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‘Like a hawk among house sparrows’: Kauto Star, a steeplechasing legend¹

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The concept of ‘icon’ has been applied to numerous athletes as a result of their sporting achievements, likeable public personas, and stories of triumph, resilience and courage. The cultural role of the horse as icon, hero, celebrity and national luminary, however, is lacking within the literature. In this article we extend this human concept to apply to the racehorse Kauto Star, who was heralded by many as the saviour of British racing in the early twenty-first century. We argue that the narrative surrounding Kauto Star had all the essential ingredients for the construction of a heroic storyline around this equine superstar: his sporting talent; his flaws and ability to overcome adversity; his ‘rivalry’ with his stable mate; his ‘connections’ to high profile humans in the racing world; and, the adoration he received from the racing public. Media representations are key elements in the construction of sporting narratives, and the production of heroes and villains within sport. In this paper we construct a narrative of Kauto Star, as produced through media reports and published biographies, to explore how this equine star has been elevated beyond the status of ‘animal’, ‘racehorse’ or even ‘athlete’ to the exalted position of sporting icon.

Key words: Animals, celebrity, equine sport, hero, icon, media representation, racing

Introduction

Sports lend themselves to the production and presentation of cultural icons. The status of a sporting icon is usually conferred on men and women for their performances on a field of play.² However, is iconicity defined by performances alone? Over the last three/four decades there has been a proliferation of writings about the achievements of certain sports men and women. However, very rarely have non-human athletes featured within this literature. The focus of this paper is the racehorse, Kauto Star, a French-bred Thoroughbred who achieved great success on the racetrack and gained a special place in the hearts of the British racing public. We argue that Kauto Star should be considered a sporting icon in much the same way as some human athletes have been granted iconic status. As with many human sporting icons, Kauto Star’s story contains incredible sporting achievements, an ability to overcome adversity, an intense rivalry with a competitor, and, perhaps most importantly, an ability to galvanise public support and affection. Our aim in this paper is to explore the varied ways in which Kauto Star’s status as a sporting icon has been developed.

As we will show below, the narrative of Kauto Star contains many of the ingredients that are familiar from the narratives of human sporting icons, as identified by a number of different authors.³ However, Kauto Star is not a human, and therefore we need to question whether it is appropriate to consider a non-human animal as an icon – a human, or perhaps super-human, concept. Fudge suggests that the concept of ‘biography’ is applied to humans alone, and not to animals, because the idea of ‘telling a life’ is to do more than just state facts, it also implies that the individual concerned can construct a life story themselves, and can communicate through language their own understandings about that life story.⁴ Clearly Kauto Star cannot do this, or not in terms that humans can understand. However, we argue that although Kauto Star’s inability to construct and relate his own life story in human terms may limit our ability to fully understand that life, this does not mean he cannot be granted

iconic status. In fact, we would go as far as to suggest that his inability to tell his own story, offer his own interpretations and insights, actually increases the iconic status of Kauto Star and other non-human animals who excel in the human-defined world of organised sport. In the absence of Kauto Star's own interpretations, the racing press and public are free to write his story and portray his character on their terms.

Kauto Star (19 March 2000-present) is a retired French-bred Thoroughbred National Hunt champion racehorse. He is a bay, with an easily recognisable white stripe on his face. He is owned by Clive Smith, was trained by Paul Nicholls and was ridden primarily by champion jockey Ruby Walsh. He won the Cheltenham Gold Cup twice, the King George VI Chase a record five times and the Betfair Chase four times. He is widely considered one of the greatest steeplechasers of all time; frequently being compared to the legendary pair of Arkle and Desert Orchid. Kauto Star was retired in October 2012 as the season's highest rated steeplechaser for a fourth time. He retired as the most successful National Hunt horse in the history of the sport, winning a total of £2,375,883 in prize money, including the Betfair Million. Kauto Star's racing credentials are testament to his exceptional ability, and this ability, coupled with his unrivalled achievements, are key elements in his elevation to sporting icon. However we contend that ability and success alone are not enough to account for the high regard in which this racehorse is held by the racing public in Britain. We suggest that there are five factors that contribute to the elevation of Kauto Star to the status of sporting icon: his exceptional ability; his flaws and ability to overcome adversity; his 'rivalry' with his stablemate, Denman; his 'connections' to high profile humans in the racing world; and, the love and adoration he engendered in the racing public. This paper begins by considering the literature surrounding sporting icons, heroes and celebrities, and briefly exploring some of the issues related to the inclusion of animals in sport, and particularly in racing. We then move on to consider, through an analysis of media reports and biographies, the varied ways in which this exceptional bay Thoroughbred has been constructed as a sporting icon, using the five factors outlined above as a framework.

