

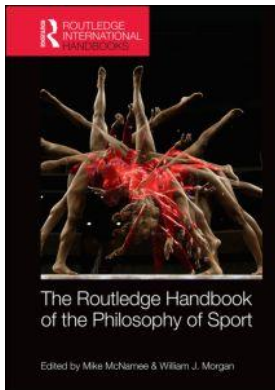
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SECTION III

Key issues and themes in the philosophy of sport

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COMPETITION

Paul Gaffney

The relationship between sport and competition

‘Competition’ and ‘sport’ are not coextensive terms. On the one hand, competition can be understood as the wider category, which suggests that competitive sport represents merely one instantiation of a basic type of human engagement. Indeed, it is not difficult to conceptualize many of our encounters with one another and many of our institutions as structurally competitive. In adversarial law, for example, two advocates are pitted against one another and successful litigation is measured directly by victories as much as by the achievement of justice or the determination of truth. In democratic politics, candidates must win elections to gain office, and then must ‘win over’ constituencies to implement public policy. In economics, competition is a defining feature of market capitalism, even if this ideal is only approximately realized in practice. Producers compete with one another for market shares, and there is even something of a contest between producers and consumers over the terms of their transactions. Finally, in cultural and intellectual arenas, we refer to a marketplace of ideas, which suggests – developing the economic metaphor – that contenders must survive a battleground of opposition and critique to be considered successful.

Competitive sport seems to share some features with these examples, which we might call ‘institutional varieties’ of competition. In each arena, there is an objective measure of success, a rival (or set of rivals) to confront, and an ineluctable logic to the confrontation: the success of one is, generally speaking, inversely related to the success of others. This basic similarity lends some plausibility to a remark by former Georgetown University basketball coach John Thompson: ‘Life is *about* competition’ (Gilbert, 1988: 88). One might feel an initial discomfort with this broad generalization because it appears to blur distinctions that are both obvious and important. For instance, whereas the institutional varieties provide structures to resolve some of life’s inevitable and consequential struggles, competitive sports are generally contrived affairs that challenge their participants to overcome what Bernard Suits famously called ‘unnecessary obstacles’ (Suits, 2005: 55). But a moment’s reflection reveals the inadequacy of this response, not only because the outcomes of sports do matter, at least to their participants, but also because the institutional competitions employ their own contrivances, such as formalized procedures and conventional standards of success. Indeed, following Thompson, it is not difficult to conceptualize much of modern life as a series of oppositional engagements within which we

pursue certain scarce goods, such as power, money, favorable decisions, and glory. The stakes of the engagements differ, of course, but the logic and the psychology compare insofar as these structures create spaces wherein the combatants simply fight it out. And sport is one of those fights.

We can employ two strategies to understand the relationship among the varieties of competition. First, we can think of all of them as domestications of war, which suggests their intelligibility and moral value consist in their disposition to contain the basic problematic of the human condition. Competition of any sort, on this view, is simply regulated warfare. Viewed in this light, there is nothing particularly glorious or beautiful about what athletes do, even if we attribute some value to their efforts, nor is there a fundamental difference between an athlete's pursuit of glory, an entrepreneur's pursuit of money, or a warrior's pursuit of power. In modern professional sport we have, of course, ample evidence that argues for this reductive account. But the perspective is hardly new and would not seem to be entirely attributable, if at all, to increasing commercialization. George Orwell (1998) gave forceful expression to this understanding, partly because he feared the political manipulations of international sport, and partly because he distrusted the root of the competitive drive animating sporting contests. Sport, he famously said, is 'war minus the shooting' (p. 442). A similar sentiment is sometimes attributed to William James (1910), who coined the phrase 'moral equivalent of war', although he himself did not explicitly mention sport in his well-known essay. But many – both defenders and critics of sport – recognize in sport precisely what Orwell and James had in mind, namely, a surrogate for the experience of military exercise and engagement.

