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Stokesy ct. Foakesy b. Woakesy

Transparent nicknames in British sporting discourse

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Research Article

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Abstract

Using a data set of nicknames of elite athletes compiled from the mainstream British sporting press and media, this article explores grammatical patterns in the way we create hypocoristic nicknames like *Hughesie*, *Robbo* and *Macca*. It outlines the purpose of nicknames and their particular role in sport, and provides an analysis of the predictable morphological and phonological rules that apply to a type of nickname categorised here as 'transparent'. It offers some initial observations on the social distribution of particular nickname variants and on the potential for creativity and playfulness inherent in transparent nicknaming processes.

Introduction

For several years, I have been keeping a scrapbook (see Figure 1) of examples of vernacular English in the British sporting press and media. Initially conceived as a means of combining two of my passions – sport and language – to distract from the daily commute, the inventory quickly grew into a rich source of #WordOfTheDay tweets and ultimately inspired an annual *Sports Word of the Year* blog post. Items that catch my attention typically represent examples of sporting jargon, slang and dialect – linguistic classifications that frequently overlap, but are extremely revealing about the nature of sporting discourse, and about the identities of sportsmen and women and sports enthusiasts. This paper focuses on a particularly frequent phenomenon in the inventory: nicknames and, more especially, the observable patterns that underpin a specific type – single-word hypocoristics derived from an athlete's name and generated by predictable grammatical processes. I first consider the purpose of nicknames, and their particular role in sport, and then provide an analysis of the morphological and phonological rules that apply to a type of nickname I categorise here as 'transparent'. Finally, I offer some observations on the social distribution of particular variants and on the potential for creativity and playfulness inherent in transparent nicknaming processes.

Nicknames and sport

According to Starks and Taylor–Leech (2011), while we have little or no control over the selection and use of our personal names, nicknames by contrast 'are designated through life, providing the users with a powerful tool for both self and other identification'. Nicknames are an integral part of our informal repertoire: we use them as affectionate forms of address and to express familiarity and camaraderie. While they may also have negative outcomes: name-calling based on physical characteristics or personal habits that 'others' people is, sadly, a common form of bullying (see e.g. Kolawole et al. 2009), in my experience nicknames in sport are seldom used divisively so I do not focus on this aspect here. Nicknames exist in many domains: Starks and Taylor–Leech (2011) report investigations into nickname usage within gangs, the armed forces, families and, notably, sports teams. I sense they are particularly popular within sporting circles as they 'connote solidarity and kinship' (Alford 1988, 82–85), thus encapsulating the desire, especially in team sports, to create intimacy and establish relationships as a means of fostering a sense of shared identity and team spirit.

For the purposes of this paper, I exclude nicknames applied routinely to certain surnames. Most people my age (born 1964) will probably know the odd *Smudger* [Smith], *Nobby* [Clark(e)] or *Dusty* [Miller]. Commonly associated with Forces slang (Knox 2015), such nicknames are arguably less common nowadays, although it is

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Figure 1. Documenting vernacular English in the British sporting press and media.

interesting to note that Premier League footballer, James Milner (born 1986), recalled sharing the disappointment of Leeds United's 2004 relegation with other 'local lads who came through the academy, people like Smudger and Robbo[1], who it hit harder' (James 2013). Nonetheless, as such nicknames are assigned 'automatically' they are not relevant to this discussion. Nicknames based on physical appearance or personality traits are also out of scope. Well known examples for professional athletes include *Psycho* [footballer, Stuart Pearce (Taylor 2014)] – a reference to his intimidating on-field persona; *Nord* [footballer, Gareth Southgate (Ronay 2023)] – a reference to his uncanny resemblance to TV presenter and film critic, Dennis Norden; and *Crouchy* [footballer, Jill Scott (Asante 2022)] – a reference to male footballer, Peter Crouch, who is similarly exceptionally tall.

