

What Comes Next? Sports Celebrities as Influencers in the End-of-Career and Post-Career Phases: The Case of Gigi Datome *

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The end-of-career and post-career represent a delicate transition for sports celebrities. At this stage, the management of the celebrity capital accumulated over the course of a competitive career involves a renegotiation with the target audience and stakeholders, in an attempt to reinvest it in the same or other (political, business, etc.) sporting spheres. Social networking platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, constitute media environments in which celebrities can set up forms of self-representation and self-narratives that influence and inspire the behaviour of followers and wider circles. Such communicative stages may also be aimed at practising forms of activism (cultural, civic, political, social, etc.). This paper intends to investigate the practices and processes through which sports celebrities, in the end-of-career and post-career phases, renegotiate their public role by being influencers and influ-activists. The specific case examined concerns the analysis of the forms of self-narration and self-representation set up by basketball player Gigi Datome on his official Instagram page, in the period between the end of his career and the first months of his post-career.

Keywords: sports celebrity, post-career, ageing, influencer culture, influ-activism

* Article submitted on 26/04/2025. Article accepted on 15/06/2025. This article is part of the research activities of the PRIN 2022 PNRR project “CELEBR-ETÀ – Ageing celebrity in contemporary media and sport contexts: a model of social and cultural well-being” (project code P2022XS937, CUP D53D23019930001), funded by the European Union – Next Generation EU.

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End-of-career and post-career for sports stars and the renegotiation of celebrity capital

Celebrities are charismatic and fascinating personalities. In the field of social sciences, Charles Wright Mills (1956, pp. 71-72) provided a fundamental definition of celebrity: “The celebrities are The Names that need no further identification. Those who know them so far exceed those of whom they know as to require no exact computation. Wherever the celebrities go, they are recognized, and moreover, recognized with some excitement and awe. [...] More or less continuously, over a period of time, they are the material for the media of communication and entertainment”. Mills outlines an initial theoretical systematization of the relationship between celebrity, on the one hand, and prestige, stratification, and power, on the other. Additionally, Mills identifies a class of “professional celebrities,” whose success is determined solely by their public visibility.

Only since the 1990s has the sociology of celebrity and fame undergone significant development. Marshall (1997) and Rojek (2001) studied the commodification of celebrity as an indicator of capitalism’s ability to commercialize any subject or phenomenon. Dyer (1979) and Cashmore (2006), however, observed that celebrities are both products and promoters of the commercialization and the capitalist market economy. Moreover, Dyer (1979) highlighted the active role of audiences in the construction and affirmation of celebrity, through symbolic processes that cannot be reduced to the intentions of the cultural industry. These studies pave the way for subsequent developments in the sociological analysis of celebrity, with interactions with Media Studies and Fandom Studies.

In the sports context, an athlete is perceived as a celebrity when he/she is publicly recognized as a figure to whom society attributes prestige and honors, thanks to his/her technical and character qualities, both within and outside the sporting context. This celebrity status increases the athlete’s visibility and opportunities to gain recognition, privileges, and material and immaterial benefits (van Krieken, 2012). Sports celebrity is closely tied to physical abilities. Athletic skills, when expressed in highly competitive contexts and leading to significant successes, allow individuals to gain public attention and notoriety. Thus, the glory of a sports celebrity is based on an ideal of competitiveness that, in the eyes of the public, is synonymous with authenticity (Smart, 2005). Since it is the result of years of training, sports celebrity can be seen as an “achieved celebrity,” earned on the field (Rojek, 2001).

The body of a sports celebrity is the epicenter of multiple processes. It is the means through which athletic excellence is expressed. Moreover, especially in the digital age, it represents socially approved values such as naturalness, well-being, and positivity, reflecting the prevailing aesthetic standards of the time. Beyond technical and tactical skills, other qualities favor the attainment of celebrity status: sacrifice, courage, leadership, cooperation, tenacity, and creativity (Bifulco & Tirino, 2019).

Celebrity is a status that depends on public attribution, fueled by the media echo of sports events and the stories surrounding them (controversies, private life, etc.). Therefore, it is important to place the phenomenon of sports celebrity within the meta-process of the

mediatization of sport. The media play a crucial role in shaping sports cultures (Tirino, 2019 and 2022a). According to Frandsen (2020, pp. 16-17), this analytical framework: 1) focuses on the study of mutual interrelationships between media changes and sport changes; 2) describes how media cause changes in sport organizations, proceeding in “waves” (Couldry & Hepp, 2016); 3) identifies media processes that can produce long-term changes in individual practices, organizations, and the social structure of sport; 4) explains how the incidence of media on sport varies significantly, between different sports, between different groups within the same sport, between national contexts, and in different eras; 5) defines a holistic analytical approach, linking mediatization to other meta-processes, such as globalization, commercialization, and individualization, in producing relevant social changes in sports.

Sports celebrity, therefore, remains intrinsically tied to the interplay of three meta-processes: the mediatization, commercialization, and globalization of sport. By meta-processes, we mean a vast and diversified set of phenomena whose impact is measurable only in the long term (Krotz, 2007). One of the keys to strengthening an athlete’s fame is the ability to manage their public image through the media. In the public arena, every famous athlete continuously interacts with fans, spectators, and audiences, sharing emotions related to sporting events and their private life. The narration of their stories fuels the sports myth, which is recounted through films, TV series, comics, novels, podcasts, and theatrical plays.

