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A Star is Born: An analysis of the media construction of Linda Caicedo's sporting star status in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

The teenage Colombian woman footballer Linda Caicedo has had a meteoric rise to prominence following her performances in several international tournaments in 2022 and 2023. Her star status is important to analyse from an intersectional perspective given her identity as a Black woman from humble Colombian origins. There has been insufficient analysis of the meanings and representations of Black women footballers, let alone sportswomen from Latin America regarding their star construction. Therefore, this article investigates media narratives around Linda Caicedo, by analysing three Colombian publications, *El Espectador*, *El Tiempo* and *Semana* around the time of the 2022 Women's Copa América, the 2022 Under 20 Women's World Cup, the 2022 Under 17 Women's World Cup, and the Women's World Cup in 2023. We argue that media narratives present a rupture with traditional discourse around women's football in Colombia, by constructing her star status around her exceptional playing attributes, her values and capacity to overcome obstacles.

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Introduction

Linda Caicedo has recently become the standout women's professional football player in Colombia and Latin America. From an academic perspective, this allows us to interrogate the social processes that surround a Black woman footballer from humble origins. For this reason, and given the lack of research of the construction of sporting stars on Afro-Colombian women footballers and on Latin American women athletes more broadly, this study investigates how the media represent Linda Caicedo and the meanings that they (re)produce, to the extent that she can currently be understood as a national footballing star.

There is some inconsistency in terms used when writing about sporting 'stars', 'heroes', 'icons' and 'celebrities'. Books by Whannel (2002), Andrews and Jackson (2001) and Smart (2005) tend to use 'star', whereas Hassan (2013) and Allen (2013), for example, opt for 'icon'. Andrews and Jackson argue that given the 'necessary dynamism of the celebrity complex',

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famous sporting figures can oscillate between these terms, depending on most recent sporting events and newsworthy incidents (2001, 2). They cite a hierarchy proposed by Monaco (1978) of ‘heroes (figures whose actual achievements garnered positive notoriety); stars (individuals who actively cultivate public interest in their own personifications); and quasars (people unwillingly sucked into what Wernick (1991) described as the vortex of promotion)’ (ibid). Icons, interestingly, is not included in this hierarchy. Hassan defines a sporting icon as ‘individuals that epitomize something truly outstanding through their sporting prominence and success’ (2013, 417), with Allen suggesting that an icon is ‘that person, sporting or otherwise, who symbolizes the identity of a sporting nation’ (2013, 585). The symbolism aspect is important; an icon must have an ‘appeal to the visual’ and a ‘capacity to convey some relatively fixed meaning or value’ through an image (Nieblyski and O’Connor 2014, 1). Sporting icons will be associated with images and memories that will convey meaning to those who will know how to ‘read’ or ‘understand’ those messages, though these messages may well shift over time and to different audiences. In this article, as we are focusing on media narratives and discourse rather than images, we shall refer mostly to ‘star construction’ though we shall also establish meanings and symbolisms bound up in reporting of Linda Caicedo that could lead to her being perceived as an icon or a hero, particularly her sporting prominence and association with national identity.

Linda Caicedo’s rise to prominence occurred through her performance at several major football competitions in 2022 and 2023. Success in World Cups, (though usually men’s competition) has long been seen as an important way of putting South American countries on the world map (Goldblatt 2008, 206). The global visibility of the tournament due to vast media coverage allows a nation to reinvent its identity or image internationally (Grix and Brannagan 2016, 252; Hall and Horne 2006: 59; Whitson et al. 2006, 59; Xu 2006, 90). Domestically, the extraordinary nature of a World Cup means that victories generate powerful collective experiences and memories (Black and Van Der Westhuizen 2004, 1195) that can create a shared identity based around the exploits of their national representatives. These moments of exceptional sporting nationalism engendered by team or individual heroic performance that foment national pride and prestige (Giulianotti and Robertson 2009, 58; Maguire 1999, 90) can then be mobilised by politicians and the mass media towards national unity or societal transformative projects, often with footballing heroes at the forefront.

Colombia’s participation in the men’s World Cups in 2014 and 2018 after sixteen years provided the opportunity for President Santos to instrumentalise football as part of an ongoing sporting nationalism project supporting his peace project with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Internationally, he sought to improve Colombia’s international image, tarnished by years of conflict, violence and drug cartels. However, a poor qualifying campaign meant that Colombia failed to qualify for the World Cup in Qatar 2022. This absence from the epicentre of the global footballsphere meant an abrupt end to a source of positive narratives of nation. However, women’s national football tournaments provided an opportunity to fill this void, restoring pride, and creating stars like the teenage Linda Caicedo.

Ardila Biela (2023) has shown that women’s football does not appear in most Colombian football history books and there are decades when women’s football disappears from media reporting entirely since early examples of it being played in the 1940s. The Colombian

women's national team debuted in the Women's South American Football Championship in Argentina in 1998, which did lead to some news articles, before the women's game was invisibilised again (Ardila Biela 2023, 359). There had been two previous official Women's World Cups and two Women's South American championships, showing that Colombia was one of the South American countries whose participation in these tournaments - thereby officialising women's football - was most delayed. A process of developing Colombian women's football began, attempting to attain media visibility, helped by winning the U17 South American championship in Chile in 2008 which occurred at a time when the men's teams were struggling. After this victory, Colombia qualified for World Cups at different age categories: the U17s in 2008, the U20s in 2010, and the senior team in 2011. Despite these tournament appearances, press coverage was 'selective and episodic' (Biram 2024, 139), with women's football disappearing from media reporting in between times. Ardila Biela argues that women footballers had to open most of these reporting spaces for themselves given the lack of institutional support, but then the spaces were closed once again (2023, 169).

The national women's professional league began in 2017, 69 years after the male version, driven by the achievements of the footballers and measures adopted by FIFA and CONMEBOL. Two years later, Linda Caicedo debuted for América de Cali at just 14, quickly gaining attention due to being the league's top scorer. In 2022, she stood out in the Copa América, being chosen as the tournament's best player as Colombia were runners up to Brazil in front of 28,000 home fans. During the U20 World Cup in Costa Rica where Colombia reached the quarterfinals, the International Federation of Football History and Statistics (IFFHS) named her as the world's best youth player. Two months later, in India, she made history as captain of the U17 national team who were the first Colombian team, male or female, to reach a World Cup final. In this tournament, she also won the silver boot as the second-best player. Following these performances, in February 2023 she signed for Real Madrid. At the Women's World Cup in July-August 2023 in Australia and New Zealand, she was one of the standout players, winning the FIFA Hyundai Goal of the Tournament for her strike against Germany, as Colombia reached the quarterfinals before losing to England.

