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On the Rhetoric of Sports Heroism in Ancient and Modern Times

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O retoryce sportowego bohaterstwa w antyku i współcześnie

Streszczenie

Współczesna fascynacja mistrzami sportowymi jest przedmiotem wielu analiz socjologicznych i psychologicznych. Artykuł uzupełnia tę wielopoziomą perspektywę o analizy filozoficzne z zakresu historii idei i komunikacji retorycznej. Prezentuje on ideę bohaterstwa sportowego jako historycznie rozwijającą się formę dyskursu komunikacyjnego. Przesłanką jest teza, że postać sportowego bohatera jest każdorazowo tworem kontekstu komunikacyjnego, czyli przekazu i interpretacji wykorzystujących aksjo-normatywne, apelujące i perswazyjne środki retoryczne. W tej retoryce obiektywne i wymierne mistrzostwo sportowe zostaje wzmocnione i przekształcone w komunikacyjny obraz wzbogacony o znaczenia moralne, społeczne, estetyczne, ludyczno-hedonistyczne oraz marketingowe. Artykuł mieści się w humanistycznym obszarze historii kultury, a jego refleksja, będąca owocem *desk research*, rozwijana jest w odniesieniu do istniejącej literatury tematycznej z wykorzystaniem hermeneutycznej zasady fuzji horyzontów interpretacyjnych. Celem jest ukazanie spektrum znaczeniowych komponentów postaci bohatera sportowego, począwszy od atletyki greckiej, przez dyskurs antycznych filozofów (rozwijany przez Coubertina), aż po medialną sławę dzisiejszych mistrzów sportowych. Retoryka i praktyka sportowego mistrzostwa to dwie strony sportowego medalu.

Słowa kluczowe: bohater, mistrz sportowy, retoryka, komunikacja, media.

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Abstract

Contemporary fascination with sports champions is the subject of many sociological and psychological analyses. The article complements this multi-level perspective with philosophical analyses in the field of the history of ideas and rhetorical communication. It presents the idea of sports heroism as a historically developing form of communication discourse. The premise is the thesis that the figure of a sports hero is each time a creation of a communication context, i.e. a message and interpretation using axio-normative, appealing and persuasive rhetorical means. In this rhetoric, objective and measurable sports mastery is strengthened and transformed into a communicative image enriched with moral, social, aesthetic, ludic-hedonistic and marketing meanings. The article is located in the humanistic area of the history of culture, and its reflection, which is the fruit of desk research, is developed in relation to the existing thematic literature using the hermeneutic principle of the fusion of interpretative horizons. The aim is to show the spectrum of meaning pertaining to the sports hero's character components, starting from Greek athletics, through the discourse of ancient philosophers (developed by Coubertin) to the media fame of today's sports champions. The rhetoric and practice of sporting mastery are two sides of the sporting coin.

Keywords: heroes, sports champions, rhetoric, communication, media.

Introduction

In the academic discourse around sporting mastery, the figure of the hero is often invoked and taken as the personal role model of the athlete. This discourse is an attempt to describe and explain the phenomenon of almost universal admiration, adoration, and even worship of the champions of stadiums and sports halls. In critical interpretations, researchers reach back to archetypes of sporting mastery and therefore go back to the origins of European athletics. The cultural prototype of the hero in Western civilization is the mythical Greek hero. Greek athletics was religious in nature; its ideological and paradigmatic horizon was, alongside the worship of the gods, the worship of divine-human beings, or heroes. The extraordinary feats of the heroes were meant to be a testament to man's ability to approach within his own mortal condition the ideal of perfection and power, thus ensuring immortality at least in the memory of posterity. The spectrum of values constituting the identity of the Greek athlete was a reverberation of the ontic and axiological power of the heroes of the religious cult, such as Heracles, Theseus and Pelops, and the warriors from Hesiod's and Homer's epics, such as Cadmus, Achilles, Ares and Odysseus. The praise poetry (*epinikia*) and ancient philosophy transformed and developed this pattern, adding new and subtle intellectual, aesthetic and moral values to it. This ideal was then developed in subsequent eras. A significant role in this respect fell to medieval chivalry, which had its saintly patrons such as the heroes of the 13th-century *Legenda Aurea* by Jacob de Voragine: George, Maurice, Theodore, Sebastian, all of whom died a martyr's death. Christian heroes became role models for knighthood in wrestling for supremacy in tournaments and on the battle-

fields.¹ These rivalries were intended to confirm the status of the knights' nobility, and this nobility was understood not only as a social position in the feudal hierarchy, but also as a set of moral values in which honor occupied the chief place. In modern times, the idea of honor has been adopted in a new form, in the ethos of the gentleman, which has been absorbed by the ethos of sporting competition based on the principle of fair play.² All these values, ideals and rules were taken up at the end of the 19th century by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, who laid the foundations for the ideology of neo-Olympism. This ideology, integrated into educational, sociological and philosophical discourse, marks out to this day the spectrum of values and principles of sport and is often the premise of moral hermeneutics of sport.³ In this way, in the melting pot of cultural changes, a complex normative model of a sports hero gradually emerged, elitist and dense with powerful meanings elevated far above mass mediocrity.

