

University of Tartu  
Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics  
Department of Semiotics

Daniel Prokes

Constructing athletic identity in American leagues: a semiotic analysis of  
professional sports

Master's Thesis

Supervisors: PhD Elin Sütiste, PhD Nelly Mäekivi,

PhD Silvi Salupere

Tartu 2025

I have written the Master Thesis independently, myself. All the other authors, texts, main viewpoints and resources have been referred to.

Author: Daniel Prokes

Date

.....

.....

## **Abstract**

This thesis identifies and investigates the construction process of athletic identity in selected major U.S. professional sports leagues through the lens of semiotic theory. Applying Juri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, it explores how athletic performance is translated into symbolic value through systems such as contracts, statistics, media framing, and institutional regulation. Focusing on the NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB, the study demonstrates that identity is not innate but produced within interconnected economic, linguistic, and cultural frameworks.

# Contents

Contents.....	4
INTRODUCTION.....	7
Overview of the evolution of professional sports.....	7
The role of the Olympics as a historical predecessor to modern professional sports.....	10
Economic transformation and evolution in sports.....	10
The Emergence of Sports Clubs as Companies and Brands.....	11
Thesis statement: Outlining the significance of athlete identity.....	12
Historiographical Background.....	15
CHAPTER 1: CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN THE SEMIOSPHERE: METHODOLOGY AND KEY TERMINOLOGY.....	19
1.1. Introduction: Lotman and the Semiosphere as a Framework for U.S. Professional Sports.....	19
1.2. Centers, Borders, and Boundaries in the Athletic Environment.....	20
1.3. Methodology: Semiotic Ethnography of a Professional Sports Culture.....	21
1.4. Definition of Key Terms: Identity, Persona, Self, Other.....	22
1.5. The American Professional Sports System as a Semiosphere.....	25
CHAPTER 2: SEMIOTIC STRUCTURE OF SPORTS AND ATHLETIC IDENTITY.....	28
2.1. Entry into Semiotics of Sports.....	28
2.2. Social Construction of Reality.....	28
2.3. Navigating Dual Realities: The On-The-Field and Off-The-Field Dichotomy in Athletic Identity.....	31
2.3.1. The Power Dynamics of the On-The-Field Persona.....	32
2.3.2. The Nature of the Off-the-Field Persona.....	33
2.4. Summary of the on-the-field and off-the-field dichotomy.....	34
CHAPTER 3: ECONOMICAL MEANING: AMERICAN SPORTS AS AN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MODEL.....	36

3.1. The Process of Transformation to a Business Model: A Brief History.....	36
3.2. Contract as a Crucial Semiotic Symbol of Identity.....	38
3.3. The Life-Cycle of Contracts: From Draft to Free Agency.....	41
3.4. Trading Players: Symbol of Variability and Control.....	43
3.5. The Business Model's Dominance Over Performance.....	44
3.6. The Economic Structure of American Leagues: Salary Caps, Revenue Sharing, and Division.....	45
3.6.1. Division and Conference Organization.....	46
3.6.2. Salary Caps.....	46
3.6.3. Revenue Sharing.....	47
3.7. The Role of Agents and Player Representatives: Structuring Athlete Identity and Career.....	48
3.8. The Business Model: Players as an Investment Product.....	51
3.9. Economic Impact and Corporate Entertainment Model.....	55
3.10. Transitioning Club Structures: From Sports Teams to Corporate Enterprises.....	56
3.11. Summary: Athletes as Central Figures in a Corporate Entertainment Model.....	58
CHAPTER 4: THE LINGUISTIC APPROACH: THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION OF LANGUAGE OF SPORTS TO LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS.....	61
4.1. Introduction into the Linguistic Approach.....	61
4.2. Theoretical Framework: Linguistic Semiotics in Context.....	62
4.3. Management Discourse and Lotman's Text Within a Text.....	65
4.4. The Rise of Game Management in Sports Language.....	66
4.5. Key Elements of Game Management.....	67
4.6. The Business Embedded in "Professional Athlete".....	68
4.7. Implications for Athletic Identity Building Process.....	70
4.8. Summary of the Linguistic Approach.....	71
CHAPTER 5: THE SEMIOTICS OF TRANSLATION APPROACH: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF GAME STATS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY	

DEVELOPMENT.....	73
5.1. Introduction: Technological Growth and the Gathering of Data.....	73
5.2. Data and Identity: Translating Performance into Market Value.....	74
5.3. Semiotic Translation: From Raw Data to Identity Formation.....	75
5.4. The Role of the Clubs: Translating Data into Strategic Identity.....	77
5.5. Semiotics of Translation in Market Evaluation.....	78
5.6. The Economic Implications of Translating Data.....	79
5.7. Semiotics of Translation: The Role of Media and Public Interpretation.....	80
5.8. The Limits of Translation: Performance vs. Identity.....	81
CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF MEDIA ON IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT.....	83
6.1. The Evolution of Sports Media in America.....	84
6.2. Goffman's Frame Analysis and Athlete Identity.....	85
6.3. Barthes and the Myth of the Athlete.....	86
6.4. The Power of Social Media: Athletes Earning Beyond Their Contracts.....	89
Works Cited.....	96
Resümee.....	101

# **INTRODUCTION**

## **Overview of the evolution of professional sports**

In recent decades, more specifically in the course of time between the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the present time, professional sports have undergone a heavy and dynamic transformation from serving as mere forms of entertainment even on the high competitive level into powerful cultural phenomena with a strong socio-cultural and economical power that helps shaping societal values and attitudes. In the time of mere decades, professional sports clubs have changed from being predominantly individually owned and sponsored clubs, to being operated as multi-billion dollar brands on a predominantly corporate level – owned, managed and run primarily to generate profit, create PR and most importantly, maximize their value on the market. Simply put, sports have during the process of professionalization transformed into a very strong branch of business. The sole purpose of the entire environment has shifted and thus, it is natural to suppose that with it, the meaning-making process itself within this environment has also evolved and adjusted to the changes.

This transformation has been particularly evident in the American culture, where the professionalization of sports was the most dynamic and leagues such as the National Football League (NFL), National Basketball Association (NBA), National Hockey League (NHL), and Major League Baseball (MLB) not only enjoy immense popularity but also serve as key players in the global economy. They are now turned into corporate brands operating in the business area of entertainment and professional sports. They are built and handled as organizations of similar nature in other fields of business, which is often described as sports franchises.

The value of these franchises directly reflects their multilayered and powerful roles within the global society and deservedly makes them leaders in the realm of professional sports and entertainment business. On the economical level they represent the market leaders and oftentimes serve as information source and guidance to other sports and professional leagues, but also brands in general.

According to Forbes (2023), the following list represents currently the most valuable sports franchises globally:

1. Dallas Cowboys (NFL): \$8 billion
2. New York Yankees (MLB): \$7.1 billion
3. Los Angeles Lakers (NBA): \$6.9 billion
4. Golden State Warriors (NBA): \$6.8 billion
5. New England Patriots (NFL): \$6.4 billion

This extensive financial landscape displays exactly how sporting success intertwines with broader commercial and cultural dynamics, illustrating that the most valuable franchises are indeed found within the American leagues. This positioning emphasizes the focus of this thesis on the particular identity construction processes within these particular environments. Ultimately, although all these professional leagues essentially deal with completely different team games (American football, Baseball, Ice hockey, Basketball) with different rules and regulations on the field, the way they are constructed as organizations and the way they operate carries a lot of similarities oftentimes referred to as American Professional Sports. All of these leagues share a very similar organization of the season and the competitive processes – the structure of Divisions and Conferences based on their geographical location on the North-American continent. In addition, in each of these leagues the basic nature of the competition is also almost identical – after the regular season where all the teams compete against each other come the playoff part of the season. In the playoffs, clubs play an elimination (usually best of 7 games) format that produces the winning team of the season. All these features have created something that very often is referred to as a “system of professional sports in America”, which essentially can be indeed perceived as one single environment.

Even though in this master thesis the core of the analysis is represented by the four major American professional sports leagues, namely the NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB, it is important to acknowledge the growth of the phenomena of American sports across the continent as additional sports leagues have been established and organized, following in their essence the format of those leagues that are the subject of this thesis. Most notably, the Major League

Soccer (MLS), the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL), the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA), and the Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL). Launched on January 1, 2024, the PWHL has been growing rapidly, with Seattle announced as its eighth team for the 2025–26 season, underlining growing popularity not only of the league, but women's professional sports across North America in general. Therefore it is expected and quite natural, that some, maybe even most of the conclusions this master's thesis will establish may also be applied to these other emerging leagues. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this thesis, it will be the NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB as the original and leading institutions that have historically set the standards which others are trying to follow or be inspired by. These four leagues have been the trendsetters, the global representatives of American sporting culture, and the primary architects of the commercialized, media-driven model that for the purposes of this thesis really defines the semiosphere of U.S. athletics in these four major game-based professional sports.

Hence, despite the fact that athletes entering this system are competing in different games and sports with a different way of play and purpose, their process of developing a successful identity is from some perspectives almost identical. It is absolutely safe to say these athletes oftentimes share a significantly similar experience within the system of American professional sports.

It is the primary purpose of this thesis to provide a further understanding of the process of identity development within this system primarily from the perspective of the athletes entering and becoming a part of this system. The key target is a comprehensive description of the process behind the creation of a mindset of success within the system, working with the premise that this system meets all the criteria of Lotman's concept of semiosphere.

## **The role of the Olympics as a historical predecessor to modern professional sports**

Historically, high level competitive sports have roots in the ideals represented by the Ancient Olympic Games, which were built around and emphasized the idea of human athleticism, meritocracy, and personal achievement. The modern Olympics, re-initiated in Athens, Greece in 1896, originally founded on principles that celebrated among others pride, persistence and human accomplishment, carry their specific line of semiotic symbols designed specifically to support some of the values mentioned above. The five interlocking rings symbolize the unity of the five continents, while the Olympic flame represents the spirit of competition and the idea of enlightenment (Holt 2006; Miller 2001). These symbols convey values of honor, discipline, and fair play, echoing the noble intentions that served as meaning-making pillars behind the entire idea of the modern era Olympic Games as we knew them throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century all the way to their current status.

## **Economic transformation and evolution in sports**

However, there were very few economic implications for the athletes, as the notion of amateurism that dominated the Olympics for much of the 20th century gradually stood in direct contrast to the rapidly growing world of professional sports, growing rapidly specifically on the American continent. While Olympic athletes were expected to compete without monetary compensation, oftentimes rewarded somehow after the long-lasting competitive career essentially without a fully legitimate professional contract. In the course of time however, the landscape of professional sports has dramatically transformed, leading to a process which is often referred to as a commodification of athletic talent. This process changed utterly the dynamics of what a professional sports career really is and how it is constructed. According to Friedman, athletes today are bound by contracts which are awarded

in the form of annual income in order to prioritize marketability and branding over traditional notions of amateur ideals (Friedman 2010). On the same note, Holt says that this shift reflects a growing trend where professional athletes are increasingly viewed as marketable assets, with their economic value tied to their public personas (Holt 2006: 49). In any case, for the purpose of this thesis it is crucial to say that every athlete within the system of the American professional sports is under a standardized professional contract and thus his rights are for the time of the contract owned by the club that can manage his rights within the rules and regulations of the given league.

This commodification marks a pivotal shift in the sports landscape, where performance and persona intersect directly in a number of ways. A notable example is a U.S. Ice hockey club, the Anaheim Mighty Ducks, which was owned by the Disney corporation during the period from 1993 to 2005. The team was not merely a sports franchise but an entertainment entity, integrated into Disney's broader corporate portfolio. The mascot of the club, The Mighty Duck was a Disney owned and created movie character, hence the connection with the entertainment part. Additionally, Friedman states that this convergence of sports and entertainment exemplifies how leagues operate as businesses, seeking to maximize profit through innovative branding and marketing strategies (Friedman 2010: 55).

## **The Emergence of Sports Clubs as Companies and Brands**

The commercialization of sports provides a rich source of incentives for understanding the identity dynamics of athletes today. They are not only expected to compete in their respective sports but also required to function and fulfill a considerable amount of expectations surrounding branding, representation and public image. The beginnings of this dual expectation reach back to the process of professionalization of sports, a transformation that began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In striking contradiction with the amateur ideals of the modern Olympic Games, which began in 1896 symbolically in Athens, Greece and were founded on the principle of amateurism, the rise of organized leagues, spectator

demand, and mass media fairly quickly shifted the established paradigm. By the early 1900s, clubs in baseball (the National League was founded in 1876), and later American football began paying athletes, having them under contracts as club employees. Inherently, selling tickets to the games was the basic economic model at that time. The growth of professional leagues in the U.S. – such as the NFL (founded in 1920), NBA (1946), and NHL (1917) – transformed sports clubs into increasingly powerful commercial entities. This strengthened particularly in the post-World War II era with introduction of radio and television broadcasting, leading to what is referred to as *monetization* of sports performance and the consequent growth of popularity and size of the clubs. Hand in hand with that also came the emergence of athletes as celebrities as successful professionals in sports and public figures.

As Miller notes, “the commercialization of sport has changed how athletes construct their identities, as they must now navigate both athletic performance and marketability” (Miller 2001: 28). Athletes are tasked not only with elite-level performance in their given sport (their profession and subject of their contract), but also with developing identities that have potential to resonate with audiences across the globe leading to a complex dynamic between personal narratives and commercial success. Hence, the modern American sports club as of today operates as both a competitive team and a corporate brand simultaneously, shaping the environment in which athletes develop their identity. This dual role brings important implications for how athletes present themselves not only as sport performers but also as celebrities and role models.

### **Thesis statement: Outlining the significance of athlete identity**

As mentioned above, this thesis specifically focuses on the NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB because, despite the inherent differences in the actual games (American football, basketball, ice-hockey, and baseball), these leagues operate within a shared semiotic system. They create and maintain similar structures and business models that extend beyond the territory of their respective sports, establishing themselves as leaders in the methods and knowledge that shape

the world of professional athletics. This shared framework represents an opportunity for an analysis of the process of identity construction across different sports, recognizing both the commonalities and unique cultural contexts that each league embodies.

To this end, this thesis seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do the professional athletes within these major American leagues (NBA, NHL, NFL, MLB) develop their identity in order to achieve both athletic and economical success?
2. What are the key elements of this process when we apply Lotman's semiosphere model and other key semiotic theories?
3. How did the transformation of professional sports alternate the entire meaning-making process for the professional athletes entering the system today?

Although a socioeconomic approach and focus on monetization of athletic performance go hand in hand with the process of professionalization of sports also offer a potent object for research, this should not serve as the main subject of this thesis. Rather than providing an analysis of the structural changes in the environment of the U.S. professional leagues such as media exposure, fan base, endorsements, this thesis will focus more on the implications these bring to the individuals within that system – the professional players themselves. Hence, through application of Juri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere in this environment, this thesis claims to seek a better understanding of how a player's identity is constructed. Therefore, rather than stating *what happens* when athletes sign their contracts and become professional players, we focus on *how* and *why* particular meaning-making processes are in place, how concepts such as 'top-player', 'legend', 'success', 'public figure' and 'celebrity' are constructed within that particular sign system and culture. Essentially, Lotman's concept of the semiosphere is applied to the athletic persona not merely as a product of external forces, but a very dynamic and constantly changing sign system shaped by culture myths, media, fan interpretation. The focus of this thesis in its core is on how athletic identity is constructed and how it transforms within the sign system of these U.S. professional leagues.

The process of finding answers to these questions then goes as follows – the key theory applied to this thesis will be Juri Lotman's definition of the semiosphere as a space within which meaning is created. This main theory will be supplemented by concepts and theories of other semioticians, in each chapter relevant to the subject. Nevertheless, although some different semiotic approaches (Linguistic, Translational, Socio-cultural) will also be used in order to provide use of that theory in a specific context, and should be again, re-applied within the system of Lotman's semiosphere.

The first chapter will give to the reader the basic understanding of the methodology and structure of the thesis. Lotman's semiosphere theory will be substantially explained and introduced, further related to the realm of the U.S. sports environment and the process of athletic identity-building. Also in this chapter some key terms will be defined in relation to the subject of this thesis. The second chapter will examine the on-the-field and off-the-field dichotomy, discussing how athletes manage their alternative personas in different contexts and the implications for their performance and their athletic success. Chapter 3 will focus on the economic approach to athlete's identity construction, professional contract as a symbol of success and cultural hierarchy, the dominance of the business model over the performance, while chapter 4 of the thesis will reach into the linguistic aspects of identity formation, particularly how business language and terminology have infiltrated the discourse of professional sports on the field and in general. The translation approach in Chapter 5 will examine the process of reading and interpreting game statistics in order to help create and further develop the professional identity of athletes. Finally, the sixth chapter will examine the role of media and mass communication tools in expanding the athletic persona beyond the field of sports.

Drawing mainly from Lotman's fundamental works and supporting his semiotic notions with works of some additional semioticians such as Eco, Jakobson, Saussure and others, this thesis aims to identify and apply the most central semiotic processes that underlie the identity construction in the realm of professional athletics. In addition, this thesis also intends to further open semiotic research into professional sports, for while the field of sports psychology has undergone an immense growth and popularization, the field of sports semiotics has not impacted the realm of professional sports as much. Nevertheless, there is no doubt within the realm of professional sports that the process of persona building to develop

an extremely complex and highly structured identity is absolutely crucial to a potential success in sports.

Despite the fact the center subject of this thesis is the system of American professional sports, it has to also be mentioned that this fact is rooted merely in the history of the environment, rather than its current sociocultural situation and status. While all the leagues that are the subject of this thesis evolved indeed in the American society of the 20th Century, today all of these act and identify themselves as global brands and entities, having a worldwide reach to their international, multi-cultured fan-base.

To be more precise and further clarify, The National Football League (NFL) has recently introduced its International Series, a game played in London, and one most recently in Germany, in order to further export the game beyond the American market. Adopting precisely the same idea, The Major League Baseball (MLB) had also set up games abroad, in their popular markets in Tokyo or Mexico City. Furthermore, The National Basketball Association (NBA), in particular, has demonstrated even much broader and intense international engagement, initiating NBA Africa and organizing exhibition and preseason games in countries including China, Japan, and the United Arab Emirates. And also the NHL often conducts their preseason games or the season-openers in countries where ice-hockey is a strong global market, countries such as Finland, Sweden, Czechia, Germany and others.

So when we identify or define certain symbolic structures, rituals, and meaning-making processes within the American leagues, it still needs to be understood that although these are tightly bound to the American history and culture, they shall no longer be viewed solely in the domestic contexts but have to be elevated and adapted onto the global scale. Accordingly, American professional sports today operate not solely as national institutions, but as parts of a speedily growing international entertainment enterprise. Recognizing this broader impact supports the need for a deeper semiotic analysis, simply because it should also bring further clarification on how athletic identities and cultural narratives are reshaped in the variety of different socio-cultural and linguistic contexts.

## Historiographical Background

The study of professional sports as such has indeed been a subject of interest for researchers across disciplines, whether it be history, sociology, economics, psychology, cultural studies or some others. However, most of the research into professional sports focuses particularly on professionalization of sports, its commercialization, the growth of contracts, evolution of the environment and some of the implications coming as the result of these changes.

