

Play, Performance, and the Docile Athlete
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Discipline

For those dedicated to sport and to athletic play it can be a surprise, though perhaps a useful one, to be reminded that many in our society regard such exertions to be a form of physical tyranny to be evaded at all costs or, at best, imposed only upon those who inexplicably volunteer for it. For all the attention and financial reward lavished on the professionals of the genre and the reflexive acknowledgement that we and our children need to spend more time running and less time sitting, the life of athletic training remains an obscure prospect to many. Moreover, as exercise science advances, its application to the high performance athlete appears to separate the common person even more from the carefully directed and precisely documented life of the kinesiological conscript. In this paper, I explore a view that likens the life of sport to that of mechanical intervention and direction. The phrase in the title, “docile athlete”, is adapted from Michel Foucault’s “docile body”, a term he employs in describing the application of techniques of analysis to the human body as a means of exacting orderly efficiency and predictable control of its capacities.¹ The analogy with sport science is clear and I shall in the following draw out certain of the more obvious parallels. However, there are also some vital disanalogies as well, and it is in analysis of these that we can come to a further clarification of how sport, ideally at least and perhaps practically, differs from mere drill.

The difficulty to be approached is the relationship between play as a spontaneous expression of self and technical performance, where the latter is a largely learned set of skills developed for achieving a given set of ends. I intend to argue that play and technical performance are not only *not* at odds, but that the latter improves the former. This view may be itself at odds with that of the non-participant in sport; it is also evidently at odds with that of, for example, Johan Huizinga, who remarked in *Homo Ludens* that the “spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit; it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness...” (Huizinga 1970, 223-224). He goes on to claim “[i]n the case of sport we have an activity nominally known as play but raised to such a pitch of technical organization and scientific thoroughness that the real play-spirit is threatened with extinction” (Huizinga 1970, 225).²

¹Docile bodies are those that can be “subjected, used, transformed, and improved” (1977, 136). Discipline “produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile bodies’. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an ‘aptitude’, a ‘capacity’, which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it...turns it into a relation of strict subjection.” (1977, 138).

²See also Caillois who remarks that those who play for pay “are not players but workers. When they play, it is at some other game.” (Caillois 1961, 6). Likewise, Suits (1988, 8-9).

While professional sport has much to answer for in terms of the degradation of play (and sport), I hope to show in the following that these statements are false in principle if not always in particular fact. The critique that I shall take on here is not Huizinga's meta-social principle of agonistic binarisms, but a relatively postmodernist one. Drawing on both Foucault's analysis of the elaboration and internalisation of disciplinary practices and structures, both in the configuration of social institutions and in the legitimisation of knowledge claims, and Susan Bordo's examination of contemporary western attitudes to the body, one can develop a critique of modern sport practices that treat the body of the athlete as a physiological machine whose ways can be measured, quantified, developed, improved, and even rebuilt, that can be made the subject of extensive research, that can be analysed in high performance labs and psycho-analysed by sports psychologists—all in the service of producing superior *performance*. In effect, the creation of the docile athlete.

If we are to look at the problem from within this framework, then, there are four generally Foucauldian theses that are relevant to the sport situation.

The first is the claim that there has been, through the modern period, a shift in the exercise of control and punishment from the overt use of force to the development of complex and increasingly subtle systems of regimentation and regularisation of physical movements; that discipline is not so much applied from without as adopted by the subject herself as a routine designed to produce an end that is assumed as necessary or desirable.

Secondly, that in most instances this is not done explicitly or optionally, but is seen as unavoidable or not seen at all—the discipline is internalised and thus self-imposed. The subject conforms with a set of behaviours and expectations as if they were her own best realisation, her own natural identity.³

This then supports, thirdly, the notion that a person has a true self that is revealed through disciplinary practice, if only one will trust oneself to its direction and that of its licensed practitioners.