Icons/Celebrities/Heroes

According to Malcolm literature on sporting icons has largely centred upon three main themes: gender, 'race' and nation, and the various intersections therein.⁵ A number of sports have featured within these analyses, including association football, cricket, ice hockey and boxing.⁶ More recently, in a volume by Wagg and Russell, focusing entirely on the north of England, icons from sports including fell running, climbing and speed way have been examined.⁷ However, currently, notwithstanding Crawford's analysis of Foxhunter and Red Rum, the cultural role of the horse as icon, hero, celebrity and national luminary, is lacking within the literature.⁸

Current literature has tended to discuss iconic sporting individuals within the discourses of heroism and celebrity. Various authors have attempted to define the statuses of sporting hero and celebrity, though there has been less literature devoted to the sporting icon. We acknowledge that each of these concepts is heterogeneous in its own right and we do attempt to situate each within an appropriate discourse throughout this paper. For now however, it is appropriate to articulate some of the literature on sporting heroes and celebrities. In an early conceptualisation of 'heroes', Carlyle ascribes the notion to various men, namely: Gods, prophets, poets, priests, writers and kings. A number of scholars have already identified the absence of the sporting hero within this conceptualisation.⁹

Whannel argues that sporting icons are a focal point for practices of identity construction and consumption.¹⁰ According to Fishwick, 'We simply must have [them] ... They give us blessed relief from our daily lives which are frequently one petty thing after another'.¹¹ Continuing this, Holt and Mangan argue that sporting icons and heroes concentrate the general public's 'vicarious excitement', thereby compensating for the drawn out monotony of everyday life.¹² In addition, Oriard asserts that some heroes offer the public a sense of meritocratic hope; representing a rags-to-riches openness and the democratic ideas of society.¹³ Fishwick goes on to say that icons are 'invariably the products of their period' and act as representatives of a people.¹⁴ However, in late modern times, what is the heroic image of our time, and who are the people they are tasked with representing? In their Prologue to *European Heroes*, Holt and Mangan capture the complexity of contemporary scholarship on the sports hero: 'in the modern world of multifarious recreations, extensive leisure and technological complexity the sports hero or heroine comes in many guises ... they differ in their morphology and their functions'.¹⁵ This uncertainty is epitomised by Wagg and Russell in the introduction to *Sporting Heroes of the North*, where they argue that, in the late/postmodern era, what we are witnessing is a cultural shift from above conceptualisations of heroes and icons, to a cult of celebrity.¹⁶

Celebrity, as a cultural phenomenon, has itself had a growing literature since the 1960s.¹⁷ According to Rojek, the emergence of celebrities, termed 'celebrication', in their modern form occurs as a result of three interrelated historical processes: the democratisation of society, the decline of organised religion, and the commodification of everyday life.¹⁸ However, as Wagg observes, celebrities do not ascend, spontaneously from among the common people; on the contrary, they are, to a degree, a 'cultural fabrication'.¹⁹ Boorstin makes the distinction between heroes and celebrities: 'The hero was distinguished by his achievement, the celebrity by his image or trademark. The hero created himself; the celebrity is created by the media'.²⁰ According to Wagg and Russell 'Sportspeople therefore appear before their public primarily as texts and, as befits an age of consumer sovereignty, the public makes of them what they will'.²¹

However, as Andrews and Jackson observe, celebrity cannot, beyond a certain point, be scripted.²² For example, Malcolm argues that the main factor distinguishing sporting celebrities from other aspects of popular culture is *authenticity*.²³ For Malcolm, 'While contemporary celebrity epitomizes 'the inauthenticity or constructedness of mass-mediated popular culture', authenticity is the essential feature which makes sports celebrities stand out'. He continues, 'There are additional reasons for thinking that sportspeople offer something distinct to celebrity culture'; their ability for cross-promotion, for instance, makes them highly sought after commodities in the consumer-driven twenty first century. For Malcolm, the final quality distinguishing sports people from other celebrities is their 'representational element', in that sports celebrities arguably have greater resonance beyond the sport itself (see below).²⁴ These conceptualisations treat celebrities as a conduit to further social processes, for example, articulating collective identity, status and pride, and while these are clearly important, for the purposes of this paper, we must also begin to articulate how and why particular narratives of sporting icons are popularised. In the case of Kauto Star, we suggest that, whilst his athletic ability was widely celebrated, there were other, far more quotidian aspects of his life and career that galvanised the general public's interest in him.

Icons and celebrities arguably rely on the public for different things. The celebrity is less reliant on 'achieved' status, compared to the icon and rather craves a form of 'moral validation' in their celebrity status.²⁵ According to Andrews and Jackson, the extent to which

the public has access to the celebrity's 'true' self can encourage them to develop a sense of familiarity, intrigue and often, obsession, with them.²⁶ Traditionally, celebrities restrict public access to them; maintaining a degree of mystery around 'who they really are' and 'what they are really like'. In contrast, the icon does not crave public attachment. Their status is representative of their achievements and therefore, it transcends them as individuals. Individuals are iconic because they represent something beyond the sport itself: they become representatives of wider social issues.²⁷

However, rarely are sporting icons granted that status via achievement(s) alone. In addition, it is widely acknowledged that sporting icons need a compelling narrative; one that engrosses supporters, fans and the general public. For Hill a central feature of this narrative should be a journey leading through *adversity* to *achievement*.²⁸ According to Holt and Mangan, a long lasting sporting icon must have grit and determination; survive setbacks in their performances and attempt to overcome adversity and win at the highest level; lose courageously; and fail with style.²⁹ As we demonstrate in this paper, Kauto Star's narrative both exemplifies and goes beyond these characteristics.

