

(Re)Presenting Wales: National Identity and Celebrity in the Postmodern Rugby World

John Harris, Kent State University

John Harris is an Associate Professor in the School of Exercise, Leisure and Sport at Kent State University, Ohio. He has published a number of articles in the sociology and administration of sport focusing mainly on issues relating to gender, the nation, and sporting celebrity. John is also Head Coach of the Kent State University Rugby Football Club.

Rugby Union lies central to Welsh identity, and because of this, the men's national rugby team is subject to very high expectations.¹ A golden period in the early 1970s, when Wales was a leading power in the game, led to rugby being used as an important signifier of national identity within the Principality. From the late 1980s onwards, however, defeats by perceived lesser rugby nations such as Western Samoa and Romania, together with heavy defeats against all of the major rugby powers (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, England and France), meant that Welsh rugby was in a perilous state at the dawn of a new professional era. Rugby Union had been an amateur sport for over a century until it was openly professionalized in 1995. Up until this time many of the best Welsh players had been tempted to move to the paid ranks of Rugby League where they could earn money from playing the game. This had a profound effect on the performances of the national Rugby Union team because once a player had professionalized himself he could no longer play the Union game. The defeat against Western Samoa in the 1991 World Cup gave rise to the widely cited phrase that "it's lucky we weren't playing the whole of Samoa." In many ways, success or failure on the rugby pitch in Wales is often taken to be indicative of the health of the nation.²

By the start of the twenty-first century, the many changes that had blighted the Welsh economy were in part mirrored by the state of its national rugby team. Years of bickering, parochialism, and constant recollections of the way things used to be meant that Wales had fallen behind on the world rugby stage. A series of false dawns fleetingly raised the hopes of the nation, at least until the next crisis, which was often little more than one game away. An insular mentality within the sport, together with nostalgic recollections and comparisons to the past, presented further barriers for the players.

¹ See especially Dai Smith and Gareth Williams, *Fields of Praise* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1980).

² Jason Tuck and Joseph Maguire, "Making sense of global patriot games: Rugby players; perceptions of national identity politics," *Football Studies* 2, no. 1 (April 1999): 26-54. *North American Journal of Welsh Studies* Vol. 6, 2 (Summer 2006) for the North American Association for the Study of Welsh Culture and History 2006. All Rights Reserved.

Andrew Williams suggests that “the glorious teams of the ‘70s were to hang like an albatross around the neck of Welsh rugby for the next twenty-five years.”³ It is within the context of the above overview that the research presented in this paper needs to be understood. Early on in the history of the game, a perceived addiction to Rugby Union became one of the major characteristics through which other nations defined the Welsh and by which the Welsh came to see themselves.⁴ The two players who form the focus of this study both play important roles in understanding Welsh rugby in the professional era. Although Rugby Union had become the national sport of Wales, Rugby League represented a potent and ever-present threat to the nation throughout the century leading up to the professionalization of the union game. Within this paper I critically assess the mediated (re)presentations of Harris and Henson in an attempt to understand more about the place of sporting celebrity in contemporary Wales. This analysis is framed within and around the changes taking place in both Rugby Union and Welsh society.

Iestyn Harris, one of the leading rugby league players in Britain, arrived in Wales in the summer of 2001 as the most expensive Rugby Union signing in the world. The move away from (sh)amateurism, following Rugby Union’s inception as a professional sport in 1995, saw a gradual change in player movement between the two rugby codes, which up to this point had always been one way. The signing of Harris signified a noticeable shift in the power structure of the rugby world, but in the summer of 2004 he returned to rugby league. Although he represented Wales in the 2003 World Cup, and remained a fixture in the national squad, he never ascended to the position expected of him. His departure to Bradford Bulls led to much questioning about the significant financial cost of his three years in the Principality.

