Watching Sport

Aesthetics, ethics and emotion

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Watching Sport

Do we watch sport for pure dumb entertainment? While some people might do so, Stephen Mumford argues that it can be watched in other ways. Sport can be both a subject of high aesthetic values and a valid source for our moral education. The philosophy of sport has tended to focus on participation, but this book instead examines the philosophical issues around watching sport. Far from being a passive experience, we can all shape the way that we see sport.

Delving into parallels with art and theatre, this book outlines the aesthetic qualities of sport from the incidental beauty of a well-executed football pass to the enshrined artistic interpretation in performed sports such as ice-skating and gymnastics. It is argued that the purist literally sees sport in a different way from the partisan, thus the aesthetic perception of the purist can be validated. The book moves on to examine the moral lessons that are to be learned from watching sport, depicting it as a contest of virtues. The morality of sport is demonstrated to be continuous with, rather than separate from, the morality in wider life, so each can inform the other. Watching sport is then recognised as a focus of profound emotional experiences. Collective emotion is particularly considered alongside the nature of allegiance. Finally, Mumford considers why we care about sport at all.

Addressing universal themes, this book will appeal to a broad audience across philosophical disciplines and sports studies.

Stephen Mumford is Professor of Metaphysics at the University of Nottingham and Professor II at the Norwegian University of Life Science (UMB). His previous books include *Dispositions* (1998), *Russell on Metaphysics* (2003), *Laws in Nature* (2004), *David Armstrong* (2007) and *Getting Causes from Powers* (2011, with Rani Lill Anjum).

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Preface

In November of 2007, I drove through the night from Valencia to Madrid. The aim of my journey was Estadio Santiago Bernabéu, the home of Club de Futbol Real Madrid. After hanging around for most of the day, including watching a third division game at Rayo Vallecano, I took my seat high in the stands. I chose a ticket near the very back, behind the goal, so that I could see the whole stadium and the entire crowd in front of me. Real were top of La Liga and their visitors, Mallorca, were healthily placed in seventh. They turned out to be very good and, although Madrid took an early lead, Mallorca equalised almost straight away with a fine finish into the goal behind which I was sitting. Madrid scored again, within a few minutes, but before the interval Mallorca levelled once more with an outstanding 30-yard shot. I had to get my breath back at half time. The football was amazing. Sometimes, at ice hockey games, the puck moves too fast for the eye to keep up. The players were passing the ball so quickly that it was having the same effect. It was all one-touch and move. I didn't believe the second half could be quite so good. But five minutes after the restart, Mallorca took a shock lead with another superb effort from outside the penalty area. Madrid upped their game again, finding an extra gear I didn't realise they could have. Raul scored and it was 3–3. At that point I realised two things. One was that it was inevitable that Madrid would win this game. The other realisation was that of all the football matches I had attended – nearly 1,400 at that time – this was the best. It had it all. The play was superb, the stadium setting was fantastic and the 80,000 crowd provided a spectacular back-drop. On top of all that, breathtaking goals were flying in and adding high drama to the proceedings. As it dawned on me that this was the best game of my life so far, I felt some tears welling up. Perhaps it was the sleep deprivation from the journey but at the time it felt like I had found football utopia. Even I, one of the biggest fans of the game, had not realised that football could be this good. It seemed a moment wherein I had glimpsed the sublime. This had transcended mere sport, and the contingencies of human existence generally. The game seemed to have become something else: something that made a profound comment on the human condition. Was sport of this level art? Was it something more? Inevitably, Real Madrid did score a fourth and winning goal, Ruud van Nistelrooy popping one in off the post. All too soon, the game was over. The 90 minutes had felt like nine. I left breathless and deep in thought.

I was stunned and couldn't quite figure out what had happened. I had to drive back to Granada that night – another four-hour journey – and was not at my hotel until 1.30 am. But still I could not sleep. I had experienced a moment of revelation. I had spent years enjoying the game as a partisan: supporting a single team through thick and thin. This had its ups and downs but, as every fan will testify, it's worth taking the rough with the smooth because of the sheer intensity of the emotional experiences. Yet I had just watched a game with no interest in who won and who lost and it was nevertheless the deepest emotional moment I had experienced in sport. And with this, I had become a true purist. I had to write about it.

