

Philosophic Exchange

Volume 3

Number 1 *Volume 1, Number 3, Summer 1972*


Article 12

1-1-1972

On Weiss on Records and on the Significance of Athletic Records

Warren Fraleigh
The College at Brockport

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex

 Part of the [Continental Philosophy Commons](#), [Epistemology Commons](#), [Esthetics Commons](#), [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [History of Philosophy Commons](#), [Logic and Foundations of Mathematics Commons](#), [Metaphysics Commons](#), [Philosophy of Mind Commons](#), and the [Philosophy of Science Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Fraleigh, Warren (1972) "On Weiss on Records and on the Significance of Athletic Records," *Philosophic Exchange*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol3/iss1/12

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @Brockport. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophic Exchange by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @Brockport. For more information, please contact kmyers@brockport.edu.



The College at
BROCKPORT
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



WARREN FRALEIGH

Professor of Physical Education
S.U.C. Brockport

ON WEISS ON RECORDS AND ON THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF ATHLETIC RECORDS

by
Warren Fraleigh

Men have expressed an interest in athletic records for centuries. A variety of references, allusions, and images pertaining to athletic achievements have appeared in the *Odyssey*, Pindar's Odes, Paul in the New Testament, minstrel songs of the medieval courts, and the modern chronicles of athletic events with accompanying asterisks and footnotes. In spite of this long history, little has been said in regard to the meaning of athletic records for man. Professor Weiss has opened this area of inquiry to our view in his paper "Records and the Man."

In his treatment of the topic Weiss clearly identifies several factors which are associated with record keeping. He points out that "Athletic records purport to report what was accomplished." By such reporting, athletic records inform us of ". . . the best results that men have brought about . . ." Additionally, "Records are cherished because of their assumed impersonality, impartiality, exactitude, and objectivity." Because of assumed impartiality in addition to the effort of reporting the best accomplishments, record keeping provides a basis for the comparison of human achievements in the present and between the present and the past.

Because of the factors noted above and their proper association with record keeping, it seems logical to conclude that "The more extensive the records are, the more ready we are to accept them as objective summaries of what a man not only has done, but what he can do, and therefore what he truly is." But with regard to this last phase Weiss issued a warning that we ". . . go much beyond where we should." For, Weiss warns us, upon closer examination of record keeping we find many influences upon the actual achievement which are not reflected in the record itself. To name a few unrecorded influences; the condition of the playing surface, the presence or absence of wind, a friendly or hostile crowd, the decision of the officials, are all things which help to determine what actually occurs in an athletic event but are not a part of the record of the event. From these observations Weiss tells us, "At their best, records provide only partial evidence of what was done."

As if these elements do not complicate enough the potential accuracy of athletic records as an accurate reiteration of what actually occurs, Weiss points out also that "there are aspects to every athletic performance which are forever beyond the reach of any recording . . ." These aspects, "Concreteness, contingency, novelty, luck, obstacles, and opportunities all make a difference to what is achieved. Since records abstract from these, they tell us not what in fact did occur, but the outcome of a multitude of factors of which we take little or no note." ". . . records provide only partial evidence of what was done."

To this point a summary of several points included in the first two thirds of the Weiss paper has been made. This summary will provide a legitimate base for

ON WEISS ON RECORDS AND ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ATHLETIC RECORDS

the following reaction since it is necessary to declare what is being reacted to in order for the reactions themselves to be clear.

Weiss has properly clarified many reasons supporting the contention that athletic records *cannot* provide complete insight into what really did happen during a particular athletic event. In so doing, he raises some problems for the athletic fraternity and its corps of record keepers. For example, the question, "If records do not describe what actually occurred and if the diverse modifying conditions present at differing athletic performances are never the same, how is a record (in the sense of the best all-time performance) a record at all?" To state the problem another way, "Given all the situational variables which are uncontrolled, how do we *know* what best performance is?" If we accept the points which Weiss has made we cannot state that we know, in any univocal sense, that any particular athletic record describes in a complete way what did occur at the time and place of any particular athletic performance. Perhaps the most we can say, in the words of Weiss, is ". . . records can tell us only what men did in a number of incompletely described and inadequately understood situations. They report the accomplishments of outstanding contextualized individuals, and then only in certain sports, and in abstraction from various conditions which in fact made a difference to the result."

