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Commemorating Tragic Heroes: Statuary of Footballers Who Died Mid-Career

Chris Stride (University of Sheffield, UK) and Ffion Thomas (UCLan,UK)

Statues of footballers are a phenomenon as global as the sport itself, with over 300 currently in situ at stadiums or civic sites around the world. In his analysis of the monuments of Washington DC, historian Kirk Savage notes how 'monuments erected by a people... reveal who the people really are'. Accordingly, these bronze ball players tell us how clubs and fans seek to construct cultural memory from a combination of their social mores, and their perception of the hero depicted. In this way they offer a lens through which to examine the similarities, differences and temporal changes in football cultures across national boundaries. Almost 95% of these statues have been erected within the past 20 years. Twin drivers behind the rapid growth in football statues are their use by clubs as part of a marketing strategy to evoke nostalgia and hence increase fan attachment; and a desire by clubs, fans and communities to proclaim a distinctive and successful identity within stadium and civic landscapes that are increasing globalised, commercial and homogenous. It is not uncommon for statue subjects to be alive when unveiled - and a handful have been still-active players.

However, a small subset of football statues have been motivated by the collective grief of a life and career cut unexpectedly short. Monuments erected for this reason have deeper roots than the wider football statuary, but in common with that wider statuary, have also become more frequent, to the extent that, when an active professional player dies, there is now an immediate clamour for statuary amongst fans. Such statues, at least initially, are primarily sites of mourning and commemoration of a life lost, and as such might be expected to have similar themes. However, the design, location and meanings of these monuments show heterogeneity atypical of the wider statuary. Further, this variation reflects specific intersections between football, fanaticism and religion across a range of national and supporter cultures, engagements and tensions illustrated by considering three cases where an active player's sudden death has inspired figurative sculpture.

In August 2001, goalkeeper Serhiy Perkhun died from a head injury sustained in a collision with an opposing forward whilst playing for CSKA Moscow. He is commemorated in his home city of Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine, in front of the State Institute of Physical Culture and Sports. Perkhun's statue (figure 1), funded by fans of his hometown and first club, FC Dnipro, combines idealised goalkeeping aesthetics with overt religious imagery, his body soaring upwards towards heaven, catching a ball decorated with stars.

Conversely Dragan Mance's statue in Novo Groblje (New Cemetery), Belgrade, (figure 2) converts football fanaticism and flashbulb memory into secular material form within a religious setting. The lauded Partizan prodigy, killed in a car crash in 1985, kneels in his trademark celebratory pose having scored a crucial goal against bitter city rivals Red Star. Enhanced by an accompanying flagstone in club colours, the partisan (and Partizan) nature of the monument is an overt demonstration of fan power and commitment to Mance and the club. By siting their statue at an accessible location yet one that requires a deliberate act of visiting, fans have also created a place of pilgrimage for followers of the 'religion' of Partizan Belgrade, and annexed public, religious space within a divided city.

The statue of Antonio Puerta (figure 3), a memorial to the Sevilla FC defender who died shortly after collapsing during a match in 2007, is located at a secular site, and does not draw upon religious iconography. Its funding by Sevilla FC and erection outside of their stadium provides an official club sanction for, and ownership of the commemorative process. The statue foregrounds club successes that Puerta was part of, though the inscription and images of trophies on the plaque. The action design is typical of stadium statues the world over. Puerta's figure is deliberately oriented towards the sunrise to reflect his emergence from Sevilla's successful youth academy, and the hope of further glory this brings.

Figure 1: Statue of Serhiy Perkhun, Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine



Figure 2: Statue and grave of Dragan Mance, Belgrade, Serbia



Figure 3: Statue of Antonio Puerta, Sevilla, Spain



Authors and CVs:

Dr Chris Stride, Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, UK
c.b.stride@sheffield.ac.uk

Chris Stride is the statistician at the Institute of Work Psychology, University of Sheffield. He has published across a wide range of social science disciplines and beyond, and is particularly interested in the use of statistical methods to support and add rigour to research in areas where advanced quantitative analysis would typically be considered an anathema.

Ffion Thomas, School of Sport, Tourism and the Outdoors, University of Central Lancashire, UK
fthomas@uclan.ac.uk

Ffion Thomas is a postgraduate student at the University of Central Lancashire, UK, with research interests in football and baseball, and is currently investigating the impact of nostalgia upon the visual culture of sport.

For the past 3 years, Chris and Ffion have been working together on the Sporting Statues Project, which has combined a series of publications examining the development, motivations and meanings of the world's sporting statuary, with collection and dissemination of data on UK sports, US baseball and world cricket statues via the project website www.sportingstatues.com. The database collection/creation/ dissemination phase will conclude by 'unveiling' a database of the world's football statues in March 2014.

www.sportingstatues.com, twitter.com/sportingstatues

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- Stride, C. B. 'Bronze boundary markers' *The Cricket Statistician* (2013).
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Conference papers, media coverage and project information are listed at www.sportingstatues.com