How football fans perceive sports heroes – The case of Israel

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- A) conception and design of the study
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Abstract

Background: Hero-making and hero-worship are common in human society. Yet despite the universal appeal of heroes, the features attributed to these figures and the attitudes toward them change depending upon the circumstances. Heroes have been the topic of extensive discussion in the academic literature. Nevertheless, little research attention has been directed at sports heroes. Examining soccer heroes is of special importance, particularly in view of soccer's popularity across the globe and the celebrity status of top soccer stars.

Purpose: The objective of this paper is to examine and map the defining features of soccer heroes as subjectively perceived by their fans.

Methods: We conducted a qualitative study that entailed semi-structured interviews with 18 young Israeli soccer fans as well as content analysis of fan chants.

Results: The research findings indicate that fans attribute special importance to three main characteristics that are not perceived as dominant among heroes in other contexts: loyalty to team and family, modesty and morality, and the ability to influence their surroundings. Based on the findings, the paper discusses the unique nature of soccer heroes in contrast to other elite players and the role played by these heroes for their fans.

Key words: Heroes, Role Model, Soccer, Football

Introduction

Research literature has discussed and extensively examined the significance of larger-than-life figures in society, their influence on individuals and groups, and the psychological needs they satisfy. Known as “heroes” or “role models,” these figures have appeared throughout human history, from Oedipus in Greek mythology to popular athletes in the modern age, such as German racing driver Michael Schumacher (Biskup & Pfister, 1999). While the image of the hero has taken many forms, for the most part it is marked by a limited number of characteristics that exert a similar impact on human beings (Allison & Goethals, 2016). The hero figure answers an individual and social need and can therefore find expression in various fields. This study examines the widespread admiration afforded to sports heroes who serve as role models for sports fans (Shuart, 2007). In view of soccer's popularity across the globe and the disproportionate lack of research attention given to this specific branch of sport, the study focuses on

soccer heroes. The research objective is to examine and map the characteristics of soccer heroes as perceived by fans. To this end, the research adopts a qualitative approach that uses two research tools: in-depth interviews and content analysis.

Literature review

There are many terms for sports heroes in the theoretical literature, including celebrated athletes, celebrities, stars, icons, and role models. Their commonality is that they are all athletes who enjoy a special status among the public and the media due to their success in sports. The existence of such a variety of definitions is mainly due to contradictions between those figures' values and appeal inside and outside the sports context. For example, Reid (2017) points out that contrary to the heroic perception of sports heroes as soldiers or Good Samaritans, sports heroes do not protect the innocent or save lives and, in any case, do not endanger their lives in order to achieve their goals. That is, they do not exhibit self-sacrifice or make any form of contribution to society and its weakest members. Moreover, their role as role models may also be perceived as problematic. For even if they are setting an example of sporting excellence, it is only relevant to other athletes at their level who can make effective use of this example (*ibid.*). Therefore, their status as role models should be based on their ability to display excellence in other sports or other fields. Freezell (2005) notes that celebrated athletes may influence others' behavior, especially young fans, but do not set a moral example or even represent normative behavior, meaning they cannot be role models outside the context of sports. In comparison, Dixon and Flynn (2008) argue that the public also sees universal values such as integrity, expertise, reliability, and durability in sports celebrities. The conceptual distance between athletes and the traditional model of heroes is also found in Tännsjö's (1998) claims that when it comes to sports, common spectators have contempt for personal weaknesses and evaluate athletes primarily on talents and success above hard work. In the present article, we do not seek to define the sports hero's contribution or values but rather focus on how fans perceive this term.

