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‘Bring on the Dancing Horses!’: Ambivalence and class obsession within British media reports of the dressage at the London 2012 Olympic Games.

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Due to historical relationships with the military, royalty, landed gentry and upper-class society, equestrian sport faces regular accusations of being elitist and exclusionary. Through qualitative textual analysis of British press reporting of dressage events at the London 2012 Olympic Games we argue that despite British dominance of the sport, these historical associations with the upper classes, privilege and elitism were foregrounded in many media reports; trivialising and at times mocking dressage. We identify three key themes related to the ways in which media reports framed dressage and its participants in heavily class-laden terms. Faced with their ignorance of the sport, the majority of articles analysed resorted to class-based stereotypes that trivialised, satirised and devalued this seemingly elitist and incomprehensible sport. The success of Team GB in dressage meant that media reports were never wholly critical and elements of the hysteria and pride surrounding the Games led to a highly ambivalent response to dressage that reflects the “vague, confused, contradictory [and] ignorant” (Cannadine, 1998: x) attitudes to social class that characterise British society at the current time.

Key words: Dressage, Equestrian, Media, Olympic, Social Class

Introduction

Throughout the summer of 2012 Britain seemed to experience an unusual sense of unity and national pride. From ‘Super Saturday’ to ‘The Mobot’, the British media whipped up a storm of hysteria as the nation was urged to show their support for Team GB. As the medals stacked up, the excitement rose to fever pitch, culminating in a triumphant victory parade through the streets of London on 9 September. Team GB experienced success in a wide range of sports, from athletics to cycling to women’s boxing, but unprecedented success in the equestrian sport of dressage prompted an outpouring of media content that revealed the continued prevalence of another British obsession in addition to sport: that of social class.

David Cannadine (1998: ix-x) observed that “most British thinking about class is not only obsessional, but also vague, confused, contradictory, ignorant and lacking any adequate historical perspective”. All of these aspects can be observed in the British press’ responses to

Team GB success in dressage, as we discuss further below. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen (2000[1899]) explores the connection between social status and leisure choices. As has been documented in a number of sports histories, including cricket (Stoddart and Sandiford, 1998; Williams, 1999), association football (Mason, 1980) and rugby (both codes) (Collins, 2009, 2012), modern sports forms represent distinctive sets of values, and in so doing, provide a vehicle for the expression of social difference and differentiated social class (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2000: 311). Sports requiring higher levels of monetary and time investment, including equestrian sports, hunting and shooting, are associated most regularly with the aristocracy and landowning classes. Polley (1999) suggests that a main part of the attraction of equine sports for the higher classes has been their traditional image, and the opportunities afforded by them for conspicuous displays of wealth. Indeed, as Bourdieu (1978) argued in his analyses of sport, the ways different groups approach and display their physical culture is an outward marker of class. While the working classes demand 'outward signs of strength' (boxing and rugby for instance), the middle classes emphasise good manners, health and hygiene.

Equestrian events have been on the summer Olympic programme since 1912, but participation was limited to military officers only until 1952 (Dashper 2012a). Due to historical relationships with the military, royalty, landed gentry and upper-class society, equestrian sport faces regular accusations of being elitist and exclusionary (Riedi 2006). Despite reports that 4.3 million people in Britain ride (British Horse Industry Confederation, 2009), to many, equestrianism remains the preserve of the upper classes (Polley 1999). Moreover, although participation in equestrianism is now much more evenly spread across socio-economic groups and now involves more women than men (British Equestrian Trade Association, 2006), the history of the sport remains firmly linked to upper-class masculinity (Dashper 2012b). Although equestrian sport could be considered relatively progressive in relation to gender representation (it is the only Olympic-level sport in which there is no sex segregation and men and women compete against each other on equal terms), it retains an image of tradition and conservatism (Dashper 2012c).