The media shape the symbolic environment in which champions gain visibility (Cashmore, 2006) and build their myth (Bifulco & Tirino, 2018). Both informative media (radio, television, talk shows, etc.) and narrative media (films, series, video games, etc.) contribute to constructing and sometimes destroying sports celebrities’ reputations. Radio and television have allowed fans to perceive an unprecedented closeness to celebrities, fueling what Horton and Wohl (1956) define as a “parasocial relationship”, through which the fan experiences a kind of “distant intimacy” with the champion. Since the 1950s, with the increasing role of television broadcasters in sports, athletes have begun to capitalize on their visibility through advertising, sponsorships, and collaborations with companies. Celebrity enables them to accumulate economic resources, while sports-related consumption is driven by the aura of authenticity, success, and positivity that elite athletes convey. The “celebrity capital” – i.e., the “accumulated media visibility, derived from recurring media representations” (Driessens, 2013, p. 17) – can be converted into other forms of capital (economic, social, cultural, etc.). The study of the end-of-career and post-career of sports stars makes it possible to explore how this phase becomes an opportunity to renegotiate the limits imposed by an ageing body in order to experiment with new professional opportunities and new forms of connection with fans. Celebrity capital can also be converted into civic and social activism, politics, and entrepreneurship.

In the digital era, social networks have amplified the possibilities for self-construction of the public image of sports celebrities, transforming into spaces where athletes manage their visibility and “celebrity capital” (Bifulco, 2023). These environments mix private and professional spheres, a phenomenon that has led to the overlap of contexts, increasing the

risk of inconsistencies and contradictions in the values expressed by sports celebrities (Tirino, 2024). The growing presence of celebrities on social media requires careful reputation management to avoid unpleasant situations such as cyberbullying or data theft (Tirino, 2022b).

This makes the study of ageing and post-career transitions of sports celebrities particularly interesting. Ageing entails a reduction in physical and cognitive abilities, forcing the end of an athletic career and a lifestyle change, much like other traumatic events (such as major defeats, injuries, and scandals) (Marshall & Rahman, 2014). Not all athletes are prepared for these considerable changes in their daily and public lives (Tinley, 2012). This transition period affects not only the professional career (Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017; Ronkainen et al., 2023), but also the negotiation of the identity (Hlasová & Ronkainen, 2023; Hlasová, Pauha, & Ronkainen, 2024; Schmid, Hlasová, Ronkainen, Conzelmann, & Schmid, 2024) and the physical and mental health of athletes (Voorheis, Silver, & Consonni 2023).

When sports celebrities end their competitive careers, they enter a critical phase in which they must plan a new public role within the sports context but in a different capacity (such as coach or executive) or in other career contexts (Coakley, 1983). The mediatization of celebrity, therefore, assumes specific relevance in the post-career phase. The post-career of sports stars is also influenced by mainstream media narratives in two different ways. On the one hand, sports celebrities' narratives contain numerous references to a glorious and memorable past (Jerslev & Petersen, 2018). On the other hand, the very presence of the celebrity in many media products (commercials, TV series, films, guest appearances on various shows and so on) confirms their profound mediatization in the contemporary era. The search for new professional positions thus involves a reconfiguration of their relationship with their fanbase. Almost always, this period is linked to ageing. In this redefinition, many celebrities attempt to create new self-narratives (especially on social media) that go beyond the sports dimension. Managing one's celebrity capital in contexts beyond athletic competition becomes crucial.

The rise of sports stars as influencers

The rise of social media platforms has revolutionized content consumption and engagement, particularly in sports. Practices of identity construction and self-presentation and performativity (Polesana, 2023; Taddeo, 2023), through self-representation and self-narration on social media, allow sports celebrities to give rise to public-relevant meanings, intensifying para-social relations (Bifulco & Tirino, 2019) and profiting from commercialization practices of their image.

This digital shift has led to the emergence of "sport influencers," individuals with substantial online followings who are seen as role models or experts by their audience. These influencers, who may be athletes or play other roles (journalists, former players, coaches, and so on), share content regularly and have the power to shape opinions and

behaviors. The platform society (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018) offers athletes a range of tools and environments to reconfigure their relationship with audiences and fandom, under the banner of greater engagement, immediacy and personalisation (Russo & Germano, 2023).

Sports influencers have become key figures in the sports industry, leveraging platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok to connect with and influence sports fans. They create interactive and engaging content that promotes a more immersive sports experience. Academic and industry interest in sports influencers is growing. Some researchers are exploring how athletes use social media to shape sports perceptions (Szymkowiak, Garczarek-Bąk, & Bączyk, 2024): Chmait et al. (2020), for example, analysed the effects of tennis players, as influencers, on social media engagement and demand for tournament attendance. Similar to what has been proposed in other fields, Lamirán-Palomares, Baviera, and Baviera-Puig (2020) presented a system for measuring the influence of sports influencers. Other scholars have investigated how the influencing frame is changing actors and processes in sports journalism (Germano & Russo, 2024; McEnnis, 2023). However, most studies focus on the potential effects of sports influencers on purchase intentions and brand loyalty of followers and fans (Abuín-Penas & Máiz-Bar, 2022; Aydın, 2024; De Araujo, Kamath, Pai, & Dhaigude, 2024; Guld, 2021; Lee, 2021; Massi, Piancatelli, Vocino, & Rojas-Méndez 2024; Moreira, Pereira, Santos, & Pires, 2023).

