

Gamesmanship in Professional Darts: A Response to Leota, Turp and Howe

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Abstract: This paper evaluates Howe and Leota/Turp’s accounts of gamesmanship by examining case studies of gamesmanship from professional darts. While Leota and Turp make some substantial improvements on Howe in reconceptualizing the idea of sporting excellence, I claim that there are points of criticism that must be addressed, notably in their claims that sports do not prescribe necessary skills, and that it is impossible to distinguish between legitimate sporting strategy unaccounted for by the rules on the one hand, and gamesmanship on the other. Leota and Turp criticise Howe’s account of rules for being misconceived: rather than rules prescribing necessary skills as Howe claims, rules actually proscribe skills and set limits on behaviour, rather than prescribing skills. I use darts and other sports to make the case that rules actually do both things. Elsewhere, in the phenomenon of ‘grouping’, I argue that we find a skill completely unaccounted for by the rules of darts and not a necessary skill for playing darts, which nonetheless counts as excellence for darts. This problematizes some claims from Leota and Turp on which their account of gamesmanship hinges. An aspect of Howe, Leota and Turp’s accounts on which they all agree is the importance of psychological resilience in sporting endeavours, which I discuss with reference to darts and rule changes in professional sport. The article ends with a discussion of an example from darts of a potential gamesmanship strategy, from a match between Michael van Gerwen and Darius Labanauskas, that unquestionably remains within the rules of the sport and which could not be eradicated through rule changes because it would violate the spirit of the sport. This is an interesting, controversial example for studies of the different forms of gamesmanship and their categorization, and indicates some limitations on what I say in my argument.

Leslie Howe defined gamesmanship as “the attempt to gain competitive advantage either by an artful manipulation of the rules that does not actually violate them or by the psychological manipulation or unsettling of the opponent”¹. Whereas cheating involves a direct violation of the rules, like Diego Maradona’s ‘Hand of God’, gamesmanship is a more subtle phenomenon where a competitor engages in “conduct that falls short of cheating (as it does not violate the

¹ Howe, L. Gamesmanship. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. 2004. XXXI. p. 212-225. p. 213

formal rules) but is morally dubious nonetheless.”² Gamesmanship is often a controversial issue: it goes to the heart of what it means to play the sport in question in a legitimate, fair manner. It is also difficult to distinguish from legitimate play - if an action is permitted by the rules, how can it be illegitimate? Leota and Turp recently pushed this logic to its extreme, theorizing gamesmanship as a form of ‘strategic excellence’, largely based on a criticism of Howe which argues that her “definition of gamesmanship is untenable with respect to competitive sport, as strategies of gamesmanship cannot be distinguished from all other legal categories.” (Leota/Turp 2020, 2) Gamesmanship operates in accordance with the rules and is therefore indistinguishable from legitimate sporting strategy. If strategic excellence is about creating the conditions to win against a strong opponent and the gamesman does whatever it takes (within the rules) to win, then gamesmanship should be considered strategically excellent. In this paper, I examine the sport of darts, ultimately with the aim of evaluating Howe, Leota and Turp’s accounts of gamesmanship, showing that in darts we can find interesting examples for reflecting on and criticising them. In making my case, I will use the two most-discussed types of gamesmanship in professional darts as case studies: excessive or aggressive celebrations, and slow play. But I will also discuss a match between Michael van Gerwen and Darius Labauskas, an interesting case for the philosophy of gamesmanship because it represents a case where a player, while remaining completely within the confines of the inherent logic and rules of the sport, deliberately used unquestionably legitimate play to intimidate or psychologically fluster his opponent. This case shows that while there are examples of gamesmanship that could be eradicated by rule changes, not all could because any rule change that would remove them would violate the spirit of that sport.

² Devine, John William and Francisco Javier Lopez Frias. "*Philosophy of Sport*". *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/sport/>>.

Case Study 1: Gerwyn Price's Celebrations

To introduce Howe, Leota and Turp's accounts of gamesmanship, let us turn to what is probably the most high-profile example of gamesmanship in darts, or certainly one of the most discussed by players, pundits and fans – Gerwyn Price's celebrations. No contemporary article about gamesmanship in professional darts would be complete without mentioning it. A clear-cut case of cheating in darts, explicitly against the rules, is disturbing your opponent's throw through unwanted noise or physical contact.³ Rubbing the metal barrels of your darts together, for example, can make an off-putting noise while your opponent is throwing. But this is cheating, not gamesmanship: the rules clearly state that you cannot disturb your opponent's throw. But the rules do not say anything about what you do in celebration of your own throw. Darts players often celebrate high scores or high checkouts in an over-the-top fashion, but no one courts controversy over it quite like Gerwyn Price, current world champion and world number one. Price is known for his celebrations which, with or without a crowd, are ludicrously loud, aggressive and often in close physical proximity to his opponent – it is easy to see how someone could be put off by them. There is no rule against this, but he has often been accused of gamesmanship because of it with the key case being the 2018 Grand Slam tournament, which he won. The final, between Price and Gary Anderson, is one of the most notorious, controversial, and ill-tempered professional matches in the history of the sport. The tension on stage was palpable – Price was celebrating everything wildly and it was affecting Anderson, who became increasingly angry throughout the match to the point that he lost eight of the final

