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The point and purpose of sport – a few considerations

ABSTRACT

Self-validation and self-improvement, peer and public approval, sense of purpose and understanding of greatness are components of the motives for doing sports. But when it comes to professional involvement in sports, the stakes get high and the reasons dramatically shift. However, although the present major concern of theoreticians is the emphasis on the contemporary industrialization of sport, the discussion about its aspects can only be plausible if the history of sport's development gets taken into account, for the motive and justification of sport have always been greatly influenced by the broader cultural context of the communities, making sport a significant part of the relation man-world and thus prone to different approaches. Sport has evolved rather ambivalently, from a mere physiological need for survival to a part of sacred rituals, to profane entertainment and sacred involvement again, and to a realm for exhibiting mechanisms of power (coming from the spirit of competitiveness and togetherness) and a lucrative "machinery". Hope remains that understanding the development of its purpose would shed some light on its present purpose, facilitating the direction of further, more focused investigations.

Key words: sports, culture, action, sacred, game, purpose, meaning

Introduction

Of all the enterprises from the human past, sport might be one with the most curious directions of evolvement. It has always been an ineluctable part of the life of the community and of the personal involvement in action. Sport as a phenomenon can be analyzed through several aspects of its development and meaning, and through several

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philosophical theories. Of course, the attempt to research anything through some theories, and not others, faces the problem of reductionism, because it highlights the chosen aspects and neglects the ones that were left out. However, when it comes to sport and its point and purpose, any relevant aspect chosen (relevant in the sense of its connection to the very core of the sport as endeavor, action and venture) is complementary to the others, and even when it leaves their analysis out, it offers space for further, only seemingly divergent, and in fact, convergent, line of research.

Those aspects might be: a) the meaning of sport in personal and joint growth – physical and moral; b) the ways sport affects the paths of ethical choices; and c) the ways it can diverge from a moral orientative value into a negative value connected to humans as means and not ends. The theories through which sport might be accounted for might be: a) the theory of the distinction of the sacred and the profane and of the rite as a ludological affair, which closely relates to b) the theory of sport as a game in the broader context of culture seen as a game, as well as in the more narrow (yet, pluri-encompassing) sense of sport having all the major characteristics for the typical behavior of *homo ludens*; and c) the theory for the search of thrill or tension, connected with the meaning and the meta-meaning in sports.

Sport as a major industry in the contemporary world has gone under the influence of political, economical and social circumstances, to be able to shift from one way of organized expression to another, more or less person-oriented one. The problems of the lack of definition for its purpose, and consensus for its point, not so much on an individual, but on a larger social level, as well as the danger of human-objectification of the participants in sports and the possible dangers for their health have accompanied sport since its very beginnings. In the industrialization of sport (even though it is difficult to determine when and how that "industrialization" has occurred and dominated), the same issues are only being enhanced because of their enhanced accessibility and established globality. Those problems might be, only succinctly: the understanding of the initial need to do sports and the question about what that need means on a deeper physiological or existential level; the meaning of personal involvement in a group effort to win and prevail; the question of the treatment of the participants in that effort as objects (whether idolized or only considered as goods); and, in that sense, of exposure to injuries and danger to life along with others, usually implications of the previously mentioned ones. So, to understand where the possible problems for the understanding of sport under the banner of ethical considerations might (or more precisely, do) occur, a broader examination of the cultural impact of sport and its axiological account for the ones involved in it should be proposed. The aim of this brief and reduced analysis is not to show all the aspects of sport in a cultural context during its development, nor link them to the ethical considerations of the currents ethical

surveys and meta-analyses, but just to point several possible explanations of the point of the practice of sport and the purpose of the passion about and dedication to it.