However, especially in the field of social sciences and Media Studies, fewer studies have been devoted to the role of influencing in the processes of renegotiation and reconfiguration of celebrity capital by sports stars (especially in the late and post-career). This paper aims to explore exactly these issues.

The Gigi Datome case

Cross-referencing the theoretical frameworks of celebrity studies and sports mediatization, our paper starts with three research questions: a) In what ways do sports celebrities renegotiate their celebrity capital by acting as influencers? b) What are the peculiar strategies of self-narration and self-representation on social media in the phase before and after leaving their competitive career? c) How are these media practices relatable to cultural, civic and social activism?

Methodology

To answer these research questions, we deemed it appropriate to proceed with a case study. The choice was based on these parameters: the unfolding of a career marked by excellence in terms of national and international sports successes; the implementation of multiple civic, cultural and social activism initiatives over the course of the career (elements

that allow for the identification of an “exemplary biography”); the placement of the end and post-career in a recent period (2023-2024); and the management of an Instagram profile marked by a constant production of content and interactions over time. The choice fell on Gigi Datome, a basketball player for Olimpia Milano and captain of the Italian national team (when the selection took place).

To answer the research questions and consider the identified case study, we decided to apply a mixed method approach (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017), which involved the application of different qualitative research techniques. Reconstructive biographical research offers detailed and methodologically reflective proposals for the analysis of experienced and/or narrated life stories (Becker, Pohn-Lauggas, & Santos, 2023; Riemann, 2006). The adoption of reconstructive biographical research aims to trace the key stages in the construction of Gigi Datome’s celebrity status, to contextualize both the concluding phase of his professional career and his post-retirement trajectory, and to investigate the processes through which he came to embody the role of an activist influencer.

For Datome’s self-narrative, we decided to focus the analysis on his Instagram profile, because it is the social media on which to a more significant extent athletes give rise to self-narrative and self-promotion practices (Bae, Hahn, & Cho, 2023), through images, linked to social, cultural, and aesthetic values (Caldeira, De Ridder, & Van Bauwel, 2018; Caliandro & Graham 2020). Datome’s Instagram profile, in the chosen observation period, had about 300,000 followers. In addition, during the period under review, the profile had the characteristics of continuity, consistency and richness of communication and constant interaction of followers.

The content analysis of the athlete’s Instagram profile was conducted through media content analysis (Macnamara, 2005). This method allowed us to identify content classes structured according to precise parameters. We wanted to understand which matrices and models dominate the celebrity’s (self)narration on social media in the post-career phase. The investigation focused on Gigi Datome’s Instagram activity during the period surrounding his retirement from professional basketball (May 25, 2022 – June 30, 2024), considering both form (the analysis of media content types, stylistic features, and linguistic registers employed) (Delli Paoli, Addeo, & Bottoni, 2021) and content (the identification and classification of topics and content categories). From a qualitative perspective, particular attention will be paid to how the former captain of the Italian national team renegotiates his sports celebrity status. This will be examined through the evaluation of parameters such as vividness, verbal interactivity, caption length, and posting schedule, within a communication strategy primarily oriented toward the promotion of physical, mental, and cognitive well-being, and an active lifestyle (Recio Moreno, Gil Quintana, & Romero Riaño, 2023).

Like other researchers engaged in media content analysis, we confronted various methodological considerations (Prasad, 2008). These challenges were addressed through a systematic process encompassing several stages: first, we defined the precise elements to be analyzed; second, we established clear categories for interpretation; third, we selected a representative sample of content relevant to our research; fourth, we verified the consistency and accuracy of our coding procedures; and finally, we executed the content

analysis (Stempel, 1989). In order to ensure a process of double-check reliability, the operation was carried out by another scholar as well¹. The posts were classified according to the content of the message, beyond the media typology of the materials (images, images plus text, video, etc.).

Results

The reconstruction of Datome's sporting biography enables us to outline both a concise profile of his athletic career and a brief account of his civic, philanthropic, and social engagement. Reconstructive biographical research was conducted, using 258 articles published in newspapers and online magazines as sources, between January 1, 2003 and June 30, 2024.