The professionalization of sport, not accepted by Coubertin himself, progressing since the mid-twentieth century, changed the face of sport and turned modern stadiums into a capitalist agora of influences external to sports rivalry: economic, political, corporate, media, advertising and bureaucratic. Under the new conditions, thanks to fame and presence in the public media, the sports hero has become a profit-generating commodity. The hero is thus transformed into a star and a celebrity. In connection with these inevitable processes, there is criticism that the real noble heroes have left modern stadiums and that their place has been taken over by celebrities and entertainers who treat their sporting successes as a springboard for global fame that multiplies their profits. Researchers write about the illusion or degeneration of the heroic role model and the increasing threats to the sustainability of its ethos.⁴ Here we are dealing with the stories that fans, publicists and academic researchers weave around the idea of sporting mastery. These stories enmesh the real people who are elite athletes in the rhetoric of either myth, ethos, ideology or, finally, aesthetic and social discourse on pop culture and entertainment. They are certainly a testimony to the fact that man is a being for whom intentional strategies of sense-making and value-transformation of the existing reality inscribed into the schemes of concepts, ideas, categories, principals, ideals and norms prove indispensable.

¹ J. de Voragine, *Złota legenda*, transl. and prefaced by L. Staff, Wyd. Zielona Sowa, Kraków 2003.

² M. Ossowska, *Etos rycerski i jego odmiany*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1973.

³ J. Kosiewicz, *Moralność i sport*, Międzynarodowe Towarzystwo Nauk Społecznych o Sporcie, Warszawa 2016; E. Ryall, *Philosophy of Sport. Key Questions*, Bloomsbury, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney 2016, pp. 123–130, 167–170.

⁴ D. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Vintage Books, New York 1992, pp. 45–76; E. Shils, *Mass Society and Its Culture*, „Daedalus” 1960, vol. 89, pp. 288–314; S.J. Drucker, *The Mediated Sports Hero*, [in:] S.J. Drucker, R.S. Cathcart (eds), *American Heroes in a Media Age*, Hampton Press, Inc., Cresskill, NJ 1994, pp. 82–93.

Material and Methods

The article is located in the humanistic area of the history of ideas, mainly the idea of sports heroism, and therefore its reflection, which is the effect of desk research, is developed in relation to the existing conceptions and interpretations dealing with the issue of heroism, including sports heroism. In this respect, the article is based on a search and critical elaboration of the subject literature in the philosophy and sociology of sport, history of culture and sport, mass media communication and other materials like ancient sources and modern sports biographies. The analysis fulfils the methodological directives of the human sciences, in particular the principle of understanding (*Verstehen*) developed in the philosophical hermeneutics of Wilhelm Dilthey and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Considerations are therefore carried out in accordance with the hermeneutic principle of fusion of interpretive and axiological horizons. The aim of this procedure is to outline a complex portrait of a sports hero and his cultural meanings.

Rhetoric and communication

The addition of persuasive and appellative content to sporting mastery, consistently sustained and developed throughout the history of sport, its reception and interpretation, testifies to the fact that we are dealing here with rhetoric that creates a meta-sporting reality. In this rhetoric, objective and measurable sports mastery is reinforced and transformed into a communicative image suggesting a moral, aesthetic or existential message embedded in it. Lance Strate is therefore right when he writes, "But, as a general rule, members of a society are separated from their culture heroes by time, space, and social class and therefore know their heroes only through stories, images, and other forms of information. In this sense, there are no such things as heroes, only communication about heroes"⁵ [Strate 1994: 16]. In his analysis, Strate focuses on showing the historical relativization of the character of the hero, compatible with the development of communication technologies: "It is through communication that we come to know our heroes, and consequently, different kinds of communication will result in different kinds of heroes."⁶ Going further, the author distinguishes three cultural formations on the axis of historical time and the progression of transmission techniques: oral, literate and electronic, attributing

⁵ L. Strate, *Heroes: A Communication Perspective*, [in:] S.J. Drucker, R.S. Cathcart (eds), *American Heroes in a Media Age...*, p. 16.