Six months on from Harris’s return to the North of England, Gavin Henson wrote himself into the history books by kicking the penalty that gave Wales a victory in the first game of the 2005 Six Nations Championship. What made the penalty kick even more special was that it came against England, the reigning World Champion team and the oldest foe of Wales, both on and off the rugby pitch. The man with the spiky hair, fake tan and shaved legs became a national hero. This penalty kick, together with his much-publicized relationship with the singer Charlotte Church, saw Henson move into the realm of celebrity, where his fame and notoriety moved beyond the game and into other realms of popular culture.

These two players, Harris and Henson, are important characters in the professional era of Rugby Union in Wales. By exploring the cultural politics

³ Andrew Williams, *The Dragon Awakes: The Rebirth of a Rugby Nation* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2000), 25.

⁴ Richard Holt, *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

of sporting celebrity, this paper aims to provide an insight into issues surrounding the (re)creation of identities within the game and into the (re)invention of Welsh identity. Such an analysis needs to be located and understood within and around discourses of both the professionalization and the globalization of Rugby Union.

Method

Sport is a ritualistic arena in which notions of culture are embodied and (re)presented by the players who become symbols – metonyms of cultural ideas – particularly in a sport deemed so important to the nation. The media may give emphasis to the sport star’s incarnation of cultural values, and in Welsh rugby, any player who shows promise is rapidly elevated to the position of (potential) hero. One good match on the international stage and the press begin to build a character portrait of the new star. The mediated characters of Iestyn Harris and Gavin Henson are reflections of the above process yet also incorporate aspects that make their positioning somewhat unique. Harris was different to all other media creations in Welsh rugby: rather than someone who had progressed through the ranks, he was a big money signing who had been purchased to play for the national team. The role of Gavin Henson is also different in that he does not fully conform to traditional rugby-playing masculinities that lie central to notions of Welsh identity expressed through the game and beyond. Moreover, his relationship with Charlotte Church and movement into the celebrity circuit has created an image and profile rarely (if ever) seen before for a Welsh rugby player.

An interpretive philosophy informs the design and undertaking of this study, which adopts a critical discourse approach focusing upon the social semiotic analysis of multimodal discourse. Focusing upon the place of sporting celebrities as a site for exploring the fluid character of power relations incorporating areas such as national identity is recognized as fertile ground for scholarly enquiry.⁵ The contemporary sports star is, or is at least portrayed as, an idealized model for one or more cultural connotations that s/he carries with him or herself through his or her efforts, achievements and failures as an athlete. Yet in these studies there has been little consideration of the place of Welsh athletes. The nation and notions of Welsh identity are often taken for granted and assumed to operate at a “common sense” level, but, as this essay demonstrates, conceptualizations of the nation, and the selection of individuals and teams to (re)present it, is much more multi-faceted and complex.

⁵ Some recent examples of research into the cultural politics of sporting celebrity include Barry Smart, *The Sport Star* (London: Sage, 2005), Garry Whannel, *Media Sport Stars* (London: Routledge, 2002), and David Andrews & Steve Jackson, eds., *Sport Stars* (London: Routledge, 2001).

A variety of newspapers were used in this study both from the Welsh and from the “British” press.⁶ The notion of a British press is somewhat problematic given the Anglo-centric focus of much coverage. However, stories relating to Harris and Henson appeared in a number of these publications. Whilst the relationship between sport and the media has received much attention in recent years, there has been little work on the mediated (re)presentation of sport in Wales.⁷ In presenting an account that draws upon media sources, it is important to note that media discourse is both socially constituted and socially constitutive. Textual analysis, with a focus on qualitative content, attempts to investigate and expose “hidden” meanings inherent in cultural texts, and the print media offers an interesting site to observe the social construction of meaning.

Whilst not subscribing exclusively to any one school of social thought, this study engages with some of the key debates central to discussions of globalization and postmodernism. Postmodern thinking highlights the idea that all studies take place within a particular social, historical and cultural framework. If modernity is read as being about economic and social certitude and progress, then the postmodern encompasses negotiated or contested meaning and uncertainty. Such a descriptor seems particularly appropriate when applied to the transition of Rugby Union from an amateur game to a professional sport. After more than a century of amateurism the professionalization of the sport in 1995 led to transformational shifts in the management of the game. These shifts meant that many of the traditional values and practices of the sport were undermined by the postmodern forces of global consumer capitalism.⁸ When read as signifiers of postmodern identities, cultural metonymies reflect an uncertainty about, and an undermining of, essentialized constructions of Welshness. Viewed in this way it is apparent there is not any one single truth but that there are multiple realities. It is also important to locate any discussions of Wales and Welshness, in the postmodern game, to wider social change and in particular the increased globalization of the sport.