Luigi Datome began his professional basketball career at age 16 with Mens Sana Siena, contributing to the team's victory in both the Italian Championship and the Supercup during the 2003-04 season. In parallel, he joined the Italian national youth teams as a small forward, earning two bronze medals at the FIBA U18 European Championship (2005) and the FIBA U20 European Championship (2007). Following a season with Legia Scafati, Datome became a key player for Virtus Roma, where he was named MVP of the Italian Serie A in the 2012-13 season and led the team to the playoff finals. Between 2013 and 2015, he played in the NBA for the Detroit Pistons and Boston Celtics, participating in the playoffs with the latter. Due to limited court time in the NBA, Datome returned to Europe and signed with Fenerbahçe. During his tenure (2015-2020), he won three Turkish Super League titles (2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18) and secured a EuroLeague championship in 2016-17. In 2020, he signed with Olimpia Milano, with whom he won the Italian Cup (2020-21) and two national championships (2021-22, 2022-23). On a more international level, Datome earned 203 caps with the Italian national team (2007-2023), ranking tenth in all-time appearances for the senior team and first overall when including youth national teams. He concluded his career at the 2023 FIBA World Cup in the Philippines, captaining Italy to an eighth-place finish. While the athletic career of the Sardinian basketball player is marked by numerous triumphs, his public image is equally positive. The biographical reconstruction highlights, first and foremost, his strong attachment to family values. For instance, upon joining the Boston Celtics, Datome chose the jersey number 70 as a tribute to his family's basketball club, Santa Croce Olbia, founded in 1970.

Secondly, Datome has demonstrated a long-standing commitment to supporting children with disabilities. In 2017 and 2018, he organized the 'Gigione Day' charity event, donating the proceeds to the Association of Parents and People with Down Syndrome and to the National Association of Parents of Autistic Individuals. His environmental advocacy is also evident. In 2017, he participated in WWF Italy's 'Earth Hour' campaign to combat climate change. Moreover, he has supported various charitable initiatives, including campaigns for the Bambino Gesù Foundation (summer 2019) and aid for vulnerable communities in Sardinia (August 2023). During the war in Ukraine, he actively endorsed several initiatives

by the Italian Red Cross – also through social media – aimed at delivering essential supplies to affected populations.

The analysis of the form of communication developed by Datome on his Instagram profile allows us to develop some preliminary thoughts. Firstly, the published content shows a meticulous attention to aesthetic aspects, as evidenced by the careful selection of images, videos, and (more rarely) musical tracks. Secondly, the content management policy also includes a painstaking classification of reels into homogeneous sections ('Afternoon', 'Manila WC', 'Olimpia Milano 23-24', 'Cooking', 'Ravenna', 'Championship', 'Top 10!', 'Turkey Earthquake'). Thirdly, Datome frequently employs an ironic and self-ironic linguistic register. A clear example of this is the strategic use of hashtags aimed at engaging fans (#serinascorinascogigione [if I am reborn, I will be reborn as Gigione]; #cosaledgegigione, [What does Gigione read?]). Fourthly, the posted content displays a sensitivity to diverse cultural, religious, and political perspectives, conveyed through conscious and respectful language choices. This civic vocation is reflected in the commitment to promoting shared values of integration, solidarity, and inclusion. Equally pronounced are the cultural vocation, primarily expressed through the continuous promotion of reading, and the pedagogical vocation, demonstrated by the constant attention to younger audiences and a focus on the group rather than on the individual self.

The media content analysis encompassed 139 posts and 8 reels (comprising a total of 130 media items) published by Datome on his Instagram page between May 25, 2022, and June 30, 2024. This period includes the months leading up to and immediately following the Italian basketball player's retirement from competitive sports [FIG. 1].

The media content analysis conducted on the Instagram profile of Gigi Datome allowed us to operate based on content classes. We identified the following five content classes: a) Career; b) Activism; c) Family and Private Life; d) Sponsorships; e) Media Penetration [FIG. 2]. The "Career" category comprised the largest share of posts, with 73 entries (52.49% of the total). We subdivided this category into "Competitive Career", "Career Celebrations", "End-of-Career and Post-Career", and "(Other) Celebrities" [FIG. 3]. The "Competitive Career" subcategory included 36 items; 12 specifically related to Olimpia Milano, and 24 to the Italian National Team.

The posts dedicated to Olimpia Milano celebrate the team's victories and cheer on teammates and fans. First of all, the contents (video and images) aimed at celebrating the club's 29th championship stand out. The post reserved to advertise the extension of the contract for a further season, dated 12.07.2022, is among the most interesting, as it denotes the awareness of the passing of time and the approaching conclusion of the competitive career [FIG. 4]. Generally speaking, the tone used is that of a leader capable of galvanising the environment, stimulating his teammates, but also ironising (as in the videos of his teammates sleeping while travelling) and celebrating friendship (as in the post dedicated to Nicolò Melli). During the 2022-23 regular season there is a rarefaction of posts, whose frequency goes back to being significant during the playoffs, the championship finals, and then for the celebration of the title won (Olimpia's 30th).

In the content about the national team, Datome shows a strong awareness of the role of captain. The pattern often involves publishing a post before the national team's match, inviting followers and fans to support the team, and a post afterwards, commenting on the performance. The captain encourages the team after a defeat and calls for improvement even after a victory. The emphasis is often on the importance of the team as an entity capable of achieving any goal through unity of purpose, determination and sacrifice. The frequency of publishing content on the national team, physiologically, intensifies during competitions in which the team plays several games in a few days, such as the European Championships, played in Italy in 2022, and the World Championships, played in the Philippines in 2023. The Italian Basketball Federation (FIP) recognises Datome's role as a symbol of Italian basketball, for instance through a post shared on the official profiles of the Federation and the player, with a photo of the athlete in his game uniform (dated 26.08.2022) or through a video (dated 02.09.2022) in which he extols his sense of belonging. Furthermore, sports experiences are lived and recounted by Datome as an opportunity to explore the territories, as attested by the post (published on 12.09.2023 and accompanied by 9 photos) in which the champion regrets having been able to make few excursions to the Philippines, due to his competitive commitments and the climate. Even in the content dedicated to the national team, there is no lack of light-hearted moments, such as in the post (published on 31.08.2022) in which – in a photo with the game uniform, surrounded by white, red and green luminescent tubes – Datome winks at Star Wars.

