ELLIS CASHMORE EXPLAINS HOW SPORT HAS BEEN AFFECTED BY CELEBRITY CULTURE

We don't expect our athletes to embrace celebrity culture with the brisk and cheerful readiness of an aging soap star who has been off the radar for ages and is desperate to get back on television. So, when in 2007, former professional footballer Rodney Marsh, then a spry 63-year-old, submitted himself to the Australian rain forests in *I'm a Celebrity ... Get Me Out of Here!* there were groans of dismay from his fans.

After all, Marsh was a player often compared to George Best. Marsh was born in 1944, Best in 1946. Both played professional football in the 1960s, and, while Best is acknowledged as the finest player of his generation, Marsh offered a thrilling rivalry. Both players had distinguished careers in Britain before moving to the less demanding American leagues.

In retirement, Best succumbed to alcohol-related illnesses and died in 2005. Marsh worked with the media, in particular with BSkyB, though he was fired after making an off-colour remark about the tsunami disaster. On *I'm a Celebrity* his misfiring remarks occasioned outrage before a ligament injury forced him out of the show. He was not the last or the best athlete to appear on the show (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-495283/Im-A-Celebrity-ex-footballer-Rodney-Marsh-rushed-hospital-jungle-fall.html)

Following Marsh, Martina Navratilova, arguably the finest female tennis player in history, accepted the challenge and suffered the indignity of finishing runner-up to a nondescript soap actor Joe Swash (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpGxPX60r8Q).

In 2009, professional snooker player Jimmy White MBE, his best playing days behind him (he was ranked only 56 at the time) parachuted into the jungle. It's doubtful if he or any of the athletes agreed to the ritual humiliations of *I'm a Celebrity* for money (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kdMwRfrg6Is).
White had earned over £4 million in prize money alone. Navratilova was the first female athlete to earn $10 million in prize money and retired in 2006 with career earnings estimated at nearly $22 million.

This is one the perplexing paradoxes of celebrity culture: why do people who have spent much of their lives pursuing clearly defined goals with purpose and resolve suddenly opt to do something that seems senseless and unnecessary?

There is no obvious answer. This is why celebrity culture is so compelling. It makes rational people behave irrationally; ordinary people become extraordinary; humble people turn into show-offs. No one is left untouched by celebrity culture: it is all pervasive and inescapable. It doesn't just surround us, but it inhabits us, affecting what we want, buy, like, do - and how we think about ourselves.

We are forced to contend with what is for some an uncomfortable reality: sport is very much part of celebrity culture. Forty something years ago, when Best was opening nightclubs, hobnobbing with rock stars and sliding into one crisis after another, he was an oddity (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koKL4tuRISA).

For all his talent, he was a misfit who could never accommodate the demands of an athletic career and preferred to play in less taxing environments than the one he'd experienced in Manchester. He was a square peg. With the possible exception of the USA's "Broadway Joe" Namath, the National Football League star, there was no one quite like Best (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qf3oOQq9KFU).

Today, Best's antics would be considered quite moderate. It's a rare Sunday when one of the tabloids doesn't carry at least one lurid story of the peccadilloes, wrongdoings or sundry transgressions of Premier League players. Reason? We, the consumers, devour details of
sports stars' private lives as hungrily as we gobble down those of rock singers, movie stars, supermodels or any other member of celebritydom - if the reader will pardon the invented phrase: I mean the class of people as well as the lifestyle collectively associated with them.

**Celebrity athletes have been willing accomplices.** They appear to luxuriate in the attention of the paparazzi, they indulge themselves by entering pseudo contests, such as *Gladiators* or *Strictly Come Dancing*, they respond certainly to requests to endorse consumer products, whether cars, cologne or cappuccino.

*Forbes* magazine's "most powerful celebrities" included fifteen "ultra-famous" athletes, including Tiger Woods (#4), basketball player Kobe Bryant (#10), Roger Federer (#27), David Beckham (#28), and Serena Williams (#67). Angelina Jolie was top. Kate Moss squeaked in at number 97 (http://www.forbes.com/lists/2009/53/celebrity-09_The-Celebrity-100_Rank.html)

Who is responsible for this change? Well, no one actually. Over the past two or three decades, global culture has taken shape. By this I mean electronic media of communication, enabled by transponders circling around the earth, have made information instantly accessible anywhere in the world. The proliferation of media channels that followed the launch of Telstar, the first of the active communication satellites, in 1962, created a global network, but without enough content. The media, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Popular entertainment offered a solution.

Out of the cultural vacuum popped a new generation of entertainers: not stars, at least not in the inaccessible, godlike, otherworldly Hollywood sense of the word. But celebrities - people who were so like us that we might chat to them at the supermarket checkout, except they were better known.

At first we insisted that they had something that passed as talent. But, as the 1990s drew to a close, "talent" underwent something of a redefinition. People with no apparent skill or aptitude had a different kind of talent - a talent to capture consumers' attentions, attract them to tv sets and, more importantly, incite them to buy magazines, DVDs, and the range of products associated with celebrities.
The new celebrities' talent lay in the ability to engage us. By engage, I mean to arrest our attention, absorb us for a while and induce in us a willingness to spend money on commodities. Celebrity athletes do this. We know Rebecca Adlington is a champion swimmer, but we are also aware that she advertises British Gas, Speedo. Jenson Button drives for Vodafone McLaren Mercedes. Danny Cipriani may play rugby and date film actors, but he also model Ultimo underwear. Maria Sharapova plays tennis, but she also encourages us to buy Canon Powershot digital cameras (http://www.metacafe.com/watch/88527/maria_sharapova_canon_commercial/)

All of these pale beside David Beckham, of course. Initially a footballer, Beckham morphed in the 1990s to a global icon and all-purpose celebrity who endorsed, among other items, razors, soft drinks, mobile phones, sports gear, underwear, and felt tip markers. I use the over-used term icon with care: I mean that Beckham's representation, likeness, or, in general, image became known throughout the world; few people actually new Beckham the flesh and blood individual. This did not diminish his power to engage us, perhaps in a way no other athlete before or, for that matter, since (and I am not forgetting Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods). (http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/galleries/gallery-23361709-detail/David+Beckham%27s+advertising+campaigns/pos-1-image/gallery.do)

Beckham epitomized the celebrity athlete. Sport was just one aspect of a multi-platform, broad-spectrum presence built around the football Adonis, who engrossed the planet. He became so famous that his name had no need of the prefix "the British footballer." His reputation was universal. In a sense Beckham provided a model of how an athlete could transcend sport to become a celebrity known initially for sport but ultimately for being ... well, Beckham (http://www.amazon.co.uk/Beckham-Polity-celebrities-Ellis-Cashmore/dp/0745633676/ref=sr_1_9?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1258556962&sr=1-9).

Traditionalists yearn for the day when athletes were known for the accomplishments on the field, in the ring, on court or wherever the competition took place. Not for modeling underpants. But celebrity culture has changed our tastes: we are not content to look at them playing; we want to know every detail about them, including the people they drink with, sleep with, as well as play with! Like it or hate it, celebrity culture has changed every aspect of contemporary culture, including sport - especially sport.
Ellis Cashmore’s book *Celebrity/Culture* is published by Routledge - get it [here](#)