# Breivik, Gunnar, ed. 2017. *Skills, Knowledge and Expertise in Sport*. London & New York: Routledge. *$155 Hardback, $47.95 Paperback, $47.95 E-book*

[**https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2020.1811107**](https://doi.org/10.1080/00948705.2020.1811107)

*Skills, Knowledge, and Expertise in Sport*, a collection of papers edited by Gunnar Breivik, is an excellent resource for those who are interested in the philosophy of skill, know-how (both in sport and in general), and how our embodied nature shapes sport and our sporting performances. It would be (or rather, should be) an interesting book to build an upper-level or grad-level seminar around, due to the ways in which it intersects with other parts of the literature, not just in the philosophy of sport, but in philosophy more broadly.

The chapters all stand alone, and one can dip in and out of the collection, though there are some useful connections between many of the chapters. It covers several major themes. One theme concerns the ways in which a sportsperson can be said to know what they are doing even though they fail if they think too much about what they are doing. Other chapters explore the nature of concepts like skills and know how, trying to draw out the distinctions between them or arguing for a particular understanding of a particular concept; some chapters take a more empirical approach, exploring a sport in depth (there is a chapter each on parkour and rope skipping) in order to illuminate our theoretical discussions. There are important connections to other fields such as phenomenology, philosophy of mind, and epistemology, and several chapters engage with Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus & Dreyfus in some depth. Breivik’s short introduction is valuable, it sets the scene with an overview of some important discussions and briefly introduces the themes and chapters in the collection.

Gunnar Breivik’s opening chapter surveys a range of different views and presents a concise argument for a particular way of understanding what a “skill” is. Breivik also offers a plausible argument that sports are won *through* skills, and other features like luck and courage only let you win if you have the skills already. The distinctions that Breivik draws in delineating the nature of a skill are particularly useful. Breivik argues that skills differ from abilities because skills require some development or training whereas abilities are more natural; skills also admit of grades, which is why we can say that skilled performances are more or less skilful (7-8). Knowledge-how involves having a skill and possessing not an intellectual proposition but an “*objectual* grasp… of what to do… It is a direct bodily skilful understanding of what to do” (11). Someone who had the skill but is now too old to perform it can still know how to perform a certain skill because of this objectual grasp, even if she no longer can perform the skill. Further, a coach (who had never performed the skill) lacks knowledge-how but does have practical knowledge. The coach might be an expert, but they would be an expert *in* kayaking rather than an expert kayaker: according to Breivik, an expert in kayaking has propositional knowledge that they can communicate, for instance they could be a commentator or a writer (13-14).

Breivik’s account of skill, and his distinctions between skills and related concepts, is a useful analysis of an important concept that helps us to better understand the different skills and knowledge required to carry out different roles in sports. Jens Erling Birch’s chapter goes into more depth on know-how. He argues that knowing-how is a form of propositional knowledge, though he is careful to make clear that knowing-how is different from having the ‘acuity’ (29) required to successfully carry out that skill. Arrigo Sacchi, the legendary AC Milan coach, never played to any decent level. Some doubted whether he could be a decent manager, he famously replied: ‘I never realised that in order to become a jockey you have to have been a horse first.’ Breivik and Birch give us the theoretical underpinnings for why Sacchi’s lack of experience does not mean he lacks practical knowledge—he merely lacked particular footballing skills.

Vegard Fusche Moe offers a fascinating insight into the difference between practicing and being in the zone, shedding light on the ways in which athletes know what they are doing and what it is like to exercise a skill. Moe notes that when we are practicing, we can explain what we are trying to do, but often when we are in the zone, we cannot do this. Moe argues that trying involves representing the task as propositions, whereas this is absent when we are in the zone. Nonetheless, when we are in the zone, we act intentionally, but it is *our bodies* that are acting intentionally, not our wills (46). Drawing on analytic and continental sources, especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Moe’s chapter is really interesting, well-illustrated, clear, and compelling.

Øyvind F. Standal and Kenneth Aggerholm continue some of the themes of Moe’s chapter in order to shed light on the value of physical education. They draw on the idea of a habit, found in both Merleau-Ponty and Dewey. They argue that physical education should not just be a way of introducing students to various sports, nor should it be merely a way to promote health. The first approach is shallow, in the second ‘the body becomes objectified as a thing that must be exercised and physical activities become technocratic tools to achieve fitness and health’’ (61). Instead, by seeing physical education as helping students to ‘develop habits that support a healthy life,’ we can justify physical education as worthwhile. Physical education can encourage us to reflect on these habits and can encourage us to develop embodied—not necessarily mental—habits that are responsive and not rigid.