Given this footballing panorama which positions Linda Caicedo as one of the standout women footballers in Colombian football, as well as her unprecedented media impact, this study investigates the Colombian press narratives about her, seeing the media as (re)producers of meaning and central to the process of the construction of sporting stars. Her performances and achievements have made her more visible in the national press than other footballers. Although players have achieved some visibility during international tournaments, or when complaining about injustices such as Yoreli Rincón (Biram 2024), success was narrated as a collective effort by the team as the so-called 'Chicas Superpoderosas' (the 'Superpowerful Girls'), and not the product of one specific star player. Any visibility has lacked continuity once tournaments have finished. In this article, an intersectional perspective is also deployed, analysing how Linda Caicedo's different identity markers of gender, race/ethnicity, social class and sexuality may have affected the construction of her star status.

Women's football in sporting nationalism projects

Giulianotti has argued that 'football is one of the great cultural institutions ... which shapes and cements national identities' (1999, 23), especially in Latin America, where it is a mass

cultural practice. The representation of national teams in international matches established a link between football and nation as press and politicians discussed the feats and characteristics of the men representing the nation, and has been exploited by political and social actors ever since, especially during international tournaments. Central to these constructions of national identity were the stars deemed key to the national team's success, such as Diego Maradona for Argentina or Pelé for Brazil, who become representative of a national footballing style (Archetti 1999; Alabarces 2002, 42–43), and were the focus of media attention given their exceptional quality and public relatability. This tendency occurred in Colombia with press and presidential discourse around the 2014 and 2018 World Cups focusing on star players James Rodríguez and Radamel Falcao as representatives of a national identity; President Santos often described them as heroes and ambassadors of the nation (Watson 2022, 127).

These constructions of sporting national identity have almost entirely focused on men's exploits, with women excluded from these narratives as they began, and increasingly marginalized as they continued (Nadel 2015, 46; Elsey and Nadel 2019, 63, 66; Biram and Martínez-Mina 2021; Garton, Hijós, and Alabarces 2021, 631; Moreira and Garton 2021, 07). As Elsey and Nadel point out regarding Brazil, 'the exclusion of women took place at the very moment when the narrative of the sport as a democratizing and unifying force of national identity [...] took hold' (2019, 63). Though historians have shown that women played football in the early decades of the twentieth century (Elsey and Nadel 2019; Cornejo Amestica, Matus Castillo, and Cabello Escudero 2022; Scharagrodsky and Pérez Riedel 2022; Bonfim 2023; Brown 2023), women footballers have been written out of hegemonic narratives and histories. According to Bonfim (2023) in Brazil at the start the twentieth century, women of the upper classes were the first to have the chance to play football. From 1913, there is evidence of girls kicking a ball, from 1915 of women playing, and gradually women's teams were created to participate in sporting festival organized by elites in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. It seems that women's football was spreading around the country, which shows an interest in the sport from its origins in Brazil. However, from 1930, women's football was restricted and deemed inappropriate, immoral and improper by the most well-known football clubs (2003, 114), an idea promoted and supported by the press. Although the Latin American press did report on women's sport, there was a divide on what were acceptable sports for women to practise. This was based on notions of idealised masculinity and femininity, linked to hygiene, health, strength and beauty. Brown argues that 'sporting bodies were seen as potentially beautiful repositories of grace, rhythm, and art' (2023, 122) which governed which sports were deemed appropriate for men and women. The physicality of football, involving strength, endurance and potential violence, meant that it became limited in the public mind to masculine practice. If women played football, they could become 'masculinized', risking their beauty, health, femininity and sexuality, thus becoming a transgressive or 'antinational' practice given their purported role for the nation (Nadel 2015; Elsey and Nadel 2019; Moreira and Garton 2021; Ardila Biela 2023, Brown 2023). Therefore, women's football was either banned (in the case of Brazil), ignored or marginalised, preventing women from representing the nation in the same way as their male counterparts (Moreira and Garton 2021, 12).

The reporting of sport, its social significance and symbolism in the mass media has been constructed from the hegemonic perspective of heterosexual men (Binello et al. 2000, 33–34; Wood 2018, 576; Biram and Martínez-Mina 2021). This ensures that the status of

women's football has retained the same stereotypes, transgressive or improper associations and remains mostly invisible or marginalised (Cornejo Amestica, Matus Castillo, and Cabello Escudero 2022: 198). This further embeds gender differences and hierarchies (Elsej and Nadel 2019; Wood 2018, 568). Most studies of women's football involving interviews with players in Latin America reveal experiences of having their sexuality or femininity questioned, being sexualised, trivialised, or subject to *machista* criticism of being 'out of place' on the pitch (see, for example, Ardila Biela 2022, Biela 2023). Given these representations, social pressures and hierarchies, it is unsurprising that women's football has become a site of resistance and struggle (Knijnik and Garton 2022, 291; Hawkins and Hang 2022). Accordingly, the best women footballers who have emerged, such as the Brazilian icon Marta or the Mexican Maribel Domínguez, are not only sporting heroes, but also heroes in the struggle against *machismo* and gender hierarchies. They are fighting for their right to play, for equality, visibility and opportunities to represent the nation. In doing so, they have often become associated with feminist movements such as the #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneMore) campaign against femicide (Garton, Hijós, and Alabarces 2021; Hawkins and Hang 2022). Thus, women footballers become doubly heroic; their life journey involves a constant struggle, and this struggle is representative and recognisable to many. Aided by alternative and social media sources which challenge the narrative control of traditional male-dominated media, women's football and star players are gradually acquiring a space for increased visibility, facilitating their right to represent the nation.

Football, women and media representation

To consider how the media have represented women in sport, particularly football, Wensing and Bruce proposed five rules (2003, 387–389), which are employed to suggest an 'appropriate femininity'. Firstly, 'gender marking', in which women's sporting events, unlike men's sporting events, require a word to identify the competition as being for women (e.g. *Women's World Cup*), which implies an inferior version of the sport. The second rule is 'compulsory heterosexuality', where women are described through socially constructed traditional gender roles or as sexual objects. Third is 'emphasising appropriate femininity', focusing on describing stereotypical feminine behaviour, emotions or physical characteristics, which, for example, may include a focus on beauty or emotional instability. The fourth rule is 'infantilization' which is the tendency to refer to women athletes as 'girls' or use first names, thereby not treating them as successful adults. Finally, the fifth rule is 'non-sport related aspects', where discourse focuses on the personal life of sportswomen, their personality, family, relationships, etc, which relegates sporting endeavour to a secondary position. Some of these rules have been analysed in relation to Colombian football previously; in a study of the social representations of the Colombian national women's team in the Copa América 2014, gender marking was in evidence, since the Colombian media reinforced the social difference and masculine hegemony in football, stating 'football' to refer to the men's team, and 'women's football' for the women (Martínez-Mina and Goellner 2015, 53). A sixth rule, 'ambivalence' has been added to the initial five where 'positive descriptions and images of women athletes are juxtaposed with descriptions and images that undermine and trivialize women's efforts and successes' (Wensing and Bruce 2003, 388). These issues have been evidenced in other studies, discussed later.

