

# Sport as Bodily Practice of Remembrance

## Remembering Heroes, Remembering Nations

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His remains were consigned to their parent earth, on Wednesday, November 15th, at the Highgate Cemetery, attended by an immense concourse of the sympathizing and curious. A committee of friends, the admirers of true British courage, have resolved to raise a monument over the spot where — After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.<sup>1</sup>

Fig. 1: Tom Sayers' tomb at Highgate Cemetery  
(Image: Wikimedia Commons).<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Introduction

«SOME four or five weeks ago, a strange procession made its way through the north-western suburbs of London, from Camden Town to Highgate Cemetery»<sup>3</sup> reports *The Spectator* in its 10 February 1866 edition. The obituary – or more a form of reckoning – is dedicated to Tom Sayers (1826–1865), considered the last English bare-knuckle prize fighter. Mocking the attending crowd, *The Spectator* drew a sharp comparison between the «immense crowd» composed of the «dregs of the population of London» and

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1 Sayers/Miles 1866, 188.

2 Image source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SayersTomb\\_Highgate-Cemetery.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SayersTomb_Highgate-Cemetery.JPG), image credits: John Armagh, copyright: public domain, (accessed June 3, 2019).

3 The Spectator 1866.

Lion, Sayers' dog, «as chief mourner, a gigantic dog, of the St. Bernard breed, sitting in lonely grandeur on the top of a little pony cart.» Continuing the skeptical tone, *The Spectator* reports:

Perhaps a more grotesque funeral was never seen in the streets of London; yet was it not altogether out of keeping with the no less grotesque career of the dead hero of the procession. It was something akin to a feeling of true devotion and duty which drove this London mob to crowd around the bier, to show its last respects to Tom Sayers, «Champion of England.»<sup>4</sup>

Tom Sayers' tomb (fig. 1) is both monumental and fairly simple with Lion probably attracting the most attention of visitors.

The funeral and the gravesite prompt the question about remembered and forgotten athletes. *The Spectator's* damning obituary places the question of remembering and forgetting into the context of sensationalism of both the crowd and media coverage. Its reference to the crowd's hero, the «Champion of England» plunges the question into the middle of identity politics and discourses about nationhood.

Taking the discourses around remembering Tom Sayers as the starting point, this article will explore the relationship between sport, nationhood, and memory. It argues that memorial practices in sport that remember national heroes are political practices that on the one hand strengthen a sense of togetherness, and on the other hand walk the fine line on the verge of nationalistic discourses. This article is written from the perspective of someone who grew up in Austria. With Austria's history and complicity in the Third Reich, discourses around the nation («Nation»), a people («Volk»), national identity («nationale Identität»), or nationhood were problematic and were often used to resonate with far right-wing and extremist political and ideological ideas. To some extent, that is still true today when right-wing parties continue to hijack discourses around national identity and use it as tool for othering (the «Daham statt Islam» / «at home instead of Islam»<sup>5</sup> is a prime example of these processes).<sup>6</sup> As such, the author comes from a background where discourses about nationhood are politically laden and brings his background into his analysis to problematize heroic myths of identity and nationhood.

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4 The Spectator 1866.

5 Die Presse 2015.

6 Bushell 2013, 193–214.

## 2. *Tom Sayers: The Hero and The Memorial*

Tom Sayers' life and pugilistic career played out in the 19th century which saw a big interest in bareknuckle fighting at the start of the century and witnessed a decline in support and interest towards the middle of the century. While bareknuckle was illegal, it was widely accepted and perceived to perform a vital social function.<sup>7</sup> The illegal status of pugilism was not necessarily linked to concerns over the fighters' health because at that time, it was seen as a fairly civilized encounter and as a site to settle conflicts and disputes.<sup>8</sup> Rather, the questions of pugilism's illegality and social acceptance were linked to issues of social control.<sup>9</sup> Initially, in the early 18th century, commentators interpreted pugilism as bestowing a sense of masculinity onto the fighters at a time when masculinity was perceived to be endangered by a spread of effeminacy as well as an essential element of class identification.<sup>10</sup> In other words, because it was seen as a means for the «instantiation of hegemonic cultural values»<sup>11</sup> and a stronghold against perceived threats to society, pugilism was a vital and accepted part of public space despite its illegality.<sup>12</sup> From the mid/late 18th century onwards, however, authorities increasingly perceived bareknuckle fighting and prize fighting as a threat to public order.<sup>13</sup>

Tom Sayers' boxing career, its peak, and his death happened during the time when pugilism and its social status went through stark transformations. Born in 1826, Tom Sayers' death in 1865 marked the end of the bareknuckle prize fighting era.

As much as boxing itself was a «site of a complex encounter between different social groups»,<sup>14</sup> so was Tom Sayers' funeral. Classed as the «largest working-class funeral» in 19th century London by Chris Brooks,<sup>15</sup> the funeral, the funeral procession, and Highgate Cemetery were sites of complex class encounters. Staged with elements from ceremonial funerals, in particular Arthur Wellesley's, 1st Duke of Wellington, whose funeral took place in 1852, Brooks argues that Sayers' funeral «seems a conscious

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7 Downing 2010, 348.