This book is in the well-established tradition of the philosophy of sport. There are many philosophical issues to be found here. Most of the current work being produced, however, centres on the participants in sport. Issues such as fairness in competition, use of performance-enhancing drugs, what constitutes winning, what constitutes participation, health and well-being, how dangerous we should allow sports to be and how sport is distinguished from games and play are all worthy areas for philosophical investigation. But many people's experience of sport is not as a participant. There are, nevertheless, philosophical issues around the watching of sport that I think require further examination. Is there less interest in those issues because watching sport is somehow seen as inferior to playing it? If we think of Homer Simpson, for instance, watching the Superbowl in front of the TV, with a beer in one hand and a huge bag of potato chips, is he getting anything out of watching sport? Is it just pure, dumb entertainment for him? Are there any philosophical issues around what he is doing? I argue that there are. There are many such, and in that respect this book is only a start. Are there different ways of watching sport? Do two similarly placed viewers of the same event see the same thing? Why is it more exciting to watch the event 'live', as it happens, than to watch an unedited recording of it? Why is it more exciting to watch with others than alone? Can the watching of sport be morally improving or is it all about selfish competitive people trying to establish dominance? And is there a connection between the ethics of sport and its aesthetics? These are some of the questions to be addressed in this book, but I do not see them as exhausting the limits of the topic. My hope, therefore, is that more philosophical work on the philosophy of watching sport will follow.

I have had a lot of fun writing this book. At times it has felt like the book I have wanted to write for the past 20 years. I have always watched sport but I have been a professional philosopher for only two decades. During most of that time I have practised metaphysics and, with specialisation being the order of the day, I have had little time to stray into other areas of interest. But I have nevertheless been thinking of this book for much of that time and, when I came to write it, I found I was bringing to bear thoughts that had been lurking in the dark corners of my mind for a long time. It was a surprise to me when they appeared in this book; but I am pleased that they did. Anyone who has also read my work in metaphysics is going to find lots of surprises in store here. They might doubt it is the same author: but I can assure them it is. I have aimed for the account to be a general

one that applies to the cases of many different sports. A lot of the examples used are from association football or soccer, however. I don't think this needs an apology as it is, after all, the most popular spectator sport in the world. But I have been happy to use examples from other sports where it has been appropriate. There are issues that are specific to some sports and not others, so we have to recognise that diversity.

I have been a part of the sports philosophy community for only eight years and I realise this still makes me something of a novice. But it is a most welcoming, eclectic and open-minded bunch that has right from the start paid an interest in my project and offered me every assistance and encouragement. I am grateful to all who have supported me through discussing the ideas, both in response to talks and also informally. Regular annual conferences of the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport (IAPS) and the British Philosophy of Sport Association (BPSA) have provided a perfect environment to try out new ideas and various parts of this book have been explored there. I also thank Verner Møller for arranging for me to be a visiting scholar at their seminar at the University of Aarhus and Itir Erhart for organising such a well-publicised event at Bilgi University in Istanbul. Gabriela Tymowski and Charlene Weaving arranged a wonderfully rewarding visit to eastern Canada, which I enjoyed greatly. I was also a very fortunate visitor to the University of Sport in Porto, arranged by Teresa Oliveira Lacerda, who put on a special event for me. Douglas McLaughlin invited me to Cal State University in Northridge and it was while there in LA that I finished the book. I have presented philosophy of sport talks also at Hertfordshire, Lund and Nottingham and am grateful for the opportunity and the feedback. I must also thank the regular gang with whom I have passed such lovely, fun and stimulating days at philosophy of sport conferences (sorry if I've accidentally left anyone out): John Michael Atherton, Andrew Bloodworth, Ask Vest Christiansen, Leon Culbertson, Cathy Devine, Nick Dixon, Andrew Edgar, Lisa Edwards, Itir Erhart, Peter Hager, Alun Hardman, Leslie Howe, Stephen Howell, Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza, Ivo Jirásek, Carwyn Jones, Kevin Krein, Teresa Oliveira Lacerda, Sigmund Loland, Douglas McLaughlin, Mike McNamee, Bill Morgan, Arno Müller, Verner Møller, Jim Parry, Heather Reid, John Russell, Emily Ryall, Barış Sentuna, Heather Sheridan, Sarah Teetzel, Cesar Torres, Gabriela Tymowski and Charlene Weaving. And how could I forget Jeffrey Fry (no one can forget Jeffrey Fry!)? Thank you all for such a wonderful time. A special mention must go, however, to Leon Culbertson, who has been with me every step of the way. You're a special guy, Lee. I also owe a huge thanks to Elvio Baccarini. Elvio read the whole book as it was being written and not only spent hours discussing it with me but also participated in a wonderful symposium on the book at the University of Rijeka in Croatia. Thanks to all who participated in that, especially Milica Czerny Urban, and my thanks to Luca Malatesti and Predrag Šustar for organising it. The stories at the start of Chapter 7 come from my art historian colleague Mark Rawlinson. I am grateful to Alaska Williams for encouragement and support and similarly to all my fellow philosophers at the University of Nottingham. I know I am not always the perfect colleague. Many

