

THE DRAMA OF AGONISTIC EMBODIMENT:
NIETZSCHEAN REFLECTIONS ON
THE MEANING OF SPORTS

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Should I be embarrassed to admit that the most exciting day of my life was when my alma mater, Villanova, beat Georgetown for the 1985 NCAA basketball championship? I'm sure that many philosophers love sports, but they probably live out a schizoid segregation of intellectual pursuits and the enjoyment of athletic contests. A main reason is that academic circles tend to rank competitive games quite low on the cultural scale, viewing them either with disinterest, disdain, or mere bemusement, or as nothing more than entertainment. And the enormous popularity of professional sports in America is often cited as a sign of the coarseness and decadence of our culture. Clearly such deprecation of sports is a residue of our philosophical tradition, which has privileged contemplation over action, mind over body, harmony over conflict, equality over competition, and seriousness over play. But I want to defend my interest in sports as intellectually respectable, and I would have to begin by challenging these philosophical preferences. It seems clear that Nietzsche would be an excellent resource in such a defense because his thought aimed to switch or at least destabilize the traditional priorities listed here.

One preliminary difficulty: Nietzsche said little if anything about sports or athletic activity. I find this somewhat surprising for two reasons: 1) Nietzsche's thought celebrates action, performance, conflict, embodiment, spectacle, and play—all of which are emblematic of sports. 2) In the ancient Greek world, which Nietzsche also celebrated, sports were not only popular, they were given a level of cultural importance that has never been matched.¹ Accordingly, it seems there is something missing in Nietzsche's thought; he should have seen athletic games as expressive of his own philosophical predilections and as an important part of culture.

I can think of two possible explanations for this lacuna in Nietzsche's intellectual interests: 1) As a person, Nietzsche was not predisposed to appreciate sports. In his youth he was rather serious and studious (a nerd, really), and he didn't go in for physical games.² At Schulpforta he did like swimming and hiking, but he hated gymnastics.³ 2) In general terms, 19th Century German society did not put much emphasis on organized sports.

In the end this matters little, because we can simply borrow from

Nietzsche's thought in attempting to reflect on the meaning and importance of sports. Although athletics remains an integral part of our educational system and has become a huge force in popular culture, nevertheless it has not been thematized much or given the philosophical depth it deserves. A Nietzschean perspective that emphasizes agonistics, performance, sublimation, spectacle, and play can, I think, make a profound contribution to the "philosophy of sport."⁴

My text will consist of three sections: 1) Sports in the Greek world, 2) Nietzschean themes that pertain to sports, and 3) Reflections on sports in the light of these themes.

Sports in the Greek World⁵

We might think it odd that Pindar would call sports "sacred" (*Nemean Odes* 6.61) and that religious sites would include stadia, wherein athletic games were held during religious festivals. Such things seems odd, however, only because our sense of "religion" is so different. Early Greek myth and religion displayed a world view that fostered an intrinsic relationship between sports and fundamental cultural meanings. If we take Homer as a guide, we can explore this point by focusing on three basic features of the early Greek world view: earthliness, agonistics, and the heroic ideal.⁶

Greek myth and religion reflected the finite conditions of earthly existence, not a transcendent realm of deliverance. Their narratives expressed the lived world, the full range of human experiences, circumstances, and predicaments. Sacred manifestations embodied worldly achievement and power, visual beauty, and the mix of competing forces that govern the human situation.

Greek culture was also thoroughly agonistic. An *agon* is a contest or a struggle. Greek poetry, from Homer and Hesiod to tragedy, showed the world as a conflict between competing powers. And in practice the Greeks conducted contests in virtually all cultural endeavors: in athletics, of course, but also in the spheres of physical beauty, handicraft, visual arts, song, dance, drama, and oral disputation.⁷

The cultural significance of the *agon* can be understood in the light of the heroic ideal, as exemplified in Homer's *Iliad*. In Homer, human beings are essentially mortal and subjected to a negative fate beyond their control. Despite their finitude, mortals can achieve the worldly compensations of privilege, glory, and fame by risking their lives and confronting death on the battlefield, by testing their prowess against other warriors and divine powers. The important point here is that the meaning of excellence is necessarily related to limits and risk. As expressed in the *Iliad* (12.310-328), if it were not for the limit conditions of death and danger, it would not be necessary, or possible, to become the heroic exception. We can generalize and say that without the possibility of loss or failure, gain or success would not *mean* anything.