The second strategy would begin, so to speak, from the opposite end and would interpret all varieties of competition as better or worse approximations of sport. This view argues in effect that 'competition' belongs properly to sport (or perhaps, more generally, to games) and only analogously to the institutional varieties, and not at all to warfare, precisely because in sport the struggle itself is thematized as a locus of value and interest. Of course, participants in competitive sport strive earnestly for victory, but the character of the contest and even the difficulty of the struggle are embraced as intrinsic values. Philosophers sometimes describe sport as 'autotelic', which means an end in itself, both created and governed by 'constitutive rules' (Suits, 2005: 51) (formalism). In this sense, as I will explain below, competitive sport enjoys a kind of purity compared with the institutional varieties, because it need not make reference to, nor justify itself in terms of, the achievement of anything beyond its own activity. The institutional competitions, by contrast, involve a competitive element only as a structural mechanism, and their exercise does not guarantee achievement of the institutional ideals. Justice is not always served in adversarial law because one side might simply out-perform the other, just as bad policies and bad governments sometime win elections because of rhetorical superiority or personal charm. It should be noted that the purity or priority of sport is a conceptual point, although, in some respects, it might reflect historical developments as well. For instance, Stephen Miller (2004) has argued that some institutional principles, such as equal standing before the law, are actually lessons first realized at the Olympics Games and then adapted to institutional settings (p. 18).

Given these two understandings of the relationship among the varieties – which we might call respectively the 'war paradigm' and the 'sport paradigm' of competition – this chapter defends the latter. That is, it understands competitive sport to be the paradigmatic instance that makes intelligible all other varieties of competition. Reductive strategies, such as the one based on the war premise, ultimately fail because, in making all instances in principle the same, they under-appreciate the special goodness of sport and, at the same time, diminish the moral seriousness of the other endeavors.

On the other hand, as we consider the relationship between competition and sport, we can understand sport to be the wider term, given that much of what appears to qualify as sport is not competitive. We engage in many activities for the sheer pleasure of the physical exertion, for the camaraderie these activities occasion, for the health benefits, or for the aesthetic satisfaction that mastery of a skill provides, among many other satisfactions. Even those who intend ultimately to compete will spend a lot of time in non-competitive exercises. For example, soccer (football) players at every age and level will kick a ball around, just as baseball players will go out to play catch; a group of friends will meet for a morning jog, perhaps varying the route on a daily basis for sake of different scenery, and talking all the way; and tennis players will hit with a partner without concern for a score. There are countless other examples, and all would seem to be sporting activities in some important sense of the word. Admittedly, for some participants the non-competitive exercises gain their intelligibility from an eventual competitive engagement, so the tennis player will think about implementing her strokes into match play even as she hits with her partner, but for others kicking a ball around with friends is their whole experience of sport.

It is significant – not to mention troubling – that we often describe these non-competitive sporting exercises as something we do ‘just for fun’. This suggests that competition somehow darkens an activity that was formerly playful, and thereby constricts or perhaps even corrupts its essential character. There is etymological and historical support for this understanding. ‘Sport’ derives originally from ‘disport’ (*dis + portare*), which means to carry away from or to divert, and therefore connotes a sense of liberation from the burdens of work and responsibility. Yet, as Steven Connor (2011) explains, the sense of ‘sport’ has significantly altered in recent history: ‘During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, for a time, as it remarkably seems, almost entirely in England, sport changed its meaning, and came to designate particular pursuits involving forms of physical competition governed by rules’ (p. 23).

Thus emerges the familiar hybrid we know as competitive sport. The elements of this new form of life are still distinguishable, but it certainly seems that competitiveness is the dominant gene. That is, we would recognize the form even if there were there little or no evidence of the playful aspect, but we would exclude from this genre any activity that was not earnestly competitive. This may be primarily a matter of presentation, but the change is telling: whereas originally the countenance of sport was an exuberant, carefree smile, the modern expression – worn by the combatants and also, increasingly, by the coaches, fans, and various other stakeholders – is characteristically a scowl.

Scott Kretchmar (1975) distinguishes between tests and contests, both of which present ‘counterpoint’ challenges, although in logically different ways. A test stands before an adventurer as both ‘impregnable’ and ‘vulnerable’; that is, it presents something difficult but not impossible to do (there would be no point if either of the two conditions were missing). For example, a mountain climber takes on her challenge because she believes the task to be significant in its own right, which implies that success is not guaranteed. A contest, as the word implies, occurs when two or more take on the same test, but not merely simultaneously:

The transition from test to contest is the change from human singularity to community. Simply, it is finding someone with whom one can share a test. In addition, a commitment is made by each side to attempt to better the other’s performance.