One of the very important sports researchers is indeed Richard Holt, whose works *Sport and the British: A Modern History* (1989) brought more clarification into the relationship between sports and modernity. Holt particularly explored the process of the transformation of sports based on amateur, noble Olympic ideals into a *grand spectacle*, a cultural event with a high entertainment value, heavily intertwined with the idea of capitalistic monetisation, economical value and profit. Consequently, given the size and nature of the U.S. socioeconomic environment, it is natural this trend became most broad and dynamic particularly in North America.

In a similar manner, Miller's research, more specifically his work *Globalization and Sport* (2001), describes professional athletes as global cultural icons tied predominantly to media networks, popularity and consumerism, highlighting the fact that today's athletes must navigate through dual roles – as competitors and marketable figures.

The transformation of American professional sports – particularly within the NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB – has been widely studied from the perspectives of commercialization and mediatization. It has been argued that sport in the United States became a central cultural and economic institution, driven by television, advertising, and franchising (Collins 2013; Whannel 2002). These leagues – referred to collectively as the “Big Four” – established parallel structures for developing talent, broadcasting games, and constructing narratives around individual athletes. The “American sports space” has been described as dominated by these leagues, which command cultural and economic attention in ways unparalleled globally (Markovits, Hellerman 2001). While each sport maintains distinct internal cultures, the

leagues share institutional logics that turn athletes into branded cultural products within a common professional ecosystem.

The mediatization of sport has also produced a highly developed “sporting star system,” wherein athletes function as celebrities and public figures, their identities mediated through narratives of success, failure, and morality. It has been observed that modern sports stars are constructed not only through their performance but through a synthesis of athletic achievement, personal charisma, and media representation (Whannel 2002). Athletes are no longer private individuals but complex signifying agents whose meaning extends into realms of nationality, race, class, and gender. A paradigmatic case is offered in *Michael Jordan, Inc.*, where Jordan’s identity, while grounded in extraordinary athletic talent, was carefully cultivated through media, corporate alliances, and symbolic narratives that positioned him as an icon of global capitalism (Andrews 2001).

In his book *Sports Semiotics*, Arthur Asa Berger (2023) has contributed to this direction, framing sports as cultural texts or some symbolic arenas where social values are encoded and performed. Berger draws mainly on Barthes, on his myth and contemporary media studies. Consequently, Berger argues that everything from game rituals to press conferences can be indeed read as kinds of signifying acts that reflect on deeper cultural structures. He states that sports are not just games but they act as systems of meaning, filled with rituals, myths, and signs that tell us who we are and what we value” (Berger, 2023). In addition, Berger’s book *Semiotics of Sports* confirms the idea that sport operates within a system of signs, serving as grounds for semiotic analysis.

While sociological, economic and media-based approaches provide a substantial path to understanding of the structural and cultural aspects of professional sports, very often the essential subject of the research deals with the outcome – contracts, salaries, endorsements, and fame – rather than exploring the meaning-making processes themselves. This thesis aims to fill that space by applying a specific semiotic theory (the semiosphere by Juri Lotman), which serves as a dynamic model for understanding how identities are not merely produced by the processes mentioned above, but are actively negotiated through cultural codes and symbols in the form of an ongoing translations within a bounded semiotic space.

Even though semiotic theorists such as Umberto Eco, Roman Jakobson and others have significantly expanded on semiotics in the general relation to language, signs, and codes, etc., the application of these theories to the realm of professional sports remains extremely limited. Some of the existing semiotic approaches to sport have mostly focused on elements such as logos, uniforms, and ritual gestures, not really working with the process of identity construction in particular almost at all. Lotman's concept of the *semiosphere* – as articulated in *Universe of the Mind* – provides a useful macro-semiotic framework for understanding how athlete identities are not simply shaped by external forces (such as commercialization or media narratives), but are actively produced, translated, and recontextualized within a larger cultural system (Lotman 1990). In this view, the athlete operates as both a sign and a translator of cultural codes, situated within a complex ecology of symbols that include the sport itself, media coverage, sponsorship, fandom, and social media. The athlete's identity emerges through continuous interaction across semiotic boundaries – between sport and commerce, private and public, tradition and innovation. Recent research into athlete social media behavior supports this view, showing how players in the NFL, NBA, MLB, and NHL curate multifaceted public personas that combine professionalism, entertainment, activism, and personal branding (Sanderson 2013). These platforms are not simply channels for communication but are semiotic spaces where athletes negotiate and reshape the meanings attached to their persona.

In summary, the earlier studies have addressed and researched the process of commercialization and mediatization of professional sports, nevertheless the semiotic approach to the process of athletic identity construction is still to be further developed. Lotman's concept of the semiosphere provides a very useful lens that – thanks to the structure and dynamics of the U.S. professional sports – can be applied in order to perhaps initiate some future research into this topic.

# **CHAPTER 1: CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN THE SEMIOSPHERE: METHODOLOGY AND KEY TERMINOLOGY**

## **1.1. Introduction: Lotman and the Semiosphere as a Framework for U.S. Professional Sports**

The fundamental premise of this thesis is that this particular environment can be perceived as a culture in the very Lotmanian sense. That means that by employing Juri Lotman's concept of the *semiosphere* as the central theoretical model, we will achieve a better perception of the processes through which the identity of professional athletes in American sports is developed. As one of the founding figures of the Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School, which described the semiosphere as a semiotic space in which all signification occurs, as it most naturally does in all other biological systems. According to Lotman, all meaningful sign activity can occur within the realm of the semiosphere; it is virtually the foundational environment for all communication, all systems of meaning, and all cultural interactions.

If we apply this theory to American professional sports - in the case of this thesis the leagues of the NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB – we should reach a better insight into the nature and framework of the nature of the meaning-making processes athletes engage in and undergo. From this perspective, the American professional sports landscape represents a very fitting environment to be a subject of this type of research. For indeed it holds its own, very rich, very dynamic and extremely interesting semiosphere – a precisely structured and internally coherent sign system governed by rules, codes, rituals, and most importantly a constant movement. Within the semiosphere in all of these leagues, despite the fact that they may be completely different sports such as baseball or ice hockey, the players' experience shows signs and tendencies that are extremely similar or clearly identical simply because the environments are. Hence, although the games themselves have different goals and rules, the structural

organization and the league design is very similar, therefore we can consider these leagues to essentially represent a whole semiosphere. Here, the players are not merely performers but are constantly engaged in a meaning-producing process within the system, where they become a subject whose identity is continuously constructed and negotiated through signs.

In his work Lotman clearly states that “The semiosphere is the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages” (Lotman 1990: 123). This implies that virtually every single act within the American sports system – from entering the system with signing of a contract to the performance of a touchdown celebration all the way to the media interviews and fan popularity – all this shall be interpreted within the boundaries of this cultural semiosphere. The leagues themselves indeed act as self-regulating subsystems, each with its core (the dominant rules, commercial structures, and cultural expectations) and peripheral zones (emerging forms of play, alternative identities, media narratives).

To provide a better insight into this world of U.S. professional sports, this chapter will introduce the theoretical groundwork by positioning the athlete within this structured semiosphere and will state that every aspect of their identity construction – on and off the field – is a process of cultural negotiation. In addition, Lotman's semiosphere model allows us to explain not just how athletes behave or communicate, but more importantly *why* certain modes of behavior, performance, and professional representation are highly important and worthy of a deeper observation in this system.

## **1.2. Centers, Borders, and Boundaries in the Athletic Environment**

Lotman did not view the semiosphere as one coherent, homogeneous space. Ultimately, he believed its dynamics and functions lied in tensions. Tension between what he called center and periphery, tensions between the familiar and the unknown, between order and chaos. Essentially, he saw tensions as key agents in the entire meaning-making process. If we place this model in the context of American sports, we find the center of the semiosphere consists of all the institutionalized rules, traditions and economic structures of the leagues subject to

this thesis. These are tightly regulated and highly codified, usually defined and updated in time by the league administrations themselves. Hence, the contracts, drafts, media relations, all these function as some sort of the grammatical rules in the sports semiosphere.

Upon entering the system (most commonly through the draft or free agency as will be described later), athletes cross the boundary into the semiosphere where they inadvertently become a subject to its structural laws, some of which relate to the game itself, and other to different aspects of life of a professional athlete in the U.S. In his research, Lotman emphasizes that boundaries are not merely divisive, they don't serve as mere territorial borders, but they are also the primary sites of the process of translation. As he states, "The boundary is not only a dividing line; it is also a space for semiotic activity" (Lotman 1990: 136). The athlete must translate their previous cultural codes (from amateur, collegiate, or international play) into the language of professional American sports, adopting its signs, roles, and expectations.

As the realm of American sports is highly codified, it is crucial for the athletes to familiarize themselves with all the necessary procedures and the codes of the center (knowing league norms, the economic nature, media protocols, team hierarchies). This adjustment to the environment and the system is extremely important and crucial for their later athletic success. Those athletes who are better in adapting to the new system often move closer to the semiosphere's core have a better potential to be successful within this environment.

### **1.3. Methodology: Semiotic Ethnography of a Professional Sports Culture**

As far as the methodology is concerned, it can be stated that in its essence, this thesis performs some form of semiotic ethnography, simply by treating American professional sports as a cultural semiosphere, defined by its signs, codes, institutions, and habits. By seeing the entire US sports environment as a culture, it seeks to understand how meaning is produced and stabilized.

Hence, rather than seeing all the athletes simply through the lens of them being game

performers, this study views them as focal points inside the network of very dynamic sets of semiotic flows. The texts that surround them – contracts, interviews, sponsorship deals, highlight reels, social media posts – are analyzed as very important acts of movement of a broader semiosphere. This then should deliver a further understanding of how identity is shaped not by the athlete alone, but by the complex interaction of institutions, discourses, and symbolic systems within the context of the US professional sports.

In addition, this approach also opens up ways to bring further attention to power. While Lotman himself does not emphasize power in the Foucauldian sense, the structure of the semiosphere brings implications that hierarchies and enforcement of norms play an essential role. By supplementing Lotman with Foucault's concept of power as a major meaning-making device, we can better comprehend how certain athletic identities are normalized and popular, while others are marginalized and a subject of critique.

#### **1.4. Definition of Key Terms: Identity, Persona, Self, Other**

Hand in hand with method identification comes the step to introduce and explain the key terms. This section defines the core concepts that will be used throughout the thesis: *identity*, *persona*, *self*, and *other*, each interpreted through the lens of Lotman's cultural semiotics and consequently applied to the realm of the US sports environment.

**Identity:** Within Lotman's semiosphere, identity is a status created and maintained through the continuous translation of signs across cultural and communicative contexts. It is not a fixed essence but an ongoing, dynamic process - constantly shaped by interaction with both the center and the periphery of a semiotic system. In this model, identity is always in motion, always a subject of change and evolution. For the professional athlete, identity functions as a multi-layered construct that emerges from both inward-directed auto communication and outward-directed performance. It is a combination of self as an individual and a professional competitor in the highly exposed sports system, but also a portrait of a self in a highly

symbolic system of professional sports with all the variables it contains, such as contracts, media portrayal, public reception and ultimately market value. In the U.S. sports in particular, identity is continually challenged and has to be constantly reinforced by performance measures, public expectations, and commercial interests. This thesis takes identity not only as a central object of its analysis, but as a subject to be approached from different semiotic angles in addition to Lotman's semiosphere theory. Therefore, Chapter 3 will further examine how contracts serve as a key semiotic tool to the entire process of identity construction and its crucial role in the whole system. Chapter 4 explores how statistics function as codified representations of athletic identity; Chapter 5 investigates how the language of sport translates into the language of business, shaping identity through discourse, and Chapter 6 analyzes how identity is mediated to the public and made to maximize its commercial potential. Although different semiotic strategies and concepts will be used and applied, in its core principle this thesis views professional athletic identity as a result or a product of ongoing semiotic negotiation formed inside a flux of performance, power, and meaning. Within this complex system, athletes are under continuous pressure to develop what is often referred to as a *successful athletic identity* – which can be briefly described as a complex image that contains elements of many images of personal performance, public persona, successful professional and a role model. Nevertheless, all these will be approached with consideration of Lotman's semiosphere theory as the main branch of this research.

**Persona:** On the other hand, the public image of athletes, managed and portrayed by themselves and distributed by the teams, the league, and the media constitutes the persona. This, in essence, represents the version of the self constructed for the other, hence residing in the outer layers of the semiosphere where signification is most visible. Persona is inherently selective, oftentimes shaped and constructed according to the audience expectations. In the case of professional athletes, this includes all the public interviews and social media content, sponsorship appearances, and community engagements. Their public persona is in its core a branded image that reconfirms professionalism with the league's core values and other cultural expectations. While the on-the-field performance (as we will identify later in the thesis) may be governed by physical and mental skill, the persona ultimately represents a symbolic performance created intentionally for more visibility and market value. Inherently,

an athlete's persona often serves as a bridge between the athlete and multiple other audiences: fans, media, sponsors, and organizational stakeholders.

**Self:** According to Lotman, the process of auto communication is inherently internal, it could be simply defined as a reflexive consciousness with a capacity to translate the experience into cultural codes (Lotman, 1990: 22). The self is what crosses into the semiosphere and must orient itself within its symbolic space. For the professional athlete, the self initially works as the most important part and the original point of the entire identity formation. It is where personal values, emotional responses and behavioral patterns are generated and reflected upon. Through auto communication, the athlete processes all the key information from their performance evaluation, their status within the organization, and the feedback from others. It is a process of a constant reinterpretation and redefinition of their role within the broader system. It is most certainly the self that helps withstand the pressures of competition, possibility of a failure, public exposure or fan feelings and expectations. On the other hand, the self also works as the basis and storage from which both on-the-field execution and off-the-field decisions emerge. The self represents the core that must adapt to new exposure and continually respond to the very dynamic semiotic environment of the US professional sports.

**Other:** From the Lotmanian perspective, the other is any external interpretive agent within the semiosphere. In the system of U.S. sports, it relates mostly to fans, media, coaches, league authorities, or fellow players. Nevertheless it is of equal or higher importance as the self, simply because the relationship between self and other is a key element to the entire process of identity construction. The other also exists at multiple levels – from those immediate professional relationships with coaches and the rest of the team, to institutional and public relationships with the league and the fans and the media.

The aim of this thesis is to further explore (not only) these within the framework of Lotman's theory of semiosphere, and apply them to the status of a professional athlete in the realm of US professional sports. However, the thesis also mentions other key terms, exploring more than the simple binaries of internal vs. external identity, focusing on their broader implications

and dynamics of these in a complex semiotic space.

### **1.5. The American Professional Sports System as a Semiosphere**

American professional sports leagues exemplify all the characteristics of Lotman's semiosphere:

**Structural Unity:** As Mentioned above, even though each of these leagues are different sports and different games, the way they are structured, managed and run creates a solid unity. Each league functions as a semiotic system with internal grammar with its contracts, gameplay rules, competition formats, and PR protocols, nevertheless, their organization and athletic experience show significant signs of similarities creating structural unity of US professional sports.

**Boundaries:** Through the act of signing a standardized form of a professional contract, athletes enter into a system that requires translation into professional codes such as game assignments and positions, branding, draft protocols, sponsorship language and others. In sports, this translation process of familiarization is often referred to as an act of adjustment to the professional reality.

**Center/Periphery Dynamics:** In the realm of US professional sports, quite naturally it is the big achievers that occupy the center of the semiosphere – the star athletes that break records and achieve exceptional things in the game, elite clubs that are successful in the game and also as a brand of business. Their actions, performances, and public personas are highly visible, codified, and widely circulated. In contrast, lower contract players or the minor league affiliation clubs inhabit the periphery, a realm where visibility and exposure are limited. These figures may struggle to translate their identities into the dominant codes of the semiosphere, either because they have not found success in their respective sports or somehow have not managed to connect with the fan base, general public and media. Generally speaking, the center is a space of semantic stability and cultural authority, while the periphery serves as a

zone of potential innovation, tension, but also exclusion. Athletes move between these positions depending mainly on their performance, public perception, and organizational politics, negotiating and developing their identity in professional sports is constantly within the logic of the US sports environment.

**Translation Zones:** Lotman defines translation zones as boundary areas within the semiosphere where different semiotic systems come into contact. In result, in these zones meaning is negotiated or transformed. These zones can be described as active sites of cultural and symbolic translation. It is a space where unfamiliarity becomes adapted to the internal logic of the semiosphere (Lotman, 1990: 136). Once again, if we apply this to professional sports in America, translation zones can be understood as transitional moments where an athlete's identity undergoes some sort of redefinition. Most commonly these relate to some sort of change in the athlete's status, such as being traded to another team, renegotiating a new contract before free agency periods, but also coming back from the injury, or being listed as long term injured and being able to perform. In these moments, athletes are often expected to recalibrate their identity according to the given situation, cultural codes, and social environments. These translation zones are extremely important as they are oftentimes bound to some sort of a decision made either by the athletes themselves or the organization which bears his contract. These may be hence viewed as junctures where the semiotic structure of the sports world becomes visible, and where identity construction is most vulnerable to disruption, transformation, or reinvention.

Within this system, athletes are not only participants in games but also subjects in a tightly controlled symbolic order. Every contract signed, every public appearance made, every data point collected contributes to the ongoing semiotic construction of who they are. To perform successfully in this system is to read and reproduce its codes fluently; to fail is to risk becoming unreadable or marginal within the semiosphere and ultimately lose value on the market. Thus, the study of professional sports becomes a study of a cultural system of signs - a semiosphere in which every athlete must learn to communicate, translate, and position themselves strategically in order to survive and succeed.

After definition of some of the key terms that serve as the theoretical foundations of the semiosphere and introduction of the key concepts such as identity, self, and symbolic positioning, the next chapter will provide further an analysis of what roles these semiotic

structures play within the athlete's actual experience. More particularly, it explores how athletes construct and negotiate their identities in relation to the dual pressures of on-the-field performance and off-the-field expectations. By applying the semiosphere framework to this dichotomy, it will clarify the dynamics between internal meaning-making and external social codes, thus clarifying more of the essentials of the process of the construction of professional athlete identity.

## **CHAPTER 2: SEMIOTIC STRUCTURE OF SPORTS AND ATHLETIC IDENTITY**

### **2.1. Entry into Semiotics of Sports**

In the landscape of professional sports in the United States, athletes enter a complex semiotic system where their identities must be crafted and navigated with utmost precision. Juri Lotman's cultural text metaphor also finds resonance in these sporting environments. Lotman (1984: 11) argues that "culture functions as a text that guides individuals in understanding their roles within society". The environment of North American sports certainly shows traces of a very strong culture almost identical across different games and leagues.

### **2.2. Social Construction of Reality**

Identity construction in professional sports is deeply intertwined with theories of social constructionism, underlining the significance of human interactions in creating reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966) assert that reality is indeed socially constructed; it is not an objective entity but a product of social interactions. They argue that individuals come to understand their roles, statuses, and even selves through repeated patterns of interaction within socially structured environments. In professional sports, this is especially relevant: athletes do not simply possess a fixed identity – they *construct* it through their engagements with the institutions and audiences that surround them.

