Preface

Philosophy and Sport brings together the lectures given in the Royal Institute of Philosophy's annual lecture series for 2012–13. In the Olympic year, it seemed fitting to consider some of the many philosophical and ethical questions raised by sport, and to bring together contributors from both philosophical and sporting worlds. This ground-breaking volume considers many different areas connected to sports and its practice. These include the watching of sport, drugs in sport, the Olympic spirit, sport and risk, sport as a moral practice, rivalry and glory in sport and the importance of sport in human life more generally.

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Ways of Watching Sport

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1. Sport and how it is watched

There are many ways that we can watch sport but not all of them are philosophically interesting. One can watch it enthusiastically, casually, fanatically or drunkenly. One might watch only because one has bet on the outcome. Some watch a friend or relative compete and have a narrow focus on one individual's performance. A coach or scout on the lookout for new talent may have completely different interests to a supporter of a team. But what of the ways of watching sport that are of philosophical interest?

I am going to defend the distinction between partisan and purist ways of watching sport. In doing so, I will opt for a strong distinction between these two ways of watching: they are different to an extent that a partisan and purist looking at the same event may literally see different things. And I will then proceed to explain the substantial basis for the distinction between these two ways of watching. This comes down to what we see sport as being about. Is sport ultimately aimed at victory or is it about something else? I argue that our partisan and purist spectators are watching sport for different purposes and looking for different things. These two purposes are not necessarily in conflict, however. Indeed, one can assist the other. When we ask what sport is about, we could answer that it is about victory. But I will argue that the purist is looking for an altogether different kind of answer to this question, demanding a different level of explanation. This will also constitute a defence of the purist way of watching sport against the charge that it is in some way inferior because it misses the essence of sport. On the contrary: I argue that it captures the essence of sport perfectly.

2. Victory

What does the athlete aim to do when they engage in sport? An obvious answer is that they aim to win, or at least to do their very best. Some participants will realise that they have no chance of

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victory, such as an also-ran in a marathon with hundreds or thousands of runners. But even here there is some goal: to do their best, to complete the race within a certain time limit, or just to complete at all. In the high-level competitive sports, we want to see each competitor strive for success. If they deliberately do less than their best, they are often seen as betraying a central norm of sport. This could be a form of cheating, if part of match-fixing for instance. But even a legitimate winner could be criticised if they have not given their all for it could be seen as insulting or patronising to their opponents. Suppose a runner is so far ahead in the home straight that they stop and light-up a cigar? This, I suggest, conflicts with a norm concerning regard for one's opponents, even though there are some sports such as boxing which flirt with the disregard of this norm. My suspicion, however, is that in all sports athletes tend to have a mutual respect, born out of a shared understanding of the demands of the sport and a common interest in its flourishing, even if there are minor antagonisms that are sometimes encouraged.

Victory as the aim of sport *prima facie* conflicts with its aesthetic interpretation in which sport is often likened to art and athletes to artists. In some sports, its best competitors are thought of as maestros, concerned with the higher value of producing beauty rather than with the vulgarities of victory and defeat. But how literally should we take this? Is it still not the case that unless the competitor is aiming to win, they are not properly engaging in sport? If, for example, a footballer stops trying to win and instead juggles the ball as a show of skill, then they may be in the business of pure entertainment but they are no longer playing football. If a sportsman or woman really does wish to create art, then while they may have become an artist, they will have done so at the expense of sport.

Philosophers of sport have understood this. Elliot affirms it in the following:

> The goddess of sport is not Beauty but Victory, a jealous goddess who demands an absolute homage. Every act performed by the player or athlete must be for the sake of victory, without so much as a side-glance in the direction of beauty.[1]

And this is surely how many sports fans see it too. While a beautiful win might be preferred to an ugly one, an ugly win is always preferred to a beautiful defeat. Beauty may be a by-product of victory, and of

[1] R. Elliott, 'Aesthetics and Sport', in H. Whiting and D. Masterson (eds) *Readings in the Aesthetics of Sport*, (London: Lepus, 1974), 107–16, 111.

playing for victory, but it never should itself be the primary aim. It may become an optional extra only once victory is secure. Two ugly goals always beat one beautiful one and only if an unassailable lead is acquired would the fan feel comfortable with their team 'turning on the style'. Dick Fosbury's innovative high-jump technique was far from graceful. It was even called a 'flop'. But such was its effectiveness that very soon all the contestants were jumping the Fosbury flop. Were it an aesthetic contest, this jump would have lost. But it is of course a contest merely of how high one can jump, by any style, and height is all that matter for the win.

