Chapter 3

How Does the Mass Media Contribute to People’s Understanding, Values and Beliefs about Sport?

- the relationship between sport and the mass media
- think critically about the impact of the mass media on sport by investigating questions such as:
  - who benefits and in what ways?
  - how does the media influence our understanding of sporting events?
  - how have sports been changed to suit the needs of the media, e.g., uniforms, rule modifications, structure to accommodate advertising breaks

The media is recognised as the most influential and comprehensive method of communication available in today’s society. Major methods of communicating are by mass media, by way of print publishing or sent electronically. Print media comes in the form of newspapers, magazines and journals. Electronic media covers television and radio broadcasting and the internet where information can be accessed via either computer or mobile phones. Such broad media platforms have made access to sports coverage much easier and more accessible.

There are many benefits for companies that operate the media, as well as for athletes and sporting organisations. It is very much an interdependent relationship, whereby the commercial gains from the media by promoting Australian sport and its athletes, supports the ongoing recognition of sport as a viable product. Without media exposure, lesser known athletes and sports would not have the platform to build up their profile, nor command as much money and sponsorship. Similarly, without the athletes and sports to cover, the media would not be able to provide such comprehensive and often sensational reports nor attract advertising revenue.
Television and radio media are able to provide up-to-the-minute commentaries of sporting events such as football, cricket, horse racing and tennis. Often ‘one off’ events like boxing and sailing are televised, along with selected sports like netball and golf. The rise of internet coverage of sporting events using podcasts has provided an alternative access to sport away from television; and social networking sites such as Facebook have opened up opportunities for interactive debate and comment on all aspects of sport. Pay TV and ‘pay as you view’ for specific sporting events have allowed ‘lesser watched’ sports to become financially viable to be televised and available for those who can afford the cost.

The television medium has the ability to manipulate and influence how the public think about sport and what sport they watch. The imagery that is presented can alter the viewer’s perception of what is being seen. Camera angles, close-ups and wide-angled shots can influence the viewer as can the commentary of the event. Sports that are regularly televised are usually male-dominated sports that have mass appeal. Traditionally, female sports are noticeably under-represented on television. Netball, basketball and international tennis have all had regular coverage in recent years, however, there has been controversy over scheduling of games and cutting to the news at key points.

Channel 10 aims to change the face of televised sport in Australia and launched a new digital free-to-air sports channel ‘One Digital’ in March 2009. Major sports such as netball, golf and swimming will move from pay TV to this channel. The channel was deliberately named without the word ‘sport’ so as not to dissuade members of the public from tuning in. A high profile advertising campaign featuring male and female sports stars built up to the launch with over $1 million spent in promotion.

The print media continues to be a major form of delivering sport coverage and although it must compete with television and other electronic media, it does provide lasting images of great sporting moments and articles that dissect and analyse the game or event. Newspapers devote whole sections of their daily broadsheets to sport, using action photographs and articles that exemplify society’s expectations of athleticism, strength and tough mental armour. Sporting magazines such as Inside Sport also encourage the public into hero worship of their sports and star players.

The use of flamboyant language in newspaper headlines can immediately ignite positive or negative reactions to an article. Language is often ‘warlike’ depicting tough violent games with lots of aggression. For example, a headline in the Melbourne Age which read, ‘Swashbuckling youngster revels in debut’, exudes glamour, daring and the success of the young cricketer David Warner in his first 20/20 game.

The personal opinions of journalists have the ability to manipulate and influence public interpretation of specific incidents that happens in sport. Journalists who report on violent behaviour, either on or off the field, drug use or other unsociable conduct by athletes can cause major divisions between the community. The print media offers avenues where different views can be aired and debated at length. For example responsible codes of conduct are now expected doctrines for all high profile sports. Pressure on sporting clubs to discipline teams and athletes can often be fuelled by emotive articles from the press.

Sport plays an important part in sustaining the financial viability of the print and the electronic media. It has become a marketable product that provides entertainment for all ages of the Australian population.
Television networks pay huge amounts of money in contracts with sporting bodies for exclusive broadcast rights to cover specific sporting events at national and world championship levels, including the prized Olympic Games. Competition between television networks is fierce in the race for the sport dollar.