Animals in sport

The use of animals in human sport is a contentious issue. Unlike human participants, animals do not choose to take part in sport; they do not understand the purpose of the activity in which they are involved, nor the standards and requirements expected of them.³⁰ Animals used in human sport usually have a commodity value, a price attached to them that affects their worth in relation to human standards. This necessarily impacts on how sports animals are treated, frequently resulting in them being traded, sold, moved between owners and trainers, and, if they turn out to be poor performers when judged against human sporting standards, rejected, moved on, or possibly even put to sleep.³¹ This paints a bleak picture for animals in sport, and suggests a world involving abuse, pain and neglect.

However, although there undoubtedly are many examples of animal abuse, and racing in particular has a reputation for high animal 'wastage' (a euphemistic term for death through sporting injury), not all animals involved in human sport are abused.³² Although they can never give informed consent to take part in human sport, many competitive horse riders speak of partnership, rather than domination, and talk with real affection and concern for their horses.³³ In similar ways to other animals involved in human service and interaction, like police patrol dogs or pets, animals involved in sport are usually well cared for and often highly valued, even loved, by their human connections.³⁴ This was certainly the case for Kauto Star, as we discuss further below.

The developing field of human-animal studies explores interspecies interactions, and recognizes that human-animal relationships cannot be understood simply by ideas of dominance and submission, and this applies to the use of animals in sport. Although commercial pressures and commodity values attached to racehorses may encourage humans to develop a somewhat instrumental relationship with those animals, competition animals are not simple tools of human pleasure.³⁵ Rather, racehorses occupy a liminal position, on the boundaries between 'human' and 'animal', at once valued for their individual characters and abilities, yet also discarded and traded according to market demands.³⁶ The relationships between humans and racehorses are fraught with ambiguity and ambivalence.³⁷ However, as we show in our analysis of the narrative of Kauto Star, racehorses (particularly successful ones) are also seen as a 'defined person' and incorporated into networks of human relationships.³⁸ The human-animal relationship, as

characterized through the lens of sport, is thus highly complex, grounded in what Herzog described as the 'constant paradox' of human-animal interactions.³⁹

Although dogs and other animals are sometimes involved in human sport, horses remain the most common sporting partner and horseracing the most visible and financially powerful of all equine sports. Within British society, horseracing holds a position defined by longevity, royal patronage and popular support. Split into two separate fields – flat racing and National Hunt (jump) racing – racing is commonly referred to as 'The Sport of Kings', a title which hints at both the importance of 'pedigree' (both human and equine) and the male domination of this sporting milieu.⁴⁰ However, although those involved in owning, breeding, and, frequently, training racehorses are often from privileged social backgrounds, a key element of racing relates to gambling, and these 'punters' are usually from lower socio-economic groups.⁴¹ The 'racing public' of which we speak in relation to Kauto Star thus represents a wide range of groups and individuals from varied social backgrounds and, whilst still predominantly a male-dominated world, there are increasing numbers of women attending racetracks.

We have provided a brief outline of our theoretical approach in relation to the production of sporting icons, and have introduced some of the complexities that underpin the interactions between humans and animals in sport. In the next sections we turn to the narrative of Kauto Star, as produced through media reports and published biographies, to explore how this equine star has been elevated beyond the status of 'animal', 'racehorse' or even 'athlete' to the exalted position of sporting icon.

Creating an icon: Kauto Star

***'The real deal'*⁴²**

In the elevation to iconic status, a necessary but not sufficient requirement for any athlete is evidence of exceptional sporting achievements. Although many sports fans and journalists warm to the underdog in competition, enduring popularity and star status is only granted to those who exhibit exceptional individual performances.⁴³ Kauto Star's illustrious racing record qualifies him on this criterion.

As the only racehorse ever to win, lose, and then regain the coveted Gold Cup, described by jockey Ruby Walsh as 'the Championship race', as well as winning the King George VI Chase a record five times, Kauto Star is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest steeplechasers of all time.⁴⁴ As a youngster in France his extraordinary ability and quirky character earned him the name 'L'extraterrestriel'. His French trainer, Foucher, described him as 'a champion' whilst his first jockey, Guiheneuf, remembers him as 'the best I have ever ridden'.⁴⁵ Kauto Star made a strong early impression when he arrived in Britain as well, with jockey Walsh describing him as 'a machine' and 'an aeroplane', whilst trainer Nicholls recalls how Kauto Star 'set my pulse racing' as he 'moved like a gifted athlete and had a real presence about him'.⁴⁶

According to Cooke, heroic (iconic?) actions are both constrained and liberated by the stage, setting and context of the performance.⁴⁷ He writes:

Only the sporting acts that take place on the biggest of stages ... go down in history as acts of real greatness or heroism. Performing under the greatest of

pressure when it matters most and when everyone is watching is considered to be the true indicator of sporting greatness.⁴⁸

Kauto Star performed under pressure and on the biggest stages of jump racing, and thus earned his place in the prestigious Cheltenham Hall of Fame on his retirement in November 2012.⁴⁹ Although, as we discuss further below, the racing media were quick to criticize Kauto Star when he showed any signs of weakness, his outstanding achievements and ability to dominate many races with seeming ease, led to an outpouring of praise for this 'marvel beyond measure'.⁵⁰ Various descriptions as 'nothing less than poetry in motion', as 'the definitive stuff', as 'the king', and as a horse whose 'class was welded and melded with courage', the legend of Kauto Star was created in part through the emotive and celebratory representations of him and his achievements in the racing press.⁵¹