Globalization impacts upon our understanding of national cultures and identities. Despite globalization’s powerful influence on economies, societies and cultural processes, it is imperative to note that notions of nationality and national identity have retained their importance. The effects of globalization

⁶ Many of the articles come from *The Western Mail*, *Wales on Sunday* and *The South Wales Echo*. “British” newspapers consulted include *The Independent*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Sun*, *The Telegraph* and *Daily Mail*.

⁷ See for example, Raymond Boyle and Richard Haynes, *Power Play: Sport, the Media and Popular Culture* (Harlow: Longman, 2000); and Lawrence Wenner, ed., *Media Sport* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁸ In “The postmodernisation of rugby union in Australia,” *Football Studies* 6, no. 1 (April 2003): 51-69, James Skinner, Bob Stewart and Alan Edwards provide an interesting overview of the postmodernizing influences shaping the sport.

upon the sports world have been well documented; yet how it has affected Wales and the Welsh has received far less attention than any other country in the UK.⁹ Globalization is a key factor in locating the stories of Harris and Henson, given that "satellite dishes and the intrusion of global mass media were setting the tone of a deindustrialized south Wales, bringing a new awareness of cultural pluralism and of alternative forms of recreation and entertainment."¹⁰ Yet globalization has also created spaces where historically submerged nations have been reawakened. This discourse needs to be read and understood alongside the process of Europeanization and the move towards devolution in Wales.

Rugby, National Identity and the Imagined Community

Rugby came to Wales largely through the influence of Englishmen who took the game into the leading Public Schools of the Principality. During the nineteenth century, huge inward migration saw massive growth in the population of Wales as it experienced a higher immigration rate than anywhere outside of the United States of America. The national rugby side's victory over New Zealand in 1905 cemented the place of Rugby Union within Welsh culture. As the New Zealand team had defeated all of the other home nations, the victory was also seen as upholding the honor of the mother country and empire, and symbolized national definition in the modern world of sport.¹¹ Through critically assessing the mediated (re)presentations of both Harris and Henson I discuss how new images of Welshness are (re)created and (re)presented. The two men's roles are particularly relevant given that sport (and especially rugby) has been central to the inventing, maintaining and projecting of a single Welsh national identity.¹²

The "imagined community"¹³ of Wales is (re)created through its Rugby Union side, yet Wales must also be looked at in relation to the differences between its various parts. A North/South divide is often presented as a visible demonstrator of the rugby and football playing parts of the country to show the geographical locatedness of the two sports within the Principality.

⁹ Useful texts on sport and globalization include Alan Bairner, *Sport, Nationalism and Globalization* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001); and Joseph Maguire, *Global Sport* (Cambridge: Polity, 1999).

¹⁰ Dai Smith and Gareth Williams, "Beyond the fields of praise," in Huw Richards, Peter Stead and Gareth Williams, eds., *More Heart and Soul* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), 220.

¹¹ See especially Dai Smith, *Wales: A Question for History*, (Bridgend: Poetry Wales Press, 1999); and Gareth Williams, *1905 and all that* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1991).

¹² Martin Johnes, "Eighty minute patriots? National identity and sport in modern Wales," *International Journal of the History of Sport* 17 (2000): 93-110.

¹³ For an overview on the concept of the nation as an "imagined community" see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

Rugby Union's assumed position as "the national game" has often been questioned on the basis that it is predominantly a game played and followed in South Wales.

