

## The College at Brockport: State University of New York Digital Commons @Brockport

---

Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education  
Faculty Publications

Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education

---

2005

# Competitive Sport, Evaluation Systems, and Just Results: The Case of Rugby Union's Bonus-Point System

Cesar R. Torres

*The College at Brockport*, [crtorres@brockport.edu](mailto:crtorres@brockport.edu)

Peter F. Hager

*The College at Brockport*, [phager@brockport.edu](mailto:phager@brockport.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/pes\\_facpub](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/pes_facpub)

 Part of the [Kinesiology Commons](#)

---

### Repository Citation

Torres, Cesar R. and Hager, Peter F., "Competitive Sport, Evaluation Systems, and Just Results: The Case of Rugby Union's Bonus-Point System" (2005). *Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education Faculty Publications*. 19.

[https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/pes\\_facpub/19](https://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/pes_facpub/19)

### Citation/Publisher Attribution:

Torres, C. R., & Hager, P. F. (2005). Competitive Sport, Evaluation Systems, and Just Results: The Case of Rugby Union's Bonus-Point System. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 32(2), 208-222.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education at Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kinesiology, Sport Studies and Physical Education Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact [kmyers@brockport.edu](mailto:kmyers@brockport.edu).

# **Competitive Sport, Evaluation Systems, and Just Results: The Case of Rugby Union's Bonus-Point System**

**Cesar R. Torres and Peter F. Hager**

Among their numerous functions, the rules forming and informing sports specify the evaluation system through which value is assigned to goal achievements. Evaluation systems translate goal achievements into uniform, computable, and, therefore, comparable tallies. This is extremely important in competitive sports, in which the addition of these translations is what determines the results of particular contests. Sport-evaluation systems also stipulate the value of the results of particular contests. Such systems help governing bodies manage season-long competitions or tournaments, including round-robin phases in which contestants are ranked. Evaluation systems tend to enjoy a high degree of stability. Nonetheless, because sports are not rigid and closed structures that do not evolve, gamewrights occasionally introduce changes to evaluation systems.

One such change was implemented during the Rugby Union World Cup, organized in Australia in October and November of 2003. Early that year, the International Rugby Board confirmed that a bonus-point system awarding teams a bonus point for scoring four or more tries and/or losing by less than 7 points would be implemented during the Rugby Union World Cup. The bonus-point system only applied to the initial stage of the tournament, in which the five teams from each of the four pools played each other in a round-robin. The first and second teams from each pool qualified for the single-elimination final stage that decided the championship. In addition to bonus points, teams were awarded 4 points for a win and 2 for a tie.

With the addition of the bonus-point system, teams could accrue a maximum of 5 points for a win, 3 for a tie, and 2 for a loss. It was possible for two teams to tie and yet be awarded a different number of points. This was the case because different types of goal achievements do not carry the same value in Rugby Union. The evaluation system is as follows: A try is worth 5 points; a penalty try, 5 points; a conversion goal, 2 points; a penalty goal, 3 points; and a dropped goal, 3 points.

The bonus-point system was rationalized as a way to encourage and reward positive and offensive play, as well as try scoring. It was also constructed as an incentive, or even benefit, for teams that fail to win or tie close matches. Other arguments, perhaps more pragmatically grounded, proposed that the bonus-point system

---

Torres <rtorres@brockport.edu> and Hager <phager@brockport.edu> are with the Dept. of Physical Education and Sport, SUNY College at Brockport, Brockport, NY 14420-2989.

could have a decisive impact in the rankings that decided which teams advanced to the final phase of the tournament and promoted more entertaining games for spectators. The bonus point, however, was criticized, as well as praised. Before the Rugby Union World Cup, one of the major concerns was that the novel system would increase the gulf between less developed teams and the sport's powerhouses. After the Rugby Union World Cup, some even perceived that less developed teams were abused in the many blowouts that occurred during the first round of the tournament. Another criticism was that, in many cases, the bonus system did not entice teams to field their strongest side throughout the pool phase to ensure maximum tally. Regardless of which side is right, it is not clear whether the bonus-point system will be used in future Rugby Union World Cups.

The controversy surrounding the Rugby Union bonus-point system points to the need for a thorough analysis of this addition to the sport's evaluation system. In addition to its intrinsic worth, the case of the bonus-point system also serves as fruitful terrain from which philosophical lessons about the rationale and organization of just<sup>1</sup> evaluation systems can be drawn. Therefore, our purposes for this article are twofold. First, we will evaluate whether or not the bonus-point system is a commendable change. To do this we will demonstrate the superiority of interpretivism as a theoretical approach to assessing change in sport. We will then present an interpretation of the sport of Rugby Union and analyze the proposed change in accordance with it. This analysis will demonstrate that the bonus-point system is compatible with this interpretation and also that Rugby Union's evaluation system honors the game more fully with its implementation. Second, based on our previous analysis, we will draw principles that will help in designing and implementing evaluation systems that more accurately reflect and reward performance. This examination will reveal that just evaluation systems take into consideration not only the result of a game but also the process through which this result is achieved. That is, the quality of play, display of skill, and embodiment of the internal goods of a practice are all elements represented in well-crafted and fair evaluation systems.

## Interpretivism and Change in Sport

Over the years, the philosophy-of-sport literature has featured several accounts purporting to explain what sport is and how it functions. One of the primary challenges these theories face is how to evaluate change in sporting contexts. A sporting community might turn to such theories when attempting to determine whether a particular rule change is in the best interest of its sport or when assessing the moral status of a conventionally accepted rule violation. In the case at hand, Rugby Union could use a specific account of sport in normatively analyzing the value of its recently implemented bonus-point system.