The subcategory "Career Celebration" hosts very relevant content as to the research questions. Through the reconnaissance of some significant milestones of his career, in this type of posts, the basketball player seems to retrace his achievements, somehow highlighting the essential components of his celebrity capital. In this sense, we can mention: a short video, steeped in nostalgia, but also pride and awareness, showing all the game uniforms worn in his career, with the background of Bob Dylan's song *A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall* (29.07. 2022); the celebration of 3,000 points in the Italian championship (30.10.2022); the video-montage of the most significant moments of his entire career, accompanied by the champion's words, filled with gratitude ("I never would have imagined...") (07.07.2023) [FIG. 5]; the repost of a Euroleague post in remembrance of the Fenherbace victory (2017) (07.07.2023); the four posts dedicated to the last game in Italy with the national team jersey (17.07, 12.08, 14.08, 22.08.2023); the 200th game with the national team (also celebrated by a FIBA post of 04.09.2023); reflecting on the importance of enjoying the end of a career, during the "BSMT" podcast (05.10.2023); the Turkish Basketball Federation's tribute, during a Fenerbahçe Euroleague match (05.10.2023).

The posts in the subcategory "End-of-Career and Post-Career" are dedicated to reflections on the conclusion of Datome's long competitive career and the new roles undertaken by Datome as a manager of Olimpia Milano (from September 2023 to July 2024), head of delegation for the Italian national team (from October 2023 to July 2024), and coordinator of all men's teams in the Italian national program (from July 2024). This category of content highlights Datome's profound awareness of what these new roles entail: the importance of seizing opportunities, assuming responsibility, and the need for training in

these new roles – all aspects that appear to be consistent with the leadership displayed by Datome, especially in the second part of his competitive career. The basketball player discussed these topics in an interview given to “Sky Sport”, during a special, significantly titled “The New Life of Gigi Datome”, which was reposted on his Instagram profile (04.10.2023) [FIG. 6]. The new image that the champion constructs in post-career appearances seems consciously oriented towards transferring the celebrity capital he accumulated during his career to other contexts. In this perspective, we can interpret his experience as a testimonial for the prestigious Executive MBA Master’s program at the “Luigi Bocconi” University: in the relevant post on the Master’s official account (shared by the basketball player’s Instagram account on 23.11.2023), photographs from the meeting are accompanied by the text: “The dialogue in the classroom ranged from the development of charisma, to the importance of change, to a team management style that places authenticity and vision at its core”. Similarly, in the clip from the popular television show “Le Iene” (posted on 20.12.2023), Datome, who states that he is frequently invited, after his retirement, by schools and companies for leadership seminars, emphasizes the importance of empathy in becoming a leader and inspiring others. In another public intervention, on the podcast *A carte scoperte*, reported in a post on 22.12.2023, the former captain of the national team argues against the conception of sport as an obsession, with its related psychophysical consequences, inviting reflection on the importance of mental serenity and respect for one’s own limits.

This process of renegotiating celebrity capital reaches an initial concretization with the new roles entrusted to Datome. His Instagram profile encapsulates the narrative of this status transition. In a post from 20.02.2024, reposted by the champion’s Instagram page, the FIP (Italian Basketball Federation), on the occasion of the Italy-Turkey match, simultaneously celebrates Gigi’s first time as head of delegation and Nicolò Melli’s first time as captain, in a kind of ideal handover that also celebrates the friendship between Datome and Melli. This post is followed by others showing him in official engagements accompanying the national team (26.02, 20.06.2024), among which one stands out in which – photographed in the classic pose of the *umarelli* [a slang term for elderly men who spend their time observing construction sites], while supervising the technical inspection of scoreboards and baskets – Datome jokes about his ageing [FIG. 7]. Even Euroleague, in a post shared by FIP and FIBA, congratulates the champion on his new role as manager at Olimpia, using a photo of Datome in a suit and tie and the caption “That suit really suits you” (23.02.2024). In a post from 17.06.2024, Gigi bids farewell to Olimpia after the conclusion of his experience as a manager, with a selection of the most beautiful moments lived in Milan during his four years serving the club and a text that contains a keen reflection on the complexity of the post-career period: “And now that the celebrations are over, I can say thank you to @olimpiamilano1936 for these 4 years together. I will always be grateful to Olimpia for the last seasons as a player and especially for having accompanied me in the first year after my career, which can often be critical and destabilizing”.

The “(Other) Celebrities” subcategory, entirely residual (just 4 posts), contains materials dedicated to other basketball and sports personalities – specifically, athlete Filippo Tortu

(25.05.2022), basketball players Filippo Bargnani (Datome's friend, 14.07.2022), Vasilis Spanoulis (in a post dated 18.09.2023, on the occasion of his retirement), and Sergio Rodriguez (in a post dated 19.06.2024, also on the occasion of his farewell to basketball).