The close relationship between sport and the media, and the power of the media to represent sport in both positive and negative lights, has been well documented.⁵² In the case of individual athletes, media representations are the key to the creation of sporting personas, be that as hero or villain, which are easily consumed by sports fans and commodified by sponsors. The language used by sports journalists in relation to performances, teams and athletes is significant in the production of these narratives and the celebration of individual sports stars.⁵³ Kauto Star was consistently described in terms emphasizing class, courage and stamina, all admirable qualities in a racehorse. However, although this underscored his stellar athletic performances, this alone may not have been enough to catapult him to iconic status. Although free with their praise (and criticism), the racing press also presented Kauto Star as truly exceptional and almost otherworldly. As Down noted, following Kauto Star's 2006 Tingle Creek win, 'there was something almost unnatural about his air of ease and apparent lack of exertion. That is the mark of a good one, I suppose'.⁵⁴ Kauto Star's 'unnatural' presence and ability is what marked him out from other great racehorses. If sporting icons give fans 'blessed relief from our daily lives', then the extraordinary is a central aspect of their enduring appeal.⁵⁵ The representation of Kauto Star, 'L'extraterrestrial', marked him out as extraordinary, as performing at a level 'where mere mortals stop and the gods kick in'.⁵⁶ The longevity and phenomenal achievements that framed his sporting career, coupled with media representations of his extra-ordinary characteristics, helped to create a heroic aura around Kauto Star. As Racing Post journalist Lee Mottershead succinctly explained, 'Not only is Kauto Star good enough, he is the best, the real deal, the true champion'.⁵⁷

***The 'chink in Kauto Star's armour'*⁵⁸**

Although we have argued above that the media were a fundamental element in raising Kauto Star to iconic status, media representations were not always positive. As many human athletes have experienced, the media are fickle supporters and are quick to criticize and speculate about failure when an athlete experiences a setback or shows any sign of weakness.⁵⁹ Despite his undeniable brilliance, Kauto Star was also subject to much criticism from the racing press.

Previous analyses of race horses have tended towards hagiography; uncritically celebrating their achievements.⁶⁰ Each of these studies argues that icons are embraced for their sporting achievements and, more importantly, for winning. In an obituary to three-time Grand National winner, Red Rum, for instance, Simon Barnes wrote:

'He [Red Rum] owes his place in national affections not for flashy looks or extravagant technique, but for winning'.⁶¹

Barnes goes on to argue that the certainty of a Red Rum victory and therefore, the confidence with which gamblers could 'invest' their money on this horse, meant he was sure to be embraced by the racing community: 'He was the horse who made a lottery into a certainty ... We shall not see his like again'.⁶² In contrast, whilst Kauto Star was consistently a very attractive bet (a reported £1.24 million was gambled on him winning the 2007 Gold Cup, for example), his performances were certainly much more of a lottery. Arguably, for many punters, this uncertainty made Kauto Star a more exciting bet.

According to Holt and Mangan the longevity of sporting icons is determined by their ability to: survive setbacks in their performances, attempt to overcome adversity and win at the highest level; to lose courageously; and fail with style.⁶³ We have already documented the supreme sporting achievements of Kauto Star. However, we argue that it was not simply Kauto Star's achievements that elevated him to iconic status. Rather, it was the nature of his performances, both in victory and defeat. Kauto Star's racing record was not unblemished and consequently, he made an impact with the critics. His tendency to make massive blunders at crucial points during important races led to the near constant questioning of his ability and temperament. Alistair Down regularly criticized his jumping: 'His supporters will insist he is not a bad jumper, but even the most purblind admirer cannot maintain he is a good jumper of fences'.⁶⁴

Jumping blunders cost Kauto Star dearly in a number of important races, and nearly cost him in a number of others. Despite hitting fences in both the 2006 King George VI and Tingle Creek and 2007 Gold Cup, he still won each race. Down suggested that Kauto Star's ability to make mistakes and still come out on top was a reflection of his class: 'Two palpable howlers yesterday ... would have put paid to lesser horses, but he merely shrugged them off ... [This] is not the work of an everyday horse'.⁶⁵

However, Kauto Star was not always able to recover from his mistakes. In 2008, during the Betfair Chase, he unsaddled stand-in jockey, Sam Thomas, following an awkward landing. Similarly, in 2010, in vying for his fifth consecutive King George VI, he stumbled at the last, eventually finishing third, the first time he had completed a race outside of the top two. Many have argued that the tendency of Kauto Star to make such high profile mistakes restricts him from being compared alongside 'true' steeplechasing legends, such as Arkle. For others, such imperfections added to his character, and furthermore, added to the sporting spectacle, setting him apart from other horses, making him the most entertaining. Newton, for example, described him as 'exciting ... the one that really matters', whilst McGrath argues that 'the point of Kauto Star is his overall majesty, not the fastidious detail'.⁶⁶