According to Simon (20; 21), Dixon (2; 3), and Morgan (17), the accounts that are best able to answer questions concerning change in sport are interpretivist ones. As defined by Simon, an interpretivist account is one that "derives the principles and theories underlying sport . . . from an appeal to the best interpretation of the game or an inference to the best explanation of its key elements" (21, p. 8). According to Dixon, interpretivists "hold that judgments about sport should be based in part on rationally grounded principles about the nature and purpose of sport" (2: p. 106). Interpretivism thus requires the members of a sporting community to recognize

their sport as a unique test of skills through which certain types of excellence can be achieved and to evaluate proposed changes in relation to the logic and principles on which the test and its various brands of excellence are based. Once identified, these previously hidden resources, which as a whole constitute an interpretation of a specific game, may be used in the normative analysis of potential or implemented changes. Using the logic and principles underlying its sport, a sporting community will be better able to determine the advantages and disadvantages that would result from changes and, after weighing these, would be better able to distinguish sound changes from unsound ones.

In assessing the bonus-point system, an interpretivist analysis would allow the members of the Rugby Union community to use principles related to the achievement of excellence in their sport when evaluating this controversial change. Such principles, for example, might relate to excellence displayed through the primary type of goal achievement in Rugby Union: try scoring. They could also relate to the excellence demonstrated by teams whose stingy defenses allow little or no scoring during matches. Alterations to Rugby Union's evaluation system that recognize the importance of these kinds of excellence and reward them appropriately would be viewed, on an interpretivist account, as positive changes. Modifications failing to recognize or reward these elementary aspects of the sport would be considered unsound on such a view, because they would ignore excellence in the particular test of skills that is Rugby Union. Thus, we see that an interpretivist analysis allows the members of the Rugby Union community to use principles grounded in the logic and test of skills of their sport to determine whether the value of the bonus-point system warrants its inclusion in future Rugby Union World Cups.

It is through reference to normative tools such as those described that interpretivist accounts of change in sport gain advantage over those offered by formalist (8; 18) and conventionalist (1; 14; 15) theorists. As Dixon (2: p. 107) reminds us, both formalism and conventionalism are descriptive brands of theories. Formalism, the view that sports are defined and understood primarily through their constitutive rules, describes a sport in terms of its goals and challenges (21: p. 2). Conventionalism, the view that a sport can only be fully and accurately understood if the functioning of its ethos is accounted for, describes how the customs and conventions of a sport affect how its rules are interpreted and, in turn, how that sport is played.

Dixon (2) notes that although these two types of theories can help explain what happens in a particular sporting context, they "are unable to account for the reasoning process that is necessary when debating . . . any proposal for change in sport" (p. 107). Put another way, neither formalism nor conventionalism provides the members of sporting communities with the resources necessary for the strong normative assessment of change in their sport. Formalists have only the rules of a sport to refer to when assessing the value of a potential change, and conventionalists, only the ethos of a particular sporting context. Although undeniably important, the rules and conventions of a sport are of little help to sporting communities struggling to evaluate change, because they cannot help the members of such communities determine the strengths and weaknesses of particular changes. This being so, both formalism and conventionalism are incapable of explaining the reasoning process through which sporting communities can distinguish warranted changes to their sports from unwarranted ones.

In the case of the Rugby Union bonus-point system, the interpretivist approach will clearly be superior to formalist and conventionalist approaches because, as

just demonstrated, it is capable of accounting for this normative reasoning process. Whereas conventionalists can only point to the general acceptance of the previous “traditional” evaluation as the status quo, and formalists can only assert that wins are worth 4 points, ties are worth 2 points, and losses are worth no points, interpretivists can refer to principles rationally grounded in the particular “gratuitous logic” that molds and informs Rugby Union in their analysis of the bonus-point system. These principles make it possible for members of the Rugby Union community to identify the strengths and weaknesses of this modification and to determine its worth as an improvement to the sport’s evaluative process.

Having demonstrated the normative strength of the interpretivist approach, we will now use such an approach in our own analysis of the Rugby Union bonus-point system. In this analysis, we will emphasize principles and elements related to the achievement of excellence in Rugby Union and use these to assess the value of this alteration to the sport’s evaluation system. Before this, however, it is necessary to make some remarks about traditional evaluation systems and articulate a brief interpretation of Rugby Union, on which we will base our analysis.

## **An Interpretivist Analysis of Rugby Union’s Bonus-Point System**

The philosophy-of-sport literature is replete with either condemnations of the obsession with winning so prevalent in sport communities across the world or reminders that winning is neither the only value that matters in competitive sports nor the most important. In spite of these warnings, winning is usually regarded as a reliable assessment of superior athletic performance. For example, even though Dixon thinks that because of distorting factors such as cheating and poor refereeing some victories are not accurate representations of athletic superiority, he affirms that “regarding the winner as the better athlete is generally a harmless convention” (5: p. 19). Similarly, Simon suggests that in “many competitive contexts, it won’t do to separate winning and losing from how well one played the game, because the outcome of the game is an especially significant indicator of how well one actually played” (19: pp. 36–37). Everyday experience in competitive sport tends to corroborate the theory that, typically, outcomes accurately reveal athletic excellence. It is far more controversial, however, whether sport communities equitably compensate contestants for the excellence and degree of superiority displayed during play and manifested in contests’ outcomes.