Rituals and sacred affairs

Starting from sports activities as a sheer need in performing and sustaining living skills and improving the ways of survival of the primordial tribes in the distant past¹, sport acquired a new function – being present and respected as a necessary part of the fight for survival in the profane sphere of the life of the community, it was also used as a sort of a bridge between the profane and the sacred. When it comes to understanding sport as a part of the primordial organized life, it must be held present into account how a historical account must be present in mind, to be able to understand how very different the scope of sport was then.² The form might have been similar to the one of the contemporary sports, but the meaning, in the sphere of the sacred, was much more important. In the context of the playful character of the rituals, sport was a game, at the same extent any rite had ludological characteristics. But at the same time sport was not always competitive, or at least not in the modern sense of the word. The competition in sport was always closely related to the feeling of the sacred and thus distant from the purposes of the profane. The unconsecrated action might have been also present, but only as a bridge to a sacred action.³ Namely, Levi-Strauss is fully aware of the playful game-like element in the ritual, consid-

¹ In the sense of protection against the forces of nature or wild animals. Skiing, for instance, wasn't meant to be a competitive activity, but a means of transportation, a way to get from one point in space to another.

² Of all the major sociologists of the twentieth century, Norbert Elias was probably the one who argued most consistently and strongly in favour of a 'historical' or developmental approach in sociology (Eric Dunning, Malcolm, Dominic, "History, sociology and the sociology of sport: the work of Norbert Elias", in eds., Eric Dunning, Malcolm, Dominic, Waddington, Ivan, *Sport Histories Figurational studies of the development of modern sports*, Routledge, London, 2004, p. 5). His view on sport, through the definition of the term (in "The Genesis of Sport as a Sociological Problem", in E. Dunning, ed., *The Sociology of Sport: Selected Readings*, Frank Cass, London, 1971 and "The Genesis of Sport as a Sociological Problem", in N. Elias, Dunning, E, eds., *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986) is that "sport" can be used in a general sense to refer to non-work related forms of physical activity, which may, but does not need to, include an element of competition; and, more concretely, to refer to a group of competitive physical activities which are specifically "modern", as in, having started to appear in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This involved a process of formulating and writing down explicit, comprehensive and non-ambivalent precise rules, nationally and internationally standardized; an understanding of an ethos of "fair play" and equal chances; as well as a better, or more strict control of the opportunities for violent physical contact and the chances for the infliction of injuries.

³ It is the theories working on and around the sacred in mythological context that elaborate this, sometimes too strongly, like Mircea Eliade's account scattered in his works (in fact, in all his works on religion one can find his emphasis on the sacred as ontologically superior and the profane as a means to shift into sacred action). Claude Levi-Strauss upholds this in *Structural Anthropology* and *La pensée sauvage*, for example, but with a lighter approach, as does Lucien Levy-Bruhl in his research of the primitive mentality, keeping into mind that not all action is oriented towards reaching a reactualization of the sacred, which one might object to Eliade (and, to some extent, to Levi-Strauss).

ering game as a sacred part of the acknowledgment of the circle of life. Every game is defined with a set of rules that enable non-limited number of reruns, but the ritual, also played out, looks more like a privileged competition chosen between offered possibilities and set to make a balance between two groups.⁴

Johan Huizinga in the broad ludological theory⁵ notices how children play dedicated with a sort of sacred seriousness, and how sportsmen and musicians get almost lost in what they're creating, again, with a sacred involvement. But we cannot deny their awareness about the nature of that involvement – as they always know it is a game. The aforementioned sustain of the circle of life and sports very often linked, not only in primordial communities and the early mythologized Christianity, but also today in the secluded tribes protected from the influence of modern civilization, and also proliferated in disguise in many sacred actions. Or, it can be said that the feeling of the sacred in dedicated activities remains very much present not only in temple-shrine-credent circumstances but also in the seemingly very profanized realm of sport today. The question is whether the industrialization deprives it from this precious component or makes it even more pronounced.⁶ When it comes to sports activities in the tribal setting, Levi-Strauss reminds that the game as a competition must be seen differently in the tribes that treat it as a part of the cult, than in the modern constellation of different stakes. For instance, some tribes of New Guinea were taught extremely easily how to play football, but they could not grasp the point of the sport. They repeat the game as much times as it is needed to establish a full balance between the times each side has lost or won. The game is clearly a ritual. The sport is clearly a ritual.⁷ And when it comes to the high stakes of the sport industry, the high stakes of sport back then must be taken into consideration as well. For example, the Fox tribe has a complex set of rituals to enable the soul of the departed to pass to the other world without rancor. So that the soul can pass on assuming the position of a guardian spirit, there is always a sport competition to ensure the passage. Two sides are ad hoc chosen to rep-

⁴ Balance is not something that is being emphasized in sports as a competition, as it is exactly the shift of balance that makes the winners and the losers.

