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‘Full speed ahead Barcelona’: the social construction of Roy Keane’s 1999 semi-final performance versus Juventus

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ABSTRACT

For over 30 years, the men’s UEFA Champions League (UCL) has showcased Europe’s most elite and wealthiest football clubs. Debates surrounding the competition’s best individual performance rarely reach a consensus. However, one common response points towards Manchester United’s Roy Keane versus Juventus in the 1999 semi-final second leg. After falling 2–0 behind within 11 minutes, Keane almost single-handedly swung the game in United’s favour as the final in Barcelona loomed. This article examines Keane’s performance through the lens of a sociological case-study, drawing on the circumstances of his career and the match itself. Critical attention is given to sociologist Everett Hughes’ conceptual belief of turning points, which has been innovatively applied to a single event in this paper. The author argues that, while statistics have typically driven performance analysis, only a sociological interpretation of Keane’s performance provides an accurately sophisticated comprehension of, arguably, one of the UCL’s greatest individual performances.

Introduction

As the men’s UCL reaches its 30th anniversary, debate has often arisen on the best matches, goals and performances. Whilst a consensus is rarely agreed upon, suggestions on the most impressive individual performances typically include Ronaldo versus Manchester United (2003), Steven Gerrard versus AC Milan (2005), Robert Lewandowski versus Real Madrid (2013), Lionel Messi versus Bayer Leverkusen (2012) and, the inspiration behind this paper, Roy Keane versus Juventus (1999). No objective answer or statistical analysis can prove which of these footballers made the biggest contribution within a single 90-minute match, and the decision to explore Keane’s semi-final second leg performance against Juventus is two-fold. Firstly, the 1998–99 season was a momentous one for Keane’s club, Manchester United, in their pursuit to become the first English team to win a domestic and European treble. Therefore, the wider implications of his performance proved to have great significance when reflecting on the history of the competition. Secondly, success in the match itself looked bleak for United after Juventus took a 2–0 lead inside the first 11 minutes. The Italians had not lost a European game at home since November 1995, whilst United had never won a competitive match in Italy. As English match commentator, Clive Tyldesley, put it “Manchester United need a minor miracle now”.1 That miracle came in the form of Roy Keane, who spearheaded an unlikely comeback for the English side with a headed goal mid-way through the first half. The scene was a rarity; Keane only scored three headed goals in his entire
professional career. An ill-judged lunge shortly after saw Keane receive a yellow card that would see him suspended for the final in Barcelona should his team progress. Undeterred by the disappointment, United equalized two minutes later and found a winner in the 84th minute, securing a famous 3–2 victory. Manchester United’s quest for European success continued with Tyldeley famously declaring, “full speed ahead Barcelona”. Albeit without their influential captain in the final.

Historically, performance analysis has been driven by a volume of statistics on both teams and individuals. Therein lies an issue with this approach. Statistics can often be manipulated to prove or, indeed, disprove most assertions and these offer a limited narrative of performance. This paper argues that by utilizing a sociological interpretation of an individual’s performance we are afforded a deeper understanding into the construction of world-class sporting talent. Remarkable sport performances emerge and develop through a network of several structural determinants and processual conditions. The researcher draws on the work of sociologist Everett Hughes, particularly his concept of career turning points which demonstrate how key moments and events in one’s life can mark significant transitions. This innovative approach of attributing Hughes’ ideas to a single event, in this case Keane’s performance versus Juventus, has not previously been explored by scholars. By taking this case study method we can further the understanding of exceptional sports performances beyond the limitations of statistics and offer a sociological awareness of how these performances are constructed.

This paper will begin by introducing Hughes’ theoretical perspective, before identifying the key turning points in Keane’s career up until 1999 and applying them to his performance against Juventus.

