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## The Locker-Room Librarian: The Maradona of literature dissemination

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### ABSTRACT:

*What is the similarity between a book and a football? Given imagination, you can do tricks with both. What is the similarity between karate and promoting literature among young people? They are both martial arts. What is the similarity between a locker-room librarian and an athlete? They both aim for peak performance.*

*For most libraries and librarians the school system has up to now provided the only avenue for promoting literature among children and young people. The project "Sport and Reading" is different, arising from the realisation that many youngsters spend much of their spare time training or playing for their local team or sports club and that this can provide an arena for the locker-librarian, the Diego Maradona of reading.*

*The locker-librarian is part of a larger initiative aimed at sports in general, both top-class athletes and the everyday amateur. His or her task as a professional librarian is to promote literature by direct contact with youngsters in training throughout a wide range of sports and clubs. Each librarian and club is supplied with a bag of books, some 50 titles, to be loaned out, read and exchanged among the young members. The club will also be visited by both professional writers and interested sports personalities. When a locker-librarian promotes literature in this way, the use of imagination can be compared to the art of dribbling in a game of football. Anything is possible. However, it cannot be denied that there is a widespread notion that top athletes have no interest in literature. This corresponds to the widely-held belief among many young people that literature is boring and only to do with school lessons and homework. The Norwegian website, bokpallen.no, however, often invites sports personalities to talk about and recommend books, thus disproving the general belief that professional athletes have no interest in literature. In this way both sports and the art of reading can contribute to putting two common prejudices to rest, while at the same time improving their own images. Surely this is an ideal win-win situation for both camps.*

At this moment I would like to go 22 years back in time, to the World Soccer Championship in Mexico in 1986. We are well into the championship, and have reached the quarter finals. It's England against Argentina. Or I should rather say: On one side of the centre line there is England. On the other side stands a short, stocky man named Diego Armando Maradona. He stands, unchallenged, as the best soccer player of all time. Eleven Englishmen are facing one small Argentinian.

Five minutes into the second half it happens. Diego Maradona is catching up with a cross which is about to land inside the penalty line. He is alone with the English goalkeeper, Peter Shilton. The big, in all meanings of the word, Shilton appears to be in control as he rushes out to knock the ball away from little Diego. But something happens in the moment that little Diego jumps up to head the ball. A sort of ... miracle ...

Because Shilton's hand hits only empty space. And the ball apparently hits little Diego's head, and he can just steer the ball into the empty goal. Little Diego runs towards the corner flag, with both arms outstretched in triumph. He throws a barely discernible glance at the referee. The score is 1-0. The score is 1-0 for Diego Maradona. Against England.

What nobody noticed, apart from Shilton and an alert photographer positioned behind the goal, was that little Diego himself had knocked the ball into the goal. Even when looking at a replay of the scoring this is impossible to see to this day. Afterwards, when questioned whether this shouldn't be seen as a rather dirty and unsporty trick, or even as downright foul play, little Diego answered, quite truthfully, that the scoring was not made by his own hand. On the contrary, it was the Hand of God. So no reproaches please... And I will continue to use little Diego's Christian terminology: Everybody was greatly horrified and frightened by what they saw and heard. Apart from the Argentinians themselves. What the rest of the soccer world forgot was that in Argentinian soccer foul play is accepted as long as it is done in style. As long the cheating bears the signature of the street-smart trickster, everything is OK. And as long as you can get away with it, the applause is yours.

Since then, little Diego has wandered far and wide among us, and it bears mentioning that in the same match he scored an even more miraculous goal than the one known as the "Hand of God", if only to confirm who possessed the courage, the will and the ability to perform miracles on that sweltering afternoon in June 1986.

My starting point for recounting familiar events from World Championship history is this: What can little Diego teach us about the promotion of literature? To youth? I will return to this point in a minute. First, however, I would like to tell you about the project "Sports and Reading". This project is run by the Association for Promotion of Reading, and is financed by the Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority, among others. The locker-room librarian is a key figure in this project. "Sports and Reading" targets sports groups at the elite as well as mass level. Put simply, a locker-room librarian is a librarian who promotes literature directly to young people in the context of sport, within a wide range of athletic disciplines and clubs. In support, the librarian and the club receive a book bag containing approximately fifty titles. Each book bag contains a core of titles, and the selection is further adapted to the age level and wishes of each club. These are provided, loaned, read and exchanged underway.

There is some truth in the myth that says that athletes are not avid readers, and those who engage in the world's major sport, soccer, are even less so. When athletes are asked by the media to state their favourite book, more often than we like the response is that they do not read books, and the last time they did so was in school. This is the situation in Norway, and I believe the description is also valid for the rest of the world. This serves to establish two sets of prejudices concerning reading and literature. First: Athletes do not read. Second: Literature is boring, and is only connected to homework and other imposed obligations. "Sports and Reading" aims to dispel these prejudices. It is just not true that athletes do not read, and there is a greater diversity here than we believe. The part of the project that targets elite sports comprises, for example, the website [www.bokpallen.no](http://www.bokpallen.no) (The Book Rostrum), where famous athletes recommend literature. The idea is that many young people admire star athletes, and the presentation of these as readers will consequently influence the notions of reading as an activity among young people. I would like to add that prior to the start of this year's Norwegian soccer elite series, a newspaper ran a feature on my own favourite team, SK Brann. A group of the club's players had formed a reading group, and they stated that this activity had served to establish a new kind of fellowship among them, which in turn had a unifying effect on their performance during matches. It was also a pleasure to see the top player of the club and the Elite Series, Thorstein Helstad, among the most active members of the reading group.

