

Why sports morally matter

william j. morgan

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Why Sports Morally Matter

When we accept that advertisers and sponsors dictate athletic schedules, that success in sport is measured by revenue, that athletes' loyalty lies with their commercial agents instead of their teams and that game rules exist to be tested and broken in the pursuit of a win, what does our regard for sport say about the moral and political well-being of our society?

Why Sports Morally Matter is a deeply critical examination of pressing ethical issues in sports – and in society as a whole. Exploring the historical context of modern ethical America, William J. Morgan argues that the current state of sport is a powerful indictment of our wealth-riven society and hyper-individualistic way of life.

Taking on critics from all sides of the political debate, Morgan makes the case that, despite the negating effect of free market values, sports still possess important features that encourage social, moral and political values crucial to the flourishing of a democratic polity. It is this potential to transform society and the individual that makes sports a key battleground in the struggle for the moral soul of contemporary America.

Why Sports Morally Matter represents an important contribution to the ongoing debate about the role of sports in society. For students and researchers working in sport studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and for anyone who cares seriously about sports, this is an essential text.

William J. Morgan is Professor in Sport and Exercise Humanities and Cultural Studies at the Ohio State University, Columbus. He has written widely on the ethics and philosophy of sport, on social and political philosophy and on critical social theory. He is the author of *Leftist Theories of Sport* and former editor of the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*.

Routledge Critical Studies in Sport

Series editors Jennifer Hargreaves and Ian McDonald

University of Brighton

The Routledge Critical Studies in Sport series aims to lead the way in developing the multi-disciplinary field of Sport Studies by producing books that are interrogative, interventionist and innovative. By providing theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded texts, the series will make sense of the changes and challenges facing sport globally. The series aspires to maintain the commitment and promise of the critical paradigm by contributing to a more inclusive and less exploitative culture of sport.

For Susan, Jennifer, and Melanie

Series editors' preface

It is often said that the most useful exchanges at academic conferences take place outside of the formal program of plenary speakers and PowerPoint presentations. In what is widely known as 'networking', an unfortunate term imported from the business world, it is in the informal social gatherings tucked away in the spaces around the conference venue that the most productive discussions are usually held. This was certainly the case at the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport conference in Tucson, Arizona in 2004. Not that this conference was lacking in engaging and interesting papers, but it was during discussions over lunch and coffee that we met William Morgan and came to know about a book he was writing on morality and sports. As a term, morality has tended to be claimed as the preserve of the political right and sport romantics. Morgan contests any such associations, provoking us to challenge our own complacent acceptance of dominant discourses. And as Morgan spoke passionately and persuasively about his latest project, to catalogue and analyse the decline of morality in American life which is writ large in contemporary American sports, and to insist on the importance of moral considerations in sporting matters today, it was immediately clear that this was the kind of text that needed to be included in the Routledge Critical Studies in Sport series.

Why Sports Morally Matter draws on philosophical discourse to offer an immanent critique of contemporary American sports. Morgan offers an innovative analysis since it raises ethical and social issues about sport in the context of a social-historical account of the Progressive movement and its heirs. As such it is not simply an argument concerning the philosophy of sport, but more importantly for us as series editors, the political philosophy of sports. Thus, *Why Sports Morally Matter* is not a nostalgic yearning for a mythical era of a moral sport, still less is it a conservative rant at the apparent decline of ethical considerations. Rather, it stands as an important contribution to criticism from the left of the corruptive effects of extending the sphere of markets too far into the sphere of (sporting) culture. However, building on his criticism of the left's disdain for the popular appeal of sport, most fully articulated in *Leftist Theories of Sport*, Morgan constructs a defense of the ethical power and richness of sport as a social practice. Unlike many leftist commentators, Morgan is not dismissive of the social obsession with sport, indeed he comments that "there is no reason

to bemoan Americans' enthusiasm for sports especially at their best, since such enthusiasm is not only fully justified but a possible harbinger of good things to come". In the best tradition of social criticism, *Why Sports Morally Matter* outlines the redemptive power of contemporary sports.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Morgan's analysis and prognosis is a matter of great consequence for the critical sociology of sport irrespective of which country the reader comes from. While focused on American sports, Morgan's thesis transcends its geographical specificity. *Why Sports Morally Matter* poses key questions for our time and reflects the rationale of the Routledge Critical Studies of Sport series. The guiding philosophy for the series can be summarized as:

- Interrogative: challenging common sense ideas and exposing relations of power in the world of sport.
- Interventionist: highlighting the relationship between theory and practice and providing arguments and analyses of topical and polemical issues
- Innovative: seeking to develop new areas of research, and stimulating new ways of thinking about and studying sport.