8 See Holt 1998, 16; Radford 2005, 257.

9 See Anderson 2001, 35.

10 See Juengel 2003, 91–93.

11 Juengel 2003, 92.

12 See Downing 2010, 348.

13 See Sheard 1997, 43.

14 Griffin 2005, 15. See Gorn 2010, 29–30; Stewart 2011, 477–481.

15 Brooks 1989, 5.

imitation-cum-parody of the carriage funerals of the gentry and upper bourgeoisie.»<sup>16</sup> Newspapers disagreed on the status of the deceased, too. Some newspapers covering the funeral, «emphasized the funeral's national sporting significance, locating Sayers as a national hero.»<sup>17</sup> Other newspapers were more critical of the hero status and funeral attendees. *St Pancras Reporter* and *Illustrated Sporting News* called the funeral a riot.<sup>18</sup> *The Spectator*, as noted earlier, was concerned about mob behavior threatening the sacredness of Highgate Cemetery and attributed to Lion, Sayers' dog who accompanied the coffin, the status of the true mourner and the only appropriate behaviour.<sup>19</sup>

The perception of the funeral as well as Highgate Cemetery as a burial place are key in understanding not only complex class encounters but also issues of memorializing athletes and the question why and in what context and in what spaces athletes are memorialized, immortalized, and remembered. That newspapers were concerned over the intrusion of Highgate Cemetery was not just because of the sacredness of the place. More importantly, sacredness here needs to be understood in terms of «appropriate space» people from different backgrounds are allowed to inhabit. To what extent the decision to choose Highgate as Sayers' burial place was deliberately intended to subvert class discourses remains unclear. «It seems feasible, however, that choosing Highgate as the goal of the great procession was a part of the funeral's whole challenge to middle-class values. There was, after all, a ready alternative [...] the most obvious place for Sayers to be buried was the St Pancras Cemetery at Finchley»<sup>20</sup>. Or maybe, it was «a badge of social arrival»<sup>21</sup>?

Tom Sayers certainly had «arrived» – at least in the minds of his supporters and fans. According to his biographer, Henry D. Miles, Sayers (fig. 2) had earned his place in the Elysian fields as «one to whom the shades of Ajax, Entelles, Milo, Dares, [...] and the deified twins, Castor and Pollux, may well give the fist of friendship for a turn-up on those yellow fields of asphodel,» where poets have feigned departed heroes carry out their sports.»<sup>22</sup>

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16 Brooks 1989, 14.

17 Huggins 2011, 413.

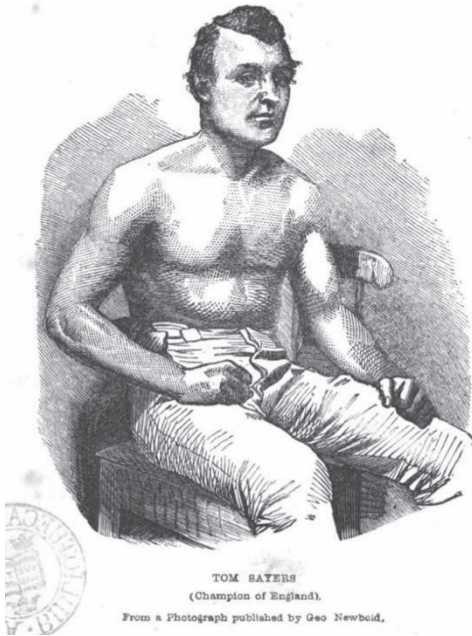
18 Brooks 1989, 16.

19 The Spectator 1866.

20 Brooks 1989, 17.

21 Brooks 1989, 18.

22 Sayers/Miles 1866, 3.



*Fig. 2: Tom Sayers, Champion of England.*<sup>23</sup>

### *3. Creating Heroes*

The image of and reference to «giving the fist of friendship» the «yellow field of asphodel», or the Elysian fields, carries Tom Sayers away into a mythological realm and elevates his heroism on a par with Greek heroes. The biographer draws on ancient Greece to link athletic with moral achievement: physical strength as an expression of virtues such as «scorn of ease»,<sup>24</sup> patriotism, physical and mental endurance, perseverance, and steadfastness. The author also refers to a passage in Plato that links boxing with «military art»<sup>25</sup>. The connection between physical and mental endurance was not uncommon in ancient Greece. Boxing was a way to

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<sup>23</sup> Sayers/Miles 1866, vi.