A key problem with the evaluation systems of most sports is that they do not discriminate the quality of play supposedly represented by outcomes when stipulating weights to the results of particular contests. Most evaluation systems take outcomes at their face value and have a marked tendency to neglect the qualitative and quantitative differences displayed in sporting contests. That is, neither the type nor the quantity of goal achievement is taken into consideration. Put another way, evaluation systems award points for victories while nominally trifling the genuine and comprehensive value of the athletic excellence displayed during sporting contests in the process. For example, in the majority of national football tournaments across the world, the rules establish that the winner of a match is awarded 3 points and the loser none and that in the case of a tie each side receives 1 point. Whether a team barely manages to win by scoring a solitary languid goal or mounts

effective collective play and scores four times while not allowing a goal against is categorically irrelevant for the evaluation system. Moreover, the current evaluation system of football has been designed to reward exclusively the offensive dimension of the game. Undeniably, goal achievement is a paramount factor in football success and should be rightly compensated, but prevention of goal achievement by the opponent is of equivalent importance in competitive football. Hence, the defensive dimension of the game should also merit explicit recognition and formal compensation in evaluation systems.

Football is not an isolated case in the sporting world. The fact is that regardless of the sport in question, narrowly missed victories, strong defenses, or wide margins of victory do not count when scores are converted to value and distributed between competitors. In most cases, the winner takes all and the loser goes away empty-handed. Although, as Simon (19: pp. 35–38) rightly points out, excellence is not the prerogative of the winner, evaluation systems not only favor the excellence displayed by winners in the formal award of value but also deny losers any compensation they might have justly earned. This is because evaluation systems do not accommodate the internal development of each game. For instance, given the previous scenario in which one team wins and scores four times in an enchanting display of football skills while another comes out on top with a solitary goal, is it right to award the winner 3 points in each case? Along the same lines, do losing sides always deserve no points regardless of the lusory equivalence demonstrated on the field of play? The larger question is whether current evaluation systems do justice to the central purpose of competitive sports and to the intricate stories that unfold on playing fields. The underlying rationale and the habituation of sport communities to these evaluation systems may lie at the core of a common, if unfortunate, expression heard in sport arenas all over the world: A win is a win.

It is against the backdrop of what appear to be inequitable practices regarding evaluation systems in competitive sports that the analysis of the Rugby Union bonus-point system is necessary and important. Intuition suggests that under the bonus-point system the idea that a win is a win loses some of its value. This is the case because the value of victories can be increased when discriminations, not only in the type and frequency of goal achievement but also in the capacity to prevent opponents from goal achievement, are incorporated into the value assigned to results. The same rationale applies to defeats and ties. In other words, because of a more accurate translation of teams' abilities to negotiate the sport's challenge into value points, a win remains a win only from a formal, and superficial, point of view. Contests are no longer governed by a zero-sum-game logic, and the various degrees of excellence manifested in sporting contests are more accurately served.

Whereas traditional evaluation systems function as a rigid either/or dynamic, the bonus-point system better accommodates, honors and rewards the complexity and diverse range of athletic performances. The latter not only releases the stringent nominality of the former but also allows for the introduction of differences in degree into the distribution of value to results. This seems to serve in a superior manner the central purpose of competitive sport. Sportspeople not only wish to know whether one side is superior to the other; they also want to know how extensive their difference in ability is. Again, intuitively, the added elasticity of the bonus-point system to traditional evaluation systems helps reward the efforts of contestants more equitably while transforming outcomes into even more trustworthy indicators of athletic superiority and accomplishment.

Before analyzing the specific merits of the bonus-point system as implemented in the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup, it is first necessary to review the game and offer a brief interpretivist analysis. This is important because, as established in the preceding section, a solid assessment of change in sport requires that the modification be considered in relation to that interpretation and the central purpose of competitive sport.

Rugby Union has increased its global appeal, especially since the inception of the Rugby Union World Cup in 1987. According to the International Rugby Board's *Laws of the Game*, the "object of the Game is that two teams . . . should by carrying, passing, kicking and grounding the ball, score as many points as possible, the team scoring the greater number of points being the winner of the match" (10: p. 4). In Rugby Union points are achieved by scoring either tries or goals. A try is scored "when an attacking player is first to ground the ball in the opponents' in-goal" (10: p. 42). This method of scoring carries 5 points. On the other hand, a "player scores a goal by kicking the ball over an opponents' cross bar and between the goal posts from the field of play" (10: p. 7). Goals can be scored through conversion kicks, penalty kicks, and dropkicks, but not all of these methods provide the same number of points. A successful conversion kick (i.e., a kick at goal after a try has been scored) is worth 2 points, and penalty kicks and dropkicks are worth 3 points each.<sup>2</sup>

Although a Rugby Union team can achieve points by scoring tries and goals, there is widespread agreement that "scoring tries is the real joy of rugby" (24: p. 15). From a formal standpoint, this sentiment is supported by the fact that in Rugby Union tries are rewarded with the greatest number of points. This assignment of weight to goal achievement can be understood as a clear sign that try scoring is meant to be the most important element of the game. Arguably, this is the case because try scoring is the culmination of effective collective play and teamwork rather than the achievement of a solitary player. Furthermore, instead of isolating and rewarding one specific skill, try scoring requires and highlights the combination of several skills. It would appear that try scoring is worth more because it is very difficult to achieve. Most probably, when constructing and adjusting the game and weighting different scoring methods, gamewrights wanted to not only encourage try scoring but also emphasize it as a distinguishing feature of Rugby Union.<sup>3</sup>