In 2003, when the national football team went through a mini resurgence, and the rugby side experienced a succession of defeats, the national press posed the question whether football was now the new rugby. A victory for the football team against the highly rated Italian side was positioned against the defeat of the national rugby team in Rome, which was treated as a "national crisis" within the media. Yet claiming that the crisis was an outcome of a North/South dichotomy ignores the facts: many parts of South Wales have always been football playing areas, and the most successful teams in the history of Welsh football have been from the south of the country.

In the international arena, Rugby Union plays a significant role in (re)presenting Wales, particularly when one considers where Wales sits in relation to the world's two biggest sporting events. In the Olympic Games leading Welsh athletes compete for Great Britain but given the hegemony of the English, particularly as relates to the interchangeability of the terms "England" and "Britain," the Welsh are often hidden. It is also important to note that Wales is the only nation that is not represented in the Union Flag. In football, Wales has only once qualified for the World Cup finals, where in 1958 they were knocked out of the tournament by Brazil. Beyond this, the invisibility of Wales is apparent in numerous other contexts. The England cricket team is actually made up of the best players from the British Isles (and beyond), and throughout history a number of Welsh players have played for this team. The governing body of the sport is the England and Wales Cricket Board, but this is a silent "W," as the organization is generally presented by the abbreviation ECB.

Promoting national identity through sport is generally regarded as especially important to nations that are subservient to a dominant nation. Living in the shadow of its much larger and more powerful neighbor, Welsh identity is often constructed and defined against that of England. It is also important to note that given the hegemony of the English nation vis-à-vis the use of the term "British," there has often been a strong resistance to British identity within many parts of the Principality. This can be shown, in part, by the fact that the term "British Wales," as used in Balsom's three Wales model, has sometimes been used as a term of abuse to imply that its members are not really Welsh.¹⁴ In a sporting context, however, particularly at a time when national identity seems much more fluid and relatively unfixed, notions of Welshness may be less specifically defined. Players, coaches and

¹⁴ Denis Balsom, "The Three-Wales Model," in James Osmond, ed., *The National Question Again* (Llandysul: Gomer, 1985).

administrators from other parts of the United Kingdom and from overseas have played, and continue to play, an important role in Welsh rugby.

Nostalgia and the Golden Age of the 1970s

The success of the Welsh national team in the 1970s meant that in subsequent years, the pressure and level of expectation upon the national team increased. Former Wales outside half Phil Bennett suggested that although rugby used to be the undisputed national sport of Wales, this was now rivaled by the emergence of another pastime: "talking about what went wrong."¹⁵ Closely linked to nostalgia is a sense of melancholy, a longing for a particular time and place. In its widest sense, and more specifically in relation to Rugby Union, nostalgia served as a mediator between an imaginary, folkloric articulation of the past and a contemporary sense of loss for the disappearance of the "traditional" qualities of Welsh rugby. The arrival of Iestyn Harris gave rise to recollections of the most recent golden age, as the following newspaper article highlights:

Wales have produced a number of legendary No10s over the years and one of them, Phil Bennett, has already compared Harris to Barry John. His three tries were reminiscent of John at his most nonchalantly sublime, beguiling defenders as if he carried a hypnotist's watch before strolling through gaps and touching down before anyone knew what was going on.¹⁶

Previous research on media (re)presentations of rugby has noted how *The Times* newspaper ascribed particular identities to the rugby nations of the United Kingdom, portraying the Welsh as "sorcerers," "magical," "poetic" and "inventive."¹⁷ Iestyn Harris was seen in many ways as a potential savior (the redeemer Mark II), someone who played the game in a "(post)modern" way, yet who also played in the style associated with previous eras. As *The Guardian* noted:

In an era when many curse rugby union for becoming more like league, it has taken a player who had never played in the code before the end of last month to show what it used to be like.¹⁸

Ironically, the arrival of Harris had a major effect on Gavin Henson, who recalls in his autobiography how he walked out of a national squad session in fear that the signing of Harris had placed him even further down the pecking order for the number ten shirt. Henson's candid and controversial account

¹⁵ Phil Bennett with Graham Thomas, *The Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 12.