(Kretchmar, 1975: 27)

This description contains some interesting elements. First, the contestants share something, which indicates that contesting is at some level a cooperative venture; and, second, the

commitment to ‘better the other’s performance’ trades on a rather fortunate ambiguity of the phrase insofar as a contestant attempts not only to outdo the other’s performance but also, in the same effort, quite possibly to improve the other’s performance. This is a theme that I develop below.

Kretchmar’s analysis helps us outline a more precise taxonomy: 1) First, some sport is purely diversionary and playful, expressing tumultuous delight in movement and creativity; 2) second, some sport gains its intelligibility from a test of some sort, such as the completion of a marathon or the performance of a gymnastic routine, simply for its inherent value; 3) third, some sport is structured as a contest, which necessarily involves two or more participants pitted against one another and governed by constitutive rules. It is evident that the first category is non-competitive sport and the third category is competitive sport; the second category shares some features with both (for example, a runner who pushes herself to improve upon her personal best is competing with previous efforts). As I suggest later in this chapter, however, competition requires genuine otherness.

The foregoing argues that sport is a broad genus comprising a variety of expressions, even if the competitive expression seems to dominate our contemporary sports culture. Mindful of this context, the remainder of the chapter concentrates on the structure and meaning of competitive sport. Clearly something changes when we decide to keep score. Typically, we say that the game now ‘counts’ – a remark that implies both seriousness and quantification – and we are given to understand that the results will be a matter of public record, now and forever. The commitment to contest matters in a number of ways, but we should remember that the transition from non-competitive to competitive is not that from non-sport to sport, or from non-serious to serious, or from non-challenging to challenging.

Competition as relationship: Hobbesian and Hegelian understandings

I suggested above that we could understand competitive sport either as a domestication of warfare, or as the paradigmatic instance that makes sense of all the other varieties of competition. In philosophical terms, the first approach derives from Thomas Hobbes, the second from Georg Hegel. Both philosophers begin their account of human sociality with a primordial struggle but they understand the terms and the meaning of this struggle differently.

For Hobbes, the natural state of humankind is a universal war of all against all, a zero-sum struggle to survive and to acquire scarce goods. In *Leviathan* Hobbes (1999) lists competition, diffidence, and glory as the ‘three causes of quarrel’ and tells us that humans take no pleasure in each other’s company without a ‘common power to overawe them all’ (Book I, ch. 13). His account would seem to imply that no value inheres in struggle *per se*; in fact, in the Hobbesian account it would be better if the other were simply not there. Although Hobbes’ thought experiment has proven its value as a foundational political study, this last point indicates why it serves poorly as a model for competitive sport, since in sport we do not wish to eliminate our opponent. We need our opponent to be there and, even more, we need our opponent to thrive, at least to some extent, or else the activity ceases to have meaning. Of course, within the event the competitors’ state of mind is simply to defeat one another, and the more soundly the better. But even here we must qualify the point: an easy victory is less than fully satisfying for someone seeking out a genuinely competitive engagement. We must also remember – recalling Kretchmar’s point about the opponents agreeing to ‘share a test’ – that in sport the competitive fire burns within a cooperative endeavor. This is not domesticated warfare; it is not warfare at all.

As the above suggests, in competitive sport the antagonists are neither friends nor enemies, although they exhibit characteristics appropriate to both these interactions. In Warren Fraleigh’s

(1984: 83–4) language, opponents are both ‘facilitators’ and ‘obstacles’. They are ‘friendly’ insofar as they enter into a relationship, seeking a good not otherwise available. A competitor needs a worthy opponent; no one else in her circle – not her coach, not her trainer, not her fans, not the people who love her – can provide her with the satisfaction that she craves, precisely because they all want her to win. Her opponent, however, acts like an ‘enemy’ in the sense that she uses all her ingenuity to deny her the object of desire, and with no remorse whatsoever. A competitor deliberately sets out to frustrate her opponent (*qua* opponent), often employing deceptive strategies and exposing technical weaknesses in the effort. It is precisely because competitors do not want their opponents to enjoy the satisfaction of victory that victory, once achieved, is satisfying. Thus, the basic paradox of competition.