The dictionary defines the word "hero" as "a person admired for achievements and noble qualities" (Merriam-Webster.com, 2020). This definition refers to two distinctive traits of the hero: personal characteristics and actions. Hence, being a hero does not depend solely upon physical strength or inborn talent. Rather, a woman fighting breast cancer can also be defined as a hero (Burrows, 2010). Indeed, someone who has no remarkable personal achievements but has demonstrated bravery, endurance and sometimes even self-sacrifice in coping with a particular difficulty can be considered a hero (Keczer et al., 2016). In their paper on the prototype of the hero, (Kinsella et al., 2015) identified thirteen central features alongside thirteen peripheral features. Among the central features were moral integrity, bravery, self-sacrifice, selflessness and altruism, while the peripheral features included leadership, strength, humility and risk-taking. Being deemed a hero is not necessarily dependent upon superiority over others, but rather on reciprocal relations with others. Accordingly, another definition of hero" focuses on serving as a role model (Parry, 2009), defined as an influential individual who is "geographically, generationally and experientially close" to the lives of those being influenced (Walker, 2007). According to Zimbardo (2011), the modern hero is not exalted over others or endowed with special inherent abilities. Rather, a hero is an ordinary person who understands the risks they are taking, is willing to pay a personal price, and whose actions are perceived as heroic in that they are intended to serve a moral cause. From here emerges society's need for heroes who on the one hand represent the potential for greatness among ordinary people and on the other hand symbolize taking a stand against something perceived as negative, such as injustice, evil, or corruption.

Both celebrities and heroes arouse admiration among fans and are perceived as role models based on the values they represent or based on their behavior. Both, in the modern world, are images represented by the media (Dumitriu, 2018). Moreover, the recent expansion of the hero concept includes aspects of everyday activities, blurring the line between heroes and celebrities (Frisk, 2018). Similarly, Reid (2017) argues that a reduction in sports heroes' status as such is due to the alleged exploitation of their status as celebrities. Reid notes that the connection between athletes and heroes stems from their relationship to heroism or its values. This aspect is crucial for differentiating between the two terms as it emphasizes the message or values that athletes represent. Celebrities represent sporting success expressed in terms of status and money, while sports heroes represent behaviors described in connection with heroism and its values.

Among other things, fans' identification with sports heroes stems from a desire for a connection to success, thus leading to a sense of emotional and social well-being (Teitelbaum, 2008). This identification also contributes to fans' sense of self-efficacy and motivation to succeed (Jun et al., 2016). Hero worship also serves the social need to preserve the ideal perception that individuals can succeed in realizing their dreams despite outside

limitations (Rader, 1983). Thus, because heroic leadership is of value to society, people act to ensure that heroes will remain part of the collective conscience and memory (Allison & Goethals, 2016). The special status afforded to sports celebrities in modern society reinforces the desire to model oneself on them and attracts others to this field (Shuart, 2007). According to Gammon (2014), perceptions of sports heroes and their qualities are also dependent upon the local cultural context. For example, in North America the emphasis is primarily on winning, while the British concept also relies upon the aesthetics of sports. Despite this, specific common characteristics can still be attributed to sports heroes. More than three decades ago, Barney (1985) described a number of such qualities, among them athletic excellence, moral excellence, altruism, and an ethical lifestyle appropriate for the times. These qualities must be placed in historical context, and the way the sports hero arrived at these personal and athletic achievements should also be considered (Hughson, 2009). The importance of context is tied to society's need for heroes and to the way in which heroism is expressed (Gammon, 2014). While heroes are measured by their achievements, an achievement can find expression in major victories as well as in steadfast resistance to defeats (Rauch, 1996), as can be seen in the cinematic portrayals of sports heroes and the widespread interest in athletes who are underdogs and therefore not among those favored to win. At the end of such movies, success in sports is measured by impressive victories or by losses after brave confrontations on equal ground against favored athletes endowed with greater talents, as in movies such as *Cool Runnings* (1993), *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), and *Rocky* (1976; Vandello et al., 2016).