Finally, (a) that with the post 17th century emphasis on the “scientific” control of bodies and activities there has been a corresponding growth and proliferation of technical disciplines in a wide range of social areas, and (b) that these disciplines are regulatory in at least two respects: they validate knowledge claims and they inculcate the idea that the self/body must be subjected to the oversight of knowledgeable persons (experts).

Play

The basic thrust of the critique that can be posed by way of this postmodernist analysis of power, discipline, and knowledge is that sport is, or has become, the antithesis of the play out of which it grew and eventually mutated. The joyful, *playful*, expression of subjective self that might once have motivated the invention and *playing* of games has been transformed into the pursuit of *performance*: a carefully charted series of routinised movements, not only in the training phase, but increasingly in the execution of the sport competition itself. Success in sport is measured by the degree of skill in producing discrete, quantifiable movements: a performance which is, if not absolutely predictable, can at least be anticipated as occurring along narrow

³Apart from *Discipline and Punish*, most notably in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. One* (1978), but see also “Body/Power” 55-62, “Truth and Power” 109-133, esp. 125, and “Powers and Strategies” 134-145, esp. 141-2, all in the collection *Power/Knowledge* (1980).

lines. Thus, “physical education” becomes the science of producing, for example, hockey or football players who are manageable according to a virtual manual of stimulus mechanisms, easily manipulable, i.e., docile, bodies that will do what is necessary to achieve certain ends that they have absorbed into their being as if their own but that are also in an important sense outside of them. Play, on the other hand, is the anarchic human(e) fundament of expression and innovation, a disruptive element that must be coached out of players at an early stage—unless they are extraordinarily talented, in which case it can be tolerated or excused—or shunted off to down time away from the field of “play”.⁴

It has to be admitted that the critique does have a point here. And yet, there is something profoundly wrong with this picture as well. In part, I think that which side of this question one comes down on depends to a large degree on how one understands the word “play”. To clarify the situation, I will distinguish several senses of “play” that I take to be relevant to the sport context; there are no doubt others, but these will do for going on with.

1: Playing a game/sport. When I suggest to you, “let’s play”, we agree between us to engage in a more or less specific and recognised set of behaviours, with appropriate bodily movements, all according to some set of rules and conventions. One of the important things to note here is the intersubjective nature of this play, not only in the sense that we engage in an interplay of subjectively initiated physical movements, but that the rules and conventions that govern this interaction as well as the meanings of our actions are determined by an interpretive consensus. This is true whether we decide to play a game that is already culturally available or opt to devise one all our own, whether it involves teams as opposed to individuals, or whether it can properly be called a game or sport.

2: To play-at. To pretend; to employ, perhaps in order to mock, the forms of “serious” play for other ends, perhaps deconstructive ones. I will not be discussing this in this paper, but point out that this sense of “play” is dependent on the intersubjective background that is presupposed in any given instance of sense 1.

3: A play. This is a fixed set of movements, performed by one player or several, that may or may not have been planned or practised in advance, designed to gain some advantage or attain some end consistent with play in the first sense (for our purposes, this will include fouls as interpreted by the rules of the sport in question).

4: To play. Spontaneous self-expression in movement, as either
 (a) an improvisational response to a dynamic situation, or
 (b) a purely subjective expression of self; this second can slide easily into the next sense.

Hyland’s conception of play/playfulness as “responsive openness” captures a portion of what I intend in (a). He elaborates this notion as occupying “a precarious balance *between* mastery and submission in such a way that an excess of responsiveness easily devolves into mastery, an excessive openness into submission” (1977, 45). The relevance of this for what I want to draw attention to here is its emphasis on the importance of a directed yet adaptive response to a dynamical situation. Just as Hyland suggests that this attitude or stance subsists on a continuum that can dip to one side or the other, as closed rigidity or indeterminacy, I would also suggest that one can express oneself in play well or badly, not only in respect of technical skill, but in that one’s play can be the externalisation of authentic creativity or

⁴This Apollonian-Dionysian opposition appears to be expressed by Huizinga as well; see 1970: 223-225.

unimaginative reduplication; hence (b).

