



» Outside view

THE ARENA AS A CASINO

The French-Senegalese novelist Fatou Diome on the commercialisation of sport

Sport? The French dictionary *Le Petit Robert* first introduces the idea of a 'pastime', then gives this definition: 'Sport: a physical activity undertaken for play, competition and exertion, and whose practice requires training and involves respecting certain rules and disciplines.' Defining something confines it, sets out a semantic perimeter which can itself evolve with passing time.

It is clear that in modern day life, sport – whether individual or collective – oversteps succinct dictionary definitions. If we imagine contemporary thinking as a vast ocean into which we could throw the word 'sport' as a net, we would haul in at random the following concepts: physical effort, relaxation, meeting people, team spirit, event, competition, confrontation, victory, wealth, celebrity, dreams, challenges, doping... Everything becomes more complicated and the thematic scope broadens when we explore the imaginary world revolving around sport.

In a century whose culture focuses on appearance and performance, for many people involvement in any form of sport has become a

way of staying in the race. Some people do adhere to the famous phrase attributed to Churchill, 'no sport', but there are countless medical and aesthetic considerations that transform even couch potatoes into conscientious sports men and women.

Amateur sport may well still have its element of play, but is there any sense of a 'game' left in professional sport? The very word profession presupposes work, hence exercising an activity with certain constraints, even if merely the promise of remuneration. Accepting that sport has become just another economic sector means implicitly acknowledging that the lure of financial gain has supplanted the heroic values of old. This evolution is happening all around the world, but its effects vary from one geographical area to the next.

Right back to the gymnasias of ancient Greece, our forefathers the world over engaged in physical activity for exertion, pleasure and the challenge. In return for their prowess they hoped only to feel pride in exceeding their own expectations, and to earn the admiration of their community. In Senegal, for example, tradi-

» PROFILE

Fatou Diome was born in Senegal in 1968 and has lived in Strasbourg, France, for 20 years. After studying literature, she taught at the University of Strasbourg and Karlsruhe University of Education. Fatou Diome has published five novels and a collection of short stories. Her debut novel, *The Belly of the Atlantic* (2006), deals with immigration: it tells the story of Madické, a young boy who cannot read and write but who dreams of a career as a footballer in Europe.

tional wrestling among the Serer people was a rite of passage. Through this ancestral sport, which required technique and endurance, young men made the transition to adulthood by demonstrating vigour, skill and courage in combat. They were eligible to fight only after an initiation process, a training period during which the elders instilled in them the community's ethical values. From one tournament to the next and one season to the next, the best in each age range would emerge. For a long time the most important trophy for a champion was a simple flag and a rope; the rope represented the ox he had won. Modest returns we might think from our financially motivated perspective, but that would be forgetting that these wrestlers fought primarily for honour. The greatest rewards for them were praise and singing and the handsome hand-woven fabrics that the women festooned them with during the victory dance.

Nowadays sponsors and television channels transform every wrestling match into a po-

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tential jackpot. The arena has become a giant casino in which gladiators, crazed by enormous fees, pulverise each other without a second thought. In Africa and Europe alike, new demands are changing the social function of sport, and athletes' aspirations are not what they once were. Long gone are the days when Pindar's lyrical poetry celebrated the heroic spirit more than the hero, praising the winner with his crown of laurels for his moral qualities above all else.

The mercenary aspect of present-day sport is changing the very nature of some disciplines. Traditional Senegalese wrestling, for example, now includes punches, integrating the codes and violence of boxing in order to be more of a spectacle, but flouting the ethical values it once promulgated. With their traditional initiation invalidated, boys are abandoning school and

deserting rural communities. Drawn to the instant wealth of big name wrestling, they join wrestling 'stables' in cities, condemning themselves to a thankless future. And, because the huge sums involved in professional football still fuel dreams, some see illegal immigration as a way of profiting from their well-turned calves.

Transfers, buying, selling, lending, contracts – this commercial lexicon has become familiar in football, and other sports are following in its wake. Most of these transactions take place in the Western world, but in an age of globalisation when information is available worldwide, the stratospheric sums involved in sports contracts engender fantasies and a sense of vocation. Many players are prepared to risk their lives to reach this supposed El Dorado in the West. Speculators exploit this, trawling Africa to recruit young talent, luring them with the promise of lucrative careers. Footballers have become merchandise, and agents take a punt on their African recruits as others might on a

far from closing the North/South divide, its current financialisation is accentuating this economic imbalance.

We do have the Olympic Games as a remnant of the sporting agons in Ancient Greece, but Polyclitus' Diadumenos is no longer enough to justify present day tendencies in sport. Citius, Altius, Fortius... perhaps but Coubertin would be disappointed to see that his motto now galvanises only gold diggers. Cups and medals look pretty on television but it's their financial value that makes people sweat. Once worshipped before altars to the gods, the athlete's body is now profane, offered up to big brands who transform it into a sandwich man for advertising. Like film actors, champions are now stars, and they fascinate more for their wealth than their virtues. In a way, their questionable behaviour even helps build their legend, as if celebrity granted absolution. It is no longer the exploit that towers over us but the podium, and so disproportionately so that spectators beneath it are crushed, not by the athletes themselves, the objects of their admiration, but by the infrastructure crowning them.

When sportsmen train today, others think for them, evaluate them and negotiate their talents. What if Rodin's amputated sculptures, his headless athletes, were an allegory for our contemporary sportsmen? ■

Translation: Adriana Hunter

horse. A handful from poor countries might achieve success in Europe, but the majority of football exiles are bitterly disillusioned. There are frequent discussions about plundering Africa's raw materials, about the brain drain and emigration, but the question of a sport drain also warrants consideration. Of course the stampede of young men towards European clubs is not the only motive for emigration but it is now a more than negligible factor. There are many aspiring young footballers not taken on by clubs who end up with no papers, reduced to abject poverty in Europe. If the dividends of sport are welcome in Africa, the continent can develop its potential effectively only by favouring education and training geared towards a genuine policy for integrating the young. It is said that sport helps bring nations together but,