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Philosophy of Sport

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- define philosophy of sport and identify the tools of philosophical analysis;
- define and give examples of the internal and external goods of sport;
- describe the two components of athletic integrity;
- explain the aesthetic components of sport and distinguish between aesthetic and nonaesthetic sports;
- describe a healthy democratic society and its implications for sport.

On a recent sports show on ESPN, two guests were arguing about the impact of anabolic steroids on home-run proficiency. One maintained that there is not a shred of scientific evidence that steroids impact one's ability to hit a baseball out of a ballpark. The other argued that if that were true, then ballplayers such as Barry Bonds and Jason Giambi would not have taken such drugs in the first place. Welcome to the world of philosophy of sport!

Because of the tremendous worldwide interest in sport, there is without question a great need for athletes and sports fans, young and old, to be exposed to philosophical thinking about the vital issues in sport. This chapter tries to do just that by taking a selective and summary look at some of these key issues.

What Is Philosophy of Sport?

Philosophy has historically been divided into five chief subdisciplines: metaphysics (study of what is real), epistemology (study of theory of knowledge), aesthetics (study of beauty), ethics (study of how we ought to live), and logic (study of argument analysis). Yet today philosophers study a diverse field of practical issues, from feminism and race relations to conflict resolution and death. Philosophers take many of the same questions that arise with respect to the “big five” and apply these to a broad array of topics. Philosophy of sport is one such topic of study.

Philosophers of sport ask questions such as the following:

- What precisely is sport?
- Is violence an inescapable part of competitive sport?
- Are female athletes inferior to male athletes?
- Does sport affect or merely reflect social mores and values?
- Should certain drugs be banned from sport?

The Five Major Disciplines of Philosophy

- **Metaphysics:** the study of what is real.
- **Epistemology:** the study of theory of knowledge.
- **Aesthetics:** the study of beauty.
- **Ethics:** the study of how we ought to live.
- **Logic:** the study of argument analysis.

- Is the team that wins the championship game always the best team?

For many, answers to these questions may seem unnecessary because the questions themselves seem absurd. What, for instance, would an athlete make of the question, “What precisely is sport?” To a competitive basketball player, a legitimate answer might be, “It’s just what I do. I play basketball.” This, however, is no more satisfactory an answer than pointing to a miniature collie when someone asks, “What’s a dog?” The question of what is sport asks for a definition that relates to all practiced sports or at least distinguishes legitimate from nonlegitimate sports – not an example of a sport. In this manner, philosophy is a **metadiscipline** (i.e., it is not a discipline such as mathematics, biology, or even competitive sport, but one that examines and evaluates disciplines themselves).

What are the tools of philosophical analysis? The primary tool is logic, and the proper application of logic requires intellectual integrity and an open and critical mind.

The Nature of Sport

Competitive sport, if Homer in the *Iliad* is a reliable witness, has its roots in celebratory funeral games in honor of fallen warriors in Greek antiquity. In Book 23, Homer describes competitive events such as the chariot race, boxing, the footrace, shooting the bow, the discus throw, wrestling, throwing



of spears, and fighting in armor (Figure 6.1). The Greek word *athlein* (the root of the English word *athlete*) means “to contend” or “to fight for a prize,” yet it also means “to suffer” or “to endure.” The very contests in which athletes competed were called *agones* (“places of combat,” “arenas,” “contests,” “labors,” or “struggles”), from which we derive our word *agony*. Early competitive sport, then, was preparation for war and the province of males only.

From this meager beginning, there are today thousands of types of sports, from tennis on a court and tennis on a table to competitive poker and strongman/woman competitions. New sports, accessible to both males and females, are constantly being created. The types of sports seem limited only by the human imagination.

Requirements of Philosophical Analysis

- **Intellectual integrity:** a commitment to an honest search for truth, conceptual clarification, or heightened understanding.
- **Open-mindedness:** being open to rationally founded views that are inconsistent with your own.
- **Critical attitude:** an assumption of fallibility as a willingness to entertain all reasonable claims as true, if only provisionally, in an effort to increase understanding for all parties involved.

Thus, philosophical analysis is essentially a cooperative quest for truth.