It is no coincidence that in its *Review of the Game 2003* the International Rugby Board remarked that "tries continued to win matches" and added that on "only 16 occasions out of over 120 played since RWC99 (Rugby World Cup 1999) has the team scoring the fewer number of tries won the game" (12: p. 4). Similarly, when analyzing the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup, the International Rugby Board remarked that "81% of the matches were won by the team scoring the most tries" and that "proportionately more tries and fewer penalties were scored than in all World Cups but the first one" (13: p. 1). It is important to note Rugby Union officials' deemphasis of penalties and stress on tries.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to viewing try scoring as the fundamental aspect of the game, Rugby Union officials believe that two principles are attached to the game. These principles are the contest for possession of the ball and maintaining continuity of possession (11: pp. 10–11; 12: p. 2). The contest for the ball occurs in different ways during the three distinctive phases of play—open play, set play, and second phase. Open play occurs when there is no interruption in the game. Set play includes all situations in which the game has been discontinued for various reasons and there is a need to

restart it. Finally, second phase refers to instances “where the ball is contested in tackle situations, rucks and mauls” (24: p. 15). Once in possession of the ball, the aim is to advance in the field and score points by skillful means. The longer a team maintains possession of the ball, the greater the chance it will score. Presumably, continuity of possession allows for the creation of opportunities to score and, more specifically, to score tries. In light of this discussion, it is reasonable that Rugby Union is a game of which the contest for possession, maintaining continuity of possession, and capitalization primarily in try scoring are central features. This, of course, requires and is accomplished through the display of high-level skills.

## **Rugby Union’s Bonus-Point System: A Just Evaluation System?**

As suggested previously, one of the strengths of the bonus-point system implemented in the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup is that it takes into account all dimensions of the game when assigning weight to the results of individual contests. By awarding an extra point for scoring four or more tries and/or losing by less than 7 points, the offensive and defensive dimensions of the game are properly recognized and valued. This is an improvement over traditional evaluation systems, which almost exclusively neglect in their formal structure the defensive dimension of games. In the case of the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup, however, this recognition was partial—the version of the bonus-point system developed for the tournament only rewarded the defensive capacity of the losing team. On the positive side, this was accomplished by encouraging teams to mount offensive, as well as defensive, efforts, all of which, once again, honors the offense–defense complex. Nonetheless, more comprehensive recognitions of the defensive dimension of the game could have been offered. For example, winning teams that are also extremely successful in preventing opponents from scoring could be rewarded with an extra point. By adding this variant to the bonus-point system, both contestants could be compensated for their defensive efforts and merits.

In addition to the formal recognition of the defensive dimension of Rugby Union, the bonus-point system improves the manner in which the offensive dimension of the game is rewarded. By granting an extra point for scoring four or more tries, it not only discriminates between types of goal achievement but also clearly establishes which type is the most important in the game. Arguably, the change in the evaluation system is the consequence and articulation of a given *interpretation*—similar to the one advanced earlier—of what Rugby Union is all about. For gamewrights, try scoring rather than other methods of goal achievement deserves encouragement, recognition, and, consequently, weightier compensation. They want to promote matches in which try scoring flourishes. Even though the team scoring more points, regardless of how goal achievement has been reached, is still the winner, the extra point for scoring four or more tries indicates that at its best Rugby Union is a game in which try scoring should predominate.

It is worth mentioning that the extra point for try scoring does not merely serve a discriminatory function in terms of type of goal achievement but also puts a premium on volume. The requirement of four or more tries is important and strengthens the evaluation system in at least two ways. First, it not only acknowledges and rewards try scoring as a demonstration of Rugby Union excellence but



also emphasizes superlative ability in achieving this excellence. In this regard, type and quantity of goal achievement go hand in hand. Whereas in traditional evaluation systems, quantity of goal achievement is neglected once a team has established more points than its rival, the bonus-point system incorporates it as a sign of athletic competence. The idea is to reward teams that can display Rugby Union athleticism and excellence frequently rather than occasionally. Gamewrights want consistency in this particular type of goal achievement. Second, if accomplished, the standard of volume minimizes the effect that luck, chance, or refereeing errors might have on the establishment of legitimate competitive comparisons. It is rare that these elements influence and vitiate so many instances of goal achievement in a given match. Downplaying factors that distort and dilute athletic comparisons serves to highlight the role of skill, effort, and, ultimately, merit.<sup>5</sup>

Another strength of the bonus-point system is that it underlines a cluster of skills residing at the core of Rugby Union. These skills are presumably the ones that gamewrights intended to test and those through which players and teams were to meet the challenges set forth by the constitutive rules. Torres (22) has labeled this set of skills as constitutive skills because they are the ones required to meet the challenge the sport presents. In Rugby Union they include various highly specialized forms of “carrying, passing, kicking and grounding the ball” (10: p. 4) derived from the constitutive rules and the numerous strategies developed in the course of the history of the game.<sup>6</sup>

The bonus-point system also represents an improvement over traditional evaluation systems in that it takes into account what has been achieved, as well as how that achievement was accomplished. That is, the novel evaluation system is a step forward because it is process oriented, as well as outcome oriented. Here the “how” of the achievement includes the distinction between different types of goal achievement, the quantity of goal achievement, and the ability to prevent goal achievement against one’s side. In other words, this comprehensive process-oriented evaluation system takes seriously all dimensions of games and, in doing so, better serves the central purpose of competitive sport—the establishment of meaningful athletic comparisons—and more reasonably and accurately rewards the skilled performances of teams.