<sup>24</sup> Sayers/Miles 1866, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Sayers/Miles 1866, 2.

demonstrate and embody Greek ideals of discipline and beauty and Greek writers such as Pindar saw in winning a fight the «culmination of virtuous living worthy of Zeus' blessing.»<sup>26</sup>

The Romans might have introduced pugilism to England, but with the beginning of the Christian Era it would have disappeared again, Gorn argues. He suggests that the rediscovery of pugilism in England was part of a broader and renewed appreciation of classical texts during the English Restoration in the 17th century.<sup>27</sup> Sayers' funeral, his tombstone memorial, and his biography as written memorial certainly seem to suggest that fans deemed sporting figures and their achievements worthy of mythological recognition. Sayers' biographer concludes the written memorial with the observation that a «committee of friends, the admirers of true British courage, have resolved to raise a monument over the spot where — After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.»<sup>28</sup>

The ending of Sayers' biography attributes special significance to that very moment when the living meet the dead, when the living meet the decaying body, when the living materialize their act of remembrance in the form of a monument. I argue that this space where the living materialize remembrance and meet materialized remembrance becomes crucial for understanding the social and political significance of remembrance - as I will explore further in this chapter.

Sport seem to be a particular arena to invite ritual and myth making practices. Sport – as a system – with its competitions, its financial webs, fan engagement, and ceremonies offers a space for rituals to be acted out. «The embodied athlete», Varda Burstyn argues, «has become, on a social scale, the living mythic symbol-bearer, and the idea of the athlete-hero is fundamental to the nature and success of sport.»<sup>29</sup> Ritual practice in sport «generates and sustains a *mythology* – a set of story-beliefs about society and the cosmos – that is ideologically laden. The rituals and mythologies of sport are the account sport gives of the world, and the base on which its vast contemporary economies rise.»<sup>30</sup> The crowd at Tom Sayers' funeral, his biography, and the media accounts oscillating between appreciation and sensing a threat to the ordained social order can give us an idea of the account that Sayers' decaying pugilist body carried into Highgate in proces-

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26 Gorn 2010, 22.

27 See Gorn 2010, 23.

28 Sayers/Miles 1866, 188.

29 Burstyn 1999, 20.

30 Burstyn 1999, 20.

sion was giving of the world. Sayers' biographer calls the sponsors of his memorial a «committee of friends, the admirers of true British courage»<sup>31</sup>.

In the early and mid-19th century, the middle and upper classes increasingly fostered a perception that prize fighting does not boost public morality but fosters gambling and uncontrolled and savage behaviour.<sup>32</sup> Bareknuckle boxing vanished after Tom Sayers' death, but boxing, with its rules and regulations, became incorporated into acceptable (because policed) behaviour. The admiration of «true British courage» seemed to reflect and resonate with something that laid the groundwork for the increasing connection between sports, military, courage, and discipline. The identifier «British» seems to suggest that there is something distinctive and unique about «British» courage that sets it apart from other forms of courage. Holt argues that from the late 19th century onwards, sports, military, and national identity have become increasingly intertwined: «With an impregnable sense of their own virtue, the British saw themselves as «good sports» who, unlike most foreigners, «played the game». Sporting metaphors increasingly permeated the wider language of national character as military service became the exception rather than the rule.»<sup>33</sup>

While Holt seems to downplay the importance of the military, Burstyn actually identifies an expansion of military preparedness across Europe in the 19th century leading up to the ability to quickly mobilize the male population for a total war.<sup>34</sup> Sport seems to have played a key role in this militarization of Europe. The late 19th century saw an increasing athleticization of English society as means to channel violence and aggression and to produce docile bodies.<sup>35</sup> It is not difficult to see links between this push towards the athleticization of (male) society and the press coverage of the «mob» that attended Tom Sayer's funeral. The mob that does not know its proper place or proper behaviour needs to be absorbed into socially acceptable, useful, and productive forms of exercising the body. In other words: bareknuckle fighting and the masculinities it produced, once seen as on a par with ancient Greek heroic deeds, had lost its bio-political purpose. Or to follow Foucault, a «calculated management of life»<sup>36</sup> that aims to optimize and adjust the population to economic processes and requirements. In this context of the increasing athleticization of society, the mili-

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31 Sayers/Miles 1866, 188.

32 See Juengel 2003, 99.

33 See Holt 1998, 12.

34 See Burstyn 1999, 67.

35 See Burstyn 1999, 49, 70, 76.

36 Foucault 1978, 140.



tary, too, became increasingly athleticized in the UK and beyond, in particular in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

Ideas about sport as disciplining the moral agent and the spilling over of sports ideals into non-sportive contexts contributed to the development of the idea of the (white male) hero embodying manhood and aggressive masculinity<sup>38</sup> – that, however, always remains channeled and controlled. Boxing was part of a mix of sports contributing to ideas of military preparedness and legitimizing western militarism.<sup>39</sup> In fact, boxing history shares parallels with military history, as Woodward and Dawson argue, in particular with reference to warrior legends, nationalist discourses, and ideas of patriotic duties.<sup>40</sup> It can be argued that narratives about boxing heroes and soldier heroes benefitted from each other, in particular in the middle of the 19th century.