Television sports commentators are emerging as celebrities in their own right, as they enhance the marketability of a sport and can play an important role in sponsorship deals. Sponsors can expect high returns for their exposure during prime media time. Commentators will often encourage audience participation and make the coverage more interactive by providing reports and discussions of sport statistics. Viewer competitions are good public drawcards and increase the network and the sponsor’s profitability.

There have been many advancements to promote viewer interest in sports coverage and the delivery of televised sport, including:
- development of aero dynamic and multicoloured clothing and equipment
- introduction of technological umpires, such as the 3rd Umpire and Hawk-Eye
- changes to game rules to ensure that the match flows faster and more smoothly
- spaced breaks during play to allow for advertisements
- changing game times to increase audience numbers, are all changes that have enhanced the delivery of televised sport.

- **deconstructing media messages, images and amount of coverage**
- **analyse the media’s role in giving meanings to sport by considering questions such as:**
  - how does the coverage given to particular sports reflect which sports are valued and which ones are not?
  - what metaphors are common in sport, eg football as ‘war’?
  - has the media pushed extreme sports to take excessive risks?

Media in all its forms is designed to inform and entertain people. The pressure on the media to have suitable and appropriate news stories that will attract viewers is paramount. The balance between providing entertainment and informing the community about issues can often be skewed more towards entertainment where sport is concerned.
The major criticism of media in Australia is the domination of sporting coverage at the expense of serious discussions about social issues that impact on much of the viewing population. Many people in society want their entertainment to be light and non-serious and to share in the passion of a team playing well. So when sport and serious social issues combine, the media and sporting clubs struggle to maintain clear, light entertainment in the face of health media messages. Domestic violence, alcohol fuelled assaults and the use of illegal recreational drugs, have all dogged the high profile football codes over the last few years. Players such as Ben Cousins in AFL and Greg Bird in Rugby League have been suspended and clubs have had to go to expensive methods to ensure that their players are behaving appropriately. Players are now being breath tested by clubs and some players have had their contracts terminated. These are examples of how important it is for a sport to have a positive image in the community, which subsequently attracts sponsors and advertising and positive media coverage.

- differences in coverage for different sports across various print and electronic media

Television networks and to a lesser extent print media allocate time or space to sports that have the ability to gain corporate sponsorship and are popular with the public. Networks and media companies collect demographic data that provide them with statistics on the populations habits and opinions. To a large extent these statistics form the basis in selecting the programs and coverage that will produce the largest profit for all stakeholders. Sports with star players and those who are associated with a particular brand product are more likely to be given media space and coverage.

Often, sensational headlines, images and articles are used in print media which can help build the profile of a particular sport and increase its popularity. In effect the media is nurturing the public’s perception of the sport. After the televised coverage of lawn bowls competitions and the Pot Black billiards tournaments, both sports experienced an increase in popularity and a dedicated media following.

Television networks and newspapers can often sensationalise a sporting story to gain an advantage over a competitor. Sometimes rough play can be taken out of context and thrown out of proportion in an attempt to develop an interest in the story. Newspapers with headlines like ‘swashbuckling players’ and ‘outright war’ are using language and clever positioning of articles to sensationalise situations between teams and players.

In the media there tends to be a larger saturation of sports articles, particularly in newspapers, devoted to male sports and athletes, typifying their ‘manly’ characteristics. Female sports get a far more limited representation, flicking through the sports pages of any newspaper will typically show more coverage of greyhound racing than women’s sport. When female sports and their competitors are included, the language used is often centred on the athlete’s appearance and femininity. A female athlete who is strong, powerful and focused on her sport can be portrayed as having a masculine image and have her sexuality questioned. Similarly, male athletes who don’t fall into the media’s criteria of masculinity can be subjected to unflattering press. In the case of talented Australian diver Matthew Mitcham, who has openly discussed his homosexuality, limited coverage has been given to his diving skills and gold medal at the Beijing Olympics, but more directed to the fact that he is an athlete who is a homosexual.