The literature provides much evidence for the extent to which heroes influence individuals (Keczer et al., 2016) and the importance of sports heroes to their fans' lives (Shuart, 2007). The sports hero phenomenon encompasses various components that touch upon the notion of hero-making and sports in general. A sports hero is defined by heroic qualities shared by heroes in other fields of human endeavors as well as by outstanding and exceptional athletic abilities (Lines, 2001). Sports fans expect their heroes to embody characteristics valued by society, such as leadership and determination, and at the same time exhibit proficiency and expertise in their sport (Parry, 2009). Bobby Charlton, a soccer player who survived the Munich air disaster and had a long career with Manchester United, is very popular with fans but is not considered a hero. One attribute that fans consider to have been a barrier to his becoming a hero was his distance from the fans and his preference for socializing with the club managers rather than the other players on his team (Taylor, 2000). Heroes are outstanding due to their talents, but at the same time they are ordinary people, just like their fans (Woolridge, 2002). Fans also look for universal cultural values in their heroes that find expression outside the arena of competitive sports. Among these values are loyalty to the family and involvement in charitable work (Parry, 2009), alongside tolerance, excellence, and compassion (Berg, 2002). Note also that heroic activities often entail other personal attributes seen as positive, such as special talents and an aesthetically pleasing external appearance. Hence, many modern cultural heroes represent a combination of good looks and good works, particularly in fields demanding skills, such as acting, politics, and sports (Allison & Goethals, 2011). With respect to the outward appearance of athletes, Nevill et al. (2009) found that the top ten soccer players of 2000 were taller (by 1.2 centimeters) and heavier (by 1.29 kilograms) than their successful counterparts in the previous decade.

In the 21st century, the popularity of sports in modern society is rising. Among other reasons, this is due to the increased dominance of new media (Boyle, 2009). Furthermore, sports heroes appear more frequently in the media (Whannel, 2005). As a result of this increase in the popularity of sports in modern society and the expansion of media coverage, high-level athletes have gained worldwide recognition among both men and women, and even among those who are not interested in sports (Lines, 2001). This rise in the number of familiar sports figures is accompanied by a growing number of people seeking role models and heroes in the world of sports (Parry, 2009). In addition, the world of sports is replete with linguistic expressions related to these heroes and the myths surrounding them (Levental & Galily, 2018). In a study conducted in England among students studying various sports disciplines, more than 75% indicated that they admired at least one sports hero who often served as a role model for their behavior (Shuart, 2007). The popularity of sports heroes also finds expression in the establishment of sports halls of fame and museums (Snyder, 1991). Today, the mass media is the main source of information about current events, while at the same time sports have claimed a larger volume of the various media in terms of content and channels (Vogan, 2015). Hence, more than any other area, the field of sports serves as fertile ground for hero-making (Lucifora & Simmons, 2003). Note that the period of a sports hero's professional and competitive activity is limited, usually up to two decades. Nevertheless, the games in which a hero takes part are documented and discussed by fans, in the press, on television shows, and in films, such that the hero remains in the public consciousness for much longer periods of time (Woolridge, 2002).

Methods

This study focuses on soccer heroes as their fans perceive them. It should be emphasized that this study dealt with Israeli fans' perceptions of athletes from Israel and other European countries. While cultural importance cannot be ignored, sports fandom's visual expressions and motivations in modern times are mostly similar across the globe (Johnson et al., 2021). Therefore, while this study is particularly relevant to the Israeli case, it can serve as a basis for the analysis of fan perceptions worldwide.

The research objective is to examine the defining characteristics of soccer heroes as subjectively perceived by soccer fans from different groups. The goal is to find points of similarity in how these heroes are defined that are not dependent on the personal context of these idolized athletes. To this end, we adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach that entailed conducting semi-structured interviews with 18 sports fans. All the interviewees were men between the ages of 19 and 27, Israeli residents, Hebrew speakers, and fans of various soccer clubs in Israel and in Europe: Liverpool and Arsenal (UK); Barcelona and Real Madrid (Spain); Beitar Jerusalem, Maccabi Haifa, Maccabi Tel-Aviv, and Hapoel Haifa (Israel); and Inter Milan and Roma (Italy). The study included soccer clubs from four different countries to elicit characterizations of soccer heroes that were not dependent on the heroes' local circumstances but rather on the Israeli cultural and social context. The participants were chosen in two ways. First, we contacted official fan organizations through Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups and asked them to participate in the study. Second, due to the closed nature of these fan groups, we also used the snowball method to locate additional interviewees (Haridakis, 2010).

