Sports on Television. An Introduction
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Sports have, for the entirety of television's history and in all affected countries, formed an exceptionally important part of the programming array. Live transmissions of sporting events were already a feature of the earliest years of television, and they served both to interest people in this new medium and to show off its technical possibilities. Time and again technical innovations (such as colour TV, cable and satellite reception or HDTV) are introduced during major sporting events (the Olympics, the soccer World Cup or boxing matches) (Johnson, 2009).

Sports and television clearly have a symbiotic relationship: television (exactly like telegraphy and the newspaper press from the end of the 19th century) grants sports a wide audience that is not only interested in a single game or club, but in sports in general. Since the 1980s, television has furthermore become the greatest source of income for the most popular sports. Vice versa, professional sports offers television an endless flow of events – the weekly rounds in national soccer competitions matching the weekly structure of television programming. But aside from this continuity sports simultaneously enables more exceptional events, not just when the best teams or players go head to head, but because (at least at the end of the season) only one can be crowned champion. Sports thus dependably and continually offers television new events that are also always seen as highly relevant. It combines the continual, serial development, which enables daily or weekly programming discussing the latest turns of competitions, with special occasions that break through or change television's routine programming.

It should also be said that sports cannot be seen as one uniform or coherent TV genre. Firstly, it appears both in the guise of live reports and recaps, as well as in the form of talk shows. Secondly, almost every sports show displays a collection of features specific to television's different functions. Gary Whannel, for instance, has shown that television sports is always a mixture of journalism (e.g. information about a rumoured player's transfer), drama (the weekly soap opera playing out around a forward that still has not scored) and entertainment (predictions, human interest interviews) (1992). However, its specific form of witnessing and commenting on surprising events ensures that *live reporting* can be seen as the most characteristic formal element of television sports (Raunsbjerg, 2000). The rest of this article will then discuss how features of live sports programming contribute to the experience of sports, to the transmission of cultural knowledge and to the formation of social categories such as national identity, gender and so on. Throughout this article, the following example taken from the 2010 Winter Olympics will be used to show that television sports has certain formal and institutional characteristics that ensure its specific cultural productivity.

On February 23rd, 2010, the Richmond Olympic Oval in Vancouver played host to the men's 10,000m speed skating competition. The favourite to win was Dutchman Sven Kramer, who in the last race of the day appeared opposite the Russian skater Skobrev. Though Kramer made the best time (a record 12:54.50), he was disqualified for changing from the outer to the inner lane at the wrong moment. The TV commentators, having already seen this mistake when it happened, wondered how this could have happened. At the end of the race, the television reports focus on two different aspects of the game.

On the one hand there are the many contradictory emotions steaming live off the people at the Olympic Oval: Kramer's angrily throwing down his sunglasses when he hears about the costly mistake; the Korean skater Seung-Hoon Lee's surprised joy at winning the gold medal; Kramer's despairing fans; his trainer's fury and so on.

On the other hand the reports are simultaneously using replays and recorded images from other camera standpoints to try to explain what exactly happened in the race and why: a shot from above the ice reveals that Kramer only switched to the inner lane at the very last

moment; a close up of his coach is used to reconstruct that he was the one who pointed Kramer to the inner lane; interviews with former top skaters discuss what athletes themselves observe during races and so on.

Although this example is perhaps somewhat out of the ordinary, it does reveal television sports' typical characteristics. It furthermore shows why sports is such an important and special part of television programming.

Event and Community

That 10,000m race connects two radically different aspects that jointly contribute to television's (national) community-building powers. The first being the long-planned, passionately awaited and exquisitely organised happening that is the Olympics, the 10,000m race here in particular. The second being the completely surprising, unforeseen mistake made by Kramer's coach, prompting a quest to find out just what went wrong.