I also exclude 'hyperbolic' nicknames attributed to players by fans and journalists. Examples include *Can't Miss Swiss* [tennis player, Martina Hingis (Bierley 2004)] – in recognition of her relentless consistency; *the Postman* [golfer, Ian Poulter (Bull 2014)] – in recognition of his ability, especially in Ryder Cup competitions, to 'deliver' victory; and *Thorpedo* [swimmer, Ian Thorpe (Mason 2014)] – in recognition of his incredible speed in the pool. In their study of nicknames in professional ice hockey and baseball, Kennedy and Zamuner (2006) categorise such nicknames as 'Homeric' in that they function like Homeric epithets in referencing a perceived 'heroic' characteristic of the athlete by exploiting literary devices, such as wordplay, metaphorical imagery, alliteration and rhyme. They conclude that such nicknames are 'descriptive' and 'only used referentially, usually in sports narrative' (Kennedy and Zamuner 2006). Such monikers do not generally occur, therefore, as spontaneous forms of address used by friends and fellow athletes of, or to, the individuals concerned; rather they function more like aliases than authentic nicknames. If we consider Ian Poulter and Ian Thorpe, both have widely documented nicknames derived from their surnames that meet the criteria of 'transparent' nicknames – *Poults* and *Thorpie* respectively. Kennedy and Zamuner (2006) state that such hypocoristic nicknames are 'used for both reference and address' (i.e. athletes and others use these forms when they talk about, and to, other athletes) and that they 'signal membership on a team', which explains why nicknames of this type appear to be so popular among sportsmen and women. Furthermore, a single word hypocoristic serves a more prosaic purpose in that calling for the attention of, or offering encouragement to, a teammate is communicated more effectively in one or two syllables than by using a given name, especially if that name is polysyllabic.

In the *Guardian* article cited above, James Milner – *Milly* to teammates and to his former Liverpool manager, Jürgen Klopp (Wilson 2019) – calls former Leeds United goalkeeper, Paul Robinson, *Robbo*. Closer inspection reveals a pattern in nicknames like *Milly*, *Robbo*, *Poults* and *Thorpie*. *Milly* and *Thorpie* share the same suffix (<-ie> and <-y> are spelling variants reflecting the same phonological output[2]). *Milly*, *Robbo* and *Poults* are structurally similar in that a bound morpheme, <-y>, <-o>, or <-s>, combines with the

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first syllable of the surnames *Milner*, *Robinson* and *Poulter* respectively (the double medial consonant in *Milly* and *Robbo* is a natural reflex of English orthography). Such 'transparent' nicknames are by far the most common type in my own personal sporting experience and in the data I have compiled. This paper, then, focuses on nicknames formed by productive morphophonological processes, for which I use the term 'transparent'. Although transparent nicknames are by no means exclusive to sport – I have friends with nicknames of this type and there are countless famous real life and, indeed, fictional examples beyond sport, such as *Parky* [broadcaster, Michael Parkinson (Parkinson 2008)] and *Smithy* [*Gavin & Stacey* character, Neil Smith (Ofori 2024)] – my data suggests they are particularly common in sporting circles.

Data collection

My inventory of nicknames derives from British sporting discourse of several types, primarily newspapers, broadcast output and social media posts. Live coverage and commentary, exchanges between pundits, match reports and analysis, post-match interviews, radio phone-ins, social media posts, and online content is often characterised by a conversational style in which nicknames occur naturally and spontaneously. Even formal print accounts frequently include quotations from interviews with players, coaches and expert observers who use nicknames in their reflections on a teammate or opponent. The current total of 369 transparent nicknames is relatively broad in terms of the sports represented, but is inevitably skewed towards sports in which I take a greater personal interest (mainly ball sports) and which feature most prominently in press and media reporting. The list includes athletes from 13 sports (see Table 1) and spans nearly 50 years of playing and following sport, with more comprehensive coverage since I started recording data more systematically in 2014.

Regrettably, despite efforts to include sportswomen, sportsmen dominate the list with 327 male athletes and only 42 female athletes. While I acknowledge this bias reflects my own greater immersion in men's sport, it is also a consequence of the fact that women's sport, especially team sports, remains woefully underrepresented in the mainstream sporting press and media. While the situation is improving and the visibility of women's football and cricket, for instance, has increased significantly in recent years, coverage of predominantly female team sports in the UK, like hockey and netball, remains frustratingly elusive. As a former hockey player with a wife and daughters who play(ed) hockey and netball, I have, however, been able to supplement the inventory with examples from both sports, either from personal experience or from examples supplied by friends and family. The inventory only includes examples for which I have reliable evidence: in most cases, this is a newspaper or magazine article, book, TV or radio broadcast, social media post or website (see Figure 2), but also occasionally includes ephemera, such as match day programmes, club newsletters and archived personal communication. Whenever I encounter evidence of a new nickname, I search (primarily online) for corroboration and only when I find multiple sources that confirm a form as genuine do I add it to the data set. The complete inventory, including a bibliographic reference for each nickname, appears in the Supplementary Material.

Nickname types

The data set reveals three common variants of transparent nicknames (with sub-types). Table 2 shows monosyllabic surnames that acquire one of three suffixes; Table 3 shows polysyllabic surnames that are clipped and may additionally acquire one of five suffix types; and Table 4 shows nicknames as initialisms and blends. Further discussion of each type follows below.