It is also important to note that what I want to capture here is not simply *paidia*. While one could certainly wish for that sense of spontaneous playfulness to which Caillois refers (1961, 28), I want to call attention to its expression (i) as *this* person's translation of the joyful spirit of play into concrete action within or without structured sport (*ludus*, for Caillois) and (ii) this manifestation of play as the expression of one's own self; in other words, one's play as uniquely oneself and one's own, both objectively and subjectively.

5: Playing-with someone, as a selfish withdrawal from intersubjective connection—this is the degeneration of play as an expression of joy to showing off and eventually “showing up” another (but beyond these comments I will not be discussing this further here).⁵

It seems to me that the critic and the sport-apologist might well find themselves arguing at cross-purposes. It's not simply that the critique opposes **play** to sport, but that it understands the “play” incorporated within sport to be exhausted by senses **1** and **3**, the rules and techniques of the game or competition in question, while holding back **4** for itself as a privileged meaning. If sport is indeed only concerned with play in the first and third senses, then the critique may well be correct. But if sport includes more than this, if it includes or even *requires* play defined in terms of spontaneity, either as improvisation or self-expression, then the critique, while not therefore wrong in its entirety, is at least incomplete. This is not, however, to deny its usefulness as a critique of a conception of sport as an entirely mechanical and joyless pursuit of quantifiable performance at the expense of the spontaneity of play. Let us turn now to consider the relation between sport and play in the sense outlined in point **4**.

Performance

Insofar as sport is defined as performance in the pursuit of excellence it would appear that there is little if any room for play of type **4**. Depending, of course, on what “excellence” refers to, and “performance”. In common parlance, a superior athletic performance is one where the athlete runs faster, jumps higher, scores more points, or executes the required figures with greater exactitude than the other competitors. Performance in this sense can be statistically verified and recorded. Play cannot. Play vanishes and can only be remembered.

Performance can be trained. It requires the mastery of technique and it requires discipline, both in the sense of a subjective self-control and in the sense of a detailed and specific knowledge of the sport and how to produce the movements required by that sport. It requires expertise. In these respects, performance is indeed a product of the kind of disciplinary practices described by Foucault.

This is what is involved in the devising of training plans and the analysis of sport-specific movement; the prescription of training drills is an outcome of the development and growth of a body of expert knowledge and the certification of experts to administer such knowledge on the bodies of athletes. And so we get Training Centres, Sports Institutes, and Faculties of Kinesiology. Consider the following example, taken from a Rowing Canada coaches' training

⁵Suits (1977) discusses playing-with and remarks that the attitude implies a lack of seriousness in one's approach to that with which one plays. This would be true in a destructive way in the kind of situation I envisage here; this may in fact be a good part of what is annoying in such an attitude: someone who plays-with us in this sense is not taking *us*, much less our play, seriously. At best this may be time-wasting; at worst, it can be insulting.

manual, that recalls much of the flavour of the examples of handwriting practice and rifle drill that Foucault cites as examples of the instruction of the docile body.⁶ It describes one element of the “drive”, which is one element of the entire rowing stroke, and it is a movement the duration of which is typically less than one second:

“3. Release

- legs flat and knees locked out – flat platform
- body angle approximate 15 degrees
- head and shoulders bowward of handle
- firm and erect lower back
 - no slumping
 - seat stationary, not rolling back towards the stern as the oar is released
- legs down hard, upper lumbar region (trunk) finishes the swing as the arms complete the pull
- shoulders relaxed
- outside elbow level with handle
- outside forearm parallel to the water
- outside elbow closer to the midline of the boat than the inside elbow