The focal point of the bonus-point system is not only the outcome but also the athletic excellence produced during play. Noticeably, it assumes that justice in rewarding achievements and recognizing athletic merit requires more than reading a tally sheet at game’s end. This evaluation system has the potential to mitigate feelings of injustice expressed in phrases heard in sport arenas when, for example, after equivalent efforts and displays of excellence, a Rugby Union team comes out on top by a slim margin in the last minute of play. Although the winner deserves compensation for its narrow victory, the loser is also entitled to be rewarded for its display of excellence. Not all victories, defeats, and ties are equal and merit the same treatment. Differences in performance are better accommodated and rewarded by the bonus-point system. In short, this evaluation system is truer to the internal logic of Rugby Union and, using Torres and McLaughlin’s (23) terminology, embodies the attitude of “meaningful resolution seekers” who care about and celebrate the excellences of a game. And because excellence can be demonstrated by all participants and not just winners, the idea advanced by Simon (19) that competition is not a zero-sum game but “a mutually acceptable quest for excellence through challenge” (p. 27) is articulated and honored by this policy.

The bonus-point system is faithful to the central purpose of competitive sport and distributes rewards considering both outcome and process of sport contests while maintaining the “sacrosanctity of results” — the pervasive attitude in the world of sport that the outcomes of matches are inviolable and accurate representations of athletic excellence. As shown previously, Dixon (5), Simon (19), and most of the philosophy-of-sport literature, not to mention sportspeople from around the world, agree with this claim. In Latin American football, there is a phrase, *los goles no se merecen, se convierten* (goals are not deserved, they are scored), that speaks to this point. By focusing on results, we avoid the introduction of questionable criteria such as those based on aesthetic or tactical categories to evaluate the merit of objective achievement. One of the reasons that “objective sports” are so appealing is that achievements are assessed according to whether “something” actually occurred or not, independent of external criteria used to adjudicate the value of that “something.” In such sports, subjective interpretations and valorizations do not affect or determine results. For instance, a try is a try and carries 5 points regardless of whether the scoring player and team displayed grace and skill in the play leading up to the grounding of the ball in the opponent’s in-goal. We agree with this viewpoint but believe that a closer look at results, such as the one inspired by the bonus-point system, reveals more about the actual unfolding of games, which in turn requires sportspeople to honor their sporting endeavors more completely, without violating the objectivity of results.

The dual function of respecting the objectivity of results while more fully honoring the process by which contestants arrive at those results is facilitated by the various weights assigned to scoring methods in Rugby Union. This is quite different from sports like football, handball, lacrosse, ice hockey, field hockey, and baseball, in which all types of goal achievement carry the same weight—1 point. Like Rugby Union, however, American football assigns different values to different forms of goal achievement, but it has yet to modify its evaluation system, which could help to more objectively decide conference standings and overall rankings at the professional and college levels. Basketball has moved in a direction similar to that of Rugby Union and American football by drawing a distinction between 1-point free throws and 2- and 3-point field goals. The point to emphasize here is that careful analyses and adjustments to sports, their rules, and, consequently, their skills can help gamewrights craft evaluation systems that better serve the fundamental purpose of competitive sport without radically altering the centrality of the lusory project and the results of contests. In that process, it can also help sportspeople focus more on the unique core of excellences of their sports and less on the quest for results.

The bonus-point system also has the potential to strengthen Rugby Union by positively influencing the community of practitioners. Although the following points are not based on an ideal of what a just evaluation system should look like, they do warrant mention. As advertised by proponents to justify the new evaluation system in the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup, the bonus-point system could have a positive effect on the attitudes of players and other members of the sport community. By offering an extra point for scoring four or more tries and/or losing by less than 7 points, the system encourages management and contestants to give a maximal effort throughout matches. A point, or points, earned in this manner could determine whether a team qualifies for later rounds of a tournament and/or its ranking or seeding in those rounds. Along the same lines, the novel evaluation

system could promote positive strategies and play, better all-around players and teams, and, ultimately, closer, more satisfying and entertaining games, as well as better spectacles. This, in turn, could further interest in the game, increase ticket sales and TV audiences, and attract more sponsors and improve the financial stability of Rugby Union institutions worldwide.

After the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup, detractors of the bonus-point system argued that the promise of more interesting games was not fulfilled because of the number of mismatches and blowouts produced by it. In the last 10 years Dixon (4; 6; 7) has argued that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with “running up the score” in competitive situations such as the Rugby Union World Cup. Space does not allow us to review the discussion that ensued from Dixon’s thesis, but, in our estimation, his case has survived the arguments put forward by his critics.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, regardless of whether running up the score is morally acceptable, the mismatches do not appear to have been caused by the bonus-point system in the case at hand. Rather, the qualifying system used by international Rugby Union officials, which allowed, for example, contests between the representative of a national federation with about 10 years of experience and a sport powerhouse, are more likely to be the cause of those aggrandized results.<sup>8</sup> The latter fielded highly trained and paid athletes while the former fielded enthusiasts with a comparatively low level of skill and knowledge of the game. The likelihood of blowouts increased when Rugby Union expanded its World Cup from 16 teams in its 1987 debut to 20 teams in 1999. Some of the new slots were filled by teams that were not well prepared for elite international competition.

Arguably, the number of teams allowed to participate in the Rugby Union World Cup since 1999 was increased because of commercial interests. Rugby Union’s officials and sponsors wanted a broader audience. To widen its appeal, the game’s international management welcomed into its prime tournament newly created national federations, which barely had the tradition, infrastructure, and resources to develop teams capable of participating on the world stage. This is further proof that, in the current climate of international elite sports, there is often tension between commercialism and the promotion of the internal values of sport, which are potentially embodied in closely contested games and on leveled playing fields. In short, the charge that the bonus-point system was to blame for the 2003 Rugby Union World Cup mismatches is likely false.<sup>9</sup>

The preceding remarks, however, suggest that the implementation of just evaluation systems is not a simple matter. The decision of what to reward and how to reward it in terms of value should be the subject of debate among all members of each sport community. This debate would necessarily refer to an articulated interpretation of the game as construed by the constitutive rules. This can only benefit the sport community by educating its members and inviting them to cultivate the sport’s central features and distinctive elements. Each sport should analyze the frequency and difficulty of different types of lusory goal achievement to decide when outstanding degrees of excellence have been achieved and merit special reward. Evaluation systems certainly do not have to turn into incomprehensible mathematical artifacts that only experts can understand and manage. Regardless of the difficulty of constructing and implementing specific bonus-point systems and evaluation systems in general, the process appears to be necessary if competitive sport is to highlight athletic merit and legitimate comparisons and fairly compensate contestants for their displays of excellence.