³ In the Darts Regulation Authority rulebook, it clearly states in section 5.15.4 that “players shall remain silent during their opponent's throw”, and section 5.9.3 stipulates that any player that makes serious physical contact with another will be removed from the venue. (*The Darts Regulation Authority Rulebook*. <https://www.pdc.tv/sites/default/files/2020-08/DRA-Rules.pdf>)

ten legs. Price was accused by many of seizing an opportunity to psychologically interfere with Anderson's game and taking it. The DRA (Darts Regulation Authority) investigated the incident and agreed, fining Price £11,500 for gamesmanship in the final and an earlier match of the same tournament against Simon Whitlock.

Now, is such behaviour gamesmanship? And if so, can or should it be condemned? Some argue that Price is just expressing himself – it is part of his character, and it is not his intention to disturb his opponent. His celebrations are part of the way he fires himself up, getting himself in the mindset he needs to play well, and darts would be less entertaining if players could not engage in such behaviour. The opponent is not throwing while Price is celebrating, and aggressive celebrations are not forbidden by the rules. However, this kind of behaviour can seemingly be used as a gamesmanship strategy. Price was losing, realised that his celebrating was getting on Anderson's nerves, so he started doing it more intensely and frequently, even for scores that would not normally warrant big celebrations. This led to altercations between them, clearly made Anderson angry and put him off his game. Price exploited the opportunity to psychologically unsettle his opponent with his celebrations, winning eight out of the last ten legs to clinch the victory.

Price's behaviour would fall under Howe's definition of gamesmanship, which Leota and Turp (I think accurately) characterise as "a deliberate and legal strategy not prescribed by the sport, performed with the purpose of gaining a competitive advantage." (Leota/Turp 2020, 2) Price made use of a strategy which involved behaviour that was unprescribed (and not forbidden) by the rules to gain an advantage and ultimately win the match. Leota and Turp's account of gamesmanship consists largely in a conceptual criticism of Howe, expressed in points like this:

Howe's definition of gamesmanship rests on her distinction between prescribed and non-prescribed skills. That is, skills and strategies that are considered *part of the sport*

and those that are not. If this distinction fails, then there is nothing that separates gamesmanship from conventional gameplay. (Leota/Turp 2020, 5)

In the case of Price vs. Anderson, the grounds for saying that Price engaged in gamesmanship (and that this is morally blameworthy) rests on the idea that certain skills, practises and strategies are prescribed by the rules of sports, and some are not. Those that are not cannot be considered as examples of excellence for the sport, since excellence involves “the successful execution of the skills prescribed as necessary for carrying out the specific activity named by the sport in question”. (Howe 2004, 217) If you are engaged in practises unprescribed by the rules for the purpose of gaining a competitive advantage, you are engaged in gamesmanship – in Howe’s words, trying to “win one game by playing another.” (Howe 2004, 1) Leota and Turp argue that Howe’s distinction between prescribed and unprescribed skills fails because it does not correlate with how sporting rules work and affords us no way of distinguishing gamesmanship as a morally blameworthy practise from any other legitimate behaviour unaccounted for by the rules of a sport.

For Leota and Turp, rather than saying that sports prescribe necessary skills for playing the sport legitimately, “it would be more accurate to say that sports prescribe necessary goals and *proscribe* skills deemed unacceptable for achieving these necessary goals.” (Leota/Turp 2020, 3) The idea that sports prescribe necessary skills involves a conceptual error, partly because “any putative description would *underdetermine* what would count as legitimate skills and strategies [...] [and] the legitimate domain cannot be fully specified, even in principle” (Leota/Turp 2020, 3). As they explain, one might think that dribbling and shooting are essential skills prescribed by the rules of basketball, but some of the best defensive players (like Dennis Rodman) went entire games without taking a shot and some centres go entire games without dribbling or shooting the ball – but they are still playing basketball. Similarly, headed goals in

football are clearly an example of footballing excellence, even though heading is not a necessary or essential skill for playing football: if you fail to head the ball, you are not failing to play football. Howe's account leads us to conclusions that should strike us as unacceptable: if you are not executing the specifically prescribed skills of a sport, you are not really playing the sport, or at least you are not doing so in an excellent manner. Dennis Rodman was not really playing excellent basketball, and headed goals are not footballing excellence.