⁵ His book *Homo ludens* is an excellent overview of almost all cultural involvement as a game.

⁶ Man's knowledge of the sacred is not completely a result of man's endeavors; it is not initially the end product of man's rationalistic reasoning. Man knows the sacred because the sacred reveals itself to him (to mankind) - hence the concepts of hierophany, kratophany and other types of revelation (just a few examples might be Mircea Eliade, *Images and Symbols, Studies in Religious Symbolism*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1969, p.17 et passim, *Patterns in comparative religion*, Sheed and Ward, New York, 1958, pp. 4, 39, 452, 39, 446-448, 452, passim; also, the entire *The Sacred and the Profane* includes frequent emphases on this). But, in the sense of modern sport, can we really speak of hierophany? Is it really symbols of the sacred, that is being reached by the sports action, that we see? Doubtfully. And yet, what is the feeling (the sacred is never direct, it is exteriorization of its powers, and the feeling of that exteriorization) of the power and rush of adrenalin and joy while winning if not the exteriorization of a sacred power? It could be advisable that cultural anthropologists joint the efforts of social anthropologist in determining the extent of the (de)sacralization in the modern sports field.

⁷ Klod Levi-Stros, *Divlja misao*, Nolit, Beograd, 1978, p. 74.

resent two halves – one of the living and one of the dead. The sense of this is that the living, before getting rid of the soul of the departed and wining it over, they give them the consolation to play another game, but with the score known in advance – the side of the departed must win.⁸ In reality, reminds Levi-Strauss, in the biological and social game constantly playing out between the living and the dead, the living are clearly the winners. But the sports employed in the entire northern American mythology confirms that winning a sports game symbolically means killing off the opponent.⁹ Also, if during the ritual of playing a fixed game, things go wrong and somehow the side of the living has higher score, it is believed that horrible consequences will occur, the departed soul refusing to protect the tribe as only one of the many. In many southern-american, African and Australian tribes a widely spread practice is the one of attributing a divine protector as the head of a sports team against another divine creature that might or might not be a stronger protector. The game is played to see which of the divinities is stronger so to be sure which to the rites should be targeted, and in the past it was not unusual the entire team that lost to be sacrificed. Or, if it wasn't a corporeal sacrifice, it was a matter of getting a vindictive or ill boding for a certain period of time, in which the team that lost was not protected by the said divinities.¹⁰ In their psychology this might have been even more devastating than actual death – although they were not excluded from the tribe they were not protected by the sacred objects (be it an axis mundi, or any other artifacts¹¹). So the stakes were higher then they are in the industrialized sport, as the endangerment of life or the human dignity wasn't only during the actual sport activity, but also depending on the results, in a way much more substantial than in the contemporary setting.¹²

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In the present situation it cannot be the case. With the attention paid in the last 30–40 years to the diminishing of the exaggerated exhibition of physical aggression and the risk of self-inflicted injuries while performing the sports action, the idea seems ridiculous, for sport is about joint growth and spirit of togetherness. And yet, applied linguistics would find some meaning in the use of phrases containing the words "kill" and "destroy" (as in "they killed us" or "we destroyed you", for example) when conveying results of sports games when one side won with a significant difference in scores.

¹⁰ It would be extremely far-fetched to call sponsors who endorse the sports-persons "the new divine protectors", as they are clearly not divine, only a significant part of the lucrative outcome of sport. But it is true that they do provide protection and not only facilitate, but also enable, the whole activity of the sports-persons who would not get much along without them. The mascots, again, are not to be seen as symbols of totems in a rudimentary and desecralized form, or at least not more than coats of arms, flags, dances, anthems etc., are residues of the totems or tamgas.