There was no letting up, as there had been from time to time during the conflict with Napoleon, in police efforts to prevent fights but the attitude towards combat sports had to be somewhat modified, and anxieties over the fitness of the population for military service, aroused by the war, continued through the late 1850s and 1860s, to the general benefit of all physical sports.<sup>41</sup>

The idea that pugilism might help promote ideas of manliness, masculinity, «the national spirit and its promotion of military potential» was not limited to Europe but could also be observed in other parts of the world, such as the US and Australia.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the 20th century, sport contributed to «normalising, legitimising, endorsing and venerating militarism in general and western state militarism in particular.»<sup>43</sup> It did so in a variety of ways, through promoting the idea of military preparedness, paying tribute to the armed forces, or sending sports soldiers to sporting events, such as the Olympic Games.<sup>44</sup>

The increasingly intimate relationship between sport and the military also rekindled popular fascination with the soldier hero, «one of the most

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37 See Burstyn 1999, 68, 71, 76.

38 See Burstyn 1999, 68.

39 See Kelly 2017a, 277–278.

40 See Woodward 2007, 29; Dawson 1994, 11.

41 Brailsford 1988, 135.

42 Brailsford 1988, 143.

43 Kelly 2017a, 277.

44 See Bundeswehr 2018; Fischer 2017, 64–78; Kelly 2017a.



durable and powerful forms of idealized masculinity»<sup>45</sup> in particular in the west since antiquity. The body of the soldier hero has served as canvas to portray and embody adventures, courage, and virtues.<sup>46</sup>

«Heroic narratives», Graham Dawson argues, «have been given a particular inflection in discourses of the nation generated since the emergence of the nation-state in early-modern Europe. [...] Their stories became myths of nationhood itself [...] If masculinity has had a role in imagining the nation, then so too has the nation played its part in constituting preferred forms of masculinity.»<sup>47</sup> In particular after 9/11, in the War on Terror climate, the soldier hero has gained renewed significance to harness public support for the troops. John Kelly discusses in detail how armed forces become heroes and how this «hero-fication» allows for a paradoxical separation between soldier-heroes and the war, as common slogans such as «support the troops, not the war» demonstrate.<sup>48</sup>

And it is in particular the soldier hero that becomes the object of veneration, myth building, and remembrance, the object and subject of nationalist discourses, in the context of CrossFit.

#### *4. Remembering Heroes – Practicing Nationhood*

In the context of prizefighting in the United States, Elliot Gorn argues that «sports such as prize fighting embodied deep-rooted national mythology.»<sup>49</sup> But how these national mythologies were embodied, who they attracted, and who was woven into hero myths changed over time: «What changed by the late nineteenth century, however, was the fact that boxers were no longer heroes exclusively to working-class and ethnic peoples. Now America's growing white-collar population craved muscular demigods. Athletic idols were harbingers of transformation as the success ethic stretched to accommodate new social necessities.»<sup>50</sup>

The strong muscular bodies, however, are not the only aspect of sporting heroes that attract attention. Rather, their bodies, how these bodies look and what they do, are intertwined with values, ideas, and narratives. As Richard Holt argues, «Sporting heroes are both universal and particu-

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45 Dawson 1994, 1.

46 See Dawson 1994, 1.

47 Dawson, 1994, 1.

48 See Kelly 2017b, 149–162.

49 Gorn 2010, 249.

50 Gorn 2010, 250.

lar. They resemble each other and differ from each other. They have common qualities like courage and will-power but they also have specific national and social characteristics. [...] Heroes are not just gifted individuals we admire; their lives are woven into stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.»<sup>51</sup> What happens, however, when that «telling» of stories about soldier heroes and about ourselves becomes embodied practice itself? In other words, what happens if the hero is remembered not just by craving the hero and (usually) his demigod body, but when both remembrance and the myth are acted out through bodily sportive practice rather than through an extensive written or oral narrative?

CrossFit is a highly popular high intensity fitness regime founded by Greg Glassman in 2000. It is typically performed in small groups, that combines elements from gymnastics, Olympic weightlifting, bodyweight exercises, and athletics and has enjoyed an increasing popularity over the last decade. While CrossFit defines itself as «constantly varied functional movements performed at high intensity»,<sup>52</sup> it features a set of standard workouts. All of these standard workouts are named, for example, the Benchmark Girls, such as Fran or Nancy, or the New Girls, such as Eva or Hope. Another set of workouts – crucial for the purposes of this paper – are called the «Hero Workouts» named after fallen service members (mostly men).<sup>53</sup>

### 5. *Remembering through Body Practice*

JT, Michael, Murph, or Daniel are not simply (or just) the names of US-American soldiers who fell in combat in Afghanistan and Iraq, but they also form part of the pantheon of the Hero Workouts, a collection of CrossFit workouts named after fallen (and mostly male) service members. In this pantheon, Murph is one of the best-known CrossFit Hero Workouts. It consists of a one mile run, followed by 100 pull-ups, 200 push-ups, 300 squats, and another one mile run, all performed in body armor or a 20-lb vest. These hero workouts, such as Murph, do not just come with a set of instructions of what the workout consists of, but the CrossFit website also features an image and a mini-biography of the fallen service member. Murph, for example, is named:

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<sup>51</sup> Holt 1998, 12.