The mass media as a social institution that (re)produces social representations provides the base from which different groups build practices, meanings and values about other groups (Hall 2010). Through the media, people model behaviours and attitudes, exercising socialising effects, although individuals can resist their meanings and messages (Kellner 2001). An imbalance and gender gap has been identified regarding who is reported in sporting news, where women have little visibility compared to men's sport (Barbero González and Angel 2017; Cooky, Messner, and Musto 2015; Mujica Johnson and Concha López 2020; quoted in Adá-Lameiras and Rodríguez-Castro 2022). In South America, studies on media representation have revealed that some outstanding players have gained greater media coverage, such as Marta, who has been legitimised as a footballer in the same way as male footballers, and considered as responsible for the visibility of women's football in Brazil (Salvini and Marchi-Junior 2013). The Brazilian press has reduced their focus on the beauty and femininity of footballers due to a recognition of the talent of players like Marta, and of successes obtained by the national team (Da Costa 2014). Unlike other athletes who fulfil socially constructed beauty ideals such as Maria Sharapova, she is also not portrayed as a beauty icon (Januário 2017), possibly, as is suggested by post-colonial Black feminisms, because representations of beauty and femininity are based on whiteness (Brown et al. 2018).

Another aspect occurring in press representations is the varying modes of reporting results of the men's and women's teams. Da Costa (2019) argues that when the men's team performs poorly, diverse and ambiguous media discourse is produced, allowing spaces for reporting on the women's team as a new focus. When the men's team starts winning again, however, order is re-established, relegating the women's team and continuing the tradition of the men's team as the base for constructions of national identity. This ambiguity has also been studied with the Japanese national team, where sectors of the media glorified the women players as a source of national pride, whilst trivialising their success by emphasising their femininity (Ho 2014). This could be due to the media needing to satisfy their audiences, maintaining the established social order. An important aspect of their success was that victories were linked to the nation, as in the case of the Japanese national team triumphs in 2011, which promoted nationalism and nation building efforts (ibid). In this context, the media also have influence, as through their narratives they stimulate patriotic feeling and identity linkages, although this is usually constructed through men's national teams (Martínez-Mina and Goellner 2015). This is reflected in a study by Watson (2021b) who identified that Colombian women's footballers during the Santos presidency (2010–2018) were not mentioned as frequently as their male counterparts in presidential tweets and discourse, nor praised using the same words. On the point of women footballers achieving notable success for the nation, Wensing and Bruce note that the media conventions mentioned above 'may be "bent" to accommodate nationally important female sport stars' and that this 'bending the rules is mostly likely to occur in events such as the Olympic Games when national identity overrides all other identity markers, such as gender' (2003, 388). This may well be the case with Linda Caicedo, as we will discuss later.

When studying the racial reference point, research on tennis star Serena Williams highlights the influence of racial differentiation associated with the production of Blackness in contemporary US society (Schultz 2005). Litchfield et al. (2018) found that social networks amplify inequalities, which implies the superposition of multiple forms of simultaneous

oppression, reinforcing the notion of 'other' upon the athlete. Questions of race and gender are configured to determine representation of the sportswoman. Postcolonial and Black feminisms show that the bodies of Black sportswomen are generally represented as 'outsiders', due to the belief that the Black female body is more masculine than that of white women. Brown et al. (2018), for example, has shown that press discourses of hypermasculinity of the South African athlete Caster Semenya reinforced such beliefs. This implies a more stereotypical representation based on differences which are supposed to be 'natural'. However, there are very few studies centring on the star construction of Afro-Latin American sportswomen and their media representation.

The media are crucial for the visibility and recognition of footballers. Furthermore, they reproduce meanings and reinforce representations of national identity, gender, sexuality and other social markers (Martínez-Mina, Goellner, and Orozco 2019; Martínez-Mina and Goellner 2015). Regarding sexuality, Bullingham and Postlethwaite (2018) examined the media representation of the lesbian footballers Megan Rapinoe and Casey Stoney and discovered a greater focus on social questions and rejection of homophobia, and less on their sexuality. Regarding Stoney, the media concentrated on her family life and her non-sporting identity; as for Rapinoe, the media emphasised non-sporting aspects such as her activism, her gender and her age. This should be read in context, as in countries such as the USA and Great Britain, the legitimacy of non-heteronormative sexual orientation can be greater than in Latin America. For Moreira (2014), it is common for the public to question the sexuality of players, and this allows the media to create an image for consumption, and can thus hypersexualise players, as happened with Marta, Hope Solo and Alex Morgan. This leads to further embedding gender stereotypes of women. Although the media reinforces hegemonic discourse, it can also resignify other discourses and change perceptions, which can produce new ways of seeing women's football. However, elite female athletes are often invisibilised by the press, and when they are shown, gender stereotypes are often reproduced, usually regarding their physical appearance (López-Albalá 2016). This implies a different treatment between men and women athletes, which evidences media complicity in reproducing the existing social order. Other studies have revealed that some sporting media are now more aware of adjusting their commentating on women footballers during matches, avoiding infantilising them and comparing them with male players (Bernal-Barbosa 2019). Such infantilization was evident at the start of the Colombian women's professional league as describing women's football was new for the commentators (Martínez Mina, Goellner and Orozco 2019).

Media construction of sporting stars

Sports stars play a central role in shaping concepts of sporting nationalism, with their exceptional deeds accruing representativity regarding how the nation speaks about itself, but also how it is perceived by other nations (Whannel 2002; Smart 2005; Allen 2013, 584–6; Hassan 2013, 417; Parry 2021, 886). The global audience that a sporting mega-event provides enables the star to transcend national boundaries, with their performance, skill and values often becoming synonymous with their country. Hobsbawm's point that 'the imagined community seems more real as a team of eleven named people' (Hobsbawm 1990, 143) is often quoted, but the star of the team regularly becomes the focal point of the (inter) national audience. Their footballing deeds can help to foster or re-energise a sense of

collective unity, as the football moment becomes a shared time for an emotional, horizontal connection of citizen.

The press is vital for the construction, shaping and broadcasting of sporting stars and its role has been thoroughly studied (see, for example, Whannel 1999; Giulianotti 1999, Andrews and Jackson 2001; Smart 2005; Tulle 2016). Sporting deeds are turned into stories that can be understood by the public, who must have a shared understanding of the value of the performance in its cultural context, which makes them symbolically significant. Whannel describes this process:

Sport coverage is dominated by stars, who, as the bearers of this process of narrativization, play a central role in the strategies employed by media organisations to win and hold audiences. The work the media performs on sport in turning it into representational form is essentially that of narrativization - it works upon the materials of the sporting contest and organises them into narrative form (Whannel 2002, 54).