¹¹ Axis mundi as the rallying and protective rod marking the "cosmos" territory of the tribes, and also different artifacts close to its sacred strength. In Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, PUF, Paris 1968, p. 50–56 et passim, also extensively in any edition of Mircea Eliade's works, *The Sacred and the Profane, Myth and Reality, The Myth of Eternal Renewal*, for example.

¹² The "loser" of the game today does not lose the previous ontological status, only possibly some material/social aspects of the existence. The winning and the change of status (to "winner", "champion" etc) cannot be seen through the concept of liminality, either, for there is no setting for such a ritual. So, the stakes are less dangerous, as the change coming from the outcome does not include a major change in the ontological setting.

Cultural life and organized competition

If the role of rite and sport in the cultural life of the social groups is being examined, the medieval tournaments spring to mind. The feudal society of the middle ages had a special interest in tournaments. With all the strong dramatization and the aristocratic flamboyance it cannot be actually called a sport. The sport in those staged and pompous set of events was part theatre – part competitive activity. But how is that so different from what we have today in arenas and sports fields? How are the harlequins and marching musicians performing during the breaks centuries ago different from the cheerleaders or famous singers or conceptual artists that are employed to do the same function today? The difference between the theatrical setting of sport of this type and the sport with many similar aspects today is in the possibility of access to it, though. In the medieval times, the active participants were exclusively from the higher classes. As the church suppressed the rating of the physical exercise and the merry trainings (although strong ethnological evidence confirms that often strength was measured through game), even the development of the humanistic ideal for education and the strictly moralistic ideal of the reformation and counter-reformation could not fully acknowledge the value of the physical training and the sports achievement. And up until the eighteenth century sport could not assume any other worth other than the light amusement. However, the carnivals, trying to play life itself, and game becoming life¹³, were externally and internally connected to church holidays, as carnivals featuring sports competitions or exhibitions were held during some church festivities, or if not strictly related to an event from the church history or some specific saint, held during the last days of the fasting season.¹⁴ But bioethically speaking, considering the worth of the human dignity and safety, the participants in sports were not treated any better than the other participants in flamboyant carnival-looking activities, like the harlequins, for example, only as means of amusement and fun, not serious members of a seriously important activity.

After the decline of the sacred, sport lost that side of importance. However, it began to assume a new function, transforming itself from amusement into an evolving set of organized and worthwhile competitions. So there is evidence from the last three centuries of sport slowly shifting priorities. Dutch paintings from the seventeenth century picture men seriously playing *kolf*, but there is scarce evidence of organized clubs and societies or any promotion of competition. However, as Huizinga observes, the easiest way to

¹³ Михаил Бахтин, *Литературно-критические статьи*, Художественная литература, Москва, 1986, p. 298.

¹⁴ Well overviewed in Bahtin's *Introduction to the Work of Francois Rabelais and the Medieval and Renaissance Folk Culture* (М. Бахтин, *Творчество Франсуа Рабле и народная культура средновековья и ренессанса*), and in fact, there is no ambivalence there, any relevant work on medieval-renaissance carnival history or history of celebrations refers to this structure of carnivals and thus, the involvement of sports during them.

organize dedicated opponents is by choosing adversary groups with some background – which is a process old as the world itself – village against a village, a school against a school, a borough against a borough. The win is secured only by hard training and the spirit of togetherness, and as groups team up to practice games with balls, especially in the nineteenth century in England, the structure of the modern sport arises. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, sport becomes a game seriously taken. Rules are created and manual books published. Slowly, judges are being trained and journalists specialized. It is no more amusement and play, but high scores are sought after. And, with the bigger systematization and discipline of the game, the game loses some of its playful characteristics, the point is no longer the play itself but the win and the ranking. As professionals distinguish themselves from the amateurs, a line is made between the possible winner and the current player. It is interesting, however, that during that differentiation, sport gets further away from the game and becomes an element *sui generis*, that is not a game, but is still not a reality. Huizinga feels that the connection with the sacred remains only on a distant and suppressed psychological level. Sport, by losing the sacred element, loses the organic relation to the structure of the society it previously had, even when prescribed by the regime. And, although sport is taken to a level of a major spectacle with immensely high expectations, although it concerns major ethical issues constantly offering new fields for theoretical and applied research, although it is such a huge part of life, it is more of an individual exploration of agonal instincts rather than a maker of fruitful social meaning. The general culture creates the sport's stakes, no the other way around. Although the external effects of mass demonstration of need for some sort of a connection are brought to a perfection, it still fails at promoting sport to a culture-making activity. As the factor of the game and the factor of the sacred are forlorn, Huizinga thinks, no matter how important sport is to the participants and the viewers and those who profit from it the most (which are not the viewers and not even the participants), it remains a sterile function compared to the time when it was not organized, disciplined and industrialized.¹⁵ Emphasizing the element of industrialization of sport today in this (Huizinga's) context becomes less comprehensively including, as it slides over its historical development and the shifts of its meaning.