<sup>52</sup> CrossFit HQ 2016.

<sup>53</sup> See CrossFit HQ 2018.

In memory of Navy Lt. Michael Murphy, 29, of Patchogue, New York, who was killed in Afghanistan on June 28, 2005.

This workout was one of Mike's favorites and he'd named it Body Armor. From here on it will be referred to as Murph in honor of the focused warrior and great American who wanted nothing more in life than to serve this great country and the beautiful people who make it what it is.<sup>54</sup>

Murph was first posted on the CrossFit website as a workout on 18 August 2005,<sup>55</sup> with the first Hero Workout being JT posted on 5 July 2005.<sup>56</sup> Looking at past iterations of the CrossFit.com website on the Internet Archive Wayback Machine, it seems that it was not until roughly June 2006 that the canon of CrossFit Hero Workouts appeared under «The Heroes Workouts» in the FAQ section. Containing only four Hero Workouts in 2006, JT (being the first Hero Workout posted 6 July 2005), Michael, Murph, and Daniel, the number of Hero Workouts has since grown from the original four CrossFit «saints» to almost 200 with one of the latest additions being the workout Oits added 24 April 2018.<sup>57</sup>

The workout Murph also holds a special place in what could be called CrossFit's «liturgical year». It is typically performed on Memorial Day Weekend and has become highly popular not only in the US but in CrossFit boxes around the world. CrossFitters around the world can participate in the Murph Challenge,<sup>58</sup> a fundraising event for the LT. Michael P. Murphy Memorial Scholarship Foundation (independently from the company CrossFit organized).<sup>59</sup> Military.com, a military and veteran membership organization consisting of roughly 10 million members, also advertises the event.<sup>60</sup>

While CrossFit and the US Military are independent organizations, links between the two can be seen as interwoven on different levels. The CrossFit Journal, for example, features dedicated coverage on servicemen and servicewomen doing CrossFit at home and abroad.<sup>61</sup> More importantly, however, the Journal itself pushes the idea of remembering service heroes through workouts: «These men were fathers, husbands and sons.

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54 CrossFit HQ 2018.

55 See CrossFit 2005a.

56 See CrossFit 2005b.

57 See CrossFit HQ 2018.

58 See Forged 2018.

59 Murph Foundation 2018.

60 See Smith 2018.

61 See CrossFit Journal 2019.

They were brothers to their fellow SEALs. They were also CrossFitters. In their actions, these men embodied the values and spirit of true heroes, and to immortalize their courage, bravery and self-sacrifice, the CrossFit Hero workouts were created.»<sup>62</sup>

For some CrossFitters, Hero Workouts are not just challenging workouts or opportunities for social gatherings. Rather, they are embedded in and enact practices of remembrance. In an article explaining the rationale of the workout, Daniel O'Brien explains that «Hero WOD's are made by CrossFit to honor the men and women that have fallen in the line of duty.»<sup>63</sup> By doing workouts such as Murph, CrossFitters not only suffer through gruelling workouts, but they «pay special tribute to Lieutenant Murphy by joining together and suffering through this workout.»<sup>64</sup> These Hero Workouts are about paying tribute where tribute is due because service members like Lt Murphy have sacrificed themselves: «Besides the story of an amazing human being who gave his courage and ultimate sacrifice for his team and country»<sup>65</sup>. O'Brien continues saying it makes sense that sacrifice be paid tribute with sacrifice: «Crazy story right? Now it's all starting to make a little more sense on why CrossFitters make a big deal out of Memorial Day and Murph. It's the least we can do to honor the courage and selfless sacrifice that was made that day.»<sup>66</sup> Lisbeth Darsh, a CrossFit writer and former aircraft maintenance officer in the US Air Force tells a similar story. She sees in named CrossFit workouts a way to let the memory of fallen service people live on: «Perhaps folks would rather not remember. Remembering is a hard thing, a painful thing. It's not fun, so it's easier to forget, to gloss over. [...] Honor these heroes, thank them, and let their memories live on.»<sup>67</sup> Most narratives about remembering heroes are wrapped in ideas of remembering those who fought for freedom.<sup>68</sup>

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62 Berger 2010.