Is it reasonable for us to believe that records should provide complete insight? In one sense, no, for it is the nature of a record to be capable only of approximation of some of what actually occurred during the event. The finest stereophonic recording is not the same as the experience of sensing the conductor, the orchestra, and the concert hall. The "instant" replays of televised sports are not the same as the original view on the screen while what is viewed on the screen is not the same as what is experienced by a spectator in the stands. To generalize, we should not expect more of a *report*, a *reply*, or a *record* than it is capable of supplying.

But is this *approximation* of what happens during an athletic performance all that athletic records speak to us about? Perhaps another type of inquiry into what athletic records may tell us of humankind would be productive. As indicated, at the least, athletic records establish an *approximation* of the best contextualized performances so far achieved and, in so doing, provide a basis for comparison, present to present and present to past, of other so far achieved contextualized performances. Perhaps if we focus our inquiry upon the long standing, avid *interest* of humans in recording athletic performances, rather than upon the records themselves, we will find some promising directions.

To proceed from this point it is necessary to declare two corollary assumptions about human interest. First, humans do not persist in directing their interest to concerns which are insignificant to them as humans. Second, the positive corollary, humans persist in directing their interest to concerns from which important meaning is available to them as humans.

Now the question for exploration becomes, "Given the avid historic interest of humans in athletic records, what important meaning is available to humans through this interest?" The ancient Greeks said *arete*—excellence. The slogan of the modern Olympics says *citius, altius, fortius*—faster, higher, stronger. But ex-

WARREN FRALEIGH

cellence with respect to what standard? Faster, higher, stronger in regard to what comparative? The Greek concept of excellence was intimately interwoven with the anthropomorphic ideas of the gods as perfect men. Faster, higher, stronger at first glance means in comparison to other men, but if we look more deeply we may discern man's inexorable Sisyphus-like struggle with the space, the time, and the gravitational force of his world. Our lives and our language are filled with the symbols of Western man's continuing struggle to dominate his world. The first man on the moon said, "a long step for man." Alan Shepard executes a golf swing on the moon—an act which reiterates the symbolic acts of humans on earth to test their abilities to control themselves and the forces of their world to conform to their will. Humans are continually attending to the self identity clues provided by feedback from athletic and dance performance, both human endeavors which use movement as the medium and the body as the instrument. In athletics, humans move their bodies to determine how fast, how high, and how much they compare. In dance, humans move their bodies to use space, time, and force to produce images of infinity, eternity and omnipotence as a symbolic means of overcoming their "earthliness."

The significance of the interest of humans in athletic records may be explained as an expression of the continuing desire of humans to ascertain status in the world. The fact that the records themselves are but approximations of actual achievement is inconsequential in comparison to the continuing desire for knowledge of the human condition. Humanity seems not to be satisfied by the type of comparative of the dictum "man—the measure of all things." Man apparently demands comparatives other than himself. So, in history, he has compared himself with God, gods, angels, the devil, beings from other planets and his space-time-force world.

If status in the world is a comparative, athletic records provide opportunities for four kinds of comparisons. One of these is that of the individual non-record achiever to the best recorded performance in a particular athletic event. In effect, this is a comparison of the personally effective powers of the non-record achiever and the personally effective powers of the record achiever. Such a comparison responds to the implicit question, "How do I compare with him?"

A second is comparison of the present performance of an individual with his own best past performance. This comparison is between the personally effective powers of the present "I" with the personally effective powers of the best past "I." The response is to "How do I compare with I?"

A third comparative is that of an individual record achiever to a presumed best possible performance. The comparison here is between the personally effective powers of the approximately best performer with the presumed limits on human performance imposed by an impersonal world. Years ago the four minute mile was a presumed best possible performance. The question to be responded to here is "How do I compare with it?"

The fourth comparative is between the current record achiever and the collective, historical record achievers in the same athletic event. This compares the personally effective powers of the current approximately best performer with the historic *trend* established by the personally effective powers of many past

ON WEISS ON RECORDS AND ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ATHLETIC RECORDS

approximately best performers. The question here is "How do I compare with we?"

These four comparatives, born in athletic records, have two things in common. First, each is concerned with personal human effective powers, either individual, or collective, or historical. Second, personal human powers are measured by relative abilities to move a mass or masses in a spatial-temporal context governed by specified rules. Thus, the comparatives available in athletic records express symbolically the effective personal powers of humans to exert force in space and time.¹ Such symbolic expressions provide humans one source for their sense of personal status in a force-space-time world. Any single record, in and of itself, is not only incomplete as Weiss informs us but is also insignificant. However, any single athletic record as one point for a multitude of comparisons of personal human effective power is a source for human symbolization regarding human status in the world.

