

SPORT: A PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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There are two great national institutions which simply cannot tolerate either internal dissention or external interference: Our Armed Forces and our . . . sports programs. Both are, of necessity, benevolent dictatorships

—Dr. Max Rafferty,
Former State of California
Superintendent of Public Instruction

Sport, as an institution, is often sentimentalized through nostalgia for the lost Hellenic ideal of youthful perfection, or is assumed to have the posture of a Victorian cult, wherein one attributes the noble qualities of sportsmanship and character-building to this all-too-romanticized medium of American life. On the other hand, certain modern “exposés” by athlete-scribes such as Bouton, Meggyesy, and Scott¹ may lead one to believe sport is nothing more than an arena for masochistic self-indulgence.

For the average performer, sport is probably a little of both. Few writers have dealt directly with the issues that affect the central core of an athlete’s experiences. For example, few have asked whether or how sport contributes to the development of a self-image. Few have realistically inquired if athletes tend to become alienated from their own societal normative structure due to apparent inconsistencies in values associated with sport as a sub-culture. And few scholars have asked if the expectations of the performer and the coach are internally consistent, and, concomitantly, whether such expectations result in what could be described as “personal fulfillment.”

I

THE FUNCTION OF RULES

It would appear that the rules which govern certain sports, such as surfing, are like those governing classical ballet—they grow out of the *function* of the human body in relation to the task, rather than out of a need to create and regulate a contest. When one is concerned about that contest attracting spectators, rules assume a much different function and are likely to be, in Sartrean language, “removed from the person.” The rules not only must create and regulate a given contest, but they must do so in a manner that makes it “appealing” to the intended audience.

In some sports, the rules have predictably developed to reflect values of those who will be spectators, and subordination of the athlete’s self-expression becomes

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¹ See J. BOUTON, *BALL FOUR* (1970); D. MEGGYESY, *OUT OF THEIR LEAGUE* (1970); J. SCOTT, *THE ATHLETIC REVOLUTION* (1971).

increasingly apparent in the rule-making process. Edgar Friedenberg, the noted sociologist, has pointed to basketball, often referred to as the "native American sport," as an example of an abstract parody of American middle-class life.² He has postulated that basketball reveals the quality of America as an adolescent nation. Through its temperament and its vividness, it mirrors the "Pepsi generation." Friedenberg has asked "How else can one dramatize so effectively our *legalism* [emphasis added]—the intricate web of regulations, among which we live, and upon which we climb?" Who but contemporary Americans could have designed a sport in which status changes so quickly that no lead can be considered commanding until the last few seconds of play, and in which the officials run back and forth like agitated ferrets looking for breaches of regulations? Furthermore, Friedenberg points out that basketball rules, in fact, affect the game quite differently from the way in which rules operate in most other sports. In football, for example, the actions defined as "illegal" generally either disrupt the game, as in the case of off-side or holding penalties, or are dangerous to the players, as with clipping or unnecessary roughness penalties, and the sanctions imposed are genuinely intended to discourage illegal play. However, the basketball player, or certainly the coach, responds to the rules of his game as a business executive does to the Internal Revenue Code. He wins, not by obeying them, but by conveniently balancing the penalties risked by each violation against a strategic advantage which might be gained. In basketball, a deliberate foul might be committed so as to interrupt a scoring drive by the team in possession, thus giving that team a chance to lead by only one point instead of two and enabling the offending team to gain possession of the ball on more favorable terms. It is interesting to note that the rules which governed the National Basketball Association in its 1971-72 season were disrupted by the practice of "giving" a foul. Youth throughout the nation were constantly reminded that it was *acceptable* to foul, providing it was to your advantage! The question became not one of "doing a wrong," but rather one of "balancing hardships." Finally, the wizards of basketball regulations recognized that the game was no longer palatable, and in the 1972 Regulations provision was made for a mechanism by which this practice was, hopefully, to be eliminated. Of course, in no way were the rules altered because of "fairness," but rather because of spectator boredom. And sport was again made to conform to the dictates of economic advantage.

II

INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL OF ATHLETICS

It must be noted that aggression and exuberance are necessary for success in sport. Yet, it is precisely this vitality that social institutions, such as the schools, are designed to control, if not stifle. Traditionally, schools have been the very institutions in which exuberance has been regarded as a threat to good order and good

² See H. SLUSHER, *MAN, SPORT AND EXISTENCE* viii-ix (1967).

judgment. Athletic activity channeled into organized sport is understandably dominated by the very authorities who dominate the disciplinary actions of the schools. Thus, it is not surprising that sport is administered in such a way as to deprive the individual participant of a sense of himself as an aggressor. It is not unusual that the behavior of many high school athletic coaches, reflecting the rigidity and straightness of the general educational pattern, is not merely repressive, but counter-productive.

