

Translating Sports Idioms

What do political figures like President Barack Obama, President Bill Clinton, both Presidents Bush, and Supreme Court Justice Anton Scalia all have in common? They each use common sports expressions in place of everyday language. Hail Mary Pass, Down for the Count, Slam Dunk, Moving the Goal Posts, and many other sports idioms serve to depict political wins, losses, and impasses.

In the United States, sports phrases are commonly used outside of the sports context, especially in business and politics. Sports-themed movies, games, apps, and website offerings similarly embrace sports phrases in their content. These phrases can be difficult to understand for non-native speakers, and can be a challenge to accurately translate. As a result, it is important to give proper attention to these phrases to make sure that your target audience understands your message.

While sports and recreation are a part of every society, they permeate some cultures more than others do. Soccer (football in most of the world), despite being the most popular sport across the globe, is still only peripherally relevant in the US. American football, while very popular in the US, has not been widely adopted elsewhere. Cricket is probably the second largest worldwide sport, with the UK and many former British colonies participating; yet cricket is virtually unknown in other cultures.

The varying popularity of certain sports in different locales means that corresponding sports phrases tend to be associated with those locales. For example, the popularity of both soccer and cricket in England means you may commonly hear phrases like Sticky Wicket, Stumped, Bowled Over, Hit for Six, Move the Goal Posts, Red Card, and Home Goal. The term Sticky Wicket in the UK might be called a Curveball in the US. If you were shocked or surprised, you might be Bowled Over where cricket is common, or Blindsided in American football, but you would be Thrown for a Loop if you embraced boxing terms. A flamboyant player who overacts may be a Show Pony to Australian football fans, but would be accused of Hot Dogging or Show Boating in American sports.

Boxing continues to have strong appeal in the United States, Latin America, Ukraine, and the Philippines. HBO's boxing broadcasts even include interpreters who translate the banter between rounds from foreign speaking fighters and their coaches. Some popular boxing idioms include Knockout, Lightweight, Saved by the Bell, On the Ropes, Down for the Count, Infighting, Throw Your Hat into the Ring, and Pull Your Punches.

Some phrases are too general to be attributed to a specific sport (Score, Point, and Foul, for example). Some phrases come from industries that are now also a sport, such as sailing, giving us phrases like On the Rocks, Run a Tight Ship, All Hands on Deck, Show Someone the Ropes, Sink or Swim, High and Dry, Know the Ropes, Close Quarters, Rock the Boat, and Three Sheets to the Wind.

Despite the popularity of the big, international sports, many countries continue to enjoy culturally unique sports. For Japan, Sumo would be the most prominent. Finland hosts the World Championship in Eukonkanto (wife carrying). In Switzerland, wrestling (or "Schwingen") is an old tradition from the rural central cantons and considered the national sport by some.

Depending on your intent, you may need to choose sports phrases that refer to the sports that are most relevant to your target market. You can help the linguists by listing the sports phrases you use in your content in a glossary to help clarify your intended message. Identifying whether your usage is literal or metaphorical assures that your message resonates with the recipient, whether they are from near or far.

So if you want to Throw your Hat into the Ring and Rock the Boat by using sports idioms, you better Know the Ropes and Run a Tight Ship if you want your translation to be a Knockout.

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