We can approach an understanding of this paradox through the ‘Master and Slave’ section of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977). According to Hegel, the basic struggle of humankind is not for physical survival (as in Hobbes’ materialistic vision), but rather for acknowledgement or recognition (*Anerkennen*), which transforms a ‘subjective self-certainty’ into an objective truth. That is to say, in the dialectical construction of spirit, self-consciousness requires recognition to assure itself of its own being. ‘Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged’ (section 172). Acknowledgement must come from an adequate other, namely, another self-consciousness engaged in precisely the same pursuit to assure itself of its own objective truth. Because each side seeks something that it refuses to grant, a ‘life and death’ struggle ensues that ends only when one side gives up the quest in order to save its life. As Hegel explains, each self-consciousness attempts to gain dominance over the other through what he calls work (*Arbeit*), which can be the body, physical labor, power structures, or even (I am suggesting) the challenges of sport. The ‘winner’ of this struggle (the master) is acknowledged as free and independent, while the ‘loser’ (the slave) is forced to relinquish that claim.

The outcome, however, will be precarious and mutually unsatisfying: the slave does not at all succeed in gaining recognition, and the master finds the recognition provided by the slave inadequate precisely because it comes from an un-free self-consciousness. Each side, in different ways, finds itself dependent on the other, and thus the engagement fails to achieve its objective. But the imbalance proves to be merely a temporary stage because the slave finds dignity in the work he is forced to do and so prepares himself, with his new-found strength, to rise up against the master in search of his own recognition. Of course, the next stage in this dialectic will simply reverse the positions of the two antagonists, as the former slave will dominate his former master but find recognition from the ‘new’ slave to be inadequate and unsatisfying for precisely the same reasons the first recognition was inadequate. This back-and-forth dynamic continues, in principle, with only provisional resolutions.

The applicability of this paradigm to sport should be apparent. Hegel’s theory of dialectic provides a structure according to which we can understand the reciprocally constructive engagement of competition. Although not every sporting event unfolds according to the pattern of the Hegelian dialectic, many of the best and most satisfying instances do. Some games, such as soccer or basketball, are structured in such a way as to permit a series of ‘runs’ of energy and execution, with one side and then the other gaining an upper hand. These reversals not only augment the dramatic appeal of the contest but also testify to the respective adequacy of the opponents, which makes the recognition eventually paid to the winner all the more meaningful. The contest ends – in principle if not in fact – when one side cannot respond and so must acknowledge the other’s superiority. This is a bittersweet moment, even for the victor, because it signals the end of the contest and might come sooner than satisfaction requires. The winner enjoys his recognition even though it is somewhat qualified, because it

comes from a loser; the loser finds disappointment in the outcome but has something to gain in a future meeting, because victory over the winner would appear to hold value. And so the competitive paradox is, on some level, irresolvable. Connor explains:

The relation of opponency expresses this relation of reciprocity in struggle in the tightest possible fashion. Because the only way in which I can be free of my opponent is to overcome him, even though I cannot fully overcome him without revealing my dependency on the fact of his acknowledgement of my victory over him, my opponent is simultaneously the avenue to and ambushing of my free selfhood.

(Connor, 2011: 193)

The ascendancy of the dialectic helps explain the fortunate ambiguity of the word ‘better’ in Kretchmar’s account of contest. The opponents try to out-perform their adversaries to gain victory, but because each successive stage of the dialectic (which could be seasons, or matches, or even exchanges within an individual match or game) presents a new standard for the inferior position to match, the responses must improve upon what went before. Each side pushes the other to reach new heights, although the manner in which they push varies according to the structure of the particular sport, as I explain below. In an important sense, it is my opponent who improves my competitive excellence, confidence, and resiliency – all of which are positive or ‘friendly’ effects of the relationship – all while aiming to block and frustrate my efforts in this regard. As a matter of fact, it is probably no exaggeration to claim that if my opponent did not endeavor fully to block and frustrate my efforts, the ‘friendly’ benefits would be empty if not altogether absent.