In order to avoid this problem, the proposed set of essential skills would have to be defined in a very general, coarse-grained way. For example, it is impossible to play without breathing, movement or consciously intending to contribute to some goal. Considered at this level of generality, however, it is clear that any proposed set of essential prescribed skills would be consistent with additional legitimate non-prescribed skills. (Leota/Turp 2020, 4)

Any attempt to fully specify what counts as legitimate play in a sport is bound to be underdetermined, poorly defined and general to the point of absurdity, including strange things like breathing or movement, and nebulous phenomena like 'intending to play a sport'. Rather than thinking of sporting rules as prescribing necessary skills, we should think of them as prescribing necessary goals and forbidding specific actions from being performed in the pursuit of these goals. Sporting competitors act within limits imposed on their behaviour, avoiding what is forbidden to them rather than executing a prescribed set of skills. Rather than saying dribbling is an essential skill for playing basketball, the rules rather say that a player cannot move with the ball in their possession if they are not engaged in the act of bouncing it on the ground. Football's rules say you cannot touch the ball with your hand or arm, not that you must use your feet or head. Sporting excellence does not mean executing a sport's necessary skills in a high-quality way, but rather means acting within the limits prescribed by the rules in a

manner that results in excellent play and victory.⁴ This means that Leota and Turp do not face the same problem that Howe does when she says that sports prescribe necessary skills. Basketball players can go the whole game without dribbling and shooting but would still be playing basketball because the rules of basketball do not say that you must engage in these behaviours to be playing basketball, they rather set limits and tell you what you cannot do.

While I think Leota and Turp are right to emphasize this dimension of sporting rules and proscribing behaviour and setting goals are undoubtedly important things that rules do, I do not necessarily agree that this is all they do. But neither do I agree with Howe that prescribing necessary skills is all that sporting rules do. Perhaps rules do both things, even if they do not and cannot completely specify the legitimate domain of play. An example from darts that puts pressure on Leota and Turp's view of rules is throwing overarm, which can straightforwardly be said to be a necessary skill prescribed by the rules of darts. You cannot play a game of darts without throwing darts and throwing them overarm, since throwing underarm is explicitly prohibited. You cannot adopt a strategy that does not involve throwing darts overarm because you would be failing to legitimately play the game of darts. You cannot kick them, head them or fire them out of a gun – you must throw them. Throwing darts overarm is an essential skill for playing darts, one prescribed by the rules.

This gives us reason to suspect Leota and Turp's claim that sports do not prescribe necessary skills – some sports do prescribe some necessary skills, and there are cases of sports where if you fail to engage in these necessary skills, you fail to engage legitimately in the sport. This

⁴ Leots and Turp arguably place more emphasis on victory than other sporting virtues than Howe does, but they do agree with Howe that “winning is – of course – a goal of competitive sport, but it is not the only goal.” (Leota/Turp 202, 3)

does not mean that this is the only thing that rules do, or that sets of rules could ever completely determine the domain of legitimate gameplay, but it could be evidence that rules do both the things that Leota and Turp, and Howe, claim they do. While Leota and Turp's account of rules makes sense when applied to the examples they discuss, there are other examples of sports which prescribe necessary skills, like sports that are quite specific and only involve a few actions and skills, rather than team sports that involve many skills and where the domain of potential legitimate behaviour is much larger. Some Olympic sports might be indicative of the way very specific necessary actions are prescribed by a sport. Race walking, for example, defines and prescribes the necessary skill of walking: your legs must be straight, and one foot must be always on the ground. Failing to do this means that you fail to legitimately execute the sport of race walking and can be penalized as a result. The high jump prescribes the necessary skill of jumping, while also setting limits on one's behaviour – such as the rule that you must leave the ground on one foot. Similarly, cricket's rules both prescribe and proscribe certain actions for bowling a ball fairly: the bowler's elbow, once it has reached the height of their shoulder during the delivery swing, must not extend by more than 15 degrees.⁵ Extending the elbow during this part of the delivery swing is called 'throwing' rather than bowling and is forbidden by the rules. However, the rules explicitly prescribe a correct, fair way of bowling a cricket ball: the bowler's arm must remain straight past this particular point of the swing, their front foot must land on or before the bowling line, etc.