⁶ Ibid.

to each of them their respective protagonists, i.e. oral heroes, print/typographic heroes and electronic heroes. Using the observations of Walter J. Ong, he started from the category of “heavy figures” of heroes, who were characteristic to illiterate cultures.⁷ According to Ong, the oral form of transmission of the heroes’ stories required extraordinary memory, therefore, the characters of heroes had to be exaggerated, their number limited, deeds full of drama, all in order to be more deeply embedded in memory. With the development of communication technologies, i.e. the invention of writing, printing and then electronic media, it is possible, according to Strate, to notice a gradual liberation of the figure of the hero from the burden of ideal meanings. The hero becomes a realistic figure, psychologically individualized and defined either by intellectual and moral abilities (*typographic/print heroes*) or by media fame and ludic functions created and reproduced by audiovisual representation and the cultural industry (*electronic heroes*). In connection with these processes, there is a gradual proliferation of heroes and their trivialization and the heroes themselves become gradually „lighter”. However, when we look at the successive milestones in the development of the hero figure using the example of a sports hero, it becomes apparent that in the course of the historical transformation of sport and its understanding, it is not weakened, but loaded with new meanings, including ethical, aesthetic, ludic and marketing meanings. Successive eras add new content to the figure of the hero, making it semantically dense to a far greater extent than was the case with heavy figures in illiterate cultures. At the root of this transformation lie certainly historical changes (including the complex history of sport itself) and the development of technology, which fundamentally affects the depiction of the heroic narrative.

However, the issue of heroism is complex and goes beyond communication technology alone. It is a phenomenon developing at the intersection of historical, cultural, ideological, social, psychological, economic, marketing, communication and media factors. Its root motif lies much deeper and is of anthropological provenance, as it concerns the rudimentary question of man’s potential, its limits and the transgressive impulse to transcend them. Alasdair MacIntyre, who in *After Virtue* derives our moral culture from heroic stories, has pointed out that behind these stories lies the fundamental question whether “[...] it can remain true that a human life as a whole can be envisaged as a victory or a defeat and what winning and losing really consist in and amount to.”⁸ The rudimentary nature of this question explains the persistence of the heroic narrative in its many cultural-historical forms throughout human history. Situated in the collec-

⁷ W.J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the World*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London 1982.

⁸ A. MacIntyre A., *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Third Edition, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 2007, p. 130.

tive social imagination (or in the collective unconscious of humanity, as some authors wish, following Carl Gustav Jung or Joseph Campbell),⁹ between the fragility of the mortal human condition and possible immortal feats and fame, the figure of the hero, as if through a lens, focuses these weighty anthropological and existential questions in an archetypal way. Subsequent generations have enriched the hero's portrait with new features, answering this question in their own peculiar way. To highlight this complex process of 'thickening' the figure of the sports hero, let us look at the Greek origins and the contemporary media versions of his historical and cultural development.

Greek heroes of myths and epics

The Greeks had a keen awareness of the impassable boundary between mortals and gods. Despite the fact that gods and people came from the primeval mother Gaia, the human being – as the mythologist Karl Kérenyi writes – was perceived by them in contrast to the „easy-living gods” as *deílón*, a miserable creature and *deinón*, awe-drawing.¹⁰ People are *ephemeroi*, „short-lived beings”, and their fate, burdened with toil and cares, comes to an inevitable end. This is probably why the Greek imagination brought into existence the figure of a hero, a human-divine being capable of overcoming the fragility of existence and at least partially participating in the ontic fullness of the gods.

The morphological structure of Greek mythical heroes is dominated by initiatory trials to reach for power: participation in battles, defeating monsters, travelling far and perilously, colonizing wild lands, assuming the royal throne, hierogamy with the princess, returning to the homeland with treasures. As royal victors, the heroes are demiurges, establishing laws and institutions, functioning as personal and social role models. They attain the highest social and political positions and, in the memory of generations, function as initiators and founding ancestors of societies.¹¹ Among heroes' inventions, the athletic games took a prominent place.¹² The latter have become an important element of their cult in general, a symbolic-ritualistic reproduction of the archetypal fight against hu-

⁹ C.G. Jung, *Archetypy i symbole: pisma wybrane*, selection and translation by J. Prokopiuk, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1993; J. Campbell, *Bohater o tysiącu twarzy*, transl. by A. Jankowski, Wyd. Zysk i S-ka, Poznań 1997.

¹⁰ K. Kerényi, *Misteria Kabirów. Prometeusz*, translated by I. Kania, Czytelnik, Warszawa 2000, p. 63.

¹¹ J. Campbell, *Bohater o tysiącu...*, p. 183; Lord F. Raglan, *The Hero: A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, Watts, London 1949; M. Zowczak, *Mit bohaterski jako opowieść o granicach ludzkich możliwości*, „Etnografia Polska” 1984, vol. XXVIII, no. 2, pp. 243–267.