There are three equestrian disciplines represented within the Olympic Games – show jumping, eventing and dressage. Both show jumping and eventing have a history of British success and relative popularity, with events like Badminton Horse Trials attracting hundreds of thousands of spectators each year and horses such as Olympic show jumper Foxhunter

winning affection from television audiences (Crawford, 2007; This is Gloucestershire, 2009). In contrast, dressage was slower to gain popularity in Britain and a dedicated organising body – British Dressage – was not set up until 1998. The sport of dressage developed as a means of training cavalry horses for performance both in battle and on parade. Over the course of the twentieth century dressage developed as a sporting endeavour, with increased complexity, subtlety and difficulty characterising competitions. The international organising body for equestrian sport, the Fédération Equestre Internationale (FEI), states that “Dressage is considered the art of equestrian sport and is used as the groundwork for all other disciplines. It is the highest expression of horse training” (FEI, n.d.). Modern dressage is, as Bryant (2008: 192) suggests, something of a paradox, situated somewhere between athletic pursuit and art, and it is this ambiguous position that may confuse non-specialist observers and that may have contributed to the relative lack of public attention previously given to dressage by the British media, in comparison to the more easily understood formats of show jumping and eventing. In this article we have chosen to concentrate on British press representations of dressage alone, to the exclusion of the other equestrian disciplines included in the Olympic Games, because British success in dressage at the 2012 Olympic Games marked the first occasion when the national media gave this paradoxical, marginal sport sustained attention.

We argue that despite British dominance of dressage during the 2012 Olympic Games (Team GB won team gold, individual gold and individual bronze), these historical associations with the upper classes, privilege and elitism were foregrounded in many media reports on British success within this sport, trivialising and at times mocking dressage. At a time when the British government - led largely by ex-public schoolboys and Oxbridge graduates - are imposing deep cuts to public services and welfare, and stories of widespread tax avoidance by wealthy individuals and corporations are dominating the news, this relatively unknown and certainly poorly understood sport in which large, expensive horses perform intricate and highly specialised movements, under the serene control of a rider dressed in an archaic outfit of top hat and tails, offered an easy target for media pundits. However, the undeniable success of Team GB in dressage meant that media reports were never wholly critical and elements of the hysteria and pride mentioned above led to a highly ambivalent response to dressage that reflects the “vague, confused, contradictory [and] ignorant” (Cannadine, 1998: x) attitudes to social class that characterise British society at the current time.

Methodology

Previous analyses of media coverage of sport have revealed the prevalence of discourses related to nation (Poulton and Maguire, 2012), gender (Jones, 2011), race (Eagleman, 2011), sexuality (Wright and Clarke, 1999) and class (Rhodes, 2011). Journalistic and editorial decisions about the content, focus and style of media sports reporting often reflects deep-rooted inequalities and reinforces negative stereotypes of marginal and under-represented groups (Gee and Leberman, 2011). Media analyses of coverage of sports events thus remains an important tool in exploring social attitudes, both within and beyond sport.

Data for this paper were collected via a media search using the newspaper database LexisNexis. One of us undertook an extensive review of all UK newspaper coverage of equestrian events at the London 2012 Olympic Games. The search period was set between July 1 and October 1, 2012. Whilst we accept the limitations of such a narrow search period, this timeframe did allow us to examine coverage in the lead up to, during and after the Games. The search was limited to all UK publications. These included both print and online sources, traditional broadsheets and tabloids, and other more 'local' publications. Publications searched included *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Express*, *The Daily Mail* and *The Times*. Search terms were informed by our casual following of equestrian events at the time and included: 'equestrian', 'dressage', 'dancing horses', 'horse ballet', 'Olympic', 'London', and 'class'. In total, over 2,300 citations (excluding duplicates) were retrieved. Each article was then read and qualitatively coded according to the frequency of particular themes, and the resonance of the narrative with themes identified in the literature reviewed. Our analysis was textual and did not include semiotic analysis of images and photographs. We appreciate that focusing solely on the 'text' is problematic in that images and photographs were also highly significant in the way the sport of dressage was framed throughout the research period. However, we felt that integrating semiotic analysis was beyond the scope of this Rapid Response paper. We would also like to stress that only articles focusing on the sport of dressage were analysed. Whilst dressage is a component of eventing for instance, we limited our focus to 'pure' dressage, as explained above. We identified three key themes from the textual analysis related to the ways in which media reports framed dressage and its participants in heavily class-laden terms, and how this led to trivialising and devaluing this seemingly elitist and incomprehensible sport.