## Principles for a Just Evaluation System

Our analysis of the Rugby Union bonus-point system is relevant on two different levels. On one hand, this study has shown that when considering the aforementioned interpretation of Rugby Union and the central purpose of competitive sport, the bonus-point system is superior to traditional evaluation systems. Thus, its continued implementation will make Rugby Union a better game and will only enhance the game's reputation. However, a full understanding of the significance of the bonus-point system might require educating the Rugby Union community about what competitive sport is all about and, specifically, what Rugby Union entails.

On the other hand, our study has implications well beyond Rugby Union. This is because our analysis suggests the need to articulate a theory that assists in crafting fairer evaluation systems. We believe that our discussion provides the resources to do this. In this section, we outline such a theory based on our findings in the Rugby Union's bonus-point-system case study. The theory's outline will take the form of principles derived from the abstract claim that evaluation systems should do justice to the athletic merit displayed by contestants on the playing field. Undoubtedly, the list we present is not exhaustive, but it captures the fundamental elements from which other principles can be drawn.

Much like the games they serve, evaluation systems are not rigid but dynamic and ever-evolving structures. The set of principles presented here will help sport communities make adjustments to evaluation systems while preserving their primary compensatory function. These principles are not meant to be taken as a set of easy-to-use recipes but as guidelines to be used in conjunction with (a) the notion that the central purpose of competitive sport is "to provide an accurate measure of athletic superiority" (5: p. 10) and (b) a thorough study of each game's nuances, traditions, and history. Based on these factors, we offer the following general principles while acknowledging that just evaluation systems of different sports may take diverse forms even though their underlying principles may be the same. The principles are as follows.

*When applicable, just evaluation systems should explicitly discriminate and compensate the two most recognizable dimensions of competitive sport: offense and defense.*<sup>10</sup> Frequent offensive success (in the gamewrights' preferred mode of goal achievement if applicable) is indicative of consistently sound execution of the constitutive skills of a given sport. Conversely, strong defensive efforts demonstrate an ability to disrupt opponents' use of these skills and thwart their scoring opportunities. Both the offensive and defensive efforts of contestants play an important role in determining the outcome of a match. Hence, superior performance in either or both of these categories should be properly rewarded through the evaluation process.

*Just evaluation systems should discriminate and compensate between different types of goal achievement.* The rules of a sport should attempt to differentiate types of goal achievement that are more consistent with its central lusory project from those that are not. If the rules of a sport emphasize a particular type or types of goal achievement, that emphasis should be reflected in the scoring structure of the sport. The centrality and degree of difficulty of each type of goal achievement discriminated should be accounted for when assigning them formal value. Similarly, outstanding consistency of primary goal achievement should also be formally rewarded in the evaluation system of the sport in question.

*Just evaluation systems should put a premium on goal achievement through constitutive skills.* The rules of a sport set forth the skills that may be used in meeting the sport's challenge. It is these constitutive skills that are emphasized in the process of competition and that *should be* stressed by evaluation systems. Competent performance of these skills, which leads to the achievement of the primary goal of the sport, should be justly and generously rewarded by the evaluation structure of the sport. Putting a premium on goal achievement through the execution of constitutive skills also helps "define and shape the character of games" (22: p. 86).

*Just evaluation systems should stipulate value, accounting not only for results but also for the difference in athletic excellence embodied within them.* Undeniably, the end result of a sporting contest is a good indicator of athletic superiority, but results per se do not reveal the whole story of that contest. Levels of athletic excellence are embodied during competition that are not fully displayed or appreciated by the outcome of the contest. A just evaluation system will reward offensive excellence attained through sound performance of the sport's constitutive skills and defensive excellence demonstrated through the disruption of constitutive skills execution. This will be accomplished by a strong appreciation of the athletic process through which contestants establish the outcome of a contest. Thus, contestants' strengths and weaknesses in competition will be as important as the outcome itself. In short, a just evaluation system will reward athletic excellence, as well as outcome, and assign value based on the levels of play demonstrated by winning, losing, or tied teams during a contest rather than awarding the victor all of the spoils or tied sides an equivalent number of points.

## Conclusion

In their search for ways to improve their sports, sport-community members have often overlooked their evaluation systems as ground for productive and helpful change. In this article, we have carried out an interpretivist analysis of Rugby Union's bonus-point system and found it to be a sound change that improves the fairness of the sport's evaluative process. The bonus-point system rewards aspects of athletic excellence that many sport-evaluation systems ignore. Offensively, it rewards outstanding performance in the achievement of Rugby Union's primary goal and distinctive feature: try scoring. In doing so, the bonus-point system rewards frequency and consistency in the execution of the constitutive skills of the sport. Defensively, Rugby Union's bonus-point system rewards a losing team's ability to keep a game close, but it could be further improved if it explicitly rewarded the ability to limit scoring, as well.

