

I Think Therefore I Play

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Book Review

Pirlo, A. with Alciato, A. (2014) *I Think Therefore I Play* (Backpage Press: Glasgow) Pages 200. £6.99. ISBN 9781909430167

What can high profile athletes' autobiographies offer to sport business scholarly community and practitioners alike? Despite the social media explosion in recent years, which has offered fans of sport an access to athletes that they have not previously had, it can still be difficult for academics to reach these stars for research purposes. Thus, the reading of autobiographies may be one such way for sport business academics to gain an insight into the thoughts of these high-profile athletes; after all, they are arguably key stakeholders in the global game, especially those with prodigious talent that cannot be replaced easily.

Andrea Pirlo is one of the most successful footballers of the 21st century, winning five Italian Serie A titles, two UEFA Champions League trophies, and the 2006 FIFA World Cup, being named man-of-the-match as Italy were victorious over France in the final. Yet, perversely, these successes seem to be a footnote in Pirlo's career; in his autobiography, only one Serie A title is mentioned, success in the 2003 Champions League is not mentioned, while the pinnacle of his career, winning the 2006 FIFA World Cup is tinged with regret. While Pirlo goes into detail about the pressure of taking the first penalty in a penalty shoot-out to decide the World Champions, his revelations of the aftermath of this momentous occasion is almost lost as he reveals that a move to Real Madrid broke down in the months following the tournament. Perhaps this is indicative of the mind-set of an elite performer; that it is the losses and defeats that stand out in his mind rather than the successes.

Much of Pirlo's autobiography is standard footballer autobiography fare, but as the title of the book alludes to, Pirlo is perhaps a deeper thinker than the average footballer. There are three key subjects in the book that should be of interest to sport management academics; match fixing, doping and the introduction into football of Qatar. His opinions on gambling in football are thought provoking; arguing succinctly that gambling on the second and third tiers of Italian football should be banned due to the financial problems of the leagues, with many players not getting paid on a regular basis. Pirlo reasons that, in order to supplement their meagre incomes, players agree to manipulate results, and bet on these arrangements with bookmakers. He also criticises the Italian system of banning any player aware of teammates attempting to fix matches, possibly out of support of his former manager at Juventus, Antonio Conte, who received a four-month touchline ban for failing to report a teammate who was involved in match fixing. In addition to banning betting, Pirlo believes that 'positive incentives' would also help eradicate the issue, controversially proposing that a club who is not involved in a match should be allowed to offer financial incentives to encourage other teams to be win matches. Pirlo offers a view from inside the game that academics with an interest in corruption may have otherwise not been aware of.

Pirlo also has opinions on sport outside of the insular world of football. He stops short of accusing opponents of taking performance enhancing drugs, but is highly defensive of football in comparison to cycling, a sport which has had a well, documented problem of doping. It appears that Pirlo is fond of the sport, but takes offence at cyclists accusing footballers of being spoilt and 'prima donnas'. Pirlo argues that football is 'undoubtedly a clean world' in

comparison to cycling, believing that it is too easy for cyclists to deny taking drugs, and compares Lance Armstrong unfavourably to the *Calciopoli* match-fixing scandal in Italian football, which saw Juventus relegated to Serie B and stripped of two titles, while Pirlo's club, AC Milan were deducted points. While Pirlo is fiercely critical of those cyclists who dope, he is sympathetic of the onerous expectations put on riders, arguing that if the stages of races were shorter, fewer cyclists would be inclined to dope. Pirlo's solution to teach young cyclists about the perils of doping is 'shock treatment'; making them aware of those who have died in suspicious circumstances. Pirlo's views offer the sport management scholarly community the opinions of a stakeholder who is directly affected by corruption in sport. Furthermore, it is perhaps these key stakeholders whose opinions are not generally sought by academics, who can provide potential solutions.

The book finishes with an insight into the introduction of the Middle East into the world of football. The directors of Al-Sadd, a Qatari football club, met with Pirlo with the intention of transferring him. Al-Sadd offered Pirlo 13 million a year, in addition to use of a private jet, Ferraris, and most surprisingly, offered to build a school especially for Pirlo's children, employing only Italian teachers. This is indicative of the levels of excess that the Middle East has injected into world football, with the region now a legitimate stakeholder in the world game. Pirlo declined the offer, citing his reluctance to emigrate, yet it is unlikely that all footballers who are offered this sort of remuneration would spurn the opportunity to earn a life-changing amount of money, especially those in the twilight of their career. At the time of the book's publication, no player of Pirlo's standing within the game had moved to the Middle East. Yet, in summer 2015, Pirlo's contemporary, the legendary Spain and FC Barcelona midfielder Xavi Hernandez joined Al-Sadd. There is little in the public domain regarding the incentives that tempted Xavi to move to Qatar, yet Pirlo's detailing of the offer he received provides scholars with an insight into the extent that those in Qatar are prepared to go to in order to penetrate the global football market. It seems unlikely that Xavi would be the only star name to join a Qatari club, yet it remains to be seen whether he will have a similar impact to that seen of David Beckham in the USA. As Pirlo's accounting of the financial incentives offered allude to, should there not be an influx of footballers playing in the Middle-East in the future, it is unlikely to be due to financial reasons.

Andrea Pirlo is without doubt one of the most successful players in the world game since the turn of the century, yet it is only through an autobiography that academic scholars can start to gain access to the thoughts of such an athlete. Where the book perhaps lacks detail is in the management of the clubs with which he played. There is little attention paid to, for example, the management styles of the different managers he played for, particularly considering the levels of success that Pirlo's teams have had. It would have been particularly interesting to know the methods used by the management of AC Milan to help those involved in the 2005 Champions League final recover, or how the managerial style of Marcello Lippi helped unite Italian players to become World Champions just twelve months after the aforementioned *Calciopoli* match-fixing scandal. Nevertheless, for sport academics, this book offers a fascinating insight into the thoughts of one of the top footballers of the past decade.