The second identified class, designated "Activism", comprises 39 posts (representing 28.04% of the total), subdivided into three subcategories: "Bookgrammer" (28), "Culture" (5), and "Charity and Social Promotion" (6) [FIG. 8]. Collectively, the content within this category presents a precise image of the reconfiguration dynamics of Datome's celebrity capital within various forms of social activism: activities promoting books and reading, expression of cultural interests, and direct engagement in civic, social, and solidarity-based causes. Datome's activity as an influ-activist committed to promoting reading and literature – while not unique² – contradicts the deeply rooted stereotype of the uncultured professional athlete with an aversion to culture. The analysis of the 28 posts dedicated to literature, which attest to Gigi's dimension as a bookgrammer and cultural influ-activist, reveals meticulous attention to classifying and communicating the books read, a notable heterogeneity and variety in his choices, attempts at in-depth analysis of the books, and invitations to engage with lesser-known works; the pursuit of direct contact with publishers, booksellers, and even popular writers (such as noir novelist Don Winslow). Furthermore, specific attention is given to the memorial and civic value of literature, as exemplified by the books recommended on the Day of Remembrance (*Se questo è un uomo*, 1947, by Primo Levi, 27.01.2023; *La nuit*, 1955, by Elie Wiesel, 27.01.2024) and Liberation Day (*La scelta*, 2022, by Walter Veltroni, 25.04.2023). For Datome, the passion for narrative is not limited to reading, but has also translated into writing the children's graphic novel *Il gigante del campetto* [The Giant of the Playground], published by Il Battello a Vapore in 2023: this is a work with a clear pedagogical vocation, with an anti-bullying focus, to which several promotional contents are dedicated on the champion's Instagram profile (29.03, 26.04, 11.05.2023). Significantly, the bookgrammer activity has garnered several external acknowledgements, traces of which can be found on the basketball player's Instagram page – for example, being entrusted with a special book show on Radio 105's *105 Kaos* program (23.06.2022), being invited to a talk about books (21.07.2022), or being attributed the role of "special curator" at Book Pride in 2024 (09.02.2024), and so on.

The second subcategory, "Culture", which is residual in nature (only 5 posts), gathers content related to Datome's other cultural experiences (music, cinema, travel). Due to its record number of interactions (131,000 likes, 273 comments), the most significant content is a short video showing Gigi participating as a guest guitarist at a Patti Smith concert [FIG. 9]. On that occasion, the caption chosen by Datome highlights his view of his Instagram page as a deliberate space for self-representation and self-narration: "I was undecided about posting about last night because it was so special that no words or video could truly convey the happiness I felt. But social media are a sort of personal diary for us, and yesterday's page definitely deserves to be immortalized!"

The last sub-category of the second class, named "Charity and Social Promotion" and also residual (6 posts), collects contents in continuity with the charity and social promotion activities Datome has been carrying out for many years, such as: the participation in events

for the rights of people with Down syndrome (12.10.2022, 21.03.2023); the promotion of initiatives in favour of the victims of the earthquake in Turkey (a country where Datome lived and established deep ties during his militancy in Fenerbahçe) (10. 02.2023); his direct involvement in the “Move for the Planet” programme to combat climate change (07.06.2023); the public initiative held, at the invitation of Bulgari and Save The Children Italia, on the occasion of the International Day for the Rights of Children and Adolescents (20.11.2023); the meetings with schools as manager of Olimpia Milano (20.03.2024).

The publication of material relating to family and everyday life is, on the whole, limited. In fact, only 16 posts (11.51% of the total) were attributed to the third content class, “Family and Private Life”. This type of content strengthens the para-social relationship with fans (Horton & Wohl, 1956) through different strategies of self-narration of his everyday life. A romantic register presides over the publication of images with his partner (basketball player Chiara Pastore), as in the posts during her pregnancy (04.08.2022), on Christmas Eve (24.12.2022) and for their anniversary (16.12.2023). Gigi’s bond with his little daughter Gaia is immortalised in many posts, often dominated by an ironic linguistic register and images of funny poses and situations (13.03, 09.05, 01.07, 22.12.2023, 07.03.2024). The post in which Gigi appears reading a book to his daughter Gaia (11.10.2022), in addition to conveying values such as care and paternal love, appears consistent with his public image as a bookgrammer committed to claiming the educational function of reading and also denotes the porosity of the content classes identified. Similarly, the post in which Datome reviews, through selected images, the most significant moments for him in the past year (31.12.2022), highlights the intermingling of professional and private life, in fact confirming the collapse of contexts (boyd, 2008; Vitak, 2012; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014) that presides over the forms of self-narratives on social networking platforms.

The size of the “Sponsorship” class is also modest (6 posts, or 4.31% of the total). The sponsored posts concern an ADV for Tissot (04.09.2022), a commercial for the phygital copies (physical and digital) of his graphic novel (19.09.2022), a partnership with the magazine “Sportweek” (24.12.2022), an advertising campaign “Remember the Why” for Adidas (11.04.2023), a testimonial activity for Engie Italia for the promotion of environmental sustainability (04.10.2023), a participation in the advertising campaign “Ready to Play” in collaboration with Decathlon (26.03.2024).