Type 1 nicknames apply to athletes with monosyllabic surnames and differ from the other two types in that they generate a longer name than the corresponding surname, whereas types 2 and 3 generally produce truncated forms. By far the most common type 1 model is simply to attach suffix <-y> to a surname. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) records <-y> from the 1400s as a 'pet name' or 'diminutive' (e.g. 'dear' → *dearie*, 'mum' → *mummy*) that has 'recently [been] appended to surnames to form a familiar name', citing *Smithy* and *Coxy* from 1941 and 1958 respectively. My data includes examples from a wide range of sports, such as *Rooty* [cricketer, Joe Root] in Table 2, and includes several generations of athlete, confirming this well-established process persists across several decades.

Green's Dictionary of Slang (2024) notes suffix <-o> is 'used variously to create extended nouns, often as terms of address' (e.g. 'boy' → *boyo*, 'kid' → *kiddo*); *Collins Dictionary* (2024) records suffix <–sy> as a 'suffix forming nouns or adjectives, sometimes a diminutive of the base word and usually confined to informal or jocular use' (e.g. 'foot' → *footsie*, pop → *popsy*). My data includes only a small number of each, such as *Hempo* [footballer, Lauren Hemp] and *Keysy* [cricketer, Rob Key] in Table 2, suggesting these forms are considerably less common than y-suffixation.

The simplest form of nickname identified as type 2 is created by clipping an athlete's polysyllabic surname.

Table 1. Numbers of transparent nicknames by sport

football	cricket	hockey	rugby union	rugby league	golf	tennis
122	86	53	36	25	12	8
cycling	**athletics**	**darts**	**netball**	**swimming**	**boxing**	**other**[3]
5	4	3	1	1	1	12

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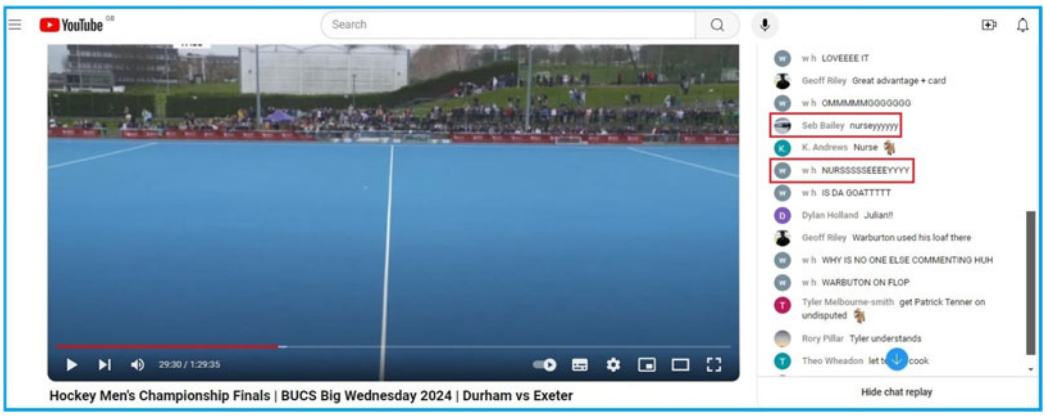


Figure 2. YouTube live stream of BUCS (British Universities and Colleges) 2024 Men's Hockey Final (Durham v Exeter) incl. praise for *Nursey* [Nick Nurse] in live chat.

Table 2. Type 1 nicknames – monosyllabic surname plus suffixation

process	example	athlete
y-suffixation	*Rooty*	cricketer, Joe Root
o-suffixation	*Hempo*	footballer, Lauren Hemp
sy-suffixation	*Keysy*	cricketer, Rob Key

Table 3. Type 2 nicknames – polysyllabic surname with clipping (& suffixation)

process		example	athlete
clip		*Braz*	netballer, Ashleigh Brazill
	y-suffixation	*Monty*	golfer, Colin Montgomerie
	o-suffixation	*Hendo*	footballer, Jordan Henderson
	s-suffixation	*Morgs*	cricketer, Eoin Morgan
	er(s)-suffixations	*Radders*	tennis player, Emma Raducanu
	R/S → Z (+ suffixation)	*Faz*	rugby union player, Owen Farrell

Katamba (2005, 180) describes clipping as 'the formation of a new word-form, with the same meaning as the original lexical term, by lopping off a portion and reducing it to a monosyllabic or disyllabic rump'. English speakers create clips in a number of ways:

1. back-clipping, i.e. removing all word final elements (e.g. 'public house' → *pub*)
2. fore-clipping, i.e. removing all word initial elements (e.g. 'telephone' → *phone*)
3. mixed clipping, i.e. removing both word initial and word final elements (e.g. 'influenza' → *flu*)