The importance of athletics in the Greek world can now be understood more clearly.⁸ The word *athlos* means conflict or struggle, and so athletics can be directly associated with the agonistic notion that competition in the midst of limit conditions generates meaning and excellence (also, the word for “prize” is *athlon*). What can distinguish athletic contests from other kinds in Greek culture is the extent to which sports display and accentuate the earthly elements of physical performance and skill, the beauty of the body, and a specific kind of dramatic spectacle. Competitions are arranged around spatial and temporal boundaries and certain situational narrative structures (e.g., a foot race) that set up and prompt the possibilities of physical prowess. In this way the exploits of heroic action are modified into a kind of theatrical play.

If we notice the extended treatment of the funeral games in the *Iliad* (23.256-897), where chariot races, boxing, wrestling, foot races, and other contests seem to occupy the same kind of exalted atmosphere as other heroic exploits in the epic, we can get a sense for why the Greeks gave sports such high esteem. Athletic contests must have represented a kind of religious ritual, an organized drama in which physical competitions were performed as a mimetic analogue of sacred exemplars—both divine and heroic—and as an elaborate incarnation of the cultural significance of the *agon*.

Perhaps now we can better comprehend the great enthusiasm the Greeks had for sports and the enormous cultural importance of periodic athletic contests, especially the Olympic games. In addition, we can appreciate why renowned visual artists and poets often chose athletes as models for their creative work (e.g., Pindar). In time, though, the significance of sports declined in the Greek world, one reason being the advent of philosophy as a cultural competitor. The importance of the body and action was gradually overshadowed by an emphasis on the mind and intellectual reflection. Likewise the agonistic, fatalistic world view that characterized early Greek myth and religion was eclipsed by an interest in spiritual transcendence and a rationalized cosmic order. Although Plato and Aristotle both recognized the importance of physical training in education, they began an intellectual revolution that eventually came to underestimate and even denigrate the cultural importance of sports—because of its celebration of the body, action, struggle, competition, and victorious achievement.

Nietzschean Themes Relevant to Sports

Despite the fact that Nietzsche gave scant attention to sports, his thought was heavily indebted to the early Greek world view that prized athletics so highly. In response to this interesting juxtaposition, we can explore a supplementary analysis that applies Nietzsche’s articulated

vision of human experience to the question of sports. In so doing we might be able to gain insight into why people enjoy sports so much and why sports can be seen to have significant cultural value. The Nietzschean topics I will briefly address in this regard are: will to power, sublimation, embodiment, spectacle, and play.

Will to power is fundamentally an agonistic concept. It names a primal condition of finite becoming, but it is more than simply an expression of change; it is constituted by conflicting tensions. As Nietzsche put it in a 1887 note, “will to power can manifest itself only against resistances [*Widerständen*]” (*KSA* 12:9[151]). Power, therefore, is not simply an individual possession or a goal of action; it is a global conception, an interactive force-field. Will to power indicates that an essential part of existence is the overcoming of obstacles and counterforces, so that each affirmation is also a negation, and conflict is a mutual co-constitution of contending agents. We see here that an application to athletic competition can be obvious and illuminating.

The idea of sublimation (see *HH* 1) is central to Nietzsche’s thought. *Sublimierung*, for Nietzsche, is less a function of repression and more akin to a Hegelian *Aufhebung*.⁹ Nietzsche’s naturalistic interpretation of culture holds that primal drives and instincts (organized around will to power) become redirected and refashioned into civilized productions and practices that are less crude and dangerous but nonetheless still fueled and charged by primitive impulses. On occasion Nietzsche describes this process as a “spiritualization [*Vergeistigung*]” of instincts and drives (see *BGE* 229, *TI* “Morality” 1). So, for instance, the drive to destroy can be channeled into a drive to surpass or to create. A significant example from the texts is Nietzsche’s depiction of slave morality and the ascetic ideal as creative reconstitutions of will to power. In a note from 1886-87, sublimation is implicated in the spheres of art, science, morality, and religion (*KSA* 12:7[3], pp. 256-57). It is easy to see how sports could be added to this list.