Traditionally, it is the gym teacher who becomes the school disciplinarian. It is he who assumes the role of father. It is he who is often appointed "Dean of Men," the euphemistic title for school bouncer and enforcer. It is he who snarls at the aggressive youngster and who puts down the trouble-makers. It is he, among the teachers, who shows the most hostility to boys with long hair, mod dress, and beads. It is he who will do anything to make certain the school is run in an "orderly" manner. Furthermore, the deanship is often a stepping-stone to the coveted principalship. In surprising numbers, these men bring to school administration the spirit of the informal Napoleonic Martinet. They are superficially jolly on the outside, but intolerant of spirit in young people, especially in athletics. Generally speaking, sport, as a social institution, is hostile to the very values of spirit and self-determination it stresses.

It is not surprising that the men who administer sport look to the Greek ideal, as personified by the Olympic Games, as the highest achievement of man. Greek sculpture, Greek games, and Greek sports were dedicated to the glorification of the body. In addition, Greek life was so man-centered that religion was anthropomorphic.³ Furthermore, the games were elitist, rather than democratic. Only the "best" performed. This great tradition of attempting to bifurcate human existence was extended by the coming of Christianity. The body becomes stigmatized, and is held almost to be sin, in and of itself. Perhaps, it is not simply symbolic that the body is to be mortified. The soul is deemed significant, while the body is but a base of support.

In our present day, we see the student as almost schizoid in his relationship between body and soul. He goes through an educational experience which stresses academic and non-academic subjects. He is told of curricular and "extra-curricular" activities (not *co-curricular*). Most importantly, he is reminded that the "mind-related" subjects are superior to the "body activities."

III

THE REASON FOR SPORT

Most of those involved in the institutionalization of sport have never really inquired into what it is that motivates the performer to make the sacrifices related to sports participation. Even among the few who have pursued this basic inquiry,

³ See Batt, *They Shoot Horses Don't They?: An Essay on the Scotoma of One-Eyed Kings*, 15 U.C.L.A.L. Rev. 510, 533 (1968).

the answer often suggested is that sports participation is a response to an otherwise unfulfilled human need for activity and outlet that is so basic to human existence that not even language can bring it to the surface. Most cultures have become aware of these needs in the form of dance. However, individual activity in sport might well be communicating a truly profound message which is often overlooked by even the most sensitive of the coaching fraternity.

What is being communicated by the "noises" of sport? The phenomena indigenous to most sport forms typically yield, as a consequence of self-discovery, anger and estrangement. Much has been written about the cruelty and the loneliness of certain sport forms; however, it is interesting to note that formal research efforts in this area have not been abundant, and at this point, little can be postulated as to the reasons that make the athlete extend beyond "the social forces" which lead him to the contest.

The performer who places a high premium on individual self-discovery will probably shy away from regulatory controls. Thus, the questions of authenticity and independence are not *inherently* tied down by social norms in many performers. Yet, they do become compromises with the social order, an approach which is probably not a viable solution to the ultimate problems faced by the performer. In a word, life for the participant becomes bearable because that is "the name of the game." And resultingly man plays, but without much meaning. For so many, it just does not make a real difference.

It has been the writer's observation that the sobriety of many athletes leads to decisions which weigh heavily on the performer's mind. He feels the emotions of shame and anxiety stemming from guilt. His guilt is real—he knows the sport he chose is constantly in the process of valuing contrivances; yet, he cannot, really, accept anarchy; nor can he, really, accept any true radical approach.⁴ He is too much a product of the most routinized of all sub-structures. How many performers can truly respond in a manner described by this fifteen-year old athlete?

Well, I think there is no feeling quite like running down the track, or something, and winning. Or, going out on the football field and suddenly deciding you like this, and you do it and you feel kind of crazy. Like I was in a game last year, and we lost by a very bad score, but in the midst of it, I was, seemed to be, having a fairly good day. And, I just felt light-headed, and I just didn't play—I played for the heck of it, for the fun of it, because I just wanted to. . . . And I'd go back to the huddle and I'd be dying laughing, and they'd think I was crazy, but I enjoyed it and it was just, I couldn't stop it, and, I mean, after the game was over I felt terrible because we lost so bad. But during the game it was just this feeling of exuberance; I was having fun and nothing much could do anything about it, you know? . . . But after the game I was not so happy, because we lost so badly. And that's the thing, when you're not realizing it, you're not really trying to think about it; you just know you are enjoying what you are doing right now. I just enjoyed it. And I don't see how, I mean we were getting schmeared all over the field.

⁴ See Brown, *Jeepers! Peepers Is In Charge Now*, SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, Oct. 23, 1972, at 40.