In all its meticulously planned glory, the Olympics is a typical 'media event' as defined in great detail by Dayan and Katz (1992): an event with a culturally anchored meaning that, despite television's great investment in it, is not organised by that medium. Aside from sporting events, Dayan and Katz also count as media events such grand ceremonies as royal weddings or such exceptional accomplishments as the moon landing. Television especially tasks itself to convey the 'spirit' of the event – in the case of the Olympics for instance always emphasising the mutual friendship and respect among athletes, as well as ideas of sportsmanship and honesty. It is exactly because the event is to be understood as something not just taking place for the television cameras that its appearance on television is granted special meaning. Media events are thus typically announced far in advance and warrant a significant break in the regular programming structure; this alone makes them special moments that fall outside of the day-to-day routine. In the above example, for instance, a running text at the bottom of the screen just after the end of the race tells us that the regularly scheduled talk show *Pauw & Witteman* has been moved to another channel. This makes it clear that the Olympics and this race in particular are so important that a familiar and popular show is to make room for the sports story's ongoing development.

While running and finishing according to plan is crucial to other media events such as coronations and state funerals, television sports is characterised by the possibility that the scheduled event turns out surprisingly different from expectations – as in the case of Kramer's dramatic failure. This lack of a fixed outcome emphasises television's 'live' character (Doane, 1990). As opposed to, for example, photography, which can ultimately only show traces of past events, television (and particularly its sports programming) promises the possibility of being party to events unfurling at that very moment. This is especially emphasised by the fact that television not only shows us the event itself – Kramer's lane change, for instance – but also the instantaneous reactions of the people watching it happen right there in the stadium. The commentators' voices, with their exclamations, sighs and warnings (at the crucial moment breathlessly crying out "Watch out! Watch out!!" to Kramer's unhearing ears), underline the specific characteristics of the event (Marriot, 1996). The unforeseen event led to extensive post-mortem analyses: appearing on the front pages of newspapers, being discussed on blogs and via Twitter, and of course also talked about in depth on TV the day after. The combination of an already expected special occasion (the Olympics) and a completely surprising, sensational event (Kramer's mistake) leads to extensive communal attention, thus offering a shared talking point for all kinds of discussions.

Media events such as the Olympics furthermore have a global influence, as people in the most geographically diverse countries watch the very same event. The national perspective, however, remains dominant in these cases (Puijk, 2000). In light of the journalistic ideal of neutrality, many countries see vehement discussions on the extent to which commentators are allowed to side with, or cheer on, 'their own' athletes or teams. The American Olympics programming has, for instance, explicitly abstained from using the term 'we'. Still, a national perspective remains apparent in the choice of broadcasted events and in the on-screen interpretations, but also in the manner of reception. The still predominantly national

organisation of the media landscape (in which both public and commercial networks have a nationally oriented audience in mind) and the likewise chiefly national organisation of professional sports (which sees athletes or teams appear in world cups or the Olympics as representatives of their country) thereby support the national focus of international sporting events. One interesting exception here is the Eurosport network, where one commentator reports, for instance, for both the Dutch and Flemish audiences, or for the German, Swiss and Austrian ones.

Just the fact that Dutch television pays so much attention to skating is the result of a specific national interest. German television, for example, pays much more attention to the biathlon, a sport that has many successful German athletes. The commentary's perspective is also national in character: whereas the Dutch reporters can explicate the performances of Kramer or other Dutch athletes using information about past achievements or the athletes' personal lives, their information on, for instance, the Korean or Russian athletes is far more limited, which is one of the reasons why the commentators then lapse into stereotypes or generalisations (Tudor, 1992). In the clip described above. Skobrev and Lee are both referred to as the 'Russian' and the 'South-Korean' again and again, while Kramer, although being a representative of his country as well, is always spoken of as an individual and never as the 'Dutchman'.

Television sports thus not only sparks the attention of extraordinarily large groups of people, but it also makes its viewers feel part of a collective (a national community). The genre thus illustrates the nation's conceptualisation through images, stories and emotions that make that nation a reality. In daily life, an individual's belonging to a specific country (one's national identity) often remains formal (for example in the form of a passport) and abstract. What exactly makes up one's country remains vague, and the cohesion between people with the same national identity effectively only exists through the media's mediation. A nation can thus also be conceived as an 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), meaning a community that is not characterised by the fact that its members know each other. Instead, a nation's 'imagined community' is mostly based on a common conception of the traditions, characteristics and emotions that connect a group of people who do not actually know each other.