Sports stars are, therefore, producers of, but also products of multiple texts (Andrews and Jackson 2001, 8; Allen 2013, 585). Their sporting performance begins the construction process, but this then becomes subject to narrativization through television, radio, written press and social media, which interact to construct an understanding and meaning for what has happened on the pitch. The sport star is also shaped by other texts such as interviews, adverts, photos, non-sport events, and social media production, which help make someone both normal and recognisable, but also exceptional. This press attention means that a sporting star is 'likely to possess a heightened presence and affection within popular consciousness making the transition to potent celebrityhood that much easier' (Andrews and Jackson 2001, 8). This awareness stems not only from their sporting exceptionalism but also from their personal values which can be extolled as being nationally characteristic and worthy of emulating (Crepeau 1981, 24; Whannel 2002, 7). Often, these values can be related to overcoming adversity or social barriers such as race, class or gender discrimination, which in turn can enable 'new forms of belonging' (Tulle 2016: 252) for similar citizens on the periphery of national narratives. These sporting stars can also jeopardise an existing national order, bringing into sharp focus marginalisation and lack of institutional infrastructure, having succeeded in spite of the state. Though the state might try to co-opt such a figure, sporting stars can be at the forefront of resistance or a socially transformative movement (Hassan 2013, 418–9). An authentic, principled stance enhances their sporting currency and iconic value. In fact, this might transform the star into an icon.

Sport stars are often narrated in heroic terms; heroes can even be considered as media constructions (Tominari 2009) and sport is consolidated as a privileged place for the emergence of heroes in modern society (Rubio 2001). As mentioned above, the media usually represent sportswomen differently from men. In the case of heroism, Rubio (2001) mentions that in Greek mythology this condition was constituted as a masculine function, as those attitudes considered heroic acquire a different value when women display them. Tominari (2009) compared newspaper construction of male and female sporting heroes and identified that attributes praised in the male athlete were associated with masculinity, while those of the female athlete were not associated with femininity nor masculinity. However, both were represented using the same strategies; exaggeration of their capabilities, responsibilities, and their protagonism in their teams, without finding significant difference in the way they were portrayed as a hero/heroine.

Other strategies implemented by the media for constructing heroines is emphasising features that the majority of the population can identify with, and in the case of being Afro-descendant, the racial question acquires particular notoriety in media narratives (Marin-Montin and Bianchi 2019). Similarly, attributes in sportswomen that transcend the sporting domain are foregrounded, such as overcoming health, economic or emotional difficulties. In this way, the media take these setbacks, ‘spectacularize’ them and transform them into myths to construct the players as heroines (Sanfelice 2011; Dos Santos and Filho 2015). This is how the media play a fundamental role in creating and narrating sporting heroes, which, in the case of women, is rarer given the lack of visibility of women’s sport. This implies that the media construct more sporting heroes than heroines.

Methodology

For this study, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of digital versions of three Colombian current affairs publications: the newspapers *El Espectador* and *El Tiempo*, and the magazine *Semana*. These were selected as having the greatest number of readers, and arguably, therefore, are particularly significant for the creation of sport star narratives (Mobimetrics 2020; El Tiempo 2024). We opted not to study sport-specific publications, as we wanted to analyse how national representations and narratives were constructed by publications with a current affairs focus. Given Caicedo’s increased fame, in each publication there is now a ‘Linda Caicedo’ tag which contains all the stories about her in that publication. Similarly, we also used the ‘Colombian national women’s team’ tag to analyse how she was discussed within a national team focus and context. We decided to concentrate our attention only on the text of the articles and not images; we suggest an analysis of images for further research on this subject.

We concentrated our content analysis around articles published a week before, during and a week after the four main competitions in which Caicedo represented Colombia in 2022 and 2023. These tournaments were the Women’s Copa América hosted by Colombia (8th–30th July 2022), the Under-20 Women’s World Cup held in Costa Rica (10–28 August 2022), the Under-17 Women’s World Cup in India (11–30 October 2022), and the Women’s World Cup hosted by Australia and New Zealand (29 July–20 August 2023). The periods before and after these tournaments are relevant to assess as articles about national expectations and what was at stake for Colombia often appeared before, and the week after the tournament allowed for analysis of coverage of team visits to the Casa de Nariño presidential palace at the invitation of President Gustavo Petro, for example. We also analysed the week of stories around Caicedo’s signing for Real Madrid on 24 February 2023.

This study is centred on the sport star construction of Linda Caicedo with a particular focus on the following aspects: being a protagonist and reference point for Colombian women’s football; how she was described and associated to national characteristics and identity; and her national and international recognition and representability. This is a topic yet to be analysed with relation to women footballers in Colombia. Our focus was how hermeneutic meaning and symbolism was created around Caicedo at these potential times for generating narratives of nation around women’s football given the state of enhanced patriotism that international tournaments have the capacity to produce in Colombia. We also looked at how and if her gender, sexuality, race and performance were narrated and

represented in the construction of her as a footballing star, as well as how these linked to ideas of nation.

Results and discussion: Linda Caicedo and media representation

Our analysis of the narratives of the three online Colombian publications on Linda Caicedo and her construction as a sporting star showed new forms of representation which break with traditional tendencies of reporting women footballers, not only in the content of the discourse, but also in the increased visibility in the press towards women's football in the country. To summarise, we identified three main aspects that the media emphasised about Caicedo: her protagonism and starring role in Colombian women's football; her youth, characteristics and their relationship with her success; and, finally her achievements and international recognition that enhanced a positive image of the country.

A protagonist and reference point for Colombian women's football

'If in 2022 Colombian women's football was a film, Linda Caicedo would have the starring role' wrote *El Espectador* on the semi-final of the U-17 Women's World Cup 2022 (*El Espectador* 2022a). This precisely reflects the emphasis on Caicedo in the three publications studied. The narratives of each publication highlighted her footballing abilities, but, above all, their stories marked her out as the player directly or indirectly responsible for the team's successes. She was portrayed as the star player, and, therefore, her goals, passes, tricks and whole performance became featured moments and were linked to the team triumphs. This media narrative then converted her into the principal reference point for Colombian women's football.

Salvini and Marchi-Junior showed this tendency with the Brazilian footballer Marta in *Revista Placar*, where the player's name was used as an allusion to women's football with her agency capable of representing the group or even the whole sport (2013, 309). In this way, the star player is the one responsible for the team's achievements, and this status is primarily constructed through footballing activity. As Linda Caicedo is a young Afrocolombian, lesbian woman with a body defined due to footballing practice, this perhaps meant that the five rules (gender marking, compulsory heterosexuality, emphasising appropriate femininity, infantilisation and non-sport related aspects) established by Wensing and Bruce (2003) were not overtly in evidence in our analysis. There was some presence of non-sport related aspects, but these discourses are also established as being a key element of sport star construction, allowing a sense of recognition and proximity with a national audience. Regarding infantilization, as Caicedo was only 17/18 during the tournaments, her age was frequently mentioned, but with no negative connotations. Her age, in fact, was a way of underlining her achievements at such a young age, which showed her exceptional sporting ability and her success story overcoming personal obstacles, much in line with a sense of Colombian '*berraquera*'. Ramírez defines *berraquera*, a particularly Colombian word, as 'the concept of survival invoked in the face of difficulties. It becomes an attitude to life which underpins new subjectivities. It encourages Colombians to persevere against all odds. It is the glue of national identity, reconciling regional differences' (Ramírez 2018, 17). This is a concept which we will return to later.