Table 4. Type 3 nicknames – initialisms & blends

process		example	athlete
initial		*KJT*	heptathlete, Katarina Johnson–Thompson
	+ surname	*Jennis*	heptathlete, Jessica Ennis–Hill
	+ clip	*G-Mac*	golfer, Graeme McDowell
	+ clip + suffixation	*Kedders*	tennis player, Kyle Edmund
clip	+ clip	*Charmar*	hockey player, Charlotte Martin

4. mid-clipping, i.e. removing a word medial element and combining a word initial and word final element (e.g. spectacles → *specs*)

Nicknames of this type in the data are almost universally created by back-clipping, as in the case of *Braz* [netballer, Ashleigh Brazill] in Table 3, although *Studge* [footballer, Daniel Sturridge] is one of a handful of intriguing examples of mid-clipping. *Tosh* [footballer, Malcolm McIntosh] is the only example of fore-clipping, and there is also a single case of fore-clipping combining with back-clipping to produce the nickname *Geech* [rugby union coach, Ian McGeechan]. In this case, the output prompts a phonetic change as the resulting clip surfaces as *Geech* (/gi:ʧ/) – i.e. with a word final affricate, /ʧ/ – while the corresponding syllable in the surname, *McGeechan* (/mə'gi:kən/), has a final plosive, /k/. I discuss other orthographical and phonological implications of transparent nicknames below and give further detail in the Supplementary Material.

While clipping clearly requires structural modification of an underlying form, it also has semantic implications that make it an ideal vehicle for generating nicknames. Jamet (2009) notes, 'the clipped form is marked colloquial or slang compared to the base lexeme which is the unmarked form' and Plag (2003, 23) suggests clips 'share a common

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function, namely to express familiarity with the denotation of the derivative'. This, then, confirms the suitability of clipping for creating nicknames, which I noted earlier are devices for expressing group affiliation and camaraderie. Furthermore, linguists note that clipping is frequently accompanied by suffixation, especially with the diminutive suffix <-y> (e.g. 'barbecue' → *barbie*, 'television' → *telly*). Jamet (2009) cites Plag (2003, 117) in concluding that 'truncated names and clippings are used to express familiarity', while diminutives 'express familiarity as well as a (usually) positive attitude towards the person or thing referred to'. This explains why clips with y-suffixation, such as *Monty* [golfer, Colin Montgomerie] in Table 3, make ideal nicknames and are consequently among the most numerous in the data.

Green's Dictionary of Slang (2024) notes suffix <-o> is used 'variously to create general shortened forms, mostly of nouns' (e.g. 'ammunition' → *ammo*, 'combination' → *combo*) and suggests this construction is especially productive in Australian English (e.g. 'afternoon' → *arvo*, 'milkman' → *milko*). Two examples from British sporting slang are *statto* [= 'statistician'] which *Collins Dictionary* (2024) records as someone 'preoccupied with the facts and figures of a particular subject, esp[ecially] a sport'; and *lino* [= 'assistant referee' i.e. a hypocorism of the older term, 'linesman' (Room 2010, 89)]. A large proportion of the nicknames of this type apply to surnames ending in <-son>, as illustrated by *Hendo* [footballer, Jordan Henderson] in Table 3 which might lead one to speculate that there is some morphophonological motivation for <-son> names belonging primarily in this group. There are, however, a handful of examples of <-son> nicknames formed with other suffixes (e.g. *Harmy* [cricketer, Steve Harmison] and of other surname types which acquire <o> suffixation – e.g. *Burno* [hockey player, Ella Burnley (see Figure 3)]. I am also conscious that <-son> is an extremely common final element in English surnames and that the numbers are inflated by the presence of several Robinsons (mainly *Robbos*) from my own family.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) records <-s> as a 'shortened form of the hypocoristic dim[inutive] suffix <–sy>' that can be 'added to the same classes of words' producing forms that, like nicknames, 'serve predominantly as affectionate forms of address' (e.g. 'babe' → *babs*) and illustrated by *Morgs* [cricketer, Eoin Morgan] in Table 3.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024) notes <-er> serves 'to make jocular formations on nouns, by clipping or curtailing them and adding -er to the remaining part, which is sometimes itself distorted' (e.g. 'football' → *footer*, 'breakfast' → *brekker*). I combine suffix <-er> with <-a> suffixation (e.g. 'accumulator' → *acca*), since for most varieties of English in England and Wales (but not in Scotland and Ireland) they produce the same output, namely schwa, /ə/.[4] Thus I consider *Killer* [footballer, Brian Kilcline] and *Macca* [rugby league player, Paul McShane] are generated by ostensibly the same process. I also conflate these forms in my data with forms with an additional <-s> as, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2024), both <-er> and <-ers> suffixation were '[i]ntroduced from Rugby School into Oxford University slang' in the late 19th century. The additional <s> in <-ers> is first recorded in 1892 and the entry notes it can be '[s]uffixed to the first part of a proper or common noun, to form a familiar or humorous nickname' (e.g. 'badminton' → *badders*, 'champagne' → *champers*), as is illustrated by *Radders* [tennis player, Emma Raducanu] in Table 3.