An elitist sport

The dominant theme throughout the media content analysed was the framing of dressage as an elitist sport and the preserve of the rich and privileged. Some publications used such framing to disparage dressage as ridiculous and irrelevant, such as the ironic article by Kelly on *MailOnline* (3 August) that featured the comment “Anyone can participate in dressage, just as long as they have a top hat, tails, white gloves and a £1million horse that can do ballet”. Other articles were more positive about the appeal and value of dressage, but still presented this support within a class framework, such as Brigg’s headline in *The Daily Telegraph* (11 August) “Forget class, hard work was behind dressage success”. This story went on to praise the members of the British team who had worked hard to train their own horses (for example, Charlotte Dujardin who, as a teenager, began her career as a stable hand at a team mate’s (Carl Hester) yard), examples of riders who “buck(s) the stereotype” – presumably a stereotype which associates wealth and privilege (and, by association here, many dressage riders) with an unwillingness to get stuck in with hard (‘manual’?) work.

Social class continues to structure many elements of life, including education (Bolvier 2011), health (Elo 2009) and choice of leisure activities (Bourdieu 1988; Veblen 2000[1899]). This is by no means a distinctly British phenomenon. However, Britain is one of the most unequal countries in the western world and the British as a nation are often perceived to be particularly ‘class conscious’ (Roberts 2011). The British class system has proven to be relatively stable over the last 100 years, and Dacin *et al.* (2010) argue that this is due in part to continued deference for tradition and factors which are not directly linked to economics, such as ancestry, title, accent, education and lifestyle. A social pecking order persists and ideas of the British Establishment – a small, elite group of (mainly) white male members, bonded through kin, shared educational experiences and friendships – represent social, political and economic power (Bond 2012). This pecking order is rarely overtly challenged and there is widespread acceptance of different class positions – working class, middle class, upper class - even if there is incoherence in how and to whom these terms are applied (Payne and Grew 2005; Savage, 2007). This was reflected in media representations of dressage at the 2012 Olympic Games.

A key feature of media interest was the social backgrounds of the riders in Team GB, and indeed their diversity provided justification for class-based discussion and speculation. Several articles contemplated the differences between individual gold medallist Charlotte Dujardin, a working class girl who had worked her way up from the stableyard, and individual bronze medallist Laura Bechtolsheimer, “the grandchild of a German billionaire” (Faulkner, *MailOnline*, 7 August). This is a newsworthy element of the small dressage team’s success, yet it is the way that Dujardin’s educational background at a comprehensive school was contrasted with Bechtolsheimer’s public school education that reveals much of the ambivalence and confusion within the media’s framing of the social class of the dressage riders.

Dujardin was frequently praised for her rise from “Stable girl to queen of the dressage ring” (McArthur, *The Times* 10 August), and she was presented as the embodiment of working class diligence and neo-liberal ideals of social mobility. In comparison, Bechtolsheimer’s expensive education was reported as evidence of continued elitism within the sport (*MailOnline*, 7 August), and she was not personally linked with hard work in any of the articles analysed. However, although Bechtolsheimer was more often presented in ambivalent terms than the more ‘normal’ Dujardin, there was also evidence of a certain level of admiration for Bechtolsheimer’s privileged background and resulting social capabilities. Reporting on an interview with the two female riders, Samuel (*MailOnline*, 10 August) notes how privately-educated Bechtolsheimer was considerably more eloquent during interviews in her responses to questions about gender equity within this mixed-sex sport than her team-mate. He comments:

We know the advantages of attending a school like Stonar, so it is no surprise that Bechtolsheimer can speak for herself and is independent of thought, but it contrasted greatly with tongue-tied Dujardin, whose family were not wealthy and who left school at 16, having bunked off a lot of it. Asked about her education, she had to check the name of her school with her mum.

The links between social class, education and confidence in terms of self expression are well documented (e.g. Dacin *et al.* 2010), and the above quote indicates a degree of reverence

for the social skills and capabilities that result from a private education. In contrast, Samuel presents the “tongue-tied Dujardin”, with her more modest background and limited schooling, as relatively stupid, thus reflecting common practices within the British media that disempower the white working class, through a thinly veiled tone of disgust (Tyler 2008). Although Dujardin is by no means under-privileged, the juxtaposition of her and the upper-class Bechtolsheimer throughout many of the media reports analysed positions her as both working class hero and ignorant chav. Press reporting on the two female stars of the dressage section of Team GB thus reflects highly stereotypical, even caricatured, views of the British class system.