The researchers built the semi-structured interviews used in this study. The use of this research tool facilitated delving into the interviewees' subjective interpretations while maintaining flexibility, which is essential in qualitative research that seeks subjectivity (Shkedi, 2011). All the interviews took place face to face in the first months of 2020. In some cases, complementary interviews took place by phone. The questions focused on characterizing the image of the sports hero and the hero's perceived importance in soccer fans' lives. To this end, some questions touched upon the soccer heroes themselves, while others focused on the fans and their support. Sample questions include "What characterizes you as a soccer fan, and how does your support find expression in your everyday life?" and "What are the outstanding features or characteristics of your soccer hero?" In addition, the questionnaire included a question focusing on a negative incident related to the hero, in accordance with the identity of the specific hero. The following question, for example, was asked about soccer hero Steven Gerrard: "How did you feel when Gerrard made his famous dive, which cost Liverpool the game and, according to some, the championship for that season?" About Thierry Henry, the questionnaire asked, "How did you feel when Henry left to join Barcelona after eight years with Arsenal?" The purpose of these questions was to examine the interviewees' attitudes toward incidents that seemingly contradicted the hero image and related characteristics, such as athletic success and loyalty, that emerged from the literature review. In analyzing the interviews, we placed emphasis on the interviewees' various interpretations of the image of a soccer hero as well as each interviewee's subjective views. First, we analyzed the interviews separately to determine central and outstanding categories. Then, we mapped the interviews to formulate thematic categories.

To complete the individual perspective, we used another research tool: content analysis of fan chants. These songs served as an additional platform that facilitated collective observation from the point of view of soccer fans and their attitude toward their favorite players. Popular fan chants are important as they point to two critical aspects in the present study. One is that their popularity expresses the fans' connection as a community to the symbolic content that appears in the lyrics. That is, they feature images of heroes as perceived by sports fans. The second is that they contribute to forming a collective identity among the fan community by representing its common symbols. We chose five songs in English from the internet site *Fanchants.com* that referred to fan favorites for a particular club. The objective of analyzing these chants was to provide a comparative perspective to the fans' individual interviews. The chants selected were "Duncan Is Our Hero" (Everton), "Big Paddy Bonner" (Celtic), "Forever and Ever" (Manchester United), "When You're Smiling" (Leicester City), and "Stevie Gerrard Is Our Captain" (Liverpool). Due to the small sample, relative uniformity of the songs was needed. Therefore, all songs chosen were in the English language, from a similar fan culture, and perceived as particularly popular. That is, the songs were in congruence and offered a reliable representation of the fans.

Results

Analysis of the interviews yielded a broad range of personal attributes and behavioral characteristics of soccer heroes. Among others, these touched upon their personal conduct outside the world of soccer, their perceived

emotional ties, their professional choices, their behavior on the field, their place in the minds of fans, and their personal stories. While all these were noted frequently and in the context of specific players, three central and significant themes emerged among all the interviewees. These themes reflect how the research participants perceived their soccer heroes and yielded an image focused on their behavioral and symbolic traits. The names of the themes were taken from soccer fan chants and express the main ideas emerging from these themes: loyalty, being a role model, and having emotional influence. The first theme discusses the importance of loyalty in defining a soccer player as a hero, mainly in the context of fan loyalty to the hero and the team being reciprocated through the hero's loyalty to the fans and the team. The second theme deals with the soccer hero's status as a role model through athletic behavior on the field and positive ethical conduct off the field. The third theme describes the emotional impact of the soccer hero on a fan as deriving both from the hero's status as a revered figure and from the fan's profound emotional investment in the hero and the team. This impact is in essence the perceived result of the first two themes.