Watson (2021b) has noted that usual media stereotypes and rules problematizes women's potential role as national footballing representatives in Colombia, where beauty is valued as a source of national pride. However, as Caicedo is Afrocolombian, as hegemonic beauty ideals are thought of based on characteristics associated with whiteness (Brown et al. 2018) and as the player's femininity goes beyond social gender norms due to her body characteristics, emphasis in the press instead was on her footballing quality and star role on the pitch. This footballing focus, as Salvini and Marchi-Junior (2013) establish, legitimises women playing football and establishes them as rightful sporting representatives, destabilising the exclusive masculine privilege in this sport. Caicedo's sporting performance was considered exceptional, and was identified as the principal attribute highlighted by the publications analysed. This sporting exceptionalism is a central ingredient in the construction of the sports star, and therefore overshadows gender, race, and sexuality markers, giving primary relevance to sporting achievement. This can also be related to Wensing and Bruce's arguments that national identity has greater relevance than other social markers in major continental or global tournaments, and therefore the five rules can be displaced in media coverage (2003, 388). In our analysis, therefore, we could observe an association between brilliant sporting performance and the ability to represent the nation.

In this way, the media emphasis on her footballing ability, leading Caicedo to become the reference point and most significant player of the Colombian women's national team, increases in significance when the team began to acquire greater national representativity, representing the whole Colombian nation, rather than just Colombian women's football or Colombian women. This shift towards discourse relating to 'whole country' representation first occurred in reporting of the semi-final against Nigeria and final against Spain of the U17 World Cup, and was also present during the Women's World Cup in 2023. The team and Caicedo's performances (plus fitness worries) became the focal point of national attention, excitement and concern, as is shown through comments such as 'The country was filled with joy and gratitude, and those two feelings have a name and surname: Linda Caicedo' (*Semana* 2022a), and 'Linda Caicedo loses her smile and Colombia begins to panic' (Gámez 2023). As already discussed, the Colombian women's team has struggled to represent the nation and garner the media attention needed for this to happen; through Caicedo's performances, a hero emerged who is seen as responsible for historic achievements achieved in football tournaments when national pride is at stake. Colombia, since 1990, has always seen the importance of football World Cups for promoting national unity and aiming to reshape a negative national perception from abroad (Watson 2022, 38), but previously this has been a press and political discourse built around men's achievements. That the successes of the national women's team in 2022 and 2023, with Caicedo at the forefront, are seen as historic for Colombian football (not just women's football), is also vital in Caicedo's star construction. The U17 team reaching their World Cup final had never been achieved before by a Colombian team, male or female, at any age group, and the senior team's World Cup performance reaching the quarter finals equalled the best performance of the men's team at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. Each publication described these feats as historic and memorable for the country, for example: 'the country celebrated one of its most important achievements in sport' (*Semana* 2022b), 'Linda Caicedo can't stop making history with the Colombian national women's team' (Ascencio 2023), and, when describing Caicedo's fantastic goal against Germany, 'a memorable jewel of this women's World Cup 2023 which competes with the goals by Freddy and James' (Pérez Echeverry 2023). In the latter example,

Caicedo's goal is equated in the Colombian sporting pantheon with two of the country's most famous goals, Freddy Rincón's last minute equaliser against West Germany in the 1990 World Cup, and James Rodríguez's spectacular goal against Uruguay in the 2014 World Cup. Both players and teams they featured in were very significant for sporting nationalism discourse (Dávila Ladrón de Guevara and Londoño 2003; Watson 2022); it is, therefore, significant that Caicedo is grouped with them as it evidences her legitimisation as a footballer, as well as women's football as a generator of national sporting memories.

Each publication placed Caicedo on the same semantic level as men's stars of national football through considering her footballing quality above any other of her characteristics. Understanding that media culture exercises a socialising and acculturating effect *via* their models of roles, gender, and through the various positioning of the subject, as they value certain forms of behaviour and ways of being while not valuing or denigrating other types (Kellner 2001), Colombian women's football starts to become valued in a different ways in newspapers, leading other bodies, sexualities and femininities to become visible and legitimate. This is evidenced in news about players such as Caicedo and the ways in which they are represented. In synthesis, the publications emphasised narratives about Caicedo's footballing ability, her leadership on the pitch, and portrayed her as the star and leading figure of national team games in each tournament, which permits greater legitimacy for Colombian women playing football and destabilises the patriarchal order which characterises the sport. Her footballing talent is recognised in such a way that the women's national team starts to be seen as representing national identity, meaning other identity markers that may be considered as traditionally problematic in a footballing context recede to the background.

Youth and berraquera on the field

Age was a fundamental characteristic used in describing Caicedo, not as a form of infantilization, but as an example of prodigious talent and overcoming obstacles. She was, therefore praised frequently as someone who has achieved a great deal of success in little time. This identity factor is a significant aspect in her star construction, as being someone who in only three years of sporting trajectory had achieved what others would be incapable of doing. It was common to find expressions such as 'at the age of just 17', 'at such a young age', 'despite her youth' and 'the young forward' and her age almost always appeared in news about her. Her youth becomes a constant marker, which contributes to the discourse constructing her as a sporting star due to having achieved success at such a young age. On this issue, Parry (2021) mentions that in their reporting, the media often repeat the achievements of elite athletes, making them seem even more spectacular, although focusing on their achievements is not sufficient to explain the heroization process. Her age is often linked to the adjectives and phrases used to define the player which include: 'young promise', 'revelation of Colombian football', 'the star of national football', 'one of the stars of women's football', 'captain and star of the Colombian team', 'the present and future of national football', 'star of Latin American football', 'leader of the team', 'the jewel of national women's football', 'the great promise of world football' and 'the prodigy', amongst many others. Such phrases bestow leadership and protagonism upon her, and differentiate her from her teammates. Regarding other identity markers, only one article, in *El Espectador*, made any allusion to her ethnic origins, although in an indirect fashion: 'the youngster with the hair weaves' (2023a); her race was not a significant characteristic in how the publications analysed

represented her in discourse. This suggests that ‘the myth of natural ability’, attributed to the feats of Black athletes, which are considered a result of biological racial differences (Whannel 1999), was not obvious in press narratives. Her footballing ability and age defines her. Through footballing deeds and subsequent media reporting, footballers become stars and celebrities, which is considered by Allen (2013) to be a tendency of the media; they judge players and raise them up, but are also those that bring them down. The difference between hero and celebrity, according to Boorstin (1992, quoted in Hassan 2013), is rooted in that the celebrity is more known for their notoriety, image or brand, but a hero is known for their achievements. The hero, therefore, creates themselves, while the celebrity is created by the media. All three publications present Linda Caicedo as a sporting heroine, principally due to her outstanding performances and achievements; however, given these footballing exploits and regular press reporting, she becomes both a hero and celebrity.