“Homer’s Contest” is an early text that is quite pertinent to our analysis. It exemplifies both will to power and sublimation, and it draws connections with elements of early Greek culture that we have mentioned. In this piece Nietzsche insists that civilization is not a transcendence of nature but a cultivation of more vicious natural drives into less destructive channels. Taking heed of Hesiod’s distinction between a bad and good Eris, Nietzsche distinguishes between a brutal drive to annihilate and a modified drive to defeat in a competition. He discusses the proliferation of contests in ancient Greece and how they represented both a sublimation of cruel instincts and a setting for the production of high achievement—since talent unfolds only through a struggle (*kämpfend entfalten*). In this way the culture of the community is furthered by an agonistic

education (*agonalen Erziehung*).¹⁰ Near the end of the text, Nietzsche gives a cathartic spin to sublimation by suggesting that without the full range and extent of their cultural contests, the Greeks would have regressed into “the abyss of a horrible savagery of hatred and lust for destruction [*Abgrund einer grauenhaften Wildheit des Hasses und der Vernichtungslust*].”

This text is quite important for our understanding of will to power and Nietzsche’s notorious affirmation of opposition and struggle. For Nietzsche, opposition generates development. The human self forms itself in and through agonistic relations. It is not formed first in an internal, individuated sphere, only then to be exposed to external relations and conflicts. Nietzsche takes a quasi-Hegelian line by insisting that our natures are partly formed by what we oppose and what opposes us. Consequently, any annulment of one’s Other would result in one’s own annulment. Here we get a deeper perspective on the structure of competition and see it less as a onesided impulse to dominate or eliminate (although it can be this for some), and more as a shared activity for the fostering of high achievement. It is interesting to note here that the etymological meaning of the word “compete” is “to seek together.” Competition, therefore, is an intrinsically social phenomenon. Moreover, it is crucial to distinguish competitive conflict from violence. Ironically, violence implies a desire to *eliminate* conflict by annihilating or incapacitating an opponent. In a later work Nietzsche discusses the “spiritualization of hostility [*Feindschaft*],” wherein one must affirm the presence and power of one’s enemies as implicated in one’s own posture (*TI* “Morality” 3).¹¹ What Nietzsche helps us see here is that the category of the “social” should not be restricted to notions of peace and harmony. Consequently, agonistic relations, including the kind found in athletic competitions, do not represent the deterioration of a social disposition.

Another obvious avenue to the topic of sports is Nietzsche’s naturalistic philosophy of embodiment. Throughout the texts dualistic and spiritualistic frameworks are rejected, although it is important to distinguish his naturalism from a crude materialism or scientism (see *GS* 373, *HH* 276). In *Zarathustra*, we are told that the human self should not be understood as something different from the body; we *are* our bodies (*Z*:1 “On the Despisers of the Body”).¹² In that same text the concept of beauty is defined in a naturalistic manner as power becoming gracious (*gnädig*) and visible (*Z*:2 “On Those Who are Sublime”). Here we notice the possibility of connecting power, embodiment, and cultural refinement in an examination of sports.

We continue in this direction by considering the concept of spectacle. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche depicts tragic drama as a communal, cultural event, as a public gathering and performance wherein a people

can witness and experience their deepest cultural expressions—in the case of the Greeks, the ineluctable tensions between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, between heroic individuation and a pervasive, fatal negativity. Nietzsche stresses the shared experience of a visual display that so captivated the Greeks, as well as the communal impulse of immersion and absorption in the performance. In this way Nietzsche connects tragic spectacle with the exalted effects of religious rituals, which both teach and transform in a blend of revelation and catharsis. As I have suggested, the Greeks experienced athletic contests in a similar manner; the spectacle of the games was a communal gathering wherein onlookers (which was thought to include the gods) and participants could experience the excitement of agonistic exploits.¹³