**Using Everett Hughes’ theory of ‘turning points’ in a sociological analysis**

One of the forerunners in theorizing the construction of careers through a sociological perspective is Everett Hughes, who studied and later worked as a scholar within the world-famous Chicago School of Sociology. He posits that the “joining up” of decisions and events within a man’s life would contribute to creating a unique life for the individual. Hughes’ arguments are rooted in the belief that when humans are faced with critical turning points, transitions or decisions throughout their life course, choices are made which influence and shape their journey and, more specifically, lead the individual from one “status” to another. Borne out of this confluence of ideas, turning points are impacted and interpreted through sociological and historical forces, wider social processes and key encounters with both individuals and core institutions. Whilst Hughes fails to clearly define the term “turning points”, he conceived it as a concept which depicts an individual’s life cycle alongside events in the wider world. Hughes’ work is characterized by attention to detail into people’s lives which scrutinize turning points and can be applied to work, family, recreation, religion and politics. Generally, the theoretical use of “turning points’ has been multiple, nuanced and complex. There have been subsequent uses of Hughes’ concept by scholars who sought to investigate the social construction of careers, with one of the most prominent being the work of Howard Becker, who undertook studies of jazz musicians, medical students, painters and photographers throughout his academic career. Meanwhile, DeLuca and Rocha-de-Oliveira focused on the career paths of tattoo professionals. More recently, Trejo and Williams used Hughes’ perspectives to analyse the early life and development of footballer, Lionel Messi. Whilst academic research into turning points is relatively rich and varied, there is a very prominent gap in the application of such ideas within the context of elite athletes and specific performances.

No common definition of turning points has been agreed upon amongst scholars, and many different terms have been used to, essentially, give rise to similar meanings, such as “revolutions” and “events”. To avoid the confusion caused by multiple interpretations, for the purposes for this paper the theoretical phrase “turning point” will remain throughout. Given that it has been suggested there is a subjective element when deciding what should be deemed a turning point, it will be productive here to clarify what this paper will classify as one. There are major transitions that individuals undergo in

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their life which can be deemed as normative, for example: going to school, getting married, starting a family etc. It is expected that these transitions will occur as they are experienced by most of the population and therefore these will not be taken into consideration. Within this paper turning points have been identified by their nature of disrupting the life course of an individual. The researcher suggests that they are consequential shifts that redirect a process, in this case the trajectory of Keane’s career and, by using Hughes’ perception, will lead Keane from one status to another.

Below, the researcher uses Hughes’ insights to chart the career of Roy Keane up until 1999, identifying turning points which saw Keane’s status change, and answering the specific research question: what prior circumstances and events allowed Roy Keane to possess the mental strength to undertake the performance of his career in that particular setting against Juventus, two-nil down, and playing a significant portion of the match with the knowledge that he would not feature in the potential UCL final? Whilst this paper could be open to criticism for hyperbole, after all it might be argued that, simply put, Keane had a strong desire for his team to reach the pinnacle of club competition, the researcher aims to open a more nuanced and novel perspective to performance analysis by offering an alternative viewpoint that stretches beyond statistics. This is not to suggest a bias against statistical methods, which unquestionably provide a level of insight into both team and individual performances. However, they clearly overlook cultural specificities of performance and the unique social and emotional ties entwined with it. Therefore, the researcher argues that without applying a sociological lens we will not gain such a sophisticated understanding into exceptional sporting performances.