¹² M. Eliade, *Historia idei i wierzeń religijnych*, vol. 1: *Od epoki kamiennej do misteriów eleuzyjskich*, transl. by S. Tokarski, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1988, pp. 199–200.

man boundaries. The central formative event of the heroic condition, however, is the extraordinary death (like the apotheosis of Heracles in the act of self-immolation). There is a paradox in the death of the hero: it is through this final test of power and courage in the clash of being with the horror of non-being that he attains a form of immortality. The hero gains *time*, honor and fame, which are upheld in a ritual form by their followers and worshippers. Ritual immortality means immortal existence in privileged places. Heracles and Ganymede ascend to Olympus, Achilles resides on the mythical island of Leucadia, the heroes of Thebes and Troy inhabit the Happy Isles, their mounds become centres of athletic competitions (Pelops) or oracles (Orpheus), and they themselves assume the function of guardian spirits of these places.¹³ Unlike mere mortals, heroes are still active after death, however, their benevolence is not permanently guaranteed, it can quickly turn into an uncharitable attitude towards human desires. Their superhuman condition entitles them to transcend the norms they themselves constituted. The classical and Hellenistic sublime image of the hero is the result of literary transformation, as in Pindar. Archaic cult heroes such as Heracles or Pelops, or epic heroes such as Achilles (who compares himself to Heracles) combine many contradictory attributes and are ambivalent figures. The bravado and extravagance of their existence is associated with horrific physical and character traits: they have above-average height, they fall into madness, unbridled rage, murder the innocent, rape, perform sacrilegious acts, use treachery and deceit.¹⁴ Pelops won Oenomaus in the chariot race by trickery, and let us remember that the myth of Pelops is the founding act of the Olympic Games. Entering the competition, Pelops bribed the stable boy Myrtilus to place wax pegs in the wheels of Oenomaus' chariot. During the race, the wheels of Oenomaus' chariot fell off and Pelops' rival died, dragged by his own steeds. Myrtilus was then thrown off a rock by Pelops, but he still managed to curse his assassin. To cleanse the taint, Pelops instituted mourning games in Olympia in honor of Oenomaus, but deceit, bribery, treachery and curses constitute their mythological dark reverse, even if the games were fortified in their historical course by precepts of honesty and purity of custom, morals and religion. The mound of Pelops was held in high esteem and reverence in Olympia; it was to this hero that offerings were originally made during the Games, much earlier than to Zeus.¹⁵ The Olympic Games have another patron, i.e. Heracles, who was

¹³ G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans. Concepts of the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry*, Revised Edition, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London 1999, p. 9; M. Eliade, *Historia idei i wierzeń...*, p. 201; S. Miller, *Starożytni olimpijczycy. Sportowe życie antycznej Grecji*, transl. by I. Żółtowska, Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 2006, p. 152.

¹⁴ M. Eliade, *Historia idei i wierzeń...*, p. 202.

¹⁵ Z. Kubiak, *Mitologia Greków i Rzymian*, Świat Książki, Warszawa 1999, pp. 499–501; M. Pietrzykowski, *Mitologia starożytnej Grecji*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warszawa 1983,

to bring them back to life again in honor of Pelops, after years of oblivion. His famous 12 labors, consisting mainly of defeating wild animals and monsters that threatened the social order, were called *athloi*, which means “competition”, “games.”¹⁶

Full of contradictions, the characters of the heroes as cultural demiurges, brutes and tricksters stem from their borderline condition, situated between the world of the sacred and the profane, gods and men, life and death, anomy and law. Patroclus calls Achilles an *ainaretēs*, a hero of ‘terrible virtue’, but at the same time worships him like a deity.¹⁷ Achilles is the epitome of the Homeric *arete*, a virtue which was not moral but ontic and social in nature. The category is derived from words such as *aristos* (best), *areskein* (to please) and *aresthai* (to achieve, obtain).¹⁸ And although Homer’s heroes were *aristoi* by birth, they were obliged by the customs of a highly competitive society to assert their nobility in victorious struggles. Competition was a proper test (Gr. *peira*) of a warrior’s power, of his great heart (*megasthymos*).¹⁹ The lives of Homeric heroes oscillated between the fear of *ajdos*, i.e. the shame and humiliation and the desire for *time*, i.e. the honor. *Megasthymos* was the volitional-emotional center of man. It led to avidity, anger, aggression, pride, but also loyalty, friendship, compassion and tenderness. These features are adequately epitomized in the figure of Achilles, whose anger at Agamemnon is the dramatic axis of the plot of *Iliad*. Achilles desecrated Hector’s corpse by dragging it behind a chariot, but in the end, weeping, he yielded to Priam’s request to give up his son’s body, thus showing his deep and hearty compassion.²⁰

The Panhellenic athletic games were already more than just this Achaean struggle between poles of shame and honor, they were a competition subject to certain rules and principals: linking the figures of Heracles or Pelops to the athletes at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, Corinth, they no longer appealed only to heroic myth. The agonistic athletic display of excellence and physical prowess was a reflection of a complex social ethos, a set of values and rules with religious, aesthetic and moral quality. The poets of choral lyric poetry, the authors of

pp. 223–225; P. Grimal, *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej*, transl. by M. Bronarska et al., Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1987, pp. 145, 261, 284; J. Łanowski, *Święte igrzyska olimpijskie*, Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, Poznań 2000, pp. 17–18; Miller, *Starożytni olimpijczycy...*, p. 87.

¹⁶ Z. Kubiak, *Mitologia...*, p. 451.

¹⁷ A. Krokiewicz, *Moralność Homera i etyka Hezjoda*, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1959, p. 64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 58; W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, transl. by M. Plezia, vol. 1, Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1962, pp. 35–46.