To sum up, Rugby Union's bonus-point system is a positive change that not only increases fairness in the sport but also more comprehensively honors the uniqueness of Rugby Union. From our interpretivist analysis, we have inferred that just sporting-evaluation systems should (a) reward offensive and defensive competence, (b) discriminate between different types of goal achievement and compensate them according to their primacy in the sport, (c) emphasize goal achievement through a sport's constitutive skills, and (d) distribute value in a manner that accurately accounts for the athletic excellence displayed in the contest rather than solely distributing it according to results. The just evaluation system is, thus, one that more completely accounts for the excellence revealed through the competitive process

and rewards the strong play of tied or losing teams, as well as the successes of winners. Hence, such systems reduce the weight accorded to the outcomes of contests and justly remind us that a win is not just a win and that it is important how one plays the game, after all.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In this article, the terms “just” and “justice” are not used in the traditional sense that is most often used by moral and political philosophers (i.e., a fair distribution of society’s goods, equality of opportunity, equality before the law, and other similar principles). Instead, these terms are used in a sport-specific way and refer to fair results that accurately reflect the relative athletic abilities of contestants. Consequently, in this context these terms are also applicable to the analysis of the scoring system by which contestants are rewarded for their performance.

<sup>2</sup>Penalty kicks are awarded to the nonoffending team when a player from the opposing team infringes some of the rules of the game. A dropkick is a kick taken during general play after a contestant has dropped the ball to the ground from his or her hands and as it rises from its first bounce.

<sup>3</sup>The evolution of the value assigned to try scoring in Rugby Union clearly illustrates this point. At the dawn of organized Rugby Union, tries did not count. As the game established itself, however, and a common scoring method emerged and was adopted by governing bodies across the world, try scoring was given a more prominent role. In the mid-1880s a try was worth 1 point, but by the end of the decade its value was increased to 2 points. In 1893 a try carried 3 points, a value that remained the same for over 7 decades. In 1971 the worth of a try was increased to 4 points and, finally, in 1992, to 5 units. See C.H. Gadney (9) for a history of Rugby Union’s laws of the game.

<sup>4</sup>Experts in the Rugby Union international governing body recognize that penalty goals are also an important aspect of the game. This recognition is only partial, however—penalty goals are presented not only in relation to, and compared to, tries but also as an aspect of the game that is not so dominating in determining the outcome of competition. The relevance of penalty goals is evident in the final stages of Rugby Union World Cups, in which the bonus-point system does not make sense because these stages are governed by a knockout logic. Rugby Union officials acknowledge that as Rugby Union World Cups enter into their decisive phases, the relationship between try scoring and penalty-goal scoring changes dramatically. As Rugby Union World Cups advance, penalty goals increase while tries decrease in the scoring mix. Yet, in an effort to show the supremacy of tries in Rugby Union, officials hurriedly emphasize that in spite of the shift in the penalty goal–try ratio as Rugby Union World Cups progress, “in general, it is tries that win matches” (13: p. 11). Moreover, in an attempt to highlight try scoring, Rugby Union analysts wrote that “of the 185 RWC (Rugby World Cup) matches played to date, 158 (or 85%) were won by the team scoring the most tries and **only 7 were won by the team that scored the fewer tries but kicked more penalties**” (13: p. 11). Undoubtedly, Rugby Union officials, and arguably connoisseurs across the world, recognize that the game is at its best when try scoring flourishes.

<sup>5</sup>In this sense, it is important to acknowledge that it is highly implausible that the influence that elements such as luck or chance have on sporting results could ever be eliminated from the world of sports. Also, as Sigmund Loland argues, “sport is not a scientific experiment aiming at valid or scientifically ‘true’ knowledge, nor is it like a court of law that strives toward perfect meritocratic (or rather retributive) justice” (16: p. 91). As Loland himself agrees, however, acknowledging that luck and chance play a role in sporting contests, and might even enhance them, does not mean that these elements should prevail in determining the result of competition.

<sup>6</sup>These constitutive skills of Rugby Union are explicitly prescribed in the rulebook, but there are others such as tackling and moving into the right position in the field to support teammates that although omitted in the rulebook are of equal importance in meeting the central lusory project established by the sport. Torres (23) argues that constitutive skills are fundamental to games in

a way that restorative skills are not. The latter are employed when something has gone wrong in a match, for example, when rules are violated or when a player is injured, “to put the game back on track” (23: p. 85). If games do not go awry, at least in theory, restorative skills are not needed. This, of course, is highly improbable in the “real” world of sport, but from this improbability it does not follow that restorative skills enjoy the same lustrous status as constitutive skills. Nor does it mean that contests should be decided on the basis of the skillful implementation of restorative skills. For instance, in Rugby Union it is possible to score tries as a consequence of an efficient execution of a line out or scrum, which are restorative skills, but the actual try scoring necessarily involves kicking, passing, or grounding the ball, which are constitutive skills. This clearly indicates what skills are central to Rugby Union, at least for those who craft and tune up the game. Although restorative skills are a legitimate part of actual games, when they predominate the central lustrous project is transformed into one in which constitutive skills paradoxically take an ancillary role. Neither is it a coincidence that in Rugby Union all methods of goal scoring are rewarded less handsomely than try scoring. By stressing the latter, Rugby Union gamewrights made clear that the sport is best construed as testing a combination of constitutive skills with the purpose to ground the ball in the opposing in-goal. These skills are the skills that the constitutive rules of the game set out to test.