Apart from the feeling that our athletes ought to be trying their best, the idea has an underpinning in the philosophical theory of what constitutes sport. The somewhat grandiosely titled ontology of sport deals exactly with this. And the most progress on the matter is made by Bernard Suits in *The Grasshopper*.[2] Suits attempts to define what it is to play a game but it is pertinent here because sport may be understood as the institutionalised form of games.[3] To play a game is, according to Suits:

> to engage in an activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by the rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.[4]

A simpler way of summarising the account is that 'playing a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles'.[5] I say that sport is an institutionalised form of game-playing in that it is a status bestowed upon certain games by the institutions of sport, such as world governing bodies, the biggest of which is the International Olympics Committee. Such institutions grew historically around certain forms of practice with aims among others of codifying them, but one might also say commercially exploiting them.[6]

It follows from this that to watch sport is to watch someone voluntarily attempting to overcome unnecessary obstacles. If one considers a sport picked at random, such as the shot put, one sees that to play

[2] Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games Life and Utopia*, 2nd edn, (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2005).
[3] Stephen Mumford, *Watching Sport: Aesthetics, Ethics and Emotion*, (London: Routledge, 2011).
[4] Suits, op. cit. note 2, 48–9.
[5] Suits, op. cit., note 2, 55.
[6] Mumford, op. cit., note 3, ch. 4.

this sport is to accept certain artificial constraints in attempting to complete a certain task. The aim appears to be to get the shot as far as possible from a fixed point. Suits calls this the prelusory (pre-game) goal of this particular sport. This is only superficially the aim, however. If one really wanted to get the shot down the field, there would be more efficient means of achieving it than propelling it in one throw without leaving a small circular area. One could carry it down the field, or construct a catapult, or at least take a run-up before the throw. But to play the sport is to accept the constraints of the rules, and one does so, according to Suits, precisely because they make game playing possible. They make the shot put a sport. Without the constraints of the rules, we would have no game. Hence the aim within the game – its lusory goal – is to propel the shot by a single unaided throw from within a seven-foot diameter circle. Now if one opts out of this – if one ceases to take a lusory or game-playing attitude to this activity – then one ceases to play the sport. If one gains the longest throw by taking a run up, starting outside the circle, then one has not played the sport of shot put.

We can generalise this to other sports. One has not played high jump if one gets to the other side of the bar by walking under it rather than jumping over it. And one has not competed in a running race if one gets to the finishing line first by cutting across the infield. Sometimes the unnecessary obstacles are physical impediments, such as the high bar. In some sports they are provided by other competitors: football would be so much easier if it wasn't for the other team trying to stop you getting the ball in their net. And sometimes the unnecessary obstacles come in the form of rules that make the prelusory goal harder to achieve, such as the rule that the baton within a relay has to be passed within a small bounded stretch of the track.

This is by way of justifying the claim that if one aims to do anything other than voluntarily attempting to overcome the unnecessary obstacles circumscribed by the sport, one has thereby ceased playing the sport. And the case that interests us here is if one instead seeks to produce beautiful movements or moves within the sport that are not assisting one's lusory goals. Hence, my aim could be to get over as high a bar as possible. I don't mind if my movement is beautiful as I jump, as long as it does not hinder me. But my focus has to be entirely on the lusory goal and any beauty I produce in my sport is incidental.[7]

[7] See David Best, 'The Aesthetic in Sport', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, **14** (1974): 197–213, for example.

We have here a putative philosophical underpinning to the idea that the goal of sport is victory. If I aim during the game to produce aesthetic value, for instance, I have ceased playing that sport. And as watchers of sport, the spectators have come to see that voluntary attempt to attain the lusory goals. The spectators are thus thwarted in their aim if a player of football starts aiming to please in aesthetic rather than competitive ways. If the spectator is happy to see that, then they may have ceased being a sports fan and instead they have become an art-appreciator, perhaps.

The partisan watcher of sport can claim, therefore, that the way they watch sport, looking for victory, is the appropriate and right way to watch sport. They are not art appreciators. They understand the goals of sport, what it is all about, and in watching to see a win, they have tapped into the essence of sport.

This would seem to offer a vindication of partisanship as the fit and proper way of watching sport. The partisan is a supporter of a sports team or an individual. He or she watches sport in the hope of seeing his or her favoured team or individual win. It does not matter so much if the opponents underperform as this assists the favoured team to victory. And a win is always preferred to a defeat, even if it is an ugly win. Aesthetic pleasure will be accepted in sport as long as it provides no impediment to the favoured team's triumph.