The emphasis on competitive psychology suggests two considerations. First, one could claim that in competitive sport one competes ultimately against oneself, that the opponent merely objectifies the challenge of playing up to one’s full potential. Such a description would effectively collapse the distinction (drawn by Kretchmar) between tests and contests and makes structural differences between sports less noteworthy. It would also seem to eliminate the need for an ‘unfriendly’ attitude toward the opponent, since the emphasis is now placed simply on doing well rather than doing better than. Some players and coaches provide anecdotal support for this approach when they report that they do not concern themselves with their opponents’ strategies or mindsets, they simply try to ‘play their game’ and let the outcome be what it will be (although, as the next sections explains, this approach works better for some sports than for others). There would seem to be both advantages and disadvantages to this approach. On the one hand, the ‘self-competition’ approach might provide for a calmer and more focused psychology within the event, which might translate into a more effective performance. One could further imagine different motivations for adopting the ‘self-competition’ attitude: either that it helps me play better and therefore win more often, or it simply allows me to enjoy the activity more. On the other hand, it is apparent that the term ‘self-competition’ is something of a stretch, whatever psychological and competitive advantages it might have, because I am not other to myself and I can never be sure that I push myself as hard as an opponent would. The ‘self-competition’ approach seems vulnerable to the same criticisms that Ludwig Wittgenstein (2001) identified in his consideration of the possibility of private language, namely, that one cannot have epistemic certitude about the comparability of discrete experiences (sections 243–71). Unless one is measuring oneself against something objective, such as a clock, it would seem necessary for a competitor to be able to check himself against others to be sure his ‘improvement’ is not delusional. Robert L. Simon explains:

For one thing, an especially significant criterion of improvement is change in one's competitive standing when measured against the performance of others. Perhaps the best way of judging one's progress is to see whether one is doing better against opponents now than in the past.

(Simon, 2010: 29)

Ultimately, the suggestion that all competition is against oneself is a claim about the ontology of selfhood; it denies the constitutive role that another might play in the development of the self. By contrast, the present view argues for a relational ontology of selfhood, well-exemplified by sport: my opponent forces me to find a level of performance and even a dimension of myself that I did not know was there. Seen in this light, the competitive relationship reveals itself to be a positive and irreducible good.

Categories of competition and their respective psychologies

We should resist any reductionism that attempts to interpret all contests as tests, or vice versa. But it is important also to remember that there are a variety of contests, and this implies the second consideration about competitive psychology. Steven Skultety (2011) has argued that philosophers of sport typically emphasize a fairly narrow conception of competitive intentionality and then identify events that employ this psychology, which prejudices what qualifies as competitive sport. 'The result has been a heavy emphasis towards 'head-to-head' sports such as football or boxing, and subsequent generalizations that inadvertently neglect a wider range of competitions' (p. 434). Skultety proposes to begin with the various external structures of competition and then find the purposes and psychologies appropriate to them, rather than the usual method that works the other way around. Developing a distinction between performances and games originally introduced by Suits (2002: 33–4), Skultety (2011: 441) suggests two modes of assessment, 'standardized' and 'vis-à-vis', which determine the success of a performance. The former lends itself to judgment according to a set ideal – say a perfect score in bowling or a flawless gymnastics routine – whereas the latter indicates that the point is to outdo an opponent, whatever level that might require. In addition to this distinction, we recognize two ways in which competitors might interact: competitors can directly interfere with one another's actions, as in tennis or soccer, or they can perform parallel actions, as occurs in golf or in any racing event in which one remains in one's lane. Skultety distinguishes these as 'encumbered' and 'unencumbered' competitions. Taking these two distinctions together gives us four possible types of competition: 1) *vis-à-vis, encumbered competitions*, such as tennis, basketball, and wrestling; 2) *vis-à-vis, unencumbered competitions*, such as swimming and track; 3) *standardized, unencumbered competitions*, such as figure skating and archery; and 4) *standardized, encumbered competitions*, such as bocce ball and billiards. These are all competitions, argues Skultety, but because they set different challenges for the participants and comprise different relationships it only makes sense that they would inspire different competitive psychologies. It would be very strange, to say the least, if a gymnast and a boxer were to approach their competitions with the same mindset. And yet we cannot deny that each engagement is, in its own way, intensely competitive.

Skultety provides an important corrective with this article, although he admits that some events do not fall neatly into his categories (for example, some sports, such as downhill mogul skiing, combine standardized and vis-à-vis elements), and it also would appear that the distinctions are not absolute. For example, the standards in a performance sport like diving might evolve as a result of vis-à-vis competitions, as the innovations of past performances will

continually explore possibilities, which might make some elements mandatory in future programs. Similarly, the distinction between encumbered and unencumbered competitions might permit of some discussion. Skultety claims that in encumbered competitions the opponents ‘affect one another’s behavior’ and in an unencumbered competition the opponents ‘participate in the event without directly interfering with one another’ (2011: 441). But this raises interesting questions about what it means to affect or interfere with another’s actions in a sporting event. For example, in golf, which Skultety holds up as a prime example of an unencumbered sport, it is easy to see how one player could force the hand of another. Imagine a tournament coming down to the final hole, with the top two players separated by two strokes. Let us say the leader hits first and decides to play aggressively (perhaps imprudently); she hits a shot that carries over the pond in front of the green and sits with a 30-foot putt. At this point, the second player really has no choice but to try to carry the pond as well, because it is extremely unlikely that the two-stroke difference can be made up unless she gets up and down from where she lies in the fairway, and even then she will have to hope that the leader misses two putts. This example shows how both distinctions – between standardized and vis-à-vis, and between encumbered and unencumbered competitions – might be tweaked slightly to explain specific situations, although this does not detract from their general explanatory power.