These examples do not invalidate what Leota and Turp say about what rules do, in fact they highlight an important aspect of what rules do – but setting goals and proscribing behaviour is

⁵ The 15 degree clause was introduced because a study found that not straightening one's elbow at all at this point in the bowling action was near-impossible, so some natural flexing of the elbow joint had to be accounted for by the rules.

not all that rules do, some rules may prescribe necessary skills too. However, their resultant conception of sporting excellence is certainly preferable to Howe's since it avoids the unacceptable conclusions I discussed previously. Leota and Turp's conception of sporting excellence is certainly different from Howe's, involving acting within the limits imposed by the rules in a manner that maximises your chances of winning, rather than relying on the excellent execution of specific skills prescribed by the rules. The excellent sporting competitor takes the limits on their behaviour set by the rules into account, then devises and executes a strategy that results in excellent play and ultimately a victory.

However, Leota and Turp conclude from this that gamesmanship should be thought of as a type of strategic excellence. Howe, they argue, gives us no way of distinguishing between legal unprescribed strategies and gamesmanship, or between "strategies of gamesmanship from strategies intrinsic to the sport" (Leota/Turp 2020, 2) - neither are forbidden by the rules and sporting rules are by their nature underdetermined. There will always be strategies and skills that are not, at the time, accounted for by the rules of a sport. But competitors are only obliged to abide by the current set of rules at the time, not some future unwritten set. The current set of rules determines what counts as sporting excellence or strategic excellence for that sport at that time. Strategies of gamesmanship, therefore, would fall under Leota and Turp's description of sporting excellence until such a time when they are deemed illegitimate by the rules.

Their example of Sean Avery is instructive here. Avery was a Canadian hockey player who once, during a playoff game, stood in front of the opposing team's goalkeeper and waved his stick in their face to distract them and block their view. This was completely legal at the time,

but the next day the National Hockey League issued a rule change forbidding this kind of behaviour, which has become known as the ‘Sean Avery Rule’.

In our view, the effective use of these tactics would be considered an example of strategic (and thus sporting) excellence only up until the NHL changed the rules. Once the rules change, the skills and strategies that exemplify sporting excellence also change, and the players ought to adapt their gameplay in pursuit of this excellence. (Leota/Turp 2020, 11-12)

The rules of hockey at the time defined a set of limitations on the players’ behaviour in pursuit of the goal of scoring the most points in a match. Avery’s behaviour at the time was not accounted for by the rules. His actions, despite being unusual, were a permitted (but not prescribed strategy) within the rules of hockey at that time. Afterwards, the NHL decided that such behaviour did not agree with how they thought the game should be played and made a ruling to prevent it, so such a strategy now would be penalized as cheating. Something about waving a stick in a goalkeeper’s face solely for the purpose of distracting them seemed antithetical to the spirit of the game of hockey, presumably because they thought hockey players should have the opportunity to play the best game they could possibly play, free from tactics that have very little (if anything) to do with the mechanics of a fair game of hockey – with dribbling, shooting, passing the puck, riding well on the ice, etc.

To return to our first example from darts, Gerwyn Price’s excessive and aggressive celebrations to psychologically disturb his opponent during a game would be analogous to Avery’s stick-waving. Though unorthodox and having nothing to do with the game’s mechanics of accurately throwing darts, making the correct finishes (and so on), Price’s behaviour was not forbidden by the rules of darts. On Leota and Turp’s account, Price was acting within the limits set on his behaviour by the rules, making use of a strategy that maximised his chances of victory, which

resulted in him winning – an excellent sporting strategy.⁶ There are several things to consider here about Leota and Turp’s account, some of which I agree with and some I think are problematic.

Leota and Turp’s account hinges on the idea that, in the domain of behaviour unaccounted for by the rules of a sport, it is impossible to distinguish gamesmanship from legitimate play. Howe distinguished between “skills and strategies that are considered *part of the sport* and those that are not”, but “if this distinction fails, then there is nothing that separates gamesmanship from conventional gameplay.” (Leota/Turp 2020, 5) Leota and Turp are right that Howe’s conception of sporting rules is narrow: she conceives of gamesmanship as consisting only in behaviour unprescribed by the rules. But we can, in line with what I have said so far, perhaps rephrase the definition as follows: gamesmanship consists in ethically dubious behaviour unaccounted for, either by prescription or proscription, by the current rules of that sport, performed to gain competitive advantage. On Leota and Turp’s account, within this domain of unprescribed and un-proscribed behaviour, we have no way of distinguishing between legitimate, excellent play and gamesmanship. However, in what is referred to in darts as ‘grouping’, we find an example of a type of behaviour unaccounted for by the rules and yet one that can be easily distinguished as darting excellence and not gamesmanship. This problematizes what is arguably one of Leota and Turp’s central claims. Without the inability to distinguish between gamesmanship and excellent strategies unprescribed (or un-proscribed) by the rules, their account is much weaker and the idea that gamesmanship is strategic excellence does not as easily follow.

⁶ I have not said as much about what Leota and Turp say about ‘strategy’, but I am in complete agreement with them that strategic excellence in general is a form of sporting excellence, and an integral part of sport.

