

Negotiating national identity through loss: analysis of newspaper coverage of the 2010 FIFA World Cup

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Aim

Sport has long served as an arena for the development of national identity. In many respects Australia's contemporary global persona has been created through sport and its media coverage. Australia's reputation as a sport loving nation has been forged by hosting major sporting events and by the international performances of its athletes at world championships and Olympic Games. However, at the FIFA World Cup, Australia has been less successful. It has qualified only three times for the tournament (1974, 2006 and 2010), and the expectations of the team, its results and the coverage of the tournament and the sport of soccer in the media have been mixed. This presentation reports on the findings of a content analysis of the newspaper coverage of the 2010 FIFA World Cup.

Theoretical background

Soccer in Australia occupies the unusual position in that it has the highest overall participation rates from the four football codes (AFL, rugby league, rugby union and soccer), yet is ranked fourth of the four codes in popularity and resources, and is often seen as a marginal code by the media and its position in global football success (Skinner, Zakus & Edwards, 2008). The history of Australian soccer closely follows the history of immigration to Australia (Danforth, 2001), as most post-Second World War arrivals to Australia came from Eastern Europe, and as such, soccer was the dominant sport of choice. These immigrant communities contributed to the expansion of the code in Australia and were the mainstay of its success; however, because of their marginal position in Australian society this also contributed to soccer's further marginalization (Skinner et al, 2008). Soccer, as a sport, has been derided as un-Australian – or less Australian than other sports – because many teams and clubs were founded by, and remain linked organizationally, to non-Anglo ethnic communities (Hallinan et al, 2007). Historically, the Australian commercial media has not been generous in its coverage and treatment of soccer in Australia, however with the restructure of the

national body (Football Federation Australia), the establishment of a national league (A-league) and recent qualifications for the FIFA World Cup, the focus on soccer in the Australian media, and subsequent expectations for success, have evolved.

Research method and analysis

Data analysis was conducted over a ten-week period, which included four weeks prior to the event, the month-long event itself and two weeks post event, and included all major daily newspapers in Australia with a circulation greater than 100,000, equivalent to 94% of all major daily newspapers sold. The data collection resulted in 2,566 articles related to the FIFA World Cup, of which 1,343 consisted of more than simply standard match reporting and technical analysis.

Results and discussion

Content analysis of the newspaper reporting was undertaken, with the major themes of patriotism, national identity and dealing with loss selected for further investigation. Subsequent analysis revealed that in the pre-event phase the media constructed a clearly articulated national sporting identity, which was then used as a reference point for media coverage subsequent to Australia's loss to Germany in the first game of the tournament's group stage, a significant turning-point.

The contested nature of Australian sporting nationalism is used as a lens through which to examine the ways in which the media negotiated and reinforced a specific Australian national sporting identity through the Australian soccer team's poor performance. The finding that a strong nationalism was projected during the tournament was unsurprising, given the context of an international event, with nations competing against each other. A distinctive Australian identity was evident, predicated upon notions of mateship and loyalty; however this national identity was complicated in this case due to the multicultural history of soccer in Australia.

References

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