To create this conception of commonalities and transcend the variety present in a group of people from very different circumstances (urban or rural, rich or poor), the media uses stories about events that are seen as of national importance – such as that of Kramer, who as a 'representative' of the Netherlands (wearing a suit in red, white and blue, and cheered on by a crowd of orange flags) gets special attention from Dutch television networks and whose 'failure' becomes a part of Dutch history that will be recapped in television's reports about the most significant events of the year. Television reports also contribute to the conception of Dutch identity by foregrounding specifically 'national' themes and by generating a common pool of knowledge among the viewers on the reported topic. Important sporting events additionally offer many concrete images of national community that also carry a high emotional charge, such as those of fans wearing the same colours, or representatives of government or royalty, all displaying their simultaneous emotional reactions. At the 10,000m race, for instance, television images included Kramer's girlfriend, the Crown Prince Willem Alexander and his wife Maxima, alongside anonymous fans as part of community rooting and feeling for Kramer.

Because major sporting events are especially announced as media events, and because they partly break through the established rhythm of daily life, these events also change the way we watch: often people watch in groups, sometimes even in public spaces (in 'public viewings'). Television reports of these media events will then not only show images from the event's site, but also images of viewers following the events via television all around the world. The phenomenon that television is generally enjoyed by large numbers of people at the same time becomes clearly visible in television's coverage of these sporting events, and in that sense also highly relevant; television reports thus contribute to the visibility of the collective through both its content (collectively sympathising with Kramer) as well as the form of its reception. The soccer World Cup is not only depicted on screen by images of the Dutch players and their fans at the stadium, but also by the groups of fans rooting for 'their' team in the farthest

reaches of the Netherlands, visualising the country's 'unity'. Research is not clear on whether sports also contributes to a stronger sense of nationalism outside of these events, but it is obvious that television sports contributes considerably to the images and conceptions we have about ourselves and about 'others' (see Poulton, 2004; Stankovic, 2004).

Staging and the production of knowledge

This national perspective inherent to media reporting points to the fact that media events in general and sporting events in particular are not merely events to be reported. On the one hand the media influences sports in the organisation of events themselves. The American media, for instance, has enough of an influence to determine when certain games can be played so they can broadcast them at the best possible moment, at prime time.

On the other hand the events also always undergo a number of transformation processes in order to best be televised. These for instance include: close-ups emphasising the athletes' efforts and emotions; graphs clarifying the current rankings; and split screen use that helps compare the styles of different skaters (Whannel, 1992: 87-102). The diverse temporal and special aspects of the various sports need very specific technology (underwater cameras, or cameras mounted on motorcycles or even the helmets of skiers) and formal elements (editing, split screen, graphics) to make the athletes' performances visible and palpable, as well as to convert the competition into an exciting story with identifiable characters. The various sports have necessitated the development of specific conventions that most thrillingly condense the time and space in which the sporting events take place, as these are just not the same for tennis matches, cycling or golf competitions (Stauff 2009s, Cossar, 2005), where the athletes are at completely different distances from each other.

What all these different sports broadcasts have in common, however, is that they use considerable technical skill to create a visual spectacle, clearly differentiating its style from those of other TV shows but simultaneously showing commonalities with other media. Sports broadcasts generally combine very divergent material: extreme slow-motion replays show falling drops of sweat and transform the athletes' efforts into unreal movements; and graphs and statistics enter the image, drawing attention to certain aspects of the performance. This multiplicity of stylistic techniques (historically first developed for television coverage of American Football in the 1970s and spreading globally in the 1980s) makes television sports an important example of the broader development of what is called 'televisual' style (Caldwell, 1995). In the 1980s, this multitude of stylistic and technological innovations turned a TV show's 'look' into an important distinctive characteristic. Some of these stylistic innovations were borrowed from other media, such as video games, which becomes evident in the following examples: the various Olympic sports are presented on television as a kind of menu with various options to choose from; before the games every athlete is presented as a kind of avatar; and the computer is also used to generate gameplay simulations afterwards, for instance to check if a player was really offside.