¹⁶ *The Guardian*, October 29, 2001.

¹⁷ Jason Tuck, "Patriots, barbarians, gentlemen and players," *Sporting Heritage* 2 (1996): 26-54.

¹⁸ *The Guardian*, November 7, 2001.

reflects upon this and other incidents, such as when he refused to play for the Under 21 team following a falling out with authority figures about the socks he was asked to wear. Although he attracted much negative comment for his tales of drinking sessions, and particularly his comments about other players and coaches, there was no questioning of Henson's Welshness and his refusal to represent the nation.¹⁹ Henson became a national hero almost overnight, following his match winning penalty kick against England in 2005. Newspaper reports commented upon his playing style, likening him to flair players of the 1970s. Such a position carries pressure to perform, and comments such as "Henson carries the hopes of a nation"²⁰ appeared frequently in the media. Some commentators, including his team captain Gareth Thomas, suggested that Henson had moved to a level of stardom beyond "any other player who has ever played for Wales."²¹ Yet as with many other stars in the postmodern world of "planet celebrity," Henson's distinctiveness and difference became the means by which he would be criticized and condemned merely months after being positioned as a(nother) savior of Welsh rugby.

The Problem Child and the Prodigal Son

Iestyn Harris had already achieved a great deal in rugby league, winning its highest honor – the Man of Steel award – in 1998, captaining the Welsh team and appearing in test matches for Great Britain. Born in Oldham, Lancashire, Harris was very much a product of the North of England. Yet as the name Iestyn highlights, a family background in the Principality was an important feature of Harris's identity. Iestyn's grandfather Norman, originally from Abercarn, went North to play Rugby League just as many other Welshmen had done before, and many more were to follow in subsequent years. It was somewhat ironic that the nationality of Harris's grandfather was cited by most newspapers as the reason for Harris' eligibility for Wales. Harris's signing took place not long after the "Grannygate affair." Brett Sinkinson and Shane Howarth had been recruited by their fellow New Zealander Graham Henry to represent Wales on the basis that each had a Welsh grandparent. Both played a significant part in the series of victories during the early days of Henry's tenure, but nobody within the Welsh Rugby Union (WRU) had checked to see whether their claims were valid, and it transpired that neither had Welsh grandparents.

Under the guidance of this New Zealand coach, the WRU began to cast the net further afield to recruit those eligible to play for the country. The costly recruitment of the Australian Jason Jones-Hughes close to the

¹⁹ Gavin Henson with Graham Thomas, *My Grand Slam Year* (London: HarperCollins, 2005).

²⁰ *The South Wales Echo*, February 11, 2005.

²¹ *Wales on Sunday*, February 13, 2005.

beginning of the 1999 World Cup was, prior to the arrival of Harris, the most high profile signing. This was part of a conscious decision by Henry and the WRU to actively recruit non-nationals to play for Wales. Of course, selecting players from another country was not new to Wales or rugby in general. During the first golden period of Welsh rugby, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the victory over the New Zealand touring team of 1905 was achieved with a full-back from Nottingham, a pack-leader from Lincolnshire, and a captain born in Gloucestershire.

In light of the increased globalization of the game, then, those chosen to represent any given nation could come from (in this case, literally) the other side of the world. What often went unnoticed in these days, particularly during the period that Wales embarked upon a series of victories under Henry, was the pool of talented youngsters in the Principality. One of these players was Gavin Henson, who in 2001 was crowned World Under 19 player of the year. Many of these players may have found their development stunted by the recruitment of players from overseas. The conscious signing of players to represent a national team is an area that has rarely been looked at in globalization research. Whilst many authors have looked at issues related to labor migration, they have focused almost exclusively on the experiences of migrant workers who take their skills and represent clubs or teams in another country. The issues surrounding “non-nationals” who represent different countries and the conscious recruitment of non-nationals to represent a nation other than their own has received scant attention.