Knowledge, inclusion and exclusion

The dressage riders were consistently framed in class terms, and the sport of dressage did not escape such classification either. Sport fan communities, and in particular audiences at live sport events, tend to have identifiable demographic profiles (Giulianotti, 2002; Crawford, 2004). Although there are no current audience profiles for spectators at equestrian events, participants in equestrian sport in Britain (across all levels and disciplines) are predominantly female and white, with urban and rural dwellers participating in roughly equal numbers. Participation is spread across wide age and income distributions (BHIC, 2009; Sport England, 2009). According to Crawford (2004), these patterns do not occur by chance; rather they tend to be shaped by the history and tradition of each sport. Existing research on sports cultures does suggest that a distinction exists between the types of sports attended and consumed on the basis of social class (Holt, 1990; Hill and Williams, 1996; Sugden and Tomlinson, 2000; Williams, 1999). Bourdieu (1978) argues that this distinction exists due to differences in middle and working class communities’ tastes. For Bourdieu, middle class tastes are often more suited to sports involving the development of body and skill (for example, the subtleties of dressage), while working class tastes are more aligned with sports involving higher levels of risk and bodily strength. Hughson et al. (2005: 153) suggest that each class has not only its own ways of thinking, and preferences, but also their own physical culture and forms of bodily activity. Working class engagement with sport, for instance, is consistently depicted as ‘drone-like’ and ‘uncritical’ (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2000: 315). Armytage (*The Telegraph*, 5 September) emphasised this ‘distinction’:

Dressage has never quite been my cappuccino. I have never got the attraction of riding in pretty patterns round an arena. Naturally, as a racing man, I prefer the somewhat cruder method of testing the athleticism of a horse by seeing which is fastest from A to B, preferably with a few obstacles thrown in.

Knowledge of the nuances of the sport operates as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1978) and distinguishes 'real' and 'authentic' followers of the sport from the newly acculturated, and can act as a form of social exclusion. According to Hughson et al. (2005) the sporting activity is often just the pretext for the rituals of a particular social group. For Bourdieu, cultural preferences act as both the product and the producer of class. Tastes are linked to status through the acquisition of cultural capital; the knowledge of what constitutes appropriate taste. In other words, one's habitus dictates one's tastes and preferences. However, this capital is not necessarily transferrable into different fields. Accordingly, general enthusiasts of sport are not necessarily able to accrue capital via having knowledge in one sport and transfer this capital to another. As Spracklen (2007: 26) argues, "The meaning of capital, of particular artefacts, or structures, or symbols, may be completely different between two fields". It was commonly argued in the media reports that the subtlety of dressage performances (particularly how they are judged/assessed) was exclusionary; being unfathomable, and therefore, boring, to the unacculturated (read: working class). As depicted by Squires (*The Express*, 30 July):

In the shadow of the meridian, time was made to stand still by the only Olympic event where a slow-motion replay puts the pictures into rewind ...The hardcore horse-lovers ... may have appreciated the inertia, but for the casual interloper dressage remained a locked box of puzzlement strategically placed behind a high wall of confusion.

Marsden (*The Independent*, 13 August) reported similarly:

I've learned new terms that are now set for four years of mental cold storage: ... the passage, piaffe and pirouette in the wonderfully baffling dressage. But knowing what those three Ps mean didn't help me assess equestrian skill; I watched the event while thinking "Is this a medal winner? I've no idea."

Knowledge and participation in the event allows spectators to feel a much greater sense of belonging. Lack of understanding of something can often lead to hostile responses from those who feel excluded from the 'inner-circle' of specialist knowledge, particularly when the activity under question is perceived as an upper-class activity that the lower classes do not understand (Pyke, 1996). Some hostility was evident in several of the articles analysed. Giles Coran in *The Times* (10 August) lamented dressage's inaccessibility to the uninitiated, and stressed its lack of sporting spectacle:

I have no idea at all what is going on. I applaud it. I am all for it. Lovely-looking gee-gees. Hats off to the guys and girls in top hats and morning coats ... But as a sporting spectacle, this is truly the least exciting thing I have ever seen.