On the one hand, this technology and the connected multiplication of stylistic forms mainly help produce a visual spectacle that can generate tension, emotional intensity and entertainment relatively independent from actual events; on the other hand, however, it also means that athletic performances can be subjected to precise analysis and surprising ones can possibly be better explained. Viewers already receive information about the athletes' perceived tactics and various skills during the race or game. Obviously the viewers can use the events to start discussions themselves, using their own knowledge about the sport, the athletes or the athletes' previous performances to contradict the commentators or the athletes on screen. Television provides the basis for this knowledge by linking and scrutinising performances using different techniques (graphs, close ups, instant replays and interviews). Even more than other TV genres television sports sees a mingling of experts' specialist knowledge and the popular knowledge of viewers (Stauff, 2009b).

Margaret Morse (1983) has pointed to the instant replay's ambivalent role as television sports' single most characteristic visual strategy: on the one hand functioning as an aesthetic stylisation, making a fluid movement seem surreal and dreamy, and thereby making the body

on camera an object of aesthetic admiration; on the other hand also as a quasi-scientific product that makes the body the object of an analytical gaze (answering questions such as: Was the ball out? Did the player touch the ball with his or her hand?). This entangling of science and emotion, of a detached, truth-finding gaze and an emotionally involved one, of realism and melodrama, is typical of television sports and unsurprisingly present in the example of the 10,000m race in Vancouver.

After the end of the race, the television images try to explain how this mistake could have happened, first replaying the images of the race, then providing them with commentary. Later on several instant replays show the exact moment Kramer switched to the wrong lane, with additional camera viewpoints showing that he only did so at the very last moment and that his coach gave him instructions right before. This begs the question whether the coach was the one who made the mistake, and soon after TV images indeed show that the coach sent Kramer to the inner lane. Over the course of the evening (and the days after) these images are repeated constantly and discussed by commentators as well as several former top skaters. 25 minutes after the race, Kramer does a TV interview in which he presents his take on the events, and a little less than an hour later audio from a just-recorded radio interview with coach Gerard Kemkers reveals how he made his mistake (television accompanying his words with images of the crucial moments).

This clip shows how television sports enables a constant quasi-scientific (re)examination of an event using all manner of technical and personal skills. This way of presenting sports, however, is not limited to just finding an objective answer to what caused the incident in question, the morality behind the behaviour (and thus also the character and the identity) of the people concerned is also up for discussion.

Knowledge and cultural norms

Like other media events, sporting events do not only lead to forming a shared national perspective. The extent to which sports makes specific performances visible in a specifically targeted manner also contributes (just like reality TV formats or soap operas) to a continuous assessment of people's behaviour, and thus also to the debate on cultural values. In our example television is not only interested in what really happened, but also how the people concerned are dealing with what happened. After the race, it is not just the details of Kramer's performance (and mistake) that are endlessly scrutinized through graphs and slow-motion replays, but the behaviour of the athletes and coaches, of the audience members and the officials is also very precisely observed, commented on, and evaluated. The television images show us how the coach tells Kramer what happened, how he wants to give him an encouraging tap on the shoulder, and how Kramer then angrily shakes him off. First Kramer throws his glasses onto the ice, then he kicks one of the cones that border the rink. Later images show Kramer sitting in the foreground on a bench just off the rink, while his coach desolately kneels in the background. These images are interspersed with shots of the cheering winners.

It becomes clear here that surprising sports imagery like this offers arresting displays of emotion. Just like soap operas, it presents a wide array of characters with fates that often stand in stark contrast to each other, and whose lives are followed by audiences for long periods of time. Before the Olympics had even started, Kramer's public perception already was that of an arrogant and temperamental athlete, so some of his reactions certainly did not come as a surprise. Just as in soap operas, sports invites us to continuously empathise with the protagonists' situation, leading to endless discussions about their actions (Rose & Friedman, 1997; O'Connor, 1993).

