

# Kobe Bryant, Brexit and the Politics of Sport

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Just over two weeks ago, on the evening of Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January, news began to break about the death of the basketball icon Kobe Bryant.

The former NBA star was travelling by helicopter with his daughter, Gianna, and seven others to attend Gianna's youth basketball match. There were no survivors of the crash in the Calabasas area of Los Angeles County. The legacy and visibility of Kobe Bryant spread far beyond the world of sport; this tragedy has shown that his life and career showed that athletes can influence the world in much more significant ways.

During the Brexit era of European integration, the unifying, and occasionally divisive nature of sport might have a significant role to play in shaping attitudes toward Brexit in the years to come.

The global appeal of an African American sports hero strongly contrasts with the perceived outlook of many British and European citizens in the wake of Brexit. Growing nationalism, racism and anti-migrant discrimination is antithetical to the multi-cultural, multi-racial world of elite sport.

Kobe was famously a polyglot and linguaphile; often learning new languages in order to communicate with diverse audiences and journalists. Outside of his native English, he was a near-native speaker of Spanish and, most significantly, Italian. This love of languages might have begun during his childhood years spent living in Italy. His father, Joe "Jellybean" Bryant is a retired American professional basketball who plied his trade in Europe. The young Kobe went on to emulate his father by becoming a professional basketball player, but it was another sport which would have a similarly important influence of the younger man: football.

Bryant's favourite football team was AC Milan of the Italian Serie A. This giant of European football has been inextricably linked to the

politics of Italy for Decades. The club enjoyed a period of enormous success, from 1986 until 2017, under the ownership of former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Previously, the club's rivalry with Inter Milan, symbolised a city's divisions along the lines of social class and political attitudes. During WWII, AC Milan was used as a propaganda tool by the Mussolini regime, and, in the early post-war years, AC and Inter came to represent the emergent working and middle classes of Milan, respectively.

Italy is not unique in its relationship with important political events and figures. In Spain, another of Kobe's favourite teams was FC Barcelona of the Catalonian region in Spain. The Catalan independence referendum of October 1st, 2017 created a seemingly irreparable rift between Catalonia and the rest of Spain. While many sports teams remain neutral of political issues, FC many Barcelona's players and staff were strongly supportive of the attempt at independence.

Among the most vocal was Gerard Pique (husband of Shakira), whom retired from the Spanish national team shortly after the fallout of the events. Many have drawn parallels between the independence movements in Catalonia and Scotland. If Brexit does, as countless have argued, lead to the break-up of the nations of the United Kingdom, Scottish football could become a further forum for division between pro-unionist and pro-independence parts of Caledonia.

Outside of the NBA, Kobe Bryant was also one of the significant members of the U.S.A Dream Team which reestablished a dominance of Olympic basketball in the first and second decade of the twenty-first Century.

During my time as an undergraduate at the University of Birmingham, I was fortunate enough to be taught by the UK's leading expert in the politics of sport, Professor Jonathan Grix. The final year module taught me of the dual significance of major sporting events such as the World Cup and the Olympics. Kobe won Olympic gold at Beijing 2008 and London 2012. These Olympic Games, like the forthcoming Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, did more than showcase sporting excellence.

An important element of these mega events is their ability to generate a feel-good factor among citizens and to use the net income of the tournaments to regenerate cities and build positive legacies. The London which hosted the Olympics, during the mayoralty of Boris Johnson, will feel very different from the Brexit-era Birmingham which invites the world to its streets in 2022; those latter games will surely be used to present the UK as an open, tolerant and welcoming nation, despite the oft-contradictory rhetoric of the Brexit movement.

The Champions League is among the most popular annual sporting events in Europe. It showcases the best footballing talent playing in Europe's major leagues, and often puts little-known European players in the shop window for major Premier League clubs. Kobe Bryant famously transitioned from a famous high school player to burgeoning NBA star, eschewing the collegiate system of young player development in the States.

Here in Europe, young players are often recruited from the academies of other clubs, and further developed by the club who purchases their services. Brexit, however, poses some concerns for this talent pipeline. A report in the Independent recently illuminated fears that FIFA regulations would make it impossible for British clubs to recruit young players, under the age of 18; this is permitted only for members of the EU or European Economic Area.

In 2019, a Guardian columnist warned of a retreat into "Little Englandism," namely the creation of a post-Brexit Britain hostile to outside influences; the article argued that "foreign stars have undoubtedly raised standard" of British sport, especially in football.

While great international players, such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Didier Drogba, have graced British football for decades, a new crop of international basketball players are following Kobe Bryant into the NBA. Young European players Giannis Antetokounmpo and Luca Doncic have cited the late, great shooting guard as an important influence in sparking their love of basketball, and igniting their desire to head to the States to play in the NBA.

Kobe Bean Bryant was considered the greatest player in the history of the NBA's most famous team, the Los Angeles Lakers. He was a five-time NBA champion, two-time Olympic gold medalist and winner of

the 2018 Academy Award for Animated Short Film, for his work 'Dear Basketball'.

The loss of such a popular sporting and cultural figure, alongside his young daughter and several family friends, redraws our attention to the complex and profound relationship that sport, politics and society often share.