

Biographical Narratives of Sport Stars: Björn Borg**Anders Ohlsson**

My interest in biographical narratives of sport stars is due to the simple fact that the most important *existents* or characters, which besides *events* make something a narrative, are the athletes. Some of these main characters we know as media sport stars, and stardom depends upon, as Gary Whannel reminds us in his *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*, “circulation, on representation, on telling, on narrativisation” (2002: 47). An excellent performance, a real deed, is not enough.

Together with four colleagues I am presently trying to obtain funding for a research project that we have titled “Sporting Narratives in Sweden”. In my part of this project, I will focus on media sport stars. The reason is, of course, that sport stars are – next to politicians, film and rock stars – the aristocracy of our time. The annual sports festival on Swedish television is undoubtedly a festival of sport *stars*. I am especially interested in the way in which media sport stars are constructed and used. Which themes and ideologies do we find in narratives on sport stars? And how are these constructed and used?

Our knowledge of sport stars comes from at least four different forms of the media: newspaper stories (news stories feature stars, accompanied by résumés of the career), magazine profiles, television previews of sporting events and biopics and, lastly, biographies and autobiographies (Whannel 2002:56).

Thus far my project has focused on the Swedish middle-distance runner Gunder Hägg (born 1918). Hägg reached the peak of his career during World War II and had broken sixteen world records when, in 1946, he was disqualified for the

remainder of his life for having violated the amateur rules. With respect to Hägg, his stardom during the pre-television era was mainly constructed through newspaper stories, magazine profiles, and, last but not least, biographies and autobiographies. The last category includes some ten books from the very peak of his career up to the 1990s. In comparison to a sport star from the 1970s, television and biopics were of course not of the same importance to the stardom of Gunder Hägg, even if many newsreels from the 1940s featured the Swedish running champion.

On the other hand, the stardom of Björn Borg, five time winner of the Wimbledon between 1976 and 1980 etc. and elected athlete of the 20th century in Sweden, was of course to a larger extent the result of TV-media, which by the mid-1970s had grown to maturity and had become a global medium. Consequently, our knowledge of Björn Borg stems to a great extent from the many television previews and biopics, for instance the prize winning documentary “Bjorn Borg – the Saga” from 1998 by Folke Rydén, a former correspondent for the Swedish Television in the US. However, that kind of material is not the subject of this paper. Instead I will address the importance of written biographies about and autobiographies by sport stars in the TV-age, and my example will be Björn Borg. The question is: why this somewhat surprisingly long list of *books* in the age of the media?

First of all there are of course economic reasons: publishers and authors take the chance to earn money. They can rely on the presumed readers' curiosity and eagerness to learn more not only about the life of Björn Borg but also about how to improve their own tennis. For instance, many of these books include instructions on how to hit a backhand. This may nourish readers' dreams of becoming a top

tennis-player themselves. Disregarding many other possible explanations about the fact that books that have been written about sport stars still seem to thrive, I will focus on how some of these – autobiographies and some biographies – seem to fill the needs of the sporting stars themselves. Readers may use a sport star as a role model – but how does the star him- or herself use an autobiography?

I will now turn to one of the books in my list, *Bjorn Borg: My Life and Game as told to Gene Scott* that was published in 1980, and then translated into various languages, among them Swedish. Scott is a former member of the US Davis Cup Team and was a famous tennis journalist and columnist at the time of publication.

The reason for someone to write his or her autobiography is often to summarize one's life (for instance a statesman) or to try to restore it (for instance a victim/survivor of the Holocaust). Identity depends on narrativisation. However, much research into this genre has also emphasized its dialogical nature (Bachtin 1984). While reading Borg's *My life and Game*, we are able to hear many voices. First of all, we have the main character's own parts in first-person as told to his ghost-writer. Secondly, there are Gene Scott's own parts on Borg, written in third-person. Thirdly, one chapter is devoted to the "rivals" and there quite a few of Borg's opponents – Gerulaitis, Nastase, McEnroe, and Connors among others – comment very positively on his game and skills. However, Borg has the last word as he briefly comments on the statements of his competitors.

Besides, there is a dialogue going on between Borg's autobiography and a couple of extra-textual voices. During long periods of his career, Borg's relationship

to tennis journalists was strained, although not hostile. Consequently, when he is given the opportunity, he criticizes them for not doing their job properly: “I don’t volunteer much to reporters. If they ask me a question, I answer it briefly, but most of their questions are impersonal or foolish, or both. They watch my matches, why do they ask me what happened? A good journalist knows as much about my strategy after a five-setter against Vitas Gerulaitis as I do. That is, if he cares as much about his profession as I do about mine” (Borg 1980: 12).