Finally, I include as type 2 variants, nicknames that occur with a restricted set of polysyllabic surnames containing word medial, intervocalic <-r-> or, less commonly, surnames for which a clip features word final <-s> preceding a plosive. Clipping plus conversion of word medial, intervocalic <r> to <z> occurs in informal English (e.g. 'sorry' → *soz*, 'tomorrow' → *tomoz*) and is a particularly productive means of creating informal contractions of first names (e.g. *Kaz* [footballer, Karen Carney (Wrack 2019)] and *Tez* [rugby league pundit, Terry Newton (McDermott 2023)]). Dalzell and Victor (2006) lists several such formulations, including with additional suffixation (e.g. 'Barry' → *Bazza*, 'Sharon' → *Shaz*) and Table 3 includes *Faz* [rugby union player, Owen Farrell]. The conversion of postvocalic <s> to <z> is similarly apparent in colloquial formulations where <s> is the first element of a syllable final consonant cluster, often attracting an additional <-y> suffix (e.g. 'best mate' → *bezzie*; 'swimming costume' → *cozzie*, and the wonderfully innovative 'cost of living (crisis)' → *cozzie livs*). Examples in my data with additional suffixation include *Gazza* [footballer, Paul Gascoigne] and *Fozzy* [cricketer, Neil Foster].

One final observation regarding type 2 forms with suffixation is that, as with simple clips, back-clipping is privileged; *Coisty* [footballer, Ally McCoist], is the only example of foreclipping used to create a type 2 nickname with suffixation. As noted above with the double medial consonants in *Robbo* and *Milly*, some outputs prompt spelling modifications to ensure they conform to English phonological and/or orthographic principles – noteworthy examples include *Dicko* [footballer, Lee Dixon] and *Merse* [footballer, Paul Merson]. The surname, *Dixon*, contains orthographic <x> representing the consonant cluster, /ks/; the change in spelling reflects the 'normal' process of removing word final <son> (/sən/) to generate the clip 'Dick' (/dɪk/) prior to adding suffix <-o> – i.e. the nickname is *Dicko* (/ˈdɪksəʊ/) not **Dixo* (/ˈdɪksəʊ/). **Mers* might suggest a pronunciation with word final /z/ – i.e. /məːz/, thus rhyming with 'hers'; the additional <-e> makes it clear that the nickname, *Merse* (/məːs/) ends in a voiceless consonant – i.e. rhyming with 'hearse' – to mirror the pronunciation of the same consonant in the surname, *Merson* (/ˈməːsən/).

Type 3 nicknames include examples of a single initial – e.g. *H* [footballer, Harry Kane]; double initials that represent first name and surname – e.g. *LJ* [footballer, Lauren James]; or a double-barrelled surname – e.g. *JP* [hockey player, Charlotte James–Pajwani]. There are also examples of triple initials representing first name plus double-barrelled surname – as confirmed by *KJT* [heptathlete, Katarina Johnson–Thompson] in Table 4; or, occasionally, one initial represents a surname prefix – e.g. *MVG* [darts player, Michael van Gerwen]. For most nicknames of this type, each initial is pronounced separately – i.e. as an initialism – although *BOD* [rugby union player, Brian O'Driscoll] is one of

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Figure 3. X post from Exeter University Women's Hockey Club including the comment *who let burno* [Ella Burnley] *be so tall*.

a small number pronounced as an acronym – i.e. *BOD* rhymes with 'cod'.

I include in this group nicknames formed by blending, since the vast majority feature an initial in combination with a clip and/or suffixation. A blend is a word formed by combining the sounds and meanings of two or more words to create a new word. They differ from compounds, which retain the whole of both of the original words (e.g. 'net + ball' → *netball*, 'swim + suit' → *swimsuit*), in that one or both elements in a blend is a clip, or 'splinter', of the source words (e.g. 'breakfast + lunch' → *brunch*, 'skirt + shorts' → *skort*). Table 4 shows a range of processes can combine to produce nicknames of this type, including initial plus whole surname, as in *Jennis* [heptathlete, Jessica Ennis–Hill]; initial plus clip, as in *G-Mac* [golfer Graeme McDowell]; initial plus clip plus any of the suffixes listed in Table 3, illustrated by *Kedders* [tennis player, Kyle Edmunds] here; or a blend produced by a complex clip of both first name and surname, such as *Charmar* [hockey player, Charlotte Martin]. Crucially, most are pronounced as portmanteaux – i.e. as a newly formed composite word: *Jennis* rhymes with 'tennis'; *Kedders* rhymes with 'headers'; and *Charmar* rhymes with 'ha-ha'. Spelling is, therefore, usually as a single unit, although in forms like *G-Mac* the initial is a discrete element – i.e. the pronunciation is 'jee-mack' (/ˈʤiːˌmak/) – and hence often hyphenated in writing[5]; such forms take their orthographic and phonological inspiration from English constructions like *H-bomb* (/ˈɛɪʧˌbɒm/) [= 'hydrogen bomb'] and *P-flick* (/ˈpiːˌflɪk/) [= 'penalty flick'].