In a sense, it is unusual to attach a priority to this form of emotion, wherein the formalization of the sport, rather naively, is attempted to be overcome. Yet, when the player is confronted with himself, he will likely find that it is this emotion, or at least a search for this emotion, which provided the motivation for his participation. This thought was recently captured by Will Hetzel, a most successful basketball player at the University of Maryland, when he said

[P]layground games are so much more fun than college games. The people on the playground are playing primarily for the enjoyment of the physical activity, and that's what athletics should be all about Athletics can be such a beautiful thing, it's a shame to have to keep score.⁵

IV

A RIGHT TO EXPRESSION IN SPORTS

In Thomas Emerson's *Toward a General Theory of the First Amendment*, the scholar notes that:

The essence of a system of freedom of expression lies in the distinction between expression and action. The whole theory rests upon the general proposition that expression must be free and unrestrained.

It would seem unlikely that school administrators have read Emerson's words. Athletes continue to be dismissed from school teams because of length of hair, personal appearance, and other forms of expression that would be difficult to categorize as "harmful" to others. However, what is unusual is that the courts have often upheld the school authorities without even the briefest mention of analogous decisions.⁶ They have failed to view sport as a mode of expression *in itself* or, in the alternative, to protect forms of expression *associated with* the sporting contest. Similarly, while it would appear that the coach has no right to interfere with the student's personal and social life, the courts have often avoided disrupting the established system by indicating that individual schools and athletic boards can make decisions that are within "their province."⁷

It is likely that we will see an increased participation in sport forms which afford individuals the opportunity to test their own limits and explore individualized paths of personal fulfillment—in a word, to express themselves absent external dictatorial practices. One can hope that the courts will be a positive force in this direction. The application of the first amendment and procedural and substantive due process theories may go a long way in facilitating a mechanism wherein trust will become as important as sacrifice and sportsmanship. However, for this to occur, it is necessary that athletes come to know one another and their coaches in a manner which does not reflect a feeling of *in loco parentis* with its concomitant disciplinary ramifications. Rather, the relationship must be characterized by a student-teacher relation-

⁵ J. SCOTT, *supra* note 1, at 67.

⁶ See, e.g., *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).

⁷ See, e.g., *Robinson v. Illinois High School Ass'n*, 45 Ill. App. 2d 277, 195 N.E.2d 38 (1963); *State ex rel. Ging v. Board of Educ.*, 213 Minn. 550, 7 N.W.2d 544 (1942).

ship—where *both* can grow as they become *aware* of each other's needs. One can only hope that a theory of "expression" as developed by the courts will extend to the field and to the gymnasium.

Trust brings upon personal liberation. Since trust is probably facilitated in solitary activities, it is possible to think that society will increasingly turn to sport modes that provide liberation rather than restriction. Accordingly, there may be an increasing awareness that one has the *right* to satisfy one's emotional needs and private expressions within the sports mode, and this right may well be one of the chief reservoirs for educational development in the next decade.

This prognosis might appear unusual to some. Sport has always been symbolized by group values—team work, promise, sacrifice, and cooperation. These have been its trademarks. Yet, the awareness of some blacks, as demonstrated by the Olympic boycotts and similar situations, in realizing that sport has simply "used" their abilities is nothing more than an expression of distrust. Specifically, the claim is that their skills and talents were exploited, and the wholeness of their being as men was not recognized. It is understandable that blacks have turned their proficiencies into weapons. Today, while the need is still present, the overt acts must be expressed, not only by blacks, but by men of all colors. It is this expression that, theoretically, is guaranteed by the Constitution. Yet, when one looks for specific cases on point, there is not only an absence of agreement, but not a single case which characterizes this basic element of expression in sport.

History may well reveal that one of the most important functions of modern day sport is to surface the anger reaction in an evolutionary activity. The athlete, in his search for dignity and responsibility, recognizes that sport provides a solitary environment through which his needs can be actualized. Thus, as the athlete rediscovers and redefines the "group" experience, which is so much a part of sport, he will be faced with the problem of rediscovering and redefining the self. And, this is what "it" is all about.

CONCLUSION

The institution of sport has not been naive to the decision-making process. But the literature has constantly spoken in terms of decisions made *during* performance and, thereby, avoided the fundamental issue of initial choice within the social setting. It can be hoped that the courts, when presented with the opportunity, will see the balance in decision-making responsibility swing from the institutions removed from the individual, to the individual—as dictated by the first and fourteenth amendments. In language of the day, sport will be less a media for behavioral control and will become more a mechanism for dialogue. The attempt will be to articulate and to cope with the tensions which are set up by men as they seek to work their way toward an increasing form of liberation of their own capacities. It is toward this objective that the real opportunity to freely express one's self with one's body might well be considered.