

## The Unlikely Hero. The treatment of Maradona's Death in American Media

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### Abstract

The news coverage of a figure as complex as Maradona reflected his importance as an idolized sports figure, immensely popular despite his tumultuous existence. But media coverage also reflects a sociological view of sports heroes, and especially flawed ones. In this chapter, I look at the coverage of Maradona's death in the United States, analyzing thirty-four media outlets across platforms. The study shows an informative character when reporting about Maradona, but also a detachment about his figure and legacy. The paper argues that the media analysis reflects the secondary social role of soccer in the United States in comparison with the rest of the world, acknowledging the importance of Maradona, but also viewing him as a foreign idol, and a failed one. We finally argue that Maradona's history is unparalleled in the American sports landscape, and it is only understood when explored in depth.

**Keywords:** Maradona; soccer; American media; sports

### Introduction

On November 25, 2020, Diego Armando Maradona died in his home of Buenos Aires, Argentina, from a heart attack after complications resulting from brain surgery. The news sent shockwaves across most of the world, especially in Europe and South America. In his native Argentina, television coverage of his death and the raucous funeral was 24/7, something habitual on the other hand. As a result, Maradona's death was on the front cover of the most important media outlets globally and was featured in the day's news reports and news coverage. Specialized sports media such as *L'Equipe*, *Marca*, *Mundo Deportivo* and *La Gazzetta dello Sport* featured long pieces about his death. General media across different countries also included the news on the cover and featured lengthy eulogies, such as *La Nación* (Argentina) *Liberation* (France), *El Pais* (Spain), *The Guardian* (England), *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* (Germany), or *Corriere della Sera* (Italy). The news was also quickly spread on social media, where Maradona-related posts were the most commented and shared topics of the day: Twitter recorded 35.4 million worldwide tweets using hashtags such as #D10S, #ElDiego o #GraciasDiego. In Argentina, seven out of the top ten hashtags for that day were related to Maradona.

While the rest of the world was covering the news of Maradona's death, in the United States, the event's coverage was slightly different and explained the event and the complicated context of Maradona's immense popularity in other countries. Of course, the

popularity of soccer in other nations can justify the media attention that Maradona received (and one can argue that not only on the days after his tragic death, but throughout his life). However, American media treated the story as a second-tier story for the day, with a much more detached language and reflecting certain respect for Maradona's figure but a distant lack of understanding of Maradona's incredibly complex figure.

This article aims to analyze the media coverage of Maradona's death in the United States in the days following the event. A content analysis of the coverage in mainstream media across platforms (thirty-four outlets in radio, television, printed, and online news outlets) will describe how American media views a figure like Diego Armando Maradona. Therefore, the first section of the article will examine the event's coverage across media, pointing out the main characteristics of such coverage, including language, imagery, and tone of each article. The second part analyzes the coverage from a wider perspective, including the sociological worldview on Maradona and the reasons why from an American cultural worldview, Maradona's figure was difficult to comprehend.

### **The treatment of Maradona's Death in American Media**

The news of Maradona's death was featured on every major media outlet in the United States. The following section analyzes the coverage on different outlets, including both online and offline, across platforms (television, newspapers, radio, and internet) and both sports-oriented and general media. The resulting list of thirty-four articles provides us with a good understanding of the treatment of the news in the American media landscape. The outlets have been selected by relevance and timeliness, and not limiting ourselves to sports outlets, but including generalist media as well. The news listed cover mostly November 25 (23 of the 34 references), going until December 3, mainly for the lengthier, more elaborated eulogies. The final list includes four agencies (*Associated Press*, *Reuters*, *United Press International*, and *Bloomberg*), seven magazines (*Sports Illustrated*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *GQ*, *The Economist*, *The Harvard Gazette* and *Forbes*), eight newspapers (*The New Yorker*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Miami Herald*, *Denver Post*, *The World*, *USA Today* and *The New York Post*), two online outlets (*Bleacher Report* and *The Ringer*), one radio station (*NPR*), and ten television stations (*CBS News*, *CNN Sports*, *FOX News*, *ESPN*, *CBS Sports*, *CNN*, *NBC Sports*, *ABC News*, and *NBC News*).

