

**Against All Common Sense. The Mediatized Legend of Juve Caserta
between Basketball Epics, Aged Sports Celebrities, and Collective Memory
in the Docu-Series *Scugnizzi per sempre***

Mario Tirino

Università degli Studi di Salerno

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Abstract

This article investigates the TV docu-series *Scugnizzi per sempre* (2023) as an example of narrative mediatization of sports. Using narrative analysis and media content analysis applied to television seriality, the article aims to focus on three essential elements:

- 1) the identification of the thematic cores that develop the celebration of the epic feat of the Juve Caserta basketball club;
- 2) the ways through which the RAI docu-series (re)connects fandom with the aged sports celebrities and the collective memory of the Scudetto victory (1991);
- 3) the analysis of storylines and sequences through which the docu-series elaborates a kind of reflexive mediatization (or meta-mediatization), recounting the role of news media and communication technologies within the series' storytelling.

Keyword: Sports celebrity; Basketball Epics; Mediatization of Sports; Sports Cultures; Collective Memory.

Warning

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1. Sports docu-series in the theoretical framework of mediatization

The media have a crucial influence on the development of sports cultures (Kennedy and Hills, 2009; Hutchins and Rowe, 2013). The theoretical concept of mediatization significantly aids in comprehending the intricate connections between media and sports cultures and practices (Tirino, 2019a). Mediatization refers to the widespread integration of media into various facets of daily life and sociocultural, economic, and political activities. Frandsen (2020, pp. 16-17) offers a valuable framework highlighting the critical aspects of the mediatization of sports. This framework: 1) emphasizes the study of reciprocal interactions between media changes and sports evolution; 2) illustrates how media induce transformations in sports organizations, occurring in “waves” (Couldry and Hepp, 2016); 3) identifies media-driven processes that can lead to long-term alterations in individual behaviors, organizational structures, and the social fabric of sports; 4) explains the significant variations in media’s impact on sports across different disciplines, different groups within the same sport, national contexts, and historical periods; 5) proposes a comprehensive analytical approach, connecting mediatization to other major processes like globalization, commercialization, and individualization, which drive notable social changes in sports. The mediatization of sports manifests in diverse ways, influenced by historical, cultural, and economic contexts (Tirino, 2022).

Due to this theoretical framework’s heuristic and epistemological strength, I find it appropriate to analyze sports-themed television series as part of the many phenomena that come together in the meta-process of the mediatization of sports.

The specific role TV seriality plays in contemporary sports storytelling can only be understood if we highlight those mediological properties that unite TV series and serialized sports events (Tirino, 2023b). Sports competitions and TV series share three fundamental attributes.

First, both follow the principle of serialization. The serial production of items and content has shaped the foundation of the modern cultural industry (Smith, 2018): from the late nineteenth century through the 1930s, pulp magazines, film serials, radio dramas, and comic books paved the way for the serialization of nearly all media narratives (television, video games, technological gadgets, etc.) in the following decades (Scolari *et al.*, 2014; Tirino, 2019b; Tirino, 2023c). Likewise, the regular national and international tournaments of numerous team sports (football, basketball, volleyball, rugby, handball, water polo, field hockey, baseball, etc.) are structured in fixed, cyclical, and repeatable fixtures. This serial aspect has promoted the integration of sports shows among the cultural content that has most rapidly influenced the collective imaginary and imagination of entire generations in the Western world (and beyond) (Wenner, 1989; 1998).

Second, with the growth of available spaces, driven first by the liberalization of telecommunications markets and then by digitization, a multitude of media operators (local, national, global) have enhanced the potential of sports content in attracting broad, interclass, intergenerational, and, in some cases, international audiences (Tirino, 2019a; Frandsen, 2020). Around the premium content (the live broadcasts of the matches), a series of supplementary content has developed: it is thus possible to distinguish a “center” (the match) and a “periphery” (the pre- and post-match programs) of each sports event (Puijk, 2000). This expansion of the sports narrative allows us to establish a second parallel between the serial television narrative and the (journalistic) narrative of sports events: I’m

talking about their transmediality. By transmediality, we mean here “the characteristic feature of those communicative projects, based on the dispersion of content units over multiple media, within universes of meaning, marked to varying degrees by expansion, coherence, and diegetic consistency” (Tirino, 2019b, p. 23). Just as TV series branch out into extensions on other media, which expand their storyworld through the narration of details, backstories, spin-offs, etc., on media such as novels, video games, movies, and comic books (think of the transmedia universe of series such as *Stranger Things*, 2016 – ongoing: Alamino-Fernández, 2020; Tirino, 2023d), similarly, sporting events are communicated to viewers through a variety of content distributed across multiple platforms and media environments, in each of which a piece of knowledge is added (commentary, analysis, discussion, UGC, etc.) (Tussey, 2018; Tirino, 2019a).

Third, the structural similarity between TV series and regular sports tournaments concerns their dramaturgical framework. As we have seen, both series and championships (especially of team disciplines) are divided into episodes/days. Each series episode is usually structured according to the dramaturgical mechanism of three acts (character introduction, struggle and conflict, and resolution) (Pisanti, 2022). In any case, the dramaturgical elements that drive any audiovisual narrative are structured according to an alternation devised by the scriptwriters between moments of *stasis* and moments of *pathos* and affective “intensity”, in which the peak of emotional tension is reached. Similarly, individual sports matches involve different moments of igniting spectators in varied forms according to the specific disciplines. For example, a basketball match consists of four quarters. If it is kept in balance, the last few minutes are marked by passages of extreme emotional tension, such as awarding free throws, calling timeouts, making three-pointers, etc. Because of these media characteristics, TV series can narrate sports phenomena with sharpness (Tirino, 2024).

A first, fundamental dichotomy allows us to distinguish documentary series from scripted series (i.e., fictional, in that they are based on original scripts). Although this dichotomy should not be understood in absolute terms, since even docu-series always follow a script that, in some way, “fictionalizes”, reconstructs and reshapes the facts being told, it does allow us to circumscribe patterns and forms of documentary seriality on sports topics (Tirino, 2023b).

Based on the themes addressed, I enucleate five main types of documentary TV series of the last decade.

1) In the first category, which can be labeled “Curiosity”, I include series devoted to the telling of (a) minor practices (i.e., *Cheer*, 2020-2022, Netflix), (b) secondary champions (i.e., *Losers*, 2019, Netflix), and (c) lower leagues of better-known sports, with a specific focus on the theme of redemption and recovery of young athletes with complicated pasts (*Last Chance U*, 2016-2020, Netflix).

2) The second category, “Backstage”, includes serial behind-the-scenes narratives of professional sports in synergy with the organizations (leagues and clubs) involved. The main reason for the interest in this type of product lies in the access to places usually precluded from the public gaze, such as locker rooms, offices, and environments of the daily life of athletes, coaches, and managers. Most of these series are dedicated to football clubs with an extensive fanbase. Arguably, the most accomplished examples of this typology are *Formula 1: Drive to Survive* (2019 - ongoing, Netflix), which reproduces in the seasonality of TV series the “storyline” of the world championships of one of the most popular disciplines globally, and *The Last Dance* (2020, Netflix), which traces the legendary last feat of the

Chicago Bulls NBA team, in which global stars such as Scottie Pippen and Michael Jordan played.

3) In the third category, “Popular Passion”, we can include serial products essentially concerned with telling the story of the connection between sports, local identities, and cheering, such as *Sunderland ‘Til Die* (2018-2024, Netflix), and *Basketball or Nothing* (2019, Netflix).

4) The fourth category, “Biopics”, collects TV series to celebrate a sport’s champions and legends. Variants of this typology are: a) series dedicated not to the entirety of a champion’s career, but only to a specific experience (such as *Maradona en Sinaloa*, 2019, Netflix, or *Save Our Squad with David Beckham*, 2022 - ongoing, Disney+); b) series dedicated to multiple legends of the same sport, as in the case of boxers in *The Kings* (2021, Showtime); c) series aimed at reconstructing the legendary history of a club (*Winning Time: The Rise of the Lakers Dynasty*, 2022-2023, HBO) or a competition (*Becoming Champions*, 2018, Netflix) through the stories of champions.

5) A fifth and residual category includes TV series linked to the classic model of investigative TV journalism: examples include *The Dark Side of Sports* (2021, Netflix), *Fifa Uncovered* (2022, Netflix), and *The Fight for Football - The Super League Case* (2023, Apple TV+), which expose cases of corruption, power struggles, violations and various crimes.

Most of the documentary series of the last decade are commissioned by the video-streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, which prefer single-season products structured over six to eight episodes. Rarer are multi-seasonal series (such as *Last U Chance*, *Last U Chance: Basketball*, 2021 – ongoing, Netflix; *Cheer*, and *QB1: Beyond the Lights*, 2017-2023, go90-Netflix) and miniseries structured over three to four episodes (such as *Neymar: The Perfect Chaos*, 2022, Netflix).