More than in soap operas though, it is behaviour that is emphasised, discussed, and judged in the world of sports. Characters in soap operas gossip about the other characters in their specific diegetic world, whereas television sports feature outsiders that comment on what the viewers are seeing, all the while offering categorizations to help the audience members evaluate the events. Experts for instance discuss the question of who exactly is to blame for the mistake, the athlete or his coach, and if it is normal for athletes to blindly follow the

guidance of their coach. Similar discussions are had on whether the Korean's exuberant joy at winning was really appropriate, as he had only won through someone else's mistake. The NOS commentator, however, concluded that there was no doubt the Korean skater had deserved his win, as he had also made great time. In all these cases the behaviour under discussion is also relevant outside of the actual sports performance, relating to questions of authority, honesty, restraint and so on. As sports also exposes emotions and behaviours during exciting moments of loss and success, thus laying them open to study and interpretation in interviews with, and statements by, commentators, experts and audience members, it becomes a valid staging ground for negations about cultural norms and values.

When Kramer showed up a day after his fateful race for the men's team pursuit, the Dutch team members' every movement and facial expression are related to the goings-on of the previous day's race. When Kramer enters the stadium talking animatedly to his coach, all the commentators immediately emphasise the special character of this situation: "These are unique images." They then broaden this statement to further generalisations about human nature: "to err is human", "that's the group dynamic", or "you have to get over it somehow". Sports in this case offers poignant and evocative examples for very general cultural values.

After Kramer is asked about his relationship to his coach in a later interview, he answers that: "you don't just drop someone who you've enjoyed so much success with". While Kramer himself here already names specific norms and values, the interview itself later is material for further discussion and examined for hints to Kramer's developing character. His level of consideration and maturity is emphasised again and again: "What a grown-up man!".

Television enables us to follow an athlete's character development and add our own commentary. At the same time the case in point shows how Kramer is used as an example of what makes a man 'grown-up'. Just as the community uniting in front of the TV for sporting events has the tendency to become nationalized, the foregrounded character traits in sports are pre-eminently traditionally male ones. Besides that aspect, sports is one of the few cultural domains in which, as Margaret Morse has found, the male body is subjected to the (mostly) male gaze. Sports furthermore proves a setting in which men are allowed to show their emotions, even cry. According to Morse this is however only possible because sports simultaneously emphasises the traditional core male traits (such as strength, toughness and endurance), and because this (voyeuristic) examination of bodies and emotions is embedded in a quasi-scientific context (1983).

This does not mean that sports exclusively showcases male behaviour, it is more of a cultural arena to work out gender differences. Just as in the case of national identity, the differences between men and women constantly have to be re-formulated because they eventually are not just based on biological differences. Merely the categorisation of some sports as typically male or female reproduces culturally determined ideas about what are male and female characteristics. Strength-based sports, for example, especially those that entail direct physical contact between opponents, are seen as particularly male, whereas sports revolving around the aesthetic staging of individual bodies and movements (such as figure skating, rhythmic gymnastics and synchronized swimming) display traditionally female characteristics. One interesting blend between these two is bodybuilding, a sport that underlines how these categorizations are never entirely unambiguous and are constantly subject to re-definition.

This general differentiation between certain behaviours and physical/character traits in sports is sharpened further by media reports (Bernstein, 2002). At first this happens implicitly through what is called 'de-nomination': that is by not explicitly marking men's sports or sports competition as such, but explicitly mentioning women if women are involved. In this way the 'world championship' is implicitly for male competitors, whereas the parallel women's tournament is called the 'women's world championship'.