One of the main features of the articles analyzed is the overall detachment in the treatment of the event. Starting with the headlines: overall informative, repeating the name, age, and country of origin. Of the thirty-four headlines analyzed, all of them include the last name, 29 add the first name. Half of them include a reference to Argentina and also to the player's age. A third references soccer, usually followed by an adjective (star, legend, icon, great). The adjectives used in the headlines reflect an overall positive sentiment (loved, great, legend, icon, mesmerizing, star, superstar, greatest, better, bigger, genius, human, genius, hero) while only a few headlines reflect negative sentiment (tragedy, dangerously, darker, flawed, leftie, tormented).<sup>1</sup> It is also very interesting to note the radical difference in

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<sup>1</sup> Thirteen of the headlines used almost the similar verbiage: "Diego Maradona Dies at 60" with added variations ("Argentinian", "Soccer Star", "Legend").

treatment in the headlines of American media (as an example, *Boston Globe's* "Diego Maradona, Argentine soccer great, dies at 60") with the superlatives and adjectives used in European and South American headlines: "I Have Seen Maradona" (*La Gazzetta dello Sport*, Italy), "In the Hands of God" (*The Times*, UK), "Diego Lives" (*Corriere dello Sport*, Italy) "Which planet did you go to?" (*La Nación*, Uruguay), "D10S is dead [playing with the word Dios, God in Spanish, and Maradona's jersey number 10]" (*As*, Spain), "God is Dead" (*L'Equipe*, France), "Thank you, Diego", (*La Nación*, Argentina).

Overall, the coverage in American media has followed a similar pattern. The articles were generally informative and explanatory for an audience unfamiliar with Maradona. For this reason, and to emphasize the worldwide reach of Maradona's death, the articles frequently included quotes from dignitaries (The Pope, Argentina's president) and celebrities (Pelé, Cristiano Ronaldo, Leo Messi) to emphasize the importance of the news. The features typically explain his life, paying particular attention to the 1986 Mexico World Cup and the game against England. Some lengthier pieces set him up in the context of the military junta of Argentina in the 1970s, but most pieces explain his humble origins, the quick boost to stardom, and time in Barcelona and Naples. Inevitably, all the features include Maradona's addiction, scandals, and downfalls, with different degrees of detail.

The first paragraph of the note published by the *National Public Radio* can serve as a succinct summary of the coverage in mainstream media: "Diego Armando Maradona, who rose from the slums of Buenos Aires to lead Argentina's national team to victory in the 1986 World Cup, lost his way through substance abuse and then pursued a second career as a coach, died Wednesday at the age of 60, according to media reports" (Booker, 2020).

*United Press International* published an aseptic note citing the Argentinian Football Association and the Buenos Aires newspaper *Clarín*. Another agency, *Associated Press* provided the content used by *ABC News*, *Denver Post*, *USA Today*, *Fox News*, and *Boston Globe* (Rey, 2020). It is a long piece that offers a review of Maradona's life on and off the pitch ("although his reputation was tarnished by his addictions and an ill-fated spell in charge of the national team, he remained idolized in soccer-mad Argentina as the "Pibe de Oro" or "Golden Boy"), along with his soccer-style. As with many other articles, the Mexico 1986 World Cup game against England, with the infamous Hand of God takes much of the space of the feature, though as with many other articles, the second goal in the same game does not deserve as much attention as the first one.

*Bloomberg* published the news noting that he was "worshiped in his home country of Argentina despite his flaws" and introduces the Maradona-Messi debate: "And it was his time there -- at least for his supporters -- that helps place Maradona above modern-day prodigy Messi on the podium of soccer greats. While Maradona heaved a mediocre side to glory, Messi has always operated in relative comfort, accompanied by other star players at Barcelona. Still, the Maradona-Messi debate, split largely down generational lines, runs on." The piece also briefly comments on Maradona's politics: "Maradona himself was a political romantic. He tattooed an image of Che Guevara, the Argentine who co-led the Cuban Revolution, on his arm; vehemently supported Venezuela's socialist government; and allied himself with leftist leaders in Argentina's Peronist movement" (Clark et al., 2020).

