

The death of Australian cricketer Phillip Hughes

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According to the Australian government and the media, the country is in “national mourning” over the death last Thursday of cricket player Phillip Hughes. Two days earlier, the young man was struck in the neck by a cricket ball while batting in a state match between New South Wales (NSW) and South Australia at the Sydney Cricket Ground. The blow split his vertebral artery and caused catastrophic haemorrhaging in his brain. He never recovered consciousness.

Hughes died three days short of his 26th birthday. A talented and well-liked athlete, he had reached, in 2009, the pinnacle of professional Australian cricket—selection into the national team. He enjoyed major successes, becoming the youngest player ever to score 100 runs in each innings of an international Test match, and suffered the setback of being dropped on more than one occasion from the national team. Over recent months, he had been seeking selection, once again, in the Australian side for the upcoming series against India.

Hughes’s death is a tragedy for his family and his friends, including the hundreds of cricket players with whom he had collaborated or competed in Australia and around the world. And it is horrifying for Sean Abbott, the young man who bowled the ball that killed him.

The overblown response of the entire media, political and sporting establishment, however, deserves scrutiny. From the time Hughes’s injury was reported, immense resources have been devoted to elevating the story of the young cricketer from a country town, striving to realise his ambitions but “struck down in his prime” to nothing short of a national calamity.

Large numbers of people who knew nothing about Hughes except that he played cricket, along with others who, prior to last Tuesday, did not even know his name, became consumed by his fate. Reports of the nature of his injury, incessant reprises of television images of the ball hitting his neck, and updates on his condition after emergency surgery, became the number one news item on television, radio and the print media for the two days before he died.

By the time his death was announced, a large proportion of the Australian population had been thoroughly enveloped in the narrative about his life presented by the multi-million dollar cricket business, political leaders, and the mass media. Those not initially swept up in the public displays of emotion came

under immense social pressure to join in.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott led the barrage of public condolences issued by politicians, celebrities and high-profile athletes. All, including Queen Elizabeth II, felt compelled to put their particular tribute to the fallen cricketer on the record. By Friday afternoon, the day after his death, the NSW government had declared that a state memorial service would be held at the Sydney Cricket Ground after Hughes’s funeral, due to take place this Wednesday, for “the entire community to pay their respects.”

A post to Twitter, of a cricket bat placed outside a front door in honour of Hughes, went viral. The fan’s actions have since been repeated all over the country by many thousands, including Abbott who arranged to have a bat placed outside the prime ministerial residence in Kirribilli, Sydney.

Millions have been led to genuinely believe they “felt” the loss of Phillip Hughes. The mass mourning, however, reflected a complex interplay of emotion and unconscious social attitudes. Above all, the understandable empathy of ordinary people with the family and friends of a young man who lost his life was exploited, and then amplified, by the general obsession with “heroes” that is constantly cultivated in sport.

In 1926, the great revolutionary Leon Trotsky observed that “boxing, football, racing and other forms of sport” were one of the means by which the “deepest passions” of the British working class “were diverted along artificial channels.”

Nothing could more aptly describe contemporary Australian society. Fuelled by blanket media coverage, immense time, energy and resources are devoted to following sport of every variety, and the trials, tribulations and personal lives of the athletes who compete in them. This provides an almost endless distraction from the problems of everyday life and the deep social crisis confronting ordinary working people.

Even more pernicious is the manner in which sport is used to constantly reassert Australian nationalism. Cricket is permeated with patriotism, embodied in crowd slogans such as “C’mon Aussie” and the appalling chant, “Aussie, Aussie, Aussie, Oi!, Oi!, Oi!” Through sport, the social reality of endemic class divisions and inequality is drowned out by the propaganda of national identity and national unity.

Coverage of sport, especially at the level of international

competition, is interlaced with nationalist military metaphors. Australia's sporting "warriors" embark on "campaigns" and enter "battles"; they "fight bravely," "give no quarter," "inflict casualties" and "destroy" the opposition. If they do not "prevail over the enemy," then they go down in a "humiliating defeat"—for which the media invariably pinpoints a scapegoat.