As Berger and Luckmann (1966: 129) explain, "the individual is not born a member of society but becomes a member of society" through a process of internalizing socially constructed meanings. In a similar manner, an athlete is not born with a professional sports identity, but rather becomes an athlete through his existence and growth in the universe of competitive sport. This process is inherently influenced by external factors - coaches,

teammates, opponents, fans, media representatives, community in the city. These factors both affirm and challenge aspects of the athlete's identity. In consequence, each action and interaction represent potential building blocks of the athlete's identity and reinforce particular narratives about things like performance, professionalism, success, discipline, personality, marketability and thus help create and build certain patterns and tendencies in a player's behavior.

In addition, these social definitions of identity are institutionalized. The rules and structures of the league, the formal duties and obligations related to the game itself, but also sponsorship and fan culture all serve as vehicles for what Berger and Luckmann refer to as *objectivation* (Berger and Luckmann 1966) – where consequently all the socially constructed norms begin to appear natural and inevitable. Hence, an athlete's performance identity, public persona and private self take shape in a socially regulated environment. It is this environment that ultimately defines what it means to be either a successful and admirable fan favorite player, or controversial one that neither the fans or the media associate with much. This approach highlights that identity is not something athletes merely *have* – *but rather*, it is something they must *do*, repeatedly, in the presence of and in relation to others.

Following up on the findings of Berger and Luckmann we can state that after entering the system (being drafted and signing their first professional contract with a club), athletes become a part in a very complex cultural environment that may or may not be very different to the environment they were involved in before signing a professional contract. The interactions within this new culture shall be very impactful and carry a direct effect on player's identity development. The skill to adapt to the very specific culture of the US professional sports and fulfill the expected role in the club is absolutely crucial. Successful adjustment to the culture and effective development of the right type of identity can be the vital element for future success that may lead to a more important role and hopefully a higher value on the market, within the culture of the given league.

Empirical research supports these observations. For example, in the NFL, the interactions between players and coaches are a significant site of identity creation, where coaches direct their expectations towards players that are then translated into behavioral patterns and responsive acts on the field. A study by Jackson and Beauchamp (2010) focused on how NFL quarterbacks and coaches construct shared realities through communication, emphasizing how

this relationship influences the quarterbacks' leadership identities. The study found that quarterbacks often adopt specific linguistic and performative cues to align themselves with team cultures, further illustrating the social construction of athlete identity.

Erving Goffman's (1959) concept of the "presentation of self" offers a useful insight into the nature of an athlete's identity. Goffman argued that individuals are involved in sort of a continuous process of self-presentation, carefully building and portraying the impressions they make on others in a variety of social settings. In the context of professional sports, this performance becomes particularly significant, for athletes must present themselves differently according to the situation – on the field, in the locker room, during press conferences, or on social media. These presentations are shaped mostly by expectations from teams, leagues, fans, and broader cultural narratives. When viewed through Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, we can define these self-presentations as conscious acts of communication inside a highly structured environment. Athletes operate within a system that delivers meaning through performance, appearance, and behavior. Their identity, then, is not only performed but also interpreted and translated through the norms of the professional sports semiosphere. Goffman's framework, when aligned with Lotman's, reconfirms that athletes must continuously adapt their performances to remain useful and effective within this semiotic system.

Initially, from the cultural perspective athletes in all of these leagues enter the culture upon signing most traditionally an entry-level professional contract and the very first and arguably also the most significant meaning-making challenge is to understand their position within the two dominant subcultures – one being the hierarchy of the club, their position within the team and organization. The other one being their position within the culture of the entire league and field of business. There is a crucial need for adjustment to the realm of positioning, intended placement, and hierarchy within that culture. The given player has to become familiar and accustomed to the team organization, the league regulations and most importantly, his teammates, club employees and the way the organization functions.

The system is highly hierarchical and complex and oftentimes the transition from unprofessional junior status to a position of being on a contract in a global corporation and being expected to fulfill a very specific set of tasks related not only to the game, but also to the public, media and the entire American culture is often mentioned as being the most

challenging on the way to a potential success within that system. In order to achieve this transition smoothly, athletes develop what we can refer to as semiotic tools that should help them adjust to the professional environment..

### **2.3. Navigating Dual Realities: The On-The-Field and Off-The-Field Dichotomy in Athletic Identity**

From the perspective of the clubs, the athletes fundamentally represent a double asset. One relates to the on-the-field performance that can bring the organization higher interest of the fans and community, help the club achieve better sports results and hopefully win the ultimate championship trophy in these leagues. The other asset is represented by a potential value of the athletes off-the-field, which links mostly to their relations with the media and public, their positive role modeling, marketing activities, to raise interest of potential sponsors and all the other incentives that come with the status of a professional athlete to help maximize the profit. This creates a dual dynamic, where athletes are not only signed simply as players of the game but also as public figures, personas with a high status and most importantly, representatives of their employer – the club. Hence, right from the very beginning the athletes are challenged to engage in double identities, which are both very demanding and inherently completely opposite. Thus, it is the on-the-field and off-the-field dichotomy that is the crucial semiotic tool of the athletes. While this inherent double identity creation can be a help on one hand, dealing with the two realms in which players are involved is a challenge on the other hand. In addition, it also establishes a strong conflict in the processes of persona building and meaning-making.

### 2.3.1. The Power Dynamics of the On-The-Field Persona

The on-the-field persona is a realm dominated by power dynamics, which Michel Foucault's theories thoroughly explain. In his research, Foucault says that "power produces reality" (Foucault 1980: 194), and this concept is visible in the hierarchical structures that govern professional sports. The intense scrutiny and pressure athletes face on the field are a direct manifestation of power relations, simply because of the nature of all of these games. They are defined and carried out as competitions, which are inherently a field of power and dominance over the opposing teams. In order to achieve these goals, players have to create a "beast-like" identity and mindset that prioritizes power dominance over anything else. Oftentimes athletes speak about a process of tapping into what they call an 'animal mode' ruled by increased aggressivity, activated power instincts and a necessity to hide any doubt or weakness or mercy. The primary and most important objective is to attain power over the opposing team and in order to achieve that the on-the-field persona has to be fully activated.

Stuart Hall's notion of sports as a *battleground* (Hall 1997: 110) in his studies is self-explanatory, examining the aggressive culture of the violence and fights in the NHL, but can be effectively applied to any of the sports this thesis deals with. Athletes are very often described as warriors on the field, the intention being clearly to stress the importance of power, dominance, and victory above anything else.

Another example comes from a research conducted by Smith on the meaning of violence in hockey, which found that fights and physical confrontations can be identified as ritualized symbols, reinforcing the narrative of masculinity and strength (Smith 1979). These symbols are deeply integrated in the sport's culture, shaping how players and fans perceive the essence of hockey.

Moreover, studies on coaching strategies, such as the work by Potrac and Jones (2009), show how power relations are enacted on the field. Coaches use authoritative language and symbolic gestures to assert power and control, molding athletes' identities in line with team objectives. These studies align directly with Foucault's theories, demonstrating how the field becomes a site where power structures shape the entire state of reality.

### **2.3.2. The Nature of the Off-the-Field Persona**

In direct contrast to the on-the-field persona lies the off-the-field dimension of an athlete's identity, which is governed by social expectations that are deeply rooted in the fundamental semiotic theory. Saussure's idea that "the linguistic sign is arbitrary" (1916: 66) resonates in the context of off-field personas, where athletes become representatives and signifiers of broader societal values. Fundamentally, the very moment athletes step off the field after a game or a competition, they have to switch into the off-the-field persona and in an utmost representative manner respond to personal media questions relating not only the game itself, but their delivery or lack of it for that matter. While the on-the-field persona carries all the qualities of Foucault's power relation theories, the off-the-field identity is required to depart from this meaning and move onto a thoroughly composed one, representing the organization, the community and the business culture without any signs of aggression or power thirst, displaying integrity, cultivation and business first culture of his employer, and himself.

In recent years, research on the social roles of NFL players has shown how athletes manage these complex identities. A 2019 study by Brown and Nichols examined how players involved in activism, like Colin Kaepernick, navigated the semiotic minefield of being both social figures and athletes. Kaepernick's kneeling position during the national anthem before the game became a powerful symbol of a protest against racism and police brutality on Afro-Americans, sparking widespread debate about the role of athletes in the wider social subjects. This study underscores the semiotic challenges athletes face when their off-field actions become cultural signifiers.

Lotman's concept of the cultural text provides another comprehensive framework for understanding how athletes engage with societal expectations off the field. According to Lotman, culture operates as a semiotic system where texts – understood as carriers of meaning – are constantly created, interpreted, and reinterpreted within a shared cultural space. He states, "The text is both a product of culture and a mechanism for its continuation and transformation" (Lotman 1990). For athletes, while engaged in their off-the-field persona, this cultural text takes shape by fulfilling all the expected societal norms, media narratives, and

audience expectations, all of which display how they adjust and ultimately display their identities.

Research on social media behavior, such as Pegoraro's (2010) findings, illustrates additionally how athletes help grow and develop their off-the-field personas within this semiotic system. By engaging with fans, promoting personal beliefs, and advocating for social causes, they become both authors and subjects of these cultural texts. In today's highly technologically advanced world, the social media platforms as dynamic digital spaces amplify this process by allowing for real-time interaction and immediate feedback, which require constant negotiation between personal authenticity and public image. This further supports Lotman's assertion that cultural texts are not static but "open systems" that evolve through ongoing dialogue with the environment.

The digital layer of identity construction thus adds complexity to the athlete's off-the-field persona. It blurs the lines between private and public selves, as athletes simultaneously adhere to societal expectations and challenge them through self-expression. In this context, the off-field persona becomes a semiotic site of identity adjustment, where athletes navigate a complex list of demands of authenticity, marketability, and cultural relevance.

## **2.4. Summary of the on-the-field and off-the-field dichotomy**

The fundamental semiotic cultural theories combined with a research into American sports demonstrate how semiotic theory manifests in the real-world experiences of athletes. From the strategic growth of the off-field role modeling and serving as a public figure and a celebrity to a full engagement into power dynamics on the field, athletes operate in a multifaceted environment that demands continuous negotiation of their identities. Identifying these two most significant dynamic movements provides a substantial insight into how a professional athlete's persona is created and operated. Whether we tap into Foucault's theory of power or Lotman's theory of cultural texts, it becomes clear that the on-the-field and off-the-field

dichotomy represents both nature and at the same time the tool in the process of persona construction.

This exploration of the on-the-field/off-the-field dichotomy reveals how athlete identity is not static but continually reshaped through cultural roles and institutional expectations. With this foundation established, the thesis now turns to the economic structures that underlie and influence this identity-building process. Chapter 3 will analyze how professional sports in the U.S. have evolved into corporate business models, and how economic mechanisms – contracts, trades, salary caps – function as semiotic tools that construct and regulate athlete identity within the logic of performance and profitability.

## **CHAPTER 3: ECONOMICAL MEANING: AMERICAN SPORTS AS AN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS MODEL**

The economic, organisational and legal frameworks that govern American professional sports are not merely structural or regulatory. Evaluating these from a semiotic angle, they can be understood as very unique sign systems and textualized environments through which athletes are encoded, translated, interpreted, evaluated and then circulated. Contracts, salary caps, drafts, and league rules function as boundary-setting mechanisms that construct meaning by re-defining roles, values, and identities not only in the context of the game, but also in the context of culture and the sign systems. Their function is not simply to manage the rules and the logistics; they produce hierarchy, legitimacy and continuity within the semiosphere. This chapter aims to examine and interpret these economic texts as carriers of cultural meaning, describing how they participate in the transformation of the athlete from individual subject into a commodified, translatable symbol.

### **3.1. The Process of Transformation to a Business Model: A Brief History**

The transformation of American professional sports into a highly structured business model reflects the evolving relationship between economics and athletic culture. All the leagues that serve as the subject of this thesis – the NBA, NFL, MLB, and NHL – operate as centralized entities, with carefully organized systems governing everything from financial interests and regulations of all the clubs to the management of players' rights. This structural shift initiated in the mid-20th century and accelerated during the 1980s and 1990s, as leagues began to negotiate collective bargaining agreements, introduced salary caps (e.g., the NBA in 1984 and NFL in 1994), and consolidated media rights under league control. During this period, ownership models also shifted significantly, from family-owned teams to corporate or

consortium ownership, reflecting a broader trend of commercialization. As television deals became multibillion-dollar assets and sponsorships expanded, athletes were no longer seen merely as players but mostly as marketable assets. This chapter explores the semiotic nature of the American sports economy, where entities such as contracts, salary caps, budgets, and player marketability value are more than established financial tools – they also play a crucial part in the persona-building process of virtually all athletes in these leagues, as do their roles within the league’s structure and their connections to larger cultural narratives. These mechanisms form the grammar of a system in which success must be navigated not only through performance but through symbolic and economic alignment.

By examining the historical context of this transformation, we shall better understand how the commercialization of professional sports has created a system that relies heavily on symbolic representations to communicate both economical value and performance success. The economic structures of these leagues, including player unions and bargaining contracts between ownership groups and players, serve to reinforce this framework, emphasizing the dual nature of athletes on a multiple level – as contractors and financial assets to clubs, and as performers in the sports/entertainment industry that operates as a corporate business model.

In the early 20th Century, American professional sports were largely locally owned and amateur, with very limited financial implications. However, as the public’s interest in these sports grew, owners and investors recognized the commercial potential of leveraging the popularity of athletic competitions. Over the course of time, this recognition gave rise to a heavily structured, profit-driven sports leagues as we see today, with focus on monetizing ticket sales, merchandise, broadcasting rights, and sponsorship in order to generate profit and maximize value on the market.

By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, leagues like the NFL and MLB had established centralized control over team operations, implementing systems such as revenue sharing, salary caps and standardized contracts to maintain competitive balance. The establishment of players' unions further formalized these business structures, ensuring that players had a voice in the evolving economic environment. These unions became crucial in negotiating labor agreements and securing players' rights, including salary negotiations, health benefits, and post-retirement security.

This shift to what can be referred to as a standard business model reflects a growing awareness of professional athletes as valuable investments – assets whose performances may directly contribute to the financial success of the club they represent and the league as a whole. As Vrooman (1995: 989) notes, “professional sports leagues have become profit-oriented organizations, using the athletes' performances as products within a larger entertainment industry”. This economic model underlines the complexity of athletes' roles: they are not just competitors, but crucial figures in a highly regulated business system where their worth is determined by both their on-the-field performance and off-the-field marketability.

### **3.2. Contract as a Crucial Semiotic Symbol of Identity**

In the economic structure of American professional sports, the contract is more than a legal arrangement; it is a semiotic construct – a cultural text inscribed with value, hierarchy, and symbolic significance. It functions as both a threshold and a statement, a codified marker that simultaneously grants entry into a professional system and positions the athlete within its internal hierarchy and order of meaning. Just as Lotman described the semiosphere as “the space where different languages and codes operate and interact” (Lotman 1990: 123), the contract can be seen as the device that initiates the translation of the athlete's identity into the codes of the league. It is at once the boundary-crossing tool and the structural anchor of the athlete's professional identity.

At its core, the professional contract operates as a multilayered sign system, where each component – duration, annual salary, performance bonuses, trade clauses – carries specific cultural connotations. An *entry level contract* or a *veteran minimum deal* do not just indicate lower pay deals. They both symbolize early or late-career status, role player identity and a growing or declining level of performance. Conversely, a *record breaking contract* becomes a cultural marker of elite status, a form of codified recognition that translates mere formal economic document and becomes part of an athlete's mythology. In this sense, contracts really

represent building blocks and crucial texts that construct identity, not simply describing reality but constructing it.

Naturally, these contracts are later publicly decoded and they become shared symbolic texts in media narratives, fan discussions, and league discourse. Hence, when the press headlines a newly signed athlete's contract value – for example "\$210 million over five years" – it is not a simple financial reporting; it encompasses a storytelling part as well. The figure becomes shorthand for success, greatness, ambition, but also pressure. Thus, the contract operates within what Lotman calls the center of the semiosphere, where dominant codes and meanings are constantly reproduced and reinforced (Lotman 1990: 124). The signing of a high-value contract places the athlete closer to the cultural center, reinforcing their legitimacy not only as a performer but as a cultural object worthy of constant attention, celebration, or critique.

Furthermore, contracts are also sites of semiotic stabilization. In a dynamic system characterized by constant performance and result shifts, team development, and detailed media coverage, the contract represents a moment of fixed meaning – a sort of a pause in the flux. For the athlete, it is an anchoring symbol that secures their position within the system for a set duration and to much extent pre-defines his role in the institution. Yet this stabilization is never absolute and can be a subject of alternation pretty much at any given time in the form of a trade, renegotiation or termination. As Lotman reminds us, texts within the semiosphere are always open to reinterpretation (Lotman 1990: 33). A contract signed with high expectations can, in time, be re-read as a mistake, an overvaluation, or a burden to the team – hence changing the meaning of the athlete's role retroactively.

In addition, the process of contract negotiation itself is a semiotic performance. Agents, general managers, and media insiders leak information strategically, frame narratives, and shape public opinion in advance with predictions and arguments for and against. The negotiation period becomes a discursive event, where meanings are not only shaped but also contested and challenged. For example, should a 35 year-old player sign a 10 year old deal, it will be argued that the chances of him playing till 45 years of age are next to none and that ultimately that kind of a contract is a bad deal for the club. This whole process aligns closely with Lotman's idea of translation zones, where different semiotic systems meet and produce new meanings (Lotman 1990: 136). The player, the agent, the club, and the media each speak

different "languages" – financial, performative, emotional, and institutional – which are negotiated and translated into the final textual artifact, which is the final version of the contract agreed on and signed by both sides, the player and the club.

The structure of these contracts also reflects the self-regulating grammar of the sports semiosphere. Rules surrounding salary caps, maximum contract lengths, rookie scale agreements, and contract exceptions function as space within which meaning must be produced. The constraints make the contract not just a personal agreement but a grammatically regulated text that must again adhere to the broader institutional order. As Lotman emphasized, “any text must conform to the structural norms of the system into which it is introduced” (Lotman 1990: 65). Therefore, the contract represents both – a standardized form and a unique narrative and. In essence, it tells a personal professional story but only through a language allowed by the semiosphere of professional sports.

This semiotic framework also helps clarify why contracts receive such disproportionate cultural attention compared to other elements of an athlete’s career. They are identity milestones, highly meaningful and legible signs within a system where market value, personal narrative, and team alignment intersect. When an athlete “earns” a contract extension or signs with a high-profile team, it is interpreted not just as professional progress, but as symbolic action. Media narratives, such as *he’s finally been rewarded* or *he bet on himself and won*, reframe the contract into a kind of a moral text – affirmation of hard work and long-term steady performance, elite talent and courage.

Ultimately, the professional contract functions not only as a legal tool but as a ritualistic inscription – a codified act of meaning-making that brings the athlete into full participation in the economic and symbolic order of the league. Its role in shaping identity is not incidental but central to the cultural system of American professional sports. The contract is the text through which the athlete becomes a commodity, a professional, a symbol, and a myth – all at once. As Roland Barthes would suggest, such contracts are not just signs but myths in motion: a multi-million-dollar deal becomes a cultural fable of merit, discipline, and deservedness – “he earned it,” “he’s elite,” or “he’s worth every dollar.” In Barthes’ sense, myth operates to naturalize ideology, making the contract seem like the inevitable outcome of talent and hard work rather than the product of complex institutional systems and negotiations (Barthes,

1957). It is through these texts that the ideological framework of the league – based on reward, hierarchy, and controlled opportunity – is rendered both visible and legitimate. Thus, the contract becomes the ideal semiotic artifact: an economic mechanism disguised as moral truth.