¹⁹ A. Krokiewicz, *Moralność Homera...*, p. 59; W. Jaeger, *Paideia...*, p. 40.

²⁰ Homer, *Iliada*, transl. by I. Wieniewski, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków – Wrocław 1984, pp. 527–530.

praise poetry like Pindar, and the philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, played a great part in shaping this ethos.

Praise poetry and the fame of athletes

Poems of praise, *epinikia*, was a genre of Greek choral lyric poetry. Its source dates to the Archaic period and the beginning of the Classical era (650–450 BC). The origins of laudatory songs for victory (*epi* – for, *nike* – victory) are marked by the work of Archilochus, and their proper form is associated with the figures of Simonides, Pindar and Bacchylides.²¹ Commissioned and lavishly paid for, the odes of lyric poets proclaimed the praise of their representatives, pointing to the divine origins of their families and their extraordinary martial and athletic achievements. The honor of mythical heroes (*time*) gained a new form of expression – poetic *kléos*, i.e. fame.²² The poets considered themselves to be wise men (*sophoi*), and therefore, while praising the deeds of the winners, interjected *gnomoi*, moral maxims, into their poetry. Such a moral addition particularly distinguished Pindar’s victorious odes. Gods and heroes, invoked either as models of victorious achievements or as objects of poetic prayer and sacrifice were subject to moral idealization in this poetry.²³ Pindar freely transformed mythical themes, especially where the archaic versions did not square with his moral and pious image of deities and heroes. Heracles was his favorite hero and was his model of an athlete, but his image was devoid of the darker aspects of his legend. In the *Olympian Ode I*, the poet transformed the myth of Pelops and Oenomaus in a similar spirit.²⁴

Pindar’s piety resulted in the rationalization and moralization of myths. Gods and heroes are not only epitomes of ontic power, but also of a moral order. This order is based on the absolute power and supremacy of gods over the world of men. The superiority of gods over humans is manifested, among other things, in the fact that they are the proper demiurges of human success; it is by their grace that man is endowed with talents such as athletic prowess and valor. *Agon*, being the space of struggle with the fragility of existence, is of course the space in which man affirms his aristocratic *arete*, fitness, valor, strength, but athletic suc-

²¹ A. Szastyńska-Siemion, *Epinikion greckie. Monografia gatunku*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1975, pp. 7–75; A. Komornicka, *Simonides z Keos. Poeta i mędrzec*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków – Gdańsk – Łódź 1986, pp. 22–23, 276–291.

²² G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans...*, p. 35.

²³ B. Snell, *Odkrycie ducha. Studia o greckich korzeniach europejskiego myślenia*, transl. by A. Onysymow, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 2009, pp. 113–129.

²⁴ Pindar, *Ody zwycięskie*, transl. by M. Brożek, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1987, pp. 76–80.

cess is gods' reward for effort, their payment for *ponos*, the toil of man. The struggle is *peira*, a test of man. „The greatness of reason and the nature of the flesh” are admittedly capable of bringing man closer to the immortal (*Nemean VI*),²⁵ and the words of the poet seal the victory by lasting in the „memory of the times” (*Pythian III*).²⁶ Yet *kléos*, i.e. fame proclaimed in poetry, is merely a symbolic sign of the immortality of the victorious. Both the athlete and the poet must know their place in the world order. The contestation of human position is a sign of *hybris*, pride, which was most unpleasant to the Greek gods, for it threatened their omnipotence. Men should maintain humility, moderation and reason and know their proper position in relation to gods.²⁷ The world, however, is well ordered. By worshipping its order through valiant actions, man accesses a partial share in this universal cosmic beauty.

The praise odes were filled with religious, social, moral and aesthetic values, which places them in the wisdom context of the oldest philosophical tradition of the Seven Sages of Greece (7th /6th century BC). *Epinikia* stand midway between the archaic heroic myths and the ethos set by ideals such as *enkyklios paideia*, *kalokagathia* and *megalopsychos* of the philosophers of the classical period.

Philosophy and the stadium

The most vivid philosophical representation of the archaic myth of the hero is the ethos of the man with the ‘great soul’, the *megalopsychos*, whose image we find in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁸ The *megas psyche* is the ethical equivalent of the Homeric ‘great heart’, the *megasthymos* of the Homeric warriors. The *megalopsychos* is a man of great deeds who is truly worthy of them. He deserves admiration because he is *kaloskagathos*, brave and beautiful morally and physically. The ethical transposition of the warrior-athlete power thus acquired new and subtle ideal meanings. *Arete* which, in Homer, signified the position of an aristocrat, in philosophy becomes the quintessence of humanity. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle developed a program of self-knowledge and moral personal formation, creating a complex image of man as a psycho-somatic being endowed with *logos*, and along with it they framed an idea of integral education, *enkyklios paideia*.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., p. 166.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁷ M. Stuligrosz, *Gnoma w twórczości Pindara*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznań 2002, pp. 153–167.