It should be noted however, that there were frequent attempts from the British media throughout the London 2012 Olympic Games to introduce audiences to the nuances of each sport. A number of event 'guides' were featured on the television, internet and indeed, in the written media. This included dressage where a number of newspapers, including *The Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *Mirror* and *The Metro*, featured beginner's guides to the sport. The publication of these guides was no doubt to democratise the sport to those less familiar with it. However, this was only partly successful. As was probably the case with guides to other lesser known (and indeed, well known) sports, the quality of descriptive content varied greatly. For example, *The Telegraph's* guide to dressage featured information pertaining to 'how to play' (basic overview of the sport), 'Tactics and Techniques' (including cartoon-like illustrations of the competition space and movements) and 'Facts and Phrases' (a breakdown of the meaning of each movement) (*The Telegraph*, 2012). In contrast, *The Mail* managed only to summarise the basic movements and how scores are calculated, though did not explain what constituted either quality movement or a high score (SportsMail Reporter June 20, 2012). Similarly, in addition to a useful history and jargon buster, *The Metro* included less helpful and class-laded passages, such as "If dressage was a foodstuff it would be ... Caviar. Not a cheap habit to support and not to all tastes, but passionately loved by its devotees who will spend a fortune on their hobby" (Shea, Jan 27, 2012).

Trivialising

So far we have outlined the ways in which the British print media framed dressage and its participants as an upper-class domain, intriguing to some extent, yet inaccessible and unavailable to the masses. Leading on from this was the widespread trivialisation of dressage as a sport and a spectacle. Many questioned whether it was a sport at all, or merely a quirky, elitist pastime. According to Bourdieu (1992), the habitus of the working class is characterised by relatively simple tastes, and an associated rejection of things deemed pretentious and 'fancy' (cf. Hughson et al., 2005). For Bourdieu, when faced with aspects of this upper class habitus, the working class react with either feelings of humiliation and indifference, or mockery. Indifference and mockery were certainly evident in many of the articles we analysed. Moss, for example, referred to dressage as the "arcane horse ballet beloved of aficionados but largely incomprehensible to everyone else" (*Guardian Magazine Supplement*, July 21). It was widely argued that, while certain traditions of the sport, such as styles of dress, were expected and appreciated by followers of the sport, they were rarely understood by the 'masses'. For example, Hewett (*The Independent*, 10 August) stated that riders were, "dressed in outfits that would guarantee them podium finishes in the Monty Python Upper Class Twit of the Year contest". Other articles acknowledged dressage as a sport, but trivialised and satirised it. McLeman (*Daily Mirror*, 10 August) for example, led with the headline, 'Dances with Hooves'. Continuing this, a reporter from *The Sun* headlined, 'Am I the only one bored by the Olympics?' and reflected, "I like to call it, Strictly Come Pony. Nobody has ever explained to me why a girl wearing pink sparkly tights on top of a dancing horse is a circus act but, if she's wearing a top hat and tails, it qualifies as an Olympic sport" (*The Sun* 6 August). Similarly, Coran (*The Times*, 10 August) likened the "dancing horses" to "having Crufts at the Olympics" and suggested how the inclusion of dancing bears, elephants and seals at future Olympic Games "might be nice" too.

Such comments, although tongue-in-cheek in tone and not intended to be taken too seriously, had the cumulative effect of trivialising and further marginalising dressage as an elite, Olympic sport. By relegating dressage to the status of spectacle as opposed to sport, any feelings of exclusion and confusion experienced by many of the journalists (and probably many readers) was recast as trivial and inconsequential as well.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that the growth of modern sport was, and in many ways still is, interwoven with the class dynamics of the time (Sugden and Tomlinson, 2000: 311). Consequently the attitudes and beliefs embodied in a particular sport express class-based statuses and values (ibid.). In this short paper we have begun to outline some of the ways in which British media reports on the success of Team GB in the dressage at the London 2012 Olympic Games are reflective of broader understandings of social class within contemporary Britain. 2012 marked the first time within Olympic history when Britain has won a medal in the dressage and so this unprecedented success meant that the mainstream British media had to acknowledge this somewhat bewildering sport, which had never before been considered significant or newsworthy. British success was heralded with cautious praise, but the incomprehensibility of this intricate, unusual and relatively low profile sport (in Britain at least), led to highly ambivalent responses from journalists. Faced with their lack of knowledge of the sport, the majority of articles analysed resorted to class-based stereotypes that devalued dressage and thus absolved the journalists of their duty to understand the sports on which they report.

The reporting on the dressage was heavily laden with class references, and reflects the suggestions of Savage *et al* (2001) and Payne and Grew (2005) that class remains a relevant concept through which British people understand the society in which they operate, even if at times the concept of class is poorly defined, confused and muddled. Due to space restrictions, we have only begun to touch on many of the important issues raised by this analysis of British media reporting on the dressage events, and we suggest that a deeper analysis should also consider the intersection(s) of class, gender, sexuality and 'race' and ethnicity to the ambivalence of the articles analysed.

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