This tendency to depict sporting icons as incoherent (i.e., both brilliant and self-destructive) is a common theme within writings on human sporting icons. Whannel suggests that sporting icons require both elite performance and misbehaviour in order to galvanize public interest in them (cf. Giulianotti and Gerrard's analysis of Paul Gascoigne and Whannel's discussion of David Beckham).⁶⁷ Likewise, part of Kauto Star's allure was his Jekyll and Hyde personality: the way he could be brilliant in one moment, and perform a howler in the next. Down described Kauto Star as the 'half-brother to a Polo – he's mint, but there's a hole in him'.⁶⁸ Following this description he questioned, 'So what manner of animal do we have in Kauto Star?' He described him as 'bewitchingly exceptional', but questioned his

temperament, suggesting that the only horse in training he was ever vulnerable to was *himself*.⁶⁹ Similarly, Powell described Kauto Star's jumping as representing the 'reckless bravado of a kamikaze pilot'.⁷⁰ Kauto Star's mercurial nature added to the aura and excitement and, a certain 'morbid fascination', which accompanied his races.⁷¹

A sporting rivalry: Kauto 'The athlete' versus Denman 'The Tank'

The creation of compelling narratives is central to fan involvement and attachment, and so sports are routinely marketed as contests between individuals (or teams) with whom the audience is supposed to identify.⁷² The creation of compelling sporting rivalries has been found to be an effective tool in promoting fan involvement and increasing the commercial impact of sporting events and competitions.⁷³ A key feature of the narrative of Kauto Star, and his elevation to iconic status, was the creation of a rivalry between him and his stable companion, Denman.

The rivalry between Kauto 'The athlete' and Denman 'The tank' was the defining storyline in British steeplechasing throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century.⁷⁴ Kauto Star's rival, Denman, is an Irish-bred chestnut horse whose performances on the track were described in terms of his 'raw power and irresistible brute force', which were in marked contrast to Kauto Star's 'class', 'quality' and 'elegance'.⁷⁵ Denman was also trained by Paul Nicholls, and these two great racehorses lived in adjacent stables on Nicholls' yard, dubbed 'Millionaires' Row' due to the great successes of its inhabitants. Denman and Kauto Star did not race head-to-head until the Gold Cup of 2008, but their shared residence and trainer enabled the media and racing world to construct a story of competition and intense rivalry around the two horses, reinforced by the release of numerous pictures showing Kauto Star and Denman training head-to-head or, contradictorily, nuzzling over the stable door.⁷⁶

By 2007 both Kauto Star and Denman had amassed impressive individual victories, and were generally acknowledged as the stars of the steeplechasing world. Trainer Nicholls had cleverly avoided pitting the two against each other, and so speculation grew about which horse would win if and when they did meet on the racetrack. Many human sporting rivalries are built around frequent clashes in which rivals pit it out time and again in order to try and decide who the greater athlete is and it is often the frequency of such clashes that adds to the intensity of the rivalry.⁷⁷ Yet, in the case of Kauto Star and Denman the rarity of their head-to-head battles was a key factor in the development of media hype and anticipation surrounding the two horses. By the spring of 2008 this anticipation was nearing fever pitch as media pundits and bookmakers tried to decide which horse would reign supreme when they finally raced in the Gold Cup in March. Billed as a 'clash between two giants' and compared to famous human rivalries, such as Ali vs. Foreman, Borg vs. McEnroe, and even The Beatles vs. The Stones, Kauto Star vs. Denman was a marketing dream for the promoters of jump racing.⁷⁸ Denman was victorious in their first meeting in 2008, although Kauto Star regained his crown when they met again in 2009. Although the two horses differed wildly in style their outstanding abilities enabled racing promoters, journalists and book makers to create a compelling narrative that attracted record crowds to the racetrack, huge sums placed as bets and unprecedented media attention for jump racing, from both specialist and general media partners.

However, the concept of rivalry is a human concept, and is distinct from competition. Rivalry is relational and subjective and 'exists in the minds of competitors', often provoking exceptional and abnormal behaviour and performances when rivals meet.⁷⁹ Applying this concept to horses is problematic. Rivalry needs to be recognised as such by the actors

involved, and it is highly unlikely that Kauto Star and Denman thought of each other as rivals. They were training partners and spent their summers grazing together in a field. This is hardly the stuff of great sporting rivalries and psychological battles. Head groom for the two horses, Clifford Baker, described a touching moment of equine recognition and bonding between these two supposed 'rivals' that illustrates the inappropriateness of applying the human concept of rivalry to horses. On Kauto Star's return from an unexpected and emotionally charged win at Haydock in 2011, Baker described how Denman 'neighed at him to see him back. The first thing they did was to have a sniff between the bars. It was quite a touching moment'.⁸⁰ The idea that Kauto Star and Denman were great rivals and that each was keen to beat the other and avenge previous defeats is anthropomorphic, and the two horses were clearly trusted and familiar companions. The rivalry was a human construction, used to great effect to promote jump racing within human circles, but this is more evidence of the problems inherent in foisting human practices, values and concepts – be that icon, hero, rival or even sport – onto non-human animals.