Sports commentary emphasises this supposed manliness through, for instance, talking about how Kramer's post-race behaviour can prove his 'manliness'. It would be unthinkable that a female athlete's extraordinary performance would be commented on as having proved the athlete to be a 'true woman' (the case of the South African athlete Caster Semenya is especially intriguing here; cf. Ley, 2009). Looking at the photographs in sports journalism or

the images on television, there is still a tendency to portray female athletes outside of their sporting context and as an object of lust, whereas male athletes are more often shown in action and with concentrated facial expressions (Kennedy & Hills, 2009). It thus is only reasonable to expect that television sports at least partly functions as one of the last social arenas where, after the women's movements of the 20th century and the 'crisis of the modern man', male heroism can still be portrayed in a very traditional way (Whannel, 2001).

Towards an economy of sports

Sports also has a special relationship to television when seen from an economic perspective. Because sports captures a large and loyal audience it has, especially since the 1980s, become a highly desirable product for commercial channels and networks, cable and satellite companies, and more recently digital providers. Although nowadays most famous for its quality TV series, the American cable network HBO had its first pay-per-view success broadcasting the so-called "Thrilla in Manila", the 1975 match in which Mohammad Ali fought Joe Frazier for the world heavyweight championship. The broadcasting rights costs of large sporting events have risen exponentially since the 1980s, making sports the most expensive television genre. Its exceptionally large audience makes it possible for channels to demand equally exceptional high prices for the commercials airing around these events. Space in the commercial breaks in the American Superbowl (the final game of the American Football season) has commanded the highest prices of the global TV industry for years now. Every year companies outdo themselves to create highly spectacular and thus also highly expensive ads especially for these breaks, which turns them into an attraction in themselves, as often discussed over the next days as the game itself.

Despite these enormous ad sales earnings, TV networks often cannot make back the entire cost of the sports broadcasting rights. The end justifies those costly means, though, as the attraction of the sports broadcasts on the one hand benefits the general image of the network, and on the other hand enables it to freely publicise its other shows in those expensive commercial breaks, thus reaching a far wider audience for all its programming. To most optimally exploit sports commercially the audience has to be both temporally and socially connected to the network as much as possible. This happens temporally through extensive pre- and post-game shows that often last longer than the actual games under analysis. To increase the viewer's social engagement with the network's sports coverage, the reporting on sports performances is blended with human interest news, thus attracting not just the traditional (mostly male) fans, but also an increasingly large share of female viewers (Boyle & Haynes, 2009; Rowe, 2003).

This development is part of a more comprehensive commercialisation of sports that has (also since the 1980s) formed an important source for lifestyles and social identities. Global icons such as Michael Jordan and David Beckham net enormous marketing deals with sportswear brands (Jordan with Nike, Beckham with Adidas) and become genuine stars that outside of their appearances at games also show up in commercials, gossip rags, game shows or lifestyle magazines (Whannel, 2001).

Despite this extensive commercialisation, sports shows still make up a central part of television programming, even on public television channels. Public broadcasters on the one hand use sports to attract more viewers, just like their commercial counterparts, but on the other hand also because sports broadcasts are ascribed a certain socio-cultural relevancy. Because sporting events function as important national events this makes them a legitimate part of public television programming, thus not only reaching the entire nation, but also kindling a communal consciousness. Since the early days of British public radio (with the inception of the BBC in the 1920s) sporting events have been used to support the at that point still novel institution's claim of shaping the 'national culture'. These days many European countries still have (officially EU-sanctioned) legislation that ensures the national team's important international games are broadcast on open channels (so without additional payment), making it accessible to all citizens.

In conclusion: sports and new media

This is one of the reasons why sports takes up such a central role in television programming: it on the one hand represents events that are collectively felt to be important, and on the other hand offers highly suitable situations for processing cultural norms and values. No wonder then that sports has remained an especially important TV genre despite the growing prominence of new digital media that are more individual and flexible than the TV screen. This is firstly due to television's skill at capturing the attention of the masses, forcing the other media to also cover the same events (through television's lenses). Secondly, by constantly reinterpreting even the most miniscule details of sports performances, sports television stimulates a continuous circulation of its images and clips in various other media (Johnson, 2009). American sports network ESPN has for instance built a highly successful website where performance highlights and statistics can be contextualised in even greater detail. All the more reason to critically analyse the assumed to be self-evident cultural norms and values that underlie sports television.

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