of my followers on Twitter have given me both moral support and helpful suggestions. Twitter is so useful in philosophy: I am @SDMumford, if anyone wants to follow. My family has, as usual, been a great support and I am sorry for all the additional absences that the writing of this book involved. The final personal thanks goes to Vince Taylor, to whom I owe various debts, intellectual and probably financial as well. Vince is an unsung hero in the world of sports writing.

Chapter 13 is based on my article 'Allegiance and Identity', which was published in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* in 2004. I am grateful to the editor, John Russell, for permission to use this material, which has undergone redrafting in several places.

Contents

1 The starting line

Our subject of investigation is watching sport, and the investigation will be a philosophical one. Before we can embark on that in any great detail there are two basic questions we must answer. First, what do we mean by watching and, second, what do we mean by sport?

Although the concern of this book is watching sport, we do not mean only *watching* sport, as opposed to listening to it or perceiving it in other ways. 'Watching' is intended as a general term that encapsulates any such sport spectatorship. We do not, for instance, want to exclude the blind from enjoying the experience of an observing sports fan. Many blind people like to attend sports events, sometimes listening to a specially detailed commentary. There is much excitement to be gained in doing so, which is borne out by the fact that sighted people also like to listen to sport on the radio. Sometimes it can seem an even more exciting experience over the radio as the commentary paints a picture verbally and builds the suspense. Any such person still counts as a sports-watcher in this book.

Apart from the special case of radio commentary, however, the experience of watching sport clearly is enhanced by the presence of sound. Sounds can be just as important as sights in forming an exciting and memorable sporting experience. Sometimes it is the noise of the crowd that intensifies one's experience, as will be discussed later (Chapter 12). It is through hearing that one comes to know of the excitement of others watching the same spectacle. The crowd also add their own atmosphere, through applause, firecrackers, chants and songs. Sometimes it is the playing of sport itself that one hears. One may hear the players calling to each other; hear their feet pounding the turf or track; or sometimes hear even their gasps for breath as they stretch the capacity of their lungs. Some sports are noisier than others, as I found when I attended my first speedway meet. The roar of the motorcycle engines was the most memorable feature of the night. Horse racing provides a special experience of sound, with the rumble of horses' hooves on grass getting closer and closer, and then passing with a Doppler effect. Setting aside commentary, therefore, there is every reason to appreciate the sounds produced in sport.

More than sight and sound should be included in our investigation, however. Non-participants can enjoy sport using any kind of sensation. Smell and touch can also play a role. The smell of the grass, freshly cut and watered, is one of the

delights of a new football season. Many athletes use muscle rub with a strong 'smell of sport' that reaches the spectators. And touch is also part of the aesthetic of sport, ranging from the cold air on one's face to the grip one holds on the crush barrier in front. Taste seems one of the least utilised of the senses in watching sport. Certainly there are tastes that we associate with sport – the beer, popcorn and hot dogs sold at the stadium – but these are not intrinsic to sport. They are rather more to do with the consumer experience that has grown around sport and they can be experienced just as much at the cinema. One is not tasting the sport, whereas one may see it, hear it and, if one is physically located in a sporting venue, smell it and feel it. Nevertheless, those who enjoy watching sport may do so at least partly because of the accompanying tastes of the catering provision.