Finally, the fifth and last class, called “Media Penetration” (just 5 posts, or 3.59%), although small in size, can be considered of interest, as it gives an idea of Datome’s communication skills in various media environments. In addition to the aforementioned graphic novels and the radio show for Radio 105, the basketball player was the protagonist of the direct production of the podcast *Afternoon* [Fig. 10], conceived and conducted with his colleague-friend Nicolò Melli, and distributed on the FIP YouTube channel. The podcast told the backstage story of the national team during the World Cup in the Philippines (26.07, 18.09.2023) – Datome’s last experience as a player. Media penetration also included an interview with “Il Post” (01.03.2023), a guest appearance on the popular talk show *Stasera c’è Cattelan* on Rai Due (04.03.2023) and three podcast appearances (“BSMT” on 05.10.2023, “Tintoria”, 25.10.2023, *A carte scoperte* 23.12.2023) – all activities duly

promoted and commented on his official Instagram page, in a sort of continuous reinforcement of his media strength and visibility, also due to the traceability and “on demand” access of many of the shows Datome took part in.

Conclusions. Sports celebrities’ influ-activism and post-career

The analysis of Datome’s Instagram profile, in the immediate pre- and post-retirement period, allows us to trace the profile of a sports celebrity who approached with maturity and awareness the leaving of competitive activity, without hiding the difficulties of such a transition and thus preserving an authenticity in communication.

Gigi’s post-career is marked by a high capacity to reconvert his celebrity capital accumulated during his competitive career, both in the same sporting sphere (as attested by his roles as a manager of Olimpia Milano and head of delegation of the national team), and in other spheres (as attested by the different activities ascribable to cultural, social and civic activism), thanks to the multiplicity of interests matured over the years.

Many of the contents published by the sample are the expression of a marked vocation for the promotion of commitment and solidarity (both in the sporting and non-sporting fields) and of an active lifestyle, which improves people’s quality of life through experiences of cultural (reading, music, etc.) and relational enrichment (in the name of values such as inclusion, tolerance, mutual support, solidarity).

The analysis of Datome’s Instagram profile allows us to confirm the presence of certain dynamics of public reputation management, previously observed for other stars from different spheres (entertainment, politics, etc.). The strategy of repurposing celebrity capital into other forms of capital (social, economic, cultural, etc.) seems to produce effective results only when the celebrity – as in Datome’s case – is able to exhibit consistency between the structural qualities of his public image, built over the course of their competitive career, and the communicative practices developed on social media. In this perspective, the former basketball player shows high communication skills, evident as much in the packaging of social content as in his ability to master different media contexts (radio, TV, podcasts, comics, etc.).

Although the objective of our paper was not to analyze the forms of interaction between Gigi and his fans, we can state that Datome exhibits charismatic authorship, since – in Weberian terms – there is a large community of fans, supporters and sympathizers who attribute to him certain traits of the leader, extensively demonstrated as much in his career in club teams as in his history with the Italian national team. Datome’s reputation, credibility, and even authenticity are thus continually replayed on Instagram, seeking continuous complicity with fans.

The main contribution offered by this analysis concerns how Datome’s technical, character, intellectual and relational qualities, perfectly balanced in his communication,

accompanied the champion in redefining his public image in the delicate phase of transition to post-career.

The numerous posts dedicated to celebrating his career serve as a platform for Datome to mourn the end of his competitive career and lay the foundations for his charismatic leadership and values, both on and off the court, to find expression in other roles (executive and head of delegation). However, it is the content devoted to cultural, civic, and social activism that identifies some trajectories through which sports stars can reconfigure their celebrity capital in the post-career.

The phenomenon of “influ-activism” identifies the convergence of influencer culture and digital activism in the online sphere (Murru, Pedroni, & Tosoni, 2025). Influence culture is characterized as a toolkit of resources, skills, and strategies that individuals use to construct lines of action. Influencers, as key actors within this culture, are defined by their ability to attract a significant audience and monetize their activities on digital platforms (Kozinets, Gambetti, & Gretzel 2023; Pedroni, 2023). Influ-activism is defined as the hybrid space where the practices and aesthetics of influencer culture intersect with digital activism. Acting as influencers in the transition to a new public image in the post-career, sports celebrities aware of their communication potential (such as Gigi Datome) can inspire people, consolidate their reputation, and maintain a space of credibility and trustworthiness through the civic, social, and cultural causes they promote. While this would involve activists adopting influencer marketing strategies and aesthetics, influ-activism practices developed by Datome only marginally lead to monetization through sponsorships. This does not detract from the fact that the relational and social capital, expanded by his influ-activist activity, cannot be converted into different forms of utility, ranging from public recognition of his leadership (in institutional, as well as commercial contexts), to the entrustment of new professional roles to media visibility in differentiated occasions.

Nevertheless, the development of influ-activism is shaped by broader neoliberal and platform logics. Neoliberal logics, based on commodification and individualism, align with platform logics that prioritize visibility, engagement, self-branding, and authenticity. This link between influ-activism and neoliberal logics brings up the issue of resource gaps between different types of sports celebrities. Indeed, the sociological study of the management of celebrity capital in post-career highlights the disparities between elite and not-elite athletes. Only the former possess the economic, social, and relational capital necessary to redesign their careers, including through influ-activism practices, while the latter often face significant challenges in defining a new status and social positioning.