The docu-series *Scugnizzi per sempre*²⁸ can be traced to the third category. It chronicles the legendary rise of Italian basketball club Juve Caserta (henceforth simply JC) from the minor leagues to winning the Scudetto, the only club in southern Italy to succeed in the feat. Scripted by Sante Roperto²⁹, Vincenzo Cascone and Gianni Costantino, also the director, *Scugnizzi per sempre* is produced by Tramp Limited and RAI Documentaries and distributed by Italian public broadcaster RAI.

2. Research questions and methodology

The research questions are:

- 1) how does documentary storytelling develop the *topoi* of the sports feat?
- 2) What is the role of ageing champions? How do their presence and time-scarred bodies reconnect fandom to the collectively shared historical memory of a triumph in which city and team have totally merged?

²⁸ In the Treccani dictionary, the definition of *scugnizzo* is as follows: “masculine noun (feminine “scugnizza”) [Neapolitan term, believed to be derived from *scugnare* (to scratch, to break, derived from Latin *cuneus* (wedge)]. – Neapolitan brat, with its characteristics of a cunning and intelligent boy, lively, willing to “make do” with even poorly honest expedients; with broader signification, brat, street boy, also used outside the Neapolitan milieu” (<https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/scugnizzo/> [last accessed 13.05.2024]).

²⁹ Roperto also wrote the book *Dinastia Gentile. L'uomo dell'ultimo tiro* (2016), dedicated to the basketball history of Nando and his two sons Stefano (1989) and Alessandro (1992), both basketball professional athletes.

3) As a form of narrative mediatization of sports (Tirino, 2024), does the docu-series elaborate discourses on the role of the media in the narrated events and, more generally, on the phenomenon of the informative mediatization of sport?

Various techniques can be used to analyze TV series. I will utilize two specific methods for this paper: media content analysis and narrative analysis.

Media content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) enables the identification and examination of a corpus of media objects according to specific parameters related to the research's cognitive objectives. There have been attempts to apply media content analysis specifically to TV series (Chamieh, 2016; Döring and Poeschl, 2019; Blanco-Herrero and Rodríguez-Contreras, 2019; Kaya and Ozdemir, 2020; Chapoton *et al.*, 2020). According to the cognitive objectives of this article, media content analysis will be used to isolate audiovisual sequences, which will then be included within homogeneous content classes in line with the thematic cores identified with narrative analysis.

Narrative analysis of a TV series (Allrath *et al.*, 2005; Petridis, 2020) involves two main activities: examining the plot structure to understand the sequence of events, plot twists, and character development and systematically exploring narrative arcs to investigate overarching storylines across episodes or seasons. In line with the objectives of this paper, my narrative analysis will focus on plot elements (characters, narrative turns, directorial choices, etc.) and narrative arcs essential to studying how basketball cultures are portrayed in the TV series *Scugnizzi per sempre*. The primary criterion for classifying the analyzed elements is their connection to the process of mediatization and the associated commercialization and globalization of contemporary professional basketball. This criterion helped isolate specific contents that were analyzed using Jason Mittell's (2015) concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic norms of serial narrative. Employing these two conceptual tools – intrinsic and extrinsic norms – enables a thorough examination of the narrative strategies used in the series to address the themes of this paper. This approach allowed us to identify various main sub-themes present, to varying extents, across the TV series, which were comprehensively analyzed through two rounds of viewing all episodes conducted between December 1 and 30, 2023, and between March 1 and 15, 2024.

3. Extrinsic and intrinsic norms: a media content analysis of *Scugnizzi per sempre*

Harris and Hills (1993), in a study devoted to how some news outlets had covered the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) men's basketball tournament, pointed out that journalism has chronicled the sport using essential storytelling based on the achievement of victory and the elemental contrast between the star athletes, whose excellent qualities are enhanced in the context-team by the coaches.

More recently, Karakaya and Manning (2021) have analyzed how, in the post-COVID-19 period, numerous narratives of American basketball have taken on a nostalgic mood, partly due to the success of the TV series *The Last Dance*. The nostalgic sentiment is mainly fueled by the regret of a more authoritarian, “masculine”, and less globalized game, on the one hand, and by the presence of players who tie themselves to the same team for many years, on the other hand.

The two cases cited above allow us to highlight the many ways in which, both in news media and in fictional narratives, sports (and basketball in particular) can be told. According to

Kretchmar (2017), sports and fiction share a semantic, structural, and cultural kinship. However, even nonfictional cultural products – from journalistic articles to documentaries (TV series and films) – are organized according to easily individual storytelling principles.

The narrative analysis allows us to bring out serial television storytelling's extrinsic and intrinsic norms. According to Mittell (2015, p. 167), extrinsic norms concern “the genre, creative team, network, or codes of the television medium itself”. *Scugnizzi per sempre* can be interpreted as a docu-series on sports topics, that is, an audiovisual narrative in which themes related to sports, its protagonists, and/or its audience and fandom occupy such an essential role in the narrative that they condition its very interpretation (Crosson, 2021, p. 3). An exciting element of the creative team is that the series is the brainchild of producer Attilio De Razza, a former basketball coach, and Gianni Costantino, a director, and screenwriter from Caserta who experienced the JC epic firsthand, just like screenwriters Sante Roperto (while the third screenwriter, Vincenzo Cascone, was not yet born on the day of the historic scudetto). Based on these elements, it is easy to identify a strong motivation of the creative team, linked to their origins and a passion for telling the story of basketball in all its dramaturgical and affective nuances. The docu-series, produced by Tramp Limited and RAI Documentari, consisting of six episodes of 50' each, was broadcast in the late evening on RAI 2 in August 2023 and was simultaneously released on the free video streaming platform RaiPlay (where it can still be viewed). This placement severely limited its success. However, thanks to word-of-mouth and on-demand availability on the Raiplay platform, *Scugnizzi per sempre* has experienced a fair amount of fame, becoming a small cult sports serial and marginal critical feedback. However, although small in number, reviews of the series have been generally positive and, in some cases, enthusiastic³⁰. The show is part of a copious production of documentaries dedicated to sports by Rai Documentari and made available on the open-access platform RaiPlay³¹.

The intrinsic norms of a television series teach the viewer “how to watch and what to expect from future episodes” (Mittell, 2015, p. 168). They include the form of serialization, the basic narrative structure, the aesthetic choices, the physical and psychological characteristics of the protagonist and the other characters, the linguistic peculiarities, and the settings. *Scugnizzi per sempre* presents a fascinating narrative structure. On the one hand, each episode has its leading and identifiable theme: the first episode, *Palla a due* [Tipoff], recounts the birth of the JC myth; the second, *La reggia del basket* [The palace of basketball], is dedicated to the construction of the legendary Palamaggiò, the sports hall in which JC

³⁰ See Ametrano, 2023; Carelli, 2023; Cesarano, 2023; Falanga, 2023; Grasso, 2023; Marino, 2023; Sollazzo, 2023; Valesio, 2023.

³¹ Series includes *Sports Stories* (2019-2020, 11 episodes), *Velocità. La leggenda della Motor Valley* (2024, 6 episodes); films includes *11 metri* (2011, Francesco Del Grosso), *Ragazzi di stadio, quarant'anni dopo* (2018, Daniele Segre), *Butterfly* (2019, Alessandro Cassigoli, Casey Kauffman), *This is not Cricket* (2019, Jacopo de Bertoldi), *Paolo Rossi - Un campione è un sognatore che non si arrende mai* (2019, Michela Scolari, Gianluca Fellini), *Il migliore. Marco Pantani* (2021, Paolo Santolini), *Vola, Luna Rossa* (2021, Cristian Di Mattia), *Enzo Ferrari. Il rosso e il nero* (2022, Enrico Cerasuolo), *Er gol de Turone era bono* (2022, Francesco Micciché, Lorenzo Rossi Espagnet), *Il viaggio degli eroi* (2022, Manlio Castagna), *Alberto Tomba. Vincere in salita* (2022, Tommaso De Boni), *Gilles Villeneuve, l'Aviatore* (2022, Giangiacomo De Stefano), *La bella stagione* (2022, Marco Ponti), *Due con - La storia dei fratelli Abbagnale* (2022, Gianluca De Martino, Felice V. Bagnato), *Il tempio della velocità* (2022, Tommaso Cennamo), *Azzurro Shocking - Come le donne si sono riprese il Calcio* (2022, Azzurra Di Tomassi), *Tiro libero. Basketball World Cup* (2023, Mirko Alivernini), *Dino Meneghin. Storia di una leggenda* (2023, Samuele Rossi), *sempreXsempre - Noi Italia 2023* (2023, Mario Maellaro), *Ma chi sei, Mennea?* (2023, Luca Di Bella), *Numero 3, Sara Gama* (2023, Fedora Sasso), *Nino La Rocca. Una vita sul ring* (2023, Luca Lancise, Federico Sisti), *Adesso vinco io* (2024, Herbert Simone Paragnani, Paolo Geremei), *Vincenzo Nibali: il 7° campione* (Marco Spagnoli, 2024), *Formula biancorossa* (2024, Michele Melani).