Another example: Borg admits that he once or twice a year loses a match to a player ranked far below himself. When it happens, some people accuse him of not trying to win. According to Borg, there is always a reasonable explanation. His loss to Bruce Manson in the first round of the 1979 Palm Springs Grand Prix is due to the fact that he the day before he had won a tournament in Florida, and then had spent six hours on the plane to California because of bad weather. He arrived just in time to enter the court after a tiring flight (Borg 1980:16).

However, the most important dialogue is caused by Borg’s indignation concerning the reactions when in 1974 he left Sweden to settle in Monaco together with his father and mother. “I took absolute hell from people for leaving Sweden. I was called unpatriotic, selfish, and money-hungry by the Swedish press, which didn’t ease my distrust of tennis writers”. Borg once again takes the opportunity to defend his way of acting. In Monte Carlo, he writes, “the weather was warm and the airport more convenient to allow me to jet to my tournaments around the world”. Borg always comes up with explanations that seem to make sense. Furthermore, he repudiates the charge of being unpatriotic by immediately stating that he loves

“playing for the Davis Cup [---]. I enjoy being a member of the Swedish team”. However, Borg does not conceal that the main reason for his emigration is an economic one: “to avoid the 90 % tax bite Sweden was taking from my prize money” (Borg 1980: 43-45).

One is correct to presume that the accusation of being unpatriotic and selfish, of refusing to pay tax in Sweden, and in so doing pay back what he himself has gained from this country, generates much of the text of Borg’s autobiography. His main strategy to refute the charge is to teach or remind his readers what world-class tennis or sports is “all about.” When Borg is telling us of his performances and victories on the court, at the same time he recounts part of his incomes: “In 1978 I started out like a rainbow by winning the Italian and French Championships, and Wimbledon in a row – only the second player ever to do so. The US Open once again proved to be my undoing as I lost to Connors in the final. My ATP ranking slipped to three, but my prize money grew to \$ 469,411” (Borg 1980: 46). More examples abound! Performance goes hand-in-hand with prize money.

Furthermore, a list of his business partners – “Bjorn Borg’s Empire of Endorsements” – gives his readers the impression that Borg is not only a tennis player but a director or manager of something like “Björn Borg Incorporated”. A photograph of him shows which bits of his equipment are endorsed annually by his “major commercial connections” (Borg 1980:43). In the Swedish translation of the book, there is even a price tag on every item. The sum total amounts to some \$ 1,145,000, e.g. more than twice as much as his prize money. No one can doubt that we are dealing with a tennis player *and* a business-man.

Another recurring theme in the defense strategy by Borg is to show how dedicated and hard working he has been throughout his career. His life in tennis starts out with a somewhat mythological scene or anecdote, which has been recounted over and over again in the texts on Borg in a way that is typical for biographical narratives of sport heroes (Whannel 2003: 60). When Borg is nine, his father, who at that time was a very talented table-tennis player, wins a tennis racket as first prize in a tournament. He gives it to his son, who immediately starts hitting the ball, and uses the garage wall as his “training partner”. The next five years, he travels by train seven days a week to Stockholm to practice. Borg concludes: “I was obviously crazy about tennis from the beginning” (Borg 1980:29). There has been no change in this respect ever since: “Bjorn practices like he plays. He takes it very seriously. A lot of kids joke around in practice. Not Bjorn. He may just hit for an hour and a half with Gerulatis before they begin to play sets” (Borg 1980:86). His preparation for the 1976 Wimbledon Championships included “intensive work on the overall service motion” which, according to Borg himself, was “the most productive training I’ve had in the past five years – because it worked” (Borg 1980:95).

The image of the hard working tennis player is combined with the description of a self-confident and well-prepared professional, equipped with great patience and self-reliance. Over and over again, Borg states that he has gone his own way, for instance when it comes to technique: “Tennis instruction has suffered from the same lack of innovation [...]. Players have been fed an identical pattern for years, as if all abilities were equal and as if what made sense for one athlete made sense for

another, with no sense of the individual taken into account” (Borg 1980:135). Success asks to disregard the acknowledged way of doing things, both on the court and off. It is a rational course of action both to use two hands when hitting your backhand and to leave Sweden when having to pay 90% tax on your income.

With some examples I have stressed the importance of autobiographical writing to the sport stars themselves in the age of media. The background is to a great extent a qualitative change *in the media*, described by Gary Whannel as “spectacularisation and tabloidisation” and a growing media focus on “the indiscretions and misdemeanours of their private lives” (Whannel 2002: 129). This is the time when “appearance, style, and personality have become the currency with which fame is purchased” (Whannel 2002: 190). The autobiography is one way for sport stars to adjust the image of themselves. Without contradiction, they can try to gain control over their own trademark.

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