Loyalty: “He wears his shirt with pride, he wears it all the time”

The name of this theme is taken from the Everton fans' chant about their hero Duncan Ferguson. The chant underscores the soccer player's loyalty to the club:

*Duncan is our hero, he wears the Number 9,
He wears his shirt with pride,
He wears it all the time.
He wears it in the shower...*

This loyalty to the club and its symbols is the most prominent characteristic through which the interviewees identified their heroes. The research participants attributed particular importance to the issue of loyalty for two reasons. The first is the moral significance attributed to loyalty in all areas of society, making it valuable in the context of sports as well. The second is that the commercialization and globalization of modern soccer has weakened the ties between players and clubs so that today loyalty is even more valued because it is rare. This factor is of interest because the research literature on heroes in general and sports heroes in particular does not refer to loyalty as a positive characteristic. For example, loyalty and devotion were not among the 26 central or peripheral features defined by Kinsella et al. (2015). An example of the major importance of loyalty in defining a hero can be seen in these remarks by one of the interviewees: “True sports heroes are those who are the most devoted to the club, have the strongest ties to the fans and spend most of their career with one club.” This loyalty to one club often is at the cost of the player's personal success, for by moving from one club to another, a player can improve the financial terms of their contract and enhance their overall recognition and prestige. Another Arsenal fan referred to this when describing his soccer hero, Thierry Henry, as being both “a star and loyal and [thus] not only in pursuit of money or success.” This preference for loyalty over the pursuit of fame or success is popular in modern society in general and therefore also applies to the world of sports heroes (Lines, 2001).

The interviewees pointed to three areas in which loyalty finds expression in a sports hero: loyalty to family, to fans, and to the team. The first refers to the hero's loyalty to family, and in particular to a spouse. For example, one of the fans noted the following about his hero Lionel Messi: “He's loyal to his wife as well. They've been together since age 13. He's a family man. He's loyal to the club and to his wife, the same wife since he was young. Especially today, when so many celebrities don't stay with their wives or cheat on them...”. These remarks express the fan's admiration and respect for this quality. This component of the importance of family has also emerged in previous studies that pointed to the special significance of a hero's loyalty to the family (see Brownhill, 2010; Parry, 2009).

The second aspect of loyalty extends from the family to the fan community. When asked about the most prominent features of his hero Eli Ohana, one interviewee responded that he admired “his genuine loyalty to the spectators.” Another interviewee added, “He plays only for one group of spectators.” Yet another interviewee compared his hero Yaniv Katan to another player, distinguishing between the two based on their connection to spectators and commitment to the club: “A soccer hero is not the best player. Take, for example, Eran Zahavi. He's an excellent player but he has no ties to any club, he doesn't represent any group of fans and for that reason he is not a soccer hero... he is merely a good player who makes goals and moves from one club to another.” The literature does indicate that sports can influence a community of fans by providing them with a loyal figure (Rubio-Hernández, 2011). Nevertheless, the importance of a hero's loyalty to fans is not discussed on its own but rather is inherent in the notion of loyalty to the club, the third aspect of loyalty. In this context, the interviewees described the commercialization of sports, which has resulted in a player's personal success becoming more important to them than their loyalty to their club and their fans. Indeed, one of the interviewees made the following comment about Francesco Totti: “He received offers from lots of better teams in Europe, like Real Madrid, yet he chose to stay with Roma.”

This participant even quoted a remark made by Totti in the past on this matter: “They taught us at school that family is the most important. Roma is my family. Have you ever heard of someone who left his poor parents to live with rich strangers?” Other interviewees expressed similar sentiments:

[Yaniv Katan] played for Maccabi Haifa during the time when big money started coming to Israeli soccer and players moved to different clubs every year to improve their salaries. It was a period in which the value of a home team player and his loyalty to the team dwindled. And contrary to this prevailing atmosphere in soccer, he remained loyal to Maccabi Haifa... despite recurring offers with large salaries.