has played for more than two decades; the third episode, *Gli eterni bonsai* [The eternal bonsai trees], recounts the team's difficulty in reaching the highest levels of national basketball; the fourth, titled *Il profumo della vittoria* [The Scent of Victory], focuses on the first success, the victory of the Coppa Italia; in the fifth, *La grande scommessa* [The Big Bet], the decision to give up the most representative champion, Oscar, to change the technical-tactical set-up of the starting quintet is recounted; the sixth, *L'ultimo canestro* [The Last Basket] celebrates the resounding victory of the championship. Thus, the documentary is based on a somewhat recognizable anthology plot. On the other hand, however, the "hooks" between one episode and the next are equally prominent and underscored by narrative assertions, summarized in questions such as "Will JC succeed in challenging the domination of the Northern Italian teams?", "Will the *scugnizzi* Nando Gentile and Enzino Esposito succeed in crowning their dream?" and so on. In this way, the running plot is equally solid and engaging. The basic narrative structure of the series is based on dramatizing the sports history of the JC basketball club. As we will see more fully in this section, the essential dramaturgical conflict based on the basic narrative structure is the contrast between a small provincial reality in Southern Italy and the big basketball teams in Northern Italy. Around this core, the different storylines branch out. The aesthetic structure of the documentary is based on the juxtaposition, in itself not highly innovative, of three types of content: interviews with the protagonists (athletes, coaches, managers) and witnesses (wives, fans, journalists) of the feat; stock footage, drawn from the archives of RAI and local television networks; and fictional reconstructions. The latter turns out to be quite successful, thanks to the apt casting choice of hiring two young basketball players, Antonio Formato (as the young Gentile) and Michele Foschino (as the young Esposito). The physical and psychological characteristics of the protagonists will be analyzed in more detail in the following section. At the same time, the linguistic peculiarities of the series include the use of a technical language typical of basketball and a mix of Italian language, Neapolitan dialect, and mispronounced Italian by Brazilian (Oscar), Bulgarian (Gluškov), Slavic (Tanjević), and American (Dan Peterson) protagonists.

4. The construction of the legend of Juve Caserta through the *topoi* of the sports feat

To achieve the research objectives of this article, I will focus primarily on how the narrative structure of the series is configured to reflect the symbolic pillars of the JC epic. Right from the opening bars, the series highlights how JC's feat transcends the sporting dimension to become part of Caserta's social history and the local and national collective imaginary. In this sense, JC applies to the entire city and South by synecdoche. The connective element of this feeling of belonging is the awareness of irreverence, unscrupulousness, and courage that make JC an emergent club and the city an emerging reality without reverential fears or feelings of inferiority. The three statements that open the documentary are straightforward: "It was [...] an epic, one of a kind. Eight players from Caserta, a coach from Caserta, a young President from Caserta" (Gianfranco Maggiò, son of President Giovanni and then president himself); "[we were] a united group of youngsters who came from the street to try to achieve a dream" (Nando Gentile); "we were revolutionaries, people don't like revolutionaries" (Bogdan Tanjević, coach of the team between 1982 and 1986). The revolutionary dimension of this epic is underlined, moreover,

not only by Tanjević's explicit words, but also by the use of the rebellious song *Yes I Know My Way*, which the Neapolitan singer-songwriter Pino Daniele recorded in 1981, in the opening credits. Therefore, the first element in constructing the legend is the identity belonging that binds all the protagonists (including the foreigners) to the city of Caserta.

The second element concerns the foundation place of the Caserta epic: the small window of an anonymous bar bathroom, used as a "basket" by Nando Gentile and Enzo Esposito in a city poor in sports infrastructure. The contrast between the poverty of this founding place, from which the dream of the two *scugnizzi* starts, and the feats they will achieve in the following decades is a compelling narrative contrivance to restore the greatness of this epic.

The third building block is the descent of the *deus ex machina*, who takes the form of an outsider from faraway Brescia: the builder Giovanni Maggiò. The entrepreneur entered the company thanks to the insistence of the Piccolo brothers, who brought basketball to the city in the early 1950s and created a flourishing youth sector. Maggiò settled in Caserta for love and realized a human, entrepreneurial, and sporting path of enormous value. JC landed in the top Italian championship (A1) thanks to the courage of his choices: the hiring of the revolutionary coach of the Yugoslavian national team, Tanjević, the manager Giancarlo Sarti (a former Italian national team basketball player, who had consolidated experience in the national and international markets) and, finally, the Brazilian star Oscar Schmidt. At the same time, he developed his construction company, which grew to a thousand employees working on construction sites throughout central and southern Italy. Giovanni Maggiò is loved by the city of Caserta and admired nationwide not only for his managerial skills. Three of the testimonies collected by the authors of *Scugnizzi per sempre* are enough to restore the widespread appreciation of his human qualities. Nando Gentile recounts an episode of his debut with the Italian national basketball team, which took place precisely in Caserta, when the president ran into him, opened the zip of his tracksuit shirt, and, looking at the national team uniform, was moved (Ep. 01x03). Tanjević, on the other hand, says that Maggiò had "the tenderness of a poet in human relations" (Ep. 01x03). Oscar, Gentile, and Dell'Agnello, in similar words, say that a handshake was all that was needed to enter a contract with the president because his loyalty to the pacts was unquestioned.

But Maggiò's role is incredibly decisive in building the fourth founding element of the Caserta legend: the construction of the Palamaggiò. To meet the demands of the team, which due to the regulations of the Italian Basketball Federation was forced to play all its home games in the city of Rieti, the president performed an authentic miracle: in just one hundred days, on a plot of land he owned, he managed to build an innovative sports hall (equipped with luminous scoreboards, an entrance corridor, a small gym for pre-game training, comfortable and spacious changing rooms, etc.). Giovanni Maggiò built Caserta's new sports hall with his funds thanks to an enlightened vision of the entrepreneur's social role³², like Adriano Olivetti's (Berta, 1980). The construction of the Palamaggiò has multiple meanings. As various accounts in the series attest, for the southern public, it demonstrates that, in an area accustomed to atavistic slowness in the construction of public works and transportation infrastructure, it is possible to realize projects of national excellence. For this reason, for Caserta, the Campania region, and the entire South, Maggiò's miraculous

³² Son Gianfranco's testimony in this regard is quite eloquent: "[My father told me] Young man, remember that when an enterprise like ours reaches a large size, profit should no longer be seen as an end, but as a means. We have a duty to make this profit benefit not only our family, but the whole community around us. This is the duty of the entrepreneur" (Ep. 1x02).

operation is a source of identity pride, so much so that it expresses an almost sacred respect for the facility³³. The mythical aura has accompanied this place since its construction, as Gentile and Esposito testify about the daily pilgrimages to Castelmorrone to watch the progress of work on the sports hall building site. The sports hall becomes an authentic “basketball palace”: the arena exalts the home team through the choruses and choreographies of the warm Caserta fans and intimidates many opponents, who – also due to the location in the middle of the countryside – have the feeling of entering a sort of lions’ den (this is supported by Olimpia Milano player Antonello Riva, Ep. 01x02), as happened centuries earlier to gladiators entering the nearby Roman amphitheater of Santa Maria Capua Vetere. The “Palamaggiò effect” is such that in that competitive season (1982-83), JC won promotion to A1. The Palamaggiò replaces the old facility, built in the city’s center, for the 1969 European Basketball Championships. Because of its urban location, the old sports hall was easily accessible to young people, who often began to watch JC games and admire the first local sports celebrities, such as center Mario Simeoli and point guard Antonio Di Lella.