The final Nietzschean theme that would clearly be relevant to a discussion of sports is play. In his writings Nietzsche promotes the notion of play in a rhetorical countermove to the western emphasis on metaphysical fixtures, teleology, dogmatism, and ponderous austerity. Play represents expression that is spontaneous, creative, autotelic, groundless, purposeless, and joyous.¹⁴ Nietzsche's celebration of play captures his interest in promoting creativity over closure, art over objective truth, the "innocence of becoming" over teleology,¹⁵ and a childlike joy in life over the "spirit of gravity [*Schwere*]" (Z:3 "On the Spirit of Gravity"), in other words, an enjoyment of the free play of life without any ultimate reason or purpose, without the "seriousness" of the western tradition's battle with finitude on behalf of truth and self-preservation.

Reflections on Sports

In the light of Nietzsche's emphasis on agonistics, sublimation, embodiment, spectacle, and play, we are in a position to conceive athletic activity and sporting events as significantly Nietzschean, and therefore as expressive of a certain philosophical depth. Moreover, Nietzsche's naturalistic perspective on culture can help us better understand why so many people love to play and watch sports, and why such engagement can be seen to have great value and benefit. We can easily critique all kinds of things in the contemporary sports scene (e.g., the obscene economics of professional sports, and the over-estimation of sports figures as cultural heroes)—and such critique can also borrow from Nietzsche in many ways—but at the same time we are prepared to articulate the positive elements in our passion for sports and their enormous popularity today. Athletic events are both a performance and a production of important cultural meanings. To develop this thesis, let me briefly expand on the themes that have been addressed in our discussion.

One obvious benefit of sports is the healthy effects of athletic training and development of physical skills. The Greeks were right to include

sports in education, and not just because it is good for the body. We have learned a great deal about the symbiotic correlation between vigorous physical activity, intellectual acuity, and psychological well-being. Moreover, the sheer enjoyment and appreciation of the active body and its skills can play a role in sensitizing philosophy to embodiment and reversing its long-standing neglect of the lived body.¹⁶

Sporting events also can be understood as a public spectacle that dramatizes the finitude of the lived world, a theatrical presentation of human circumstances, pursuits, struggles, successes, and failures. The drama of achievement in the midst of limits and opposition, the risks and uncertainties that are intrinsic to a world of contingency, the tension of possibility, and yes, here it comes, the thrill of victory and the very unpleasant sensations of defeat—these are universal human experiences that are effectively ritualized and accentuated in athletic contests. Here we notice another angle on the depreciation of sports in western philosophy—due to its traditional emphasis on abstraction from immediate experience for the purpose of discovering rational principles or metaphysical constructs that can surpass the uncertainty and negativity of the lived world. Any challenge to this tradition can find some analogical supplement in sports—conceived as a deliberate presentation and production of finitude. Indeed, the very structure of athletic games is constituted by finitude with respect to spatial, temporal, and narrative configurations. A football game, for example, is arranged around physical boundaries and time limits, within which a story unfolds around performance goals and possibilities, conditions of resistance, competitive rules, and a climax of winning and losing—in all a symbolic dramatization of human strivings. Moreover, such an artifice of structured finitude creates a kind of compression that focuses attention, heightens awareness, and magnifies the excitement of narrative experience—especially with respect to occasions in a game that exhibit turning points, surprises, comebacks, reversals of fortune, spectacular plays, and decisive “moments of truth.”¹⁷

From the standpoint of human development, it is clear that sports can cultivate certain virtues in participants: e.g., discipline, sacrifice, teamwork, perseverance, courage, and practical intelligence. I want to focus on two qualities that stem from the agonistic elements of sports. The first is competitive respect, which is akin to Nietzsche’s affirmation of enemies. Since an opponent figures into the meaning of athletic achievement, athletes inhabit an ambiguous atmosphere of simultaneous negation and affirmation regarding opponents, who are obstacles to be overcome, but who must also be worthy and capable contestants if a victory is to have significance. Would we praise the New York Knicks for beating a high school squad? Would the Knicks even want to play such a game, even though they would surely get a victory? The point is that playing an

excessively weak opponent is more than unfair, it is meaningless. Ironically, you only want to defeat an opponent who is capable of defeating you. Such an attitude generates not only respect, but even certain ethical norms that are intrinsic to the logic of competition: Cheating in a contest or deliberately incapacitating a contestant amounts to trying to guarantee a win; but a guaranteed victory is agonistically nonsensical.