Sport and meaning

The bioethical implications of an action are often influenced by the motive under which such action is undertaken, as intention and consequence cannot be disregarded. As it often happens, not only the reason influences the consequence, but also the consequence starts to influence its very reason (or, in the case of human

¹⁵ Йохан Хейзинга, *Homo Ludens*, Прогресс - Традиция, Москва 1997, pp. 186-190.

involvement, motives instead of reasons). That is why sport as a way to cope with reality, to search for protagonism, and to help shift limits of resistance and perseverance is very important in an ethical discussion, as it is involved in the persons' Weltanschauung. Another theory through which sport might get analyzed is the one on sport as a human phenomenon, but not in its degeneration in chauvinism of the Olympic Games, nor its uses in commercialization, according to Viktor Frankl.¹⁶ Frankl states, however, that as long as sport is seen through the concept of man in the theories of motivation, it cannot be approached as an authentic phenomenon. According to these theories, man is a creature with needs, and tries to satisfy them only in the form of reduction of tension, only to achieve and sustain a homeostasis.¹⁷ Frankl thinks that man is not preoccupied with the internal conditions of the organism, but that is being led through life by something or someone near to him. That is either a purpose he has to satisfy, or a person to love (assuming that the other person is not considered a mean to an end – namely the satisfaction of a need). Or, in other words, human existence, until a neurotic condition changes its meaning, has the establishment of connection with something other and out of himself, which Frankl calls "self-transcending of the human existence". So, sport is not pursued as a means to a release of aggression and tension, but on the contrary, the important significance of it is the striving for rush of pressure. Frankl is convinced of four things: that man is **not** dedicated to a reduction of tension, but that he actually quite needs tension, and that he lives in a constant search for tension; that he lacks tension in the modern way of life and thus himself creates tense situations (as long as that tension is mild, justifiable and non-maleficent).¹⁸ The tension man seeks is not a tension per se, but it is always some task or fulfillment that should give meaning to the otherwise empty life. The existential vacuum is a major frustration in life, the lack of sense accompanied by boredom. So, sport in that sense is a creation of tension and purpose of the existence. According to Frankl, the aforementioned individuality in sport is the most pronounced element. In any sports competition, man is competing with himself. Or at least, that is how it should be. The optimal motivation in sport, the way to achieve the highest results requires that every individual competes with himself, and not with the others.¹⁹ This attitude is opposed to the hyperintention that logotherapy marks as a neurotic habit to pose something as a

¹⁶ The reason Frankl discusses it in this aspect is that he expressed these accounts at a scientific congress covered by the Olympic games in Munich in 1972.

¹⁷ Viktor Frankl, *Nečujni vapaj za smislom*, Naprijed, Zagreb, 1987, p. 89.

¹⁸ V. Frankl, op. cit., pp. 90-91.

¹⁹ This should not be understood solely as a "every man for himself" construction, as the point of sport is to be a part of something bigger than the mere competing individual. Even in group sports, the point is to beat oneself, with winning for the team as a group being one of the purposes. This does not mean disregarding the intervention of the others, for group sports depend on well-synchronized action, but emphasizing the individual's intervention,

goal of the effort, a main center of attention. Paradox intention is a logo-therapeutic technique made to abolish the effects of the hyperintention. Only by posing oneself as an opponent one will win – just because one is trying to beat oneself.