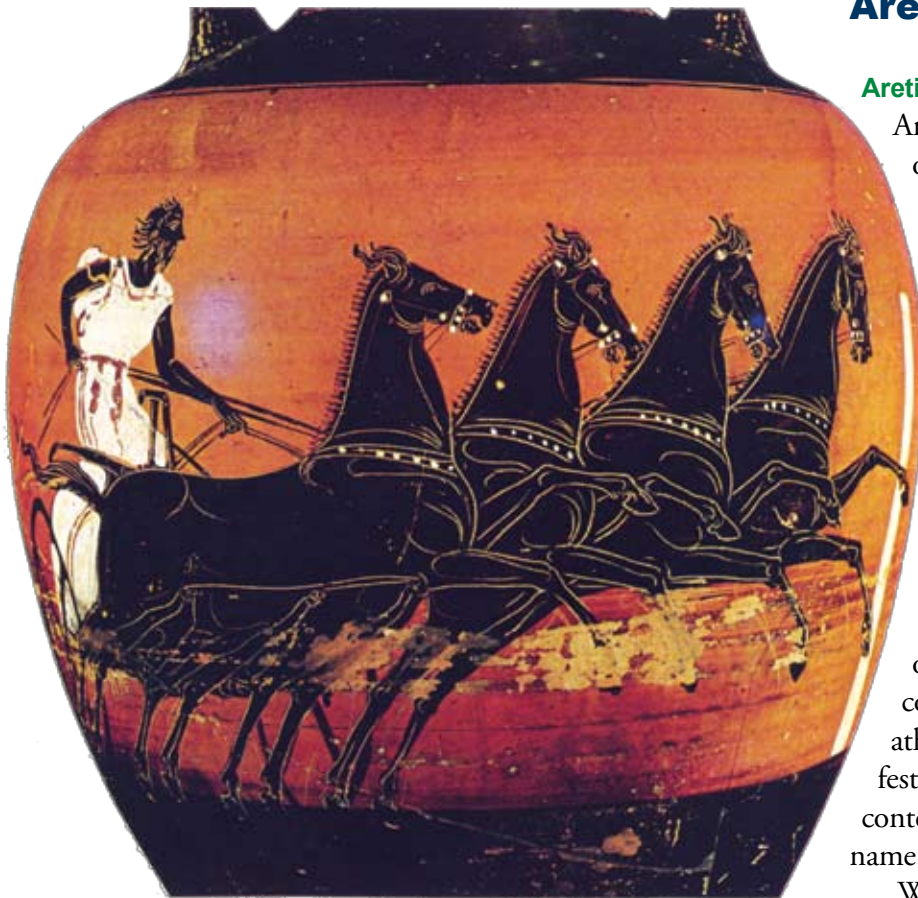


Figure 6.1 Early competitive sport was preparation for war and included events such as the chariot race, wrestling, and boxing.

Aretism

Aretism is the philosophical view developed by M. Andrew Holowchak that maintains the ideal of competitive sports is striving for human excellence. Aretism follows a tradition of contemporary thinkers and draws plentifully from the ancient Greek conception of *arete* (with the general meaning of “excellence” but often translated as “virtue” when used in ethical discourse).

It was part of ancient Greek culture to strive for excellence in many things. Competitive sport was no different. It too was a measure of excellence. Athletic excellence was earned through enduring severe hardships, ultimately for the sake of competing for a prize. And Greeks were competitive in all walks of life. In addition to athletic competitions held regularly at religious festivals such as the ancient Olympics, there were contests for poetry, craftsmanship, and beauty, to name just a few.

What is perhaps non-Greek about aretism is its focus on the striving for and not the attainment of victory in sport. Athletic excellence is a commitment to play hard, to the best of one’s capacity, but also to play fair, with full respect for the dignity of self,



others, and even the sanctity of sport as a social institution. Thus, it is not victory that is most praiseworthy, but how victory is won.

Excellence in competitive sport, then, is not just the excellence of any particular athlete or any distinct manner of doing something with an eye to excellence in athletic competition. Excellence in competitive sport is the excellence of sport itself—the values that all athletes who consent to engage in fair and honest competition with others ought to embrace. Aretism thus has an inescapable ethical component. It recognizes that the core values of competitive sport are not internal to sport but rather are those of human beings in the world at large. As a social institution, competitive sport can substantially contribute to moral contamination or moral betterment within a community, a society, or even the global human community. Athletes, committed to excellence through athletics, strive for moral and social betterment through three levels of integration: excellence through self-fulfillment, excellence through social integration, and excellence through integration with all humanity.