There was never any questioning of the nationality of Iestyn Harris. His Christian name probably served as an important signifier of his Welshness, as was the fact that he had also captained the Welsh Rugby League team. Harris’s arrival could also be interpreted as something of a payback for all of the union players taken away by league clubs in the past. It was after all the lure of Rugby League, and the monetary incentives of the 13-man game, that had attracted his grandfather to move to England in the first place. The signing of Harris marked a significant moment in Welsh rugby history, and the player was hailed as the prodigal son. Such a descriptor was indicative of a sense of claiming Harris as a genuine Welshman. Following his performance against Glasgow, *The Observer* noted that:

Not so long ago Welsh rugby would lose their favourite sons to rugby league and weep. Now a one-man mission from Leeds has reversed the trend and put a smile back on the face of the land of his forefathers. Iestyn Harris has arrived big time.²²

If Harris was the prodigal son, then Henson was at this time the problem child. Having been crowned U-19 world player of the year, Henson failed to

²² *The Observer*, October 28, 2001.

make the progress expected of him in the years immediately after this. Some commentators and coaches questioned his application. His fake tan and shaved legs marked him as different from the “average” rugby player in an arena where poseurs and any signifiers of difference are deeply mistrusted. Throughout his career, because his appearance marks him out as different from those of “traditional” rugby players, Henson has experienced being targeted on the pitch. One newspaper report suggested that when he started taking the field with his highlights and his tan, “he might as well have painted a bull’s-eye on his chest for good measure.”²³ Yet Henson’s background is one of traditional Welsh rugby-playing masculinity. He had progressed through Pencoed Rugby Football Club and Brynteg Comprehensive School. His father captained the Maesteg club from the front row. Henson’s maternal grandfather had also played for the club, and the family was firmly located within the rugby culture of Mid Glamorgan.

Although Henson briefly assumed the position of national hero following his match-winning penalty kick against England, it wasn’t long before he once again fulfilled the role of a problem child. He created much publicity with his controversial account of the Grand Slam year, which was serialized in newspapers before finally being released as a book. Henson’s views on players qualifying to play for Wales through residency or family background attracted much attention. As he states in his book, “I honestly feel that three years of living in Wales does not make you Welsh. Neither does having a Welsh grandfather if you were born and raised overseas.”²⁴ Although these comments related specifically to players from the Southern Hemisphere, it would have been interesting to learn more about Henson’s views on players such as Harris representing Wales. The move towards a professional sport saw the bigger unions flex their financial muscle, and Harris recalled being approached by the Rugby Football Union (RFU), stating that “there was some interest from England but when the RFU phoned I told them I was Welsh and that was as far as it went.”²⁵ Despite being born and brought up in England, Harris had always considered himself to be Welsh. Welshness was an important part of his childhood in Lancashire, and to play for Wales in the union game was something that he had always dreamed about.²⁶

Harris, Henson and “Cool Cymru”

On the back of construction of the Millennium Stadium, the continued success of leading Welsh popular music bands, and the move towards

²³ *The Independent*, October 15, 2005.

²⁴ Henson, *My Grand Slam Year*.

²⁵ *The Telegraph*, November 1, 2001.

²⁶ Iestyn Harris, *There and Back Again* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2005).

devolution, Harris was quickly adopted as yet another symbol of “Cool Cymru.” Just as the new stadium would be a symbol of hope, progress and pride for both Cardiff and Wales, the signing of Harris signified something important for the future. Cardiff, the capital city of Wales and frequently symbolized as the central site for Cool Cymru, is the most cosmopolitan of all Welsh cities. Yet despite an initial period often presented in the press as “Iestynmania,” Harris was never really comfortable as a symbol of Cool Cymru and struggled to adjust to life in the goldfish bowl that is rugby union in the Principality.