**Figure 3.4**

Australian diver Matthew Mitcham won gold at the Beijing Olympics in 2008.
The growing popularity of extreme sports is a recent phenomenon. Extreme sports are physical activities that are adventurous and daring. These sports have the potential to be hazardous and require high levels of fitness, fearlessness and high-quality specific equipment and clothing. There are many companies now that specifically cater for extreme sports and this has increased their popularity. However, only a limited section of the population are able to participate in these sports, as they require agility, a high fitness level, and a heightened desire for adrenalin rush. Some examples of sports that could be classified as ‘extreme’ are:

- canyoning
- rock climbing
- abseiling
- big wave surfing
- parachuting
- paragliding
- mountaineering
- base jumping
- deep sea diving

As extreme sports are not taken up by a large population, film-makers and media companies have been quick to promote the sports on television as short films or documentaries. Amazing footage of surfers riding huge waves or rock climbers negotiating death-defying cliff formations engross viewers in the human challenge unfolding on the screen. White-water rafting is one extreme sport which has benefited from clever marketing, promoting itself as both unconventional thrill and corporate bonding activity.

The future of extreme sports appears to be quite stable, however, it is likely that the wider public will want to see even more daring footage, leading film producers to encourage participants to be even more adventurous, increasing the level of danger. Television networks are also likely to want to source more extreme footage in a bid to keep their viewing public loyal to their channel.

Activity 1 (Page 208)
1. As a class brainstorm incidents where the media has showered an athlete with accolades of admiration and hero worship for their courage on the field in defying physical pain from injury and battling on to play or compete.

2. As a class, watch a televised sporting event, then answer the following:
   - Choose one passage of play or incident from the event and state how the media influenced what you saw as a viewer.
   - Suggest reasons why the media determine what images and commentary are presented to viewers?
   - Investigate the social values and standards that are promoted in sports coverage. Do these influence the social fabric of the community?
Activities cont.

3. Read the sport section of a newspaper and complete the following to share and discuss with the class:
   - Locate a sensational or provocative headline.
   - Count the number of male sports that are represented.
   - Count the number of female sports that are represented.
   - Find examples of different language used in articles about male and female sports and athletes.
   - Locate an article where the journalist shares their views on a particular sporting event or incident. How could this influence the public’s view?

**Activity 2 (Page 208)**
Choose ONE of the following sports and investigate the changes that have been made to the sport to accommodate the needs of the media.

Discuss how these changes have impacted on the sport both positively and negatively.

- rugby league
- rugby union
- AFL
- cricket
- tennis

**Activity 3 (Page 210)**
Examine the sporting supplement of a newspaper and complete the following:

- Observe the coverage of different sports throughout the supplement. Number the sports articles, from 1, starting with the largest sports article to the smallest sport coverage.
- List which sports have colour photos, black-and-white photos, and which sports have no photos.
- Identify any sensational headlines and the sports they refer to.
- Identify any sensational words that are used in the articles that suggest that sport, particularly male sports are akin to ‘war’.

From this research, suggest why the supplement is set up the way it is.

**Activity 4 (Page 210)**
View a rugby league game and make a list of words the commentators used that sensationalised a description of what was happening. Assign these words under the headings ‘positive’ and ‘negative’.

Suggest why commentators use such descriptive language when calling a game.
Activity 5 (Page 211)

In pairs, choose ONE of the following extreme sports and complete the following:

- Create a profile of the sport including any star performers and film footage to explain your sport.
- Provide opinion for and against the question of whether the media has contributed to extreme sports taking excessive risks.

Present your research in the form of a PowerPoint presentation or another electronic method.

- canyoning
- rock climbing
- abseiling
- big wave surfing
- parachuting
- paragliding
- mountaineering
- base jumping
- deep sea diving

Review Questions

1. **Discuss** how sport is represented in the electronic media.
2. **Suggest** why journalists use emotive and sensational headlines in sport reports?
3. **Discuss** the various groups that benefit from sport reports in the media.
4. **Discuss** the changes to sport as a direct result of media influences.
5. **Analyse** how the coverage of sport affects the popularity of sports today.
6. **Evaluate** the effect of the sport media in the development of role models for today’s youth.
7. **Predict** the possible outcomes for the media of the growing interest in extreme sports.