After the mythology of the Casertan *scugnizzi*, the founding place, the *deus ex machina*, the building of the house of heroes (the Palamaggiò), the fifth element in the construction of the basketball legend is the advent of the leader: the revolutionary Bogdan “Bosha” Tanjević. The coach came from the Yugoslav national team and was immediately in tune with the environment in Caserta, which was very fond of Slavic basketball precisely because it found in its performers those characteristics (swagger, wild talent, cunning, etc.) that united them with local players. However, the coach’s revolution is mainly about imposing a work ethic and merit, resulting in devastating workouts and resetting the hierarchy. The new “vision” of basketball promoted by Tanjević allows for the promotion of many young people to the first team, one of whom – Nando Gentile, at only sixteen years old – becomes the youngest captain in the A League in any era. Enzino Esposito, in the series, confirms that the coach’s charisma is such that Tanjević trained them “not only technically, but humanly”. The commander set up the 4/5 of the quintet-base of JC: alongside local sports celebrities, playmaker Ferdinando (Nando) Gentile and point guard Vincenzo (Enzino) Esposito, inseparable since adolescence, young Italian champion Sandro Dell’Agnello in the role of power forward and Brazilian star Oscar Schmidt in the role of small forward. These are the main protagonists of the JC epic, joined by wingmen such as play guard Sergio Donadoni (more than 20 years with the club) and center Georgi Gluškov (the first player from an Eastern bloc country to compete in the American National Basketball Association). A privileged role is given to the two *scugnizzi per sempre* (forever) Nando and Enzino. Their mythmaking, in the series, is also realized through the story of the “baptism by fire”, that is, the moment when they both perceive the concrete possibility of becoming champions. For Nando, two years older, this moment coincides with the inauguration of the role of captain (at only 16 years old) and then with the first dazzling performance against Cantù, in which he towers over one of the legends of Italian basketball, Pierluigi Marzorati. For Enzino, however, that moment is realized during a phone call from JC’s youth team coach Virginio Bernardi to his father Biagio to inform him of the outcome of the tryout – which the very young player secretly listens to from another device (the fictional reconstruction of the event is particularly effective, Ep. 01x01).

³³ “We almost tiptoed in, for fear of ruining (...) the parquet. For us it was something sacred” (Enzino Esposito, Ep. 1x02).

All these elements are functional in enriching the fundamental narrative pattern that fuels the myth-building process: the underdog narrative. This narrative schema permeates many American sports narratives (especially cinematic ones: Tirino, 2023a), as it relates perfectly to the self-fulfilling possibility of the Great American Dream (Vandello *et al.*, 2016). In this case, the David vs. Goliath narrative is declined as the sporting expression of a broader opposition between a politically and economically powerful North and a poor, marginalized South that is systematically penalized by an unequal distribution of resources. JC, a club with no particular basketball tradition, young and blazing, is forced to suffer many refereeing wrongs, since – even according to journalists who have closely followed the original events, such as Francesco De Core and Alessio Gallicola – the prestige of the big clubs of the North (Olimpia Milano, Virtus Bologna, Pallacanestro Cantù, Pallacanestro Varese, and so on) affects especially at the decisive junctures of the most important matches. Evidence of this “psychological subservience” of referees to the most prestigious clubs can already be seen in the 1983-84 Coppa Italia [Italian Cup] final. Several dubious refereeing decisions stop the newly promoted Caserta team, all of which favor Virtus Bologna. The event was repeated in the first scudetto series reached by JC in 1986-87 against Olimpia Milano. Equipped with more economic resources, a very high technical rate and players of the caliber of Mike D’Antoni, Dino Meneghin, Bob McAdoo and Roberto Premier, coached by Dan Peterson, Olimpia is favored in the direct clash with “little” Caserta. However, in game 1 (out of 3) in Milan, the referees whistled a questionable foul to Oscar in the first quarter, depriving JC of its player with the most scoring talent. Even if the David vs. Goliath psychosocial mechanism is determined by ideological and cultural factors that tend to overestimate the injustices suffered by “David” groups and subjects (Jeffries *et al.*, 2012), as even Gentile himself and the head fan Giacomo Aragosa admit in the series, the belief in referees’ favoritism towards the strongest clubs in the league is increasingly strengthened in Caserta’s public opinion.

Following a pattern typical of many mythic sports stories, the narrative of the basketball legend in the series is structured according to the canons of *rise-and-fall-and-rise biography* (Bifulco and Tirino, 2018). This includes the team’s ability to overcome dramatic moments, which could jeopardize its survival in professional basketball. The first difficulty came in April 1986, while the team struggled to play for its first historic access to the finals for the Scudetto. Giovanni Maggiò was arrested for alleged irregularities in his dealings with the Banco di Napoli. As rumors began to spread about JC’s ominous future, a second “blow” arrived: both manager Sarti and coach Tanjević informed Maggiò of their intention to leave the club at the end of that season. Faced with danger, Maggiò relaunched the challenge: he duly registered the team for the championship. He decided to entrust the first team to Tanjević’s assistant coach, Franco Marcelletti from Caserta, in his first experience as head coach. At the same time, Bulgarian Georgi Gluškov, from the Phoenix Suns, was signed as a center.

Despite widespread mistrust, Marcelletti, who had recruited Gentile and Esposito for the club’s youth teams, again managed to bring them to the Scudetto finals in the 1986-87 season against Olimpia Milano, still coached by Peterson. The opposition between Milan and Caserta becomes a constitutive element of the legend, configuring itself as the “perfect rivalry” between the two cities (Keskin *et al.*, 2016). On the one hand, there is the great metropolis, the political, financial, and economic capital of Italy, whose basketball club has a well-established tradition, a high-level roster, and an internationally appreciated coach. We

are in the midst of the years of the so-called “Milano da bere”, a historical period in which the political dominance of Bettino Craxi (leader of the Italian Socialist Party and for a time Prime Minister) and the entrepreneurial rise of Silvio Berlusconi are located within an effervescent atmosphere that accompanies glamorous events, fashion shows, commercial initiatives and cultural phenomena (theater, cabaret, television, and so on). On the other hand, a provincial city on the periphery of Italy feels that it belongs to a territory (Southern Italy) systematically robbed, mocked, and forgotten. The city identifies completely with its very young team, led by a rookie local coach with no sports tradition, which becomes a formidable driver of social revenge. The ups and downs punctuate every rise and fall biography and characterize this phase of the club’s life, making its narrative particularly compelling. Although defeated by Olimpia Milano in the 1986-87 finals, Caserta is now a recognized reality of national basketball. At the end of 1987, however, a shocking event occurs: the club’s true charismatic leader, President Giovanni Maggiò, dies of fulminating leukemia. Faced with the risk of a collapse of the sports project, the union between city, team, and club becomes even more total and fideistic. The series replays an emblematic sequence: in the first game following Maggiò’s death, in a Palamaggiò packed with fans, his son Gianfranco deposits a bouquet in the seat from which the president used to follow JC games. This scene is particularly effective in restoring the palpable emotion that could be experienced in Caserta in those days, which was also evident from the other sequence, in black and white, depicting the players carrying the coffin on their shoulders on the days of the president’s funeral. The death of President Maggiò, instead of marking a fatal blow to the history of JC, united all the components even more: his son Gianfranco perceived as “sacred” the commitment to crown his father’s dream of the Scudetto, even renouncing the billions offered by Virtus Roma, acquired by the Ferruzzi industrial group, for the purchase of Dell’Agnello; Nando and Enzino, being from Caserta, felt, even more, the responsibility of bringing a trophy to their city; the team became even more united on and off the court, becoming a true second family for many athletes, thanks to an atmosphere of light-heartedness and goliardery fuelled by jokes, dinners and numerous shared moments.

The fruit of this union was the victory of the first trophy, the 1987-88 Coppa Italia [Italian Cup], which allowed Caserta to shake off the label of “eternal bonsai” and participate in the 1988-89 edition of the European Cup Winners’ Cup. In the semifinals, the team accomplished a substantial sporting feat by beating Žalgiris Kaunas, in which some Soviet basketball legends such as Arvydas Sabonis and Rimas Kurtinaitis played. On March 14, 1989, in the final in Athens, where about 3,000 Casertans (about 5 percent of the entire population of the city) arrived, JC challenged another monumental club: Real Madrid. Coached by Lolo Sainz (leading the team for the fourteenth consecutive season), the Spanish lineup could count on some of the greatest European players of the time: center Fernando Martín (the first Spanish player in the NBA), small forward José Biriukov, and especially Yugoslavian point guard Dražen Petrović (who would win European and World Championships with the national team, before becoming famous in the NBA with Portland Trailblazers and New York Jets). The two teams created a match that has remained in the annals of modern basketball. Once again, however, a missed referee call on an alleged make to Nando Gentile, right on the edge of the buzzer, deprives Caserta of the chance to clinch the win in regulation time. At the end of this legendary game, in which Petrović scored 62 points and Oscar 44, Real Madrid copped the Cup, albeit by a tiny margin (117 vs 113). This stage in the club’s history has multiple bittersweet meanings. From a narrative and

mythological point of view, it corresponds to that meeting between the hero and the Dragon (Vogler, 1992): metaphorically, the hero (the JC team) is defeated by the Dragon (Real Madrid) but conquers the magic sword (the awareness of his strength). However, even 34 years after the events, the major players (Gentile, Esposito, Dell'Agnello, Oscar) cannot help but regret that they were only a few steps away from a historic international victory and failed to achieve it.