‘Grouping’ is the art of getting all three darts in your turn to land as closely together as possible – one of the most important skills in darts and yet one completely unaccounted for by the rules and not necessary to be said to be playing the sport.⁷ Darts players spend most of their time aiming at the triple-20, the highest scoring segment of the board. Triple segments are (roughly, since they are curved and I measured on my admittedly rather battered board) 1 x 2.3cm in size, so to score the maximum score of 180, all three of your darts must land inside that small area. It is crucial, therefore, to replicate the same precise throwing motion three times in a row to group your darts, ensuring they land as closely together as possible. Now, failing to group your darts well is obviously not to fail to play darts, and neither is it necessarily to fail to play excellently – some shots do not require three of the same triple, and players often switch between the triple 20, 19, and 18 during one turn while scoring highly. You can also throw three very well-grouped darts and slightly miss your target – it often happens that a player throws what clearly would have been a 180 had all three of their darts landed millimetres lower. When it happens, this seems rather more like bad luck than a poorly executed throw. Grouping, as a skill, is an example of darting excellence – to replicate your throwing motion so precisely that all your darts land next to each other is to play darts excellently, and there is no great darts player that cannot group. The better your grouping, the better a player you are likely to be because you will tend to score more heavily and efficiently than your opponents. In grouping, we find a skill unaccounted for by the rules of darts that nonetheless counts as darting excellence, and not gamesmanship - we have reasons drawn from the logic of the sport for saying so. We have no similar reasons for Price’s celebrations which, when compared to

⁷ For some examples of excellent grouping, there are some Youtube videos that compile so-called ‘extreme 180s’, which are scores of 180 with the darts grouped exceptionally well. (‘Darts Incidents and Moments’ channel, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2KLg5KA23M&t=285s&ab_channel=DartsIncidentsandMoments)

grouping, appear to have basically nothing to do with the actual logic, mechanics and practises of playing darts. It is therefore possible, at least in principle, to distinguish between gamesmanship and other legitimate, excellent practises unaccounted for by the rules of a sport, which is in obvious conflict with Leota and Turp's claims about gamesmanship.

Their account also leads us to the undesirable conclusion that there was nothing ethically dubious about what gamesman are doing at the time, or at least that we cannot ethically criticise them for it. But if there was nothing wrong with what they were doing at the time, why would we institute a rule to prohibit them from doing it in the future? Leota and Turp are sensitive to the fact that sports evolve and rules change, so

not every type of effective gamesmanship will or should stay an example of sporting excellence. Sports are dynamic practices and their rules and conventions are subject to ongoing discussion and negotiation that may lead to revision. In particular, a sport's governing body can change its formal rules so that the gameplay more accurately resembles how they believe the sport should be played. (Leota/Turp 2020, 11)

But thinking of gamesmanship in this way might lead us to wonder: if we should regard gamesmanship as strategically and sportingly excellent at the time, what would motivate us to change anything? Surely it is the fact that something seemed *wrong* about what Sean Avery was doing, in the context of the sport, that made the NHL change the rules.

Perhaps a rule change could also work in darts to limit the use of excessive or aggressive celebrations as a gamesmanship strategy. It would not be without precedent: the American National Football League (NFL) have instituted rules which prohibit exactly this in the past and, after relaxing them in the last few years, are said to be cracking down on them again this

year.⁸ Excessive/aggressive celebrations and taunting can now be penalized under NFL regulations, in an attempt to preserve a respectful attitude between players and teams, avoiding ill will and ensuring the game is played in what the regulatory bodies think is the correct spirit. NFL players can be issued yellow and/or red cards for such behaviour or even be fined. Perhaps darts could make use of a system whereby, if the referee judges that a player is engaged in the kind of behaviour Price was against Anderson, they can issue a warning, then dock points upon further incidents of behaviour they view as an attempt at psychologically disturbing their opponent.

Currently, however, there is no such system – so nobody can be penalized under it. We may be able to condemn Price’s behaviour as morally dubious, which could serve as a motivation for future rule changes, but he did (however questionably) act within the limits imposed by the rules. The fault arguably falls less on him than on the governing bodies who get to decide these things, who have a legislative say about the spirit of the sport of darts. Admittedly, the ‘spirit of sport’ is a somewhat nebulous concept,

cover[ing] a wide range of significant ethical claims, such as those centred on fairness, justice, integrity and the naturalness of sporting performance [...] [and] has been subject to considerable critique due to its conceptually vague, open and catch-all nature.⁹

However, Leota and Turp defend what I think is an apt conception of the spirit of a sport, which they argue is “constituted both by its formal rules *and* by a set of conventions that are required in order to interpret and apply them.” (Leota/Turp 2020, 9-10) So until such a time when the rules are changed, there will always be divergent interpretations of the spirit of the sport in

