Life Off the Pitch

By Theodore Dalrymple

There was an article recently in *The Washington Post* that suggested that the great footballer Lionel Messi might do more for his sport (soccer) and his fame if he were less reticent about his private life, gave more interviews to the press and on television, and in general put himself about more.

Perhaps an illicit love affair or two, or a few children conceived out of what used to be called wedlock, a secret vice like losing a fortune through gambling, an addiction or tendency to become violent when in drink, might do his image no end of good. There is nothing worse for a man's image than to live quietly and decently. What a bore!

I am not a great follower of any sport, and the more professional (which is to say the more it becomes a branch of the celebrity industry), the less interested in it I become. Even I, however, have heard of Lionel Messi, and such is his skill that it would take almost no acquaintance with the rules of the game to perceive that he is a player out of the ordinary. By no means a large man, he seems to have been endowed with an extraordinary talent.

The article in *The Washington Post* was almost dithyrambic about his performance on the soccer field, calling it "transcendent." I hesitate to use the word "genius" of any sportsman—if a sportsman has genius, what are we to say of Mozart?—but there is little doubt that someone of Messi's ability is born infrequently.

When I learned from the article—I do not follow these matters closely—of Messi's public discretion, my respect for him as a human being increased greatly. It suggests that he is aware that his God-given gift is of a specific nature, confined to the football field, and that he has no opinion worth having on the matter of whether euthanasia is a good or a bad thing, what to do if your child has ADHD or wishes to change sex, and who should win the Oscars this year. His obligation to his sport is to perform as well as he can, for in that way he is best able to please a crowd—and that is enough. The public has no further claim on him.

What is depressing to me is that the author of the article thought that the public was naturally interested in every detail of his life, simply because he kicked a ball with what was called "sublime" skill, and he ought to satisfy its interest. In fact, anyone who is known for anything now has a kind of transcendental duty to become even better known and therefore has a duty to the prurient public to reveal (or "share" or "open up about") the vices and bad habits he is supposed to have, even if he only fantasizes about them.

In my childhood in England, I thought football important and used, at age 10, to attend matches with a friend of the same age. In those days, things were very different from how they are now. Even the pitches on which the games were played were different: They were of real grass, and if it rained, they turned to mud almost immediately. The ball, which was of leather, became heavy and sodden, and the game developed into something more like trench warfare in Flanders Fields than sport. If the ball flew in the air and the footballers headed

it, they were likely in later years to suffer from *dementia pugilistica*, the punch-drunkenness of boxers who have had too many fights. The footballers were much less athletic, less fast and skillful, than they are today.

To us boys, they were heroes on the pitch nonetheless, but we knew nothing of them off the pitch, and wished to know nothing because it never occurred to us that it was important or interesting to know it. They were not even well-paid: Astonishing though it may now seem, they had not a minimum, but a maximum, wage, which was approximately that of a skilled manual worker. After the match was over, they got changed and went home, often on the bus, sometimes to lodgings with a landlady.

Some of the boys would wait outside the stadium for them to emerge to obtain their autographs, but I never did, for even at that age I understood that their fame was ephemeral, and after a few years their names would be forgotten (not by me, though), or at least they would no longer seem like colossi who bestrode the world, but ordinary men doing ordinary jobs.

When I was about 7, I went with my mother and brother to Cornwall for a short holiday. A man in his 20s, who of course seemed to me immensely old, played football on the beach with us. He was a professional footballer, and I still remember his name: Johnny Rainford. He played for a team called Brentford, an undistinguished part of London, through which I cannot pass to this day without thinking of him. He was a perfect gentleman, had impeccable manners, and was the first celebrity I ever met, though I magnified his celebrity in my mind ever afterward. In my mind, he played for England, which he never did. He would tease us slightly with the ball on the beach, being able by his skill to evade us as we tried to get the ball from him. He was staying in our hotel, and once or twice we ate with him.

When, toward the end of his career, he left Brentford, he was

a friendly game, that is to say a friendly game the proceeds of which were given to him, amounting to £550, a bigger sum then than it would be today, but not an immense fortune even then. He died, aged 70, in 2001, and I honor his memory.

He lived and played in a completely different world from the one today in which a football player aged 23 buys a Ferrari, crashes it into a tree the next day, and buys another the day after, all with the small change from his wages. No doubt it is a sign of my gradual change of species from human being to dinosaur that I think it was a more civilized world (at least in some respects) then than it is now, one in which our scale of values was better, but I am glad to think that even now Lionel Messi shares it, even if *The Washington Post* does not.

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