Based on the assumption that humans persist in directing their interest to concerns from which significance is available to them as humans and the position that athletic records provide a source for human symbolization about human status in the world, it is appropriate to conclude that humans persist in their interest in athletic records because they are a source for symbolic meanings which are of importance to them.

In the last one-third of his paper Weiss makes several assertions which are very worthy of discussion. He speaks of such related matters as "an end to which a man is dedicated" and "the end to which an athlete is dedicated" also he mentions ". . . men . . . dedicated to the attainment of complete, fulfilled lives" and athletes who choose ". . . to be fulfilled primarily by having an excellent body deployed excellently in severe, public tests, objectively judged." Still further, Weiss states "The athlete chooses that fulfillment which requires and is affected by a perfected and operative body" and "the end to which an athlete is dedicated is narrower than that appropriate to man at his best."

This last statement apparently indicates that Weiss has something in mind as an end "appropriate to man at his best." However, that end is not identified in "Records and the Man" and this would not be important except that Weiss has claimed "The end to which an athlete is dedicated is narrower than that appropriate to man at his best." Unfortunately, Weiss does not tell us to what end an athlete is dedicated and, since he also has not declared the end appropriate to man at his best, he provides no clear base for analysis of the consistency of his remarks, e.g., comparing the end of the athlete with the end appropriate to man at his best.

Perhaps a differentiation is needed in the use Weiss makes of the word "end." Whatever Weiss has intended as the end of the athlete, it may not be an end at all in the sense of that which is the mark of the fullest and most complete life. Maybe it is better termed an objective or, to be Deweyan, an "end in view." Such a term would be more accurate in describing those objectives which humans seek in the many *roles* they perform in life; for instance, the scientist as scientist or the musician as musician. The point is that no single role played by humans, be it musician, scientist, philosopher or athlete, has an objective

which is, of itself, capable of providing a complete and fulfilled life. In this way, the roles of musician, scientist, philosopher or athlete do not entail a complete and fulfilled life but only the partial completion and fulfillment available from a partial role.

Although Weiss does not identify the end to which the athlete is dedicated or the end appropriate to man at his best he has declared that the end of the athlete is one “. . . which demands for its realization the use and preservation of an excellent body.” This appears to identify the means for the undeclared end. However, Weiss states “Scientists, musicians, religious, and ethical men are also dedicated to the attainment of complete, fulfilled lives.” The “also” in this statement appears to imply that the end of the athlete is the attainment of a complete, fulfilled life. If this implication is correct it provides a base for comparing the end of the athlete to the end of the scientist, the musician, the religious and the ethical man. Both kinds of ends seem to be the same; namely, “the attainment of complete, fulfilled lives.” Nonetheless, Weiss makes a distinction in this common end which is differentiated in three ways. Roughly, these are:

1. The instrument of a complete, fulfilled life—the body for the athlete, not the body for the scientist, the musician, and so on.
2. The clarity of understanding of the nature of the end of a complete fulfilled life—clearer to the scientist, the musician and so on than to the athlete.
3. The “social” inclusiveness of the end-fulfillment for the scientist, the musician, and so on is inseparable from the completion of others while the “athletic goal rarely allows a man to work toward achievement of anyone but himself . . .”

Accordingly, the distinctions which make the athletic end “narrower than that appropriate to man at his best” are that the athlete uses his body for achievement, the athlete is less able to articulate clearly what a complete, fulfilled life is, and the athletic end is more “self-seeking.”

The first distinction is obviously correct in at least a quantitative sense, that is, the athlete more totally uses his body for achievement. However, this distinction is a difference in degree and not in kind for scientists, musicians, and so on also use their bodies for achievement. Also, although detailed discussion cannot be entered into here, any implication that the athlete’s use of his body is a “mindless” operation must be dispelled.

The second distinction regarding the athlete’s inability to articulate the content of a complete, fulfilled life is partially correct in two ways. One, if verbal articulation is intended it is probably true but if non-verbal articulation of a complete, fulfilled life is included the distinction is less meaningful. Second, the distinction is correct in those cases where a particular athlete is dominated by the athletic role to the extent that other kinds of human roles are not contributing to fulfillment. There are *some* athletes like that but there are also many who do, in fact, engage in a variety of human roles. Some level of inability to

ON WEISS ON RECORDS AND ON THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ATHLETIC RECORDS

articulate what a complete, fulfilled life is seems to characterize many persons whose day-to-day life is dominated by one kind of role, whether it is athlete, scientist or musician.