63 O'Brien 2018.

64 O'Brien 2018.

65 O'Brien 2018.

66 O'Brien 2018.

67 Darsh 2017.

68 See Schrock/Schrock 2017.

## 6. Mourning

Mourning, in Victorian times, did not just follow etiquette but produced a rich material history.<sup>69</sup> The fascination (or obsession) of Victorian times with dogs contributed to those material practices. This fascination with dogs was partly rooted in ideas of loyalty and courage attributed to dogs and the «desire to project a readable subjectivity onto the animal».<sup>70</sup> The description of Sayers' dog Lion as «chief mourner»<sup>71</sup> at the funeral procession, therefore, fits quite well into the Victorian imagination. Similarly, the image of the dog as chief mourner at the feet of their masters' coffin or grave, the imagery of the «dog mourner»<sup>72</sup>, was a popular theme in Victorian dog portraiture.<sup>73</sup> Teresa Magnum, in this context, even talks about a «desire to *be* monumentalized by an animal's grief».<sup>74</sup> Dogs, it seems, were a key ingredient in representing mourning as something that is lived, experienced, and communicated.<sup>75</sup>

Huggins argues that memorials tell us something about the perceived identity of the deceased.<sup>76</sup> He calls gravestones «spaces for public display»<sup>77</sup>. The dog, then, not only represents its deceased master,<sup>78</sup> but represents «those qualities people sought in fellow humans – attentiveness, unconditional love, courage, loyalty so unwavering it persists even in the face of death.»<sup>79</sup>

Unlike Tom Sayers whose memorial resides surrounded by plants at Highgate Cemetery and is watched over by his chief mourner, Lion, when CrossFitters perform these Hero Workouts, they become chief mourners, living displays of the perceived identity of these national heroes. By remembering the sacrifice of Lt Murphy and his fellow service members in service to their nation through bodily suffering. Yet, these bodily practices are not simply an act of remembrance of these fallen service people, but they are a lived and experienced communication of the values attributed to that particular person – values that are thought to persist in and through

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69 See Magnum 2007, 16.

70 Magnum 2002, 36.

71 The Spectator 1866.

72 McHugh 2004, 97.

73 See Magnum 2002, 38; McHugh 2004, 97–98.

74 Magnum 2007, 19.

75 See Joseph/Tucker 2014, 111.

76 See Huggins 2012, 485.

77 Huggins 2012, 482.

78 See Magnum 2007, 38.

79 Magnum 2007, 35.

out death and are closely linked to ideas of a nation and a sense of duty to that nation.

Remembrance of the dead and intimate links to the nation are by no means unique to CrossFit. In fact, sportive practices do not just serve bodily fitness or entertainment purposes, but they are closely linked to questions of identity, culture, a sense of nationhood, and a mediation of remembering.<sup>80</sup> In such a mediation of remembering, the athletes often become the mediators or the «*agents of remembrance*»<sup>81</sup>. As agents, athletes often draw on a range of shared symbols, values and ideas and make them visible on and through their bodies. For example, patriotism and the idea of the homeland enacted and exhibited through bodily practices can become crucial ingredients in remembering, as Brentin shows in his study of Croatian football.<sup>82</sup>

Some of the practices of remembrance go beyond the body of the athlete and include fans and spectators in the stadium. Foster and Woodthorpe argue that in soccer, the observance of a minute's silence or giving applause serves to strengthen group cohesion and a «fictive kinship associated with a football club»<sup>83</sup>. As such, the practice of remembrance expressed through silence or applause raises the question over who is remembered, by whom, and in what form. Thus, Foster and Woodthorpe argue that «acts of remembrance at football games need to be regarded not just as commemoration but also as tools to demonstrate who is «in» and who is «out» of the football community»<sup>84</sup>. When national service heroes are commemorated, such as in the Hero Workouts, we can expand on Foster and Woodthorpe's approach to remembrance and argue that Hero Workouts can become a tool to demonstrate who is in or out of the community of the imagined nation. This question becomes particularly relevant when CrossFit athletes (professional and everyday athletes) around the world perform workouts named exclusively after US-American soldiers. What meaning, for example, does a Hero Workout hold for an athlete in Europe and how do they relate to the nation imagined through the bodily practice? What meaning does a Hero workout hold when it is performed by an athlete such as the author of this paper: the author comes from Austria, a country where the armed forces are most visible in public life during emergency aid (e.g. flooding), or the highly controversial and populist re-intro-

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80 See Wertsch 2002, 117.

81 Brentin 2016, 862.

82 See Brentin 2016, 863.

83 Foster/Woodthorpe 2012, 53.

84 Foster/Woodthorpe 2012, 62.

duction of border control at select border checkpoints during what has been labelled the «migration crisis». Further, what meaning do these workouts hold in a political climate that seems increasingly divisive, in a climate where motivations for military interventions and the outcomes of these interventions do not necessarily overlap and are subject to debate?<sup>85</sup>

## *7. Remembering Heroes*

Wertsch argues that «collective remembering is a matter of agents using cultural tools, especially narratives.»<sup>86</sup> CrossFit Hero Workouts can be understood as cultural tools not just «in the form of narrative texts»,<sup>87</sup> but as bodily, embodied, lived, practiced, experienced, and suffered-through bodily practice. This bodily practice in the form of suffering-through not only might remind athletes of the sacrifice of fallen service members for their nation, but the workouts become a body-political enactment of the nation, nationhood, and national identity.