The following “block” in constructing the JC legend through the series storytelling concerns the brutal sale to Pallacanestro Pavia of Oscar Schmidt, the most talented basketball player and one of the globally recognized JC symbols. For the implications of the link between celebrity, aging, and collective memory, I will deal with this painful page in the club’s history in the next section. For now, suffice it to say that such a decision – in mythological and narrative terms – can manifest the betrayal and separation necessary for achieving the goal so longed for.

The construction of the JC legend concludes with the tale of triumph and subsequent fall. The 1990-91 season begins with challenges to President Giancarlo Maggìo and coach Marcelletti over the sale of Oscar. Nonetheless, JC arrives in great form in the playoffs, earning the third final series for the Scudetto, once again against Olimpia Milano. Thanks to the outstanding performances of the three leaders of the group – Gentile, Esposito, Dell'Agnello – and the ability of the recruits, Americans Tellis Frank (authentic “teammán”) and Charles Shackleford (the perfect center who took Gluškov’s place), Caserta can finally face Milan in a more balanced challenge than the previous ones. Olimpia Milano is experiencing a period of renewal. The new coach is Mike D’Antoni, the team’s former playmaker. Meneghin and Premier are no longer on the roster, but many talented youngsters (including Riccardo Pittis) and the two U.S. stars Cozell McQueen and Jay Vincent. The new addition on offense is pointing guard Antonello Riva, one of the most highly regarded Italian basketball players of the time, who – after long contending with Oscar himself – would win the record for total points scored in Serie A in 2000. TV series is adept at restoring the emotional tension accompanying the final series, which is condensed in Game 5. The match shapes up as the perfect fulfillment of the epic: JC starts ahead but faces yet another blow from fate. During the game, Enzino Esposito’s knee breaks. He stays on the sidelines despite the pain to cheer on his teammates. As both Gentile and Donadoni testify in the series (Ep. 01x06), that choice will motivate his teammates. Kept in the game by Sandro Dell'Agnello’s triples (30 total points), JC is led to triumph by its young captain Nando Gentile, who takes responsibility for two “impossible” triples, thanks to which JC keeps Milan at a distance for good. JC’s triumph remains the only scudetto won by a club from Southern Italy.

The sense that the Scudetto is the condensation of at least a decade-long cycle is represented in the series both through the testimonies of the protagonists and through a refined parallel montage that connects the legend’s beginnings and its fulfillment. First, coach Marcelletti compares the victory to a kind of liberation: “I felt a feeling of extraordinary lightness. It was just like removing a boulder from our shoulders”. Even more explicit is the testimony of Sergio Donadoni from Caserta, who played about 20 seasons for his hometown team: “At that moment, my whole sporting life was condensed into the space of a minute”.

Secondly, the authors make an evocative parallel montage between the fictional reconstructions of a hug between teenage Nando and Enzino and the archival footage of

their embrace on the Assago Forum's parquet floor after the match is over. Such a sequence establishes a perfect circularity between the beginnings of the JC epic and its highest peak. Enzino himself, with a trembling voice and moist eyes, says about that moment: "Nando came into the locker room and hugged me with tears in his eyes. And those tears meant everything. Everything. From the basket by the bar toilet to the 1991 Scudetto triumph in Milan" (Ep. 01x06).

The exceptional nature of the success explains the size of the celebrations that begin directly at the Forum of Assago (whereby any means almost 5 thousand JC fans arrive), continue at the Capodichino airport, and end in a packed Palamaggiò at 4 a.m. The triumph is the pinnacle of JC's history. The following years are marked by a gradual decline, with the farewells of all the key players and the coach of the Scudetto until the 1998 bankruptcy. A new club landed in A2 in 2004-05, and the club returned to A1 in 2008-09, remaining there until 2016-17, when it failed again and was excluded from the professional leagues.

Fig. 1. The Construction of Juve Caserta Epic

#	Historical event	Mythological meanings
1	The structuring of a deep emotional bond between club and city	Identity belonging
2	A bar toilet window used as a basketball hoop by Nando and Enzino	The founding place
3	Entrepreneur Giovanni Maggiò joins the sports club	The <i>deus ex machina</i>
4	The construction of the Palamaggiò	Building the House of Heroes
5	The hiring of Yugoslavian coach Boshka Tanjevic	The revolutionary leader
6	The 1985-86 championship final (laughed), Maggiò's arrest and the farewell of Sarti and Tanjevic (fall), the 1986-87 championship final (laughed), the death of President Maggiò (fall), the 1987-88 Coppa Italia [Italian Cup] victory (laughed)	<i>Rise-and-fall-and-rise</i> biography
7	The three finals series (1985-86, 1986-87, 1990-91) against Olimpia Milano	Opposition of cultural worlds
8	The European Cup Winners' Cup final (1989) against Real Madrid	The clash against the Dragon: awareness of one's own strength
9	Oscar's transfer to Pallacanestro Pavia (summer 1990)	Betrayal "necessary" to achieve triumph
10	Winning the Scudetto (21 May 1991) and the subsequent lapse into bankruptcy in 1998	The apotheosis and the end of the winning cycle

5. Aged sports celebrities, nostalgia, and collective memory

Three sequences in the series recount the emotional, almost "mystical" connection between the club and the city on the triumph. In the first, just off the plane that brought them back to Naples after the historic victory on the court in Milan, the JC players struggle to touch down on the short journey to the bus that will take them to Caserta, overwhelmed by the irrepressible joy of the fans. In the second, hundreds of cars, arranged on all three highway lanes, escort their heroes in front and behind the bus. Finally, in the third, the day after the success, all the players and executives carry a tricolor bouquet of flowers (white, red, and green, like the Scudetto) to the grave of Giovanni Maggiò, once again accompanied by a crowd of fans and citizens of Caserta. The testimony of one fan collected in the documentary is eloquent: "The whole city around me was a jolt. Even the concrete was vibrating. The JC's championship was a volcanic eruption" (Ep. 01x06).

The driver of this powerful team-territory bond is, of course, sports celebrities (Smart, 2005; Bifulco and Tirino, 2019; Bifulco *et al.*, 2022; Tirino *et al.*, 2022; Bifulco, 2023).

In sociology, Mills (2000, pp. 71-72) provides an early conceptualization of celebrity: “Celebrities are the Names that need no further identification. The number of people who know them exceeds the number of those they know, making exact computations unnecessary. Wherever celebrities go, they are recognized [...] Whatever they do has a publicity value. Continuously, over time, they become material for media and entertainment. And when their time ends [...] and they are still alive [...], people might ask, ‘Remember him?’. That is what celebrity means.”

As a sociological category, celebrity signifies distinction and social prestige. Essentially, celebrity is achieved through attracting attention and maintaining a presence in the public sphere. The individual/mass dichotomy is notably important: celebrities occupy public space as individuals with unique characteristics, while others are seen as audience, spectators, or the public. However, celebrity is not just a status that differentiates people; it is a form of capital that can be converted into various benefits. First, celebrity can be transformed into economic capital when famous individuals endorse brands and products, as consumers trust the values and meanings they convey. Additionally, celebrity can become political capital when celebrities run for office or support political movements. Lastly, celebrity can convert into health capital when famous individuals promote healthy lifestyles, disease prevention, and healthcare fundraising.

Celebrity intersects with various social spheres, such as cultural industries (television, cinema, and social networks), entrepreneurship, and, in this context, sports. Sports celebrity relies on two elements: athletic excellence and media exposure. Champions stand out due to their athletic prowess, but media narratives are crucial cultural factors. These narratives integrate celebrity culture into the contemporary social imaginary, recognizing the exceptional nature of champions’ stories and ensuring their visibility.

Nevertheless, celebrity is a result of negotiation among athletes, the public, and the media. Media facilitate a para-social relationship, offering spectators an illusory intimacy with athletes. This has intensified with social media, allowing athletes to manage their profiles directly, although many use social media managers. They interact with fans, curating aspects of their professional and private lives to align with their desired identity.

The theme of celebrity appears in the TV series in a twofold configuration.