Returning to the point about exceptionality, Smart makes the point that ‘in a virtual world of fakery’, authenticity for the audience is vital; sporting authenticity derives from talent and consistent performance in which the athlete demonstrates their exceptionality in a ‘highly mediated way’ (2005, 194–5). As shown, the publications construct her footballing exceptionality through aspects such as the quality of performance and age, but there was also a tendency to refer to ‘magical’ or ‘otherworldly’ qualities when describing Caicedo’s play. *Semana* was most prone to this discourse, though it also appeared in *El Tiempo*. In *Semana* there are phrases such as ‘the magic of Linda Caicedo’, ‘the magic that is inherent in her legs’, ‘a source of magic’, ‘her magical plays and goals’ and ‘with four touches of the ball, she performed magic’. Ángelo Marsiglia, the assistant coach of the senior national team, described her as ‘She’s from another planet, a unique player’ (*Semana* 2023a). This construction of ‘supernatural’ talent has been associated with narratives of Black players whose talent is somehow the product of inherent physical capabilities or exoticized traits, which erases the hard work, discipline and commitment necessary to achieve sporting excellence (Whannel 1999). This is not the case with Caicedo, however, whose work ethic, professionalism and capacity to overcome obstacles is regularly referenced. The narrative of the sporting hero who surpasses barriers (personal, societal and sporting) is another common feature of hero construction. Not only does Caicedo demonstrate exceptional qualities that raise her above the normal player, the press also emphasise very human qualities that make her respected and recognisable. It is important for heroes to be representative of the public that supports them in order to create an emotional link or connection between the hero and their fans. Caicedo is regularly described as having important qualities for Colombians, such as ‘humility’, ‘personal sacrifice’, ‘having her feet on the ground’, ‘responsibility’, ‘maturity’ and ‘hard work’ as well as *berraquera*, a particularly Colombian characteristic mentioned earlier which describes a sense of unstinting purpose and unyielding spirit. *Berraquera*, alongside initiative, friendliness and being ‘*échados pa’lante*’ (go-getters) are considered differentiating values of the country (Rosker et al. 2008). Despite Colombia being a highly regionalised country with certain stereotypes and identities attributed to different areas of the country, *berraquera* is a characteristic that alludes to all Colombians, irrespective of their region, precisely because, despite all the diverse national conflicts and violences, Colombians do not give up in the face of setbacks. The Procolombia official website for tourism and culture describes it as ‘that innate, determined, brave and audacious capacity that never makes us stop, because in the face of any difficulty or immense task, we hold our heads high. Being ‘berraco’ is undoubtedly the DNA of our cultural identity’

(Procolombia no date). According to Colombian football journalist Nathalia Prieto, ‘this is something every Colombian has, the hard-working Colombian, the fighting Colombian, the passionate Colombian’ (Watson and Ariza Carranza, forthcoming) which contributes to strengthening affiliations between public and footballer. It is, therefore, a recognised element of a Colombian national identity, which Caicedo shows through her play and in overcoming her own personal setbacks, notably the ovarian cancer she underwent treatment for during Covid. The press also regularly refers to her ‘enormous smile’ and having a ‘contagious happiness’ as key parts of her character; this fun-loving aspect is evident in social media posts of Caicedo singing and dancing with her teammates after games (Semana 2022c; El País Cali 2022). Generating an image of the happy, dancing Colombian (seen also with male national team footballers during the 2014 and 2018 World Cups) connects Caicedo with imaginaries of everyday ‘Colombianness’ that can be celebrated domestically whilst providing a positive image of the country to a global audience.

These personal, emotional connections are achieved through moments of shared sorrow as well as celebration. With Caicedo, the press achieved this affiliation by describing her tears after losing the U17 World Cup final and after defeat in the World Cup quarterfinal. Her sadness at losing evoked sympathy, showed how much she cared and made her relatable to the public. This was a moment shared across the nation and with the Colombian diaspora, very visibly present in the Women’s World Cup (Watson and Ariza Carranza, forthcoming). The press converted this shared sadness into patriotic pride and gratitude for fans support. *El Tiempo* wrote ‘she broke into tears after the 1–2 defeat on Saturday against England. Despite this, in spite of her pain, she decided to speak to Colombia and thank them’ (Sarmiento and Felipe 2023). When Caicedo gave press interviews in the four tournaments, the press chose to highlight her messages to her Colombian compatriots, thereby strengthening the link between player, fans and country, establishing her patriotism – another important quality of the sporting hero – and her own awareness of representing Colombia and Colombians. Examples of this include ‘I’d like to thank all Colombians who are here supporting us, I know it’s not easy, but I feel with that support and encouragement we are twelve on the pitch’ (Pinochet 2023) and ‘And to all Colombia, thank you for your love and support. It is an honour and pride to represent the colours of my country, my town Villagorgona and its beautiful people’ (Semana 2023a). Caicedo perhaps shows the benefit of media training here, but the press deliberately chooses to foreground patriotic pride and her links with her people, underlining national representativeness.

This star construction occurs within a Colombian cultural system where football is the sport that most generates national identity. This is, therefore, linked to Caicedo’s exploits and how she is narrated and visibilised by the media, constituting the factors by which she can be considered as a heroine. This has been rare in women’s football, but other Colombian sportswomen have stimulated patriotic pride, such as Mariana Pajón in BMX and Caterine Ibargüen in athletics. Biram, however, notes that the endeavours of these two sportswomen ‘are less high-profile than football, and do not encroach or impinge in the same way upon the symbolic male hegemony’ (2024, 20), which suggests that Caicedo’s recognition as a football star representing national identity is a significant moment. As we have seen above, this link is due to narratives of youthful excellence achieved through demonstrating characteristics associated with Colombian idiosyncrasies, such as *berraquera* and overcoming social, economic and health obstacles. Age constitutes a more defined identity marker than other ones such as her race, gender and sexuality, but instead of infantilization, her youth

is seen as a positive factor allowing for greater admiration of her talent and ability to show positive images of the nation. It is also important to note that, like Ibargüen and Pajón, Caicedo has not proved a disruptive character towards existing football structures in Colombia, which may contribute to the positive press narratives she has received. Other women footballers such as Yoreli Rincón have gained notoriety, if not star status, for protesting about unequal pay as well as many other issues undermining the so-called ‘professionalism’ of Colombian women’s football (Biram 2024; Watson and Ariza Carranza, forthcoming). Although Caicedo did participate with a team protest gesture of raising both fists into the air during the national anthem before a Copa América game on 8 July 2022 against the cancelling of the league and lack of negotiation from federation and league officials, a gesture that went alongside a social media message of the women footballers being ‘united for change’ (Infobae 2022), she has not been portrayed as a troublemaker in the same way as Rincón and other players seemingly vetoed from national team selection. By participating alongside her teammates, however, she did become representative of the struggles faced by women and women footballers in the country and earn respect for this symbolic stance against inequality, another example of *berraquera*.