The second quality is a broader version of the first, and I will call it “negative capability,” to borrow from the poet John Keats. Negative capability is an affirmation of finitude, a disposition to appreciate limits, opposition, and uncertainty—which is to say, not only to accept losses but to affirm negative conditions as necessarily implicated in the meaning of achievements. Such a disposition, which is expressive of Nietzsche’s ideal of life affirmation, can be fostered and well illustrated in the realm of sports. I recall a wonderful *Twilight Zone* episode where a deceased criminal thinks he has lucked out and gone to heaven because every request is granted and all desires are met. When he begins to play pool, he breaks the rack and all the balls go in. He is thrilled, and sets up again, but each time he breaks, every ball goes in. Disturbed, he asks his host if misses could be arranged, but he is told that “things don’t work that way around here.” He confesses that he is a criminal and suggests he has been mistakenly sent to heaven; he would like to go to the “other place.” With a terrifying laugh, the host screams that this is the other place.

The theme of the episode is that perfection is hell. The meaning of success is essentially related to the possibility of failure. The criminal now *wants* to miss a shot so that *making* a shot will have meaning. This sheds a different light on limits that we normally regret, fear, or resent. Now it can be shown that such limits are *desirable* and intrinsic to the meaning of achievements. Negative capability is a virtue that is broadly applicable in life (Nietzsche’s entire thought can be said to be based in it) and it is well exemplified in, and fostered by, athletic practice.

Next I want to briefly reiterate the Nietzschean concept of sublimation. Athletic events, it seems to me, can not only be explained as the sublimation of primitive drives and instincts (note how many sports mimic territorial struggle); we can also appreciate cathartic effects along the lines of Nietzsche’s discussion in *Homer’s Contest*. As a cultural vent for participants and spectators, sports might provide an enormously healthy channel for the expurgation of more dangerous impulses and passions. One could even suggest that the extensive proliferation of sports in our time is a good thing—the more the better—that we should prefer people getting riled up about beating those damn Bulls, say, than churning out hostility toward less fictive human groups.

The last matter I want to consider is the question of play. One reason for a diminished estimation of sports is indeed its fictive nature, that it

is mere play and nothing “serious.” We have already noticed how Nietzsche can help us disrupt such a bifurcation and consider what is important and consequential in athletic play. Sports are autotelic in the sense of being void of ultimate purpose; they enact a break from regular life pursuits so that people can enjoy exciting fictions without a concern for vital consequences. Some people, of course, take sports too seriously, and in saying this we affirm the delimitation of a sphere of play that should not be confused with “real life.”

Such connotations of “play,” however, are not serious enough, because they stem from or encourage a neglect of important meanings and benefits that stem from sports and that this paper has been trying to articulate. The word “play” is a rich and complex term that can show us avenues to what is “serious” in sports play. I want to sketch two characteristics that might help us in this pursuit: the aesthetics of play and modes of intelligence in play.

First of all, athletic performance has an aesthetic dimension.¹⁸ Appreciation of the human form and the beauty of physical motion is often among the more refined judgments in the perception of sports. In some sports—gymnastics, for instance—esthetic judgments are part of the competition. The ancient Greeks included grace, style, and rhythm of movement in the evaluation of athletic performance. In this way we can connect athletic play with certain artistic values that would be noticed in, say, a theatrical “play.” Moreover, we have discussed Nietzsche’s association of play with spontaneity and creativity. Quite often athletes are called creative and artistic for their flare, prowess, or innovation, or for their seeming instinctive inventiveness and originality in the midst of game conditions (e.g., Michael Jordan).¹⁹

Secondly, athletic play is marked by a good deal of intelligence and structure, and so it should not be restricted to notions of spontaneity and purposelessness. From an internal standpoint, games have goals, structures, and rules. Moreover, a “play” in a game, a strategy of execution, demands a good deal of mentality, discernment, and ingenuity. And “playing” in a game is akin to the demands of playing a musical instrument, more particularly to playing jazz, in the sense that athletic performance is a combination of improvisation and confinement to structure, a temporal process of attentiveness to possibilities in the midst of game conditions.²⁰ It is important to note that Nietzsche’s conception of creative play should not be dissociated from structure and regulation either. Although creativity will always involve transgression, spontaneity, and freedom, nevertheless Nietzsche maintains that both the training for, and the results of, creative production require formative shaping and structure (see *HH* 155, 221; *WS* 140).