It was interesting to discover that only three outlets commented on the outspoken left-leaning politics of Maradona, most particularly *Newsweek* that published a piece entitled "After Maradona's Death, His Opinion of America Resurfaces: 'I Hate Everything From the U.S.'". The article highlights the player's negative perception of the United States, which did not change over time, especially since his infamous expulsion from the World Cup in 1994 and his visa denial from the U.S. government: "I hate everything that comes from the United States. I hate it with all my strength," along with comments on Trump "When you see such cartoon characters like Trump, you begin thinking that if such a man takes it into his head we may all become enemies" (Crowley, 2020).

*CBS* published a few different articles. First, an informative piece reflecting on his life. It draws heavily from the *HBO* documentary and includes quotes from fellow soccer stars such as Leo Messi, Pelé, and Cristiano Ronaldo. It also references the importance of the news worldwide: "The soccer world was stunned and heartbroken over the news of his death" (Brito, 2020).

*CBS Soccer* bases its connect on a long, and heartfelt of a six-minute edition of *CBS's* soccer podcast where Argentinian soccer pundit and personal friend of the player Andrés Cantor barely manages to explain that soccer had died on November 25, 2020. This is an interesting piece because it resembles much more the media coverage the news received in Argentina, Italy, and Spain, heavily relying on commentators, former players, and coaches who knew Maradona and share their experiences with him. Naturally, therefore, this piece combines a very passionate eulogy from Cantor ("he was unstoppable", "the best I've seen play") among other superlatives (González, 2020).

*CNN* published three different articles. The first one from is a more aseptic eulogy detailing the news and commenting on Maradona's life: "While his performances on the pitch dazzled, Maradona faced a number of demons off it" (Correa & Church, 2020). The second article included in the content analysis is a lengthier feature by Matias Gretz. He comments on Maradona's social relevance for Argentinians ("almost national monument") and offers a justification for his popularity despite his downfalls ("Maradona, as has been widely documented, was flawed, but perhaps people saw some of themselves in those imperfections"). Quoting Argentinian journalist Marcela Mora y Araujo, the article explains that Maradona's extreme qualities are "the universal aspect of his appeal. I think people all over the world identify and acknowledge and recognize that and feel somehow reassured by the incredible humanity of someone who is seemingly superhuman" (Gretz, 2020). Finally, the last piece, also by Gretz & Morse draws on Asif Kapadia's 2019 *HBO* documentary "Diego Maradona" and reviews the Argentinian's life and downfall. Altogether, *CNN's* coverage summarized the three features we have seen in other media: one shorter informative piece about the news, another covering Maradona's style and influence on the game, and a third explaining the worldwide impact of Maradona dispute his raucous life off the pitch.

*Reuters* released a short note quoting the official press release from the Argentinian government: "His unparalleled footballing skill transformed him into one of the best-known people in the world, crossing frontiers and being universally recognized as the world's best player". Furthermore, they added a quote of Maradona eulogizing himself in a 2005

television show: "Thank you for having played football because it is the sport that gave me the most joy, the most freedom," Maradona said. "It is like touching the sky with my hands. Thanks to the ball" (Garrison & Misculin, 2020).