A note on the approach to this study

A research approach involving detailed fieldwork has been adopted here, a method which has its origin partly in the teaching and research of Everett Hughes. Fieldwork for this research was undertaken in late 2020 and early 2021. Interviews were conducted with the following individuals, who were able to offer insight into both Keane himself and the turning points that had been identified: Eamonn Dunphy (journalist, broadcaster and ghost-writer of Keane’s first autobiography), Jim White (journalist for the Daily Telegraph and author of Manchester United: The Biography), Patrick Barclay (former Chief Football Correspondent at The Times and author of Football – Bloody Hell: The Biography of Alex Ferguson), Michael Geasley (Cobh Ramblers’ club president and historian, Noel Spillane (long-serving football correspondent for Cork’s Evening Echo and Examiner newspapers), Eoin O’Callaghan (broadcaster, journalist and author of Keane: Origins), Sean O’Hagan (journalist at The Guardian, whose well-known interview with Keane in 2002 focused on the psychology of the player) and Dave Hannigan (researcher and reporter for Irish national broadcaster, RTÉ’s 1997 documentary Have Boots, Will Travel). All quotes attributed to these individuals that feature within this paper were given during interviews, unless otherwise stated. Selected Keane (auto)biographies also proved useful as background to the player. Keane: The Autobiography, The Second Half and Keane: Origins were all referred to throughout the preliminary stage of research. Finally, television sources were reviewed as part of the research process. Have Boots Will Travel, which charted Keane’s ascension was particularly rich in insight and included an interview with him, and Inside the Mind of Roy Keane, a 2003 documentary, which attempted to provide a psychological profile of the player, were both used. Naturally, coverage of the semi-final versus Juventus was also studied via British terrestrial television network, ITV. These individual and collective narratives aim to provide exploratory context for investigating the turning points of Roy Keane’s career.

The key turning points of Roy Keane’s career

Within this section a range of key turning points in Keane’s career up to 1999 will be explored below and, in turn, related to the match itself.
Initial rejection from the Irish U15s and early turning points

Keane had little option but to have an interest in football. Growing up in Mayfield, a northern suburb of Cork, his family represented local teams before him and, consequently, Keane and his brothers were bred to play. When Keane joined Rockmount AFC as an eight year old his desire to win was strong. He could have joined a local club and saved the 14-mile round trip to Rockmount, but Keane wanted to play with the best, and Rockmount attracted the finest young players from all over Cork. Following Hughes’ perspective this moment led to a significant step in Keane’s journey from his relatively close neighbourhood into the wider domain of top-level youth football. Rockmount was one of the oldest and most successful youth clubs in the city; nonetheless, the youth-development infrastructure in Ireland had long been poorly implemented compared to other nations. Hence, from a young age, Keane’s dream was a move to England which was thought to bring both financial gain and improved social status. However, he had one significant issue working against him: his size. Noel Spillane described Keane as “small in stature and didn’t make the starting eleven for every game”. This was perhaps expected given that he was already representing age categories above his years. Keane recognized that his physical shortcomings could be alleviated through developing factors within his control: fitness, ability on the ball and a commitment to the sport that seemed out of sync with the petulance and restless energy of a hormonal teenager. Documentary footage shows that Rockmount had little concern over Keane’s size and his skills were not overlooked by onlookers, “Boilerman I used to call him … he was involved all the time”, recalled former Rockmount coach Timmy Murphy.

Keane’s ability began to attract wider attention when he, and several teammates, were selected for Ireland Under 15s trials. From Hughes’ perspective this led to a significant step in Keane’s journey from a relatively modest local setting with Rockmount, to the broader realm of international youth football. Eamonn Dunphy outlined the importance of the trials noting, “It was a watershed moment that, in many people’s eyes, would significantly diminish his chances of playing in England if he didn’t get in”. This period constitutes a key turning point for Keane and resulted in what Hughes termed one of many “personal problems” someone would face in their unique career. Keane’s local status was impressive, experiencing success with Rockmount and capturing his side to the Under 14 national championship in the Kennedy Cup. Teammates, Paul McCarthy, Damian Martin, Len Downey and Alan O’Sullivan were all selected to represent Ireland, but Keane was deemed too diminutive. He later described it as “the worst disappointment of my life”. This was further exemplified in our interview with Eoin O’Callaghan:

Logic would tell you that if your teammates are being selected for the national team and you’re not, as the skipper, why is that? What am I doing wrong? You are a key element of that group, yet at national level you are being overlooked. Does that drive you to prove people wrong? If you look at it in terms of early career disappointments Keane didn’t experience it much up to that point, beyond a micro level. It was a disappointed feeling the pit of his stomach and it was a strange feeling for him. In terms of his trajectory that followed, I’d say it was motivation for him.