⁶“The pupils must always ‘hold their bodies erect, somewhat turned and free on the left side, slightly inclined, so that, with the elbow placed on the table, the chin can be rested upon the hand, unless this were to interfere with the view; the left leg must be somewhat more forward under the table than the right. A distance of two fingers must be left between the body and the table...The right arm must be at a distance from the body of about three fingers and be about five fingers from the table, on which it must rest lightly. The teacher will place the pupils in the posture that they should maintain when writing, and will correct it either by sign or otherwise, when they change this position’ (La Salle, *Conduite...*, 63-4). A disciplined body is the prerequisite of an efficient gesture.” (1977, 152)

“Bring the weapon forward. In three stages. Raise the rifle with the right hand, bringing it close to the body so as to hold it perpendicular with the right knee, the end of the barrel at eye level, grasping it by striking it with the right hand, the arm held close to the body at waist height. At the second stage, bring the rifle in front of you with the left hand, the barrel in the middle between the two eyes, vertical, the right hand grasping it at the small of the butt, the arm outstretched, the trigger-guard resting on the first finger, the left hand at the height of the notch, the thumb lying along the barrel against the moulding. At the third stage, let go of the rifle with the left hand, which falls along the thigh, raising the rifle with the right hand, the lock outwards and opposite the chest, the right arm half flexed, the elbow close to the body, the thumb lying against the lock, resting against the first screw, the hammer resting on the first finger, the barrel perpendicular’ (*Ordonnance du 1er janvier 1766...*, titre XI, article 2).’ This is an example of what might be called the instrumental coding of the body.” (1977, 153)

“Discipline...poses the principle of a theoretically ever-growing use of time: exhaustion rather than use; it is a question of extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces. This means that one must seek to intensify the use of the slightest moment, as if time, in its very fragmentation, were inexhaustible or as if, at least by an ever more detailed internal arrangement, one could tend towards an ideal point at which one maintained maximum speed and maximum efficiency.” (1977, 154)

- maintain lateral pressure at release
- head level
- trunk passing vertical as the shoulders start to draw back leading to the bending of the arms
- both hands push down to extract the blade from the water
- bottom edge of the blade should clear the water before the feathering action begins
- feather the blade with the least amount of inside wrist action
- the wrist joint of the outside hand should remain level with the top of the handle at all times throughout the stroke cycle
- the handle remains horizontal during the drive to the point of release
- the handle follows the line of the thighs to the point where the oar is one blade width off the water surface
- it maintains a horizontal path to the point where the catch action is initiated.”⁷

Execution of this particular technique is crucial to efficiency and speed of the boat, i.e., performance.

These sorts of considerations suggest that play and performance are indeed distinct, perhaps incompatible, activities. In “Tricky Triad: Games, Play, and Sport” (1988), Suits distinguishes performance sports from game sports in a way that excludes the pursuit of ideals of performance from the play of games. The crux of the matter, he argues, is the role played by rules.

In games, artificial barriers are erected just so they can be overcome by the use of rule-governed skills. Rules are the crux of games because it is the rules of any particular game that generate the skills appropriate to that game.

Performances, on the other hand, are not rule-governed in that way at all....[O]nce a performance is under way, there are no rules, or scarcely any, that need enforcing. (1988, 5)

I do not think that this distinction can be maintained as Suits does, for reasons already detailed by Meier (1988), namely, that rules have significantly greater application in “performance sports” than Suits acknowledges, while I also take rules, even though indispensable, to have rather less defining scope in play than does Suits. However this issue may be, my use of “performance” here is by comparison both restricted and broad: “restricted” in the respect that I intend thereby the external, quantifiable *result* of play; “broad” in that as a measurable production it can be manifested in all forms of sport (and many other types of) activity.⁸

⁷Taken from the NCCP (National Coaching Certification Programme) Level 2 Coaching Manual. Rowing Canada Aviron, (2000), page 3-6-2.