²⁸ Aristoteles, *Etyka nikomachejska*, transl. by D. Gromska, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1982, pp. 117–158.

²⁹ W. Jaeger, *Paideia...*, pp. 83–84; S. Miller, *ibidem*, p. 174.

Aristotle's attachment to elite and athletic values resulted from his personal interests in athletics, he was a sports fan and a 'reporter' writing down lists of winners of athletic competitions. Among the athletes he admired above all the pentathlon players, who, thanks to their versatile physical fitness became for him a model of courage, fitness, agility and beauty.³⁰ Philosophical schools in Athens, Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum, were situated near gymnasia, where intellect and body were developed. The famous passage in Plato's *Republic* about the dialectics of music and gymnastics indicates the need for symmetrical and harmonious human development in the service of the Muses (sciences) and the beauty and fitness of the body. In the sphere of values beauty was connected with good, just like soul and body in man himself. The perfect man is, in a sense, an athlete of body and soul. It is therefore not surprising that athletics gained moral overtones in philosophical reflection. Through *paideia*, philosophical thought created models of perfection applicable not only in gymnasia, but also in stadiums.

The set of values and principles determining the heroic ethos of the Greek athlete turned out to be an extremely durable ideological base of sport and has its legitimacy in modern sport, in which universal perfection is demanded from sports champions, and thus also moral perfection. The rhetorical nature of these images conceals the real history of Greek athletics. The fact that the Greeks created a set of rules that were obligatory for the participants of the Games indicates that the order of athletic competitions was often violated. Such rules included the peace of God (*ekecheiria*), ritual purity of players and an oath at the altar of god, in which they were committed to comply with the rules of the competition and fair play, excluding e.g. bribery. Fighters were not allowed to enter the sacred competition ground with weapons, but blood was often spilled in combat sports, especially during brutal boxing fights. In the sacred grove of Olympia, monuments were erected not only to honor the noble victories of the Olympians. There were also statues of Zeus called *zanes* built with the money from the fines imposed on dishonest athletes.³¹ The rewards for the victory were enhanced after the Sixth Olympiad by salaries and lifelong maintenance by *polis*.³²

Commercialization is therefore not just a symptom of contemporary sport. At the very origins of sport there was already a bifurcation of its nature into actual practice and rhetorical idealization, facts and ideas, sport and meta-sport

³⁰ Arystoteles, *Retoryka. Poetyka*, transl. by H. Podbielski, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1988, pp. 85–86; B.J. Kunicki, *Kultura fizyczna antycznej Grecji (ideologia, filozofia, nauka)*, Akademia Wychowania Fizycznego im. E. Piaseckiego, Poznań 2002, pp. 62–64.

³¹ D. Słapek, *Sport i widowiska w świecie antycznym. Kompendium*, Wydawnictwo Homini – Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Kraków – Warszawa 2010, pp. 751–756.

³² E. Kałamačka, *Duchowe i materialne wartości sportu*, [in:] Z. Dziubiński (ed.), *Aksjologia sportu*, Warszawa 2001, pp. 329–338.

narratives. This bifurcation did not disappear, and indeed took on a sharper dimension in Pierre de Coubertin's ideology of neo-Olympism. His adoration of the Olympics resulted in a bold project to revive the Games, but also in a meta-Olympic discourse on the values and principals of contemporary sport, its educational and moral character.³³ This set of obligatorily understood principles has gained articulation in various sporting ethical codes and set axiological priorities in scientific and public debates on sport. As Fred Inglis writes, sport is understood as a depository of values, concepts and notions that are central to our moral consciousness.³⁴ Among these, the concept of heroism occupies a prominent place.

Heroes of sport today

Sport is a phenomenon in which the interests of many areas of social life intersect. Two of these areas, the economics and the media, have changed the face of the idea of noble and selfless competition. Sport became a business and its complex cultural capital was harnessed to the economic mechanisms of the free market, which, from the 1980s onwards, began to be further fostered by the media boom around sporting events and personalities.³⁵ The development of media technology has led to the globalization and mass presence of images. Virtual images gained power over people's imagination, thoughts and understanding of the world, and became an influential transmitter of new lifestyles, needs and hierarchies of values. They also significantly strengthened the rhetoric of heroic communication in sport, becoming an influential and effective instrument for popularizing sports champions, who they transformed into great stars. Nowadays, the media, together with publicists and academics who deal with the so called 'Media Sport'³⁶ have taken over the role of archaic rhapsodists in promoting, exposing and explicating the characteristics, talents and virtues of heroes. The set of desirable and necessary values for being a sports hero is wide. It is filled with strictly sports values (fitness, excellent training, strength, endurance, effective play, records, victories), personal values (health, bravery, stub-

³³ J. Kosiewicz, *Sport i wartości olimpijskie*, [in:] idem, *Filozoficzne aspekty kultury fizycznej*, Wydawnictwo BK, Warszawa 2009, pp. 295–350; W. Firek, *Filozofia olimpizmu Pierre'a de Coubertina*, Wydawnictwo FALL, Warszawa 2016; M. Zowisło, *Coubertin – the philosopher of paideia*, "Studies in Sport Humanities" 2018, No 23, pp. 25–30; doi: 10.5604/01.3001.0013.2889.