The rejections and disappointments continued for Keane. A trial for Brighton and Hove Albion was arranged but fell through at the last minute. He wrote letters to every club in the top two tiers of the English league. Few replied and those who did offered formulaic “no thanks” responses. In Hughes’ terms, this period obscured Keane from progressing to the next phase of his social-life cycle. Whilst several of his peers secured their dream moves to England, Keane remained in Ireland waiting for his next opportunity. To understand this rejection we should take into consideration the powerful visceral quality of Keane, as illustrated by psychologist, Martin Perry, within the Inside the Mind of Roy Keane documentary:

Keane was rejected at the age of 15, which is a very sensitive age … In sport, rejection can impact someone in two ways. For some it can be confirmation they will never be good enough, they accept it. Winners never accept rejection. They use it as motivation to prove people wrong, which is exactly what Roy Keane has done.
Along with the popularly held notion that Keane’s physique was an issue for scouts, he encountered another barrier that there was little mitigation for – being from the Cork. Eamonn Dunphy said, “He [Keane] would often talk about the ‘fuckers in Dublin’ holding him back and that was huge motivation for him”. Dunphy’s stance was corroborated by Noel Spillane, “There was always a bias towards Dublin-based players”. This hypothesis permeated within several interviews conducted for this paper, with many acknowledging that being from Cork would be detrimental to Keane’s opportunities; a factor also recognized by scholars, where Dublin has long been considered a stronghold for football in Ireland. The perception of inferiority here, whether based on fact or fiction, is a significant consideration when exploring the mentality of Keane. He channelled his frustration and annoyance towards the decision makers and continued to develop with Rockmount. According to Noel Spillane, Keane was “desperate to prove them wrong and desperate to prove he was good enough”.

Traces of the determination and laser focus established during the formative stage of Keane’s career can be observed during the semi-final against Juventus. When his own nerve was tested following the yellow card, there was no time for disappointment or self-pity. As Professor Geoff Beattie suggests, this signifies the toughness in Keane’s character, a factor that was established during his developmental years:

Many other professional players in that situation wouldn’t contribute anything for the remainder of the game. The fact that he didn’t [crumble] … tells you about the inner strength of the guy.

Even as a youngster, Keane possessed a fiercely individualistic character, a factor that had been questioned when he initially failed to make the Irish Under 15s. As Keane justified, “The irony was that I had the temperament because I was so small”. Causing controversy is of little concern to Keane, and the expectations he set both himself and teammates was of the highest standard at youth and professional level. He would later glower with contempt when his more experienced Nottingham Forest colleagues laughed in the dressing room following relegation and loss of their Premiership status. Complacency had no place in Keane’s mind and his insatiable appetite for giving 100 percent, whether it be in training or matches, often transferred to his teammates. Commitment and excellence were expected, never more so than against Juventus when the entire team’s determination was challenged. Keane was a product of his environment, representing an Irish tradition of diligence. He later talked about how their response could have gone one of two ways:

Anybody looking to throw the towel in now had the perfect opportunity. Anybody seeking to prove that they were worthy of playing for Manchester United also had the chance to fucking prove it. It is moments like this that football becomes a mind game. How strong were we mentally? How strong were Juventus?

History tells us that the mental strength of United, carried by Roy Keane, won every subsequent battle. As Jim White told us, once Keane pulled a goal back, it was clear there would be only one winner.

**A sliding doors moment and new opportunities**

Ireland was gripped by an economic recession in the late 1980s, but for Corkonians, they had been battling the brunt of unemployment for years, foreshadowed by a manufacturing crisis that saw several large companies close their Cork-based operations in the early-mid 1980s. Therefore, it was unsurprising that Keane’s career choice, the dream of becoming a professional football player, was influenced by societal forces. This was alluded to by Eoin O’ Callaghan:

You have to think of how many men had their livelihood wiped out. This is not a point in history where you can pivot into different careers. The conversations with your classmates were always about where you would go – London, New York, Boston. The conversation was never about squeezing opportunities in Cork.
Keane was at a crossroad by 18 years old, and through applying the insight of Hughes his next step would prove crucial in the development of his journey. Following early disappointment, Keane was involved in the Irish youth national sides, but often at a distance. He eventually got called up to the Under 15s but failed to make the team against France. At Under 16s he was included in Ireland’s squad for the European Championships, however, served as one of two spectators for the duration of the tournament. John Connolly, the reserve goalkeeper, was the only other player not to feature. Keane harboured both a distrust and dislike for many of those in charge of the national set-up, a feeling that remained for much of his playing career. By 1988, the migration of those around Keane saw his own progress hampered. At national level there was a pattern of being overlooked and a feeling that he was good, just not good enough.