### **3.3. The Life-Cycle of Contracts: From Draft to Free Agency**

Athlete's professional journey begins with the draft, a process filled with a significant symbolic meaning. Draft, in essence, represent securing rights on a junior player moving to professional sports, and are typically standardized, with salaries and terms dictated by draft position, which symbolizes a potential rather than proven ability. In semiotic terms, the draft contract serves as a rite of passage – a *signifier* of transition from amateurism to professional status.

The draft system, particularly in leagues that represent the subject of this thesis, can be characterized as a semiotic process of identity assignment through various coded structures. The athlete is recontextualized from a general status (a junior, amateur, college player) to a franchise-owned symbol, often without input into destination. This process of drafting players is accompanied by discourses of *fairness, parity, future investment* and *league balance*, which function as ideological myths (Barthes 1957). These discourses obscure the underlying transfer of symbolic control – the athlete's change of status represents his relocation from the periphery to the center, and his identity is now defined only within institutional codes: mostly the amount on the contract and its duration. This process mirrors Lotman's translation from 'external text' to 'internal system,' producing intelligibility at the cost of autonomy.

As Lotman explains, the act of entering a new semiosphere involves “a restructuring of the individual's entire system of meanings” (Lotman 1990: 123). The draft marks this initial restructuring, where the athlete becomes a part of the league's tightly regulated economic and cultural system.

After the draft, athletes often sign entry-level contracts (ELCs), which are particularly common in the NHL but in some form or the other also work in all the other leagues which are subject to this thesis. These agreements balance the athlete's lack of professional experience with the league's need to manage financial risks. Following up on Eco's concept of *overcoding*, these contracts are heavily codified symbols, representing both potential growth and constraints on autonomy. Eco argues that “codes serve as frameworks for the production and interpretation of signs” (Eco 1976: 49), and ELCs epitomize this, encoding the athlete’s role within the league’s financial hierarchy.

As players progress, they may reach restricted free agency (RFA), a stage allowing limited negotiation with other teams but retaining significant control for the original team. RFA status symbolizes a transitional phase in which the athlete’s value is contested between autonomy and organizational control. According to (Vrooman 1995: 987), “the RFA process is an economic mechanism designed to ensure that players are both compensated and controlled, a balancing act that underscores their dual identity as employees and investments”.

On the other hand, the Unrestricted Free Agency (UFA), achieved after a number of seasons, represents the apex of contractual freedom, allowing athletes to negotiate with any team. For many players, the UFA contract is a symbol of ultimate professional success, reflecting maximization of both their market value and individual achievement. Yet, even here, the negotiation process is shaped by the league's economic structure, with salary caps and luxury taxes mediating the athlete's autonomy. These restrictions, as (Zimbalist 2010: 45) notes, “ensure that the athlete's freedom is always exercised within boundaries that serve the league's collective interests”. Semiotically, UFA contracts are determined symbols of autonomy and systemic control, balancing individual agency with the league's structural needs.

Thus, the athlete’s contract life-cycle is best understood not as a financial trajectory but as a semiotic sequence. Each deal is a communicative act that codes the athlete’s evolving role in the league’s symbolic economy. These contracts are not merely reflections of value – they are mechanisms of identity production, positioned at the intersection of institutional logic, public narrative, and personal meaning. Within Lotman’s framework, they operate as core texts in the center of the semiosphere, where dominant meanings are encoded and circulated. The athlete, through each successive contract, is continually re-inscribed into the system’s language, crossing boundaries between phases of development, control, autonomy, and

legacy. Meaning is not fixed but constantly restructured – produced through the very grammar of the system. As such, the contract becomes a central device in the semiotic machinery of American professional sports, shaping not only who the athlete is, but how that identity is rendered visible, valuable, and intelligible within the cultural logic of the league.

### **3.4. Trading Players: Symbol of Variability and Control**

The process and dynamics of player trades further illustrate the tension between dynamic movement and structure in professional sports. Trades are emblematic of the athlete's limited control within the league's framework. They symbolize the athlete's status as an interchangeable commodity, dictated by the priorities of team owners, general managers, and league executives. Vrooman's analysis underscores this reality: "In a business model where profits and parity are paramount, the player's agency is subordinated to the logic of the market" (Vrooman 1995: 993).

From the semiotic perspective, trades act as signs that represent the athlete's value not just to a single team but to the league-wide system. Lotman's idea of *boundary crossing* is particularly relevant here: trades often force athletes to adjust to new team cultures, cities, and public expectations, requiring them to constantly reconstruct their identity. For fans, trades are interpreted as markers of strategic intent, often overshadowing the human impact on the player being traded.

For athletes, the boundary crossing initiated by a trade involves a complex process of readjustment – not only to the relocation to a new city but also to the cultural integration into a new team environment. Each team operates within its own values and hierarchy, following a distinct "text" of traditions, rituals, and practices. Lotman's idea that boundaries are not merely barriers but also zones of translation and innovation is particularly relevant here. As he writes, "the boundary is not only a dividing line; it is also a zone of semiotic activity, a generator of new information" (Lotman 1990: 136). A trade, therefore, disrupts the athlete's established semiotic environment but simultaneously introduces them into a new one where

their identity must be renegotiated. While the context remains within the same league and sport, the new team represents a semiotic system with its own grammar – requiring the athlete to reorganize their role within its dynamic structures: team hierarchy, local fan culture, media narratives, and geographic symbolism.

This process of adjustment is also extremely complex and structurally multilayered. At the micro level, the athlete must learn to adopt the codes of communication within the new team: strategies, playbooks, and interpersonal dynamics. At the macro level, they must adapt to the cultural and geographic specifics of their new environment. Lotman’s statement that “the self becomes intelligible through the ‘other’” (Lotman, 1990) underlines how these transitions force athletes to redefine themselves in relation to their new surroundings.

### **3.5. The Business Model's Dominance Over Performance**

The athlete's career trajectory, shaped by contracts and trades, displays the dominance of the business model in professional sports. Success in professional sports, therefore, requires athletes to first understand and adapt to this system before focusing on their on-field achievements. In other words, the economic reality affects all the other aspects of an athlete's existence.

This emphasis on structure over agency reflects Eco’s assertion that signs are tools for communication within a regulated system. Athletes must interpret the semiotic cues embedded in contracts, trades, and league policies to navigate their careers effectively. Even performance, the most visible marker of an athlete's value, is mediated by these systemic symbols. As Zimbalist observes, “the league’s architecture is designed to commodify athletic performance, turning individual achievements into marketable assets” (Zimbalist 2010: 29).

Ultimately, the structure of the business model in American sports represents a carefully organized *semiosphere* where meaning is constructed and regulated by the interplay of economic, cultural, and athletic priorities. Athletes, as both agents and symbols within this

system, must balance their identity as performers with their role as commodities, illustrating the profound influence of semiotic structures on the dynamics of professional sports.

### **3.6. The Economic Structure of American Leagues: Salary Caps, Revenue Sharing, and Division**

The economic structure of American professional sports leagues is designed to promote continuity, competitiveness, and long-term financial sustainability. Fundamentally, it is a constructed system – a regulated and codified economic semiosphere designed to generate profit through symbolic organization. This can be described as a meaning-making environment built and structured by design. Tools such as salary caps, revenue-sharing policies, playoff systems, and geographic divisions are not only practical and organisational regulations; they act as semiotic devices that determine movement, define value, and shape identity of each player in the league.

As Lotman emphasizes, “every semiotic system has two structural parts: the stable core and the dynamic periphery” (Lotman 1990: 65). The league’s solid framework – its financial rules, seasonal structure, and divisional framework – provides order and predictability, while the dynamic periphery – games, trades, standings, off season negotiations – creates variability and movement. For athletes, ability to understand and effectively translate these codes is essential. To succeed, one must learn not only to perform but to operate within the system’s symbolic grammar, where every action inherently becomes a part of a regulated text.

### **3.6.1. Division and Conference Organization**

The geographic and competitive organization of teams into conferences and divisions is common across all major U.S. leagues and plays a central role in the semiotic logic of league design. While at first sight, it may appear that all is constructed simply for logistical purposes, it also produces symbolic boundaries that define rivalries, traditions, repetitions and historical context. Each division becomes a semantic container, a framework through which games acquire specific meanings – particularly in relation to standings, playoff standings, and club affirmation

This reflects what Lotman describes as the internal structure of cultural texts, in which repetitive patterns (divisional games, seasonal matchups) create a shared language through which change can be interpreted (Lotman 1990: 65). The division system also shapes how athletes and fans situate themselves within the competitive narrative. Playing in a specific division is not just a matter of schedule – it frames the athlete’s symbolic role in that year’s unfolding story. The structure is internalized: “meaning arises from the very act of movement within a coded space” (Lotman 1990: 124), and so victories, losses, and milestones are always contextually bound.

### **3.6.2. Salary Caps**

Salary caps are often introduced as tools of economic fairness, designed to prevent dominant franchises from hoarding talent. But from a semiotic perspective, they function as symbolic thresholds that produce cultural meaning about balance, parity, and meritocracy. They create an environment in which money, performance, and narrative must all be reconciled within a bounded space.

As Vrooman notes, “salary caps serve as institutional devices to regulate competitive balance while preserving market incentives” (Vrooman 1995: 983). In this way, the cap is not simply a number – it is a visible marker of the league’s ideological structure. For athletes, it becomes part of their identity text: contracts are negotiated not only in terms of performance but in relation to cap space, team needs, and league-wide constraints. A player’s contract thus becomes a public semiotic signal of status, potential, or sacrifice – interpreted by fans, media, and organizations alike.

This also introduces interpretive relativism into value: a high salary on a team with limited cap flexibility might be viewed negatively, while a mid-level deal in a strategic context may symbolize team-first mentality. The salary cap, in this sense, governs not only economics but the interpretation of worth.

### **3.6.3. Revenue Sharing**

Revenue sharing, another pillar of the league’s financial model, distributes income from high-earning franchises to lower-revenue teams. On the surface, it is a matter of redistribution – but symbolically, it represents a myth of unity. It creates the appearance of a collective organism, suggesting that teams compete but also cooperate under the same institutional umbrella.

Zimbalist argues that “revenue sharing expresses the league’s ideological commitment to cohesion and collective viability” (Zimbalist 2010: 47). In semiotic terms, this process reinforces the concept of a shared narrative space, where small-market teams can still participate in meaningful competition. This symbolic structure allows fans to believe in parity and unpredictability – even when economic disparities persist behind the scenes.

For athletes, this structural element affects the ecology of opportunity. It makes playing for a small-market team semiotically legible – a meaningful act rather than an economic

compromise. It sustains the illusion of a level symbolic playing field, helping preserve the coherence of the league's internal logic.

Ultimately, these economic mechanisms – division formats, salary caps, and revenue-sharing agreements – operate not just as financial tools but as semiotic systems. They are embedded in the structural core of the sports semiosphere, shaping how identity is produced, how value is interpreted, and how movement is understood. As Lotman reminds us, “the organization of space and meaning are inseparable” (Lotman 1990: 136). In the American sports league model, these tools define that space – giving shape to the movement, conflict, and identity construction that make up the symbolic life of professional athletics.

### **3.7. The Role of Agents and Player Representatives: Structuring Athlete Identity and Career**

In the contemporary business model of American professional sports, agents and player representatives play an essential role in the semiotic construction of an athlete's identity. While players are the central performers within their leagues, agents serve as critical intermediaries who mediate between players and the broader economic system of sports. Their roles extend far beyond the negotiation of contracts – they are also responsible for managing the athlete's public image, facilitating sponsorship and endorsement opportunities, and offering career guidance that ensures long-term financial security.

From a semiotic perspective, agents and representatives function as signifiers in the broader signification system of professional sports. Just as a contract symbolizes an athlete's value, an agent's guidance and strategic decisions represent a form of “secondary signification” – a layer of meaning that shapes and enhances the athlete's public persona. Agents act as curators of the athlete's brand, constructing narratives that connect the player's performance to a wider cultural and commercial context.

Juri Lotman's theory of culture as a "text" that guides individuals in understanding their roles within society is particularly relevant in this context. Lotman (1984) describes culture as a system of signs, a structured "text" that communicates meanings through its organization and rules. Within this framework, American professional sports can be seen as a "cultural text" that athletes, agents, owners, and fans read and interpret to understand their positions and roles within the league's economic and social structure. Agents and player representatives are active participants in this interpretive process, helping to navigate and manipulate the "cultural text" of professional sports to the advantage of the athlete.

Lotman (1984) further elaborates on how texts within a culture are not passive but are actively engaged with by participants who shape and redefine their meanings. In this way, sports agencies function as agents of interpretation within the sports economy. They act as mediators between the raw, athletic talent of the player and the highly constructed, symbolic nature of sports branding. Their role is to help the athlete navigate through this cultural "text" by ensuring that their talents are not only recognized but effectively positioned within the cultural and commercial landscape.

The meaning-making role of agents is not just in negotiating the best possible contract; it extends to creating an athlete's public persona and maximizing their potential for marketability. For example, agents like Rich Paul (LeBron James' representative) and Scott Boras (notable MLB agent) are deeply involved in crafting their clients' identities off the field as much as they are involved in their on-field career management. Their roles often include securing major endorsement deals, shaping media narratives, and advising on personal ventures, such as business investments or post-retirement activities. Through these efforts, agents ensure that athletes do not simply excel on the field but build lasting legacies that extend their influence beyond their sport.

In this sense, agents are fundamental in positioning athletes within a highly competitive and commercialized system, where image, identity, and financial success are inextricably linked. As athletes become increasingly viewed as brands, agents must work to establish a coherent narrative that aligns both the athlete's personal story and their performance with the interests of advertisers, media, and the public.

The increasing prominence of athlete agents also reflects broader trends in the commercialization of sports. As sports became more profit-oriented, the relationship between athlete and team evolved to resemble that of a contractor and employer. Agents, then, take on the role of intermediaries within this contractual ecosystem, shaping and safeguarding the player's financial and professional future.

Moreover, agents also help to secure the athlete's place within the economic "text" of the sports system through negotiation of deals that align with their client's interests. These negotiations extend beyond salary to include performance bonuses, endorsement clauses, media appearances, and even social media strategies. The ability of an agent to strategically position their client's identity within the media and sponsorship landscape is as crucial as the negotiations that occur between the player and team regarding their playing contract.

The role of agents is thus not just transactional; it is deeply symbolic. They influence the way an athlete is perceived both within the league and by the broader public. In much the same way that contracts serve as a semiotic tool to define an athlete's worth, agents contribute to the creation and evolution of the athlete's identity. They work within the rules of the larger business system, yet their influence allows them to help shape that system in ways that benefit their clients.

By examining this semiotic dimension of the agent-athlete relationship, we begin to see how the American sports model functions much like a complex, highly organized "text" that athletes, agents, and teams must navigate. It is a system of signs and symbols that shape the player's identity, both in terms of athletic performance and marketability. In this context, the agent's role becomes crucial not only in terms of business transactions but also in how they help structure the meaning of the athlete's existence within the broader narrative of professional sports.

In addition to individual agents and representatives, players in American professional leagues are also supported by powerful institutional bodies: the players' associations. Organizations like the NFLPA, NBPA, NHLPA, and MLBPA serve as collective representatives, negotiating with league ownership on behalf of all athletes. Their role extends beyond labor protection – they function as symbolic institutions that frame athletes not merely as performers, but as active participants and stakeholders in a very complex economic and cultural system. As Tony

Collins (2013: 158) observes, “the growth of players’ unions demonstrated that, across the sporting world, the era of the deferential athlete was coming to an end.” Through the process of collective bargaining, players’ associations turn individual performance into a complementary part of system-wide structures of meaning. Agreements on minimum salary, revenue sharing, free agency rights, and post-career support are not merely logistic, structural or legal – they are symbolic texts, codifying what athletic value and identity mean within each league.

From a semiotic perspective, these associations act as regulatory mechanisms that maintain coherence in the sports semiosphere. Drawing on Lotman’s model, we can understand them as part of the system’s core, stabilizing and reproducing dominant meanings about fairness, labor, and legitimacy. They also function as translation zones, mediating between the sign systems of economics, legality, and cultural value. In doing so, they allow professional athletes to move beyond individualized identity construction and assert a collective symbolic presence within the structure of the sport.

### **3.8. The Business Model: Players as an Investment Product**

The business model of American sports functions like a corporate entertainment industry, where the product being sold is the game itself, and the athletes are the contractors providing the service. Teams invest substantial resources in developing players, from drafting them to training and offering lucrative contracts. In this sense, players are commodified – their performances are bought, sold, and traded to generate financial returns.

Athletes are seen not only as competitors but as key assets in a complex market, with their performances directly influencing the financial success of their teams. This mirrors the broader corporate entertainment model, where talent is hired to provide value to the business. Players are thus both performers on the field and strategic investments in the entertainment ecosystem.

The sports business model, as it stands today, is a complex, highly organized system that functions both as an economic entity and as a cultural construct. While the primary focus may be on profit generation and economic value, it is essential to recognize that the very structure of American professional sports is built upon a shared social reality – a reality that is collectively constructed by athletes, owners, agents, and the public. In this constructed reality, the roles of athletes, team owners, and fans are not simply given; they are continuously shaped and negotiated through both economic actions and cultural symbols.

In their seminal work *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann argue that reality is not an objective, pre-existing entity but is rather socially constructed through human interactions and institutions. They emphasize that our understanding of the world is shaped by the meanings we assign to it through social processes, communication, and institutional structures. In the context of American sports, this theory applies in multiple ways. The roles of athletes, owners, agents, and fans are all constructed through a shared understanding of the sports system – a system that operates not only on the field but within a highly structured, economically motivated framework.

For athletes, this constructed reality is created through their contracts, performances, media narratives, and endorsements, which all contribute to their reality and identity within the professional sports world. Just as Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that institutions are products of social interaction, the athlete's public persona is similarly a product of the interactions between the athlete, their agents, their teams, fans and the media. These interactions form a web of meaning that defines an athlete's position in the league – both economically and symbolically. The contract, for example, is not merely a financial agreement but a symbol of an athlete's value, status, and role within the system. In this sense, athletes are not simply individuals who participate in sports; they are constructed as symbols that represent specific values – success, skill, marketability, and, increasingly, a connection to broader cultural narratives.

As the business model of American sports continues to evolve, the roles of athletes, owners, and the public have become increasingly codified within a set of semiotic and economic structures. The market dynamics of professional sports are shaped by a variety of economic factors, including salary caps, broadcasting rights, sponsorship, and merchandising. But at the same time, these economic factors cannot be fully understood without considering the

semiotic structures that surround them. The value of an athlete – whether in terms of their salary, endorsement deals, or media presence – is shaped by the economic system, but it is also deeply embedded in the cultural narratives that surround them.

For example, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest, the process of socialization leads individuals to internalize the symbols and meanings that are produced by society. In the context of American sports, athletes undergo a process of socialization that not only prepares them for their role on the field but also educates them on how to navigate the economic and media landscapes off the field. Agents, publicists, and marketing teams help athletes to internalize these symbols and meaning-making practices, shaping their identities in a way that aligns with the economic imperatives of the sports business model.