***'The horse of a lifetime'*⁸¹**

As we have noted, applying the concept of 'icon' to a horse is problematic. Kauto Star cannot speak for himself, and so cannot construct his own life story or present his own understandings about that life story, at least not in human terms. In some ways this may put Kauto Star at a disadvantage in comparison to human athletes who can offer interpretations of their actions, and can give explanations and rationales for dips in performance or defeats. Although Kauto Star cannot do this himself he was connected to a number of high profile humans in the racing world, and we argue that these human 'connections' were an important element in the wider construction of a compelling narrative that was fundamental to the elevation of Kauto Star to iconic status. These human 'connections' became Kauto Star's 'voice' and responded vociferously to his critics, never flinching in their belief that this was always 'a remarkable horse'.⁸²

Kauto Star was trained by champion trainer Paul Nicholls, one of British racing's most recognisable and eloquent characters. Nicholls was always a staunch supporter of Kauto Star, naming him as his number one in his top ten favourite racehorses, and choosing a picture of trainer and racehorse together to grace the front cover of Nicholls' autobiography.⁸³ Nicholls was always convinced that Kauto Star was special, stating simply that 'For me there will never be another horse like him'.⁸⁴ Nicholls frequently leapt to Kauto Star's defence against what he saw as unfair criticism from the media regarding the horse's supposed flaws, explaining how he was 'surprised and a little hurt at the way the critics were queuing up to write off Kauto Star'.⁸⁵ In response to a question from the BBC in 2009 about whether Kauto Star was past his best, Nicholls responded swiftly, 'I have never heard such rubbish. We should be enjoying horses like this, not knocking them. As soon as people realise they can't win every time – that it's a horserace, and that they are not machines – the better'.⁸⁶ Kauto Star may have been unable to defend himself against such media critics, but in Nicholls he had a strong supporter to fight his corner for him.

Similarly, Kauto Star's connection to jockey Ruby Walsh, one of the most high profile and prolific winners of the current era, also helped to counter any negativity from journalists and to maintain a public aura of success and exceptional ability. Not one to be overly sentimental, Walsh has described Kauto Star as 'a proper horse' and also came to his defence against any doubters in the racing world, explaining 'I always believed in him . . . He is the greatest horse I have ever ridden'.⁸⁷

Kauto Star's human 'connections' thus acted as a medium to defend his sporting reputation and to ensure that his undeniable brilliance on the racecourse was duly noted and celebrated. However, they did much more than just defend his performances. They gave the racing fans a glimpse into Kauto Star's world and personality, expressing respect and love for this racehorse, and in turn helping to pass on this affection to the wider racing public. Kauto Star's owner, Clive Smith, described his feelings: 'I treasure him for what he's done and I admire and respect him so much'; whilst head groom, Clifford Baker, described Kauto Star's second Gold Cup victory as 'the best day of his life'.⁸⁸ Trainer Nicholls spoke with real emotion and affection when he explained to journalists, with tears in his eyes following Kauto Star's unexpected win in the 2011 Betfair Chase at Haydock, that 'This is my proudest ever moment . . . It's not relief that I feel, it's pride, I am proud of him'.⁸⁹ This outpouring of emotion from his human 'connections' was a powerful antidote to Kauto Star's inability to express his own emotions in human terms, and undoubtedly was an important factor in endearing this racehorse to the wider public. Although an exceptional athlete, whose narrative was laced with success, drama and a compelling rivalry, as we discussed above, the emotional connection of all those who surrounded him helped propel Kauto Star into the hearts of the wider racing public. Kauto Star was more than just a racehorse, more than just a powerful animal on whom millions of pounds have been gambled, won and lost. Kauto Star's character became accessible and apparent to the public, via the words and emotion of his close human 'connections'. As Nicholls explained 'Kauto is my mate . . . If I had one last apple I'd give it to him'.⁹⁰

***'Kauto Star's people'*⁹¹**

According to Gabler icons, including sport, are ideally placed for deification as they perform under the scrutinising gaze of the masses. In so doing, '[they] emerge as the lynchpins of belonging, recognition and spiritual life'.⁹² A key element necessary to become an icon is that other people – the general public – have to elevate you there.⁹³ Richard Hoggart, in his analyses of working class life in post-World War II Britain, argues that the sports hero traditionally enjoyed an intimate connection with the people.⁹⁴ According to Hoggart the sports hero must earn his/her status through a relationship of mutual adoration – the 'performance'. The relationship between sporting icons and the public has been documented in a number of studies. For example, writing about the boxer Barry McGuigan, Hassan embraces the notion of spectators being energised and enthused as their ordinary lives are transformed – however ephemerally - whilst watching spectacular sporting feats.⁹⁵ Similarly, in *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes argues how modern sports are analogous to the theatre of antiquity, where 'epic heroes from whose exploits the sporting public derive concentrated vicarious excitement ... compensates for drawn-out everyday monotony'.⁹⁶ Furthermore, for Lasch, part of the narcissistic dependency on celebrity (also icons) means that the public can bask in the reflective glow of their performances; thus assisting in their own identity creation.⁹⁷