On the one hand, in a small provincial town like Caserta, the national visibility guaranteed to athletes by their successes in basketball is a prerequisite for the emergence of local sports stardom. In particular, JC’s leaders are young, good-looking, well-built, muscular, tall boys: for this reason, soon, in addition to being acclaimed by fans for their performance on the playground, they become sex symbols. Gentile recounts a funny anecdote in this regard: often, after home games at the Palamaggiò, he would find notes on his car with the phone numbers of his female admirers. These, however, would ruin the car’s bodywork to such an extent that the player would phone the fans to insult them. The social relevance provided by media visibility also produces phenomena of emulation. Enzino Esposito recounts that, inspired by the film *Top Gun* (1986, directed by Tony Scott), he had purchased an Avirex jacket like the protagonist and that he wore this garment continuously as he strolled through the city center, dribbling with the beloved basketball he never left. In this way, that garment had become a “must-have” among Caserta kids. Of broader scope, however, is the Shackmania (Giudici, 2020) that broke out in Caserta with the arrival of American center Charles

Shackleford. His look, which seems straight out of Spike Lee's features such as *She's Gotta Have It* (1986) or *Do the Right Thing* (1989), includes a singular haircut known as a "flat top", inflatable shoes, the gaudy jumpsuits, the massive gold necklaces, gold earrings at both lobes. In the city, more and more young fans are inspired by his original style, and Esposito adopts the teammate's haircut. In the 1984-1991 period, the Palamaggiò became a center for exhibiting notoriety and status in the city and provincial scene, fueled by its proximity to local basketball celebrities. Middle- and upper-class ladies sport furs and jewelry, politicians, and business people try to grab the best seats to be close to the team and the club, and the priest Don Mario Vallarelli himself is one of the most ardent fans, as well as a spiritual guide for the athletes, managers and their families. The Palamaggiò is increasingly likened to the city's "forum", that is, the most important public space where not only identity belonging is claimed, but where social status, conflicts, and claims are staged (Pawlikowska-Piechotka, 2021). But the social and spectacular relevance of the Palamaggiò was such that it also became a stage for other sports celebrities of the time who were interested in attending JC matches: this is the case, above all, of Diego Armando Maradona and other soccer players at that time hired by Napoli Calcio.

On the other hand, a second and more exciting discourse on celebrity invests their ageing. The collective memory of the JC feat – and, therefore, of an unforgettable period for the city and province of Caserta – is reactivated first and foremost by the comparison with the aged bodies of the protagonists of that epic. The ageing of a sports celebrity is a formidable activator of memory since it triggers the immediate comparison between the young, muscular, performing bodies (portrayed in the archive images) and the trudging, bloated, worn bodies that appear in the present interviews.

The feeling that moves those who experienced the JC epic during those years is nostalgia. According to Davis (1979), this feeling would emerge with abrupt changes, reversals, transitions, turbulence, political uncertainties and crises. This hypothesis is echoed by the disappointments experienced by Casertans because of the difficulties faced by city basketball over the past 15 years. Rather than speaking of ruptures, Tannock (1995) elaborates on the concept of vertical and horizontal cuts in time, which considers the processes of continuity and discontinuity: vertical cuts create interruptions, ruptures, and discontinuities; horizontal cuts bring the past into the present and future and vice versa, establishing continuity. The series activates a form of reversibility between temporal continuity/discontinuity, using the aged bodies of sports celebrities as a device for representing the past in the present.

In some cases, such re-presentation leads to an acute sense of discontinuity, which emerges from comparing the winning and glorious past and the anonymous present. This storyline pervades much of the narrative. The comparison between the athleticism of the past and the heaviness, bloat, and decadence of the present harshly invests the bodies of sports celebrities. However, two symbolic elements – the Champion and the Palace – allow us to experience a possible mending of the rips of time precisely through the means offered by audiovisual storytelling.

The first element (the Champion) concerns Oscar's story. A valid symbol of JC, among the most talented players of all time, Oscar was nicknamed "Mao Santa" [Holy Hand] because of the extraordinary accuracy of his shot, which allowed him to hold the world record for career points scored for many years. Oscar arrived in Caserta in 1982, and his impact was devastating. Journalist De Core, in the documentary, recalls that, in the presence

of the lethal effectiveness of his shots, the commentator of his first official match in Italy (in Livorno, A2) at one point exclaimed, “But that’s not possible, cut off his hands!”. Oscar’s identification with the city of Caserta is total. His role as an offensive leader on the court is complemented by that of “adopted” son for President Maggiò, who builds a relationship of family affection with him, and of “big brother” with the younger Nando and Enzino, accompanied and protected in their technical, tactical and human growth. The 1989-90 season ended with a disappointing elimination in the playoff semifinals. The dream of reaching the Scudetto still seems far away. Among the managers (including Gianfranco Maggiò himself), there is some skepticism about the actual chances of emancipating from the label of “eternal unfinished”. Maggiò recalls Sarti to the company and, with him, begins a series of talks with the coach and the most representative players on the roster. A shared need emerges to impose change: a new coach, a new center, a new tactical set-up, and so on. In the end, the club’s resounding choice is the “cut” of Oscar, endorsed by Marcelletti, who wants to focus on a quintet with an equal distribution of shots to go along with the growth of Gentile, Esposito, and Dell’Agnello, and more devoted to transition play. The way the choice is communicated to the athlete is also controversial: Oscar is in training camp with the Brazilian national team and is updated by a cold call from Sarti. The aesthetic solution chosen by the authors of *Scugnizzi per sempre* is particularly effective. First, in the fictional reconstruction, Oscar eats alone at a table inside a diner while Nando and Enzino look at him with distrust and melancholy. Second, the authors focus on the evocative power of the celebrity’s aged body: his tear-smudged eyes, trembling hands, and uncertain voice restore to the viewers a repressed anger that not even a distance of 33 years has been able to bridge. “I was gone like I was nothing, and that affected me” (Ep. 01x05). However, there have been attempts over the years to recompose the rift (a tournament played between Pavia and JC, the farewell to basketball at Palamaggiò on May 8, 2003, and the award of honorary citizenship of Caserta in 2016), the wound of that forced separation from JC and the city of Caserta is still not healed, for Oscar and many JC fans. When commenting on the historic scudetto, Oscar’s words express both anger at not being able to contribute to the feat and pride in having been part of that history: “I would have done anything to win that final there... After the final was over, the first telegram Caserta received was mine... I felt part of that (...) I felt Casertan” (Ep. 01x06).

Shaw and Chase (1989) establish three conditions that would develop nostalgia: a linear sense of time, an apprehension of the failures of the present, and the availability of evidence of the past such as objects, buildings, or images.

These three conditions are indeed present in the story of the relationship between JC fans and Oscar: the linear sense of time lets one feel the distance from past glory; despair over the miserable present results further shines a spotlight on past achievements; and finally, physical symbols – such as the Palamaggiò (the Palace) – constantly call to mind the deeds of the Scudetto heroes. The medium of the recomposition between past and present – at least in the narrative form of serial storytelling – is the aged body of the sports celebrity.

Again, the visual solutions are effective in a delicate balance of montage between present and past. On May 20, 2021, the Palamaggiò, abandoned for a couple of years following another bankruptcy of the JC title-holding company, was devastated by an arson fire. In the series, the theme is introduced by a sequence in which a lone fan moves among the relics of the past (trophies, calendars, photos) ruined by the flames while whistling the most famous chorus of the JC fans: “I know / I know / I know / I’m crazy about you /you

know, you know, you know / that I live for you / it's for you, it's for you, it's for you / it's only for you / wherever you'll be, I'll be / I'll never leave you"³⁴. A quick cut and a montage connection operated through the sound of the chorus itself projects us into images of the Palamaggiò of the past, filled with fans singing the same song in an atmosphere of euphoria. If we consider the ability of objects such as trophies, photographs, blow-ups, and historical jerseys – collected in places such as sports museums – to activate the emotional and nostalgic components of collective memory (Snyder, 1991), we can better understand how much the Palamaggiò's fire was perceived as a direct attack on one of the symbols of the city. Emphasizing, in the series, Esposito declares, "It's like they set fire to the Royal Palace of Caserta, or if they knocked down the Eiffel Tower in Paris" (Ep. 01x06).

The authors of *Scugnizzi per sempre* try to heal the injustice of Oscar's "missed scudetto" and the pain of the offense caused to the Palamaggiò by exploiting the potential of audiovisual storytelling. In the final sequences of the TV series, the limp, hunched, weighted, stunted bodies, in some cases (like Oscar himself) exhausted by illness, of old sports celebrities gather, together with the two coaches who were the architects of the JC epic – Tanjević and Marcelletti – right inside the "sacred" structure. It is an opportunity to mend the wounds of history, operating an attempt to weld present and past: Marcelletti tries to explain to Oscar the reasons for that excruciating choice, and the Brazilian champion and Gluškov wear the JC jersey with the tricolor (reclaiming the scudetto they had not been able to earn on the court), the Palamaggiò – albeit only for a few hours – returns to being the temple of basketball it had been for more than thirty years.