In 1988 the Irish government had announced a new initiative, the Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS), which provided opportunities for those on the unemployment register, offering educational courses that would better their chances of finding a job. This was a significant moment in Keane’s career and constitutes part of the events, according to Hughes, that would eventually drive Keane away from Cork, onto the next stage of his profession. In 1989, every League of Ireland club was entitled to nominate one of their players to participate in the FÁS training course. Keane perceived the scheme as an opportunity to put himself in the limelight and, relating to Hughes’ ideas, gain traction in name and status. He had options, both Cork City and Cobh Ramblers agreed to sign him, but Cork’s secretary delayed posting Keane’s registration to the Football Association of Ireland (FAI). This was a costly mistake on their part, and one of several sliding doors moments in Keane’s career. From a sociological perspective, this could be considered a “missed” turning point; one that in reality did not materialize but had real potential to have altered the trajectory of Keane’s career. What if Cork City had registered Keane? His place on the FÁS course was not guaranteed with Cork, nor was his position in the starting line-up. Keane informed Ramblers that if he could become their representative on FÁS he would sign for them. Through Hughes’ lens, this moment constitutes a crucial turning point for Keane as his status was enhanced with the move and sparked an opportunity that led to a momentous step towards a career in professional football. The FÁS course allowed Keane to test himself against the best young players in Ireland by training all week in Dublin, before returning home at the weekend to represent Ramblers. He described the travelling and training as “brutal” and “more intense and structured” than anything he had experienced before. However, this experience saw Keane develop from “a boy to a man”, where he had grown in both height and strength. Using Hughes’ perspective, the relationship between prospect (Keane) and institution (the FAI) shaped his development and proved to be a seismic experience for him. Ironically, despite playing several first team matches for Ramblers’ that season, travelling all over Ireland, it was in a youth cup replay against Belvedere in Dublin where Keane’s breakout moment occurred (symbolically reinforcing the notion that only players in Dublin were spotted). Unbeknown to Keane, Nottingham Forest scout, Noel McCabe, was in attendance. Ramblers were destroyed 4–0 by the home side, yet McCabe was so enamoured that he approached the Ramblers chairman at half-time to discuss Keane. McCabe later told documentary Have Boots, Will Travel: “It didn’t matter what else was going on in the game, he stood out because he was head and shoulders above the rest”. The same documentary presented McCabe’s scout report from the match, which stated: “A player to go on trial at Nottingham Forest right away”. In March 1990, Keane was offered the opportunity of a trial in England which led to a recall the following month. By May, Forest and Ramblers had agreed a transfer fee of £47,000 and instigated the next turning point of Keane’s career which saw his status progress from, effectively, an apprentice to a professional footballer player. Whilst it was a youth game where Keane was spotted, the FÁS course gave him the daily opportunity to train at the top level. Eoin O’ Callaghan emphasizes the importance of this, both in terms of making regular appearances for Ramblers and training every day in Dublin: “You wonder about all those minutes and how it fed into him mixing in with the FÁS course. Him developing as a footballer. Physically, getting bigger, better and stronger”. Dave Hannigan was more definitive in his assessment of the course in our interview, “I absolutely think, and this is ‘what if’
history, he would not have made it without the FÁS course”. An intricate combination of circumstance (Cork City delaying their registration), institutions (FAI) and people (Noel Spillane) all helped create future opportunities for Keane where numerous avenues were possible, but success by no means guaranteed.