The “Goods” of Sport

Sport is one of the many human practices that are complex social activities. Like other human activities, sport is composed of rules, and these rules define its aims and the accepted means

of achieving them. Sport is characterized by **internal goods** (roughly, its moral benefits, such as cooperation and courage) and **external goods** (roughly, rewards from without, such as money, approval, or fame).

What motivates different athletes is a complex issue. Sportive activity among children is perhaps motivated by enjoyment of certain types of expressive activities as well as desire for approval and recognition. Young children can be taught to recognize and hone certain internal motivations such as justice and self-control, but it seems unlikely that they will have anything close to a full appreciation of them. To develop an appreciation of the internal goods of sport requires a fully developed rational faculty, which children do not have.

Sportive activity among adults is more complex. Because they have fully developed rational faculties, adults have the capacity to appreciate the internal benefits of human practices. Thus, many adult athletes do play merely or mostly for love of their sport. Still, adults are also motivated by many of the same external goods as are children. Yet with adults, especially very talented athletes, certain external goods, such as money and fame, become primary motivators – sometimes with disastrous results. Often such players play for themselves, not for the team or their fans. These athletes do whatever they can to make themselves visible, and they try to reap the monetary benefits of this visibility as quickly as possible. With the external stakes so high,



athletes take unsafe risks (e.g., steroids), disregard sportsmanship, and do whatever it takes to win – even if this means cheating.

It seems obvious that sport is best when athletes compete with regard for love of sport, yet it also seems obvious, with such extraordinary external stakes in today's professional environment, that it is unrealistic to ask athletes to play with regard for love of sport. The money involved in many professional sports seems inconsistent with regard for their internal goods.

Sport and Values

How do moral values such as justice, courage, and generosity relate to social institutions, of which competitive sport is one? In philosophy of sport, there are two main views. **Internalism** is the view that the values of competitive sport are unique and not reducible to those of society. These values may even conflict with those of society. According to internalists, sport has its own set of values (i.e., competitive sport has an inner morality). **Externalism** is the view that the values of competitive sport are not unique and are merely some subset of the values of society. According to externalists, competitive sport has an external, not an internal, morality.

Of these two views, externalism is the more attractive. The inner morality of sport is just the inner morality of all properly run social practices.

Sport does not have its own core set of values, independent from society. The core values of sport are derived from society, and these values – such as regard for truth, justice, courage, generosity, friendliness, and wisdom – do not seem to vary from culture to culture but are, at least, species-fixed and, at best, universally embraced by all creatures capable of rationality.

Ethics and Sport

There are a number of vital issues in ethics and sport – too many to cover in detail in such limited space. Race, gender, and cheating are covered elsewhere (see Chapter 5), so this section focuses merely on two issues: **integrity** and performance enhancement.

Integrity

With the money involved in sports today, the win-at-all-costs attitude that predominates sport makes it difficult to play by the rules. Cheating is commonplace in collegiate sports, especially at the Division IA level, as well as in professional sports. This attitude of “bending the rules,” because it is at least implicitly sanctioned, also makes it practically impossible to treat those involved in sport in anything but an instrumental manner. Integrity seems to be a pipe dream.

NCAA Core Values

The Association – through its member institutions, conferences and national office staff – shares a belief in and commitment to:

- The collegiate model of athletics in which students participate as an avocation, balancing their academic, social and athletics experiences.
- The highest levels of integrity and sportsmanship.
- The pursuit of excellence in both academics and athletics.
- The supporting role that intercollegiate athletics plays in the higher education mission and in enhancing the sense of community and strengthening the identity of member institutions.
- An inclusive culture that fosters equitable participation for student-athletes and career opportunities for coaches and administrators from diverse backgrounds.
- Respect for institutional autonomy and philosophical differences.
- Presidential leadership of intercollegiate athletics at the campus, conference and national levels.

Although sport requires an unquestioned commitment to winning, this commitment ought to be made with respect for the rules of competition. Morality also requires respect for personhood, both for oneself and for others, while competing to win. These are the two components of athletic integrity.