³⁴ F. Inglis, *The Name of the Game: Sport and Society*, Heinemann, London 1977, p. 85.

³⁵ B. Smart, *The Sport Star. Modern Sport and the Cultural Economy of Sporting Celebrity*, SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oakes, New Delhi 2005, p. 103.

³⁶ L.A. Wenner, *Media Sport*, Routledge, London and New York 1998, <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203014059>.

bornness, hard work, firmness, self-confidence, perseverance, will to fight, impulse to improve, knowledge), aesthetic values (beauty of the body movement, clothing, appealing image, eroticism, show performance) and moral (honesty, fair play, cooperation, loyalty, devotion, charity).³⁷ Some, however, see the marriage of sport and the media as the cause of the decline and degeneration of the heroic ethos. According to Daniel J. Boorstin, the heroes of the mass imagination, who should be inspirational models of human excellence, are trivialized by the media and transformed into 'hollow heroes'.³⁸ The media are based on fast transmission, news and penetration of spectacular events. They are a stream of explosive content that is remembered for a short time and briskly flooded with new sensations.³⁹ That is why pop culture idols are shown not only from the point of view of their achievements, but also from the point of view of their trivial or scandalous home background.

The global reach of the media enables the immediate and comfortable reception of sports events, often advertised with the meaningful phrase 'welcome to the party'.⁴⁰ In this way, the media exaggerate the ludic nature of the games to the extreme, and make the athletes a bit of entertainers.⁴¹ In addition to the game itself and sports mastery, the enjoyment of watching the drama of the fight counts more and more, and the more the game is played with beautiful style and suspenseful twists, the greater the effect is. The actors of this tension are repeatedly tracked by the eye of cameras, mobbed by journalists, and then engaged by advertising and marketing managers. That in turn leads to commodification of sports champions. In this process, celebrity champions are no longer just perfect athletes, they are trademarks of the products they advertise.⁴² Having become stars and idols of mass imagination, they are burdened with new challenges beyond the halls of training, matches and competitions. Being on the wave of media fame, which is also a vehicle for wealth, requires effort and a thoughtful strategy to manage one's image and non-sporting life. Some step into these roles with full commitment. Joe DiMaggio, Tiger Woods, David Beckham, Anna Kurnikova, Robert Lewandowski are just some examples of the successful marriage of sport, advertising and big money. Michael Jordan is an exemplary athlete in this respect. Admired by millions of fans, he has become

³⁷ H. Zdebska, *Bohater sportowy. Studium indywidualnego przypadku Bronisława Czecha (1908–1944)*, Wyd. FALL, Kraków 2007, pp. 125–128; A. Tyszka, *Olimpia i Akademia. Szkice o humanistycznej treści sportu*, Wydawnictwo Sport i Turystyka, Warszawa 1970, pp. 94–99.

³⁸ D.J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, Vintage Books, New York 1992, p. 58.

³⁹ L. Strate, *Heroes...*, pp. 19–20; A. Tyszka, *Olimpia i Akademia...*, pp. 94–99.

⁴⁰ L.A. Wenner, *Media Sport...*, p. 6.

⁴¹ R.S. Cathcart, *From Hero to Celebrity. The Media Connection*, [in:] S.J. Drucker, R.S. Cathcart, *American Heroes...*, p. 36–46; Tyszka, *Olimpia i Akademia...*, p. 97.

⁴² B. Smart, *The Sport Star...*, p. 117.

a pop culture icon, a great media personality and, through the marketing and advertising of sports products, also a trademark of the Nike corporation.⁴³ The powerful impact of the media and the champion's media fame, in this case influenced an extraordinary popularization of basketball as America's national sport. Barry Smart noted that basketball before Jordan did not have the same status as it did after Jordan.⁴⁴ Certainly, this applies not only to the phenomenon of this discipline. In Poland, Adam Małysz and "Małyszomania" had a similar significance for ski jumping in the first decade of the 21st century.⁴⁵ However, one can reflect on the degree of popularity of Jordan and another American athlete, Michael Phelps. A legendary swimmer, winner of 28 Olympic medals (including 23 golden ones), who set as many as 39 world records, did not gain such great media fame as Jordan.⁴⁶ Certainly, in the case of Jordan, big and predatory advertising campaigns won, but also an extraordinary media personality: his fierce will to fight and win, 'playing for keeps,'⁴⁷ the pure sportsmanship and joy of the game revealed in competition, and, as Smart emphasized, typically American qualities such as „competitive individualism, sense of responsibility, rigorous work ethic, loyalty and commitment to his team's cause."⁴⁸ Ethics, however, was not always on the way for Jordan, he is certainly not the epitome of American Puritanism. The will to fight, perfectionism and passion for victory took on a violent expression in his life. Full of fury and anger in private and in sports and business competition, Jordan appears almost like a modern Achilles and the epitome of the *megasthymos* of Homeric heroes. He was able to vengefully cut his friend's clothes from the Puma collection, replacing them with similar ones from Nike, because he feels identified with this corporation, and he treats the clothes in his friend's wardrobe as a personal attack on himself. In any environment, he demands to be the center of attention. Even in retirement, he has not lost his wrathful temper and desire to confirm his own worth and position. At the same time, she also reveals a gentle face, donating for charity and visiting seriously ill children.⁴⁹