*ESPN* utilized the original note from *Reuters* and *Associated Press* to offer an aseptic coverage of Maradona's death, with plenty of quotes from players, dignitaries, and celebrities. Interestingly enough, it is the only American outlet that includes a quote from late Kobe Bryant: "I love Maradona. When I was young in Italy, I used to always watch Maradona when he played for Napoli" (ESPN, 2020). The death of Kobe Bryant in January 2020 serves as a good example of the journalist approach to the tragic deaths of sports icons. In the United States, the news of Bryant's unexpected death headlined every major news outlet, yet the language was still informative and descriptive: "Kobe Bryant Dies in Crash" (*LA Times*), "Helicopter Crash Kills N.B.A. Star Known to All as Kobe" (*The New York Times*), "NBA Icon Dies in Helicopter Crash" (*The Washington Post*). Therefore, even in the case of a much more comfortable figure, a perfect example of the sport idol for a country, the treatment was more detached than the South American views of Maradona.

*The Wall Street Journal* published two pieces with only five hours of difference. In the first one, Joshua Robinson defines the Argentinian as "unlikely, outlandish, dazzling, and flawed" and then summarizes his career with little attention to his personal life (Robinson, 2020). The second piece tackles the worldwide repercussion of Maradona's death and its reactions, both in Argentina and elsewhere. It includes an in-depth look at the Argentinian-ness of Maradona, quoting 1986 World Cup teammate Jorge Valdano, who describes Maradona as a combination of two personas: "Diego, the cheerful kid from the barrio, or working-class neighborhood, and Maradona, the legend. He quoted the team's trainer Fernando Signoroni saying, "With Diego, I'd go to the end of the world. But with Maradona, I wouldn't walk to the corner" (Forero & Dube, 2020). Finally, sports psychologist Laura Spaccarotella summarizes the mood of the nation those days: "with all of his contradictions, with everything that he provoked, he was always ours. Today we cry for that reason. Part of our collective identity is in sorrow for the loss of Diego" (2020).

*Forbes* published two articles. First, a brief note that quickly overviewed Maradona's career. Then, a week later, the magazine published a longer and more detailed figure. Written by an Argentinian contributor, the article sets Maradona in its context: "Maradona's life story responds to several of the archetypal characteristics of an epic poem of the ancient past, while his rise to fame accompanied the growth of modern communications technologies, particularly television." Argentinian journalist Jorge Fontevecchia explains the Argentina where Maradona grew and set his popularity in the political turmoil of the decade. The transition from a *potrero*, a dirt-field player in the Buenos Aires slums, to 1986 World Champion left an indelible mark in the Argentinian psyche, and that explains his immense popularity and cult-like figure "Maradona became the world's most famous person in the world after the 1986 World Cup and retained that level of popularity until his death". Also drawing from Kapadia's documentary, Fontevecchia does a brilliant job analyzing Maradona's main features: his technical brilliancy, his rebelliousness, and his exuberance (Fontevecchia, 2020).

*GQ* published a long piece by sports contributor Ryan O'Hanlon asking the audience to compare Maradona's legacy with other great athletes such as Michael Jordan, Peyton Manning, Messi, and Cristiano Ronaldo, adding a key question to understand Maradona: "When was the last time you saw Roger Federer self-sabotage?" (O'Hanlon, 2020). In this sense, O'Hanlon's article was the one that tried to connect the figure of Maradona for a wider audience, translating it and adapting it to other world sports superstars.

Reporting for *NBC*, London-based Alexander Smith demonstrates that location undoubtedly influences the coverage of Maradona in the world. We can see this in a small detail that separates the media treatment in the United States versus the rest of the world. While American media were direct, bold, and unapologetic about Maradona's excesses and abuses, international media were much softer. In the article, Smith quotes a British agent who explained that the player "went to some very dark corners, but history will be kind to Diego because his talent was so supreme and he never lost that desire to help the unfortunate" (Smith, 2020). Smith even goes to the extent of rooting Maradona's myth in the 19th-century arrival of soccer to Argentina through British emigres and then situates the 1986 World Cup performance against England in the Falkland war between the two countries.