The virtues and vices of competitive sport

It is no secret that many consider competition in all its varieties to be fundamentally problematic, and for a number of reasons: it operates (apparently) according to zero-sum logic, in which the success of one participant is inversely related to the success of others; it seems, for this reason, to encourage selfishness and aggression, which may spill over into violence, and it tends to put too much strain on rules, as competitors look for all possible advantages in the contest, sometimes at the expense of the regulations. As we saw in the first section, all of this might compromise the playful atmosphere of sport or even lead to problems beyond the scope of sport. Perhaps there is no solution to this tendency. As D. Stanley Eitzen (2001) remarks: ‘Some believe that competition is the behavioral equivalent of gravity, a natural and inevitable force’ (p. 235). In this section I address some concerns about the value of competition in sport.

There are two ways of exploring the problematic character of competition. First, we can approach it as an epistemological issue. An overemphasis on competitive results has a tendency to obscure other important facets of the event that a more sensitive observer would appreciate. Edwin J. Delattre (1976) argues that what really makes sport worthwhile are those intensely dramatic moments in a contest when everyone is fully put to the test: ‘The best and most satisfying contests maximize these moments and minimize respite from pressure. When competition achieves this intensity it frequently renders the outcome of the contest anti-climatic, and it inevitably reduces victory celebrations to pallor by contrast’ (p. 134). The epistemological mistake particularly characterizes partisan watchers of sport, those who are so intensely invested in the outcome of the event that they fail to acknowledge – or possibly even notice – the grace and beauty of the action, the various displays of virtue, the teamwork involved in organized plays, and countless other details, especially when they issue from the opposing side. Stephen Mumford (2012) draws a contrast between the ‘purist’ and the ‘partisan’ at a sporting event, and shows how they quite literally ‘see’ different events because they bring different sensitivities to the contest (pp. 15–24). His discussion persuasively argues that a preoccupation with winning and losing can actually limit an observer’s appreciation of competitive sport. It is interesting to speculate that, ironically, modern sport culture encourages both devotion to and disrespect for the game, and for the same reason.

Second, we can consider the problematic character of competitive sport as a moral issue. Indeed, a plausible argument could be made that most of the bad effects of sport are caused by an overemphasis on winning and losing. Competitors naturally look for any edge in a contest, but if they do this without regard to other values, the overall appreciation of sport will suffer. The rules will then appear to be mere obstacles to a desired objective, rather than conditions that essentially create a desirable form of life, and the opponents will likewise seem to be enemies that need to be vanquished and silenced. These attitudes will manifest themselves in cheating and a total disregard for the principles of sportsmanship. For example, contestants with this attitude will try to gain advantages by altering the equipment of the contest, such as when baseball players cork their bats, or even by altering themselves, such as when they take banned performance-enhancing drugs. Even worse, arguably, is the regard the opponents develop for one another: any expression of joy by one's opponent, particularly at the moment of victory, will offend, and any opportunity to unnerve or even injure the opponent is taken. For example, consider the 'bounty' scandal in the National Football League, where an obsession with winning led some players and coaches to reward financially those teammates who caused serious injury to opposing star players. Of course, this is (fortunately) an extreme example, but it illustrates how pathological the thinking can become when the proper appreciation of competitive sport is lost. Nicholas Dixon summarizes:

Putting winning and losing in a saner perspective may reduce the motivation to resort to cheating, distasteful forms of gamesmanship, and trash talking and other forms of taunting. And, while the desire to win is a necessary ingredient of competitive sport, realizing that winning is not the be-all and end-all of athletic excellence may help foster the cooperation that is part of healthy competition and prevent it from degenerating into alienation.