⁸As Meier points out (1988, 20), Suits’ example of the offside rule does not support his case, since it is regulative rather than constitutive. I would add that such game rules function very much like performance ideals. This is clearest if we compare points deductions applied in performance (in Suits’ sense) sports with the penalties that are incurred in game sports: failure to play without taking penalties (i.e., getting caught) or a player or team having to commit infractions in order to succeed likewise argues incompetence; penalties are simply indirect

Moreover, “excellence” does not only mean the production of quantifiable results. The term refers to character as well and it can be argued that sport is about producing a fully developed *person*, as well as, perhaps even more than, score sheet results. But this, too, is the outcome of a disciplinary practice, this time exercised on the “soul” as well as the body, a practice that sees the body as an intermediary element in the self.⁹ This simply reiterates the same process but substitutes a more complex object; sport, then, can be seen as a discipline for producing a certain kind of self, but as such it remains a system of techniques for producing (a kind of) performance, one that requires the administration and intervention of skilled practitioners of the science of performance, both physical and psychological.

Either way, though much more evidently in the former case, play, as an undirected and chaotic discharge of physical capacity is wasteful, counterproductive. Training is the efficient use of time and capacity to produce a measurable result, which is the same thing as to say, an improvement in performance. This is also about eliminating uncertainty. Think of it: the coach or manager who goes into the game or competition with no idea whether the athlete will win or not is not doing his job; he or she should (a) know what to expect and (b) is in turn expected to produce performance results, that is, someone who *will* win, not who simply *might*. He or she should be prepared for the uncertainties that a given sport might present and have a plan to nullify their effects. There is no room for vagaries here. Never mind that the net effect of all this is very often, as many of us are aware, stultifyingly tedious sport.

Now, I think it right and proper to resist this reduction of sport to performance, while recognising the validity of much of this critique. It must be admitted that there are a great many sports that do fit the mechanical model to a high degree: shooting and archery, diving and synchronised swimming, gymnastics, and to a slightly lesser degree, track and rowing—though it should be said that the pursuit of perfect technique is not incompatible with the joy of movement (I will return to this point later on). My point is that to reduce sport to technical performance, whichever side to the debate does so, is to confuse a method of sport for the whole of it.

The critique can be seen as buying into a Cartesian or even an Apollonian-Dionysian dualism, as if technique were one thing and play something completely other. But they are not separate things at all. Play is not the anarchic rejection of *ratio*; it is its realisation, that without which all that rational invention would merely describe an empty shell, a purely hypothetical structure.

Playfulness

Rules define any given sport and make it what it is. Effective participation in a sport commonly requires practice or training of some kind in the characteristic movements required in order to perform that sport. However, to say so much is to say surprisingly little about the actual playing of *any* sport, but especially a highly dynamic one, such as a game. This is because in between the constitutive rules and the technical drills there is a great deal of relatively undefined space, and this is where play, especially in the fourth sense, actually occurs. Play is the transformation of the technical skills particular to a sport from hypothetical appropriation

points-deductions and indicate poor performance (in my sense).

⁹ See *The Care of the Self* (1986). I am not seriously countenancing the existence of souls.

to spontaneous creation. Play does require discipline and technique, but it has to be more than its mere reiteration. What has been learned requires subsequent translation, interpretation, innovation, and constant readjustment to an ever variable context. Training and discipline give the player a repertoire of techniques and an enhanced capacity to cope effectively with a range of situations without having to stop and think through every step, but insofar as a sport is dynamic, the athlete will have to respond independently to a wider range of situations than can be anticipated and choreographed in advance. The player will have to improvise, and the better player is the one who can do so both intelligently and without explicit direction. The best player can do this playfully, that is, as an easy and joyful expression of her self.

Play of the fourth type represents the ultimate variable in sport. It is a noncompellable spontaneity; it cannot be invented by training, though training can direct it and give it the tools with which to express itself. While the techniques that constitute the docile athlete may be a *condition* of heightened play (4 or 1), such a disciplined product does not *produce* type 4 play. Play requires the spontaneous subject whose basic impulse is to play. Perhaps ironically, the best analogy here is a somewhat Foucauldian one, namely pleasure.¹⁰ Just as pleasure cannot be forced without becoming torture, play cannot be compelled without becoming mechanical drill or, at best, performance. But the moment that playfulness takes over the performance of play (1, 3), it is no longer compelled. But again, this is not to say that it is undisciplined.