The role of team owners and executives is also significant in this constructed reality. Owners and investors create the structures that govern the league, from salary caps and revenue-sharing systems to team rosters and marketing strategies. However, these economic structures are not merely practical considerations; they also have symbolic significance. For instance, the concept of the salary cap is a symbol of fairness and parity, signaling the league's commitment to maintaining competitive balance. In economic terms, it limits excessive spending and ensures that wealthier teams cannot monopolize talent. But in semiotic terms, it creates a symbolic framework that conveys a message of equality and shared purpose within the league.

Finally, the public plays a critical role in this constructed reality. Fans are not just passive consumers of entertainment; they are active participants in the economic and semiotic systems of professional sports. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) state, the construction of reality is a two-way process in which individuals both influence and are influenced by the societal structures in which they participate. In the case of sports, fans influence the success of the business model by creating demand for tickets, merchandise, and media content. They also contribute to the construction of athlete identities, as their support or criticism of an athlete can affect the athlete's public image and marketability.

Through their interactions with the media, fans shape and reinforce the symbolic meanings that surround athletes and teams. For example, media narratives around an athlete's performance, off-field behavior, and public persona contribute to the way the public

understands their value – both as an athlete and as a commercial asset. Fans’ emotional investments in athletes create a symbolic bond between the player and the fan, turning the athlete into a cultural icon who represents not just their sport but also the values and aspirations of the fan base.

The public’s role in constructing the reality of sports extends beyond mere consumption; it includes the symbolic investments fans make in their teams, athletes, and the larger league structure. Fans’ identification with their favorite teams and athletes transforms them from spectators into active participants in the economic and semiotic systems that drive professional sports.

Thus, the American sports business model functions not only as an economic enterprise but also as a symbolic construct – a complex network of signs and meanings that are continually produced and interpreted by all participants in the system. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) suggest, social reality is a shared, negotiated construct, and in the case of professional sports, this constructed reality is reinforced by the economic structures, media representations, and fan participation that make the system both economically viable and culturally significant. Athletes, owners, and fans all contribute to and draw from this reality, creating a dynamic and evolving narrative that defines their roles within the larger sports economy.

From an economic perspective, the role of the athlete has evolved significantly. According to the *National Bureau of Economic Research* (NBER), “the total sports market in the U.S. has grown substantially, from approximately \$16 billion in the 1980s to over \$70 billion in 2023” (NBER, 2023). This exponential growth in the sports industry has been fueled by the increasing commercialization of the games, with television rights, sponsorship deals, and merchandise accounting for the majority of revenue. For example, in the National Football League (NFL), TV broadcasting rights alone are estimated to generate over \$10 billion annually, which significantly impacts the way athletes and teams are valued within the system (Forbes, 2024).

As athletes become part of a larger economic ecosystem, their individual contributions to this system are increasingly measured by their marketability, which is in turn reflected in their contract values and endorsement deals. LeBron James, for instance, earned a reported \$65 million in off-court earnings in 2023, with endorsements contributing nearly 90% of his

income (Forbes, 2023). This figure illustrates the duality of the athlete's identity as both a skilled performer on the field and a marketable commodity off it. In this sense, the economic value of an athlete is not simply derived from their performance but also from their capacity to attract revenue through sponsorships, media coverage, and merchandise sales.

Moreover, Umberto Eco's concept of "open works" (Eco, 1989) also carries a major relevance, as the athlete's identity is also shaped by their interactions with fans and the public. The athlete's image is not fixed; it is continuously evolving through media representation, fan engagement, and public appearances. The athlete, as an open work, is a signifier in a dynamic system of signs, where the meaning of their image is shaped by both their performance on the field and their interaction with the public, including sponsorships, endorsements, and media narratives.

### **3.9. Economic Impact and Corporate Entertainment Model**

The sports business model closely mirrors that of other sectors within the corporate entertainment industry. The American sports leagues have adopted many of the same business practices found in other entertainment industries, where talent (the athlete) is marketed to the public, with the ultimate goal of generating revenue through media exposure and consumer spending. In this sense, sports teams and athletes are positioned within a value chain similar to that of other entertainment sectors, such as film, television, and music.

For example, in 2023, the total revenue of the National Basketball Association (NBA) reached \$10 billion, with nearly 40% of that revenue coming from media deals, sponsorship, and merchandise sales (Statista, 2023). The NBA's economic structure, where athletes are central to the product, is remarkably similar to the entertainment industry's reliance on celebrity figures who generate revenue through both their creative output (the games) and their commercial value (endorsements, media appearances, etc.).

This structure also reflects the notion of the "artist as entrepreneur," as described by economist and cultural critic David Throsby (2001). Throsby argues that in the modern

economy, individuals in creative industries, including athletes, function as both performers and entrepreneurs, managing their careers and personal brands in ways that maximize their economic potential. Just as musicians, actors, and filmmakers manage their market value through a mix of creative work and strategic branding, athletes leverage both their on-field performance and their off-field persona to generate revenue, demonstrating their role as contractors within a broader entertainment model.

For instance, in Major League Baseball (MLB), the contract of star players such as Mookie Betts or Aaron Judge often extends beyond their athletic performance to include media obligations, endorsements, and personal branding opportunities. These contracts reflect the athlete's value not only to the team but to the league and the broader sports entertainment industry, where the athlete's persona – shaped by media, endorsements, and fan interactions – becomes a commodity that generates revenue. The symbolic value of such contracts is a reflection of the athlete's worth in the larger sports-business complex, which can be measured both in terms of on-the-field performance and off-the-field economic contributions.

### **3.10. Transitioning Club Structures: From Sports Teams to Corporate Enterprises**

The evolution of U.S. professional sports leagues into corporate enterprises has transformed not only their economic models but also their internal structures. This transition has embedded the semiotics of corporate business into the very fabric of how teams are managed, operated, and perceived. The shift is not merely linguistic but organizational, mirroring the principles and hierarchies found in business corporations.

At the heart of this transition lies the reorganization of sports clubs to resemble corporate entities. Modern professional teams now feature comprehensive management structures that parallel those of businesses. Both entities operate under a bifurcated system of **front office** and **back office** operations, each with distinct yet complementary functions.

**Front Office Functions:**

The front office, as in the realm to a corporation's executive suite, is responsible for high-level strategic decisions and public-facing roles. This includes *General Management* overseeing player contracts, trades, and salary cap compliance, *Marketing and Public Relations* driving brand image, engaging fans, and managing sponsorships. And naturally, *Sales Departments*, focused on ticketing, merchandise, and corporate partnerships.

**Back Office Operations:**

Behind the scenes, back office departments handle logistical and administrative tasks, ensuring smooth day-to-day operations. These roles include:

**Finance and Accounting:** Budgeting, payroll, and revenue allocation. Zimbalist (2010) notes that "financial oversight in sports teams increasingly resembles corporate governance, with detailed budgets and cost controls to ensure profitability."

**Human Resources:** Managing staff and player welfare programs.

**Facilities Management:** Maintaining stadiums and training facilities, a responsibility that, according to Fort and Winfree (2011), has grown to include optimizing fan experiences as stadiums have become "multifunctional venues designed to maximize revenue streams."

Based on the facts above, it can be stated that these changes clearly show the structural adaptation of the clubs to the corporate ladder, underlining the shift in the meaning and the change of culture in the realm of U.S. professional sports environment.

To illustrate the structural mirroring between sports clubs and corporations, following comparisons in the management set up (*see Table 1*).

*Table 1. Comparison of management of traditional corporations and professional sports teams.*

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Traditional Corporation</b>	<b>Professional Sports Team</b>
General Management	CEO and Executive Team	General Manager and Coaches
Marketing department	Corporate Branding Teams	Media and Fan Engagement Team
Operations	Logistics and supply Chain	Training and Performance Staff
Financial oversight	CFO and Financial Analysts	Finance, Contracts, Caps

Foster (2016: 112) further emphasizes that “the structural parallels between businesses and sports organizations extend to their leadership hierarchies, where decision-making is centralized in executive teams that combine operational and strategic oversight.” This arrangement reconfirms the overall view that suggests that professional sports are business entities driven not only by performance, but mostly by the corporate structure. In such environments, athletes navigate and operate following hierarchies that mirror business models, shaped by institutional goals, managerial logic, and brand-driven narratives. This structural alignment consequently further deepens the semiotic transformation of sport into a system governed by the language and logic of enterprise.

### **3.11. Summary: Athletes as Central Figures in a Corporate Entertainment Model**

To summarize the chapter, the transformation of athletes into contractors within a corporate entertainment framework reflects the shift in the American sports business model towards an integrated, highly commercialized system. As athletes increasingly function as both

competitors and marketable figures, their role is increasingly defined by the dual pressures of performance and profitability. Through this lens, sports leagues, athletes, and owners are all part of a larger system in which the game itself is the product, and the athletes function as key contractors who generate economic value for all stakeholders involved.

In a similar fashion, the transformation of sports clubs into business organizations and the shift in strategic thinking from something that could be referred to as 'sports first' to something that could be referred to as 'business first' is very well documented in the movie Moneyball, based on a real story of the MLB (baseball) club Oakland Athletics, which (being the poorest club in the league) is simply forced by the nature of the environment to completely change their strategy when it comes to signing players in order to stay competitive. For this purpose, the general manager of the club (Brad Pitt) hires an economical expert (instead of scouts) and a Yale graduate in Economics to help him create a functional economic strategy to sign and trade players. Employing mathematics and economics, they create a formula to find hidden economical and performance value in players in order to build a successful baseball team despite the odds of a low budget. While at the beginning this strategy is facing adversity from the media, experts and other general managers, later in the season the strategy shows success and Oakland Athletics reach their top when they beat the New York Yankees, the richest club in the MLB. The movie based on a book inspired by real events in the MLB created a lot of discussion within the environment of American sports and essentially all the clubs within the American sports leagues have sooner or later adopted a similar business strategy to buying players and managing sports clubs. Four scenes in particular from this movie display the change in the mindset and essentially support the theory that ultimately, it is the economic reality that carries the biggest portion of the meaning even when it comes to managing American sports club.

Clip1: Moneyball

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5aLU2uiWps>

Clip 2: Moneyball

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKD-7WJ4U5M>

Clip 3: Moneyball

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0h19anH4MdE>

Clip 4: Moneyball

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3MjxoaynCmk&t=105s>

Overall, these scenes from the movie “Moneyball” portray in a clear and comprehensive way the transition in American sport on a general level. As analyzed in the chapter above, in the period of private and corporate establishments of the clubs in the American sports leagues, there has been a fundamental and most significant shift in the strategy and thus the entire culture of American sports, where in short, the laws of economics were gradually applied to the laws of the game and to the process of building teams and running clubs. This transition also brought a major impact on the process of identity development of the athletes performing in these leagues and on the entire meaning-making process of everyone involved – club owners and management, media, fans, and athletes themselves. The entire semiotic system has undergone a heavy change in the way it was structured and operated and hence also in the way meaning was built and created. The term to describe this process the best would be a *change of culture*.

As this chapter has demonstrated, professional athletes exist predominantly within an economic framework where their identity is shaped by contractual obligations, organizational decisions, and corporate interests. These structures not only guide their decision making but also influence how they are perceived and evaluated. In the next chapter, the focus shifts from the economic structures of reality to linguistic transformation, examining how the language of sports has evolved into a language of business. This linguistic shift will be analyzed as a further semiotic layer that reinforces the professional identity of athletes in the U.S. sports semiosphere

# **CHAPTER 4: THE LINGUISTIC APPROACH: THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION OF LANGUAGE OF SPORTS TO LANGUAGE OF BUSINESS**

## **4.1. Introduction into the Linguistic Approach**

Language, as Roman Jakobson argues, is the most vital tool for meaning-making in human communication (*Linguistics and Poetics*, 1960). Its role in shaping reality becomes even more prominent in the lives of professional athletes, who exist at the intersection of physical competition, media presence, community service and corporate business. Their identities are constructed and communicated through linguistic systems that reflect the multi-layered pressures of athletic performance, social responsibility and economic viability.

This chapter explores and identifies how in the course of time the language of sports has evolved into the language of business, particularly in the context of professional athletics in the United States. Central to this transition is naturally the phrase *professional athlete*, which encapsulates the commodification of athletic talent within a capitalist framework. Drawing from key linguistic semiotic theories – including Jakobson, and insights from the Czech linguistic school – this chapter demonstrates how language has become a primary medium for articulating and reinforcing the business nature of professional sports.

The thesis will expand on how this transformation manifests in practical and symbolic ways, with a specific focus on the concept of *Game Management*. This term, central to modern sports discourse, epitomizes the integration of business language into the core structure of athletic competition, where managing resources, opportunities, decisions and outcomes follows up on corporate strategies.

## 4.2. Theoretical Framework: Linguistic Semiotics in Context

When we apply Roman Jakobson's six functions of language we will attain a very valuable picture, showing how communication runs in the U.S. professional sports, shaping both athletic performance and off-field identity within our established dichotomy mentioned and described earlier in this thesis.

The *referential function* refers mostly to factual information, plays a big role in game analysis, statistics and their interpretation, but also scouting reports, and all other tools that provide facts and hard data. The *emotive function*, heavily connected to self-expression, takes place mostly in post-game interviews and media interactions or autobiographies in press or TV, where athletes shape and project their public persona. The *conative function* is represented predominantly in coaching discourse, team speeches and leadership speeches, where direct calls to action (*Execute the play, Stay focused, Let's go for it*) aim to result in some form of immediate actions. On the other hand, the *phatic function* is more evident in player-fan engagement with a goal to maintain essential social and professional connections. The *metalingual function*, which clarifies meaning, often manifests itself in rules, set plays, or tactical terminology, ensuring all participants understand the linguistic system of the game and are so to say on the same page as of how the game is played and how it should be executed. And finally the *poetic function*, which focuses on melodic and aesthetic expression, dominates sports marketing slogans, game-day chants, nicknames, shortcuts and expressive storytelling. Here the language serves as an instrument for some sort of ignition of attention to some part of the show and player's identity within that spectacle.

In their sports linguistics research, Billings, Butterworth, and Turman (2018: 42) provide a valuable analysis of how the referential and emotive functions of language interact in the environment of sports media. Their study demonstrates that sports commentary is not simply descriptive; it is performative, embedding athletes within culturally loaded narratives that help shape their public identities. As the authors note, "announcers do not merely describe a play – they interpret it through a framework that reflects broader social norms and expectations". Through such commentary, pre-existing storylines are attached to athletes – highlighting attributes like *grit, natural leadership, or mental toughness*. These traits become semiotic markers that elevate certain athletes to symbolic status, reinforcing their perceived value not

just in the game, but in the cultural economy of sport.

The referential function of language provides the play-by-play scaffolding, but it is the emotive function that adds to the commentary with symbolic meaning and audience engagement. “Emotive discourse,” they write, “invokes personal or cultural values to elicit a particular audience reaction” Billings, Butterworth, and Turman (2018: 56), transforming a player's performance into a narrative of character, heritage, or destiny. As such, language becomes a semiotic tool that constructs and reinforces the athlete's marketable identity. Billings argues that “language in sports media doesn't just describe reality – it helps create the social reality of who the athlete is and what they represent” Billings, Butterworth, and Turman (2018: 89). In this way, the linguistic performance of identity ties directly into the economic logic of professional sports, where narrative appeal and public resonance often influence endorsement deals, media attention, and even contract negotiations. Athletes whose personas align with desirable narratives are more likely to receive institutional support and commercial opportunities, illustrating how semiotic processes are embedded within and reinforced by the business model of American sports.

Additionally, research conducted by Domenico, Klimmt, and Griffiths (2021) further expands on this by exploring multi-platform communication strategies, showing how athletes strategically adapt their language based on audience expectations. More precisely, their use of predominantly a corporate and official tone in press conferences is in line with the idea of professional manners and business culture. However, in a different environment often adopting a more informal and emotionally engaging style on social media to connect with fans. The findings of this research emphasize the linguistic flexibility so crucial in the professional sports environment, where athletes must engage in multiple communicative spheres while maintaining a solid and easy to understand, representative identity.

In a very similar manner, Rowe (2019) in his research argues and supports the central idea of this thesis that sports language has been heavily reshaped by the process of commercialization, and as a result, business rhetoric increasingly dominates sports discourse. As Rowe puts it, “the modern athlete is not just a competitor but a communicative agent navigating a vast semiotic marketplace” (Rowe 2019). This shift fits well within Jakobson's framework, applying his linguistic principles illustrating how professional athletes function within what can be referred to as a linguistic economy, where their words and expressions

carry both symbolic and financial weight – ultimately reinforcing the central idea of this thesis about a language and conduct transition from pure athleticism to a business-driven semiotic identity. This constant and a very dynamic transition between linguistic modes of operation requires a skill of adaptability which is so pivotal to both environments we are dealing with – business and sports.

Thus, within this ever-changing system, the most important tool to athletes functioning within the environment of U.S. Sports is the tool of *code-switching*. This *code-switching* skill essentially represents the absolutely most dominant tool for managing their dual (yet multi-layered) identities. Athletes are in a daily movement between on-the-field game communication and corporate professionalism, modified and influenced by modes such as locker-room camaraderie and public engagement. Hence, being aware of the current situation and adopting the right code for that situation becomes crucial. The ability to switch codes clearly demonstrates how language in sports is not only a system of meaning but a very dynamic mechanism for identity construction in the professional sports industry. Consequently, in order to lower the complexity and make the entire process easier to handle, the code of business serves as the most dominant code which overlaps over all the other codes and modes, in order to create one single centralized narrative within the system of professional sports.

The most effective way to describe this transition of language of sports is the constructed meaning of the term *professional athlete*. Beyond denoting someone who earns a living through sports, the term connotes broader societal and economic roles, positioning the athlete as a managed and managing entity within the business oriented system of sports. In line with the established dichotomy, the term has two parts to its meaning where one is the *professional* element carrying all the meaning connected to the world of corporate business. And the other, *athlete*, which relates to the game and the skill and the process of applying this skill to what happens on the field.

The Czech linguistic school expands further with Vilém Mathesius emphasizing the functionality of language in adapting to societal needs. Terms like *Game Management* and *Professional Athlete* exemplify what Mathesius described as the “economy of linguistic expression,” where language evolves to mirror the economic priorities of its users (Mathesius, 1929).

### 4.3. Management Discourse and Lotman's Text Within a Text

Juri Lotman's research into cultural semiotics provides a basic framework for understanding how professional athletes in the U.S. sports manage to navigate through the linguistic dynamics of their environment. In particular, Lotman's notion of embedded cultural texts and the semiosphere can serve to explain the shift in sports language from performance-based to business-oriented.

In his essay "*The Text within the Text*" (1978), Lotman explains how smaller semiotic units such as rituals, specific terms and discourses may function as autonomous subtexts within a broader cultural framework. These subtexts not only reflect on the logic of the ever-evolving semiosphere, but also help provide a structure and meaning. In the particular case of professional sports, the language of *Game Management*, delivered through terms such as *managing possessions*, *executing plays* and *maximizing assets* supports Lotman's idea of a text within a text, for the very reason that these terms and many others are not mere jargon. They are crucial cultural texts that carry transport business logic directly into athletic performance, putting communication and behavioral patterns on the same line of corporate strategy.