(Dixon 1999: 26)

In addition to ugliness within the contest – as if that were not enough – we can also mention two spillover effects. First, the vices developed by the players within the competitive event might carry over into their non-sporting lives, so they tend to see every social encounter as an opportunity to demonstrate their superiority or to flout rules as they pursue their objectives. We often hear defenders of competitive sport celebrate the edifying effects of the activity, particularly on youth, but, if sport were driven by misplaced values, it would hardly surprise us that its effect would be deleterious. Secondly, we also witness the effect an emphasis on competition has on non-contestants, such as fans, owners, parents, and sponsors. They very often mimic the emotions and attitudes of the contestants: fans sometimes shout out personal and derisive comments at members of the other team, cheer injuries to opposing players, and even engage in violent displays following their teams' victories and defeats.

These are all problems, of course, but are they specifically *competitive* problems? In other words, do these bad displays spring directly from competition *per se*, or are they better understood as distortions of a genuinely competitive spirit? I want to suggest that, at least in principle, the problems outlined above – however paradoxical it might sound – evidence too little competitiveness rather than too much. Genuine competition is animated by what Suits (2005) calls a 'lusory attitude', which is a willingness to abide by constitutive rules that make the achievement of an ordinary task unnecessarily difficult. For example, in golf the 'pre-lusory' goal is to place the ball in the hole, but the game specifies the means through which one can legitimately accomplish this goal and thereby succeed in golf, which is the 'lusory' goal (p. 54). Competitors, therefore, simultaneously seek two things: victory (the objective of the endeavor)

and challenge (the difficulty of the endeavor) – and are tenacious about both. A competitor really wants to win, of course, but also really wants to comply with the rules because they define the activity. Anyone who refuses to accept either of these conditions is not competing (no matter what the activity looks like). A cheater gives the appearance of competing but fails to accept the conditions of the contest; it makes no difference, in principle, if he picks up the golf ball and carries it to the green, or corks his bat to get an edge in his confrontation with the pitcher. Likewise, a competitor who engages in cheap gamesmanship, employs dangerous or illegal hits on the field, or otherwise denigrates the integrity of the opponent shows a profound misunderstanding of their relationship, and thereby undermines the prestige of the endeavor.

The lusory attitude logically implies that competitiveness is something like an Aristotelian virtue. Just as one cannot be too courageous, one cannot be too competitive – although we know, of course, what those descriptions intend to criticize. When people talk about ‘too much courage’ they really mean the vice of recklessness, which Aristotle (1962: Book II, cc. 6–9) describes as not courage at all. Similarly, when people describe someone as ‘too competitive’ they typically describe various personal vices that become manifest in a competitive context. Extreme competitiveness is not, for example, what explains the habit of throwing golf clubs to vent frustration over missed putts, or screaming at umpires to protest close calls; extreme competitiveness is, rather, a kind of persistent vigilance in a contest in order to give oneself every opportunity to win, particularly on a tough day. It is a ‘never give up’ attitude in the throes of contest, a commitment to thorough preparation, and a genuine love for the lusory challenges (including the activity of the opponent) that define the sport. When things are going well, a true competitor senses her opportunity and moves in for the ‘kill’; when things are going poorly, a true competitor hangs in there, looking for the moment that can turn the tide. As long as one is equally tenacious in upholding the constitutive rules and the spirit of the contest, one cannot be too tenacious in the pursuit of victory.

How does the virtue of competitiveness manifest itself? Consider an example recounted by William J. Morgan (2006), from the 1967 German International Tennis Championship. The final featured Hungarian Istvan Gulyas and Czech Jan Kukul. They were virtually tied late in a five-set match when Kukul was suddenly overtaken by severe leg cramps. The rules give an injured player a specific amount of time to recover and the opportunity to seek medical attention, but even after the allotted time, Kukul was unable to continue. Gulyas could have claimed victory at this point, but instead he petitioned the umpire to allow his opponent more time. More time was indeed granted, and Kukul came back and won (Morgan, 2006: 15–18). There are a number of ways of interpreting Gulyas’s gesture. On the one hand, it seems to represent an exemplary instance of sportsmanship, patience, and generosity; on the other, it might seem foolish or even inappropriate for Gulyas to decline the victory, because he successfully campaigned to have a pre-established rule bent to accommodate an apparently less fit player, setting a problematic precedent. But it is hard to believe that his actions were motivated by pure unselfishness; he wanted to play the match out to have the satisfaction of a complete victory, and he wanted his opponent at more or less full strength. Once play resumed, we have to believe that he rediscovered his competitive fire and did everything he could to defeat Kukul – or else he was a fool. One could debate precisely how Gulyas’s character was revealed in this incident, but I would suggest that the primary virtue is competitiveness, which manifests itself simultaneously as magnanimity and as self-interest, because that reflects the spirit of the lusory attitude and the meaning of the competitive relationship.

