American idol? David Beckham and the development of soccer in the USA

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In global terms the soccer player David Beckham is without doubt one of the most significant sporting celebrities of the twenty-first century. Research has focused upon the socio-cultural significance of the athlete and his position as an international sports icon (e.g. Cashmore, 2004; Cashmore and Parker, 2003). Research has also looked at Beckham as a signifier of national identity and the way in which he is demonstrative of the fluidity and instability of contemporary celebrity profiling (Harris and Clayton, 2007). Through his courtship and marriage to Victoria Adams of the Spice Girls, Beckham became part of a celebrity coupling and a distinctive 'brand'. Yet despite its recognition, particularly in Western Europe and parts of Asia, prior to 2007 'Brand Beckham' had not really established itself in the USA.

This research focuses on the announcement of Beckham's decision to move to Major League Soccer (MLS). Using a discourse analysis it looks at how different newspapers from large metropolitan areas reported the transfer and critically assesses its importance and significance within the wider sporting landscape. The second part of the analysis looks at how the player is used to market and promote Major League Soccer and how this is presented in outlets such as Sports Illustrated magazine and the Fox Soccer Channel. Through tracking and analyzing media discourse we present an analytic narrative of the media-driven cultural significance of Beckham, drawing out the intentional or unintentional meaning behind the text and relating this to the governance of the game. Our aim is to contribute to what Frisby (2005) has identified as a dearth of critical sport management research.

Beckham's positioning, and potential significance to the development of soccer in the USA, is presented in a variety of ways. Dominant discourses included comparisons with the arrival of Pele to play for the New York Cosmos more than thirty years earlier. In relation to this theme we explore changes in the management and governance US soccer during this period. Beckham was positioned as both an ageing mercenary and a soccer missionary. Analysis highlights some of the tensions inherent in the complex interplay between the local and the global within the American sporting landscape. Our study considers soccer as a form of American exceptionalism (Markovits and Hellerman, 2001) and looks at how Beckham has already impacted upon the positioning of the game within the country through moving the sport into other areas of popular culture.

The signing of David Beckham may one day be read as a significant marker in the development of soccer in the USA. This research offers a critical interpretation of Beckham's first season in MLS and considers the implications for those involved in the governance of the game. It points towards the challenges faced in better understanding the role of glocalization in contemporary sport management and considers Beckham's place within and around the increased internationalization of professional sport in the USA.

References: