

The Sports Factor – ABC Radio

Globalisation and Sport 14/4/06

Globalisation now describes just about everything, from the way we do business to the way we watch football. So what are the implications for sport in a world where global is rapidly replacing local?

Transcript

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Mick O'Regan: Hello, and welcome to The Sports Factor. I'm Mick O'Regan.

Today on the program we're going to consider the impact of globalisation on sport. Globalisation is a difficult, contentious word, meaning different things to different people. It's the focus of sustained international protest for many, and a cause to champion for others.

So what does it mean, and what does it mean for sport?

To help me answer those questions I recorded the following extended interview with Professor Toby Miller from the University of California, Riverside, in the United States.

Australian by birth and upbringing, Toby Miller has lived and worked in the US for 15 years, and is a respected authority on issues of globalisation, culture and contemporary sport.

To begin, I asked him how he first became interested in the topic.

Toby Miller: Well I've been involved in a couple of different projects, Mick, to look at globalisation, not just as a concept that's out there to explain everything, but as in a sense, something that gets utilised within specific contexts. Because when people talk about globalisation, especially when they're referring to culture, I sometimes wonder whether it's simply one of those catch-all portmanteau words that's used to describe something that you can't understand. So I got involved in two projects: one to look at Hollywood around the world, and how the spread of film and television culture from the United States has functioned, especially in the so-called period of globalisation of the last say 20 years, and secondly to look at sport, and to see how that too has globalised.

And what we found was that there was a combination of, on the one hand, a moment of financial globalisation, partly enabled by communications technology, that meant that financial decisions could be made based on not only traditional questions like the cost of labour and the goods that labour works with, but also based on being able to move money around into different money markets, depending on all kinds of things, including exchange rates, and that that had changed significantly over the period from say the mid-1980s.

We also found that markets for labour had changed significantly, that whereas the big moment of, for instance, moving car manufacture or shipyards offshore from traditional first world locations that went on in the '70s and '80s, seemed to imply that third world labour was going to be key when it came to those very traditional manufacturing sectors; we found it was also happening in the cultural sectors, sectors that had been thought of in the past as quite nationally based, whether it be sport or film and TV, and that both labour and audiences, both workers and spectators, both athletes and viewers, were subject to globalisation, because they were both desired and controlled and governed and commodified from almost anywhere in the world that made sense economically.

Mick O'Regan: If we take that theme and consider sport more specifically, one of things I'd like to give you what might be a corny example. But I have a 7-year-old who now gets around in a Brazilian soccer shirt, with 'Ronaldo' on the back and No.9. Now when I was his age I would have been lucky to know where Brazil was, and yet my son, who's interested in soccer, has no problem at all identifying Brazil as the best soccer team in the world, and therefore wants to identify. As an overview question, is that an exemplar of what globalisation has done, to weaken national affiliations and for people to see the sporting world in global terms?

Toby Miller: Well it's a great example to say that on the one hand Yes, on the other hand, No, as academics are very occasionally wont to say. It's wrong to say it's the end of the nation, because he knows Brazil's the best team, and he knows that Ronaldo is from Brazil. Conversely, it's right to say it's the end of the nation because he's not the sort of parochial, frightfully Australian child who only knows the winner of the New South Wales Rugby League the year before. What's happened is that there's been a comprehensive commodification and televisualisation of various kinds of sport, and that has generated a new consciousness and awareness amongst viewers. So for example, Nike is really crucial in this instance.

If you think about Michael Jordan and his iconic success around the world as the figure of the National Basketball Association, he was an iconic figure for people right around the globe, who'd never actually seen an NBA game on television, but they'd seen a Nike commercial, or they'd seen Air Jordan's available, and so on. If you think about Ronaldo, then there's no doubt that along with a number of other key players within the Brazilian team, but particularly within Real Madrid, the Spanish club side for which he plays, whilst also appearing for the Brazilian national team, then his appearances are not just about scoring goals in official football fixtures, whether they be national or club based, his appearances and his success and his iconography are about Nike and various other sponsors that utilise him in particular ways, or whatever other particular shoe company he may sign with, whatever other kind of commodity subject he ends up being.

It's the same with David Beckham, why did Real Madrid buy David Beckham to play for them, when he's an OK footballer, but certainly not good enough to play for Real Madrid. They bought him because he was able to sell so much merchandise in East Asia, affiliated with Manchester United, his previous team, and then with Real Madrid, Real Madrid which buys very expensive players like Ronaldo from all over the world, needed good cash flow, where was it going to get it? By expanding its merchandising sales of shirts and soccer balls and so on, into Asia, and that's where Beckham comes in.

So on the one hand, yes, it's the end of a certain kind of parochialism and an opening up to a global cultural market in really positive ways. In others, it's one more part of a particular move towards commodification and the nation is still super important, because it's still the nation within which club contests occur, and it's still the nation that's the register at which events like the Olympics or the World Cup or the Commonwealth Games or the European Championships and so on, success is again measured.

Mick O'Regan: Well let's stay with David Beckham for a moment, because obviously David Beckham for many people, the sort of high point of his fame came in his Manchester United days, and the premier league, the English football premier league is huge in Australia. Again you'll see lots of young football fans wearing Arsenal jerseys, or Chelsea jerseys rather than, say jerseys from the Australian teams. Yet what your argument suggests is that someone like David Beckham, his contribution now to international sport, is more about his capacity to draw in money.

Yet at the same time in Manchester United, as you're probably aware, there's been this enormous debate about Malcolm Glazer, the American entrepreneur who owned a North American football team, coming in as the predominant shareholder of Manchester United. Now it seemed to me to be a tremendous tension there. On the one hand, lots of the fans liked the fact that their club is a global brand, yet on the other hand, they have this terrible nostalgic anxiety that they're losing the club that defined so much of their community.

Toby Miller: Nineteen years ago, Mick, I went to the last ever home game played by South Sydney at Redfern Stadium. The club had a group of audience members in the ground, probably I would say a quarter Aboriginal people from the local Redfern area of South Sydney; the team itself had maybe half a dozen players who were of Aboriginal background. It was very clear that what was happening then was a clearance away of what had been a very important iconic suburban team, that spoke to some of the difficulties of inner city life for black folks in Australia. And the decision to end games at Redfern Oval, rather like the decision that I gather has just taken place which is to make Russell Crowe et al, and Holmes a'Court the owner of the club, is about just the kind of transformation we're discussing. And in many ways I get very torn about these things.

I feel Old School about it, I feel very sad that a very traditional sometimes rugged, sometimes not very attractive form of masculinity, but in this case also a kind of racial counter-public sphere for Aboriginal Australians was taken away, and we're seeing this wholesale de-racination of the idea of a nexus between a place and a club, and there can be something that's seriously lost when that takes place.

In the case of Manchester United, the fact that the Glazers come from the United States is relevant, because the United States is not seen as being hospitable to football, even though the US national team is ranked, depending on the week, about 13th by FIFA in the world, and conceivably will do better than England in the World Cup, forthcoming in Germany. Secondly, they are seen as fire sale merchants, of whom there are a number in professional sports in the US, which is to say middle-ranking, reasonably wealthy people, who come into a town, buy up a club, spend vast amounts of money on bringing in very talented baseball players, football players, hockey players, basketball players, whatever it is.

Once they've won a title or two, then sell those players at inflated rates, leaving the club with very, very, low salary levels, and suddenly, complete lack of success. There are all too many stories like that, there's a fear for a lot of people that Manchester United that the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, the National Football League team in the US that the Glazers own, which was pumped up with money to buy lots of players to win the NFL title and then suddenly saw people sold, will be replicated in the case of Manchester United.

And there's also of course the sense, because at least one thing that tends to happen in Britain, is that the clubs don't literally leave the suburb they play in, because it's such a small country, that by having US owners, there'll be some measure of the connection, the very positive, powerful connection between Old Trafford and the local populace. That would be severed and gone forever. So again, you can say when those forces of international capital come in, whether it's Russell Crowe's Hollywood money, or the Glazer's Tampa Bay money, on the one hand you might get rid of some old fogeys who hang around the board room and don't bring success, and therefore disappoint local fans. On the other, you might be sacrificing precisely that notion of the 'real Manchester United' or 'the real South Sydney'.

Mick O'Regan: Toby, to continue the theme of what happens when you shift people and teams around, you mentioned there the way in which location and sport are so entwined together, yet in the United States, I think possibly when the Dodgers left Brooklyn, whenever that was, there has been this notion of franchises rather than teams that are some reflection of the local community, and I remember a huge debate in Cleveland, in the mid-west of the States, when the Browns NFL team was going to be moved, I think to Florida, but I could be wrong. Has that debate continued? Are people still committed to having local teams, or is it seen now more that it's being able to see your team on the television, rather than being able to see them at the local stadium?

Toby Miller: Well there's a mixture, and you make a really good point. When you go back to that period after the Second World War when the two Brooklyn baseball teams in New York, the Dodgers and the Giants, moved to California, the Dodgers to Los Angeles where I live, and the Giants to San Francisco up in the north. That was done because as a consequence of the vast increase in population in California after the war, because all the big military aircraft factories and others were being set up there, so there was lots of manufacturing opportunity, and because people had come back from the war and were given resettlement options away from the south and so on, that was basically done, that big move of those two baseball teams, because they were new media markets.

Suddenly it was feasible in that case to have a national competition because major league baseball had essentially been an eastern states activity, so the movement away from New York, lamented by many, tragic for many, Spike Lee, the film director who wasn't even alive when the Dodgers and the Giants were in Brooklyn, still wears baseball paraphernalia that remembers them, that recognises them. In many ways that loss, tragic though it may be, is about creating a national league instead of just a regional one. But that's something that is ongoing in the United States, and regularly what owners do, because the clubs are all privately owned with the exception of one National Football League team, is to say OK Mick, so you live in (I don't know where you live, Mick), but -

Mick O'Regan: Northern New South Wales.

Toby Miller: OK, so you live in Northern New South Wales, you enjoy having your team there, and one of my problems is that I'm not getting enough money from the local TV franchise, and I'm not getting enough money from people coming into the stadium because the stadium's rickety, and the telecommunications facilities are poor, and if you and all the other people who say that you really bond with Northern New South Wales and it matters to you, and you want to have your own club, are serious about this, give me some money, and give me some money by having a plebiscite in which you will vote in favour of a massive tax rollout, locally, that will provide me gratis with redevelopment funds for generating better telecommunications infrastructure and a better stadium.

Well that kind of boondoggle goes on all the time in the United States, and there's a pattern that's repeated on every occasion, which is: the local government says, 'Oh, you're absolutely right, we really should honour the special local needs of the populace, so we're going to commit all this public money and public service to enable you to have new telecommunications, a new stadium, and then people come in and say, This is ridiculous, this is a total waste of money, don't do it. And the population agrees, but then there's a blitz of advertising on television in the three weeks before the plebiscite that eventually is being held, and suddenly the vote goes 52-48% and yes, the boondoggle goes through and the stadium is rebuilt. It's absolutely atrocious.

So on the one hand, there is this desire to keep clubs local, that's utilised quite brutally by owners. On the other, there's one other factor that we've missed out when talking about the US which really doesn't apply anywhere else, which is College Athletics.

Mick O'Regan: Which is huge, isn't it?

Toby Miller: It's absolutely huge. And there are really very sizeable cities and towns in the US that don't have professional teams. I mean Los Angeles is twice the size of Sydney in population, but we don't have an NFL team for example. And most cities don't have the full complement of an NFL, and NBA a major league and so on. So what takes its place is the vast amount of money and energy and talent that goes into College hoops, College football especially.

Mick O'Regan: Right. Now those sports, and it's interesting that you bring up basketball, because it's a sport in Australia that seems to have peaked and troughed and peaked and troughed. Ten years ago it seemed to be the sport that was going to take all before it, and then suddenly basketball, in terms of the NBL in Australia, the National Basketball League, sort of faltered badly. But what it brought to mind to me then, there are those sports that I wonder whether they have international appeal. Now in a paper you wrote some years ago, you looked at Rugby Union in New Zealand, and back in the '90s a major corporate figure who had been a significant coach, John Hart, was brought from the corporate sector back into rugby to coach the All Blacks.

And he had this notion of wanting to make the All Blacks an international brand. Now for people who follow Rugby, the All Blacks are already a brand of extraordinary integrity and excellence. But what it begs is the question of who does follow Rugby, and you can take Rugby Union to lots of places where people have no idea what it is. For globalisation and sport to mesh completely, does the sport by necessity, have to have the capacity to be truly internationalised?

Toby Miller: I think that's right, and I think ideally, the Holy Grail that certainly in the United States, we (if I can use that term) are following with globalisation in sport, is try to get very, very, talented players from Third World countries who you can sign onto contracts for cheap, and try to develop audiences from very, very wealthy First World countries, whom you can sign on as consumers for expensive.

So what that means is -

Mick O'Regan: Buy cheap, sell high.

Toby Miller: Exactly. Major league baseball now has a quarter of its professional players living in Latin America. Does that mean Latin America suddenly got a lot better at baseball than people in the United States? Arguably they did, but more importantly, unlike those who've gone through the College system domestically, they don't have agents who are saying 'And wee want a million-and-a-half sign-on bonus', before you can see whether they've got the fitness capacities to go through a season. So that's a big factor there.

On the other hand, why is it that major league baseball wants to have opening day in Japan? Why is it that it wants to set up connections to Australian professional baseball clubs, and so on?

A lot of that is because of the desire for wealthy consumers in untapped markets, at the same time as you cut your costs, by getting very talented workers from labour markets where there's basically no competition and so prices are low.

Mick O'Regan: And yet there has been historically, a movement of workers seeking a better life, better incomes, moving from developing nations to developed nations across all sorts of industries, and I wonder whether - and I read recently that in North American football, you are 40 times more likely to play NFL football if you are of Samoan heritage. And basically now what's happening - you probably know all about this - is that American scouts for major NFL teams are going to American Samoa, this tiny Pacific nation where they have all these big-boned boys who are very strong and very fast, and they're signing them up to College scholarships. Now these boys are getting educations, but they're also getting primarily, a chance to make very good money and repatriate that money back to their families in American Samoa. Is part of the push for globalisation simply that old desire of people in poor circumstances to improve their lot?

Toby Miller: Oh, of course it is, and of course there are many opportunities for people to do that, and I wouldn't want to deny for a second, the right and the legitimacy and the competence, the skill and the brilliance of people in those developing nations to ply their trades elsewhere. What's tragic is when you get traditionally under-represented groups or oppressed minorities putting all their eggs in the sports basket, when there are other baskets that they could invest in, particularly educational ones.

And the vast majority of people who are signed up on very, very tenuous contracts by US scouts, whether it's American Samoa or its in Venezuela, are a) not going to make it if they're not good enough; b) going to get hurt or injured; c) probably unless they really get into a good college and a college, i.e. university, that makes them study and makes them take all their classes, which isn't always the case, they're likely to give up a lot of

educational opportunity and then emerge at the age of 20 or 21 with no skills, a broken body, a great sense of disappointment, and nothing much to take back with them. And that's the tragedy of, of course, the dream of the United States, that brings in so many of us from around the world. For the tiny percent that make it, of course it's a dream come true. For others, it's a nightmare you take back with you to the place you came from.

Mick O'Regan: Professor Toby Miller, who's my guest this week on The Sports Factor.

Toby, to move to what are the truly big international circuses of sport, namely the Football World Cup, which is occurring in June in Germany this year, and also the Olympics which of course is a four-year cycle for both Summer and Winter. How have those organisations such as FIFA or the International Olympic Committee, ended up being the supra national entities that seem to be able to control so many domestic policy concerns and so much money.

Toby Miller: It is extraordinary isn't it. In a way they're the best examples not of Utopic or Dystopic, but actual world government that we have. If we go back to the history of international organisations, you can see a lot of them being formed around the same time as FIFA and the IOC took form, and of things like the International Telecommunications Union, the International Postal Union, and so on, these institutions from the late 19th century or in some cases after the First World War and then the Second World War: World Health Organisation and so on, attempts to get beyond rather trivial, parochial, chauvinistic desires and policies of particular nation-states, and instead take questions of the law of the sea, or the running of the Olympic Games beyond those parochial concerns.

And this is particularly ironic in the case of the International Olympic Committee which started out, in part, the whole idea of the modern Olympics was to resuscitate French masculinity following the Franco-Prussian War, and associated military problems; and in the case of FIFA of course, we'd seen the rise of a certain kind of national aggression, often associated with football teams, take so-called hooliganism by the Dutch, the Germans, the English and so forth. But there's no doubt that they do give some model of a kind of international governance. How they achieve that, 1) because they were able to back onto imperialism, I mean they were picking up on the way in which the British Empire in particular, both at a military level but also a commercial level (think of all the sailors, Merchant Marine, and others, going through parts of Latin America spreading the gospel of Association football or soccer and so on).

The way that imperialism provided a wedge into a lot of Third World countries that then could provide these local sports activities, sometimes deliberately, the policy creatures of colonial powers, sometimes part of national resistance to those colonial powers, the duality of cricket on the one hand, it's the English invention on the other hand, for the Indians they claim it as their invention, and so forth.

So you get a kind of imposition resistance dynamic from colonialism that pushes a lot of those international sports on, and then as television makes their coverage live possible, particularly through satellite, I think the '64 Tokyo Summer Games were the first Olympics that you could probably watch in Australia while they were under way in Tokyo, at least in parts of Australia. You see there the possibilities of sponsorship, so the Tokyo Games had its own cigarette, for example.

Mick O'Regan: Really?

