 0                                |
| Becker         | 63   | 6                                 | 0                                |

(Source: *L'Equipe*, 08/08/11)