*Sports Illustrated* also published two articles, one with the eulogy and an introductory comment on his career and a wink from Brazilian star Pelé "Certainly one day we'll kick a ball together in the sky above" (Shapiro, 2020). The second piece, as expected, is a much longer in-depth analysis of the life and career of the Argentinian. Written by Grant Wahl, the article starts in Mexico 1986, to then acknowledge his failures and note that "Maradona's dark side and human frailties only seemed to endear him more to an Argentine public that anointed him a cultural deity among the likes of Eva Perón and the tango singer Carlos Gardel" (Wahl, 2020).

Writing for *The World*, Jorge Valencia eulogizes Maradona in a piece that comments on Maradona's political views and connections (including the adjective "leftie" in the headline) and explains how his death was able to unite people in his home country of Argentina.

For the *Miami Herald* article, reporter Michelle Kaufman quotes Argentinian journalists and players to explain the impact of Maradona: "For us, Argentinean people, especially for me, he was our inspiration" - Soccer player Federico Higuaín - "He will be the No. 1 forever for me ... I don't care what he did in his life, I just care about him as a football player and I really love him", words that summarize a very Argentinian vision of Maradona, one that ignores, if not justifies, his excesses off the pitch to concentrate on his value as a player and an icon (Kaufman, 2020).

*Bleacher Report* features an article that first summarizes Maradona's career on the pitch, to then explain the reason for the fanatic love he received: "his nation is rightly mourning him, but he was a man who lived three lives in the space of one. Everything, all the time, was his mantra and he pretty much always had the pedal to the metal." (Stead, 2020). The article makes a great point of situating Maradona in his context: "Now, in the information age, reputations grow, blossom and quickly die, but back then, if you'd heard of pretty much any player from outside these shores before they played here, then you knew they simply had to be something special. The UK media, especially the press, was largely inward-looking and

parochial (then as now), so you had to be something special to break their wall of xenophobia and ignorance to become known outside of the World Soccer readership” (Stead, 2020).

*The Economist* published two articles. The first one was a shorter note on November 25 that briefly summarizes Maradona’s career and hints at his transcendence at the end with a degree of detachment: “Whether Mr Maradona was the greatest-ever player, ahead of his compatriot, Leo Messi, or Brazil’s Pelé, is a debate there is no need to resolve. With his humble origins, Guaraní blood and mop of dark curls, for Argentines he was ever the *pibe de oro*, the golden boy” (*The Economist*, 2020). In the obituary, Maradona is presented as a complicated character filled with contradictions (“a peronista and a Chavista”), touched by God’s genius (“the bearded guy” as he would call him), and more importantly, fueled by a very Argentinian concept of “anger, *bronca*, fury tinged with resentment”, that transformed in a sense of revenge that drove his career. (The Economist, 2020 b)

Sean Gregory writing for *Time* magazine, does not doubt to label Maradona as “undoubtedly one of the greatest” even in the headline, to then quote Telemundo sports broadcaster Andres Cantor, who situates Maradona in the context of Southern Italy: “Everyone, regardless of their nationality, wanted to see him play because of his magic. He made Argentina famous around the world. He made Napoli famous around the world. It's very hard for any reader to understand what he meant for Napoli. The very poor southern city in Italy that no one paid attention to. And suddenly this kid put Napoli on the map playing soccer and rebelled against the industrial north and beat the powerhouses of Milan and Juventus and Inter who were the more important and powerful teams not only in Italy but in the world and Europe especially” (Gregory, 2020).

One of the longest and more thoughtful obituaries was published in *The Washington Post*. Clarke defines Maradona as “a champion alternately invincible and incorrigible — and ultimately inscrutable”. The piece praises Maradona for his performance on the pitch and bashes him for his excesses elsewhere: “A self-proclaimed champion of the poor, he led a lifestyle of toxic excess”, explaining that an evaluation of Maradona’s career was complicated because “his sporting heroics so often undercut by inexcusable behavior”. Then the article explains Maradona’s career as a player and as a manager, ending with a quote from Argentine historian Osvaldo Bayer: “Maradona is what a kid dreams when he steps onto the field. It’s as simple as that. Later, he became something he never should have been. He fell from grace when he should have been a hero” (Clarke, 2020).