3. The aesthetic way

Thus far, all seems in favour of the partisan way of watching sport. But there is another. Dixon[8] distinguishes the partisan from the purist and although I characterise these kinds of sport spectator differently from him,[9] I think the initial distinction retains use. While a partisan is a supporter of one side and wishes to see them win, a purist is someone who watches sport for its own sake, taking an aesthetic pleasure in it. A purist need not care which teams wins. She may enjoy a dramatic victory but be indifferent as to which of the sides attains it. Coming into the last few minutes of a tied game, she may hope for a victory just for the sake of the drama, not minding which team wins it. The aesthetic enjoyment of the sport can be found in its higher values being realised during the competition. The purist takes pleasure in seeing the sport played well. And it

[8] Nicholas Dixon, 'The Ethics of Supporting Sports Teams', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, **18** (2001): 149–58.

[9] Mumford, op. cit., note 3, ch. 2.

follows that the purist wants to see all competitors play their very best so that as good a game as possible is witnessed. This could contrast with a partisan who may on occasion be happy for the opposition to underperform insofar as it increases the chance of their own side's success.

What we have considered in relation to the striving for victory has been presented as a challenge to the purist. The allegation is that they are watching sport in the wrong way, looking for beauty rather than the competition to win. But insofar as this is an attack on the purist spectator, it seems premised on an assumption of the incompatibility of beauty and competition. This should be challenged, and it can be.

Imagine that we were admirers of the human physical form and the extent of human capabilities generally, whether this concerns our physical or mental causal powers as free agents. Perhaps we have seen dance and had found that there are certain aesthetic values that are to be found in human shape and movement. A fully extended limb, for example, may be more appealing than one that hangs loose. And dance performance has at times demonstrated dramatic movements. Suppose we had seen all of this but lived in a world in which there was no sport. People had run and jumped and swam but not competitively. Nevertheless, the possibility of the aesthetic admiration of these practices had already come to our attention. Jumping can look good, and perhaps the higher someone jumps the more spectacular it looks. Having seen these activities, and more variety of human movement in dance, then our aesthetic sensibilities have become attuned to the athletic human form and its potential. In such circumstances, I suggested, it would make perfectly good sense for us to invent sport for the purposes of providing us with even better aesthetic experiences.

If we think how we should go about doing that, it would seem a perfectly reasonable supposition that we need to find ways to force people to instantiate the aesthetic forms that interest us. And we can note that speed is an aesthetic category in relation to the human body. When a runner runs faster, it is more aesthetically appealing to us that a runner who runs slower. What we need, therefore, is an incentive for our runners to push themselves to their limits. The same would apply to swimming. In other cases, the aesthetic categories that interest us might be strength, stamina, dexterity, flexibility, power, height, length, extension, smoothness, grace, fluidity, and so on. And we might note that the more we get under these categories, the better. Hence a more fluid motion appeals to us more than a less fluid one.

The thinking could be, therefore, that it would be good to set up contests that were largely meaningless, in terms of their useless prelusory goals, but which incentivised the display of these physical attributes to their maximum limits. And this fits well with the account of sport we have inherited from Suits. The participants have to overcome unnecessary obstacles in their quest to win. But why have we put these obstacles in their way? Why do we make them jump over a bar rather than walk under it? To accept the lusory goal of the sport is to accept that the contest is to be staged on certain grounds, grounds that will require the exhibition of certain bodily aesthetic qualities.

The purist can be defended, therefore, on the grounds that far from not getting the idea of sport as being essentially about victory, such a quest for victory within the sport is precisely the thing that secures the aesthetic features that we admire. Sport makes us run faster, jump higher, exhibit the maximum strength. It is an entirely artificial contest, insofar as its prelusory goals tend to be worthless or worth little. But what is important about them is that their pursuit creates the athletic beauty we seek: fully-exerted human bodies, graceful style, intricate tactics and real drama.

I say that the drama is real for a couple of reasons. Sport is full of twists and turns when it is at its best. Defeat can rapidly turn to victory and vice versa. The incredible and improbable can occur. We can have all of this in fiction, of course, in a novel or play. But there the drama is contrived. The author determines it from outside the form. Except in rare cases, the writer is not part of her own novel, manipulating it as a character from within. In sport, however, the outcomes, including the dramatic ones, are determined by the participants in the course of their striving for victory. The competitors bring their athletic and other virtues to the contest so that they can battle it out. The outcome is not contrived but the result of this competition of skill and strength. Were we to find that the sporting outcome was scripted, as occasionally occurs with fixed or staged contests, we immediately feel cheated and realise that the drama was illusory.