National and international recognition

Crepeau (1981) states that sporting heroes are capable of representing the nation and its ideals, which in turn contributes to promoting national pride. International recognition and presenting a different image of the country to the world, is one of the values, which can lead to the identification of the sporting hero. Caicedo’s achievements on and off the field were the object of reporting in all the publications analysed. In 2022 and 2023, Caicedo won various national and international prizes and recognition for her football performances. Each publication repeated and emphasised these awards, and conducted campaigns inviting their readers to vote for the player when nominated. She came second in the Globe Soccer Awards, and received the most votes from the public, placing her amongst the very best players in the world. She was chosen as best player in the Copa América 2022, and was runner up as best player and third highest top scorer of the U17 World Cup. *El Espectador* and the Fundación Color de Colombia awarded her a prize for being the leading Afro-Colombian of the year in 2022. She was named as the world’s best player in the U20 category by the IFFHS, and, finally, she was awarded the prize of ‘Revelation of the Year’ in the Colombian sports awards for 2022. CONMEBOL selected as one of the best team of the year and the Uruguayan newspaper *El País* chose her as the continent’s best player, naming her as the ‘Queen of America’. *La Revista Forbes* included her in the list of the 100 most powerful women in Colombia, alongside the likes of Shakira and Vice President Francia Márquez, for women who stand out for their leadership. She won two match best player awards in her first two games at the senior World Cup in 2023 and FIFA named her as one of the three best young players of the tournament. After the World Cup, she was amongst the 29 players nominated for the Ballon D’Or Prize for world’s best footballer. Furthermore, Caicedo and her teammates also achieved political recognition, which cemented their national importance, as both the U17 and senior teams were invited to meet President Gustavo Petro at the presidential palace. This had not occurred during the Santos presidency (Watson 2021), and demonstrates a new recognition of their social and political meaning and representative power.

In many articles, these awards and achievements were highlighted, even when the main topic was not the award itself. The achievements acted like catalysts for stimulating the publications to further praise her and extol her qualities in articles, thereby consolidating them as reaffirming elements within the journalistic narratives, which portray her as an exceptional footballer and star. The international award particularly stimulated national pride not only for outstanding performances, but also for how she represented the country. More than just being Colombian, she embodied the essence of the Afro-Colombian population and Black sportswomen. It is noteworthy that, curiously, historically the Colombian national women's team had lacked Black players in several periods, for example the 2015 World Cup in Canada. In this way, she became a symbol for those who challenge gender, race and class barriers. She became a clear example of social mobility as the media have an important role in reinforcing the image of the athlete who triumphs in adversity, which becomes a prevailing image (Toncel 2010, 50). Earning a living through football until recently was just a dream for all Colombian women, not just Afro-Colombians; Linda Caicedo is, therefore, a sign of the changes in women's football in recent years and the possibilities for the future.

If sporting heroes are not just constructed around their sporting exploits but also for the narratives that the media create about them (Parry 2021), it is important to state that there were also various articles in each publication about her life story, including her family, childhood, and the obstacles she had to overcome. This is consistent with the 'non-sport related aspects' rule (Wensing and Bruce 2003), but it is also an important part of star construction in terms of creating proximity, representability and recognition between star and audience. The publications emphasise how Caicedo preferred playing with a ball rather than dolls at the age of five, the support her family gave her and the difficulties they faced together to help her with her dream of becoming a footballer. Each club and the support she had is described: Real Juanchito, Generaciones Palmiranas, El Club Deportivo Atlas C.P., the regional Valle del Cauca team, América de Cali and Deportivo Cali (the last two being professional clubs). When interviewed, obstacles seemed to derive more from poverty than sexism, as she says 'Real Juanchito gave me the opportunity. They helped me a lot with my game. Also the support of the boys who didn't discriminate against me for being the only woman' (*Semana* 2022c). Her ovarian cancer diagnosis at the age of 15 and chemotherapy, which led to her wearing a wig in the league that year, and insults from fans when moving between rival Cali clubs, is also evidence of substantial barriers conquered, an important aspect of hero construction as well as Colombian national identity.

Following her signing for Real Madrid, the newspapers paid attention to exploring all the aspects related to her connections with and signing for the club, including training sessions, all relevant events around her life as a footballer, friendships with teammates, living arrangements and reactions to her in the Spanish press. Such media focus had not occurred previously to other women footballers already playing abroad such as Leicy Santos or Mayra Ramírez. As such, Caicedo is portrayed as a woman who defied prevailing gender norms related to her femininity and had success. Stories about her private life were also present. *Semana* published several stories about Instagram posts showing Caicedo with her girlfriend Valentina Herrera, celebrating their young love and evident happiness. Notable here is how this relationship might traditionally be perceived as doubly transgressive, given the same-sex relationship, as well as Herrera being white and Caicedo Afro-Colombian. No criticism of the relationship is ever apparent, despite Colombia being a rather

conservative Catholic country. Biram has suggested that ‘there has been a consistent evasion of players’ sexuality [...] in the mainstream media [which] is reluctant to touch upon the subject’ (2024, 21). We might venture to suggest that with this type of coverage, Caicedo perhaps becomes representative of a new, accepting modernity, that clashes with previous newspaper and football discourse that often denigrated women footballers’ sexuality. It also shows a progression in Colombian women’s football reporting only a few years after the infamous comments of Deportes Tolima’s former president Gabriel Camargo who criticised women’s football as ‘a breeding ground for lesbians’ (Pulzo 2019).

Linda Caicedo, therefore, emerges as a reference point who challenges prevailing and embedded society discourse regarding the participation of women in football, and the supposed failures for this sport to be professional. Her image has the potential to transform perceptions around women’s sport and to encourage wider participation of girls in sport. Until a few years ago, Colombian girls did not have female footballer reference points; professional footballers have mentioned their admiration for male players when they were young given the lack of these references. Biram’s survey of women footballers from various nations in the 2018 Copa Libertadores shows that of the 54 players named as reference points, 17 were female and 32 male, and only one Colombian, Yoreli Rincón, appeared in the top 14 mentioned (2024, 148–9). Of women footballers, Brazilian and US footballers were the most referenced, suggesting that if Colombian girls had women footballing idols, they were mostly looking abroad to find them, though Biram did find that selections were based on national lines. Now, however, Caicedo has become a new reference point in the country, alongside other members of the World Cup team. The study ‘*Yo quiero ser como Linda Caicedo*’ (Balasnoa Rico, Carmona-Álvarez, Ospino-Márquez and Rangel Macías 2022) is a demonstration of how the women footballers’ performance and resistance in a sport that is entrenched in Colombian society as being a masculine domain is leading to social change. This is linked to the increased visibility that players like Caicedo have in the media. Stories about the players on and off the pitch are vital; biographies contribute to the construction of an athlete’s image; the media work to convert the athletes into known figures, but also in heroes, which generates a desire in the public to know the ‘real person’ (Whannel 2002). This knowledge allows for greater identification of the public with the situations and problems that the athlete has overcome, creates greater empathy and reveals their human characteristics often overshadowed by their exceptional talent. In Colombia, a country with significant inequality, the values of effort leading to success are considered important, and therefore, according to Toncel, nationalist sporting discourse provokes an optimistic feeling, proper of modernity, which links sporting triumph with progress, shown very clearly in the phrase ‘We are moving forward, we are progressing’ (2010, 38). The media show the public that a common person can become extraordinary, not solely due to their talent, but also due to their capacity to overcome obstacles.