### **Maradona According to American Media**

Once analyzed the content of the articles and notes published in the thirty-four outlets selected, the second half of the paper explores the overall similarities in the approach to the death and life of Diego Armando Maradona.

The first and obvious conclusion is that the news occupied space and time in media. Maradona's death made it to the cover of *The New York Times* and the main page of ESPN, CNN, and multiple other platforms. However, it was not the main story of the day, as in European and South American media, which is easily explained by soccer's reach in other

countries. Therefore, it was expected that American media would cover the news but would not treat it as the main feature.

The content of the articles was informative and generalist. However, there was an evident detachment from the figure, which shows in the headlines analysis. Again, compared to media in other countries, American outlets did not spare too many adjectives and typically limited themselves to informing about the basic facts (one could argue that the most common headline would be something like "Diego Maradona, Argentine soccer star Dies at 60"). Therefore, the detachment from Maradona's figure is only a reflection of a society's journalistic culture, not prone to verbal or visual excesses (at least in the traditional media considered for this project). Nevertheless, the headlines were informative, and the treatment of the information was explanatory and succinct.

It can be argued that the approach to Maradona's death is a reflection of the media culture, which stems from a culture of hard-core news and a traditional journalistic approach to reporting. As an example, we had briefly noted the comparison with Kobe Bryant's death in January 2019. The life and careers of both figures are miles away, and so were the tragic circumstances of Bryant's death. However, even in that situation, American media were much more conscripted and austere than their European and South American counterparts. It is also interesting to note that one-third of the pieces were authored by Argentinian, Mexican, or Italian journalists, who generally offered a more personal, historical, and sociological explanation of Maradona.

It was interesting to discover a two-level approach to the figure of Maradona. Those outlets that only published one article tended to remain on the surface of the Argentinian. Those pieces typically explained the cause of his death, included quotes from the Argentinian government, explained Maradona's career, overwhelmingly concentrated on the 1986 Mexico World Cup game against England, and included an unapologetic take on Maradona's downfalls.

Of course, when the longer obituaries were published, the analysis reached a deeper level. Longer pieces situated Maradona in the context of Argentina in the 1970s, explained his boy wonder condition, his early signing with Argentinos Juniors, all the way to his last days as a manager in Mexico. Shorter pieces concentrated the explanation of Maradona in fundamentally one single moment in his career, that is the 1986 game against England, which seems reasonable because that game encapsulated both extremes of Maradona's life and career: the *potrero* attitude of the first goal and the whirlwind of technique and mastery of the second goal. Nevertheless, the longer pieces were able to explain even that game with more depth. First of all, by providing political and social context to the game and tying Maradona's rebellious worldview with the social tension in the country facing that game. Incidentally, most short pieces miss the game's second goal, which is still considered by many the best goal in the sport's history.

Another element of the media coverage that was common to all media coverage was the treatment of the many downfalls and episodes that Maradona lived throughout. It is difficult to find a similar example of an athlete who has enjoyed the popularity that Maradona did while incurring many dark episodes (from tax evasion to illegitimate fatherhood to very public drug recovery efforts). This is perhaps the crucial point of difference in the treatment



of Maradona in the American media vs. the rest of the world (perhaps we should add the soccer-dominated countries, the craze about Maradona was evident in South America and Europe, but it was also present in countries like India, Israel, Egypt, or South Africa).

The difference in the treatment of Maradona's scandals in different countries can be simplified: South American and European media explain the Argentinian excesses as something apart from the game, disconnected to his skills and value as a soccer player. American media, however, does not disassociate the two and even looks at the sometimes forgiving views of Maradona with surprise. Therefore, the coverage in the United States did not shy away from explaining Maradona's life off the court. The short pieces included references to his health issues, addictions, and personality. Moreover, while they were able to acknowledge the tremendous popularity of Maradona, they often had to include quotes from Argentinian journalists and commentators to explain the meaning of Maradona for the country.