A key aspect of the series is to make sense of the changes and controversial developments that are transforming the ways in which sport is experienced and understood. Many of the old ideas about sport embracing 'noble' and 'educational' values, offering disadvantaged peoples 'a way out', bringing nations closer together, or creating healthy bodies seem increasingly to lack credibility. In particular, there are widespread concerns that economic and political forces are becoming too influential and are distorting the role and place of sport in societies across the world. William Morgan, one of the most highly respected authors in the field of sports philosophy, directly addresses all of these issues. *Why Sports Morally Matter* is a compelling polemic that demands to be read and accounted for by anyone seriously interested in the problems and potential of modern sport.

Jennifer Hargreaves and Ian McDonald
(University of Brighton)

Preface

In his path-breaking book *After Virtue* (1984), Alasdair MacIntyre famously claimed that every moral theory and scheme of moral beliefs presupposes a sociology. Many of his contemporary moral theorists took issue with his claim, insisting instead that our deepest moral problems arise independently of our social circumstances rather than sensibly extending his claim to read that every morality presupposes not only a sociology but a history and psychology as well. Their objection is a testament to their own obtuseness rather than an indictment of MacIntyre's claim. For it seems as plain as day that both our moral difficulties and their possible resolution are intimately bound up with our social and historical circumstances, with the kinds of lives they render possible and incline us to live. Fortunately, there are encouraging signs of late that contemporary moral theorists are finally – if slowly – coming around to accept such a socially and historically embedded view of the moral life.

However, the more important point I seek to press here, a point I feature as the central argument of my book, is that the present sociology that informs morality in contemporary America imperils the moral life, indeed, makes it difficult for people even to think in moral terms. And I argue that this story of the decline of moral life is writ large in contemporary American sports. Sports in this case, I argue further, are no mere reflection of larger society's growing indifference to moral considerations but, in part because of their prominent standing in contemporary society, both a conspicuous exemplification of such moral callousness and an important sign of things to come. As such, the attack on the moral life waged within their precincts is a high-stakes one that we can ill afford to ignore – if only because the stories that we Americans tell about ourselves would lose much of their resonance, their capacity to unite and move us, if moral considerations no longer figured in them.

The impetus to write this book came in part from students enrolled in my sport ethics classes during the last few years, in particular from a noticeable coarsening of their attitude regarding moral considerations of sports. At first, I found their resistance to moral treatments of sports merely curious, but I soon came to regard it as deeply troubling. In particular, what grabbed my attention was their almost visceral rejection of any claim that one should adhere at least to some subset of rules when participating in sports because of considerations of fair play or of

basic human decency owed to others. This recalcitrance to accord one's peers in sports practically any moral standing was especially worrying to me: my ethics class, as I was acutely aware, was the only class that most of them would take in their undergraduate programs and would touch on these matters, and because it wasn't so very long ago that many of my students found these very same claims persuasive, not just intellectually persuasive but practically persuasive. In other words, these previous students were prepared not only to believe that there is something morally crass about breaking rules to advance one's own self-interests but to act on such moral considerations. Of course, I would be the last to claim that our class discussions of moral issues directly transferred over to their actual sporting lives, but that was the clear impression most of them gave me.

No matter how much I prodded my more recent students, however, and forcefully pressed them to consider how they or their offspring would like it if they were similarly treated as mere instruments of someone else's egoistic desires (which is what self-interested rule breaking and rule bending come down to), I continued to run into a brick wall. Just as I thought I was losing my grip – a worry that, having recently reached middle-age, I didn't need reinforced by obstreperous students – I alighted on the idea of using case-studies to illuminate the arguments discussed in class. I reasoned that because the students were probably less disposed to abstract-sounding arguments regarding the moral rectitude of rule following than I, reared as they were, as I was not, on a steady diet of vivid visual images furnished by the likes of MTV, video games, and computers, fortifying these arguments with dramatic real-life examples of exemplary athletic moral conduct would get them over the hump, would help them to see firsthand the importance of leading a morally reflective athletic life.