Keane’s experiences up to this point of his career – his rejection from the Irish national side as a teenager and his ability to cope with the disappointment of not securing a move to England when many friends around him were achieving their dreams – gave him a huge ability to cope with setbacks. This was a footballer who had challenged a constrictive social context with strong character and so disappointment was not a deterrent to him. Consequently, when United went 2–0 against Juventus or, more notably, when he received the yellow card, there was no question that Keane possessed the mental toughness to pull his team through in Turin. In his autobiography, he refers to overcoming mental barriers when others baulked as a significant victory. The importance of psychology in the game against Juventus was reinforced in the interview with Patrick Barclay:

The player who dominated from start to finish was Keane. It was one of the best individual performances I’ve ever seen. He reduced Zinedine Zidane to an ‘also starring’, a subsidiary role. And it was all personality. It was up there with Maradona’s performance in the ’86 World Cup.

**New responsibility and career uncertainty**

We now fast forward some time, glancing over Keane’s career at Nottingham Forest and the impact of eccentric manager, Brian Clough. The omission of substantial emphasis on his relationship with Clough is purely for brevity and not a reflection of its importance on Keane’s development. According to Eoin O’Callaghan, without Clough, Keane would not have developed into a record-breaking player and therefore applying the sociological insight of Hughes, it should be acknowledged as a key “encounter”. Clough was known for giving youth a chance and whilst Keane initially moved to Forest with the expectation of playing in the reserve side for a couple of seasons, Clough awarded Keane his first team debut away to champions Liverpool in just the second match of the season. He went on to make 49 appearances throughout his first season in English football. Clough encouraged Keane to develop as a player and trusted him “immensely”, according to Eamonn Dunphy. Whilst Michael Geasley suggested that “In the context of what he achieved, Clough gave him his chance”.

Whilst appreciating that Keane’s time at Forest was enormously influential on his development, the final turning points addressed some emblematic highs and lows of Keane’s career at Manchester United. The transfer itself is a turning point and one that echoed an uncannily similarity to when Cork City and Cobh Ramblers competed for his services. In 1993, Blackburn Rovers activated a relegation release clause in Keane’s Forest contract, however, an administrative mistake noticed late Friday afternoon meant the transfer could not be completed until the Monday morning as Blackburn’s office had shut for the weekend. On the Saturday, Keane was contacted by Manchester United manager, Alex Ferguson, where they agreed on a contract and United secured his employment. Keane’s status climbed from being an important prospect within a newly relegated club, to moving towards football’s elite by joining the reigning Premiership champions for a then British record transfer fee of £3.75 million.

Four years later, in the summer of 1997, United’s enigmatic captain, Eric Cantona, unexpectedly retired. According to Keane, there were obvious candidates to fulfil the role: the likes of Peter Schmeichel, Gary Pallister, and Denis Irwin. He was as surprised as anyone when manager Alex Ferguson chose him. However, Patrick Barclay strongly contested this sentiment, suggesting that Ferguson made a natural choice in promoting Keane, “Ferguson always said ‘I’m happy when I look out on the pitch and see myself’. And I don’t think he sees himself as a better photograph than in Roy Keane in terms of his managerial self”. This belief was supported by Andrew Longmore, former Senior Sportswriter at the *Sunday Times*, who stated: “Ferguson and Keane are kindred spirits.
What he saw in Keane was something he had in himself. This hunger, this appetite, this complete and utter single-minded desire to win”.  
Barclay and Longmore both support Hughes’ idea that this turning point, the passage of one status (player) to another (captain) is often as a result of an individual meeting the same ambitions and efforts of the institution, namely, Ferguson and United. 