Few are conscious of just how much sport is subliminally linked to one of the key tenets of Australian nationalist mythology: that the country's "national identity" was forged in 1915 by the Australian "Anzac" soldiers on the battlefields of Gallipoli. Sports stars are regularly held up as the modern day embodiment of what World War I propagandist Charles Bean declared the Anzacs represented: "reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance."

Phillip Hughes is well on the way to becoming deified as the quintessential Australian hero and moulded into the Anzac legend. The front page of last Friday's *Australian* featured the disturbing photo of the young cricketer transposed in front of the Australian flag, bat on shoulder, looking upward, his face illuminated by a ray of light seemingly descending from the heavens.

The newspapers' editorial declared that Hughes was a "marvellous role model for children and other athletes"; a sense that the next innings would bring up a ton [100 runs], that problems can always be fixed, that your best days lie ahead. Such optimism fires up countries as much as it drives cricket teams."

The overblown adulation of Phillip Hughes is being used to bolster Australian nationalism at a time of immense class antagonisms, and as the Australian government participates in preparing, alongside the United States, confrontation and war with China. At the same time, it enables the cricket business to escape any critical examination of precisely how and why such a mortal injury could occur on the cricket field.

Cricket Australia management and the media conglomerates that profit from the industry have gone to great lengths to insist that Hughes was killed in a "freak accident." In fact, while rare, deaths do occur in cricket. In 2013, two batsmen, one in South Africa and one in Pakistan, collapsed and later died after being hit by cricket balls in the head and chest respectively. Numerous other players around the world have suffered injuries of varying degrees.

Far from being viewed as a significant problem, the danger associated with playing the game is being utilised as one of its main marketing pitches. Fans are urged to attend matches or tune in on television to watch Australian fast bowlers "terrorise" and "intimidate" their opponents from other countries with short-pitched deliveries, or bouncers, which are bowled to deliberately kick up to the height of a batsman's chest or head. Opposition bowlers reply in kind.

In his recent autobiography, English batsman Kevin Pietersen confessed to his fears about Australian bowling tactics during

the 2013–2014 Ashes Test series in Australia. He wrote: "I was sitting there, thinking, 'I could die here in the f***ing Gabbatour [a play on the name of the Brisbane Cricket Ground, known as the "Gabba"]'." In that series, batsmen from both sides were struck in the head or upper body on numbers of occasions, but were luckily protected by their helmets and padding.

Former English captain Geoff Boycott commented last Friday that batsmen today, rigged in protective gear, have a "false sense of security" and take risks they may not have taken in earlier times, when few players wore helmets. Inevitably, "accidents" take place. In the 2014 Australia versus South Africa series, batsman Ryan McLaren was hospitalised after being left bleeding from his ear by a bouncer delivered by Australian fast bowler Mitchell Johnson. In September, McLaren's arm was fractured by another Johnson delivery.

Having promoted "terrorising" tactics, the cricket establishment is now terrified about the impact of Hughes' death. Pointing to the commercial fears of the industry, columnist Andrew Carswell wrote in Saturday's *Daily Telegraph*: "How will the crowd react if another batsman is felled? Would Australian fans turn against their own fast bowlers if they become too aggressive?" More to the point, what if players themselves decide to refuse to play the dangerous style and deliver the "excitement" and "spectacle" that is demanded of them?

A great deal of money is at stake. Cricket Australia has projected earnings of \$1.08 billion from 2013 to 2016, up from \$684 million between 2009 and 2012, while advertising during cricket matches is a major earner for television broadcasters. World-wide, especially on the Indian subcontinent, the sport generates billions of dollars.

Hughes's death also raises critical issues about the state of the Australian health system. Because of the repeated budget cuts and chronic understaffing, no ambulance was available to take Hughes to hospital until 15 minutes after emergency calls were made. Whether this made a difference to his fate is unknown but, every year, many ordinary people die simply because governments deny paramedics, hospitals and health professionals the resources they need to do their work.

The greatest disservice to the memory of Phillip Hughes would be to allow the popular and talented young man to be transformed into a nationalist icon, while the serious questions raised by his death are simply swept aside.



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