⁸ ‘Don’t Get Excited: NFL is Cracking Down on Taunting.’ *The New York Times*. Accessed 20th August 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/11/sports/football/nfl-taunting-rule.html>

⁹ Hywel L., Tomkins, P. and Riley, G. ‘Financial Doping in the English Premier League.’ *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*. 2018. 12 (3) pp. 272-291. p. 283

question. Gary Anderson and Gerwyn Price seem to have such divergent interpretations about darts: Anderson celebrates much less and less intensely than Price and has often said in interviews that his philosophy towards the game is ‘to just get on with it’.

Which brings us to a commendable aspect of Leota and Turp’s account and one in which they are in complete agreement with Howe:

Psychological preparedness is a fundamental feature of competitive sport, and ‘the better athletes are those who are not fazed by tactics employed to put them off their game’ (Howe 2004, 215) even when these tactics violate an athlete’s personal understanding of the spirit of sport. (Leota/Turp 2020, 11)

If an opponent uses gamesmanship tactics, the target of gamesmanship cannot appeal to referees or officials to stop them doing it, since their opponent is not violating the formal rules. Leota, Turp and Howe all agree that, in such situations, the onus is on the target - as a professional sport competitor - to resist their opponent’s attempt at psychologically disturbing them into losing. If they do not resist, it is a failure on their part to overcome “one of the fundamental aspects of competition: the test of psychological strength and preparedness.” (Howe 2004, 214) Physical tests are a fundamental part of competition, but so are the psychological challenges involved in coping with pressure, maintaining focus, concentrating, resisting gamesmanship strategies, and dealing with “awkward or unpredictable opponents.” (Howe 2004, 215) These kinds of psychological tests are as much of a part of sporting competition as any of its physical aspects, and professional sporting competitors must be prepared for them.

Leota and Turp agree with Howe on this point, but criticise her because although “Howe acknowledges the role of psychological skills [...] Howe makes no mention of *strategic*

excellence as being part of the athletic endeavour [...] [and] gamesmanship is a deliberate *strategy*” (Leota/Turp 2020, 5) Howe certainly seems to place less emphasis on strategy throughout her analysis, although she does say that “gamesmanship [...] is a strategy for ensuring victory” (Howe 2004, 220). A more significant point of contention between Leota/Turp and Howe could perhaps be found in Howe’s resultant conception of gamesmanship as involving “a failure of self, of self-respect, and of commitment to oneself in sport” (Howe 2004, 216) on the part of the gamesman – “they lack the attitude towards themselves that makes effective participation in sport possible for themselves.” (Howe 2004, 221) The gamesman lacks the self-belief and confidence in their ability to win without using gamesmanship – otherwise, they would not use it. For Howe, therefore, gamesmanship is ultimately a self-defeating practise borne of a failure on the part of the culprit. For Leota and Turp, however, gamesmanship should be recognised not only as a legitimate, but excellent strategy since excellent competitors act within the constraints imposed on them by the rules. From their perspective, gamesmanship is not only legitimate but strategically excellent, so athletes that make use of such strategies should not be thought of as being psychologically flawed in some way, or as having a failure of self – they should be praised for it.

Whatever your take on the value of Howe’s and Leota/Turp’s conceptions of the psychology of the gamesman, the point about psychological resilience on which they all agree, I think, is a commendable one. Gary Anderson arguably should have ‘got on with it’ and withstood Price’s attempt at psychological interference, since “the behaviour of the opponent is merely more of the game and something else to be mentally prepared for.” (Howe 2004, 11) In the 2021 World Matchplay quarter final, Dimitri van den Bergh played Price, who again resorted to the sort of tactics he employed against Anderson: aggressive, excessive, disrespectful celebrations and even taunting van den Bergh by dancing near him when he won a leg, mimicking the dance

that van den Bergh does whenever he takes the stage in a big event. Van den Bergh, however, was unfazed and displayed remarkable psychological resilience and consistency in the face of an opponent whose take on the spirit of the sport probably contradicted his own. He even said in the post-match interview that Price's behaviour made him happy because it meant that he had unsettled him by playing so well, thereby demonstrating a commendable way to psychologically respond to potential types of gamesmanship. Rather than becoming angry, athletes could take the fact that their opponent is engaged in gamesmanship strategies as a positive, since it implies that they do not think they can win without it.