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Number of posts analyzed | 139 |
| Number of reels analyzed | 8 (130 media items overall) |
| Period | 25.05.2022 – 30.06.2024 (period straddling retirement from competitive activity) |
| Content Classes | 5 |

Figure 1. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page / Content Classes

| Content classes | | | | | |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------|-------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Description | Number of posts | % | Maximum number of likes | Maximum number of comments |
| 1. CAREER | # | 73 | 52,49 | 61053 (post n° 69) | 3223 (post n° 69) |
| 2. ACTIVISM | # | 39 | 28,04 | 131392 (post n° 16) | 273 (post n° 16) |
| 3. FAMILY AND PRIVATE LIFE | Posts devoted to the family unit and household activities | 16 | 11,51 | 13279 (post n° 116) | 97 (post n°114) |
| 4. SPONSORSHIP | Posts containing ADV | 6 | 4,31 | 2958 (post n° 55) | 245 (post n° 55) |
| 5. MEDIA PENETRATION | Posts devoted to participation in radio and TV programs, podcasts, etc. | 5 | 3,59 | 20022 (post n° 76) | 250 (post n° 76) |

Figure 2. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page. Content classes

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram profile / Career

| Content Classes | | | | | |
|----------------------------|---|-----------------|-------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Description | Number of posts | % | Maximum number of likes | Maximum number of comments |
| 1. CAREER | | | | | |
| Competitive career | Posts dedicated to competitive activity, between Olimpia Milano (12) and the National Team (24) | 36 | 25,89 | 33719 (post n° 91) | 500 (post n° 95) |
| Celebration of the carrier | Posts dedicated to celebrating career milestones | 18 | 12,94 | 61053 (post n° 69) | 3223 (post n° 69) |
| End-career and post-career | Posts devoted to activities immediately before and after the retreat | 16 | 10,79 | 49751 (post n° 93) | 1308 (post n° 93) |
| (Other) Celebrities | Posts dedicated to other basketball and sports celebrities | 4 | 2,87 | 14849 (post n° 137) | 34 (post n° 137) |
| | | 73 | 52,49 | | |

Figure 3. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page. Class "Career"



Figure 4. 12.07.2022. Celebration of the contract extension with Olimpia Milano



Figure 5. 07.07.2023 (video). Celebration of the entire career



Figure 6. 04.10.2023. SKY Sport special “The new life of Gigi Datome”



Figure 7. 30.06.2024. Irony over “umarell” status

Media content analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram profile / Activism

| Content classes | | | | | |
|------------------------------|---|-----------------|-------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Description | Number of posts | % | Maximum number of likes | Maximum number of comments |
| 2. ACTIVISM | | | | | |
| Bookgrammer | Posts devoted to discussion of books and related activities | 28 | 20,14 | 4072 (post n° 120) | 62 (post n° 120) |
| Culture | Posts devoted to cultural content (travel, music, film) | 5 | 3,59 | 131392 (post n° 16) | 273 (post n° 16) |
| Charity and social promotion | Posts dedicated to social initiatives | 6 | 4,31 | 834 (post n° 52) | 9 (post n° 52) |
| | | 39 | 28,04 | | |

Figure 8. Media Content Analysis of Gigi Datome's Instagram page. Class “Activism”



Figure 9. 02.08.2022 (video). Guest guitarist at a Patti Smith concert



Figure 10. 26.07.2023. Promotion of the podcast Afternoon

Biographical note

Mario Tirino is an Associate Professor at the University of Salerno, where he teaches “Media Communication Sport” and “Sociology of Sports Cultures” and is Scientific Director of the Digital Cultures and Sports Research Laboratory (DiCS Lab). On the mediatization of sport, he has written several articles, published in national and international scientific journals, and edited the volumes *Sport e scienze sociali* [Sport and Social Sciences] (with L. Bifulco, 2019, CONI Prize), *Sport, pratiche culturali e processi educativi* [Sport, Cultural Practices and Educational Processes] (with M. Merico and A. Romeo, 2022), *Sport e comunicazione nell'era digitale* [Sport and Communication in the Digital Age] (with L. Bifulco, A. Formisano and G. Panico, 2023, CONI Prize) and *L'atleta digitale* [The Digital Athlete] (with P. Russo and S. Castellano, 2024). He also edited the monographic issue of the journal *Im@go*, entitled *The Sports Hero in the Social Imaginary* (with L. Bifulco, 2018), and the monographic issue of the journal *Eracle*, dedicated to *Media, Society and Cycling Culture* (with P. Landri, 2022). He has been Visiting Professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona. He directs the scholarly publishing series *Binge Watchers. Media, sociology and the history of seriality* (with M. Teti).

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Notes

¹ I thank my colleague Simona Castellano for her collaboration.

² Another example is the Italian-Senegalese goalkeeper Alfred Gomis, on whose Instagram profile one can find reading tips and experiences, united by the hashtag #leclubdelecture.