Some elite athletes such as Ted Williams or Dennis Rodman,⁵⁰ however, come into conflict with the media and fans. Others try to live up to the demands

⁴³ Ibid., p. 117–128.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

⁴⁵ J. Andrzejczak, M. Wesołowski, *Adam Małysz. Batman z Wisły*, Wyd. Iskry, Warszawa 2002.

⁴⁶ M. Phelps, B. Cazeneuve, *Autobiografia*, transl. by M. Romanek, Znak Litera Nova, Kraków 2021.

⁴⁷ D. Halberstam, *Grać i wygrać: Michael Jordan i świat NBA*, transl. by W. Ziemiński, Wyd. Sine Qua Non, Kraków 2016.

⁴⁸ B. Smart, *The Sport Star...*, p. 126.

⁴⁹ W. Thompson, *Cena naszych marzeń. Sportowe biografie bez cenzury*, transl. by M. Sieduszewski, L. Wierzbowska, Znak Litera Nova, Kraków 2022, pp. 19–43.

⁵⁰ S.H. Teitelbaum, *Sports Heroes, Fallen Idols*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London 2005, pp. 13–16; D. Rodman, T. Keown, *Bad as I Wanna Be*, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing, New York 1996.

of public life under the spotlight and the marketing policies, but they often fail in this new kind of competition, falling as a result of sporting and non-sporting pressures into addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, sex, aggression and embarking on a path of self-destruction. Stanley H. Teitelbaum describes this dark psychology of fallen sports idols.⁵¹ Fan worship and celebrity status evoke vanity, hubris, inflated egos and narcissism in many elite athletes. We see that modern sports heroes continue the old legacy of the ambivalence of heroes: they have their lofty and their dark sides. Being a sporting hero today is burdened by the contexts of the global world, mass culture and mass media, consumerism, marketing and economic liberalism. The heroic narrative is still in play and brings new content to the old myth.

Conclusion

The figure of the sports hero has evolved, soaking up more and more new meanings, ideas, values, becoming an object of rhetorical interpretation and appeal. In the melting pot of the historical and cultural transformations of sport and its rhetorical mediation, the sporting champion was faced with new challenges, which burdened him with often exaggerated demands and imperatives. Today, the athletic hero must not only be a champion athlete, the best representative of their sports discipline (preferably one with a large audience), maintain a consistently high level of fitness and increase the repertoire of records, but also be a personal and moral role model, maintain a consistently high level of interest in their person on the part of fans, media and advertisers, have a lot of money, an impressive estate and possessions, lead a righteous life, be a philanthropist, sponsor and benefactor. Not surprisingly, Charles Barkley contested some of these conditions by uttering the famous phrase, "I'm not a role model."⁵² This sentence reveals glaringly the divergence of actual sporting practice with the meta-sport narratives that become a trap for many elite athletes.

It seems, however, that to stop at this point would be a huge impoverishment of the sports story. We need champions and heroes because they – even when idealized or pushed off pedestals – point to the indelible motif of our intentional consciousness, which remains in a permanent tension between the experience of fragility and the premonition of the fullness and power of existence. Myth continues to work, using different means to express and fill its motives. According to Hans Blumenberg's formula, the work on myth is the work of myth itself.⁵³ In

⁵¹ S.H. Teitelbaum, *Sports Heroes...*, p. 17 et passim.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵³ H. Blumenberg, *Arbeit am Mythos*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M 1979.

the light of this thesis, the meta-sports rhetoric of heroism can be understood as just such a vital, never-finished work on the myth (ethos, idea) of the sporting hero. In it, this myth reveals its semiotic openness, fluidity and ambiguity, depositing in its capacious matrix new layers of meanings that are the result of historical and cultural transformations in the field of sport and the discourse around sport. Certainly, it is the myth of sporting heroism that, apart from the hard work of the athletes, the hardship of the training regime, the dedication to one's discipline, team, club and the strong personality of the sporting champions, is what keeps sport still at the top of people's fascinations. The practice and the rhetoric of sport, each in its spectacular dimension, are two inseparable sides of the sporting coin and both develop their rules and principles at the interface of many social, political, ethical, economic, scientific, journalistic, marketing and media influences.

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