If the memory of the JC epic continued even after the farewell of its protagonists, whose subsequent exploits in other clubs were experienced by fans as an extension of that unrepeatable sporting and cultural experience³⁵, it is reactivated through audiovisual storytelling. The connection with the epic is also evidenced by the continuous urge to return. Not only Oscar but also Coach Marcelletti (2004-07), Esposito (as assistant coach and coach, 2014-15), and Sandro Dell'Agnello (as coach, 2015-17) will return to Caserta³⁶. The most significant example, however, is captain Gentile himself, who returns to Caserta as a player (2003-04), as a coach (2019-20), and as an executive (2020-24). Although the relationship with the new club, Juvecaserta 2021, ended in April 2024³⁷, the circumstance

³⁴ The choir can be heard in the video available at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GywFDm40Hyk> [last accessed 13.05.2024].

³⁵ Nando Gentile won the 1995-96 Scudetto and Coppa Italia with Olimpia Milano, three Greek championships and a Euroleague with Panathinaikos, also becoming a national team staple. Enzino Esposito, after becoming a player-symbol of Fortitudo Bologna in the two-year period (1993-95), is the first Italian (along with Davide Rusconi) ever to land in the NBA wearing the uniform of the Toronto Raptors. Oscar gets multiple national and international awards: he was honored as one of FIBA's 50 Greatest Players in 1991; he was awarded the Olympic Order in 1997; Schmidt was inducted into the FIBA Hall of Fame, acknowledging his achievements in international competitions in 2010; since 2013 he has been inducted into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame; since 2016 he has been in the Italy Basketball Hall of Fame.

³⁶ Although post-career analysis of JC sports celebrities is outside the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that Gentile, Esposito, and Dell'Agnello have all pursued coaching careers (only the third with decent fortunes in A2). Oscar has been a manager in Brazilian basketball, trying to create an autonomous league from the Federation for the organization of the top league, and has unsuccessfully attempted a political career. Gluškov has converted his celebrity capital back into the political arena, recently (April 9, 2024) becoming Minister of Youth and Sports in Bulgaria. Charles Shackleford's affair, on the other hand, confirms how delicate the transition from end-of-career to post-career is for an athlete's mental and physical health: after several drug arrests and various court problems, the American champion was found dead in his home on January 27, 2017, at just 50 years old.

³⁷ See Pecci, 2024. At this link is the club's official statement: <https://juvecaserta2021.it/2024/04/25/si-dividono-le-strade-tra-gentile-e-la-juvecaserta-2021/> [last accessed 13.05.2024].

that the very captain and leader of JC continued to work with the basketball players on the youth team at the time the series was filmed allows the authors to open a glimpse of hope for the future, concluding the documentary with a child scoring a few points in basketball.

6. The narrative mediatization of sports as a self-reflective process

The mediatization of sports is a complex meta-process encompassing various other processes and phenomena. It manifests in two distinct forms (Tirino, 2024). The first form is rapid mediatization, driven by news media such as newspapers, radio, TV, and online news outlets. This form primarily focuses on extreme commodification and the spectacularization of sporting events, generating continuous content loops that both precede and follow the actual matches.

The second form is narrative mediatization, a slower process powered by narrative products like films, TV series, novels, comic books, and video games. This form delves into sports' cultural and social dynamics, often with a mythologizing purpose. TV series about sports, for example, contribute to this slow mediatization by depicting heroes and events across various disciplines within genres such as comedy, drama, and teen drama.

A clarification is in order. When we speak of narrative mediatization of sports, we refer as much to fiction products as nonfiction products (as in the case examined, *Scugnizzi per sempre*). Both types of media products operate through the scripting of events, with the only difference being that in the first case (fiction products) the events narrated can be invented entirely or be inspired by actual events; in the second case (non-fiction products), the reference to actual events is the basis of the script, albeit with a certain margin of tolerance concerning the narrative invention. For this reason, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is not ontological but must be framed within a variable dosage of references to reality.

When audiovisual products operating as agents of narrative mediatization of sports also address issues related to informational mediatization, we are in the presence of meta-mediatization or reflexive mediatization. Although *Scugnizzi per sempre* devotes a minority of space in the storytelling to the interdependence of media and sports, some passages are particularly interesting.

First, the series, however quickly, deals with the issue of sponsorship, which in Italian basketball assumed a dominant role from the 1970s onward. One of the most valuable concepts for investigating the phenomena associated with the mediatization of sports is that of the SMS triangle (Martelli, 2014). This theoretical tool allows us to identify a social configuration based on the balances between sports organizations (clubs, leagues, federations), media organizations (mainstream and emerging media), and economic actors (sponsors). At the center of the triangle is the public, which can play the triple social role of fans, consumers, and practitioners (Bifulco, 2019), thus being decisive in orienting the fate of the triangle. The stability of the triangle is ensured by the mutual benefits: sports organizations derive essential resources from the sale of television rights to the media organizations that win the relevant auctions; media organizations, through the signing of television subscriptions by fans and the sale of advertising space to advertisers, secure growing profits, in part because the audiences involved in major sporting events (referred to as “premium” products) can hardly be assembled with different content; brands, by

associating their products and services with entire events, and/or with sports organizations, and/or with individual athletes, gain direct economic benefits from the visibility and prestige of the entities to which they are linked. Beginning in the 2000s, at gradual rates depending on the contexts, digitization – understood as the third phase of mediatization (Tirino, 2022) – undermines the balances established in the SMS triangle, due to the dynamics of disintermediation (creating tensions both within each of the components and between the components). However, in the years since the rise of the JC, Italian basketball has become a paradigmatic example of the SMS triangle. Sponsorships have greater significance in basketball than in other sports, as clubs – in exchange for substantial sums of money – allow sponsors to name the team. In this sense, the testimony of a famous Italian sports journalist, Ivan Zazzaroni, who in *Scugnizzi per sempre* speaks of “selling out” basketball to corporations, even to the point of surrendering the “sacred” right of the club’s name (Ep. 01x01), due to the hunger for funding, appears significant. It reveals a residual bias of Italian sports culture concerning the commodification processes of contemporary sports.

Sponsorships indicate a twofold investment by companies: on the one hand, direct funding of the sports organization; on the other hand, a desire to commercially penetrate the territory in which the sponsored clubs operate, in addition to benefiting from the national visibility provided by the media. In the period (1982-1991) covered by the TV series, the JC changed four sponsors: Indesit (1982-85, home appliances); Mobilgirgi (1985-87, furniture); Snaidero (1987-89, furniture); Phonola (1989-93, home appliances). The possibility of being associated with a club not only ensures material economic benefits for brands but also allows them to enter the collective imagination, especially in the case of success. For example, the Italian champion JC will always be remembered as Phonola Caserta.

Informational mediatization synergizes with the meta-processes of commercialization and globalization (Tirino, 2019a; Frandsen, 2020). This means that the benefits of sponsorship are multiplied by the increasingly incisive role of media organizations in the economic and organizational life of clubs, leagues, and federations. In these years, the economic value of the Italian basketball industry (which decreases the distance from the football industry) increases, mainly due to the media coverage provided by RAI, which – by broadcasting an advance of the championship day every Saturday – fosters a significant expansion of the fanbase. Live television broadcasts ensure a growing widespread interest and a more substantial presence of personalities from entertainment, politics, and business, especially in the sports arenas of cities with an established basketball tradition, such as Milan and Bologna. The overall growth of the Italian basketball system results in a substantial endowment of club resources, which are also used to hire more and more foreign champions. Even in a small, though ambitious, southern Italian club like JC, players from Yugoslavia (Zoran Slavnić), Brazil (Oscar), Bulgaria (Gluškov), the U.S. (Joe Arlauckas, Mike Davis, Tom Scheffler, Frank, Shackleford), Argentina (Edgardo Parizzia, Horacio “Tato” Lopez) arrive in the 1982-1991 period. Added to this is the international visibility provided by participation in European competitions and related media coverage: in the Korać Cup, JC reached the quarterfinals four times (1983-84, 1987-88, 1989-90, 1990-91), the semifinals once (1986-87) and the finals once (1985-86, won by Virtus Roma); in the Cup Winners’ Cup, it reached the quarterfinals once (1984-85) and the finals once (1988-

89). Therefore, the growing appeal of Italian basketball results from this interconnection of meta-processes (mediatization, commercialization, and globalization).