Standal and Aggerholm cover a range of issues related to habits. For instance, they consider the idea that habits dull our experiences, but they suggest that if we develop habits we might become more like connoisseurs who better appreciate the activity. They motivate the idea that we need to better explore the differences between techniques (‘decontextualized aspects…[like] the lay-up in basketball [60])and skills (‘basically the same movements, but performed in context’ [60]), and habits, in order to understand what sort of knowledge physical education should imbue us with (63). Their chapter emphasises the importance of focussing not just on elite performance, but also on average performers—after all, physical education aims not at creating elite performers but average ones (56), and it is worth adding that the vast majority of sports people, no matter where or how they learn, will be far from elite. It is a wide-ranging and interesting chapter that considers an important topic outside of the realm of elite sports.

Jennifer Hardes and Bryan Hogeveen criticise the idea that ‘flow’ is the epitome of sporting practise. They argue that we are always ‘forging new relations’ with others and with the environment, thus they hold that focussing on an individualistic notion of flow as some sort of epitome is too insular and ‘a more ethical account of sporting experience emphasises’ our relations with others (76). I found this chapter heavy going, and many of the concepts they introduced did not make things easier to follow. Some of their claims also struck me as under-motivated. Of course, our equipment shapes what we do, of course we learn our skills from others. There may be insights here, but I don’t see how any of this means that, as they claim, one is not alone when one climbs a mountain without others (72). This just seems to misunderstand what it means to be alone. My issues with this chapter may be due to taste—like with Sookermany’s chapter outlined below—and others may find it more rewarding.

Signe Højbjerre Larsen’s contribution is fascinating. She sheds light expertise and skills by looking at parkour. Larsen’s focus is quite particular, and she does not draw as many conclusions for sports in general as one might want, but her focus on parkour allows her to make several compelling points about how we should understand parkour. Larsen considers how learning parkour involves “informal processes of trying, failing or following role models” rather than (as Dreyfus and Dreyfus [1986] focus on) following rules (82). Her appeal to Sennett’s (2008) notion of craftsmanship was particularly illuminating. She brings out some important similarities between the craftsman and adherents of parkour. For instance, craftsmanship is somewhat akin to play, where adherents both follow rules yet also experiment with these rules to develop them (94); craftsmen and sportspeople try to improve, they try to “get better, rather than get by” (85). Like Standal and Aggerholm’s chapter, this helps to bring out some of the value of everyday sporting achievements: the abilities of a craftsman don’t have to be exceptional, and most of us can develop craftsmanship. Larsen convinced me that Sennet does have “something to offer with this theory of craftsmanship” (90), and not only in understanding parkour or our bodily movements, but in understanding sports more generally.

Katherine Liedtke Thorndahl and Susanne Ravn apply a phenomenological analysis to elite rope skipping. They consider the idea that tools are *incorporated,* they become just like a body part. Thorndahl and Ravn capture some important differences between our incorporation of everyday objects (like a fork) and the ways in which elite athletes, particularly rope skippers, incorporate their tools. This was an interesting application of the thesis of incorporation to a particular practice, and Thorndahl and Ravn use their reflections on rope skipping to modify and develop our understanding of incorporation—though I found that their conclusion, that a skip rope becomes part of the skipper’s identity (105), deserved more elaboration.

Anders McDonald Sookermany’s piece explores the idea of gamechangers and the ways in which they can go beyond the existing game and create new skills. This piece introduced several interesting thoughts, such as distinguishing between game changers who revolutionise how a sport is played and those who change individual matches, and exploring the role of the parachute in the evolution from parachuting, to BASE jumping, via skydiving. But I found much of the discussion overwrought and Theory-laden, shedding as much obscurity as light. Still, those with different philosophical temperaments might take more from it than I did.

The collection is well-balanced; it explores a reasonable range of topics to a good deal of depth whilst leaving room for a number of perspectives and approaches—and the pieces that focus on a particular sport were a welcome inclusion alongside the more abstract pieces. It is also a virtue of this collection that it does not just focus on elite sports and sheds some light on our more mundane sporting achievements, too. The collection serves as an excellent starting point to pursue Breivik’s stated broader aim: to expand interest in skills, knowledge, and expertise in sports outside of ‘Nordic sport philosophers in this issue to sport philosophers around the world,’ encompassing a wide range of traditions and perspectives (4).

I said at the start of this review that this book should be a great resource to build a course around although its cost may be outside the budget that most departments are willing to spend on an edited collection like this, and it is currently too expensive to expect students to buy it as a coursebook. These papers were originally published in *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, and one is encouraged to cite the journal, not the book (vii). Presumably, there have been few changes to the content, and one must assume that the pagination remains the same (although this is never made explicit), so readers may find the original journal more easily accessible than the published book. As a collection of papers on skill and expertise in sport, whether in journal or book form, this is a welcome addition to the literature.

**Works Cited**

Dreyfus, H.L and S.E. Dreyfus. 1986. *Mind over machine.* New York, NY: The Free Press.

Sennett, R. 2008. *The craftsman*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.