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The paradoxical world of sport

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For policy makers sport has an important social function: it is educational and healthy, contributes to employment and keeps the kids off the street. Sport also helps in the formation of groups and encourages international contacts. Naturally, it is also the ideal way of fostering team spirit. As sport rapidly becomes inextricably bound up with advertising and the media, the economic value of sports is incontestable.

That, however, is the external motivation for sport, important for administrators and politicians. The internal motivation for sport is totally different and at least as important. For those who take part in sport - the many millions of them - and for the coaches, trainers, spectators, parents and virtually everyone else in society, reference to the 'social importance' is completely irrelevant.

A father shouting himself hoarse along the touch-line as he watches his son in the football team, a faithful Ajax or Dynamic Moscow supporter cheering on his team, parents buying a new tennis racket for their child, and a mother taking her child to swimming lessons at the local pool - all of these people are doing very different things. They are giving their life and that of their children a sense and meaning through sport. The hundreds of thousands of people who devote their free time to sports clubs as treasurers, canteen managers, editors of club papers, youth trainers and so forth do it 'for the club' and 'for the sport'.

So, a chasm appears between the slightly apologetic approach of policy-makers and the total dedication of those who play sport. How does this come about? The basis for this distinction between external and internal motivation can be found in the nature of play and sport and its relationship with other activities. As we shall see, human playing - thus game and sports - contains five paradoxes which show why sport has strong internal legitimation but a rather shaky external one.

'Play is older than culture', states Johan Huizinga in his famous treatise *Homo Ludens*. Indeed, animals did not wait for humans to teach them how to play. For Huizinga it goes much further: play is a culture-creating activity which is universal. Play occurs everywhere, in all cultures and in human activities. Huizinga cites as examples 'parliamentary customs' and also science, law, poetry and war, each of which has its own playful *ludic* aspects. The first paradox is that this universal phenomenon is in effect a virtual world. Each game, each play, creates its own reality; after all, the very purpose of playing is to be different from the 'ordinary' or 'real' world. Playing, in fact any game, implies a 'departure from ordinary life into a temporary world of activity having its own nature' (Huizinga again). The goal of playing is to play, nothing else. For this purpose the game creates a world of its own, a separate universe, a 'temporary world within the ordinary one'. This virtual world can serve as an escape or relaxation, as an essential intermezzo in daily life, but above all it is 'different'.

In their play, children indicate the difference between the two worlds by using the past tense. 'You were the chief', says Jip. 'And I was the policeman'. 'So what must I do?' asks Janneke. 'You must creep around', replies Jip (Annie M.G. Schmidt, *Jip en Janneke*, Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1977, p. 114).

The world of play is a complete world: it has not only rules but also emotions, offences and punishments, clashes between personalities, friends and friendships. It also has its own ceremonies, symbols and rites. But even if it is a world of its own, it is surprisingly accessible to all. Man is such a creature of play that he can transport himself into someone else's game with the greatest of ease. The world of play is extremely open and thus forms a popular spectacle. Just as in the world of theatre and that of ritual, spectators are important.

The public is just as much a part of the world of play as the players themselves. A football match without public is a punishment, a mountain stage of the Tour de France with empty roads would be a disaster. But even a golfer who reaches home in dishevelled state wants the whole world to know that he has had a good score. And who has ever heard of an angler not trumpeting a huge catch?

This world of playing, of games and sports, is temporary and limited, yet it is also absolute. This is the second paradox. Play first of all draws boundaries: a game takes place within a defined area, in a fixed period of time, and has its own fixed rules. In short, there is complete order. Each game has a beginning and an end, takes place in a fixed location - whether pitch, board or stadium - and exists by the grace of rules. These boundaries and rules are never the subject of debate, especially not during the game itself. Players may commit offences, possibly incurring a yellow or even red card, but the football-player who would dispute the desirability of the offside rule with the referee or the representative of UEFA has yet to be born. He would be a spoilsport, good for a black card: 'scepticism about the rules of the game is inconceivable' the French philosopher Paul Valéry remarked.

Just how absolute these rules are, becomes clear when people want to change them. Alterations to the rules of the game encounter resistance and can only be introduced by a strong organisation: the offside rule in hockey and the rule about playing back to the goalkeeper in football were changed only after lengthy discussion and experiment. The numerous variations in the rules of national sports and games are part of the cultural heritage, rendering these rules more or less immutable. Any success which official organisations may have in homogenising the rules is achieved only with great difficulty.

Draughts is a case in point. Moves which are permitted in the game as played in the home are defined differently by the official organisation. The custom of 'blowing' a piece that fails to capture a piece of the opponent, is an example: widely practised in the 'folk' versions of draughts, it is not an official rule. But people continue to play the game as they have always done - and as their parents and grandparents did before them. Some sports have never succeeded in unifying the rules, and in such cases closely related sports continue to exist side by side.

Rugby is an example. Union and League, which are played for the most part in the south and the north of England respectively, have different rules and regard themselves as different sports. Nonetheless, players can easily change between the two. Australia has added a third variant: 'Aussie Rules'. Recent attempts to create a 'Super League' have not yet resulted in integration. This resembles the Brazilian and Russian 64 draughts versions, close enough to have the same people compete.

Systems of rules in sport tend to be persistent. Many sports were spread as part of the colonial system. After decolonisation everything in a country would change, but not the sports. Football continued to be played throughout the world with the same rules, as did basketball, bridge, hockey, athletics and so forth. In draughts we see the 100 square board played in the former French and

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Dutch colonies, while in the Anglophone parts of the world the 64 square board is dominant, a culture legacy of the colonisers, in all probability.