A second core of *Scugnizzi per sempre*, which can be traced back to the mediatization of sports, relates to the role of sports journalism in the JC epic. Aesthetized newspaper headlines often appear in overlays throughout the series, summarizing and accompanying the audiovisual narrative. Recognizable in some archive footage is RAI journalist Franco Lauro (1961-2020), who has been the face of basketball on Italian television screens for many years. However, the passage dedicated to Casertan journalist Mimmo Mingione (1944-2011) arouses the most significant interest. The voice of all JC telecasts, Mingione soon became famous (first locally, then nationally), not only for the unmistakable timbre of his voice (slightly hoarse) but for the emotional transport that characterizes his storytelling. His colleague Flavio Tranquillo states, “he was able to insert the human side into what he did, and therefore, he was a precursor of everything that would come thirty to forty years later” (Ep. 01x04). Mingione anticipated the figure of the journalist-fan who would become established in Italy only in the following decades, but always choosing the tone best suited for the unique and legendary feat of the JC, the environment, and that historical moment.

A third core concern is the use of media devices for match preparation. While in current events, the use of artificial intelligence to process data and statistics in the service of match analysis is now a well-established phenomenon (Castellano, 2023; Campagnolo, 2024), the match preparation techniques of Marcelletti, nicknamed “The Professor”, may now appear to be sports media archaeology. However, the fact that Marcelletti would go as far as the newsstand that served the NATO base in Naples to buy American basketball magazines and spend hours studying Super 8 footage from the NBA is indicative of the meticulousness of the Italian coach’s study of basketball, which would become even more obsessive over the years (Ep. 01x01). Also, from a media-archaeological perspective, archive footage related to the first final reached by JC in 1986-87 shows the first applications of computer graphics in live broadcasts of sporting events in Italy (Ep. 01x03).

Finally, in the sequences of the last episode devoted to how the Scudetto final is experienced in the city of Caserta, the role of the old media (radio and television) in exploiting the liveness of media reporting (Gemini and Brilli, 2024) is extolled to build the euphoric feeling of belonging to an extra-territorial community of Caserta fans scattered throughout Italy who at the exact moment are accompanying their favorites, seeing and/or hearing their exploits through technological mediation.

7. Conclusions

This paper aims to show how the mediatization of sports is a much more complex and varied meta-process than has emerged in academic debate. In this sense, a helpful starting point is the distinction between the two “faces” of the mediatization of sports. If informational mediatization tends to produce effects in line with the meta-processes of commercialization and globalization of sport, narrative mediatization, through many media narratives, pays more attention to the social and cultural dimensions of sports phenomena.

Specifically, the sociological study of the storytelling of the TV series *Scugnizzi per sempre* first allows us to highlight the strategies for constructing the JC epic’s legendary dimension. This entails some reflections.

The TV series uses three types of audiovisual sequences (interviews, stock footage, and fictional reconstructions). This operation attests to how media products that act as agents of specific forms of narrative mediatization can use materials generated by news media for two reasons. On the one hand, RAI and local TV footage facilitate the orderly and comprehensible reconstruction of sporting events. On the other hand, like each media object, these news clips activate secondary recollection, that is, recollection not of sports events strictly but of radio and television broadcasts. However, narrative mediatization performs the function of constructing a mythological framework that - through storytelling tools, in this case serial - can restore the epic dimension of the sporting feat recounted. This dimension is more evocative the more the narrated feat has characteristics of uniqueness and unrepeatability. The mythologizing of the feat can be interpreted differently by different audiences: for audiences unaware of the history of Italian basketball, the TV series ensures awareness of an otherwise neglected sports legend; for those who directly experienced the JC Scudetto, the TV story serves as a memory activator through emotional connection; for the Caserta, Campania and southern community more broadly, *Scugnizzi per sempre* can stimulate pride and a sense of belonging.

But, beyond the effects on audiences, the choice to tell the JC legend in epicizing terms indicates how *Scugnizzi per sempre*, as an agent of narrative mediatization, creates content that can mobilize local communities through affective and cognitive storytelling.

This opens to a second reflection. One of the perspectives that this study could open is an in-depth investigation of the long-term effects that a media product can generate on collective memory and, in some cases, on public debate in the territory of the community to which it is primarily addressed. In this perspective, if *Scugnizzi per sempre* is based on the exaltation of the almost mystical link between club and city, it would be interesting to investigate whether the TV series has produced social and cultural effects through the study of social interactions in social groups, newsmedia articles (on and offline) and other materials. Such effects may range from increased awareness of the JC legend at the intergenerational level to public discussion about the prospects of local basketball. Some signs about the ability of the RAI TV series to stimulate community attention about the JC epic can already be traced³⁸.

A third set of reflections invests the issue of the sports celebrity body.

Modern professional sports have a vital commercial aspect. Athletes, clubs, leagues, and federations compete in the athletic and market spheres. Celebrity, bolstered by media visibility, translates into sponsorships, advertising, and various contracts, amplified by the global reach of stars and tournaments (e.g., Premier League and NBA). The commercialization of sports celebrity humanizes consumption (Rojek, 2001). Spectators who purchase endorsed goods or services feel connected to the star's lifestyle and values. Sports champions' celebrity appeals to companies because their lifestyle and choices become models to emulate. According to Smart (2005), consumers vicariously enjoy the athlete's exceptional qualities through shared consumption.

Moreover, sports celebrities are commodities, such as stars of media-sold shows and brands with specific economic value realized through advertising, sponsorships, and

³⁸ The premiere of the first episode of the series, at Villa Giaquinto in Caserta, on July 17, 2023, was attended by more than a thousand people, with some of the protagonists of the time in attendance (Ansa, 2023). In an interview with the newspaper "L'Arena", Coach Marcelletti recounts that he was stopped by several people in Caserta after the news of the series' broadcast spread (Perlini, 2023).

product launches. The body is crucial in this commodification process, valued for its performance, athletic prowess, and functionality. The athlete's body, adhering to contemporary beauty standards – muscular, groomed, often tattooed – becomes attractive to brands due to its erotic appeal and desirability. In essence, the celebrity body stands out for athletic excellence and represents the ideals of beauty, well-being, health, and success. The commodification of the athlete's body aligns with neoliberal ideology (Andrews and Jackson, 2011), which celebrates hedonism, individualism, and self-care as crucial identity components. Ultimately, the sports celebrity's body, as a site of desire and commodity, is crafted to have a symbolic impact on the public, serving as a model (Rojek, 2001).

Granted that such phenomena and dynamics are increasingly evident in contemporary mediatized, commercialized, and globalized professional sports, the forms of narrative mediatization of sports suggest that the aged body of a celebrity may develop other sociocultural discourses. For example, the mythologizing tone of *Scugnizzi per sempre* is functional in its use of the aged body of celebrity as a sociocultural agent capable of reconnecting past and present, under the banner of celebrating a glorious time.

In conclusion, the sociological study of the mediatization of sports, applied in this case to a TV series, allows us to appreciate the extreme variety of processes by which the media create various types of relationships with social actors in sports (audiences, athletes, managers, and so on). Concerning the social and cultural functions of sports storytelling, media products attributable to narrative mediatization can make us reflect on the mythical dimension of sports events and their value for the collective memory and identity of territories.

On the other hand, precisely in the awareness of the heterogeneity of impacts generated by the multiple types of interconnections between sports organizations and media organizations, it is important not to overemphasize the role of narrative mediatization. As the same activity of meta-mediatization or reflexive mediatization exerted by the TV series *Scugnizzi per sempre* demonstrates, the role of media organizations in the creation and consolidation of an SMS triangle of Italian basketball in the 1980s and 1990s reaffirms the relevance of informational mediatization in the commercialization and globalization of sport in differentiated historical and sociocultural contexts. This prompts the need for more and more studies to analyze the interdependence and conflict between informational and narrative mediatization of sports to describe the variety of disputes, interests, values, affects, and memories activated by the complex interaction between media and sports cultures.

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About the author

Mario Tirino is a researcher at the University of Salerno, where he teaches Media Communication Sport and Television and New Media. His research interests include the sociology of digital cultures (particularly about television seriality) and the sociology of sports communication and media. To these topics he has dedicated numerous scientific articles, published in collective volumes and national and international journals, and some edited books: *Sport e scienze sociali* [Sport and social sciences] (2019, with L. Bifulco, CONI Prize), *Sport, pratiche culturali e processi educativi* [Sport, cultural practices and educational processes] (2022, with M. Merico and A. Romeo), *Sport e comunicazione nell'era digitale* [Sport and communication in the digital era] (with L. Bifulco, A. Formisano and G. Panico, 2023), *L'atleta digitale* [The digital athlete] (with P. Russo and S. Castellano, 2024). He edited with Luca Bifulco an issue of the scientific journal "Im@go" on the theme of the sports hero (2018) and with Paolo Landri an issue of the scientific journal "Eracle" dedicated to the mediatization and platformization of cycling cultures (2022). He edits the scholarly series "Binge Watchers. Media, Sociology and the History of Seriality" (with M. Teti) and "L'Eternauta. Studies on comics and media" (with G. Frezza and L. Di Paola).