The perspectives of sport and the arising issues

The self-validation and self-improvement, the seeking of a peer and public approval, and a sense of purpose are all motives to do sport. A worry in the existential field of seeing sport is that the individual and social purposes have lost much of the "individual" and much of the "social". Namely, they have become involved in the modern industrialization of sports, where they get steered by the global interest in the action undertaken; not by the initial point of participating in a joint competitive action involving physical fitness and prowess, skill and accuracy; but a general mise-en-scene with entertainment and profit as goals (not that sport, as previously established, has not been seen as entertainment during its development). When it comes to professional involvement in sports, the stakes get high and the motives shift – personal growth becomes second to, per example, growth of the number of fans, bets placed, endorsements gotten.

Right after sport has shifted from a game to a commercialized affair on a larger scale (if we're now sliding over the individual aspects of creating greatness), it presents a huge conglomerate of ethical problems. The purpose of it gets lost in the frantic brands and trend-setting, the advertisement, as well as, although less relevantly, the musical and entertainment industries that do justice to their distant predecessors from the middle ages. Its meaning as a self-seeking facilitator becomes superfluous as the external and exposed aspect gets emphasized. At some point sport gets lost in that machinery, thus losing the little of the playful meaning left in it. On a bioethical level, a substantial number of particular sports with varying degrees of popularity and health-threatening characteristics present a fertile field for analysis, because of the treatment of the body and the sensation of the deconstruction of body and action. The concept (voluntary or involuntary) of the body as means, detached from the perception of the entire person was present ever since sport stopped being a way of survival and became a different part of the evolving culture. There is also the problem of the recruitment of children. As children are most susceptible to trainings and improvement, they start doing professional sports at a rather fragile age. They also get involved in entertainment and advertising. The risk for permanent damage on their health and on their psychological growth can be compared to, but

in securing that the addition is better executed, more useful, better in general, than any others that might take place in similar circumstances.

might also be much more pronounced, as it leaves permanent damages, than in children involved in other demanding parts of public life, like touring and competitions in music or theatre (as the latter ones keeps their abilities to perform and do not wear out the very thing that makes them special – like the arms or knees in sports-persons). The processes of buying and selling players has nothing to do with dignity or self-improvement, nor can it be compared to tribal distribution of roles in teams in rituals. On the contrary, the sports figure involved in such expensive transfers is only seen as object for greater income, or means to greater popularity of the endorsements. Man is being objectified and man is a mean to an end, never an end. The win and the profit are ends. So a process of alienation occurs, of sport's inability to create culture, being in the most part individual and by sport's inability to belong to the individual, being public and controlled.

Sport is becoming more and more interested in astonishing results, younger and fitter competitors, prestigious awards, economico-political endorsers, transgression of the previous boundaries in a more extraordinary way, thus becoming more and more demanding. Further examination in the ways this will continue to affect the people involved in it remains to be a central point in social anthropology, but also gets more attention on an ethical level, more precisely, on the dignified preservation of health and life and the meaning of that preservation in the growing bioethical sensibility.

Conclusion

Sport can be a truly important part of the psychological and moral growth of the person, as long as it is seen as an important social and cultural activity depending on rules and decent moral conduct. However, seen as sport has always been connected to the high stakes of its outcome and results, and thus the risks of their implications, it has always posed as an ambivalent part of human action.

While it gets scrutinized and critiqued, sport is also undoubtedly endowed with great ability to bring together, to strive for greatness and perfection. The history of sport as a physiological matter, a non-work-related activity, a playful view on life, a sacred ritual, a social encounter for a greater togetherness and joint achievement of ends shows the shifts in its point and purpose.

However, although it seems that sport is but an overly broad range of individual and social aspects involved and different levels of psychological and social approaches employed, sport remains a manner to relief tension, to bring about faster personal growth and the feeling of belonging to a group, to employ rules and patterns in a playful arrangement and to help understand the value of health and life.