Another interviewee commented on Mauro Icardi: “He got lots of offers from clubs much larger than Inter, but despite these tempting offers he decided to remain with the club where he made his breakthrough and where the fans are so connected to him.” These sentiments also emerge in the fan chants, for example in the Celtic club’s song about its hero, Patrick Bonner: “All tried to sign him but they have no chance.” This admiration for team loyalty derives in part from perceptions of the importance of loyalty in the fan’s self-definition, where an important component of the fan’s identity is declaration of loyalty over time (Millward, 2011). Hence, fans look for these same defining qualities in their sports heroes (Teitelbaum, 2008; Parry, 2009). These three characteristics refer to the sports hero’s enduring loyalty to family, the community of fans, and the team, which in the world of sports also constitutes a type of extended family. The importance of loyalty is to a large extent a response to the commercialization of modern soccer and the frequent movement of players from one club to another. This situation has created a discrepancy between the fan’s self-definition that is based upon loyalty and the professionalism of sports today. Indeed, loyalty is a highly esteemed quality in society as a whole; it is also characteristic of fans and what they view as the exemplary values that guide them; and finally, it symbolizes the unique nature of soccer heroes compared to other athletes.

Admired qualities and being a role model: “Forever and ever, we’ll follow the boys”

The first theme focused on the importance of loyalty, a quality that is essential to a fan’s self-identity. The second theme emerging from the interviews referred to the unique qualities that turn a player into a hero and that represent values to strive for. The heading we gave to this section on the second theme underscores the duality in the meaning of the word “follow” in that it describes fans’ enthusiastic support for sports and at the same time their tendency to imitate the behavior of soccer players. According to one interviewee, “professional ability is not the only thing needed to be a hero. A hero is something beyond this. A hero is a role model . . . someone you want to be like.” The implication is that these admired characteristics are not within the realm of professional ability but rather are related to other personal attributes. Another interviewee made a similar comment about Steven Gerrard: “He also had moral and unique values. He would not feign a move simply to obtain a foul, would not resort to inappropriate means to win. In my opinion many ‘heroes’ conduct themselves in a way that is unfair and not suitable to a game like this and to players on this level, who are admired and imitated by kids all over the world.” Yet another interviewee also referred to the issue of ethical conduct: “A sports hero must demonstrate social values, for ultimately he serves as a role model for lots of youngsters who admire him and do exactly what he does.” The interviewees’ remarks indicate that an athlete must behave in a way that reflects social ideals and not in response to the needs of the sport. This contention is in line with the definition of a sports hero as someone who succeeds in sports while at the same time upholds revered social values and thus is deemed worthy of having their noble conduct imitated by fans (Shuart, 2007). Moreover, even when a sports hero deviates from this moral ideal, fans come to their defense, explaining their actions so as to make their worldview accommodate them. One interviewee referred to the immoral behavior of his hero, who was subject to public criticism. He explained in detail why the hero was misunderstood, asserting that the hero’s actions were within the required moral standards:

Everyone was interested in Icardi’s affair with his wife, including me, so I decided to examine the matter in more depth. Icardi was cast as an immoral person due to all the media coverage. But his side should also have been heard. Icardi did fall in love with his wife while she was married to someone else, but he did not hide this and immediately confessed this to his friend Maxi Lopez, who was married to her at the time. When she and Icardi got married and moved in together, Icardi began taking care of her children, which is quite common today, and they all got along excellently. There was never any provocative behavior. For that reason I think that Icardi is a very moral and sociable man, even off the field, as you can see on the social networks.

In addition to unique attributes and moral standards, the fans also noted that heroes are normal people who are not exalted above others. For example, one interviewee stated the following:

When I was 10 I went to a game between Maccabi Haifa and Beitar Jerusalem at Teddy Stadium. Maccabi Haifa's performance was lousy and the crowd booed them throughout the game and in the end when we lost. At the final whistle, all the players went to the locker room. Yaniv Katan was the only one who faced the crowd, clapped and thanked them for their support. For ten minutes he talked to the crowd about what's happening in the club, tried to explain and mainly listened. It's hard to explain how unusual this was in soccer, and certainly in Israeli soccer. I felt he was a role model.

According to Taylor (2000), by distancing themselves from the spectators, athletes generate alienation. Hence, fans attribute special importance to this type of direct contact and to a player's willingness to devote time to this connection, which they see as reflective of mutual interests.