On several occasions when a Hero workout was the «workout of the day» in one of the CrossFit boxes (gyms) I have worked out in the UK and the US, athletes were briefed with a mini-biography of the name-giving soldier and their sacrifice for their country. Athletes were encouraged to be mindful of the soldier's sacrifice during the workout. The spirit of remembrance can also be observed online when athletes comment on websites or social media when a Hero workout is posted: one CrossFit athlete who participated in the annual performance of the workout Murph (usually on Memorial Day weekend) commented on the official CrossFit website: «In your honor, Murph, I'll think of what you and so many others gave up for me. Thanks for the blood, sweat and tears.»<sup>88</sup> CrossFit coach William Imbo writes about Murph: «Murph» is not simply another workout we do in a class to increase our fitness before moving on to whatever else we have going on in the day. It is a workout designed to honor and remember the men and women of the armed forces that have lost their lives in defense of our freedom. And as is the case with every Hero workout, it has a story of courage and sacrifice behind it.»<sup>89</sup>

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85 See Zachary/Deloughery/Downes 2017, 749–82; Downes/O'Rourke 2016, 43–89.

86 Wertsch 2002, 2.

87 Wertsch 2002, 117.

88 CrossFit 2005.

89 Imbo 2015.



Chidester defines religion as something that transcends the ordinary.<sup>90</sup> Imbo's statement that Murph is not «another» workout lifts the embodied and performed workout out of the ordinary and transcends it. Drawing on Chidester, we need to ask what dimension the bodily suffering that the workout inflicts might add. Höpflinger argues that imaginations of the nation are often inscribed with (civil) religious ideas.<sup>91</sup> Doing a Hero Workout, then, transforms the thinking and imagining of the nation and nationhood into religious practice: the body performs nationhood. In turn, as bodily practice, these Hero Workouts transform the abstract concept of the nation into something tangible and real. Doing so, these workouts allow athletes to feel connected to and act as re-affirmation and renewal of their loyalty to the nation. As such, this paper stipulates that these Hero Workouts are religious practice as much as they are political practices. Nations need to become visible (or made visible) through material and visual practices.<sup>92</sup> Practices of remembrance, as Gabriella Elgenius argues, are part and parcel of this act of nation building: they «provide justifications for deaths that otherwise would go unexplained in an increasingly secular world and may provide comfort during times of war since these persist over time and conform – in form – to established patterns of mourning.»<sup>93</sup>

Elgenius further argues that symbols, ceremonies, and rituals can «turn into powerful political instruments by symbolizing unity and commonality without compromising private associations of nationhood.»<sup>94</sup> Private or informal equivalents to official or public symbols of the nation are nothing new,<sup>95</sup> and as such, these Hero workouts might seem trivial (in the sense that there is nothing more to them than remembering and honoring fallen service-people). What happens when a private organization (CrossFit), independently run gyms (CrossFit boxes), and private individuals (CrossFitters) perform nationhood?

The example of CrossFit shows that the boundaries between the public, the private, and the political are blurry when it comes to the nation and nationhood. It also poses the question why individuals and communities, in addition to public events of remembrance, engage in more private forms of embodying the nation. In the case of CrossFit, a number of former military personnel are involved in shaping CrossFit. Dave Castro, for

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90 See Chidester 2005, 1.

91 See Höpflinger 2015, 55–77.

92 See Elgenius 2018, 2.

93 Elgenius 2018, 3.

94 Elgenius 2018, 186.

95 See Elgenius 2018, 9.

example, who is responsible for the annual CrossFit Games competition, is a former Navy SEAL.<sup>96</sup> More importantly, however, it might have to do with creating an aura of credibility. The first Hero Workouts started popping up at the CrossFit website at a time when CrossFit was still relatively young and not well known. Mrozek argues that in the late 19th and early 20th century, civic and military leaders were used to lend credibility to sports:

Numerous political leaders, particularly those emerging from the genteel tradition, and a growing cadre of Army and Navy officers were captivated by the psychology of victory; and they linked sport to a general program for renewing their society and reordering world affairs. They included the likes of Lodge and Theodore Roosevelt, secretaries of war such as Elihu Root, Army Chief of Staff Leonard Wood, and Rear Admiral R.D. Evans who commanded the North Atlantic Fleet - men who placed great emphasis on personal commitment as the cornerstone of public achievement. As these politicians and officers made their public pronouncements and sometimes pursued practical policies to promote sport and organized physical education, they came to form a highly visible and reputable constituency strengthening sport's grasp at institutional permanence and importance. Although some of these leaders specifically sought to alter the character of middle- and working-class Americans by changing their sporting behavior, their impact may have been even greater in lending the dignity of their offices to sports such as football and boxing that had once been the realm of children and ruffians. Thus, they helped to change the climate in which sport could emerge to prominence, even while they made some specific contribution by advocating sports of their own choosing.<sup>97</sup>

Drawing on Mrozek, one can speculate that the narratives of courage, sacrifice, of favourite workouts of the fallen service members, intentionally or not, helped lend credibility and authority to CrossFit as an emerging sport discipline. Remembering and embodying the nation, then, can serve purposes that might be unrelated to nationhood.

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<sup>96</sup> See Myser 2013.

