



PHILOSOPHY OF
SPORT

INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY

ALUN HARDMAN AND CARWYN JONES

Philosophy of Sport:
International Perspectives

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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Philosophy of Sport

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INTRODUCTION

PHILOSOPHY OF SPORT: GLOBAL ISSUES FROM AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

ALUN HARDMAN AND CARWYN JONES

As an academic discipline, the philosophy of sport has been in existence for a relatively short period of time—about fifty years.¹ However, if we think that sport viewed from a philosophical perspective entails the explicit examination of its inherent qualities, then in one sense, the philosophical study of sport is as old as sport itself. Other sub-disciplinary perspectives on sport can be viewed in the same way—physics, biology, and psychology are all inherently connected to sporting performance and were so long before they became areas of specialised academic interest for biomechanists, physiologists or sports psychologists, etc., who now inhabit university research laboratories.

Though the philosophy of sport as an academic endeavour is relatively embryonic, a philosophical view of sport is not new even. When the ancient Greeks strove to ensure that their Olympians were able to perform at their peak, equal importance was placed on critically examining the nature, purpose and value that sport and physical activity played in Greek life. The Greeks were particularly concerned with how practising such activities was pleasing to the gods. So we can see in the works of early philosophers such as Plato, and Aristotle, signs that sports as a cultural phenomenon raises important questions that are philosophical in nature.

And now in current times, despite the fact that the formal academic study of sport has a compartmentalised focus on technical performance, philosophy continues to provide an alternative critical avenue to conceive of sport. To a large extent then, whilst much of what is studied in relation to sport focuses on the *techné* or ‘know-how,’ which allows for implementing

more effective means for improving generally unquestioned ends—philosophy considers sport in terms of *eudaimonia*—its overall good, value or virtue.

The philosopher's role and the importance of a philosophical outlook on sport cannot be underestimated. The two central processes that preoccupy the philosophic approach are those of clarification and justification. Philosophers then, ask two central questions, "What do you mean?" and "How do you know?" In the context of sport, matters of clarification ("what do you mean?") are relevant for examining matters of fact, or the nature of the object or phenomenon of interest to the philosopher. As with other aspects of critical enquiry, such clarification will involve the presentation and examination of relevant information in ways that are appropriate to the discipline of philosophy. Clear and logical conceptual argumentation is essential for this task in order to arrive at a position where those engaged in philosophical work can agree effectively, or at least have an understanding as to where they disagree on matters of philosophical interest. An example of such philosophical clarification work has been central to foundational treatises on the nature of the concepts of play, game and sport in the early philosophical scholarship on sport.²

In the context of philosophy, matters of justification ("how do you know?") inhabit the inherent greyness of normativity—the great swathe of human knowledge and understanding that lies in between the substantially smaller domains of objective certainty and subjective preference. For many philosophers then, truth and knowledge does not have the logical certainty of mathematical concepts (such as $2 + 2 = 4$) or that of natural science (such as the existence of gravity). Nor is philosophical truth a matter of personal like or dislike (such as one's preferred flavour of ice-cream). Instead, what constitutes philosophical knowledge is marked by how the clarity and astuteness of argument and reasoning stands in relation to competing and alternative arguments and reasoning. As such, the normative domain involves persuasion and debate, where it is those arguments and reasoning that come to be accepted as the best arguments and reasoning, that hold sway over peoples beliefs and values.

The philosophical study of sport, in terms of methodological approach then, mirrors philosophical study elsewhere except that the central focus that binds scholars (somewhat loosely) together coalesce around a shared interest in the social practice of sport. As with the philosophy of

education, the philosophy of law, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of religion, the philosophy of sport has emerged as a discrete philosophical sub-discipline in its own right. Within the sub-discipline a number of central philosophical questions have interested the majority of scholars. Of greatest interest are issue of an ethical nature where the moral conduct and behaviour of sportsmen and women and the overall moral atmosphere of sport is examined and evaluated in relation to a number of enduring and novel issues. Many readers will be familiar with ethical debates about the rightness or wrongness of using performance enhancing substances, the importance of fair play, and concerns that various sports participants have regarding justice and equity for sports participation. The enduring popularity of these issues reflect the view of French philosopher, Albert Camus who states that from sport “I learned all I knew about ethics.” Other philosophical interests include debates about the meaning and value of sport, its nature, its existensial significance and its aesthetic qualities. Sport therefore gives rise to a broad range of philosophical questions which are reflected in this book. Collectively, the intent is that they provide both further insight into the intriguing world of sport, but in addition provides the means by which sport further reflects and informs our understanding of life in general

The original idea for this book emerged following 36th meeting of the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport (IAPS) held at Tokyo Metropolitan University in 2008. IAPS was established in 1972 as the Philosophic Society for the Study of Sport and later in 1999 changed its name to IAPS. The organization is committed to stimulate, encourage, and promote research, scholarship, and teaching in the philosophy of sport and related practices. IAPS members are found all over the world and constitute a growing and vibrant international community of scholars and teachers. IAPS’ main publication is the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, which is widely acknowledged as the most respected medium for communicating contemporary philosophic thought with regard to sport. This publication provides scholars who presented at that meeting a further opportunity to disseminate their work to a broader readership.