It is not only the prevalence of football as the world's most popular sport almost everywhere but the United States, it was also the fact that the figure of Diego Armando Maradona was difficult to encapsulate, understand, and appreciate by American audiences, much more accustomed to a different sports hero narrative. Maradona was a problematic figure to interpret for an audience used to a much more comfortable success story in the sports world.

Like any other country, the American sports pantheon is filled with heroes, with rags-to-riches stories of athletes overcoming structural poverty and becoming successful at their job. Some other stories are ones of tenacity, resilience, and determination. Americans understand sports as an extension of their competitive nature and nurture their kids to be competitive from a younger age. In a broad sense, it reflects a country built upon the idea of entrepreneurship and leadership. An American sports hero is someone who not only excels at their craft but that inspires others: "Indeed, being a hero goes beyond performing physical feats. Every athlete does that. It's their business. It's the ones who are heroic away from their respective sport, the ones who sacrifice their time, money, and sometimes even personal well-being for the betterment of others, that are actually worthy of our admiration" (Rymer, 2010). Sports heroes are a reminder of an attitude in life that includes overcoming difficulties, striving to better oneself, and learning to appreciate the value of effort. However, sports practice is constrained by a series of unwritten sports codes, such as loyalty, humility, and respect for the adversary. When sports heroes break those codes, American media tends to find a moralistic approach. Mariano Siskind, professor at Harvard University, uses Maradona's second goal in the 1986 World Cup game against England ("the goal of the century") to exemplify this circumstance: "There are two interpretations of that goal that break along geopolitical lines: The typical U.S., British moralistic view said that was cheating, but across Latin America, Africa, and the Third World, they view it as a form of humiliating a former colonial power and the ultimate expression of cunning or shrewdness, which is central to a ludic conception of the game (and of life) that stands outside of the realm of morality" (Mineo, 2020).

Sports heroes in the United States are admired and respected in media for their sporting achievements. Nevertheless, the expectations of how they need to behave are strict, and the

media is unforgiven. Therefore, when sports idols become the center of attention for anything unrelated to their performance, media and public opinion quickly shift to remove them from the pedestal or question their legacy (the question of which comes first, media or public opinion is one worth exploring in this case). There is also a financial impact on athlete's downfalls. Falling from grace for athletes also involves losing sponsorships and contracts (another element of stark differentiation between American and European sports organizations).

While American sports have had a fair share of controversial sports heroes, from Denis Rodman to Muhammad Ali (perhaps the closest figure in terms of his political involvement), it is hard to find an equivalent to the figure of Maradona. The Argentinian was an extremely gifted player, who rose to stardom in challenging social and economic circumstances, and who received a level of fan adoration and media attention unparalleled to any other soccer celebrity before or after. Maradona's personality, political opinions, and struggles with addictions were part of his charm: Argentinians and Neapolitans saw him as a folk hero, as a reminder of simpler times with simpler rules. Maradona openly admitted the many mistakes throughout his life, and yet these were not seen as impediments to the passion he sparked in soccer fans everywhere.

Maradona was the perfect exemplification of the explosive combination of Argentinian and Italian ethos in his cultural context: a superb talent with a survivor attitude in a never-ending fight against the establishment. In that sense, his figure represented something more significant than a soccer player. Other legends such as Johan Cruyff, Pelé, or Alfredo Di Stefano, had passed into posterity as great heroes with impressive legacies, but no one achieved the demi-god status of Maradona.

While Americans culturally agree on admiring the achievements on the field, it is more complicated to make sense of someone as publicly flawed as Maradona. When American sports heroes fall from grace, they usually appeal to the better angels of public opinion asking for forgiveness, showing signs of repentance in press conferences, and apologizing profusely. Maradona could never fit that mold. He was unapologetic about his shortcomings and wore like a badge of honor his tumultuous personal life. Nevertheless, his countrymen adored him and the soccer community, in general, had a sweet spot for him.