This linguistic transformation, specifically within the structure of American leagues, directly relates to Lotman's understanding of how the semiosphere changes and adopts the most dominant cultural narratives. As athletes function within a semiosphere dominated by corporate values, it is absolutely natural that the language of management and economics becomes a primary carrier of meaning, having a direct effect on the behavior on and off the field. Hence, what once used to be tactical decisions addressed solely with language of sports have now become ritualized sign systems, of businesslike conduct, corporate values, discipline, efficiency, and execution of assignments delivered by the superiors within the idea of commercial success.

This line of thinking can also be supported with the work of another linguist, Bohuslav Havránek. In his writing, Havránek distinguishes between two fundamental forms of language – *standard* and *functional* – noting that specialized terminologies arise within professional

domains to meet specific communicative needs, often more pragmatic than expressive (Havránek, 1932). In professional sports, *Game Management* is a prime example of this functional specialization. The terminology reshapes traditional athletic discourse into something resembling a business handbook, where terms reflect strategic planning, efficiency, and rationality over spontaneity or emotion. As Havránek explains, “specialized languages develop their own internal logic, often prioritizing efficiency and precision over expressive function” (Havránek 1932: 13).

Lotman’s perspective further deepens this by suggesting that such specific terminologies are not merely tools of communication, but performative texts of the dominant semiotic order and their most important role within the semiosphere is to act as units that help form identity within the form of institutional discipline. Hence, the use of business language in sport is not merely incidental; it is semiotically structured to locate the athlete within a much broader field of business and economic power. In this sense, understanding and deploying the language of business becomes a vital meaning-making act of cultural translation and potential success.

Application of Lotman’s notion of embedded texts and Havránek’s functional language theory within the concept of the semiosphere, it becomes apparent how linguistic structures in American sports do not simply reflect changes in communication, but play a very active meaning-making role, contributing heavily to the process of identity construction of every single athlete.

#### **4.4. The Rise of Game Management in Sports Language**

The integration of a *Game Management* into sports lexicon represents a linguistic bridge between athletic competition and business practices. Initially used to describe the in-game decision-making such as strategical calls, time management, executing plays and others – the term *Game Management* has expanded to encompass a much broader strategic considerations, adapting the corporate management principles, terminology and conduct from the office onto the field.

In the NFL, for instance, *Game Management* includes deciding when to call timeouts, adjusting strategies based on risk assessment, and optimizing player deployment. These practices parallel corporate management, where resource optimization and risk mitigation are central tenets to the process of decision-making (Smith, 2015).

Another good example of the professionalization of identity in American sports can be seen in the strict game-day dress codes currently enforced by club managers across all major leagues. All players and coaches equally are required to wear business attire arriving to and departing from arenas on the game days. These fairly recent rules, established by the NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB, do not serve a functional athletic purpose, they also carry additional symbolic value. They serve as a display of business presentation, professional discipline and corporate culture. In essence, the suit and tie become signifiers of seriousness, authority, and respectability. In Lotman's (1990) terms, this ritualized conformity can be viewed and evaluated as another code maintained in the core of the semiosphere – a central system that regulates meaning and maintains internal consistency. In addition, the enforcement of business attire further supports the idea that the athlete is not just a competitor, but a corporate figure and most importantly a representative of the league's brand and values. As mentioned earlier in the chapter dealing with the inherent dichotomy of athlete's identity this business presentation becomes part of the athlete's off-the-field persona, helping to maintain the image of the professional athlete as a part of corporate branding. In this way, attire becomes not only a visual code but also an ideological marker, merging performance with the economic and cultural expectations of the institution.

#### **4.5. Key Elements of Game Management**

**Clock Management:** Time represents a key element in business therefore it is only natural that it becomes a key element in the game itself too. Time management can differ significantly depending on the score of the game and many other incentives, sometimes the

management decision can be to run the clock when leading, and on the opposite note, the team that is losing is oftentimes chasing the clock in order to turn the score around.

**Resource Allocation:** in all the leagues this thesis deals with, resource allocation relates mostly to which players to use at what times of the game or series, how they fit into the strategy system and the concept of game management.

**Opportunity Capitalization:** Capitalizing on given opportunities is another yet typical business diction applied to the on-field process. In the context of the game it naturally means scoring and those chances that come in a game, turning chances into points or goals or baskets or runs.

On a general level, the adoption of *Game Management* as a central concept in sports reflects the linguistic and cultural integration of business principles into the very fabric of athletic competition. It clearly demonstrates how athletes are expected not only to perform but also to think like managers, balancing immediate goals with long-term value creation.

#### **4.6. The Business Embedded in "Professional Athlete"**

The label *professional athlete* inherently carries business connotations, signifying a role within an economic system where value is a compound combination of performance, branding, and marketability, but where the commercial part of this meaning-making compound represents the main branch of the dynamics of the process. This label positions athletes as managed entities, whose careers are structured around business principles, from the draft to entry-level contracts to free agency negotiations, where financial considerations often outweigh personal preferences. Moreover, the term suggests a dual responsibility: to excel in an athletic competition and to maximize the off-field marketability, making athletes both performers and commercial assets in financial terms rather than purely athletic merit.

As Snyder (2018) notes, this terminology describes the process of commodification of human talent within a broader economic and financial system, where an athlete is not perceived

simply as a game player, but mostly as a “market-driven asset whose worth fluctuates based on performance metrics, media influence, and sponsorship potential” (Snyder 2018: 147). This reinforces the idea that in modern professional sports, success is not determined only by competitive achievements but by an athlete’s ability to maintain and maximize what is usually referred to as *economic viability* within a profit-driven system.

For a better understanding of how this transition of language manifests, let us look at some key terms that encompass this change and are widely used in all of the leagues subject to this thesis, but essentially more and more in professional sports on the general level.

**Game Management and Professional Athlete** – this has been addressed earlier in the chapter.

**To Execute a Play** – formerly to make a play, refers to ways action is carried out on the field.

**Possession Management** – referring to a strategy and game plan in situations where a team is having a ball or a puck and is so to say in control or on offense.

**New Acquisition** – this term is most often used when announcing that a club has signed a new player.

**Players Market** – this term refers to the market with all players in general, whether under a contract currently or in free agency. This is the most general term used to describe the players as a potential to acquire.

**Franchise Player** – formerly known as a club's star player, the most known player on the roster with the highest value on his contract.

**Free Agency Market** – refers to all the players who are currently not under a contract with any other teams.

**Trade potential** – a value of a player on the market in case he would be offered to other teams and what could be received back in terms of new assets.

**Salary Cap** – described earlier in the thesis but it is the maximum possible amount an organization is allowed to spend on players' contracts.

**Contract Expansion** – a player who was on a contract with a club agreed to sign a new

contract with the same club.

**Scouting Report** – reports, files, analysis and feedback from scouts about the situation on the market with players

On this sample list of some of the well-established terminology within the American Sports we can identify a very clear and distinguished tendency to attach a business oriented meaning to some terms that have been formerly used as sports terms, whether they refer to situations on the field (execute a play, franchise player, possession management) or whether they refer to actions taken in the office, closely related to the game itself (players market, trade potential, contract expansion etc.). Overall, there is a clearly apparent effort to alternate and transform the language of sports to the language of business, simply because that is how the system is created, built, and run. Hence, even with the terms pertaining to the game itself are expanded to carry at least some business quality and description. Therefore, in today's sports plays are not made, they are executed, a new player under a contract is a new asset acquisition, game is not played but managed, and so on.

#### **4.7. Implications for Athletic Identity Building Process**

The integration of business language, particularly terms like *Game Management*, into sports discourse consequently carries many profound implications on the character and identity of every single athlete entering the system. The general and key linguistic framing circulates around the economic part of reality and consequently, it shapes not only public perception of the athletes, but also the athletes themselves.

This dynamic highlights the broader semiotic principle that language not only describes reality but actively constructs it. The linguistic shift toward business terminology reinforces the idea that professional sports are not merely games but meticulously managed enterprises.

Drawing back on Berger's book *Sports Semiotics* we can reinforce the knowledge that business sports language functions mainly as a specific cultural code, and it reinforces the idea that *game management* and other related terms function as micro-texts embedded in the wider cultural logic of professional sports. For example, in his analysis of football and baseball commentary, Berger (2023) shows how management terms and corporate metaphors help with naturalization of the business logic behind the game performance. These terms do not serve as mere labels, but heavily contribute to the mindset of athletes, acting as professionals operating within a structured, highly specialized corporate language system. This also supports Lotman's concept of embedded texts and in addition complements Havránek's (1932) theory of functional language specialization.

#### **4.8. Summary of the Linguistic Approach**

After taking the key semio-linguistic theories and combining them with pivotal research on the language of professional sports, we can reassert the central theoretical orientation of this thesis. The findings clearly show that over time – particularly during the heavy commercialization of North American sports – the discourse of business has emerged as the dominant semiotic code within the professional sports environment. This shift has had a significant effect not only on how athletes present themselves, but also on how games are analyzed, marketed, and culturally narrated. The spread of specialized terminology and the increasing influence of business-oriented language in sports communication reveals that success is no longer measured solely by on-the-field performance, but also by an athlete's ability to manage their public persona and commercial value. These findings support the broader theoretical claim that athlete identity is not constructed in isolation, but is deeply shaped by the coded systems within which it operates.

Crucially, this development aligns with Lotman's concept of the semiosphere, wherein language is one of the core mechanisms through which individuals orient themselves in a symbolic environment. The semiosphere of professional sports – structured by institutional codes, public discourse, and commercial imperatives – requires athletes to engage in linguistic

translation: adopting, internalizing, and switching between distinct registers of communication. To establish oneself as a professional athlete today involves more than mastery of the sport – it involves learning and performing a professionalized, business-inflected language, even in moments of on-the-field conduct. This linguistic fluency becomes a semiotic competency, allowing the athletes to position themselves within the central zone of the sports semiosphere.

Consequently, the ability to code-switch between performance language, corporate language, and public discourse becomes essential. Athletes must balance their roles as competitors, professionals, and public figures, translating between them according to context. Thus, in short, it is indeed reasonable to use the phrase *all business* when it comes to the language of professional sports – simply because even on the field, communication is saturated with the symbolic logic of commerce, branding, and institutional coherence. This linguistic dimension of athlete identity illustrates how deeply the language of business is woven into the semiotic system of modern sports.

The linguistic transformation, or more specifically the infiltration of language of business into language of conduct on the field explored in this chapter describes how professional athletes must master not just physical performance but also the roads of the business-oriented discourse. This reinforces their identity as corporate actors within the semiosphere of sports. Chapter 5 follows up on this insight by introducing the semiotics of translation, describing how statistics, another crucial aspect of the actual game, are translated again into cultural meaning and economic value.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE SEMIOTICS OF TRANSLATION APPROACH: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF GAME STATS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE PROCESS OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

Extensive, highly detailed and targeted stats and hard data collecting systems in professional sports are often treated primarily as objective representations of performance level and/or quality, nevertheless, from a semiotic perspective, they function mainly as coding mechanisms. Metrics translate complex athletic behaviors into incentives that carry not only a hard numerical value, but also something that can be characterized as ideological weight. These numbers later become what Roland Barthes (1972: 109–110) calls *mythologies*: cultural narratives that may appear natural but are in fact constructed through signification. In this sense, as will be demonstrated further in the chapter, statistics are not inherently neutral. They are symbols embedded in the language of legitimacy, value, and identity within the athletic semiosphere.

### **5.1. Introduction: Technological Growth and the Gathering of Data**

In recent decades, advances in technology have revolutionized the way professional sports leagues collect and analyze player performance data. The implementation of sophisticated systems, such as the *NHL Edge* software and the NBA's *Second Spectrum*, has enabled teams to gather a vast amount of detailed data on player actions during games, from shooting accuracy to skating speed and defensive positioning. This data-driven approach has fundamentally changed the way athletes are evaluated, as performance is increasingly quantified through statistics that translate almost instantly and directly into their market value. From a semiotic perspective, the data is not merely raw information, but there is a process of interpretation and translation required.

Van Gorp (2007) discusses how translation is never a neutral act but one loaded with choices that shape the meaning of the original material. In this case, the raw data collected through advanced technologies must be translated into symbols that align with both the cultural narrative of the sport and the economic structures that govern it. The numbers gathered through systems like the NHL Edge are not simply presented. They are transformed into a readable and culturally significant text that helps define and form an athlete's identity within the larger context of the game and the league.

## **5.2. Data and Identity: Translating Performance into Market Value**

The process by which performance data becomes a critical semiotic tool for constructing player identity is deeply rooted in the translation of statistics into a narrative of value. In the environment of U.S. professional sports, technological advancements have given rise to a wealth of data that can be gathered, evaluated, and then further used to analyze nearly every aspect of a player's performance. Domains such as Statcast (MLB), NHL Edge, and Second Spectrum (NBA) represent just a few of the tools used by teams and organizations to collect detailed performance metrics, including movement patterns, shot efficiency, and advanced statistics such as expected goals (xG) and/or detailed tracking of player's movement and actions. Yet, these raw data stats do not carry inherent meaning – they must be interpreted and contextualized through the cultural and institutional codes in order to gain significance, particularly in relation to market value and athlete's identity.

In his semiotic works Umberto Eco (1986) emphasized that signs, whether they be linguistic, numerical, or visual, do not contain fixed meanings. Their interpretation depends on the codes through which they are interpreted. This perspective is crucial when considering the role of performance data and statistics in professional sports. For example, a highly specific stat like *effective field goal percentage* only becomes meaningful once it is translated within the system of values that governs in the given environment, such as scoring efficiency, tactical

contribution, or salary potential. In this way, stats function as signs that acquire significance only when contextualized through a broader cultural and economic code.

From the perspective of Lotman's semiotics, the process of turning game statistics into value is a form of cultural semiosis. It is an act of recontextualizing raw information into symbolic structures that carry social and institutional meaning. Within the semiosphere of American professional sports, stats serve once again as a type of embedded text. This text becomes interpreted not just by coaches and executives, but also by fans, commentators, agents, and sponsors.

Moreover, the act of translating data into a narrative builds the path for further development and the stabilization of identity in a very dynamic and changeable environment. A player's identity is not only shaped by what they do on the field but by how their actions are encoded, visualized, and essentially monetized on the next contract, new endorsement or a more important role in the hierarchy of the team. This process turns stats collected through a player's performance in the course of time into symbolic statements about value, effectivity, success, growth, potential. These data-driven representations then feed back into decisions about playing time, contract negotiations, media narratives, and advertising deals, creating a continuous semiotic feedback loop between performance and perception.

Thus, the identity of the modern professional athlete is increasingly constructed not solely through direct observation or lived experience, but through the mediated, encoded, and economically charged narratives that arise from statistical translation. This demonstrates the growing importance of semiotic processes in determining not only how players are evaluated, but also how they are seen, marketed, and remembered within the cultural economy of sport.

### **5.3. Semiotic Translation: From Raw Data to Identity Formation**

Performance data play a central role in defining a player's economic value within the professional sports industry. The semiotics of translation helps us understand how a player's

statistics transform from mere numbers into meaningful cultural symbols that dictate their role in the team and their marketability. As Van Gorp (2007) argues, translation is a cultural adaptation – the statistical data is not merely translated but re-framed to fit into specific cultural narratives, such as excellence, perseverance, or leadership. For instance, a statistic such as points per game (PPG) is not simply a numerical representation of a player's scoring ability, but it is often translated into a signifier of the player's value within a broader team narrative.

Take, for example, a basketball player averaging over 25 points per game. In pure numbers, this shows strong offensive ability. But semiotically, this performance is further re-framed in the discourse surrounding the player. The coaches, management and commentators might consequently describe the given player as a *go-to scorer*, *franchise cornerstone*, or *elite offensive threat*. These labels then become signifiers shaping the way the player is seen within the market, the public, the team, and sponsors – as a result, his elite scoring skills will very likely lead to the increase in his market value.

The translation of performance into identity is indeed fundamentally tied to market value. As we stated before, Foucault (1980) suggests that knowledge is inherently tied to power - those who control the narrative and the interpretation of data ultimately hold power over how reality is constructed. In the U.S. professional sports, teams and front offices are in this case the power holders, who execute this power, using data to define a player's identity not only within the team but in the market at large and make future decisions based on that whether to keep certain players, trade them, re-sign them to a new and more lucrative contracts and so on. Every time a player reaches a certain milestone, whether it is a record for goals scored or a high player efficiency rating (PER), that achievement is consequently translated into a narrative of dominance or unique talent, leading to re-negotiations of his market value and then perhaps further contract negotiations and endorsement deals. Though designed to summarize a player's overall contribution, in essence PER as a measure of effectivity is constantly and ongoingly a subject to be interpreted by fans, commentators, managers, sponsors and franchises as a kind of a proxy for value, making and transforming athletes and their performance into quantifiable symbols. This resonates with Lotman's concept of translation: athlete's actions in the game are subsequently converted into numerical data and hard facts. These then circulate within the public space, management, media and economic

systems of professional sport. Hence, the PER serves as a symbol (defined by rule), which indexes past performances and becomes iconic when visually represented in leaderboards and analytics dashboards. The numbers of the game carry cultural signals of elite status.

In American football, for instance, a running back who averages over 5 yards per carry is not only statistically efficient but may be branded as an *explosive weapon* or *key to the offensive system*. Similarly, a hockey player with a high face-off win percentage might be labeled a *two-way specialist*, a phrase that carries semiotic weight and justifies greater playing time or a leadership role, even if their scoring numbers are modest. These interpretive frameworks transform numbers into identity and identity into value.

#### **5.4. The Role of the Clubs: Translating Data into Strategic Identity**

Sports organizations also play a pivotal role in the semiotic translation of statistics. Teams use data to evaluate players, negotiate contracts, and make decisions about trades. In this process, the data – whether it be advanced statistics or traditional measures like goals and assists – is subjected to organizational interpretation, which ultimately defines a player’s market position. As Bourdieu (1993) explains, value in a field is not inherent in the object but is produced through systems of interpretation – in this particular case, a data-driven analysis. The team’s front office engages in a process of re-signifying a player’s statistics into value, shaping that player’s identity in direct relation to the broader economic structure of the league.

This translation process is not static but reflects a dynamic semiotic system. Just as Eco (1984) emphasizes that a sign’s meaning is continually shifting as it moves through different cultural contexts, player statistics are reinterpreted as they move through various stages of evaluation. A player’s worth is constantly being redefined by how their data fits into team strategies and broader market dynamics.

To list another example, in Major League Baseball, a player with a high on-base percentage (OBP) might be particularly valuable to a team focused on “small-ball” tactics that prioritize getting runners on base over home runs. However, that same OBP might be downplayed by a

team seeking power hitters for a “slugging” lineup. In the NBA, a player with a high assist-to-turnover ratio might be strategically framed as a “floor general” on one team but might be considered a bench facilitator on another, depending on how that statistic is woven into the club's overall goals. Even a modest stat, like tackles per game in football or blocked shots in hockey, can be re-signified as a critical asset under certain coaching philosophies.

These organizational narratives not only guide decision-making but also enter the public discourse, further shaping the athlete’s persona, contractual value, and long-term professional trajectory.