The third paradox of play is that of the regulated contest. Within its limited and temporary order, the game creates tension. It excites players and spectators alike and thus at once provides tensions and relaxation. In this orderly world, battle is the main theme, particularly in competitive sports. Within the safe limits of the rules, there is total commitment and dedication. Draughts players, with their deep concentration adding to the games tension, often experience lack of sleep after a game. The players throw caution to the wind, totally concentrated on beating each other. 'Football is war'. 'It's just a game, after all', is how some losers try to save face. But the winner has no need to put things in perspective: the honour, applause and publicity are all secondary to winning. Of course, parallels can be drawn with ancient forms of battle in which the combatants fought according to fixed rules - 'total war' is an invention of our century. In classical times and in the Middle Ages wars had fixed rules involving courtly courtesies, agreements and ceremonies. The same is true of some tribal wars even today. Duels resulted, through immutable protocols, either in symbolic wounds or honourable death. Despite the spilt blood, it was still a game: so war can also be football.

The fourth paradox is that of the 'empty prize'. The battle has stakes, the competition has a prize. Usually the prize bears no relation to the efforts of the players (and coaches, officials, spectators etc.). With the exception of a few 'mediagenic' sports, the prizes are no more than an acknowledgement of the achievement, a symbol of the victory.

A sports cup is the obvious example. The "Cup" lacks any practical value, is all show and no content, and may sometimes be beautiful but often is hideously ugly; yet, it is highly prized, not for its intrinsic economic value, but for the efforts needed to win it.

According to the philosopher Girard, competition is at the core of every value. An object becomes desirable only when someone else covets it too: objects and symbols are attractive only through the eyes of another. Sport prizes and titles are excellent examples of this; they acquire a value only because someone else wants them. Without competition they would not even exist. To quote the French sociologist Bourdieu, every sports competition is about 'symbolic capital', non-economic values which are shared by everyone. Champion's titles are the finest example. Titles are the principal capital of every sports association: the right to confer titles is jealously guarded - without titles no association can exist.

Rival sports associations, operating within the same sport, therefore constitute a major threat both to the sport and to the associations. Boxing has suffered for years from an impasse at world level. A number of different organisations start with the words 'World Boxing...', but they do not recognise one another, are in the hands of a few boxing promoters and can only agree on unification when there is a champion of exceptional talent. Either there is one world title or there is no world title.

This paradox also determines the strange relationship between winner and loser. The majority of the attention goes to the winner of the symbolic capital - the champion. The artificial scarcity of this capital means, however, that hardly anyone can acquire it and that everyone knows this. Competition exists by the grace of the loser - the competitor who aimed to win, but who accepts his loss. He, and not the winner, determines the value of the symbolic capital. When many losers have battled hard, the victory is indeed sweet. Many know that they will never win, but they still remain in the competition.

All basketball teams know they have no chance against the Dream Team, but they still take up the challenge with pleasure. Everything they achieve against that team acquires a special merit. So the Dream Team loses, because their victory is not what winning is really about. Simultaneous games in draughts operate along the same lines. The weak player knows he cannot score against a Chizhov or Gantwarg, so losing is not a loss. But any point scored - who knows! - is a feat to remember forever.

A player can win, but never lose completely. A player or a team always turns in a performance, achieves targets and realises hopes, although illusions may be shattered and ambitions thwarted in the process. People compete not only with their opponent but also with themselves. Achieving new goals, new personal records - these are the essential elements of sport.

The 800-metre runner who improves her personal record, the golfer who finally gets under par by making a birdie at the eighteenth, the draughts player who raises his Voimac rating and the apprentice who scores his first goal for the first team - all of them have turned in a performance which they continue to remember with great satisfaction.

These personal performances may have significance only within the setting of the sport in question, but they are valuable for all that. Indeed, performances are lasting. Here we have the fifth paradox. The temporary world of play and the arbitrary rules of the sport create a lasting history. Each club has its own history and the focal point of that history is the display case containing the prizes. Personal performances are cherished for a lifetime in medals, certificates and photograph albums. No one 'was' champion: one 'is' always the '1981... Champion'. This applies *a fortiori* to the crowning glories of the symbolic capital: the titles, championships and records. The fleeting competition confers lasting glory, the virtual world of sport gives its winner absolute fame. Olympic medal winners remain so throughout their life, whatever they subsequently may do in the 'ordinary world', whether they become coaches or bankers, shop assistants or government ministers. And the drama of sport too is lasting: besides the tension of the battle and the excitement of victory, the personal dramas often create fantastic images.

The expression of Mary Decker when she fell in the 3,000 metres, the drama of Ben Johnson's disqualification, the failure of Bubka to get over the first height despite his dozens of world records, a missed penalty in the shoot-out at the end of a final, the victory missed by Sijbrands at the 50th move of his last match - game with Chizhov: drama aplenty.

These five paradoxes show that the basic values of play and society are hard to translate across the divide. These two worlds are virtual opposites: after all, the paradoxes are paradoxical precisely when they are seen from the perspective of daily reality. The very nature of sport means that it has an enormous intrinsic value, fascination, excitement, certainly, contest, self-defence, fame, history, self-fulfilment, human drama, it has everything. Nonetheless, the 'ordinary' world not only considers itself dominant but also regards itself as the touchstone for sport.

So those who play, have the best of two worlds, one world filled with everyday worries, duties joys and emotions; and another world replete with self-fulfilment, fascination, emotion, achievement and glory. We, who live in those two worlds, enjoy the first, but are forever addicted to the fascination of the other, that miraculous world of sports.