Watching should be understood broadly to mean observation through any sense faculty, therefore, but we also need to say something about the mode of watching, for there are different ways that we can choose to watch sport. Some prefer to attend the sporting event live and in person while others may be content with watching the TV transmission. Radio has already been mentioned as an option. Others may have a more casual engagement. An edited highlights package may provide a shorter and condensed version of sport that could satisfy the less seriously engaged if not the purist. One might even follow at a greater distance, through newspaper or internet reports. These different modes of watching can no doubt be further subdivided. Among those who attend games at the venue, there is more variety. Some fans stand behind the goal, squashed together with other like-minded supporters. They may enjoy the experience of being part of a crowd, speaking with one voice, as much as being there to study the game. Some fans drink alcohol before or during these games and might not remember too much about them. By way of contrast, there are others who prefer to study the game from a side view, deep in concentration and not wanting to miss a minute of play. Still, others gather in corporate hospitality facilities, perhaps again with alcohol on offer, and watch from indoors, behind plate glass. Watching sport may be part of work-related networking where the conversation is the key thing, sport merely forming a common interest around which people of business gather. All such enjoyment of sport should be within the scope of this study, from the fanatic to the casual viewer.

There is, however, a less obvious sense in which there are different ways of watching sport. The expert sees a different game from the novice, and the aesthete sees a different game from the partisan. There may be a thought that these are mere clichés that should not be taken literally. For the expert, novice, aesthete and partisan may all be watching the same TV transmission and, one would think, it is obviously correct to say that they saw the same game. But one of the arguments of this book is that watching means more than just having light hit one's retina, hearing means more than air vibrations moving one's ear drum, and so on. There's more to seeing than meets the eye, as Norwood Russell Hanson argued (1958: ch. 1). Watching is something one does: the mind is active in it, I will claim, and there are thus different ways in which two people can look at the same thing. Two viewers with the same retinal image may not see the same.

One taking an aesthetic attitude to sport may 'see a different game' to the committed fan, for instance, even though they observe the same event. These will be philosophical and theoretical claims, but the example of watching sport provides an exemplary illustration of them.

Another aspect to this same issue, also relevant to sport, is the idea that one learns how to watch. The first time I attended an ice hockey game, I couldn't see where the puck was. It seemed too small and moved too fast. As soon as I thought I saw it, it had shot off elsewhere and my eyes had to search afresh. I saw a lot of the players in that game (and heard a lot of organ music) but I saw little of the small black contested object. I nevertheless watched a few more games and gradually found it easier and easier to see where it was. I spoke to a more experienced fan (a Canadian, and Canadians really know their hockey) who explained how one learns to see the puck. One anticipates where it will go. I was too slow, playing catch up, but the experienced fan stays one step ahead. While I was searching for it, it had already left the place I was getting to. The experienced fan, on the other hand, is looking at the place where the puck will be before it even gets there. The players' movements act as a first indicator for them. But they also understand the trajectory of the puck and the way it can sweep around the boards behind the goals. They are able to anticipate and get it wrong less frequently than I did. They have a degree of experience and expertise that I had not yet acquired. Similarly with other sports, one can learn how to see. In football, it is easy to follow the ball, but the experienced football fan has already moved beyond that. Instead, they see how the play develops, watching the movements of players and reading their intentions. The novice knows little of the tactics. They may only follow the ball. The expert, however, understands that all the really interesting action is occurring away from the ball, in the formations and movements of the players. That is where the game is really won and lost, for control of the territory of the pitch brings control of the ball and that is what produces goals.

The more experienced one is at watching sport, it thus seems, the more one sees in the sport. Our novice and expert attend the same event, let us assume, and perhaps sit side-by-side with virtually the same view on play. But one sees so much more than the other and this is not, of course, a comment on the state of their eyesight.

Much more will be said about watching as we proceed but, in similar fashion, we also need an initial grasp of what is meant by sport. This book will be more about watching than about sport. An account will be given, for instance, that allows us to distinguish aesthetic from partisan ways of watching. But no detailed theory will be offered of what sport itself consists in. Something should nevertheless be said, albeit only briefly, on what sport is assumed to be. We are aided in this by the account of games given by Suits (2005). Sport is not the same thing as playing a game, though all sports are also games. Not all games are sports, however, as backgammon and tiddlywinks clearly demonstrate; and chess probably also, though more contentiously. If we understand what a game is, then we will have gone some way, though not all the way, to understanding what a sport is.

Suits takes up Wittgenstein's (1953: §66) challenge to find a definition of game. Wittgenstein asked us to look rather than assume that there is something in common to everything called a game (other than, of course, merely that every such thing is called a game). There is nothing in common, concludes Wittgenstein, and proceeds from there to offer an anti-essentialist, family resemblance account of games. An inference seems often to be then drawn that nothing has an essence and many or all of our concepts are family resemblance concepts. But we will not go into the question here of just how many concepts are family resemblance concepts. Instead, Suits takes up Wittgenstein's challenge afresh to find some commonality among all the many different things called games. Running races, golf and backgammon, among others, are considered and Suits does succeed in finding something in common. What he then offers us is a definition of what it is to play a game, which is that it is

> to engage in an activity directed towards bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by the rules, where the rules prohibit more efficient in favour of less efficient means, and where such rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity.
>
> (Suits 2005: 48–9)

There is a simpler and more casual way of summing this up: 'playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 2005: 55).