Variation and creativity

Given the range of options available to generate transparent nicknames, inevitably the same output can arise from different inputs: I have multiple entries, for instance, for *Woody*, including cricketer, Mark Wood, and rugby union coach,

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Sir Clive Woodward. Likewise, the same input can produce more than one output: my data includes both *Fitz* [cricketer, Cathryn Fitzpatrick] and *Fitzy* [golfer, Matthew Fitzpatrick], for example. An analysis of nicknames for *Wimbledon* illustrates perfectly the opportunity for variation and creativity. While *Wimbledon* is not a surname, it is nonetheless a fascinating example of the potential for multiple nicknames for the same sporting referent: I have evidence of *Wimby* (Carayol 2023), *Wimbo* (Birchall 2017), *Wimbs* (Gaynor 2019) and *Wimbers* (Ferguson 2015), which constitutes an almost complete set of type 2 variants.[6]

This potential for variation explains why one occasionally encounters conflicting or potentially misleading evidence, especially in exchanges on online fan forums. I have occasionally come across two variants for the same individual (e.g. *Sibbo* and *Sibs* [cricketer, Dom Sibley]; *Picks* and *Pickers* [footballer, Jordan Pickford]; and *Ath* and *Athers* [cricketer, Michael Atherton]). In all three cases, both variants are from credible sources – teammates or colleagues – suggesting individuals can have multiple nicknames, which matches my own experience among friends and family. As a Castleford Tigers supporter, I have also noticed fans posting good luck messages or post-match congratulations on social media to former player Grant Millington using the nickname *Milly* (Monks 2013). While this is a perfectly plausible form, posts from the official Castleford Tigers account and evidence in approved club publications suggest friends and teammates call him *Millo*. Similarly, as a Coventry City fan I have occasionally encountered *Mads* as a nickname for Tottenham footballer (and Coventry City academy graduate), James Maddison (Whitlam 2023); this, again, is a valid nickname option, but evidence from more reliable sources overwhelmingly suggests he is more frequently called *Madders*. By pointing this out, I do not intend to question the credibility of supporters who use 'wrong' nicknames; I suspect many fans adopt plausible nicknames as a means of conveying their own close engagement with an athlete or team. Nonetheless, for this reason I only include nicknames in the Supplementary Material that are corroborated by evidence from credible sources, such as a quotation attributed to someone who knows the individual well, or a social media account that is formally associated with the athlete.

Type 2 variants with <z> suffixation and blends merit further discussion as both seem to appeal to our sense of linguistic playfulness and are consequently particularly prolific in encouraging nonce-formations – i.e. humorous forms created according to the template and used on one occasion for amusement, but unlikely candidates for genuine nicknames. Examples include **Stuzza* [footballer, Daniel Sturridge (lordpopmtop 2011)] and **M-Chaps* [sports presenter, Mark Chapman (Osman 2024)]. While such nonce-formations appear occasionally in light-hearted exchanges, especially on social media platforms, I have not heard either as an authentic nickname – the former is usually *Studge*, the latter invariably *Chappers*. There are also analogous forms that do not, strictly speaking, meet the criteria for a particular variant, but are nonetheless directly inspired by them, such as *Wazza* [footballer, Wayne Rooney (Brewin 2023)]. As an extremely talented footballer from a similarly working-class background, the young Wayne Rooney quickly drew comparisons with *Gazza* [footballer, Paul Gascoigne] prompting the nickname, *Wazza* (Taylor 2004). While structurally *Wazza* is not produced by clipping and conversion of <r> or <s> to <z>, the rhyme with *Gazza* is immediately apparent and simply requires replacement of initial <g> with <w> – i.e. Rooney's first name, not his surname.