A second reason to say that sport provides real drama, however, is that its reality has been doubted elsewhere in the aesthetics of sport.[10] It is suggested that there are various disanalogies which tell us the hackneyed cliché of sport as unscripted theatre is wide of the mark. Nobody is injured on the stage when the character of Caesar is stabbed, for the stabbing occurs to the character rather than the

[10] Best, op. cit., note 7.

actor. But in sport, people really do break legs. Victory and defeat is real in sport whereas in drama it occurs only to the characters.

The analogy can nevertheless be rescued. When sport is played correctly, the participants do adopt roles as opponents. Injuries may occur but they are inflicted on the other *qua* opponent not *qua* human being. In that case, it looks as if one adopts a character when one plays sport. One takes on an adversarial role in which it is accepted that injuries may occur but these are not inflicted directly against the person. Hence, friends playing football against each other may enter into some tough, hard challenges and as a result an accidental injury may occur. The friendship is not threatened if this was inflicted in the context of sport. Hard tackles are an integral part of some sports. Hence the analogy holds between sport and the stage. The actor playing Caesar similarly does not mind if even the fake dagger hurts his skin, for it was pain inflicted on his character rather than on him as an actor and human being.

But sport is not always played right. If one player has been holding a grudge against another, for whatever reason, and goes into the tackle not with the aim of winning the game but of injuring his opponent, then that injury is inflicted on the opponent *qua* other person rather than on the opponent *qua* opponent. In that case, the fouling player has stopped playing the sport. They have swapped their lusory goal for some other: revenge, perhaps. But then exactly the same could occur on stage. The actor playing Brutus may hate the actor playing Caesar and may deliberately dig his fake knife much further into his fellow actor than is required of his part. Our Brutus had thus stopped acting his required role and instead had sought a petty revenge. Because of that, the injury was to the actor, not to the character of Caesar. The analogy holds, therefore, for the cases of sport and theatre look the same and the drama of sport looks as real as any.

The purist has therefore a perfectly reasonable way of viewing sport: one which is in line with the purpose and essence of sport. Sport's contests force its contestants to exert their full power, to stretch, jump, run and swim to their maximum capability, or to exhibit some skill as well as they are able. Doing so instantiates aesthetic qualities. And striving for victory creates real drama which pleases the viewer. Far from the purist's aesthetic quest being incompatible with sports requirement of victory, this very quest is exactly what produces its positive aesthetic content. The purist is someone who understands this. But they appreciate the drama without worrying as to who emerges from that drama victorious. And they want all sides to play to their full capability because that adds to the aesthetic.

Hence, the purist has an interest in all contestants flourishing in a way that the partisan does not.

Partisanship requires allegiance to a single object: wanting one team to flourish at the expense of others. It can be likened to a monogamous relationship, forsaking all others. It is a love with a jealous lover: to favour any other team is tantamount to a betrayal. But when the purist wants all to flourish, they exhibit a love that is like the love of a parent to all their children. They love them equally. They want them all to do well and they cannot choose favourites.

4. Ways of Seeing

I have spoken of there being different ways of watching sport and the partisan and purist watching sport in different ways. How literally should we take this? My view is that we should take it wholly literally. A partisan and a purist can see sport in different ways: they can even see the very same event in two different ways.

One way of making this claim clear is to distinguish between accompaniment and perception theories of ways of seeing. The accompaniment theory would say that

> (T_A) two persons *a* and *b* looking at the same event E, with similar angles on E and equally reliable perceptual faculties, have indistinguishable perceptions of E but they may have different thoughts, beliefs and intentions accompanying those perceptions.

Applied to the case of the purist and partisan, we would then say on the accompaniment theory that when watching the same game, the partisan and purist see the same but what they see is accompanied by different thoughts. The purist thinks that what they see is beautiful, for example, while the partisan seeing virtually the same thing thinks that it's a chance to score. At least in theory, our partisan and purist could have intersubjectively indistinguishable perceptions and their difference in their way of seeing rests only in them having different thoughts alongside those perceptions.

The accompaniment theory might seem *prima facie* to be the easy theory to defend. The perception theory, in contrast, tells us that

> (T_P) two persons *a* and *b* looking at the same event E, with similar angles on E and equally reliable perceptual faculties, may nevertheless have distinguishable perceptions of E.