## **5.5. Semiotics of Translation in Market Evaluation**

In the process of contract negotiations, player statistics are translated into a market value that is carefully evaluated by both teams and agents. A player's market value is not only an expression of their raw performance but a semiotic construct shaped by data-driven narratives. As Bourdieu (1984) argues, value is symbolically constructed through the interactions between agents, teams, and the media, where economic and cultural values intertwine. These statistics, once interpreted, become tools used in contract discussions, endorsement negotiations, and player allocation.

A player’s identity is thus constructed through the process of data translation into economic terms, and the team has the power to determine what aspects of the player's performance will be emphasized to create the most valuable identity. This process is critical because, as Foucault (1980) suggests, knowledge is power – those who control the data, and the semiotic translations of that data, control the player’s market positioning.

## 5.6. The Economic Implications of Translating Data

The market economy of professional sports is largely driven by the translation of performance data into value. This translation is not just a mechanical or technical act; it is a semiotic operation where raw collected numbers acquire meaning within specific cultural and economic systems. As Foucault (1980) emphasizes, those who control knowledge also control value – knowledge here being the coded representation of performance. In this sense, advanced statistics such as Player Efficiency Rating (PER) or plus-minus (PM) and others function as symbolic signifiers, not only summarizing performance but participating in the construction of a player's economic identity.

However, as Van Gorp (2007) points out, translation is never neutral. It reflects the cultural, strategic, and ideological positioning of the interpreter. In sports, this becomes evident in how different teams prioritize certain metrics over others, according to their internal values and game models. A franchise focused on defense may elevate blocks and defensive rebounds, while another emphasizing offensive flow will favor scoring averages or assist ratios. These strategic filters act as semiotic frameworks through which performance is re-signified, allowing teams to shape customized narratives of value according to their priorities and needs. Thus, data becomes a language with multiple dialects – what is meaningful in one context may be marginal in another.

From a Lotmanian perspective, this process reveals the inner functionalities of the sporting semiosphere. Within this cultural space, statistics serve as translation intersections – sites where raw, unordered signs (performance) are converted into structured meaning (value). Lotman (1990) describes the semiosphere as a space where core and peripheral codes define what is understood, accepted, or rejected. In this model, game and individual statistics hold a strong position near the core: they are legible, institutionalized, and serve as shared points of reference across teams, media, and fans. Yet, the interpretation of these signs differs based on where in the semiosphere the observer stands – owner, analyst, agent, or athlete. This scale of different angles and perspectives confirms that identity, like meaning, is not fixed but negotiated within systems of cultural and communicative exchange.

For the athletes themselves, statistics become tools of self-evaluation, self reflection and

symbolic navigation. They reveal both perceived strengths and weaknesses, helping athletes position and navigate themselves within the broader marketplace. For management and coaching staff, stats serve as a semiotic grid and additional incentive allowing more comparison, projection, and evaluation within a highly competitive player's market. And for fans and media, these numbers generate discursive energy: they drive debates, generate narratives, and become shorthand for entire careers. The fact that these interpretations are often conflicting only reconfirms that meaning is produced through negotiation, not revelation.

In this professional sports ecosystem, performance data does not merely reflect ability, it constitutes identity. Through the ongoing process of semiotic translation, numbers are transformed into narratives, and those narratives feed into new contracts, endorsements, roles, and reputations. This makes the interpretation and control of data a powerful cultural and economic tool. The semiosphere of professional sports is thus not only a space of athletic excellence but a system of signs, where success is as much about the ability to be translated correctly as it is about performance itself.

## **5.7. Semiotics of Translation: The Role of Media and Public Interpretation**

The media play a crucial role in translating performance statistics into stories that the public can comprehend and consume. According to Friedrich Kittler (1999), media technologies mediate our understanding of the world by translating data from the stats into formats that are culturally legible and understandable even for those who are not directly engaged in the environment of the given game. In sports, media outlets actively frame and interpret player statistics to create narratives that fit into broader cultural scripts – such as the underdog story, the rising star, or the seasoned veteran.

When an athlete's statistics are presented in the media, they are part of a translation act that transforms data into easily comprehensible public identity. The public often consumes statistics through the lens of narrative framing, where numbers are infused with meanings

based on context and interpretation. In his research, Van Gorp (2007) argues that translation is about adaptation to a new cultural context. Thus, media outlets adapt the numbers to fit within the narrative of cultural norms, such as the American value placed on individual success.

In this context, the interpretation of statistics does not simply describe an athlete's performance but creates a narrative that either elevates or diminishes their identity. The scoreboards, sports broadcasts, and highlight reels are not neutral representations of athletic achievement; they are translations of numbers into cultural meaning, shaped by media influence.

## **5.8. The Limits of Translation: Performance vs. Identity**

While statistics are an essential component of player identity in the modern sports industry, they are not an exhaustive reflection of an athlete's contribution. As Fiske (1990) explains, statistics in sports, like any other form of cultural text, are partial translations of a much broader and more complex reality. Certain qualities of an athlete, such as leadership, charisma, or psychological resilience, cannot be captured in numbers but still significantly affect their value in the market.

Moreover, the process of translating statistics can flatten or oversimplify the athlete's true worth. For example, a player's contract is often heavily influenced by quantitative measures like points-per-game, batting average, or yards gained – factors that may fail to account for intangible aspects such as teamwork or personal growth. In the semiotics of translation, the reduction of the athlete to numbers would most certainly be limiting the complexity of their identity.

Overall, after a closer look on the role of statistics in the process of identity construction when it comes to the American professional sports, we notice that game and career stats do represent a very important branch of the meaning-making process, but at the same time it is absolutely crucial to add that they do not stand alone and that each and every stat becomes a

subject of translation on many levels. Nevertheless, following the main line of this thesis, the ultimate translation of the stats collected during the performance on the field and relating directly to the actions in the game transforms again into language of business, more specifically into a market value. The quantification of performance thus reshapes athletic identity through the semiotic logic of reduction and abstraction. In the name of objectivity, these metrics produce closed texts. attaching further meaning to a fixed numerical value that also carries some interpretive elementary behind the collected stats and data. From this perspective, advanced statistics do not simply aid analysis, but they actively participate in the process of creating value systems, hierarchies, and symbolic capital. Understanding these codes as texts enables a more critical reading of how the modern athlete is seen, valued, and remembered.

Hence, when we relate the subject of interpreting data to the process of persona building for the athletes themselves, stats represent a very valuable incentive and texts, that indicate which of their actions in game raise their market value and which have a potential to diminish it. Consequently, based on the translation and interpretation of the collected stats, athletes are expected to make adjustments to the process of training, bring more focus into the weaker areas and once again, target their work in the areas needed to increase their performance and thus also their market value. The process of translation of these stats therefore plays a major role in the process of identity construction of every athlete within the system of the American sports, whether it is basketball, baseball, American football or ice hockey.

This chapter highlighted the process of translation of game statistics and performance data into market value as another building block of a player's persona. Moving on to the final component of this line of identity construction, the next chapter will focus on the role of the media. Sports media outlets, broadcast stations, sports magazines and digital platforms also contribute to creation of the discourse and do not merely broadcast or comment on the performances. On the contrary, they actively contribute to the shaping of their public personas. Chapter 6 will explore how media tend to amplify, reframe, and mythologize athletes, turning them into symbols within broader cultural narratives.

## **CHAPTER 6: THE ROLE OF MEDIA ON IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

In the previous chapter, we examined how raw game statistics are translated into an athlete's market value, emphasizing the semiotic processes that assign economic significance to performance data. Building upon this foundation, we now delve into the media's pivotal role in constructing and disseminating athlete's identity within American sports leagues. The media not only reports on athletic performance but also actively shapes public perception, transforming athletes into cultural icons through complex semiotic mechanisms.

Today's role of media in the realm of professional sports reaches much further than a live broadcast and live or retrospective commentary of a game or a performance. From a semiotic perspective, the actions of the media actively participate in the construction of athletic personas.

In the contemporary professional sports landscape, the role of the media extends far beyond simple reportage of athletic performance. From a semiotic perspective, media outlets actively participate in the construction of athletic personas by framing athletes within specific cultural narratives, mythologizing their achievements, and embedding them within broader symbolic systems.

Arthur Asa Berger (2023) emphasizes that sports are “systems of meaning,” and that media plays a pivotal role in generating meanings through its media content and then spreading those meanings by turning athletes into modern myths. Building on Goffman's frame analysis and Barthes' concept of mythologies, this chapter explores how semiotic processes of translation, reframing, and amplification transform individual performances and most importantly the athletes themselves into cultural symbols of traits as superhuman skills, exceptionality, but also a failure and bad character. Approaching media not as passive spectators of events but as as powerful and dynamic sign-producing systems, this analysis describes how the persona of the athlete often expands beyond the field into a multi-layered public figure. While subsequently, interviews, advertisements, social media posts, and broadcast commentary also function within the semiosphere to produce lasting images of the professional athlete as both performer and myth.

## 6.1. The Evolution of Sports Media in America

Historically, the economic value of sports in the United States was primarily derived from live attendance; fans purchased tickets to witness games in person, and revenue was directly tied to stadium capacity and ticket sales. However, the landscape of sports economics has undergone a profound transformation with the appearance and proliferation of sports-dedicated media networks. The emergence of channels such as ESPN in 1979 marked a significant shift in how sports content was consumed and monetized.

ESPN's 24-hour sports broadcasting model transformed sports into a global spectacle. In recent years, ESPN's domestic revenue reached \$4.4 billion, reflecting a 9% year-over-year increase. This growth was driven in part by a 15% rise in domestic advertising sales, totaling \$1.3 billion, primarily due to increased ad rates (Sports Business Journal, 2025). To further illustrate how much American sports are viewed as a part of the entertainment business, it is worth mentioning that 80% of ESPN is owned by the American entertainment giant, The Walt Disney Company. Disney acquired this majority stake in 1996 through its purchase of Capital Cities/ABC, integrating ESPN into its vast entertainment empire (ESPN Press Room, 2025). This fact further illustrates the amount of influence the media holds over how sports are packaged, broadcast, and consumed on a global scale.

In essence, the shift from traditional gate revenues to broadcast rights has redefined the economic model of American sports. In 2019, the U.S. sports media rights were valued at approximately \$22.42 billion, accounting for 44% of the global sports media market (Sport Business, 2019). This substantial revenue stream has elevated the importance of televised sports, making media coverage not only a tool for audience engagement but also a central component of the sports industry's financial ecosystem.

Beyond traditional broadcasting, the rise of additional sports specializing media rose drastically. Sports magazines, such as *Sports Illustrated* (first published in 1954), have emerged and helped build a media market focusing at and relating solely to the world of sports. Hence, it became a standard on the media market that every media house has a fully developed and constantly maintained and actualized Sports Sections. Consequently, the realm of professional sports in Northern America has become a fully employed subject of media

coverage and thus a very substantial part of the public discourse. Furthermore, rise and the proliferation of social media platforms have additionally expanded the reach and influence of sports media. Athletes now have the ability to cultivate their personal brands and engage with fans directly through platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, adding new dimensions to their public personas.

## **6.2. Goffman's Frame Analysis and Athlete Identity**

Erving Goffman's concept of frame analysis provides a valuable lens through which to examine how media constructs and presents athlete identities. Goffman defines frames as "schemata of interpretation" that allow individuals to "locate, perceive, identify, and label" events and occurrences, thus rendering meaning, organizing experiences, and guiding actions" (Goffman 1974: 21).

In the context of North American sports media, framing involves the selection and emphasis of certain aspects of an athlete's behavior, performance, or personal life to construct a particular narrative. For example, media coverage may highlight certain athlete's charitable activities, leadership qualities, or perseverance through injury to frame them as role models. On the other hand, focusing on negative behaviors or controversies can frame an athlete in a more critical light. This process of framing shapes public perception and carries a substantial influence on how athletes are viewed by the public and consequently, club owners, managers and agents as well.

Research in the sociology of sport has applied Goffman's theories to understand the construction and confirmation of athlete identities. For instance, a study analyzing the media portrayal of NBA player Allen Iverson found that his image was framed in contrasting ways, depicting him both as a rebellious anti-hero and a cultural icon, reflecting Goffman's concept of framing in identity construction (Birrell, Donnelly 2004: 58).

In the realm of social media, athletes actively engage in self-presentation, curating their online personas to align with their desired public image. A qualitative examination of professional

athletes' Twitter usage revealed that they strategically manage their self-presentation to maintain a positive image and connect with fans, consistent with Goffman's theory of self-presentation (Lebel, Danylchuk 2014: 464).

### **6.3. Barthes and the Myth of the Athlete**

Roland Barthes' semiotic theory emphasizes the role of cultural narratives, or myths, in shaping the interpretation of signs within a society. Barthes posits that “myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the 'nature' of things” (Barthes 1972: 109).

In American sports media, athletes are often displayed as sort of mythic figures who embody cultural ideals. Naturally, this applies mainly to those who show signs of exceptional performance or are now considered star players of the game. For example, the portrayal of NFL quarterback Tom Brady extends beyond his on-field achievements, as he is very often depicted not only as an exceptional quarterback, but as a true manifestation of the "American Dream," representing success through hard work and determination. Such mythisation of a person through his performance and his star status aligns with Barthes' assertion that myth serves to naturalize cultural values, making them appear inherent and timeless (Barthes 1972: 142). Hence, athletes such as Tom Brady, Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Derek Jeter, Wayne Gretzky and others are often described as the greatest ever, the legends, the icons of their game and most recently as the GOATs (greatest of all time) too.

In his 1996 study, Andrews analyzed media coverage of Michael Jordan to explore and provide some understanding on how his portrayal in the media contributed to the construction of his persona as the ultimate symbol of basketball excellence. The research examined a variety of media sources, including newspapers, television broadcasts, and sports magazines, analyzing specifically on the way Jordan's performances were depicted – particularly his remarkable on-court action and ability to perform under pressure, but also his leadership skills and role modeling. During the analysis of media narratives in the course of time, Andrews

(1996) discovered that Jordan was frequently portrayed (framed) as someone with superhuman abilities; his performances often presented as defying all ordinary human limits. The media frequently emphasized his clutch moments, such as game-winning shots and championships, which essentially depicted Jordan as a heroic figure and elevated his perception of someone that is more than just a basketball player.

Finally, Andrews concluded that these very specific and highly repetitive displays reinforced broader ideals of individualism and heroism. Jordan's success was linked not only to his talent and skill, but also as a direct result of his personal (superhuman) greatness. Naturally, such media narratives further supported the established American cultural values of self-made achievement, suggesting Jordan as a symbol of individual success and excellence. According to Andrews (1996: 133), the media's constant process of mythologizing Jordan in the course of time helped establish his status as a cultural icon not only in the culture of sports, but in essence also within the culture of business and public success.

It is fair to state that to some very significant extent, the basketball star Michael Jordan can be seen as the very first professional athlete to maximize the full potential of turning sports identity into a multi-platform brand. He, as the best basketball player of all times, did not merely endorse products as other famous athletes did before. In essence, Michael Jordan became a product/brand himself, elevating his status to new heights and starting a new era in which the athlete's off-the-field persona was carefully crafted, commodified, and distributed across media, fashion, advertising, and global popular culture. As mentioned above, his partnership with Nike, the global success of the Air Jordan line, and his shining presence in television commercials, feature films and corporate campaigns created a new trend, in which athletic excellence alone was no longer sufficient; personal image, media presence, and narrative control became essential components of professional identity.

Around the same time, the movie *King's Ransom* (2009), which revisits Wayne Gretzky's historic 1988 trade to the Los Angeles Kings, demonstrates how a single athlete's relocation from one club to another could be framed as a significant cultural event, and not merely a sports decision. Wayne Gretzky is a Canadian born ice hockey player who is said to be the greatest hockey player of all time. His nickname *The Great One* only confirms this. For many years, he had been part of the Canadian traditional hockey club The Edmonton Oilers, where he won multiple championships and earned many records. However, Gretzky's trade from

Canada to a fairly new American market in California has completely shaken up the world of hockey. The Los Angeles Kings have brought this Canadian icon to America, and that signified not just a trade from one club to another, but a symbolic moment that helped rebrand hockey as a commercially powerful entertainment product in the U.S., especially in new markets. This laid the groundwork for understanding athletes as marketable assets within broader media and cultural economies.

Michael Jordan, however, took this concept to new heights, becoming the archetype of the media-constructed athlete whose image changed the impact of the entire sport. This mythologizing process was later retrospectively reconfirmed by *The Last Dance* (2020), a documentary film that not only chronicled his career but also reasserted his symbolic status as the ultimate competitor and brand icon. The documentary series earned a huge popularity and fan attention all over the globe shortly after its introduction.

Similar paths as Jordan's have been followed by Tom Brady, a famous NFL quarterback, whose elite skills and achievements on the field and carefully designed public image have made him a symbol of almost a superhuman skill and exceptional character.

And most recently, LeBron James, a basketball player whose off-court activities have ultimately transformed him into a global cultural figure and a celebrity, arguably even more prominent than his athletic identity. Through his civil enterprises such as his media company SpringHill Entertainment, or the *I PROMISE* school, James has created a layered public persona that extends far beyond the basketball court. His brand is not simply a product of his performance under the basket, but of meticulous and deliberate media positioning, cultural messaging, and symbolic visibility, thus reinforcing how today's athlete's identity can be cultivated as a powerful semiotic presence in public discourse, far exceeding the boundaries of the given sport.

In each of these cases, the off-the-field dimension of the athlete's identity did not merely complement performance, but in some way overshadowed it. The particular athletes have become symbols and cultural capital and through the act of maximizing the potential of their exceptional athletic performance into extensive media presence and cultural impact, they became *bigger than the game* itself. In essence, what they represented came to define them more than individual statistics or in-game achievements. This exemplifies how the

off-the-field semiotic construction of identity, through media translation and amplification, has become the dominant mode of representation in contemporary professional sports of today.

#### **6.4. The Power of Social Media: Athletes Earning Beyond Their Contracts**

The immense growth of social media has also transformed the sports industry, providing athletes with platforms to build and maintain their personal brands, engage with fans, and attract lucrative endorsement deals. This shift has empowered some of the best athletes to earn significant income through something that is referred to as sponsored content, often drastically exceeding the earnings from their professional contracts with the clubs. In essence, the ultimate aim is to maximize monetary income from the status that the professional sports identity carries and provides. The financial potential of being a highly followed person on social media is indeed very lucrative. Athletes can collect fees, endorsements and sponsorships through media presence, whether it be an acting part in a commercial spot, simple support of a product with a signature or any sort of appearances, and collaboration. Thus, these athletes effectively manage to expand their persona beyond the realm of their expertise (professional sports), and manage to become influential and successful also in other areas of their public presence, ultimately becoming famous public figures, celebrities and in a way, business brands.

Overall, we can state that the integration of social media into athletes' careers has transformed the traditional model of income and earnings, providing some of the best known athletes with a chance to further capitalize on their personal brands and engage with global audiences. As the digital landscape continues to grow, athletes who effectively use the potential of social media are likely to see continued growth in their off-field earnings, further blurring the lines between an athlete and an influencer.