In this regard, one of the first examples of morally upstanding sporting conduct I came across, which continues to be one of my favorites, concerned a 1967 German international tennis championship between Hungarian player Istvan Gulyas and his Czech opponent, Kukal. The closely contested match had come down to the fifth and final deciding set with the score tied. With the match still undecided, Kukal suddenly collapsed on court with a severe cramp. Gulyas immediately came to his aid and helped him to his feet, but after a short rest, Kukal was still hampered by the cramp and unable to play. At this point, strict enforcement of the rules would dictate that Gulyas be declared the winner by forfeit. Undaunted by this technicality, Gulyas petitioned the umpire to defer his decision and to call for a doctor. The umpire agreed, and after receiving medical attention, Kukal was not only able to resume play but went on to win the match.

Moved as I was by Gulyas's unselfish example, by his display of moral respect for both his opponent and the game itself, I was sure that my students would find his conduct morally uplifting as well. I could not have been more wrong. Most of them came to class with their minds already made up that Gulyas had done the wrong thing and that he had not only impugned the authority of the umpire but undermined the integrity of the match as well. Stunned, I asked them why they were judging Gulyas so harshly, reminding them, as is my custom, that I only

wanted to hear their reasons, not their unadorned opinions, their gut feelings of approval or disapproval.

The first objection raised was reasonable enough: a student argued that Gulyas was the more superbly conditioned of the two athletes, as evidenced by the fact that his opponent suffered a cramp as a result of Gulyas's blistering play. Hence, the student validly concluded, Gulyas should have accepted the victory with no questions asked. As we turned this claim over in class, though, it became apparent that it rested on a dubious empirical assumption. The fact was, as other students duly noted, we cannot at all be sure Kukal came down with the cramp because he was less fit, as cramps can happen even to the most fit of people, including those who pay scrupulous attention to their fluid intake. Besides, it was further noted, Kukal was an elite professional tennis player, and any suggestion that he was less conditioned than his counterparts seemed suspicious on its face, especially in the absence of any corroborating evidence. At this point, I could tell by the looks on my students' faces that they concurred.

Satisfied that we were making some headway in defending Gulyas's conduct, I was not prepared for what happened next. A student shot up her hand and blurted out that Gulyas should be morally rebuked for his actions because he had deliberately broken a rule. "What rule was that," I asked in amazement. The student quickly replied, "The rule governing the length of time allowed players to recover from injuries or traumas suffered on the court." "But," I retorted, "he consulted the relevant game authority, the umpire, who was evidently persuaded that it was in the best interest of the game and all concerned that, if at all possible, the match be continued." However, the student remained undaunted, and she was not alone as the students squirming uncomfortably in their chairs made all too clear to me. I then threw out the claim that the time rule in question was surely not a very important rule of tennis and that it certainly did not qualify as one of its constitutive rules that must, no matter the circumstance, always be observed. Again, the student in question remained adamant in her view that Gulyas had done something wrong, and now just about all the students in class were nodding their heads in agreement.

Frustrated, but still determined, I offered what I thought was my strongest rebuttal: isn't it a rather striking contradiction that most of you were quick to reprimand Gulyas for breaking a rule but that in our previous discussions of the morality of rule observance, just about the whole lot of you were just as quick to say there was nothing really wrong with breaking a rule as long as you didn't get caught (and the problem with getting caught was not a moral one requiring appropriate moral redress but a bonehead, strategic one requiring those caught to fess up to their own stupidity in being found out). To this, the students replied, as they had before when we discussed these matters, that it was the job of the referees to ensure that those who break rules are caught and punished, which, they therefore concluded, this time invalidly, relieved them of any moral responsibility for complying with the rules. When I replied this was more a cop out, an excuse to further their own self-interests, than a defensible justification of rule breaking, their eyes glassed over. They were not

in the least convinced and were increasingly skeptical of every word I uttered in Gulyas's defense.

To say the least, the first time that this happened in class, I was taken aback, not to mention dispirited. I was taken aback because, to reiterate, I never dreamed that my students would react this way; I was dispirited because my idea to use examples to stir their reflective juices was an obvious and resounding failure and because I could not fathom why they were put off rather than inspired by Gulyas's example.