Nevertheless, play, like pleasure, constitutes a potential point of resistance: while the docile athlete submits to practice in order to “discover”, that is, receive meaning from the structures that construct him, the spontaneous exultation of the body in the joy of play (playfulness) persists as a singular point of expression and construction of self, or perhaps rather, “selfness”, that is a *de facto* resistance to the reduction of sport to maximal programmatisation. The playful athlete is open to embodiment’s possibilities rather than engaged in the struggle to subdue its subjective incommensurabilities. To embrace play is to express one’s subjectivity in activity, albeit through the medium of learned movement rehearsed within conventional forms, and to, in effect, declare one’s *subjective embodiment* to be at the centre of one’s self (emphasising both the subjective *and* the embodiment).

Thus, play requires a constant insertion of an agential self and it is in this respect that it persists as a point of resistance to complete submergence under discipline.

Now, it might be objected at this point, especially by the dedicated Foucauldian, that the “self” that responds to the improvisational demand is nonetheless a discipline-constructed one, thereby denying the reality of any true agency. The notion of the independent, autonomous self that can resist all efforts to shape it is itself a construct, a fiction of liberal enlightenment theory. To this I have little in the way of answer—in fact I agree—except to offer the following consideration. William Shakespeare produced his works entirely within the socially recognisable forms of the English language, and a good deal of his work followed strict technical forms, e.g., the sonnets. Thus, his words, grammar, plot structure, mythical tropes, etc., all fell within disciplinary strictures that permitted his work to be understood and assessed, and which were neither unique to him nor within his control, but which were socially located and adjudicated. And yet what he produced was no less unique and expressive of his own genius

¹⁰ Because Foucault maintains that pleasure is a basic impulse that underlies and resists all the institutional pressures to construct pleasure and desire in specific ways: as heterosexual, as perverse, etc. See, for example, *Essential Works of Foucault, Volume I* (1997) 163-66.

and subjectivity for all that. His work is, it seems to me, a form of play (no pun intended). If this analogy is persuasive, then perhaps we could say that sport without play is like grammar without meaning, or at least without poetry or style. *Style* is an interesting and perhaps useful concept here, because style is something that can be demonstrated in almost any sport, even the most “mechanical” ones: a gymnast, a runner, or a crew can demonstrate a self-owned style even in performing a fairly rigidly prescribed set of motions.¹¹ Resistance is possible, just about anywhere.

Conclusion

In the end, I think we have to say that we could have play without sport and sport without play, but that both are significantly enhanced by their combination. In particular, dynamic-context sport would be vastly poorer as a field of fundamentally human endeavour without the unpredictability, the uncertainty, the risk, that play introduces. Moreover, play inserts the subjective into sport, and this is important if sport is to be about beings with intelligence and character, who can fail, not just mechanically, but morally (using this term in a very broad sense). As long as sport is about the athlete/player, then this remains important.

Play and sport, excellence and joy, are not *necessarily* at odds, but, admittedly, the relationship is an uneasy one. Contrary to the quasi-Cartesian view of sport-training, I maintain that the use of discipline and development of technique is properly not subjugation of either self or flesh but the increase of bodily possibilities, especially for the subjective expression of self. Just as discipline gives form to play and increases *its* possibilities, play challenges sport’s purpose and value. Play is the constant questioner, the gadfly, of sport. Where sport threatens to lose itself in too-serious technical elaboration and abstraction, there is always play to puncture the bubble of doctrine and give an itch to authority.

¹¹ Style can be false, affected; this is fashion-adopted because others are doing it, though the athlete has no subjective sense of why other than this.

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