Introduction

The fifth promotional arena of the WRC is its catalogue of driver personalities. While it might seem improper to treat drivers as ‘arenas’, the fact is that they are the public face of the entire WRC team. It is the drivers who are interviewed, praised and blamed, depending on how a rally or a season unfolds. They are the heroes – and they are accessible to the community as in no other motorsport. What’s more, in today’s promotional context, they are walking, talking symbols of the association between the sport and their financial backers and the manufacturer, and have the holders of thousands of jobs in the automotive industry, whose employment depends on them, breathing down their necks. To be successful publicists for themselves, the team and the sport, drivers thus need to resonate with the spectators, the team and the media – the entire community, in short.

For many, that is a tall order. While most drivers in the past did not need to satisfy either an international motoring press or promotional interests, by the 1990s, it was compulsory to speak a bit of English as foreign language (EFL, the global language of rallying) and be just as comfortable with the camera flashes as with the special stages. In general, as two rally historians observed by 2004, ‘modern rally drivers are finely honed athletes, a far cry from the stars of the early years who were more likely to grab a cigarette and a beer!’ (Hope-Frost and Davenport, 2004, p. 35). Yet, popularity in the WRC – here emphasised as the key attribute for using drivers for promotional purposes – is not merely gained by behaving like automotive costermongers or doing fast stage times. Despite changes in the promotional context, which have continued in the same pattern until today, a certain kind of rally
driver seems to attract the fans whether we put 1980 or 2000 into the equation. What’s more, this popularity is often narratively formed and which makes a narrative analysis of it useful.

To unpack this claim, I will in this chapter include drivers’ role as interlocutors for their sponsors, but more importantly, their role as ambassadors for the sport. By using three of the most popular world championship-winning drivers from three decades, Ari Vatanen, Colin McRae and Petter Solberg, I argue that, as has been shown by research on other sports ‘heroes’, like footballer Diego Maradona, WRC drivers must be ‘seen in their cultural context in order to understand their social meaning and to observe their communal impact’ (Archetti, 2001, p. 153; see also Holt and Mangan, 1996). In other words, where do they come from, what is their story and how have they dealt with the transformation from young talent to global stars? Unless this is taken into account, and furthermore combined with a respect for biographical authenticity, the promotional value of WRC drivers will not be valid as emotional currency in the WRC community.

A story about a beard

In recent years a new promotional element has become an organised part of WRC events: ‘Meet the Crews’ and autograph-signing sessions where fans and the media can come and talk to WRC crews, most notably drivers. Arranged within a limited space of time – 30 or 45 minutes – these sessions are not only a way to continue the sport’s close proximity to its drivers. Dressed in team apparel, including their personal sponsor logos here and there, these arrangements also illustrate how sponsorship responsibilities have been implemented as a natural part of being a WRC driver. At least over time, drivers represent a cluster of values associated with the manufacturer or sponsor. When Petter Solberg drove for the Subaru-Prodrive team, its team principal from 2002–6, David Lapworth, claimed that the Norwegian was perfect for promotional duties because he fit the image of what a young Subaru owner should be like (cited in Solberg and Svardal, 2004, p. 184). And when I did fieldwork at Rally de France-Alsace 2011, Citroën’s Marketing Director, Xavier Duchemin, said during a promo event that the image of Sébastien Loeb – who by then had been a works driver for Citroën since 2002 and racked up eight world championships – had become unequivocally associated with the manufacturer.¹

On the other hand, Loeb and other drivers are seen – especially by the FIA and the promoter – as representatives for the sport in general, not