However, when I started getting much the same reasons and answers in semester after semester, my disappointment turned into hard-boiled cynicism. Contributing to my growing cynicism was my gradual realization that what was happening in class was that the moral examples I was bringing into class were falling on deaf ears for the same reason that the moral arguments I earlier and successfully interjected into our class discussions had fallen of late on deaf ears: the students were simply not morally engaging with them. To be sure, they were just as polite, bright, and studious as their predecessors, but what had changed was their willingness or capacity (or both) to consider sports from a moral angle. So, instead of considering the effects of their actions on others and on the game itself or, what is the same thing, reversing roles and putting themselves in someone else's shoes, they were playing a cost-benefit language game in which the objective was to further their own preferences and desires. This explains their otherwise contradictory regard for the rules in the aforementioned discussion. For what removes the contradiction of claiming one has no moral responsibility to abide by the rules and condemning someone for breaking them is the calculus of self-interest. That is, what the students were really saying is that rules should be viewed and treated as egoistic devices, which means that we should follow them when it is in our self-interest to do so and break them when it is not. Gulyas's failing, then, was not so much that he broke a rule but that he did so for the wrong reason. Because the students' only apparent vocabulary for evaluating actions in sports was in terms of their positive (benefits) or negative (costs) affect on the aims and desires of the individuals who play them, Gulyas's strategic misuse of the rules was mistakenly branded as a moral failure. This brings us back exactly to where we started: the students' unwillingness or incapacity to view sports from a moral vantage point.

Of course, it occurred to me that my students' supposed resistance to moral considerations in sporting matters or, to put the same point otherwise, their conflation of egoistic calculation and moral reflection was not really resistance at all but a consequence of my own shortcomings as a teacher, my inability to get them to think morally. However, the more I thought about it, the more I was convinced that something much larger and more important was going on here than my evident failings as a teacher. For I had to admit that my students' reticence to take up sports morally was, as far as I could tell, equally true of their adult counterparts, which takes in practically the entire world of sports: those who play, finance, govern, and watch them, as well as those who report and comment on them in the media. In all these cases, moral considerations of sports were

clearly and regularly trumped by considerations of athletic success and failure narrowly construed as winning and losing.

It was also clear to me that what was happening morally inside sports was also happening morally outside them in the larger social world. It was not for nothing, after all, that Christopher Lasch in his wide-ranging critique of contemporary American culture dubbed it the *culture of narcissism*, which, so as not to leave any doubt about his unsparing assessment of the American scene, doubled as the title of his book. Narcissism on this scale, it hardly needs to be said, is not especially a cultural brew favorable to a moral life. It was also not for nothing, however, that Lasch's indictment of narcissistic America pointed us back to sports, which he fingered as one of the contributing causal forces. However, if sports were on Lasch's account part of the moral problem, they were also, interestingly enough, on his same account, part of the solution. For in spite of their obvious moral shortcomings, he insisted that there was something morally ennobling about sports (among other things, their adherence to clear standards of excellence and conduct), which offered hope, he thought, not only for their eventual moral rehabilitation but as well for the moral rehabilitation of America itself. Of course, what seems so striking about these claims today, written as they were some quarter of a century ago, is how incongruous they appear to everything that is presently going on in sports.

So, thus it was that my student's resistance to moral considerations of sports provoked me to further reflection, which, in turn, led me to write this book. In particular, they prompted the following series of tantalizing questions all bound up with one another in more or less complicated ways: why is it, exactly, that we Americans find it difficult even to contemplate sports in moral terms? Why does Lasch's hopeful moral reading of them today seem at best quaint and at worse wishful if not self-deluded thinking? What causal forces are responsible for this apparent demoralization of sports and American society? Which way do the causal vectors run: from sports to society or vice versa or in both directions? Finally, and in a somewhat different vein, when did sports and America lose their moral soul – from their very institutionalization in American life in the middle and later parts of the nineteenth century, as many critics claim, or sometime in the latter part of the twentieth century, as Lasch and other critics claim?