Commitment to Play by the Rules

Integrity demands a *commitment to play by the rules* of the game. In competitive sport, rules determine what physical skills or activities are admissible and inadmissible. Consequently, competitive sport is fundamentally a test for certain skills within rule-determined guidelines. Winning teams or athletes are generally those that best or most effectively display such skills within the rules of competition. Athletes and teams are said to play fairly when they spiritedly pursue victory to the best of their ability in keeping with the rules of a contest.

A close look at the actual practice of competitive sport shows something else. At the highest levels of competition, athletes do not seem so committed to winning by the rules. There is too much money at stake. Instead, coaches, athletes, and teams often do “whatever it takes” to win while paying mere lip service to fair and honest competition.

Winning at All Costs?

There are certainly many examples of athletes and teams committed to doing *whatever it takes* to win a contest. One need only reconsider the Tonya Harding–Nancy Kerrigan incident in 1994, where Kerrigan was clubbed on the knee in an effort to keep her from competing at the upcoming Olympic Games, or the 1993 stabbing of Monica Seles by a fan of Steffi Graf. In extreme cases, winning at all costs takes the form of brutality, and it should have no part in competitive sport.

In collegiate athletics, coaches and athletes may express outrage when they see the opposition cheating on the field or court, but they express surprise when others catch *them* trying to bend

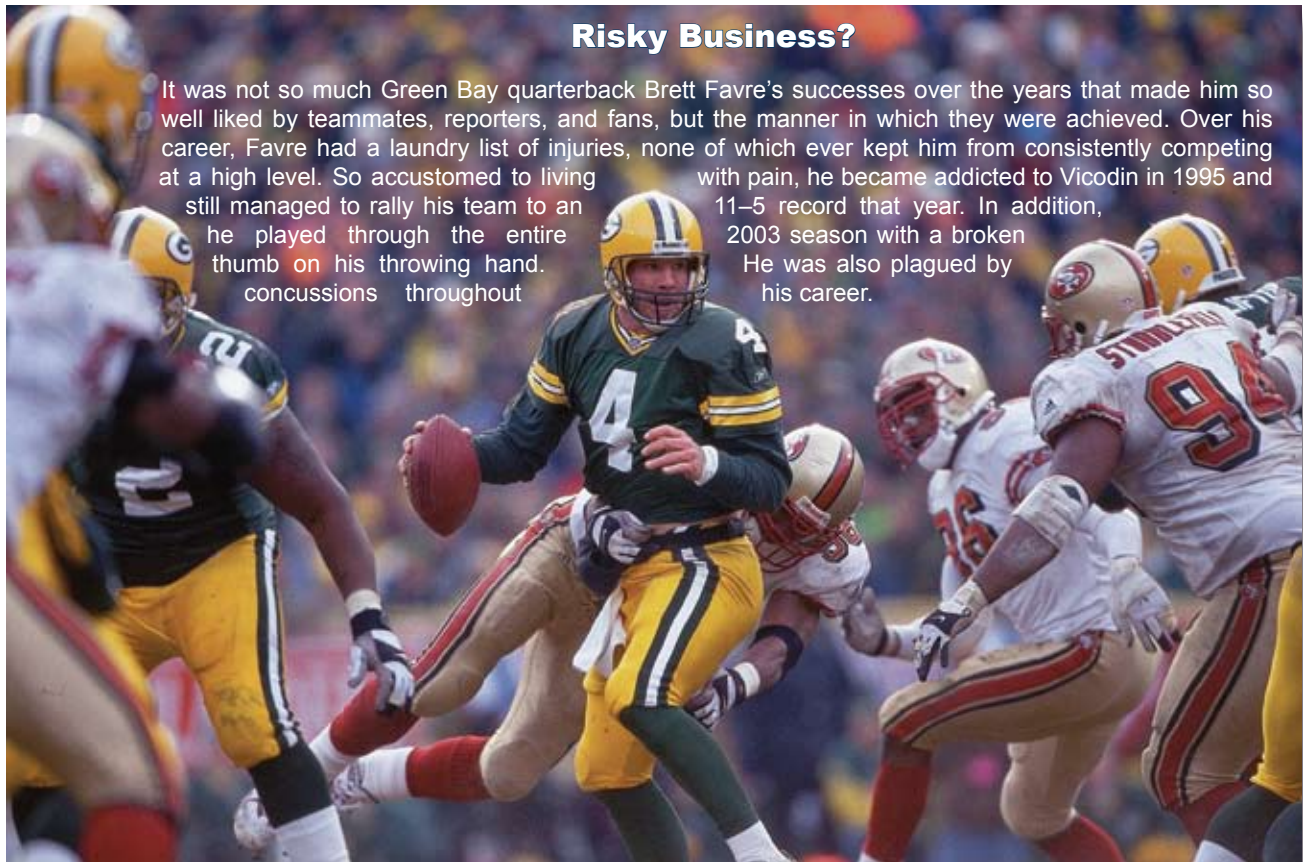
the rules. Moreover, they customarily participate in cheating off the field. Cheating has become an accepted part of recruitment procedures by college coaches and assistants. Athletes routinely take the bait – such things as free cars, “help” in finding jobs, and under-the-table money. Why is cheating so much a part of recruiting procedures? Why do coaches and players express little remorse over bending the rules on the field? The answer is simple: The measure of their success is winning, and winning generates revenue for their athletic programs, even though most “successful” programs at the Division IA level are habitually in the red. This is a harmful trend that ought to be reversed.