But in defence of Anderson, your opponent playing well should be the only thing in a sports match that should have the potential to unsettle you psychologically. Anderson should have displayed stronger psychological resilience, but Price was unsettling him in a way that had nothing to do with how well he was playing. Excellent play causes your opponent to feel psychological pressure in a way that is totally consistent with the rules and with legitimate play – but this is not how Anderson was disturbed by Price. He should arguably have been able to rise above and dealt with Price's behaviour. However, as we have seen, this behaviour is in principle distinguishable from a different, legitimate and excellent practise unprescribed by the rules of darts - grouping. An opponent that groups so well that most of their shots go in the triple will make you feel psychological pressure, but ideally this is the only type of pressure you should encounter in a fair darts match.

Ultimately, it is up to the governing bodies of sport to institute rules that ensure a game is played on what they, ideally along with the players, decide is the proper spirit. The NFL instituted a rule prohibiting excessive and taunting celebrations for the purpose of ensuring the

game is played with as much respect and as little bad blood as possible. The NHL changed the rules to ensure that players get to play the best they can free from interference like Sean Avery's stick-waving. Excessive celebrations are not always a problem in darts, but perhaps there should be a rule change to ensure the same values of fairness, respect and freedom from ethically dubious interference as American football did.

Case Study 2: 'Slow Play'

Another type of behaviour that often gets discussed as a type of gamesmanship in darts is slow play. Some darts players naturally throw more quickly than others, in what appears to be an attempt to cultivate as powerful a muscle memory as possible in the moment to be able to repeat the same precise bodily motions. Throwing your next dart quickly does not allow your body to easily forget how throwing the previous dart felt, and since darts is a game about paying close attention to bodily experience and replicating precise actions, some players prefer an approach to throwing where everything happens as quickly as possible. Players like Ricky Evans and Michael Smith exemplify this approach well – they throw so quickly that they never stop moving during their throw, and their darts land exceptionally close together. (They are, therefore, excellent case studies in 'grouping'.) But many players throw slowly, preferring to 'reset' between each dart and concentrate on getting each throw right, rather than throwing all three darts in the same fluid motion. Some players, like Mensur Suljovic, have been accused of playing slowly as a form of gamesmanship. Suljovic's 2020/2021 world championship match (also against Gary Anderson) was particularly ill-tempered because of this. Anderson appears not to like playing Suljovic because their paces of play are so different – fast players' preferred rhythms tend to be faster than slow players.

Personally, I think much of the allegations of gamesmanship around Suljovic are overblown, and that he does not throw that slowly. Compare him with someone like Terry Down at the 1985 BDO Blackthorne Masters, or Justin Pipe in any tournament. In comparison, Suljovic is a relatively quick thrower. But it is clearly conceivable that slow play could be used as a form of gamesmanship, be it in how slowly you throw or in how quickly you take in between turns, etc. The rules of darts prescribe that a player must throw three darts overarm per turn, proscribing other ways of throwing them, as well as proscribing interfering with their opponent's throw. Speed of play, however, is unaccounted for (either by prescription or proscription) by the rules: there is nothing in the rules dictating how fast, or slow, you should throw. Taking inordinate amounts of time to take your turn can frustrate quick players by not allowing them to settle into their natural rhythm, which could be exploited as a gamesmanship strategy. But this is a more difficult version of gamesmanship to resolve through rule changes, since darts is not a game about being quick or slow, it is about throwing accurately and consistently to reduce your score to zero. Penalizing players for their natural speed seems like a harsh measure, but it is thinkable that a timer system could be used, as it is in some snooker tournaments now, to prevent extremely slow play being used as a gamesmanship strategy. The question of how much time should be permitted is not easy, since some players just throw naturally more slowly than others, and they should not necessarily be forbidden from doing so - but a time limit would prevent the most extreme cases.

Case Study 3: Michael Van Gerwen's 141

The final case I will discuss involves a darts player deliberately trying to psychologically disturb their opponent, but in a manner that completely remains within the domain of prescribed and permitted behavior in the sport and one which arguably does not violate the spirit of the sport. It is therefore an interesting case for the study of gamesmanship insofar as it presents a problematic case for the categorization of its different forms. The behavior I have discussed so

far, especially excessive celebrations, have a case to be made as gamesmanship, or at least as attempts at psychological disturbance that do not fit in with or are not accounted for by the rules of darts. This case, however, sees a player attempting to psychologically disturb their opponent in a way that unquestionably remains within the rules and could not be fairly prevented with a rule change, since the rule change would violate the spirit of the sport.