The book is divided into five parts which broadly reflect a number of themes shared by the contributing authors. The first section concerns questions related to the nature of play games and sport, the second examines the artistic, aesthetic and spiritual aspects of sport. Section three explores the relationships between sporting activity and human physical embodiment. Section four presents a number of ethical issues in sport and

the fifth and final section addresses the relationship between philosophy and internationalisation.

The contributions reflect the eclectic and geographically diverse membership of IAPS, with authors from seven countries and three continents.

Notes

¹ For a comprehensive account of the history of the philosophy of sport see Scott Kretchmar's "Philosophy of Sport," in John Messing and Richard Swanson (eds.) *The History of Exercise and Sport Science*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, (1997): 181-202.

² In particular, the work of Bernard Suits in *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978 provides the cornerstone of much early scholarship in the philosophy of sport.

PART I:

THE NATURE OF SPORT, PLAY AND GAMES

CHAPTER ONE

THINKING SMALL ABOUT SPORT: A PHILOSOPHICAL RECOVERY OF MORAL LEADERSHIP

TIM ELCOMBE

Discussion revolving around leadership inundated the sport world in the last days of spring and first days of summer in 2010. English football, for instance, entered FIFA's World Cup full of hope, in no small part to the anticipated influence of new manager Fabio Capello. After two matches and two subsequent draws, English critics (as well as starting centre back John Terry, the former national side captain) openly questioned Capello's ability to lead the Three Lions to World Cup glory. Following England's ouster in the Round of 16, Capello's reputation completed its transformation from genius to overbearing tactical dinosaur. Other managers at the World Cup, including French coach Raymond Domenech and Argentina's legendary Diego Maradona, endured endless scrutiny of their leadership efficacy in tournament previews. Predictions of France's demise, attributed in no small part to Domenech's ineffective leadership, proved accurate with the squad's early exit from South Africa. Maradona, despite his unorthodox leadership style, silenced critics with his team's brilliant play in their first matches—only to face renewed criticism after Argentina's humiliating defeat in the quarter finals. On the pitch in South Africa, several players faced ongoing questions as to their ability to lead from within the squad, including Cristiano Ronaldo of Portugal, Argentina's Lionel Messi, and Samuel Eto'o of Cameroon.

Concurrently, basketball events in Los Angeles evoked assessments of leadership greatness. Phil Jackson, coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, won a record eleventh National Basketball Association (NBA) championship, further cementing his legacy as one of sport's best all-time leaders. His on-court star, Kobe Bryant, captured a fifth title and second as undisputed focal point of the Lakers. Meanwhile, on June 4, 2010, legendary college

basketball coach John Wooden passed away in Los Angeles months short of his one hundredth birthday. Winner of ten National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) titles as the University of California – Los Angeles (UCLA) coach (and one as a player at Purdue University), Wooden stood as a paragon of leadership in and beyond basketball. As UCLA Chancellor Gene Block mused when eulogizing Coach Wooden, “[his] legacy transcends athletics; what he did was produce leaders. But his influence has reached far beyond our campus and even our community. Through his work and his life, he imparted his phenomenal understanding of leadership and his unwavering sense of integrity to so many people” (UCLA, 2010).¹

Away from the action, the leadership abilities of high profile administrators in sport similarly faced scrutiny in the spring and early summer of 2010. National Football League (NFL) commissioner Roger Goodell continued to use the power of his office to suspend players, including Pittsburgh Steelers’ star quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, for poor off-field behaviour. Gary Bettman, commissioner of the National Hockey League (NHL), and his top officials dealt with highly public issues, including debates over suspensions (or lack thereof) for players targeting the heads of opponents with hits, as well as the financial quandaries of franchises in Southern USA locales such as Phoenix and Atlanta. Despite previous statements of defiance, egregious refereeing errors at the World Cup forced FIFA’s head, Sepp Blatter, to reluctantly reconsider the possibility of utilizing technology in future tournaments.