Although the comparatively small number of examples in my data suggests blending is a relatively rare nicknaming method, the possibility of multiple layers of creativity make it an attractive device for coining eye-catching portmanteaux nicknames for sporting couples – both in the sense of romantic relationships and sporting partnerships. In golf, European Ryder Cup teammates, Tommy Fleetwood and Francesco Molinari, were affectionately dubbed *Moliwood* (Murray 2018); more recently, Tommy Fleetwood and Rory McIlroy became *Fleetwood Mac* (Murray 2023). In tennis, the brief mixed doubles pairing of Sir Andy Murray and Serena Williams prompted suggestions of *Murena* (ATP Tour 2019) or *Serandy* (Murray 2019), while tennis couple, Stefanos Tsitsipas and Paula Badosa, have been christened *Tsitsidosa* (Parkinson 2023). At time of writing, Andy Murray has announced he will mark his final appearance at Wimbledon by playing mixed doubles with Emma Raducanu, prompting a burst of social media posts with the tag, *Murra-canu* (BBC Sport 2024). As these were always unlikely to develop into forms of address, they correspond – in function, but not in structure – to 'the 'Homeric/hyperbolic' nicknames discussed earlier, albeit they are likely to be extremely short-lived. Interestingly, Kennedy and Zamuner (2006) report an aversion – especially among journalists – to the apparently 'modern' preference for hypocoristic nicknames, initialisms and blends, which journalists variously dismiss as 'unimaginative', 'uncreative', or 'dreary shorthand', over the 'traditional' descriptive (i.e. 'Homeric/hyperbolic') phrasal nicknames they venerate as more inventive. Examples such as these in my data suggest on the contrary that imagination and originality remain integral to nickname creation – both in terms of generating nicknames that function as genuine forms of address, but also as playful alternative forms of reference.

Social distribution

Although male athletes outnumber female athletes in my data for reasons noted above, it would seem many nicknaming conventions apply to, and are used by, sportsmen and sportswomen alike – *Belly* appears in the data for both male cricketer, Ian Bell, and female cricketer, Lauren Bell, for instance. However, with more data it might be possible to establish the relative frequency with which transparent nicknames occur among sportsmen and women. With entries for *Brighty* [footballer, Mark Bright)], *Clarkey* [golfer, Darren Clarke], *Scholesy* [footballer, Paul Scholes] and *Knighty* [cricketer, Nick Knight], it would be instructive to know whether they also apply to sportswomen with the same surname – footballer, Millie Bright; netballers, Jade

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Clarke and Alicia Scholes; and cricketer, Heather Knight. Despite frequent searches in print and online – including on several social media platforms where nicknames proliferate – I am yet to find any evidence of these, which might suggest nicknames of this type are perhaps more widespread among sportsmen. Despite acknowledging that, in the United States, 'women in the general population tend to have fewer nicknames than men', Wilson and Skipper (1990) concluded nonetheless that nicknames were as frequent in women's professional baseball in the 1940s and 1950s as in the equivalent men's professional baseball league. The data they analysed were restricted to what they classify as 'public' nicknames – i.e. the equivalent to my 'hyperbolic' or Kennedy and Zamuner's (2006) 'Homeric' nicknames – so perhaps not directly comparable. Interestingly, though, the one sport in my data where male and female athletes are relatively equally represented – hockey – suggests transparent nicknames (and indeed all three types) are equally popular with both genders, supporting Wilson and Skipper's findings.

Not surprisingly, the data set is dominated by Anglo-Celtic[7] surnames and the athletes are predominantly British or Irish, although surnames do not always reflect nationality – e.g. *Vaughan* is a Welsh surname, but *Vaughany* [cricketer, Michael Vaughan] is English. Commonwealth countries, like Australia and New Zealand, where English is the dominant language are also well represented. While there is insufficient space to go into great detail here, it is nonetheless clear that most variants identified apply equally to British athletes with non-Anglo-Celtic surnames – e.g. *Ramps* [cricketer, Mark Ramprakash] – and indeed to athletes for whom English is a second or foreign language – e.g. *Poch* [Argentinian footballer, Mauricio Pochettino]. I have not had opportunity to investigate whether a specific nickname for a 'foreign' athlete is consistent across languages or unique to English; I suspect some apply universally, while others are subject to different rules according to language. It is worth noting, for instance, that I have no record of **Kloppy* as a nickname in English for football manager (and German national), Jürgen Klopp, although it would satisfy English phonotactic constraints. However, evidence of *Kloppi* (Simon 2013) – and *Nagi* [football manager, Julian Nagelsmann (Keskic 2023)] – suggests similar reflexes apply in German, albeit with <-i> suffixation (and clipping), but I cannot vouch for how productive a process this is.