Consequently, the play of sports is “serious” enough to be lifted above

the trivial and the frivolous. As in the Greek world, sports are more akin to religious ritual practice, as an organized break in everyday life that nonetheless has importance, moment, and impact beyond mere entertainment. In the cultural setting of athletic events, we experience and enjoy an incarnation of the human story, expressed through the refined strivings of the human body.

1 We might think of our own time as an exception, but for the ancient Greeks, athletic games were connected with religious worship and reflected their deepest cultural and educational ideals.

2 He did, however, enjoy inventing and directing model-of-life games that reflected social, cultural, and military activities. And he always reserved the key role of King for himself! See Carl Pletsch, *Young Nietzsche: Becoming a Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 39-40.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 55.

4 For some works in this area, see Drew A. Hyland, *Philosophy of Sport* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), Carolyn E. Thomas, *Sport in a Philosophical Context* (Philadelphia: Lea & Febiger, 1983), and Paul Weiss, *Sport: A Philosophic Inquiry* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969).

5 Some of this section borrows from a previous essay of mine, "The Greeks and the Meaning of Athletics," in *Rethinking College Athletics*, edited by Judith Andre and David N. James (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), pp. 31-42.

6 For an extended treatment of these themes, see my *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths* (Chicago: Open Court, 1990), Chs. 2-3.

7 Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion*, tr. John Raffan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 105.

8 For some sources on ancient sports, see E. Norman Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), and two works by H.A. Harris, *Sport in Greece and Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972) and *Greek Athletes and Athletics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

9 See Walter Kaufmann's treatment in *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), Chs. 7-8.

10 Nietzsche does briefly mention racing and throwing, but he stresses the role of non-athletic contests.

11 In this passage Nietzsche also mentions how such a competitive relationship is important for political practice. I have explored the implications of Nietzsche's agonistic philosophy for a democratic politics in *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy* (Chicago: Open Court, 1995).

12 Nietzsche's writings also regularly display an interest in physiology, diet, climate, etc., as central to our understanding of life.

13 It is interesting to note here that *agon* also means a gathering or an assembly, and the *place* of a contest.

14 In *PTA* (7), Nietzsche lauds Heraclitus, who connected the amoral innocence of play with primal becoming and creation; we are told that the “impulse to play calls new worlds into being.” Creation is also described as the intersection of necessity and random play, and the cosmos is depicted as a form of art and a game and a play (the dual meaning of *Spiel*). In *AOM* (270), Nietzsche speaks of the “eternal child,” and declares that we cannot live without play, that play should not be restricted to childhood. And in a well known metaphorical configuration in *Zarathustra*, the innocence of the child is rated the highest level of human development (over the camel and the lion) and is connected with creativity and, again, *Spiel* (1: “On the Three Metamorphoses”).

15 See the 1883 note in *KSA* 10:8[19].

16 The lived body pertains to the phenomenology of “bodying forth” in the world, of the experiences of carnal presence and circumstances—to be distinguished from the body as a physical object, to which, of course, philosophy has given much attention. In continental philosophy, the works of Merleau-Ponty represent ground-breaking studies of the phenomenology of embodiment.

17 Joseph H. Kupfer analyses the parallels between athletic games and theatrical drama in “Waiting for DiMaggio: Sport as Drama,” in *Rethinking College Athletics*, pp. 109-119.

18 See Drew Hyland’s essay, “‘When Power Becomes Gracious:’ The Affinity of Sport and Art,” in *Rethinking College Athletics*, pp. 71-80.

19 Nietzsche would probably not rate such creativity very highly, but we should not ignore the analogical connection between athletic and artistic creativity.

20 Drew Hyland develops an insightful analysis of play as “responsive openness” in *The Question of Play* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984).