The key to understanding Maradona for American media lies in the lack of an equivalent figure. American sports have produced great heroes such as Babe Ruth, Michael Jordan, or Michael Phelps. Some other heroes have fallen from grace for different reasons, such as O.J. Simpson, Tiger Woods, or Denis Rodman. However, in the history of sports in the United States, no figure has accumulated as much talent and tragedy as Maradona did for soccer in Argentina.

Another element of importance in the analysis is the contrast between the sports landscape in the United States versus South America and Europe. American fans have many competitions and leagues to follow, even with specific calendars to avoid overlapping. American sports fans tune in to the "big five" sports: football (college level through the NCAA and professional leagues such as the NFL), baseball (MLB), basketball (NBA), hockey (NHL), and lastly, soccer (MLS). Television audiences also reflect the same tendency.

According to a poll by Gallup, football was the preferred sport to watch (37%), followed by basketball (11%) and baseball (9%) (Norman, 2019).

In contrast, European audiences overwhelmingly prefer to follow soccer, both at the national league level and at the international European competitions, according to a recent white paper published by the research think tank YouGovsport. The same applies to South American audiences, who turn in massively for FIFA World Cups, Commebol, Copa Libertadores, and local leagues. Of course, other important sports are played and followed, but the prevalence of soccer is overwhelming. Therefore, while Americans have various sports heroes to idolize, the rest of the world mostly looks at soccer.

American media also falls short of understanding the profound social and political roots of sports teams in South America. While in the United States, sports franchises and leagues have operated as businesses since their inception, in South America (and Europe as well), sports teams are deeply rooted in cities and villages. While in America, teams may change owners, move to a different city, and adopt a new name, teams are part of the local fabric in other nations. In the case of Argentina, soccer clubs have become an indivisible part of the social fabric of the cities and regions, with arguably the most passionate follower bases in the world and, unfortunately, an unparalleled level of violence around the games.

Understanding Maradona's history, personality, and persona require an in-depth look at the historical, cultural, and socioeconomic circumstances that turned Maradona into the larger-than-life figure he became. Maradona was a product of the troubled 1970s decade in Argentina and the military junta that ruled the country with an iron fist. At only fifteen, he became a boy prodigy in a country arguably void of idols since Eva Perón's death in 1952. Nevertheless, his humble origins were something that Maradona not only never forgot but wore as a badge of honor and shaped much of his worldview.

In a world of sports heroes, Maradona was the archetypical anti-hero, a player filled with talent and tragedy at the same time. Professor Siskind explains the tension of heroes and anti-heroes utilizing Nietzsche's "The Birth of Tragedy," which contrasts Apollo's myth as the god of order, poetry, and rational behavior, and Dionysus god of festivities and madness. Pelé represents the former, Maradona the latter: "I propose that Maradona is the perfect embodiment of the Dionysian in us, and how important it is to make room in our lives, in the world, for the forms of unbounded freedom and desire he represents. Maradona and other Dionysian figures make it possible to imagine ourselves beyond the boundaries of social pieties, to imagine ourselves breaking free from structures we often experience as asphyxiating prisons" (Mineo, 2020).

American media looked at Maradona first from a journalistic distance and reported his death based on the facts and the global impact of the Argentinian. American media acknowledged his relevance for the sport of soccer and also reported on his controversies, scandals, and tumultuous episodes. Maradona was presented as a global icon, a sports legend, but his negative side was less apologetic than media in Europe and South America. While the rest of the world somehow forgave Maradona's excesses (not just in his death but throughout his life), American media's treatment did not try to justify or contextualize his dark side.

The gradual growth of soccer in the United States explains the treatment and the acknowledgment of Maradona's figure for the international soccer community. However, he is also seen as culturally foreign to the United States, where soccer faces much fiercer competition with other sports such as football or baseball. The analysis also reflects that when the media published more than one article and offered a more in-depth look at Maradona, the analysis became much more precise. In those cases, and many times, aided by Argentinian commentators, American media started to grasp a figure hard to understand and unparalleled in the American sports landscape.

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