Like the maximum break in snooker, darts has an equivalent, mathematically perfect way of executing a game – the 9-dart leg. For a standard 501 game, the quickest it is possible to finish is with nine darts, with the most common combination being two 180s (3 triples-20s) followed by a 141 finish, most often achieved by a player hitting triple-20, triple-19, double-12. In the quarter-finals of the 2020 world championship, then-world-number-one Michael van Gerwen played Darius Labanauskas who, in the fifth set, produced back-to-back 180s, leaving himself on the 9-dart finish. Van Gerwen, however, had scored so few points that it was a near-certainty he would lose the leg. On his next turn, Van Gerwen attempted the finish that Labanauskas required for his next shot. There could be no conceivable tactical reason for doing this in that situation, save for the possibility of psychologically unsettling your opponent so he misses, which Labanauskas then did. Some players, for certain shots, will use doubles to set up finishes – in fact, Michael van Gerwen did exactly this with the same 141 finish in the quarter finals of the next world championship against Dave Chisnall, when Chisnall had also just missed the 141 for the 9-dart finish. Van Gerwen then attempted the same finish despite not needing it, but in this situation, it made more sense because a score of 141 left Van Gerwen on an easy finish. But there were other, arguably more sensible ways to go, since using the outer ring of the board always carries the possibility of missing the board and scoring nothing. In the match against Labanauskas, going for the finish his opponent required had absolutely no advantage for Van Gerwen except for the possibility that it would get inside his opponent's head and put

him off his next turn. Whether or not it had this effect on Labanauskas is debatable: he only missed the double for the 9-darter. But Van Gerwen has absolutely no recourse to numerical or other tactical explanations: the only way this shot could make sense in that situation is as a way of unsettling his opponent. But Van Gerwen did absolutely nothing wrong here: he followed the rules completely, engaged in no forbidden behavior and used the logic of the game itself against his opponent. This seems like it is not gamesmanship, but what is it? Arguably, it is not excellent play either: he gained little to no advantage, lost the leg and scored fewer points than he would have been able to if had he stayed in the 20s. This is perhaps a limitation to what I have said in this paper: I have not been able to account for instances of psychological warfare like this.

Interestingly, however, this type of strategy cannot be eradicated from the sport of darts, since any rule change that could accommodate it would violate the spirit of darts. It is a fundamental aspect of darts that, when it is their turn, a player can aim wherever they like on the board. It is not required that a player goes for the triple-20 in the scoring phase of the game. If they feel like it, they can throw all three of their darts at the next highest-scoring triples – players often do this, whether to switch things up if they are not hitting the triple-20 well enough, or because for certain shots certain other scores are more desirable than a score of 180.¹⁰ The spirit of darts involves the player having the freedom to score and set up finishes as they please. Some players, like Dimitri van den Bergh, prefer to leave double-18 over double-20. Mensur Suljovic, for some reason, likes double-14. The rules of darts cannot limit where you can aim and when – it would limit player freedom in a way that violates a fundamental aspect of the

¹⁰ For example, hitting 171 (3 triple-19s) on a score of 211 leaves the player immediately on double-20. This is finish-able with one dart rather than 31, an unfinishable number with one dart, if they were to hit a 180.

spirit of the game. The fact that players have complete freedom over what they aim for when it is their turn, is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the game of darts and its rules. Any rule change that restricted this would violate the spirit of the game. Van Gerwen's strategy against Darius Labanauskas is one that cannot be resolved through rule changes, or penalties since it would undesirably alter the structure of the game itself.

Conclusion

In this paper, I hope to have provided evidence that darts merits more discussion in the philosophy of sport than it has enjoyed by using it to critically evaluate Howe, Leota and Turp's accounts of gamesmanship. I have argued that darts provides interesting examples to consider for the discussion of gamesmanship and that in darts we can find points of criticism to these writers' accounts of gamesmanship. While Leota and Turp make substantial improvements on Howe and are right to endorse her take on the place of psychological resilience in sport, there were criticisms to be discussed. Specifically, I have argued that darts prescribes the necessary skill of throwing overarm and that, in 'grouping', we find an unprescribed skill that counts as excellence for darts. The first contradicts Leota and Turp's claim that sports do not prescribe necessary skills and the second permits us to distinguish between legitimate unprescribed skills and gamesmanship, undermining one of the most crucial aspects of their account of gamesmanship. I also highlighted the less interesting but oft-discussed example of 'slow play' as a form of gamesmanship in darts and presented the more interesting case of Michael Van Gerwen's 141 against Darius Labanauskas as a challenging case for future accounts of gamesmanship and sporting excellence, since it involved a player remaining totally and unquestionably remaining within the rules and using the logic of the game itself to intimidate his opponent. Gamesmanship is a contentious issue in sport, and rightly so: the questions

surrounding it are similar to the ones that have driven philosophers' moral questioning since the beginning: why do the right thing if you can get away with doing the wrong thing for your own benefit? What is morally permissible and what is not? What are our grounds for saying so? How should we behave in our dealings with each other? I hope to have contributed to the discussion of how these questions manifest around sport, using a sport that is internationally popular but receives little attention in the literature.

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