Some critics of competitive sport insist that even in its best instances – that is, when contests do not descend into violence, the players do not resort to cheating, or we do not see

unsportsmanlike displays, etc. – one cannot deny that the zero-sum logic of competition presents insuperable conceptual difficulties, because the result of a contest is necessarily inequality. If ‘competition’ means anything, it means inevitably that someone will win and someone will lose, and so the dynamic tension between the ‘friendly’ and ‘unfriendly’ elements identified above will be resolved always in an unfriendly way. In response to this challenge, Simon (2010) presents a persuasive defense of the competitive engagement, emphasizing the cooperative basis presupposed by the antagonism and the intrinsic rewards of the confrontation. He defines competition as ‘a mutual quest for excellence’ (pp. 24–38), which nicely summarizes the moral appeal of the foregoing:

Underlying the good sports contest, in effect, is an implicit social contract under which both competitors accept the obligation to provide a challenge for opponents according to the rules of the sport. Competition in sports is ethically defensible, in this view, when it is engaged in voluntarily as part of this mutual quest.

(Simon, 2010: 27)

The key concept in this definition is mutuality, which implies not only simultaneity but also interactivity and reciprocity. If we employ Skultety’s categories, we might say that sometimes I pursue excellence *with* you (typically in unencumbered or standardized competitions), but sometimes I pursue excellence *through* you (typically in vis-à-vis competitions).

This still does not completely resolve the issue of zero-sum logic, but it does mean that our successes are functionally inseparable, even if the results imperfectly express that. ‘Although not all competitors can win, there is a sense ... in which all the competitors in a well-played contest can meet the challenge and achieve excellence’ (Simon, 2010: 29). We might say that a zero-sum structure creates an occasion for a host of non-zero-sum values, because only in a context in which it matters deeply whether one wins or loses would we recognize the heroism of an underdog’s valiant although unsuccessful effort, the transcendent value of teammates joining purposes for a common good, or the ‘sweet tension which seeks both continuation by further action and resolution by winning the point’ (Fraleigh, 1984: 90). The outcome of a contest provides one measure of what transpires between contestants, but other values matter as well, as Dixon, Delattre, Simon, and others have pointed out. Furthermore, we must always remember that competitive sport is, for virtually all of its practitioners, a form of life rather than a single episode. We return to the game over and over – sometimes to defend and validate past successes, sometimes to reverse, or at least improve upon, past failures, and sometimes to begin a fresh narrative with a new opponent. Kretchmar (2012) makes the point well: ‘For sportspersons, no game (aside from unusual circumstances) is the final game. No victory or defeat (apart from lopsided outcomes) offers a conclusive verdict. This pushes attention of competitors to the future, to the next chance, to the next inconclusive outcome. Hope, it would seem, is the lifeblood of the winner and loser alike’ (p. 113).

Conclusion

Competition is a familiar form of human sociality, and sport is the paradigmatic instantiation. In competitive sport we deliberately set up encounters that are at once cooperative and antagonistic, and that test the human spirit as much as the body. Precisely because the structure is contrived, the engagement acquires meaning and moral significance; because the opposition is sincere, the relationship promotes respect and edification. Competitive sport is *about* nothing other than competitive sport; in principle, the antagonists seek out the struggle for its own

inherent value and not as a means to any extrinsic reward. And thus we can say, without contradiction, that competitive sport is both playful and diversionary and yet deadly serious, in its own way. As Delattre says:

It matters whether we win or lose. It also matters whether we play the game well or badly, given our own potential and preparation. It matters whom we play against and whether they are worthy of us, whether they can press us to call up our final resources.

(Delattre, 1975: 139)

It is possible, of course, to misconstrue the nature of competition in sport, as well as the place of sport in society. These dangers are well-known and recommend our constant vigilance. But, rightly understood, the competitive dynamic in sport presents an opportunity for constructive human engagement, for moral aspiration and moral achievement, and for irreplaceable satisfactions. In its best instances competitive sport contributes significantly to the good life.

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