One nickname type is strikingly distinctive in terms of social distribution. *Collins Dictionary* (2024) concurs with other sources in describing <-ers> suffixation as 'university slang' – i.e. an informal register associated with a socially prestigious group. There are several examples of analogous formulations in contemporary British sporting slang – e.g. *Twickers* [Twickenham (Keating 2006)], *Wimbers* [Wimbledon (Ferguson 2015)] and *Cuppers* [= intermural sport at Cambridge University (Coffey 2022)]. Crucially, all three have upper-middle-class connotations – Twickenham is home to the Rugby Football Union and Wimbledon is home to the All England Lawn Tennis Club, both of which are firmly established calendar events on the social circuit; and Cambridge University is one of the UK's most prestigious (and elitist) institutions. A salient feature of nickname variants of this type is that they seem especially popular among public (i.e. private) school males. BBC Radio 4s *Test Match Special* cricket commentary team, for instance, has evolved seamlessly over recent decades from *Johnners* [Brian Johnston] and *Blowers* [Henry Blofeld] to *Aggers* [Jonathan Agnew] and *Tuffers* [Phil Tufnell], all of whom attended independent schools. It is revealing that of the 29 nicknames with suffix <-ers> in the inventory, only four are female and 23 come from four sports – cricket, hockey, rugby union and tennis – that (in England at least) are predominantly middle-class pursuits and increasingly associated with independent schools. Although the presence of a handful of state-school-educated footballers – e.g. *Rammers* [Aaron Ramsdale] – and evidence that the process extends to more general British sporting slang (e.g. *tekkers*[8] [= 'technique' (Bakowski 2019)]) suggests this is not an exclusively upper-middle-class nicknaming convention, I think the distinction between *Johnno* [rugby union player, Martin Johnson] and *Johnners* [cricket commentator, Brian Johnston] is persuasive. Both derive from the same clip, 'John', but *Johnno* went to comprehensive schools in Market Harborough – Welland Park School and Robert Smyth School (Wikipedia 2023a) – while *Johnners* was educated at Eton and New College, Oxford (Wikipedia 2023b): their nicknames appear to be a subtle clue to their respective social backgrounds.

Conclusion

This paper presents a set of predictable morphophonological rules for generating nicknames that are well established in British sporting discourse. While it is possible to identify preferences for a particular variant among certain social groups, a larger data set – especially of nicknames used by, and of, sportswomen – would help establish the extent of any tendencies identified here. Finally, the data also shows that nicknames can be created 'intuitively' and off the cuff – to be used humorously and/or to express affinity with an athlete, regardless of whether the user knows if a particular form is genuine. By presenting these initial observations and making the raw data available, I hope to encourage other researchers to take up the baton and extend our knowledge of nicknames in sport, while I intend to devise a more detailed investigation into nicknames in hockey to explore the role of gender more closely.

Supplementary material. The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078424000348.

Notes

1 *Smudger* and *Robbo* are teammates Alan Smith (born 1980) and Paul Robinson (born 1979).

2 Henceforth I use <-y> to mean both <-y> and <-ie> suffixation.

3 'Other' refers to entries for individuals (e.g. sports broadcasters, presenters, commentators, administrators etc.) who are not elite athletes and are frequently associated with more than one sport.

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4 Rhotic speakers distinguish between word final <-a> and <-er> by exhibiting some form of postvocalic R-colouring in their pronunciation of the latter; I use <-a> and <-er> suffixation interchangeably to refer to the same phenomenon.
5 The hyphen is not always required in forms where the initial is clearly pronounced as a discrete unit; I have encountered both *J Rob* and *J-Rob* [hockey player, Jonny Robinson], but it is helpful in cases where there is a potential for ambiguity. Where, for instance, **Gnev* might imply a silent <g> (as in 'gnat') or a 'hard' <g> (as in 'gnu'), the form, *G-Nev* (/ˈʤiːˌnɛv/) [footballer, Gary Neville] offers clues to the intended pronunciation.
6 The absence of medial <-r-> or <-sC-> in *Wimbledon* precludes variants with <-z> shown in Table 3.
7 I use the term Anglo-Celtic here to refer to surnames that are recognisably British or Irish – i.e. containing elements that are etymologically English (e.g. *Clough*), Irish (e.g. *O'Driscoll*), Scottish (e.g. *Gilzean*), Welsh (e.g. *Evans*) or Cornish (e.g. *Trescothick*).
8 Back-clipping of 'technique' produces 'tech', but as <ch> in English generally represents an affricate, /ʧ/, the spelling **techers* might be misinterpreted as implying the pronunciation /ˌtɛʧəz/. Re-spelling with <kk> makes it clear that the output corresponds to the medial /k/ in the underlying form, 'technique' (/ˌtɛkˈniːk/) – thus *tekkers* (/ˌtɛkəz/). I am unsure why double <k> is favoured over the more conventionally English <ck> but I have yet to encounter **teckers*; perhaps it is formed by analogy with comparable forms like *brekker* [= 'breakfast'] and *ekker* [= 'exercise'].

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