The relationship between Kauto Star and the general public was a constant feature in our analyses. Many of the articles examined pointed to the level of access the public and media had been granted to Kauto Star and his 'connections' throughout his career. This was attributed to Paul Nicholls' willingness to provide open access to his stables periodically throughout the racing season. Personal access to Kauto Star was certainly unprecedented when compared to iconic human athletes. In her introduction to *Kauto Star: A Steeplechasing Legend*, Alice Plunkett describes how the public's adoration of Kauto Star can, in part, be attributed to the unrivalled access they have had to him, and the subsequent

knowledge they have of him – ‘we [the public] know all there is to know about his regime, his trainer and groom’.⁹⁸ She argues how, throughout his career, ‘we’ have built a relationship with ‘him’ – ‘each October ... is like catching up with an old school friend’.⁹⁹ The perception that the public ‘knew’ Kauto Star was vital to the longevity of public interest in him. As we argue below, this sense of knowing contributed to the public bonding emotionally with Kauto Star, meaning that he became much more significant to them than a mere sports performer: ‘as each year has passed the anxiety has grown with every run as the attachment and friendship builds stronger and stronger’.¹⁰⁰

His charisma, coupled with his flaws (above), meant he was an appropriate icon for the public to invest in emotionally. Much like the frequently cited flawed ‘legends’ and ‘heroes’ from other sports, Kauto Star possessed that certain something that meant people beyond the sport would look out for him, adopt him as their own and, under the right conditions, worry about him during competition. According to Down, a large part of the public’s bond with Kauto Star was that they would have ‘their hearts in their mouths everytime one of those birch barriers looms into his path’.¹⁰¹ Kauto Star’s flaws meant that watching him would never be ‘dull or easy’, and spectators would be given a ‘refresher course’ in the meaning of the expression ‘the edge of error’.¹⁰²

It is impossible to methodologically quantify the impact of sporting icons on the general public and therefore, we are mindful not to over-state the significance of Kauto Star on public consciousness. However, our analysis does point to the unique relationship he was able to establish with the racing public. For example, hundreds of his supporters spontaneously lined the streets of Ditcheat (where he is stabled) to welcome him home after winning the 2007 Gold Cup. Throughout his career the general public wanted to get close to Kauto Star. His status was such that people wanted ever-lasting memories of him. With this in mind, in November 2012, a £200,000 bronze statue of Kauto Star was unveiled at Haydock. This would serve to both celebrate his achievements and reinforce his position within the consciousness of the racing public.

Conclusions

Kauto Star’s story lends itself well to the creation of a sporting icon. He was undoubtedly an exceptionally talented jump racer, but as we have argued, rarely is talent enough for sustaining iconic status. Kauto Star’s iconic status also owes a lot to the circumstances of the period.¹⁰³ Kauto Star was surrounded by the right people and he also came along at the right time to leave his mark. From the very outset he was surrounded by people who cared deeply for him. The fact that these people were amongst the best in the business at that time – seven time champion trainer, Nicholls and seven time champion jockey, Walsh (amongst others) – ensured that Kauto Star had the best opportunities for success.

Previous analyses of racehorses suggest that iconic status is reserved to those who become representatives of and/or challenge a particular period in time – for example, Foxhunter’s victory in the 1952 Olympics significantly contributed to a heightened sense of British national identity during early stages of postcolonialism.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, whilst Kauto Star’s story is certainly rooted in a specific period of time, we argue that he did not represent this period in the same way others are assumed to have. Instead, we argue that, for many, Kauto Star became the focal representative of the entire sport of jump racing. There were a number of reasons for this; not least the death of Desert Orchid and Kauto Star’s emerging commercial worth.

In November 2006, just as Kauto Star was enjoying burgeoning success, the sport mourned the death of another of its icons, Desert Orchid ('Dessie'), arguably the greatest steeplechaser of his generation. Consequently, many within the sport turned to Kauto Star to grow the sport amongst a wider audience. Throughout the noughties, the racing industry had experienced declining betting revenues, reduced racecourse attendances, decreasing terrestrial television coverage and dwindling racehorse ownership.¹⁰⁵ Horse racing has always had a devout following from men over fifty. However, like other sports battling to secure its future in the twenty first century, horse racing is attempting to open itself up to non-traditional consumers. Peter Scudamore for example, suggested that Kauto Star possessed the 'X Factor', and believed he had the potential to win over non-racing enthusiasts.¹⁰⁶

Kauto Star (and arguably Denman) was the first horse to really be subjected to contemporary forms of commercialisation. According to Hayward, Kauto Star, coupled with the sport's drive towards widening its supporter base, sparked a change in national hunt racing culture: '[He] is the leading light of a more commercial age in which new-money owners supply the ammunition to a handful of powerful yards and winning is a business as well as a passion'.¹⁰⁷ This is exemplified by Paul Nicholls. In 2009, Nicholls is understood to have employed a marketing specialist, Johnno Spence. Spence, who works at Kempton racecourse (home of the King George VI), spoke openly about Kauto Star's commercial potential: 'we're having Kauto Star merchandise on the day and we need to market it as much as possible. With the non-racing public it's almost a case of educating them about this horse and explaining the story'.¹⁰⁸ Cards bearing '4' (symbolic of Kauto Star's attempt to win the King George VI for a fourth time) and green and purple (his colours) scarves and hats, for instance, were sold in advance of the race. Spence went on to say that the rivalry between Kauto Star and Denman was essential for the sport's development.¹⁰⁹

Not only were the circumstances of his development conducive to establishing him as a sporting icon, we argue that the manner in which he finished his jump racing career solidified his iconic status; cementing him firmly in the minds of racing followers. Often sporting icons will prolong their careers well beyond their peak. For some this is out of love for the sport; for others it is in order to make an extra buck or two based on their past achievements. The latter can seriously test the loyalty of sports supporters.