Whether on the pitch or court, on the sidelines, or in administrative offices, discussion revolving around those considered “leaders” or “non-leaders” in sport raises important questions about leadership more widely. What makes an effective leader? How does one define leadership? How do ethical leaders act? When it comes to the topic of “leadership”, including within the broad field of sport, various forms of management studies tend to dominate inquiry. Research in these academic disciplines and sub-disciplines examine what a leader *is* in a reductively scientific sense in order to better understand what an “effective” leader *does* in a practical sense. Even inquiry into “leadership ethics” seems to mostly reside in the field of management “science”. But considered pragmatically, leadership can be viewed as an important *idea* infused with values and norms that greatly impact all forms of culture—including sport. Consequently, the moral forces that shape our ideas about leadership and what ethical leadership means need to be subject-matters for philosophers of sport.

To engage in a philosophical recovery of leadership, current conceptions informing leadership will be quickly overviewed, as will the cultural conditions that fuel this limited perspective. Pragmatic ideas about our social existence, the role of cultural habits, and democracy will then be presented to serve as a backdrop against which a reoriented view of leadership can be developed. Finally, the central role of ethics, and how “thinking small” importantly revitalizes our vision of leadership, will be introduced.

Leadership and the Corporatist Mentality

Gary Yukl begins his text *Leadership in Organizations* by stating “Leadership is a subject that has long excited interest among scholars and laypeople alike.”² Yet despite the rise of “scientific interest” in the topic over the past 100 years, renowned leadership scholar Warren Bennis contends that “the concept of leadership eludes us or turns up in another form to taunt us again with its slipperiness and complexity. So we have invented an endless proliferation of terms to deal with it...and still the concept is not sufficiently defined.”³ Ralph Stogdill, another influential leadership theorist before his death in 1978, wrote “there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.”⁴

These three quotes from acknowledged experts reveal some important insights into the state of “leadership studies”. First, questions about leadership, including what characteristics make a good leader, how ethical leaders behave, and how one can transform into a leader pique the curiosity of many within various fields including politics, business, education, as well as sport.

Second, as both Bennis and Stogdill note, answering questions posed about leadership with reductive conclusions evades consensus. Literally thousands of varying definitions of what leadership is and analyses of what leaders do are available in the academic literature. As Yukl notes, beyond the shared assumption that leadership involves a social influence process, “the numerous definitions...proposed appear to have little else in common.”⁵

Finally, it seems apparent that theorists working within a business management paradigm (including industrial psychology) dominate inquiry into and the facilitation of leadership studies. In addition to Yukl, Bennis,

and Stogdill—all of whom engaged in research within American Schools of Business—other prominent and acknowledged leadership gurus studied in sport contexts typically emerge from business or related industrial psychology worlds. Interestingly, however, successful coaches from highly visible sports stand as one group of non-business professionals acknowledged as “leadership experts”—in other words, publish books on the topic of “leadership.” Yet upon closer inspection, the publisher notes on leadership books such as those written by famous American basketball coaches including Mike Krzyzewski, Pat Riley, and Dean Smith, all emphasize the applicability of their ideas to business as much as they do sport.⁶

The significance of this quick analysis is captured by the following summation: leaders play an incredibly lauded role in our cultures, including sport, yet we seem unable to pinpoint a detailed concept of leadership despite over a hundred years of dedicated, scientifically-based inquiry. Is Phil Jackson’s “Zen-like” approach better than Fabio Capello’s rigid methods to lead athletes from the sidelines? Does the flamboyant personality of Ronaldo, the quietness of Messi, or the relentlessness of Kobe serve as the optimal inter-squad leadership model? How do Roger Goodell’s proactive approach to athletic administration and Sepp Blatter’s administrative conservatism compare from a leadership perspective? Was league commissioner David Stern simply born to lead a multinational organization such as the NBA? Where do ethics fit in the leadership mix?

What leadership is and how it is done continually resists cause-effect simplification. A significant reason for the inability to better understand leadership arises from a failure to consider the topic more philosophically—in other words, to view it widely from the standpoint of “generating ideas”. Analysis becomes stuck at a mechanical level, thus reducing leadership to a purely psychological concept rather than a more broadly conceived ‘lived’ notion. We erroneously limit perceptions of leadership to simplistic, linear cause-effect mechanisms, falling prey to what John Dewey termed the “business mind”—the prevalence of value standards resulting from economic success and prosperity.⁷ This value-laden commitment to efficiency and accumulation through specialization, labelled by Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul as “corporatism”, seeps into all facets of our culture, including politics, education, and of course, sport.⁸