On the field, Keane was confident that he could meet the obligations of his new responsibility at United. Away from the pitch, he found difficulty in distancing himself from the drinking culture that permeated the club for much of the late 80s and early 90s. Throughout his career Keane had often been troubled with off-field activity, typically centred around alcohol. Whilst in the past he was largely able to detach his career from his personal issues, in September 1997 the two clashed with substantial implications. When United travelled to rivals Leeds, Keane spent much of his time embroiled in a personal battle with midfielder, Alfie Haaland. Five minutes from time, Keane lunged at his opponent in retribution. As his studs caught the turf, Keane heard his cruciate ligament snap, “The pain was instant and agonizing”, he later said. His season, and potentially career, was over. Keane attributed the injury to his night of drinking two days previously, suggesting that he was in no shape to play against Leeds. In Hughes’ view, this turning point could be described as a rite, in which man is “given special instructions in the canons of conduct appropriate to his new estate”. Here, Hughes reminds us that despite change, whereby life is thought to get better and better, we become blinded to the limits in which transformations occurs. He notes “our average health is so good that we forget that man is as mortal as ever.” In this instance, the turning point reminding Keane how fragile his career was, a belief supported by Eamonn Dunphy, who told us: “It [the injury] reminded Keane how tenuous football can be. It was his mission to return”. United’s official season review portrayed Keane’s rehabilitation in a wholesome light, however, behind the positivity, Keane displayed a darker disposition. He continued drinking and in our interview with Jim White, the journalist revealed that Ferguson threatened to fine any player who was caught drinking with Keane two weeks wages. Nonetheless, once Keane began noticing progression in his rehabilitation, his mentality changed. He admitted he would settle for the opportunity for just one more full game at Old Trafford. To understand this shift, reflection on the intense tenacity and character of Keane should be considered. He was desperate to return, not least to repay both Ferguson and his teammates, whom he felt he had let down badly. Paul Howard, former Chief Sportswriter for The Sunday Tribune, said:

Keane decided then that he was going to change his life. He started to see himself more and more as an athlete. The physical change was quite incredible … You feel as if there’s a sign hung out there saying ‘Do not enter. Do not come close’.

Sean O’Hagan, journalist at The Guardian, agreed there was a switch in Keane’s mentality. He spoke about Keane’s return from injury at the beginning of the illustrious 1998–99 season: “He was reborn as Robo-captain, with a shaved head. A seething image stepped into the arena. This guy was leading the team out as if he was going to war”. Patrick Barclay emphasized that Keane wanted to serve Ferguson with increased vigour on his return: “It sounds romantic or journalistic to say he wanted to repay a debt to Ferguson, but I think he did”. Keane confirmed as much following the match against Juventus: “I was proud of our team that night. I was for once proud of myself, content that I had justified my existence and honoured my debts to the manager who’d placed so much trust in me”.

During United’s victory over Juventus, Keane became the combatant and on-field embodiment of his manager. It is not too embellished to suggest his presence in Turin, exhausting every ounce of his being to produce a performance worthy of the captain’s armband, drove them to victory. Keane may not have been a player who was blessed with the skill and finesse of many of his midfield peers, but after this performance, no-one could question his ability to inspire a team. Reliving his performance, some 23 years later, brings a legendary quality to watch a leader with such resolve. When analysing any Roy Keane performance, there is no expectation to be dazzled by extravagant trickery, and this remained the case with the Juventus match. One could be forgiven for re-watching his performance and assessing that the general level was no better than what you had come to expect from him,
particularly during that season. Nevertheless, it became the night Keane wrote himself indelibly into United folklore and proved to be another key turning point in his illustrious career. His performance was all about context. This was the same pitch, and in eerily similar circumstances, where Paul Gascoigne had broken down in tears when shown a yellow card for England against West-Germany in the World Cup semi-final nine years earlier. Rather than derail Keane, the sense of injustice that he would not be playing in a Champions League final drove him on. His performance left a lasting impression on United manager, Alex Ferguson, who later wrote in his autobiography:

It was the most emphatic display of selflessness I have seen on a football field. Pounding over every blade of grass, competing if he would rather die of exhaustion than lose, he inspired all around him. I felt it was an honour to be associated with such a player. 49

Keane’s response, predictably, personified the disdainful nature of his character when questioned about Ferguson’s assessment during a 2013 documentary:

What am I supposed to do? Give up? Not cover every blade of grass? Not do my best for my teammates? Not do my best for my club? To be honest I actually get offended when people throw quotes like that at me as if I’m supposed to be honoured by it. 50

There you have it – widely considered one of the greatest individual performances in the Champions League perfectly, and contradictorily, summed up by manager and player. Keane might have spent his career battling authority and rejection, yet it appears that his greatest detractor was himself.