This second distinction is partially incorrect in that it ignores the possibility that the athletic experience provides a different kind of basis for articulation of what a complete, fulfilled life is and, thus, potentially enriches that articulation.

The third distinction is probably the most provocative and deserves to be fully repeated. Weiss says:

Most important, the end that they [scientists, musicians, religious, and ethical men] envisage, though never free from reference to the self, is one in which their own completion is inseparable from the completion of others. When an athlete makes provision for the success of his team mates, it is usually because this is incidental to his own . . . The excellence sought by the others, though not without its element of self-regard and self-seeking, is broad enough to be realized by many independently, but in such a way as to provide opportunities for the others.

The athletic goal rarely allows a man to work toward the achievement of anyone but himself, except incidentally and as a means.²

This distinction indicates a fundamental misunderstanding of athletic achievement as it is often experienced by athletes. Misunderstanding may come clearer if the nature of positive fulfillment in athletic achievement is revealed.

That kind of athletic achievement which is often most significant on a continuing basis for the athlete is a product of a certain kind of athletic engagement. It is the achievement of a well-contested and well-played game by all parties to the event.³ The ingredients of such a well-played and well-contested game are: (1) contestants who are well-matched in terms of performance skills and physical condition, (2) interesting and demanding strategic situations in conjunction with comparable strategic abilities among the participants and, (3) an outcome which is in doubt until the final moments of the event. In combination, these elements show that a well-played, well-contested event is the product of the process of mutual facilitation by the participants. In their immediate pursuit of scoring in or winning of the event, the participants are actually engaging in the cooperative achievement of the well-played and well-contested event. Each point in the event is a mini-achievement to which all the participants contribute. The participants each utilize the very best of their abilities, conditioning and strategy. In so doing, they mutually aid each other in the cooperative achievement.

If one party in the athletic event increases the quality of his performance, his strategy, and his conditioning, he provides a basic condition for the completion and fulfillment of the other. That is, each qualitative increase is the condition whereby a corresponding qualitative increase is evoked in order for the participants to achieve the well-played, well-contested event. *Intrinsic in the structure of the well-played event is this back and forth facilitation of fulfillment.* Because of this intrinsic structure, the completion and fulfillment

WARREN FRALEIGH

of one athlete is dependent upon and inseparable from that of the other athlete and not incidental, one to the other, as Weiss seems to propose. This explains why athletes who have contested often and well *with* each other have great respect and admiration for each other. The quality of their relationships are of mutual self-facilitation born structurally out of the achievement of many well-played events.

Some athletic records are produced from well-played, well-contested events. Inasmuch and insofar as such records are marks of achievement produced in a relationship of structured mutual self-facilitation on the part of the athletes, it may be said that the excellence noted by the record results from the contributions of all the athletes involved. Though it is just and proper *to record* the approximately best achievement in the name of an individual athlete or team it is also necessary *to understand* that the particular approximately best achievement often would not be so without the efforts of other athletes. This "indebtedness" of a record achiever to the facilitation provided by other contestants is, in fact, often verbalized by record achievers in such post-record remarks as "He pushed me to it." or "I couldn't have done it without his effort." When the athletic goal is fulfillment via the well-played, well-contested game, it may be stated that the structured mutual self-facilitation process *inherently* allows the athletes to work for mutual benefit simultaneously. This, of course, is directly contradictory to the Weiss proposition that "The athletic goal rarely allows a man to work towards the achievement of anyone but himself . . ." Thus, in the sense of the achievement of the well-played game which produces a record performance, it may be speculated that the record is indicative of the ceaseless effort of humankind to extend the boundaries of accomplishment.

In summary of this reaction the following points are appropriate. Athletic records do not tell us what man is. The avid historic *interest* of humans in athletic records tells us of the ongoing quest for symbolic self understanding of human status in a world of time-space-force. Additionally, records produced from the well-played, well-contested game are the result of structured mutual self-facilitation. This inherent structure becomes a means by which humans extend the boundaries of achievement by thrusting a "superman" into history. This "superman" (the record achiever) is the best produced by many humans striving mutually for the fulfillment of the well-played game.

FOOTNOTES

¹For further explanation of these ideas see Eleanor Metheny, "Symbolic Forms of Movement: The Olympic Games" and other essays in *Connotations of Movement in Sport and Dance*. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Co., Publishers, 1965.

²Bracketed material not in the original.

³See E. F. Kaelin, "The Well-Played Game: Notes Toward an Aesthetics of Sport," *Quest* X, May 1968, pp. 16-28.