<sup>97</sup> Mrozek 1983, 30.

## 8. Concluding Evaluation

What, then, connects Tom Sayers memorial at Highgate dating back to the 19th century with workouts of remembrance created at the dawn of the 21st century? Sayers and CrossFit seem unrelated and separated by time, yet the act of remembrance ties them together. This may seem like a trivial observation, but it is this very triviality that lends the link its power. Richard Holt argues that «Sporting heroes are both universal and particular. They resemble each other and differ from each other. They have common qualities like courage and will-power but they also have specific national and social characteristics. [...] Heroes are not just gifted individuals we admire; their lives are woven into stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.»<sup>98</sup> In the 2016 version of its website, CrossFit writes that «The community that spontaneously arises when people do these workouts together is a key component of why CrossFit is so effective [...] Harnessing the natural camaraderie [...] yields an intensity that cannot be matched by other means.»<sup>99</sup> In her critique of Robert M. Bellah's concept of civil religion, Marcela Cristi argues that «The notion of civil religion needs to be framed at a higher level of generality – that is, as a phenomenon that is neither just civil, nor just religious, but also essentially political.»<sup>100</sup> What we can learn then from Sayers and CrossFit, the coverage of Sayers' funeral, his now overgrown tombstone, and the popularity of CrossFit today is that acts of remembrance and communities that emerge are never merely trivial nor innocent but political. They are intimately, materially, and bodily tied to political discourses of their day and age. Even when events or fans seem apolitical, as A. Kadir Yildirim points out in the context of Istanbul soccer teams and fans, he argues that the apoliticalness is itself political and has been politically engineered.<sup>101</sup>

Sayers and the CrossFit pantheon show that sport is not innocent and is always tied in with social conflict and political power. Remembering heroes, sportive or otherwise, then, should always come with the cautionary tale of what these heroes reveal or disguise: why do we remember, why do we long for heroes, and why and how do we – or should we – remember them and immortalize them?

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<sup>98</sup> Holt 1998, 12.

<sup>99</sup> CrossFit HQ 2016.

<sup>100</sup> Cristi 2001, 13.

<sup>101</sup> See Yildirim 2019, 232–251.

CrossFit's Pantheon also raises the question of the social and political context in which what we could – very provocatively – call hero worship emerged. Scholars across the disciplines have long pointed to the flourishing exchange between popular culture, popular imagination, and geopolitics. Jason Dittmer and Daniel Bos, for example, argue that «We live immersed in a world of popular culture. It is composed of a bewildering array of narratives, images, and sounds that we often plug ourselves into for fun or just to relax. But it is also more than that: it is a space of geopolitical action.»<sup>102</sup> What I am concerned with, then, is the imaginary that objects of and for remembrance such as Tom Sayers' tombstone as well as exercising bodies foster. How does the aesthetics of Tom Sayers' tombstone connect the «there and then» to ideals of power and heroism as a heritage from antiquity? In the «there and then» of his contemporaries the monumental tomb represented class, class conflict, ideas of appropriate places and maintaining and transgressing boundaries. In the «here and now», Sayers' tomb – while probably forgotten by a large majority – bears material witness to socio-cultural heritage and cultural memory.

The question remains whether or not and how the aesthetics of «remembering bodies», of sweaty, exhausted, suffering, male and female bodies performing these Hero WODs in the here and now might contribute to processes of cultural memory. In her analysis of Helvetia, the national personification of Switzerland, Anna-Katharina Höpflinger argues that:

Helvetia is an idealistic figure representing an imagined collectivity. Helvetia's depiction is strongly connected to shared normative and aesthetic values; this figure is not only a personification of a collectivity, but of an ideal one, based strongly on positively connoted and propagandized shared values.<sup>103</sup>

Both the construction of Tom Sayers' tombstone and CrossFit Hero WODs can then be understood as lessons in how cultural and socio-political memory is both constructed and materialized. In particular in the context of CrossFit, these bodily practices of remembrance are an example of how ideas of the nation reach out to and engulf leisurely activities and bind communities. CrossFit Hero WODs are also an example of how such memory and a sense of community that have geopolitical relevance are laid across the body,<sup>104</sup> written into the body, and experienced through the

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102 Dittmer/Bos 2019, 1. See Kirby 2018, 1–22.

103 Höpflinger 2015, 73.

104 See Brown 2008, xxiii.

body. Ultimately, remembering sporting heroes in a leisurely context and the aesthetics of sporting bodies<sup>105</sup> then and now cannot be separated from an aestheticization of politics and, in fact, this aestheticization seems to become democratized through phenomena such as CrossFit. Of course, I do not want to argue that this aestheticization, as Walter Benjamin does,<sup>106</sup> inevitably leads to war. And yet, it remains ethically (and problematically) entangled in issues of politics, race, gender, and social power structures because remembering heroes – who we choose to remember and who we forget or ignore – is always a political act.

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105 See Hartley 1992, 119–139.

106 See Benjamin 2008, 41.

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