Colombian women’s football has grown steadily in recent years and Linda Caicedo has established a precedent in the history of this sport in the country. This has been achieved through her performances and recognition of her talent, as well as the legitimacy and visibility that the media have given her in their narratives, to the extent that she has been constructed as the main reference point of women’s football in Colombia. International recognition for her brilliant performances positioned women’s football as a possible shop window for finding similar talents. This international recognition is very important, as Colombia often seeks to gain respect and validation from abroad, being aware of its

historical lower ranking in a continental and global footballing and political hierarchy. With Linda Caicedo, Colombia argues that it has one of the best players in the world, and the press takes every chance to show how the world praises her exploits and talent. Being the first Colombian woman to play for an elite club such as Real Madrid confers footballing status. Newspaper coverage of Caicedo's signing for Real Madrid was the dominant footballing topic of that week. Amongst the reporting, *Semana* reported the record social media impact that this event had. They claimed that the clip of her being presented with her Real Madrid shirt became one of the most seen of the club's posts with 2.8 million views on Instagram, her first participation in training received more than a million views, and other posts achieved over 800,000 views. Another aspect of the transfer to Real Madrid emphasising Caicedo's significance was her salary, which was between 25,000–35,000 euros, another record for a Colombian woman footballer. All of these stories further convey the footballing importance and status of Caicedo as being one of the world's best players at one of the world's most famous clubs with the prestige that goes along with it, leading to Colombian pride.

This press coverage continued with the Women's World Cup that summer, as Colombia produced their best performance at this level by reaching the quarterfinals, a feat achieved thanks to several players including Linda Caicedo. During the Women's World Cup, more international recognition was foregrounded; *El Tiempo* reported Chelsea manager Emma Hayes's praise for Caicedo (Pinochet 2023), and all newspapers reported social media posts from FIFA extolling Linda Caicedo as the new star of South American women's football. Her goal against Germany was also voted by fans internationally the best goal of the World Cup. These feats and international recognition ensured that the interest of Colombians for national team matches continued to grow, creating a feeling of national pride, 'not just in Colombia, but in sport in general' (*El Espectador* 2023a). Expressions such as 'a star of football who makes every fibre of the body vibrate in all fans ... conquered the hearts of a whole country... Colombia surrenders at her feet' (*El Espectador* 2022b, 2023b) are a clear example of how the publications linked her performance in the national team with generalised passions and emotions, leading to an approximation of women's football as a reaffirmation of national identity. This situation is a novelty, as Colombian women's football does not tend to be seen as something of 'ours', but of 'them' (Martínez-Mina and Goellner 2015).

In non-footballing representations, Linda Caicedo was shown participating in social projects, as the ambassador of the Resilient Youth programme of the US Embassy in Colombia as part of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), thereby becoming an example for her generation. Furthermore, on various occasions, Linda Caicedo was quoted emphasising the importance of supporting Colombian women's football; here she becomes a voice and representative of a marginalised collective, another distinguishing characteristic of sporting stars, as they can often express opinions that are uncomfortable for those who govern the sport, or, indeed, the country (Hassan 2013).

As we can see, the narratives about the footballer construct her as a unique footballer, who manages to reinforce the status of women's football in Colombia, bringing greater visibility to the sport as well as improving the international image of Colombia regarding its sporting talent. These are all important to understand who Linda Caicedo is at the current time and what she represents.

Final considerations

Linda Caicedo is currently the most representative women's footballer for Colombia. Through her footballing exploits, she has opened the way for historic changes in women's football in Colombia. The stereotypes that the media previously used to refer to women footballers have been displaced, now focusing on footballing skills, as well as her importance on the pitch. Similarly, there has been a transformation regarding the continuity of media reporting granted to women's football. The regularity of articles on Caicedo reveals that women's football is currently enjoying a relatively persistent media presence, at least related to the national team and its star players. This marks a change from when it only appeared at the time of international tournaments and quickly disappeared. The greater exposure of women's football as a spectacle for the media, covering different age categories from the U17 to the senior team, constitutes a feature configuring the changes regarding the constancy of broadcasting on women's football. Her talent has allowed the creation of narratives that associate women's football with Colombian national identity. Her youth, a fundamental identity marker in media narratives about her, is associated with characteristics of success and of overcoming personal obstacles as well as others present in Colombian society, reflecting the *berraquera* of a country and people that struggles to move forward despite adversity. Her multiple achievements project a positive image of the country nationally and internationally, which simultaneously awards greater legitimacy to women's football in Colombia. These aspects which stood out in the publications analysed have constructed and consolidated her as a national sporting star. This is how women have to stand out in order to legitimise themselves in spaces, such as football, that historically have been denied to them.

The progressive triumphs of the women footballers have converted the team into being capable of representing the nation. This privileges the media discourse around Caicedo, since her talent was shown to the world in a strong footballing moment for the national team in global competitions. We have shown that the narratives and discourses around Caicedo are consistent with those shown to be constructive of heroes and sporting stars. Her youth, talent, life story, and values she displays strengthen her status as a footballing national heroine. Her feats transcend the national domain to earn international recognition, as her performances contributed significantly to historic achievements and memories for Colombian sport. Consequently, Colombian football is starting to be valued differently; Caicedo, and her teammates, are responsible for women's football having been something just for 'them', to becoming something for a national 'us'. New generations of girls now have players as an inspiration to follow, and Colombian women can now consider football as a possible career.

Furthermore, media reports have also overcome traditional barriers regarding social norms of gender and sexuality through publishing news of the love life of the player, and also when they place her on the same level of importance as male footballers giving interest to their off-field lives. Such reports become legitimising and disruptive of usual constructions of gender and sexuality. There is also no evidence, beyond the description of 'magical' play, of the myth of natural ability of the Afro-descendant population, as the ethnic origin of the player is not foregrounded.

For the publications analysed, Linda Caicedo is the present and future of the Colombian national women's team, a situation that the country's football directors should reflect upon

regarding changes needed for the country's professional league, which currently lacks a defined, solid structure and institutional backing. Perhaps this is the moment to restructure and support women's football in Colombia, by seeing the opportunities Caicedo and her teammates have revealed. If Linda Caicedo is the future, this future must contain guarantees of improved opportunities for women who play football professionally in Colombia.

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