My intent in this book, then, is to try to give some clear and illuminating answers to these important questions. In the course of doing so, I try as well to give credence to the hope expressed in my title: that sports morally matter as much now and perhaps even more than they did in the important Progressive period of American history, which is the main and recurrent theme of the chapters to come.

Acknowledgments

I thank first my undergraduate students, whose recalcitrance even to think about sports in moral terms – something that I discuss in greater detail in the Preface – got me to thinking about why. Second, I thank the graduate students in a seminar I conducted last year, in which I first tried out some of the central ideas discussed in this book. I learned a lot from both these groups of students, and they helped to shape the book into the form in which it now appears.

My knowledge of and interest in the Progressive movement and its treatment of sport is owed to Mark Dyerson's fine book, *Making the American Team: Sport, Culture and the Olympic Experience*. It was from reading Dyerson's book that I first learned how important sports were to Progressive-minded reformers and how sophisticated an understanding of sports many of them had. I am indebted to Dyerson also for sending me copies of articles from *Outing* and other journals of that ilk containing many of the writings of Progressives on sports, articles that I could not locate in my own university library.

I would be remiss if I did not thank as well my wonderful colleagues at Ohio State University, Mel Adelman and Sarah Fields, both of whom encouraged my interest in this project and were willing to discuss my ideas with me. They also created a stimulating intellectual environment in which to think and write about sports in a serious and critical vein.

I further acknowledge Samantha Grant, editor of Sports Studies books at Routledge, and her editorial assistant, Kate Manson, for their encouragement and help along the way. Samantha is the best editor I or anyone else could hope for, always enthusiastic and never too busy to respond to my queries, even the inane ones. Kate is also a delight to work with and has kept me fully informed about what I needed to do at each stage of the publication of this book.

Finally, I thank the editors of the Routledge Critical Studies in Sport series, Jennifer Hargreaves and Ian McDonald. My main contact has been with Ian, who convinced me that my book was a good fit for the series and has been supportive of this project from the get-go. However, I thank *both* for seeing fit to put my book in their first-rate series.

Of course, I am obliged to say at this point, as all authors are, that I am fully responsible for the ideas that appear here and, therefore, for any errors or less-than-stellar arguments evident in the text. So, I am entirely to blame for whatever

is wrong with this book. I only wish I could say the same for whatever the book's strengths might be – that is, that I am wholly responsible for them as well – but that would be a lie and thus an especially bad way to start a book that focuses on ethics and claims to be interested in the moral failings of modern sports and how they might be rectified.

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Introduction

Imagine a society racked by a huge and growing gulf between the rich and poor. The gulf is so deep and wide that neither of these groups shares anything in common with the other anymore, which means that the social and political divisions of this society are as pronounced as those of its economics. A society so constituted, of course, would have little reason to encourage other-regarding sentiments or actions (or both), as it can point to no common good to orient its actions in this manner. This would explain, among other things, why its affluent members would not in the least be disposed politically to let themselves be taxed to support the growing underclass of the poor or to be coaxed morally, by their few remaining responsible – and therefore marginalized – members and intellectual minions to pay their employees a “living wage” so that they might enjoy a decent standard of living. In a very real sense, then, this is a society in name only, because the weak associational ties that hold it together have no real binding political or moral force. If anything, these ties leave individuals dangling to fend for themselves, so much so that any egalitarian complaint that these free-floating individuals at very least should be treated fairly (i.e., begin their solipsistic pursuits of the good life from the same starting line) would likely be dismissed as mere radical twaddle.

Now, the reason why we contemporary Americans have no difficulty in conjuring up such a disturbingly fractured social order is that it is a fairly accurate description of our own highly fractured, egocentrically riven society. What is more, the image of such a society could also easily double as a more-than-passable description of American society at the turn of the twentieth century, similarly plagued by a great and ever-growing disparity between the rich and poor.¹ The fact that a large and complex country such as ours has experienced economic inequality on this scale before is not especially remarkable, particularly because the causal forces responsible for each differed in important respects. However, what is truly remarkable, I think, is the widely divergent way in which we contemporary Americans have so far responded to this crisis as compared to our forebears. For our earlier peers, or at least for a goodly number of them, looked morally askance at this skewed distribution of wealth and set in motion a social movement called *Progressivism* to remedy it, a movement that, among other things, argued that the market must be morally reined in and that a new relationship between the