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Football statues: honouring heroes by branding in bronze?

More than 60 statues of UK football players and managers have now been unveiled in the UK, almost all within the past 2 decades. Collectively they represent the largest collection of figurative sculpture within a specific sport outside of the US, and make up the largest occupational subject group within the recent revival of the wider public statuary. This paper investigates the motivations behind their construction, the interaction of these motivations with location, design and subject choice, and assesses the extent to which this portrayal of sporting heroes from the past brings history to the public.

Using both collective evidence from across the existing statuary and a detailed examination of specific statues, we argue that, rather than merely commemorating dead heroes, 'sporting statues' are most often a multi-faceted branding weapon for the clubs or local authorities that erect them. When sited at football clubs, they are designed to generate nostalgia and create an idealised authentic yet simultaneously sanitised landscape attractive to current fans, sports tourists and further commercial investment; and to offer a sense of place and distinct visual motif in an increasingly homogenised environment. Similar motives lie behind statues erected in urban centres, most often in cities that are in search of a new identity; here they also reflect the increased profile of sport, and football in particular, in the wider public consciousness, and a desire by local authorities to use this to brand their locale rather than the traditional statue subjects of royalty, military or political leaders.

Finally we review the positive and negative aspects of football statues in terms of how they are received and interpreted by the public, and assess their likely future development. Are they a force for good in uniting and educating fans or are they an example of a mythology built upon sympathy, nostalgia and 'victor's justice' that mis-represents and re-writes our sporting history? How do they relate to the statuary of other UK sports? And has their construction peaked or will new motivations drive a further increase in their numbers?