Discussion

This paper intended to analyse the social construction of Roy Keane’s career using the perspectives of Everett Hughes. A noticeable avenue of conversation largely omitted from this research is that Keane possessed an undeniable level of talent, which is an obvious prerequisite for any elite athlete. Whilst key technical characteristics are important, these do not ensure that a player possesses the mental toughness to compete so admirably against the odds in an isolated performance. There is not enough space here to discuss other turning points in Keane’s career, such as his Forest debut against Liverpool or wider discussion into his relationship with Brian Clough, both of which impacted his hunger to achieve success. However, it is the researcher’s hope that the examples provided offer sufficient association with Hughes’ work and give an overview of how turning points can be conceived in relation to athletic performance.

Several turning points in Keane’s career may have taken him in a different direction: what if Keane had signed for Cork City instead of Cobh Ramblers and, consequently, not join the FÁS scheme? Would he eventually have been spotted by an English scout? Would he have ever encountered Brian Clough? Had Eric Camron not retired when he did, would other youngsters coming into the squad at Manchester United have replaced him as natural captain material? Would his injury against Leeds have occurred had he not been drinking two nights previously? Naturally, these questions cannot be answered with any conviction. Nevertheless, it is fair to conclude that Keane’s career trajectory may have taken different directions at each turning point. An interesting line of discussion drawn out of this research addresses the temporal aspects of turning points. Whilst this paper has been written with hindsight into Keane’s career, it is not suggested that turning points can only be recognized retrospectively. In fact, the researcher proposes that turning points are evident in real time as individuals make transitional and key decisions at various points throughout their life cycle. However, what is less clear are the consequences and trajectories that these turning points may create. These would be reflected on in hindsight following periods of transition and status change, as this paper has aimed to achieve by analysing Keane’s career and applying it to a single event.
The approach of utilizing a sociological case study to football players is a relatively new field of investigation. By taking this approach in understanding the construction of elite athletes, the focus expands to consider social, cultural, and interpersonal associations which develop the individual. This case study is not intended to provide a faultless example of how turning points can be conceived in relation to individual athletic performances; instead it aims to serve as a starter to a discussion yet to be fully engaged with by scholars. Understanding the progression of elite athletes through these perspectives might prove fruitful, with a deeper interrogation on the early development of these elite performances, as Trejo and Williams conducted relating to Lionel Messi.\textsuperscript{51} Furthermore, this approach could be employed to explain the social construction of athletes who failed under adversity. By employing a case study approach in the analysis of human experiences, we may be able to better understand the social implications in the development and creation of elite athletes and more broadly widen the appreciation of performance analysis beyond the notion that statistics are a primary driver in this field.

Notes

1. UEFA Champions League Final, ITV.
2. Ibid.
4. Hughes, Sociological Eye, 121.
5. Ibid., 120.
6. Ibid., 120.
7. Hackstaff, Kupferberg and Negroni, Biography and Turning Points, 1.
8. DeLuca and Rocha-de-Oliveira, 'Inked Careers'.
9. Trejo and Williams, 'One hell of a player'.
11. Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions..
12. Sewell, 'Three temporalities'.
15. Hughes, Sociological Eye, 124.
17. Bourke, 'Road to Fame and Fortune', 376.
19. Have Boots, Will Travel.
20. See note 15 above.
23. Inside the Mind of Roy Keane..
25. Inside the Mind of Roy Keane..
27. Ibid., 71.
29. Ibid., 186.
31. Hughes, Sociological Eye, 121.
32. Ibid., 132–3.
33. Keane, Keane, 15.
34. Ibid., 18.
35. Hughes, Sociological Eye, 135.
36. Have Boots, Will Travel..
37. Keane, Keane, 18.
38. Hughes, Sociological Eye, 601.
39. Ibid., 168.
40. Inside the Mind of Roy Keane..
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Interviews

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