Suits's account can stand a little further explanation. The state of affairs one aims to bring about in sport is what he calls its prelusory goal. The aim in golf – its prelusory goal – is to get one's ball in the hole and in running races it is to cross the finishing line first. It is possible to achieve such a prelusory goal without playing the game (prelusory means pre-game). One could simply lift, carry and place the ball in the hole, or one could cut across the infield to be first at the finishing tape. But to achieve the prelusory goal in this way is to not play the game, quite literally. To make the activity of playing a game possible, one must adopt a lusory attitude towards the prelusory goal. The lusory attitude is a game-playing attitude, though Suits does not define it that way (for that would lead to his definition of game being circular). Rather, the lusory attitude is to accept rules without which there could be no such activity (of game playing). Instead, therefore, of carrying the ball to the hole, the golfer accepts the rule that they have to hit the ball towards the hole with a stick – at least a golf club – which is a relatively inefficient means of achieving the prelusory goal. Similarly, the race runner accepts a rule that they cannot cut across the infield. These rules are not accepted because they assist in the achievement of the prelusory goals: they are actually obstacles to such achievement. But without the lusory means towards the goals, there could not be activities such as golf, race running and backgammon. The rules are constitutive of the game, for one cannot be playing the game unless one accepts them. One might do something similar to a game, as when a policeman runs to catch a robber, but he is not playing a game as he is not adopting a lusory attitude in his running.

There are many possible objections to the definition of game offered by Suits, and in his book he tries to answer them, but as our own aim is not Suits's scholarship, we need not detail every twist and turn. It suffices to say that the definition of game that Suits provides will be provisionally accepted. But where does that get us with respect to sport, a subject about which Suits says surprisingly little? It seems that we need some further account, on top of the definition of game, that explains why some games are sport and some are not. Association football (soccer, for Americans) is clearly a sport while tiddlywinks is not. What's the difference?

The difference between games that are sport and 'mere' games is not, I suggest, a philosophical one. It is not that there is a philosophically interesting, objective property that belongs to one and not the other. The difference is, on my account, explicable more sociologically than philosophically. This explains why the definition of sport does not get any greater treatment in this book, for it is not primarily a philosophical issue. As Reid has said, 'sport is a human construction. Play may be natural, even common to humans and animals, but sport only has existed and only will exist as long as we choose to make it so' (Reid 2010: 115). Sports tend to be more obviously physical than games, requiring strength, fitness and agility, but not always so. Darts is usually classed as a sport even though some of its players are not enormously fit, while skipping is 'only' a game even though to do it well one needs to be fit and agile. Instead of seeking such a distinguishing feature, I favour an institutional theory of sport: one that matches the institutional theory of art that will be developed later in the book (Chapter 4). According to an institutional theory of sport, sport is a status that is bestowed by various social institutions upon certain forms of practice. Those institutions grew up around those practices – running, jumping, ball playing and so on – first organising them and then taking authority over them. There are individual governing bodies for each sport but also some overarching bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The relevant institutions consist in more than just governing bodies, however. The media, athletes and their agents, political bodies and so on all have a role to play in determining which forms of practice deserve the status of sport. The IOC is an especially powerful body, however, in that they are able to grant the status of Olympic sport on certain games. Athletics is thus a core part of the Olympics and thus of sport, as are swimming and gymnastics. But BMX biking, for instance, began as fun: a pastime, leisure. Only once a game was made out of it – racing over a course – did it become a possible sport, and its practitioners, no doubt, thought of it as a sport from the outset. Eventually, others were persuaded to take it seriously. The IOC gave it the ultimate stamp of approval when it was made an Olympic sport for 2008 in Beijing. By contrast, tiddlywinks has never been close to approval as a sport. It has much in common with some of the things that are sports. Like darts and pistol shooting, it involves aiming projectiles at targets. Some of the participants may see it as sport but it has not been given the IOC approval. The rules of tiddlywinks are yet to receive a universal codification, though it's more serious than you might think: there are two rival