In addition, many top-notch athletes state that they are concerned with performance (of course they are). But in order to perform, they need not only large amounts of training, they also need rest and recreation. And this is where literature comes in. The athletes turn out to be readers, because they have experienced the recreation to be gained from immersing themselves in a book.

Myth or no myth: A locker-room librarian often finds himself far removed from the safe haven of his own bookshelves. Furthermore, the locker-room librarian often visits the lion's den known by most of us as "boys and reading". And on top of everything he must also relate to a group that few, if any, promoters of literature have dared to meet. In such situations, the participants in the project may feel the need to invoke higher powers.

Here, I return to Diego Maradona. Prior to all my visits to locker rooms I think of little Diego. For what reason? Because he taught me how to be brave. He dared to go for it while the whole world was watching, and to do something nobody held to be possible. This qualifies him to be the patron saint of all locker-room librarians.

Little Diego requests us to defy the rules. On several occasions back home in Norway I have claimed that the library sector is characterised by a "we-have-always-done-it-this-way" type of attitude. Everybody has followed the rules, and nobody has either failed completely or accomplished anything spectacular. At that time in '86, when little Diego rushed into his duel with Shilton, was he thinking: "Now I must follow the rules, and consider the FIFA requirements to fair play"? I don't think so. On the contrary, he wanted to push the limits and defy restrictions so that with his performance what previously was a rule turned into something more and completely different from what the rest of the soccer world thought. Because a handball that nobody sees – is it really a handball? No, it was turned into the "Hand of God". You can think whatever you want, but one thing is certain: The statement bears witness to the soccer god's fertile imagination.

How can a locker-room librarian defy the rules? Having Diego Maradona as your idol encourages you to shed some of your excessive respect for the book as a medium. In turn, this gives courage to go beyond the text in your literary mission, and to be less true to the original. Being true to the original involves an endless recounting of the content. This rendering of the content represents a kind of “fair play” with a book. Being true to the original means looking for the message that the author wishes to impart. Looking for the “theme” represents another type of “fair play” with the book. These methods make for poor literary communication. What I want to impart when I stand there, book in hand, in front of a group of thirteen-year-olds, who wonder what I am doing in their locker room, is the emotional experience. The emotions are far more important to impart than the book itself. If there is no emotional impact, communication will collapse before we have even reached the name of the author and the title of the book. The book is the ball, and we need to play it as we see fit. On these occasions, unlike in school, we do not think of the message that the author intended the book to have. Little Diego would never have let himself be restricted by these rules had he been in my shoes. With the book as my ball, I have the right to be reflective. I am allowed to be reflectively occupied with excitement, thrills, laughter and joy, pain, pleasure and bodily experiences of all kinds, even sex, when I communicate a book. Everything can be put in relation to sensory experience.

Defying the rules also implies that one should not underestimate the target group. The first evaluations of “Sports and Reading” showed that many of the librarians held the selection of books in the book bag to be too sophisticated, or not adapted to the target group. The target group itself, as well as the trainers, claimed that the level was chosen well. I believe that these diverging opinions, in addition to a fair amount of underrating, also testify to the fact that athletes know full well that an effort is required in order to gain achievements. More than half the titles in the book bag usually consist of so-called “adult literature”. This is in fact one of my pet obsessions: Young people can read “adult literature”. Young people need to be challenged. I am not sure whether such challenges can be derived from typical “youth literature”. At least not in Norway. It is unfair to say that Norwegian books for youth do not deal with challenging topics, because they often do. However, somewhere there is a stifling doctrine that says that everything should be in appropriate amounts. If a book is challenging you, it must do so in an appropriate manner. If a book is about sex, it should be in appropriate amounts. If a book is brutal, it must be appropriately so. If a book treats the topic of drugs, this must be done to an appropriate extent. And what I like least about books for youth: They must have “a hopeful twist”. They are rarely left with an open ending, and they must communicate hope. The school system has gone far in this direction, and has dug itself so far down in some fields that students can hardly read books without running into conflict with one or other system of values, some basic theories of learning, the ability to show empathy, or some commercially based anti-bullying campaign.

In my opinion this is contrary to how we usually discover the world of books. In any case it is contrary to the spirit of sport. In sport, do we claim that the best place to be is in the middle of the ranking? This can be transferred to the world of books. Do we wish to read “mid-ranked” books? My experience as an athlete is limited, but I make up for it with my experience as a supporter of a soccer team. I know that being ranked in the middle is the worst position of all. There is nothing to fight for. There is nothing that threatens to tear you apart and confine the remains to darkness. There is nothing that promises to raise you up in

euphoria and make you almost fly by yourself. Only the battle against relegation to a lower league, or the fight for medals, will make you feel alive. The middle position on the ranking table is lukewarm. The mid-table position is half-hearted. So we spit out what comes from this position because it is emotionless – neither hot nor cold.

Little Diego would never have become the world's best soccer player if he had not experienced emotional highs as well as lows. He put these emotions into the ball. A locker-room librarian can transfer these emotions to books and literature to bring his communication in harmony with the call heard from both the stands and the locker room: you must suffer for the team shirt. This is the effort required for you to experience the golden moment when the boy or girl who had never bothered to read anything comes up to you when you've finished to say that he or she would really like to read some of the books you have brought. At that moment you know that you have succeeded in communicating something new and unexpected to a coming reader. At that moment, you have contact with the "Hand of God" of literature. And at that moment, you can send a thought of sincere gratitude to Diego Maradona – the master of imaginative soccer. And, as I have said, the patron saint of all locker-room librarians.

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