Henson, meanwhile, is an altogether different character and represents an interesting figure upon whom to examine the shifting and contested nature of postmodern masculinities, given that he has “almost single-handedly ushered the Welsh game out of the age of scrubbed-scalp, gap-toothed boyos into the new one of Cool Cymru.”²⁷ The performances of the Welsh team in winning the 2005 Six Nations and the emergence of a relationship between Henson and Charlotte Church meant that a kind of “vortextuality” began to emerge around the player who now became the focus of the “British” media.²⁸ Such a development is significant, for it moves the player beyond the somewhat narrow focus of Welsh rugby culture and presents the possibility of much greater commercial appeal. Henson actively seeks publicity and media attention. Whilst there has been a great deal of research into how and why particular athletes become the focus of media attention, there needs to be more work on how the athletes themselves actively play a role in creating a particular mediated image. Henson is a product of a society in which fame and notoriety are highly prized and in the age of celebrity the value placed on these can be felt in many aspects of our lives.

Conclusion

Certain athletes find themselves chosen as representatives of the nation, given that “the sporting body bears triumphant national mythologies in a double way, extending the body to encompass the nation and compressing it to obscure the social divisions that threaten national unity.”²⁹ Iestyn Harris arrived in Wales during another time of turmoil in the national game and was positioned as the savior of Welsh rugby. Harris himself acknowledged that given the amount of money spent on him it was clear he was not only going to play for Cardiff but was expected to represent the national team also. Although he was born and brought up in the North of

²⁷ *The Observer*, March 13, 2005.

²⁸ Garry Whannel uses the term “vortextuality” to highlight how the media constantly feed off each other (at great speed) in an age of electronic and digital information exchange. See Whannel, *Media Sport Stars*.

²⁹ Toby Miller, Geoffrey Lawrence, Jim McKay and David Rowe, *Globalization and Sport* (London: Sage, 2001), 31.

England, he was positioned as the savior of Welsh rugby, the messiah and The Redeemer II. It is important to recall that the original great redeemer of professional rugby in Wales was a New Zealander. This fact reflects the ways in which representatives of a sporting nation can often hail from other parts of the globe. There is a flexibility and fluidity involved in constructing national identity that revolves around markers that may be viewed as provisional, contingent and relatively unfixed. The arrival of Harris may now be read as a factor in the relatively slow development of Henson as an international rugby player. The massive cost of Harris's short time in Wales, in a sport that was encountering serious financial problems, raises yet further questions about the governance of the game in the Principality. Although he remains very proud of his Welsh heritage, returning "home" for Harris in 2004 meant going back to the North of England.

Henson is an important figure in the postmodern game, in that he transcends boundaries in ways that few, if any, rugby players have ever done before. His positioning as a celebrity also constitutes a new kind of social distinction.³⁰ By in some ways challenging traditional hegemonic notions of rugby-playing masculinities, Henson may be positioned both as the first metrosexual rugby star and as an important site for examining changing rugby-playing masculinities in the professional age. Despite falling out with those involved in the national set-up and refusing to represent his country, Henson's Welshness was never questioned, and instead, it has been his transgression of perceived masculine norms that have attracted most attention.

In (re)conceptualizing the sports world and understanding how particular rugby players come to embody the hopes and/or failures of a nation, it is important that we move away from rigid conceptions of identity. Iestyn Harris and Gavin Henson are visible exemplars of how identities can be read as provisional, contingent and relatively unfixed. Although sport remains largely invisible, in many texts on the Welsh nation, we can learn much about changes in society by focusing upon the prominent sport stars of our times. Harris and Henson are without doubt two of the most significant figures in postmodern rugby. The game has changed markedly from the period when Welsh dominance in the sport was accepted and largely taken for granted by many within the Principality. The professional era, post 1995, signified the beginnings of a postmodern game, given that amateurism had been built up around modernity. The era of rugby in Wales, where both Harris and Henson have been pivotal figures in (re)shaping the game, is now more of a business than at any time in its history. Both as a commercial activity, and because of the legacy of the great Welsh teams of the past, significant pressure is placed upon the rugby player, as he becomes a visible symbol and signifier of the nation. In Wales, which remains hidden or

³⁰ In *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2004), Graeme Turner provides a comprehensive analysis of the place of celebrity in (post)modern society.

marginalized within many other social, political and economic discourses, the rugby player may assume an even greater importance.