Sports commentators are fond of stating things in bottom-line, clichéd fashion: “If the refs didn’t see it, it didn’t happen.” “The better team won.” “A win is a win.” Sometimes, however, these platitudes are thrown out as rationalizations that cover questionable, unethical play.

Respect for Self and Others

Integrity demands *respect for self and others*. The commitment to winning at all costs is perhaps no more evident than in the way coaches and players treat themselves and others in the effort to win. For instance, it is not uncommon in critical football games for one team to make it part of their game plan to injure a star player from the opposing team to increase their chances of winning. A win, gained in this manner, clearly violates the rules of fair play and promotes violence. Given the notion of sport as a measure of excellence, a win in this manner is not a win at all.

It is more the norm than the exception to treat others in sport as instruments for the sake of winning. If winning is the only or even the principal aim of competition, coaches, like generals in a military campaign, must use players in a manner that best makes winning possible. Teammates are friends just as long as each contributes to winning. Opponents are treated as enemies to be soundly wiped out in battle. Recall the angry words of former Miami tight end Kellen Winslow after a loss to Tennessee: “It’s war! They’re out to kill you, so I’m out there to kill them.”



Risky Business?

It was not so much Green Bay quarterback Brett Favre's successes over the years that made him so well liked by teammates, reporters, and fans, but the manner in which they were achieved. Over his career, Favre had a laundry list of injuries, none of which ever kept him from consistently competing at a high level. So accustomed to living with pain, he became addicted to Vicodin in 1995 and still managed to rally his team to an 11–5 record that year. In addition, he played through the entire 2003 season with a broken thumb on his throwing hand. He was also plagued by concussions throughout his career.

What is even more astonishing is the extent to which athletes will put their physical health on the line to secure a victory. Concussions are common among players in football, especially quarterbacks and wide receivers, and recurrent concussions have forced many players to consider early retirement. Many who have had multiple concussions, such as Green Bay's Brett Favre, continue to play at the risk of permanent brain damage, vision impairment, and even death (see box *Risky Business?*). What's the reward for taking on these and other risks game after game? Only this: Favre is universally acknowledged by his peers and fans alike as one of the toughest players ever to play the game. A conception of sport that rewards athletes for putting their own physical health at risk is absurd. Players are not pawns to be sacrificed, if needed, in the quest for victory. Opponents are not obstacles to be overcome. Athletes are people – living, breathing, thinking beings – and ought to be treated with due respect.

Moral Ground

Philosopher Immanuel Kant states that one of the grounding principles of morality is this: "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end."

Performance Enhancement

Given the win-at-all-costs approach to competitive sport, performance enhancement is everything. Athletes today will do whatever it takes to come out on top. Thus, ergogenic aids are essential to survive in this competitive climate.

Ergogenic aids are substances, techniques, or materials that are performance enhancing. They may be grouped into five kinds: mechanical, psychological, physiological, pharmacological, and nutritional. **Mechanical ergogenic aids** are