An excellent example of this relates to the former heavyweight boxing champion, Mike Tyson. Carrington documents the descent of Tyson from the man everyone feared into a 'mediocre fighter'.¹¹⁰ He argues that Tyson's final fights were motivated, not by his desire to fight, or out of his love of the sport, but, understandably, by the need 'to take care of my bills basically'.¹¹¹ Carrington suggests that Tyson's decline has redefined him in the eyes of many: 'Tyson has become a sympathetic character, invoking for some, though clearly not all, a sense of pity and understanding, rather than (or perhaps as well as) disgust and outrage'.¹¹² Paraphrasing Carrington, in the moment that sporting icons admit failure they give up their iconic status; becoming 'simply human again'.¹¹³

We argued earlier that competition horses have a commodity value, which impacts on the way they are treated. Racing in particular has a reputation for high animal wastage; a risk that increases if horses are expected to compete too late into their careers. As Kauto Star's jumping career was coming to an end, public celebration turned to worry over his health and well-being. Many believed that Kauto Star's retirement in 2012 was well over due. His form declined significantly throughout 2010/11 (losing three out of four races), leading to calls for his retirement. Instead, in an attempt to prolong Kauto Star's career, Nicholls lengthened

his rest periods and limited his races. This attracted criticism from concerned racing followers. Public criticism of the 'unnecessary' competing of Kauto Star was not unprecedented. Similar feelings have been expressed when other horses of iconic status have been perceived to have been treated unfairly by their human connections.¹¹⁴ The reason for this, according to Crawford, is that when horses have the kind of public impact of Kauto Star, they stop belonging to their owners and trainers and instead, become public property.

There must always be a temptation (as was the case with Tyson) to strive for one last performance; one last attempt to win big. Sometimes, this can lead to an undignified end to one's career, and the subsequent questioning of one's iconic status. Nobody wanted this for Kauto Star and fortunately, he was retired with dignity; graciously bowing out at the 2012 Gold Cup. As Walsh ended his race, the public's spontaneous applause was unprecedented. Many had come to watch Kauto Star win the Gold Cup for a third time. Instead, they left a little poorer, but knew that he was safe. Some may have been disappointed with this. However, the majority of his followers could now rest easy, knowing that he would see out his days grazing in a field, being ridden around the countryside, and nuzzling stablemate, Denman. As exemplified by Plunkett:

'By the time of the Cheltenham Gold Cup of 2012 the [public's] feelings had become so strong that when the great Ruby Walsh pulled up Kauto Star in the first circuit the spontaneous applause that rung around the racecourse summed up in a moment where this horse lay in the racing public's heart. There was no concern for a losing bet or prize money lost, only that their dear friend was coming back from the battle safe and sound'.¹¹⁵

Perhaps the biggest test of Kauto Star's iconic status will only arrive when it is time to write his obituary. Will his demise make the front pages? However, although Kauto Star is now retired from racing he is only 13, and hopefully will continue to enjoy an active and rewarding life in his new role as a dressage horse, so this final judgement must be deferred. Since his retirement at the end of 2012 Kauto Star has made a number of public appearances, including a demonstration of his new dressage skills at Newbury racecourse, a parade prior to the King George VI Chase at Kempton, and the unveiling of a bronze statue of him at Haydock. His retirement, coming just 11 days after the retirement of flat racing champion Frankel, has been lamented in the racing press, leaving a void that will be hard to fill.

As we have argued at several points throughout this paper, the attribution of iconic status – a human concept – on a racehorse, even one as great as Kauto Star, is problematic. He is a horse, and so has no concept of iconicity, or his 'career', his achievements or the media hype that has surrounded him. He cannot comment on his own successes, or feel the weight of public expectation that has often weighed heavily on human athletes. Yet although we acknowledge that assigning him the label 'sporting icon' is anthropomorphic, and thus in many ways inappropriate, we contend that it is still a label he deserves. Iconicity may well be a human concept, but it is in the human-defined field of organised sport that Kauto Star has been represented as heroic and extraordinary. Kauto Star's inability to understand this position may in fact have helped cement this status. Unlike human athletes, Kauto Star can never sully the heroic narrative created around him by inappropriate or offensive comments, unruly behaviour or scandals, as so often happens with human sports stars.¹¹⁶ Therefore Kauto Star, by virtue of his un-humanness and inability to communicate in human terms, becomes an icon that is all but immune to the all-too-familiar falls from grace that

characterise the narratives of many human athletes. In his retirement, as during his racing career, he remains blissfully unaware of the weight of human expectation attached to sporting icons, and so is relatively immune to the pressure this can put onto many great human athletes. All that is left is for the racing public, 'Kauto's public', to marvel at his achievements and wish him well in retirement. Nicholls, Kauto Star's staunch supporter and champion, aptly captures the ambiguous position of an equine icon in relation to his human connections: 'People kept telling me a horse couldn't come back and regain the Gold Cup crown, but the horse doesn't know anything about statistics, and Ruby and I were happy to ignore them'.¹⁷

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