The research participants noted two additional features that are essential for a sports hero to be a role model: leadership, as noted in the first theme, and modesty. Kinsella et al. (2015) identified these features as peripheral features of heroes, without any connection to sports. In this study, the main emphasis was on the connection between these two features, a connection that the interviewees repeated in the context of different players. The interviews indicated that it is precisely the athletic abilities emerging in leaders that underscore the heroes' modesty and their ability to share credit with their teammates. That is, because the heroes have superior athletic abilities and therefore are the leaders of their teams, their modesty is not necessarily to be expected. For this reason, the interviewees called special attention to the quality of modesty in the context of athletic ability. One interviewee made the following comment about Raúl: "Modesty is the quality that differentiates him from all the other stars." Another noted about Messi, "As great as he is, he is still modest and team oriented, sharing credit with his fellow players." These qualities were also attributed to Toti, Icardi, Ohana, Katan, and others. As in the case of the aforementioned features, it is not a player's built-in advantage that sets them apart as a hero but rather their normative or even ideal behavior in the context of this advantage.

The ability to influence: "When you're smiling, the whole world smiles with you"

The heading of this section is taken from the anthem of Leicester City fans and expresses the fans' deeply felt love for their team. According to the words of the song, happiness, sadness, sunshine, and rain are all dependent upon the success of the team and its players. Likewise, this theme also deals with the ability of a sports hero to exert an indirect influence on the everyday lives of fans. According to the interviewees, this influence emerges mainly in the realm of associated emotions and the love of the game.

In talking about their heroes, the interviewees repeatedly expressed their sense of excitement, as can be seen, for example, in one interviewee's comments about Eli Ohana: "It was Beitar's 96-97 championship season, and Ohana had a major role. Excitement, falling in love with soccer, and for the first time in my life, admiration for a soccer star." Another interviewee talked about Raúl González in similar terms: "The player's overall spirit and his performance excited me anew each time." While these feelings are associated with particular moments, they continue beyond a particular point in time. As Shuart (2007) claimed, nostalgic reflection on heroes after they have died or retired enhances the emotional element derived from admiration, generating significant and emotional memories among fans. The tendency to commemorate great moments in sports emerges in the interviewees' detailed and emotional descriptions, as in the following example about Steven Gerrard:

I don't remember that moment or even if I watched it live. It was in the Champions League Final in 2005 and every time I see a recap of the game I am filled with motivation and overcome with emotion. The team was losing to Milan 3-0 at the end of the first half. Around the 60th minute Gerrard made an amazing goal, signaling to the crowd to get things moving. Every move of his showed that he had no intention of losing and would give it everything he had. I think that if I had been playing with him then, I would have been caught up in his enthusiasm. After bringing the score to 3-3 within six minutes, Liverpool won the game with a penalty shoot-out during extra time.

Another interviewee made similar comments about Thierry Henry:

As I recall, Henry returned to Arsenal a few years after leaving Barcelona. He was no longer at the height of his abilities... far from that...and it was clear he hadn't come to Arsenal to be a star, but in the first game after his return that season he went in as a substitute for one of the players when the game was tied, and he made the winning goal. I remember how happy I felt...I remember his run and the crazy celebration, it was a home game or at least the stands were full of team supporters, and at that moment I was so thrilled. What a great player. What a personality. What a thrill, what a pleasure. All in all a glorious moment.

These memories are clearly accompanied by strong feelings. Yet these feelings are not necessarily always positive and are also likely to be negative, as in this description of athletic failure on the part of the interviewee's hero: "It did not change my perspective on him. I simply felt sorry for him at that moment. Even remembering it now fills me with sadness and compassion. He showed me that even a hero like him can fail. That did not scare me. Rather, I was encouraged to see him continue playing and fighting in a manner that befitted him." Even when a hero behaved in a manner seemingly contradictory to their admired qualities unrelated to their athletic achievements, the interviewees tended to examine the situation in a positive light. The following statement is an example:

It made absolutely no difference to my perception of him as a hero. As I said, over the years Katan received countless offers from other teams but chose to remain with Maccabi Haifa. West Ham United competes in the Premier League in England, and when Katan received an offer from them, all the fans were happy for him and gave him the credit he was due and felt he was representing us in the best league in the world. It was clear to him and to everyone that in Israel he has only one team.