To summarize the effect of the media on the process of identity construction with professional athletes in North America, the media indeed represents a very strong and dynamic force in the

creation of public images of the athletes, helping in shaping their public image through complex semiotic processes. By framing narratives and constructing myths, the media not only reflects but also constructs the social reality of sports. This mediated amplification of athlete's persona significantly impacts their market value, as public perception drives endorsement deals, sponsorship opportunities, and overall brand equity. Understanding the semiotic role of media in athlete persona building is thus crucial for comprehending the broader dynamics of the sports industry.

## CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this thesis was to find answer to these three core research questions:

1. How is professional athlete identity constructed in the U.S. sports system?
2. What symbolic roles do contracts, league structures, and media systems play in that construction?
3. How can semiotic theory explain the translation of athletic performance into market and cultural identity?

After conducting the analysis, we can state that the athletic identity within these leagues is not an innate or a self-generated entity, but rather a product of a highly organized system of signs and structures. Although the process of the identity formation begins with measurable performance, it is however heavily shaped and codified by institutional mechanisms – the centerpiece of which is a professional contract that symbolically anchors an athlete’s economic and positional value, places the athlete within league structures that regulate movement and status, and media platforms that project curated personas. Identity is formed through symbolic interactions – via contracts, statistics, media framing, and league structures – which act as coded systems of meaning. Athletes succeed not only by delivering an elite and high level athletic performance. Equally as important is their ability to become fluent in this system: show understanding and effective navigation within the culture and the system, learn how to perform within the codes of branding, public image, and organizational value. Lotman’s theory shows that every movement within the professional system – whether a new contract, trade, or media event – essentially acts as a translation between zones of meaning. The athlete’s success, therefore, is not only athletic but also semiotic. All of these elements operate as systems of signification, functioning within a semiotic dynamics that defines legitimacy and recognition. Applying Lotman’s model of the semiosphere, it becomes evident that athletes operate within a dynamic symbolic environment where meaning is negotiated, translated, and stabilized through a large scale of embedded texts, signs and symbols.

Essentially, every action on and off the field becomes a subject of interpretation that transforms it into data in the form of game stats, some form of public narrative, and most importantly *market value*. Media framing, statistical analysis, and brand construction are not external to identity – they are its integral and highly constitutive part with a very high added value. Ultimately, the professional athlete's identity is structured, built and formed as a result of semiotic translation across a number of various inter-connected systems, where success depends on the ability to navigate and adapt to the codes and expectations of the semiosphere.

Using Juri Lotman's concept of the semiosphere as the central theoretical model, the thesis has argued that professional leagues – specifically the NBA, NFL, NHL, and MLB – fundamentally represent a set of their own semiotic systems. Within these systems, athletes are not merely passive participants but also active sign-producing subjects whose identity is continually formed, translated, and interpreted through a range of symbolic mechanisms.

The key guiding question of this thesis was how an athlete's identity is constructed in such an environment. Not simply as a personal trait but more specifically as some sort of a result of communication, negotiation, and a large scale of institutional processes. The findings presented throughout this thesis indicate heavily that a professional athletic identity is not self-contained, not a steady feature, but rather significantly negotiated, continually formed and adjusted across multiple levels of meaning. Athletes enter the semiosphere through structural mechanisms like the draft, contracts, and league rules, and as soon as they enter the system, their identity begins to take shape within these formal boundaries. As their careers move forward in time, their public image, market value, and role in public evolve through the interplay of data, discourse, and cultural interpretation.

The main element of this construction originates in the tension between on-the-field and off-the-field identity. This inherent and simultaneously consciously constructed dichotomy plays a major role in one of the thesis's core themes. The performance on the field is not an isolated space, it represents the athlete's primary requirement in order to be able to enter the professional sports semiosphere.

Hence, elite performance is rather the prerequisite that legitimizes the athlete's presence in the system, for it is what brought him the attention of the clubs. However, in the contemporary landscape, that performance almost instantly enters a much broader and a larger structure of

meaning and market value. Success on the field is not the one and only measure of worth and is not really the pinnacle of the meaning-making process. Eventually, it becomes the foundation to which additional layers of identity are attached, constructed, marketed, and monetized. The off-the-field domain operates in a similar manner, according to specific symbolic codes and expectations. Nevertheless, athletes must learn to translate their physical actions into attractive narratives that resonate with fans, sponsors, and the broader public expectations. These narratives then help shape their position within the semiosphere's economic and symbolic hierarchy.

Within the system, the concept of semiotic translation becomes crucial. As Van Gorp (2007) suggests, translation is not simply a linguistic act. It is also and mainly a cultural adaptation, a reconfiguration of meaning to fit specific narrative structures. In the realm of U.S. professional sports, this process becomes highly visible in the translation of raw performance data into identity narratives. A broad body of specific stats, such as shooting percentage, rushing yards, goals for or goals against and of course wins become more than numbers. They become signifiers of value, leadership, or star potential. The ability to perform well statistically is semiotically connected to broader identity frameworks, which serve as a source for decisions within teams, the media, and public perception.

Naturally, this process does not take place in a vacuum. It is formed and deeply embedded within the economic logic of the sports industry. The thesis has shown how contracts, salary caps, trades, and free agency mechanisms are not merely financial instruments but crucial semiotic agents in the life of every athlete, regardless in which of the leagues they are participating in. In essence, all these mechanisms ultimately translate identity into market value., which can be best described as economic status. The economic reality is the most significant one, and for that reason it leads to the transition of the language of the game. The language descriptive expressions such as “franchise players”, “club ambassadors”, “high value assets or liabilities” only reconfirm how deeply has economic thinking and terminology entered and shifted the diction in the process of identity construction.

This shift is most clearly seen in the transformation of sports language itself. The thesis has explored how the language of business has overtaken the language of sport, with terms such as “game management”, “play execution”, “franchise player” and “market potential” now a solid part in both internal league discourse and public commentary as well. As Chapter Four

has shown, this linguistic evolution reflects a deeper cultural transition. The professional athlete today must not only be a player and a competitor in the given sport, but also in a way a manager of his own brand, a performer in the symbolic economy of sports. Lotman's semiosphere, in this context, provides a model for understanding this transformation. It frames the US sports environment as a multi-layered, self-organizing cultural space in which athletes must locate themselves and make themselves legible.

Consequently, the ability to switch between codes – to move from the language of the game to the language of the press conference, the sponsor meeting, or the contract negotiations – is no longer something that is just a part of the system, but a prerequisite for sustained success. Based on the findings, the author of this thesis argues that such semiotic literacy in some form or another is essential for athletes to successfully navigate the modern sports semiosphere. Those who master this code-switching, who understand their role as both game players and business agents, are able to occupy the center of the system, gaining visibility, influence, and economic reward in the form of high contracts. Those who do not make the necessary adjustments to this semiotic system, or whose identity resists translation into the key narratives, are often marginalized and as a result pushed to the periphery of the semiosphere, where visibility and value decline.

Thus, the semiosphere of American professional sports is not just a context – it is the condition of possibility for athletic identity. It is a culture in which every athlete's performance is interpreted, every public action is encoded, and every move becomes a statement. It is also a semiotic system, where the culture of business becomes the dominant culture, essentially framing every interaction in terms of value, performance, and marketability. Within this environment, identity does not represent a fixed quality but a moving target. A state of existence that is continually revised, evaluated, and re-translated by various semiotic agents – coaches and teams, managers and owners, media, fans, leagues, and finally the athletes themselves.

In answering the core questions of the thesis, the findings demonstrate that athletic identity in U.S. professional sports is not simply a reflection of skill or character, but it can be best described as a set of semiotic skills guided by a navigation in structured system, effective translation of signs, structured by institutional logic, and expressed through a business language. To succeed within this environment is to become semiotically fluent: to know when

to perform, how to speak, what to symbolize, and most importantly what kind of adjustments to make.

While the process of monetization and commercialization of professional sports have been widely studied, most particularly in relation to economics and media studies, the process of athlete identity construction itself has received far less attention in the field of semiotics. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, a considerable volume of the existing semiotic research in sport focuses on the general symbolic structures of games, rules, or fan rituals, rather than on the athlete as a sign-navigating and a sign-producing entity. The particular field of sports psychology has emerged and is rapidly growing and gaining on importance in the discourse, mostly for its valuable insights into motivation, confidence, resilience, and individual performance. However, what remains largely undervalued is how athletes themselves are constructed, and consequently how they are translated, framed, and circulated within the broader cultural semiosphere. This is particularly significant given that success in professional sports is often awarded to the ability of preparation, ability to understand the current situation, and meaning-making skill in relation to successful decision-making. All of these represent areas that semiotic theory is uniquely equipped to analyze and could deliver substantial knowledge and further clarification.

It is exactly this gap that this thesis has attempted to fill. By focusing on the process of semiotic construction of the athletic identity, it aims to establish somewhat of a new angle that has an ambition to follow and expand on the research in sports sociology, media studies, and psychology. The four major American leagues that are the subject of this thesis (NFL, NBA, NHL, and MLB) have been treated as the primary focus of this thesis not only because of their popularity, economic scale and media reach, but because they are acknowledged and widely perceived as trendsetters in the global field of professional sport. To a very large extent they create discourse within that field and essentially, their methods of structuring performance, translating value, and projecting identity often serve as templates for other leagues and even for other sports. This opens several potential areas for future research, such as comparative studies of identity construction in individual sports versus team games, or cross-cultural analyses of how different league systems codify athlete meaning in relation to their unique media and institutional contexts.

## Works Cited

- Andrews, David L. 1996. Michael Jordan: A Symbol of American Culture. In *Sport Stars: The Cultural Politics of Sporting Celebrity*, 130–141. London: Routledge.
- 1996. *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- 2001. *Michael Jordan, Inc.: Corporate Sport, Media Culture, and Late Modern America*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Barthes, Roland 1957. *Mythologies*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- 1972. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Beauchamp, Z. 2010. The Semiotics of Sponsorship in Contemporary Sports. *Semiotic Review* 3(1): 77–92.
- Berger, Arthur Asa 2023. *Sports Semiotics*. Leiden: Brill.
- Berger, Peter L.; Luckmann, Thomas 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Garden City (NY): Anchor Books.
- Billings, Andrew C.; Butterworth, Michael L.; Turman, Paul D. 2018. *Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field*. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications.
- Birrell, Susan; Donnelly, Peter 2004. Reclaiming Goffman: Erving Goffman's Influence on the Sociology of Sport. In: Giulianotti, Richard (ed.), *Sport and Modern Social Theorists*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 49–64.
- Bourdieu, Pierre 1983. The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed. *Poetics* 12(4–5): 311–356.
- 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- 1993. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Brown, Kelli R.; Nichols, Brian 2019. Symbolic Protest and the Off-Field Persona: Colin Kaepernick and the Semiotics of Activism. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 43(2): 123–139.
- David Throsby 2001. *Economics and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Domenico, Michael; Klimmt, Christoph; Griffiths, Mark D. 2021. The Psychology of Esports: A Systematic Review of the Literature. *Psychology of Popular Media* 10(3): 262–273.
- Eco, Umberto 1976. *A Theory of Semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1984. *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- 1986. *Travels in Hyperreality*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- ESPN Press Room 2025. ESPN NBA Full Court Press: ESPN Tips Off its Coverage of the 2025 NBA Conference Semifinals on Friday. *ESPN Press Room*, 9 May 2025.
- Fiske, John 1990. *Introduction to Communication Studies*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Forbes 2023. The Most Valuable Sports Teams 2023. *Forbes*, [www.forbes.com](http://www.forbes.com).
- Fort, Rodney; Winfree, Jason A. 2011. *Sports Economics*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Foster, G. A.; O'Reilly, N.; Dávila, A. 2016. *Sports Business Management: Decision Making Around the Globe*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Friedman, Milton 1980. *Free to Choose: A Personal Statement*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Goffman, Erving 1959. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Doubleday.
- 1974. *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Griffiths, Mark D. 2021. The Digital Athlete: Identity, Algorithms, and the New Visibility in Sports. *Sport in Society* 24(2): 220–235.
- Hall, Stuart 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.
- Havránek, Bohuslav 1932. The Functions of Literary Language and Its Cultivation. In: Havránek, Bohuslav; Weingart, Miloš (eds.), *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*. Prague: Pražský lingvistický kroužek, 1–15.
- Holt, Richard 1989. *Sport and the British: A Modern History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Jackson, Steven A.; Beauchamp, Mark R. 2010. Strategic Communication in Sport: Leadership and Identity Among NFL Quarterbacks. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 22(3): 321–339.
- Jakobson, Roman 1960. Linguistics and Poetics. In: Sebeok, Thomas A. (ed.), *Style in Language*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 350–377.
- Jones, M. 2009. *Franchise Nation: Marketing Professional Sports in Postmodern America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- King's Ransom 2005. Directed by Jeff Byrd. Written by Wayne Conley. Burbank (CA): New Line Cinema.  
— 2009. Directed by Peter Berg. *ESPN Films, 30 for 30*.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. 1999. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz. Stanford (CA): Stanford University Press.
- Lebel, Katie; Danylchuk, Karen 2014. An Audience Interpretation of Professional Athlete Self-Presentation on Twitter. *Journal of Applied Sport Management* 6(2): Article 13.
- Lotman, Yuri M. 1978. Text and Function. In: Lotman, Yuri M.; Piatigorsky, Alexander M., *Soviet Semiotics and Criticism: An Anthology*. Translated by Ann Shukman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 233–244.  
— 1990. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. Translated by Ann Shukman. London, New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Markovits, Andrei S.; Hellerman, Steven L. 2001. *Offside: Soccer and American Exceptionalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Mathesius, Vilém 1929. Functional Linguistics. In: Vachek, Josef (ed.), *Praguiana: Some Basic and Less Known Aspects of the Prague Linguistic School*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 121–142.
- Miller, David 2001. *Globalization and Sport: Playing the World*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Moneyball 2011. Directed by Bennett Miller. Written by Steven Zaillian and Aaron Sorkin. Based on the book by Michael Lewis. Culver City (CA): Sony Pictures Entertainment.

- Pegoraro, Ann 2010. Athletes' Use of Social Media in Sport Communication. *International Journal of Sport Communication* 3(4): 501–514.
- Potrac, Paul; Jones, Robyn 2009. Power, Conflict, and Cooperation: Toward a Micropolitics of Coaching. *Quest* 61(2): 223–236.
- Rowe, David 2019. Sport, Journalism, and Social Reproduction. In: Boyle, Raymond; Rowe, David (eds.), *Sport, Journalism, and Social Reproduction*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow, 1–15.
- 2019. *Global Media Sport: Flows, Forms, and Futures*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Sanderson, Jimmy 2013. *It's a Whole New Ballgame: How Social Media Is Changing Sports*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de 1966. *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Translated by Wade Baskin. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Smith, Aaron C.T. 2015. *Introduction to Sport Marketing*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Smith, M. D. 1979. Social Determinants of Violence in Hockey: A Review. *Canadian Journal of Applied Sport Sciences* 4(1): 76–82.
- Snyder, Curtis 2018. The Evolution of Digital Media in Collegiate Athletics. *Journal of Sports Media* 13(2): 45–60.
- Snyder, Timothy 2018. *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.
- SportBusiness 2019. *SportBusiness Consulting Global Media Report 2019*.
- Sports Business Journal 2025. The 2025 Sports Business Awards. *Sports Business Journal*, 12 May 2025.
- The Last Dance 2020. Directed by Jason Hehir. *ESPN Films and Netflix*.
- Turman, Paul D. 2018. *Communication and Sport: Surveying the Field*. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications.
- Van Gorp, Baldwin 2007. The Constructionist Approach to Framing: Bringing Culture Back In. *Journal of Communication* 57(1): 60–78.

— 2007. The Constructionist Approach to the Study of Translation. *Language and Intercultural Communication* 7(3): 173–192.

Vrooman, John 1995. A General Theory of Professional Sports Leagues. *Southern Economic Journal* 61(4): 971–990.

Whannel, Garry 2002. *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*. London: Routledge.

Zimbalist, Andrew 2010. *Circling the Bases: Essays on the Challenges and Prospects of the Sports Industry*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

## Resümee

### **Sportlase identiteedi konstrueerimine Ameerika profiliigades: professionaalse spordi semiootiline analüüs**

See magistritöö uurib sportlase identiteedi kujunemist Ameerika Ühendriikide profispordi kontekstis, keskendudes NBA-le, NFL-ile, NHL-ile ja MLB-le. Töös väidetakse, et sportlase identiteet ei ole pelgalt soorituse tulemus, vaid sümboolne konstruktsioon, mida kujundavad lepingud, meedia, statistika ja institutsionaalsed süsteemid. Põhiteooriana kasutatakse Juri Lotmani semiosfääri mõistet, mille kaudu näidatakse, kuidas sportlased tegutsevad tähendustest struktureeritud keskkonnas, kus saavutus muundatakse turuväärtuseks, brändiks ja avalikuks isikuks.

Töö keskmes on väljakul ja väljaspool väljakut eksisteeriva identiteedi vaheline pinge. Kuigi sportlik saavutus avab tee profikarjäärile, kujuneb identiteet läbi väliste süsteemide: mängijate lepingud toimivad sümboolsete tekstidena, meedia kujundab domineerivaid narratiive ja statistika muutub võrdluse ning väärtustamise tööriistaks. Isegi spordikeel muutub – üha enam kasutatakse ärikeelega omaseid mõisteid, kujutades sportlast nii esineja kui ka korporatiivse figuurina.

Igas peatükis käsitletakse erinevaid identiteedi kujunemise tahke – alates lepingute ja liigadesse üleminekute sümboolsest rollist kuni riitumisreeglite ja meediabrändinguni. Töös kasutatakse ka lingvistilisi, majanduslikke ja meediateoreetilisi lähenemisi, et mõista, kuidas sportlased muutuvad institutsionaalses süsteemis äratuntavateks ja kaubastatavateks märkideks.

Kokkuvõttes selgub, et sportlane peab lisaks füüsilisele saavutusele oskama navigeerida märgisüsteemide maailmas, mõistes koode, mis määratlevad tema ja ta töö väärtuse ja legitiimsuse. Semiootika – eriti Lotmani raamistik – võimaldab seda protsessi tõhusalt analüüsida. Kui spordi monetiseerimist on palju uuritud, siis sportlase identiteedi semiootiline analüüs on endiselt piiratud – ning see töö täidabki osaliselt selle tühimiku.

## **Non-exclusive licence to reproduce the thesis and make the thesis public**

I, Daniel Prokes

1. grant the University of Tartu a free permit (non-exclusive licence) to reproduce, for the purpose of preservation, including for adding to the DSpace digital archive until the expiry of the term of copyright, my thesis

### **CONSTRUCTING ATHLETIC IDENTITY IN AMERICAN LEAGUES: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF PROFESSIONAL SPORT**

supervised by PhD Elin Sütiste, PhD Nelly Mäekivi, PhD Silvi Salupere

2. I grant the University of Tartu a permit to make the thesis specified in point 1 available to the public via the web environment of the University of Tartu, including via the DSpace digital archives, under the Creative Commons licence CC BY NC ND 4.0, which allows, by giving appropriate credit to the author, to reproduce, distribute the work and communicate it to the public, and prohibits the creation of derivative works and any commercial use of the work until the expiry of the term of copyright.

3. I am aware that the author retains the rights specified in points 1 and 2.

4. I confirm that granting the non-exclusive licence does not infringe other persons' intellectual property rights or rights arising from the personal data protection legislation.

D.P.

20/05/2025