Toby Miller: What the IOC learnt to do was that instead of just signing on every conceivable sponsor, the Radio National cigar would be a great one I think for the coming World Cup of Soccer in Germany.

Mick O'Regan: Something to puff on while you're having a think.

Toby Miller: Absolutely. In addition to the Radio National cigar you also say, Well Radio National or Radio Australia if you want the cigar, you have to pay us a lot of money, because we promise we won't have any other cigars, you'll have that exclusivity clause that's so important in the IOC. Or in FIFA, if you want to go and watch the World Cup this summer in June, you have to buy your ticket with one particular brand of credit card and not the other brands of credit card, and that's part of the exclusivity deal. So when satellite and television came along, so did the possibility of these massive international brands.

Mick O'Regan: And so I think I'm right in remembering that when Australia was advertising its capacity to host the 2000 Olympics, it actually had that notion that it was Australian open for business, that the Olympics brought with it this enormous commercial fillip that countries wanted the Olympics because it put them on the map, not only in sporting and cultural terms, but also in commercial terms.

Toby Miller: And there's a huge debate about that. Montreal is still paying off, as everybody knows, the 1976 Olympic Games, and most of the countries that have held these Games and that haven't gone down the purely commodified private sector route that occurred in Los Angeles in '84, and then Atlanta in '96, have been unable to quantify to the satisfaction of most economists, the alleged payout, even years later, of the investment. The one example that's an undisputed success is Barcelona, and what Barcelona did after the '92 Olympics, as part of showing how far they had come since the overthrow of fascism, was to utilise all the European Union money that had come in to help stimulate their economy, and put them back into becoming what they now are, which is neo-colonial hegemonies again in Latin America in certain ways, and turn all the facilities that were made available for the '92 Games into centres for other kinds of major international congressional discussion.

So for instance, if you go at any given month basically in Barcelona, to the old Olympic facilities, you'll find there'll be an international world congress on HIV or AIDS, or there'll be one on telecommunications technology, or one on the book industry, whatever it might be. They've been extraordinarily successful, but a lot of that came from hidden quasi public but not national governmental subsidies from the European Union and a lot of it came from the fact that Barcelona, unlike say, Australia, is so brilliantly positioned to take advantage of that mixture of professional and tourist interests that you get throughout Western Europe, where very wealthy people can fly for just an hour and get to Paradise.

So whether or not in the fullness of time, in, say 10 years from now, people will look back at the Sydney Games and say It was worth it at an economic level, that's going to be a tough one to answer.

Mick O'Regan: And finally, if globalisation is pushed through in sporting terms to its logical conclusion, and what we see is a sort of world to play in, and we have teams like

Arsenal in the English Premier League that maybe have one or two Englishmen, but are full of stars from literally around the world, you know, Thierry Henry, Didier Drogba, I think he plays for Chelsea though, but all these international players, does that mean that particular games that grow up in specific environments, and I'm thinking here of Australian Rules Football, which is an indigenous game, developed in the mid 19th century for Australian conditions, are those games going to become increasingly isolated, or will there be pressure on them as the AFL is trying to do, to extend the tentacles of their game into international areas?

Toby Miller: Well I'd have to say Good Luck to the AFL, which has a great product, but great products are not what make capitalism successful necessarily. It's a wonderful sport that I love, (Go, Tigers!) but basically I don't think the options for the entry of new sports onto the world arena are very positive, very powerful, at the level of team sports. I think there are a lot of possibilities at the level of those individual extreme sports, we've seen the transformation of the Winter Olympics, but basically my guess is that we're going to see a concentration of the traditional sports and their success, I'm thinking particularly of football, Association Football, and the examples you give.

What's going to happen, I suspect, is that increasingly, institutions like Arsenal or Chelsea are not going to be competing in contests called the English Premier League, they're going to be in a European-wide city league, and they're not going to sell broadcasting rights to the BBC or ITV or SBS or the ABC, they're going to have their own either broadcast or internet networks that each club owns, and they do special deals for each time they play one another, the so-called G14 of the wealthy European clubs at the moment in football, and that will be the model.

So globalisation will be the name of the game, but funnily enough, it'll be back to city states, it'll be back to the period before the nation state, before the sovereign state, before empire, because that's where the money will cluster.

Mick O'Regan: Professor Toby Miller from the University of California, Riverside, in the U.S., who's currently visiting the Queensland University of Technology.

Thanks to the production team here at The Sports Factor of Andrew Davies and Jim Ussher.

I'm Mick O'Regan, thanks for listening. I look forward to your company next week here on ABC Radio National for The Sports Factor.

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