This attitude points to the fans' desire to form an emotional connection with their hero, such that they are attracted to the hero's qualities and identify with them (Parry, 2009). This attraction to athletes derives from a sense of the special qualities needed to cause fans to feel special themselves (Teitelbaum, 2008). Moreover, these feelings described by the interviewees are not only momentary expressions of emotion. Rather, to a certain extent they point to their perspective on other events. That is, these memories serve as motivational factors or stimulate feelings of optimism among the fans, leading to a sense of self-efficacy, a positive perspective, and satisfaction (Jun et al., 2016). The comments of one of the interviewees about Francesco Totti support this claim:

In the summer of 2006 I was in the eighth grade, impatiently waiting for the start of soccer practices for the coming season. But then the Second Lebanon War broke out and practices were cancelled. Totti was playing for the Italian team that won the World Cup in Germany that summer. I remember him very well from that World Cup. He was one of the team's outstanding players and was a bright spot for me during and after the war.

Another point that emerged from the interviews was the association the fans made between admiration for their hero and love for the game. Their attachment to their hero naturally emerged from their love for soccer and from watching the games. Nonetheless, most of the interviewees made the surprising claim that it was their attachment to the hero that reinforced their love for soccer and for the team and in some cases even generated it in the first place. One interviewee stated, "I have been a fan of this team for 15 years. Why? Because I fell in love with a particular player that played for Arsenal and was even considered one of the greatest players of all time. For me, he [Henry] is the reason for watching soccer." Another interviewee added, "I've been a fan of Inter Milan since I was a kid because Adriano played for them then and since then I've been an Inter fan." This subjective observation described by the interviewees effectively blurs the boundaries between love for sports, love for the team, and love for a particular player. Indeed, for the fan, the hero often symbolizes the entire team (Teitelbaum, 2008).

Conclusion

This paper sought to examine sports heroes as characterized by soccer fans. Among the many qualities attributed to these heroes in the context of soccer, fans attribute special importance to three main characteristics of heroes. The first is loyalty, defined as an absolute value and not necessarily in terms of belonging to a particular group. Loyalty is a significant factor as it is an essential component in the self-definition of fans, who define themselves in terms of their time investment and devotion, especially in the face of failure (Tachis & Tzetzis, 2015). Thus, they perceive loyalty as part of the world of sports and sports fandom in particular. Therefore, the hero's loyalty is an ideal to strive for and a way to relate to the hero. The second characteristic is the ability of these heroes to serve as role models based upon their morality, leadership, and modesty, as well as how they reflect these positive traits in their overall behavior. This is especially evident in view of the nature of professional sports these days, which often showcases negative characteristics running counter to societal ideals. The third characteristic is the long-term influence of these heroes on groups and individuals in society. While this third characteristic is related to the emotional ties between fans and their hero, the first two are not necessarily related to sports. Indeed, these heroes are often noted for how they differ from the image of a sports superhero in the modern era. A soccer hero is not defined as such simply based on their talents and performance, even though these are usually the factors that make them exceptional and cause

them to be perceived as such. The perceived distance between the hero and other players does not refer to the hero's relationship to their teammates. By contrast, in most cases the soccer hero is compared to other superior players. Hence, the picture of the sports hero emerging from this study is an expression of the branch of sports in which the hero plays and of the normative culture in this branch. This paper strives to present an initial perspective on the unique features of the soccer hero vis-à-vis the image of the hero in society as a whole. The findings point to the relationship between sports and sports heroes, indicating that modern soccer and its values, at least in the context of sports heroes, are cross-cultural rather than local.

In conclusion, soccer heroes emerge here as superior athletes who have other defining qualities, in particular loyalty, morality, and modesty—qualities that are not so prevalent among athletes at this level. Note that the research underlying this paper focused on soccer heroes who are still active or who retired during the last ten years. Moreover, the research participants were Israeli soccer fans. Hence, the research corpus should be extended to examine soccer heroes in other cultures and at other times in order to reveal similarities and differences to the examined case.

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