<sup>7</sup>The crux of Dixon’s rejection of what he has called the “antiblowout thesis” is that as long as the winning side plays fairly and shows respect for its opponents by refraining from intentionally humiliating them, the “fact that heavy defeats may cause embarrassment, psychological pain, and a resultant loss of self-esteem does not make them wrong” (4: p. 94). This is so because for him, showing compassion for the losing side does not override the central evaluative and comparative purpose of competitive sport. In short, for Dixon, “disappointment and the possibility of losing self-esteem are the inevitable and unobjectionable accompaniment of any actions in a competitive context” (4: p. 95). A second line of argument advanced by Dixon to defend a team’s right to maximize the margin of victory in one-sided games asserts that blowouts embody important sporting values other than winning. Among them are the establishment of results that accurately reflect the relative skills of contestants, the pursuit of records, and providing excitement to spectators.

<sup>8</sup>For example, the Namibia Rugby Union was established in 1990. Its national team made its Rugby Union World Cup debut in 1999. The Namibian national team has not won a game in its Rugby Union World Cup participation to date. Moreover, it suffered defeat by the widest margin in Rugby Union World Cup history when it lost to Australia 142–0 during their group stage match in 2003.

<sup>9</sup>Although it is unlikely that the bonus-point system caused the mismatches, this discussion suggests that the skill range of participants is a factor to be taken into consideration when leagues or tournaments are organized. Undoubtedly, closely contested games represent the best kind of competition. Thus, it seems reasonable to believe that the bonus-point system would work better when it is anticipated that all contestants are of relatively similar ability. Given the nature of competitive sport, however, considering the skill range of participants might minimize potential lopsided scores, but it does not guarantee their elimination. Recognizing that genuine competition involves contestants with similar levels of ability does not mean that lopsided victories are valueless or unworthy nor that running up the score is morally wrong. In this respect, see also Footnote 7.

<sup>10</sup>We say, “when applicable,” because sports like bowling, curling, and golf do not have a defensive component.

## References

1. D’Agostino, F. “The Ethos of Games.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. VIII, 1981, 7-18.
2. Dixon, N. “Canadian Figure Skaters, French Judges, and Realism in Sport.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXX(2), 2003, 103-116.

3. Dixon, N. "Rorty, Performance-Enhancing Drugs, and Change in Sport." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXVIII(1), 2001, 78-88.
4. Dixon, N. "The Inevitability of Disappointment: Reply to Feezell." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXVII, 2000, 93-99.
5. Dixon, N. "On Winning and Athletic Superiority." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXVI, 1999, 10-26.
6. Dixon, N. "Why Losing by a Wide Margin Is Not in Itself a Disgrace: Response to Hardman, Fox, McLaughlin and Zimmerman." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXV, 1998, 61-70.
7. Dixon, N. "On Sportsmanship and Running Up the Score." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XIX, 1992, 1-13.
8. Feezell, R. "On the Wrongness of Cheating and Why Cheaters Can't Play the Game." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XV, 1988, 57-68.
9. Gadney, C.H. *The History of the Laws of Rugby Union Football*. Twickenham: RFU, 1973.
10. International Rugby Board. "Laws of the Game." 2004. Available at <http://www.irlb.com/NR/rdonlyres/F9AD7B6E-4934-4EFA-8D0B-632B887BD30E/0/IRBLawsEnglish2004.pdf>. Accessed September 2004.
11. International Rugby Board. "Playing Charter." 2004. Available at <http://www.irlb.com/NR/rdonlyres/03D9F3D8-D40B-4463-B3AF-0B37CFF7CDDC/0/charter.pdf>. Accessed September 2004.
12. International Rugby Board. "Review of the Game 2003." 2003. Available at [http://www.irlb.com/NR/rdonlyres/6C7087BA-CB18-4E89-A466-C276EEC91EDC/0/game\\_2003.pdf](http://www.irlb.com/NR/rdonlyres/6C7087BA-CB18-4E89-A466-C276EEC91EDC/0/game_2003.pdf). Accessed September 2004.
13. International Rugby Board. "RWC 2003. Statistical Review and Match Analysis." Available at [http://www.irlb.com/NR/rdonlyres/98062213-C48B-4837-BC0A-26A22F81C38D/0/RWC\\_2003.pdf](http://www.irlb.com/NR/rdonlyres/98062213-C48B-4837-BC0A-26A22F81C38D/0/RWC_2003.pdf). Accessed September 2004.
14. Leaman, O. "Cheating and Fair Play in Sport." In *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport*. W. Morgan and K. Meier (Eds.). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988, 277-282.
15. Lehman, C. "Can Cheaters Play the Game?" *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. VIII, 1981, 41-46.
16. Loland, S. *Fair Play in Sport: A Moral Norm System*. New York: Routledge, 2002.
17. Morgan, W.J. "Moral Antirealism, Internalism, and Sport." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXXI(2), 2004, 161-183.
18. Morgan, W.J. "The Logical Incompatibility Thesis and Rules: A Reconsideration of Formalism as an Account of Games." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XIV, 1987, 1-20.
19. Simon, R.L. *Fair Play. The Ethics of Sport*. 2nd ed. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004.
20. Simon, R.L. "Sports, Relativism, and Moral Education." In *Sport Ethics: An Anthology*, J. Boxill (Ed.). Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.
21. Simon, R.L. "Internalism and Internal Values in Sport." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXVII, 2000, 1-16.
22. Torres, C.R. "What Counts as Part of a Game? A Look at Skills." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXVII, 2000, 81-92.
23. Torres, C.R., and D.W. McLaughlin. "Indigestion?: An Apology for Ties." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. XXX(2), 2003, 144-158.
24. Williams, T., and G. Hunter. *Rugby Skills, Tactics and Rules*. Willowdale, ON: Firefly, 2000.



Copyright of Journal of the Philosophy of Sport is the property of Human Kinetics Publishers, Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.