Steven Connor
A Philosophy of Sport.
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Although the philosophy of sport is a relatively new field, it has already formulated what may be considered to be its basic themes. Generally speaking, three issues organize the literature: first, some philosophers of sport endeavor to provide a precise definition of sport, usually in terms of rules and conventions, and thereby demarcate its activity against other social engagements; second, some see in sport an autonomous moral universe, with its own integrity and special concerns, which parallels the larger moral universe; and third, some concern themselves with the aesthetic character of sport, which is undeniably part of its appeal and, in some cases, constitutive of its purpose. In this publication, Steven Connor generally steers clear of these discussions because he believes that they have a tendency to 'treat sport allegorically,' which is to say they find their bearings outside the athletic arena, and then recognize instantiations of accepted principles or values within a sporting context (13). There is no denying the value of these studies, but Connor seeks to complement their contribution by approaching his subject matter with as 'little precomprehension as possible' (13). He intends, in other words, to provide a fresh account of the actual experience of sport, situating the action within broad categories such as space and time, but also concerned especially with the 'feel' of the contest from the perspectives of participants and the various observers.

The modesty of Connor's stated ambition should not mislead the reader: this is a highly literate, rigorous, and challenging discussion. Connor is well-prepared for his task: as a Professor of Modern Literature and Theory, he is able to weave into the discussion many fascinating observations from writers not primarily concerned with the study of sport, such as Freud, Barthes, and Sartre, but who nonetheless offer relevant and penetrating remarks. Connor also has a particularly good grasp of etymology and provides many interesting derivations in his discussion. Equally convincing, Connor writes as someone who, as both a player and a fan, knows the overwhelming and peculiar fascination of competitive sport. For example, to illustrate how broadcasting has transformed the experience of sport, he remembers himself as a seven-year-old soccer player, playing out entire matches on his lawn, while providing auto-commentary on his every move. Another example vividly conveys the powerful hold of team allegiance: Connor recalls sitting in an airport parking lot, listening to a cricket match on the car radio, delaying his exit until the latest moment that would allow him still to catch his flight—and discovering, by the simultaneous slamming doors, that many others had done the exact same thing. These personal reminiscences do not dominate, but are judiciously and effectively utilized to communicate astute observations.

Of course, Connor cannot avoid entirely touching upon previous discussions. For example, he offers his own definition of sports as 'games that tire you,' which serves quite well: the definition also nicely reminds us of the basic physicality of sport, an important theme in this book (15). Sport is ultimately about bodies pushing themselves, and Connor describes how these exertions represent an interesting paradox. The body—and, indeed, all sports equipment—stands

as both an instrument of and an obstacle to exertion; that is to say, one performs an athletic feat with the body or the ball or the racket, but it is precisely because these objects on some level resist that exertion that the feat gains significance. As he puts it with respect to a javelin: 'In a sense one might say to use it against itself' (120). This insight grounds Connor's helpful gloss on the well-known remark by Bernard Suits that 'playing a game is a voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (B. Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*, Broadview Press, 2005, 55). Connor suggests that because the body always represents a limiting condition, a fact thematized in sport, there is no distinction in principle between able-bodied and disabled sports. '…[D]isabled sports are the only kind there are' (18).

The book comprises seven chapters, each of which is an independent essay in itself and part of an integrated whole.

The first chapter, 'History,' opens with the question 'Why play?' (20). The range of possible answers helps explain the development of modern sport, which has evolved out of playful and unbounded encounters with nature, particularly in the sport of hunting, into rule-governed, competitive engagements. In other words, what was once largely a diversionary pursuit has become an agonistic struggle; this development, and particularly its relationship with modern society, is an interesting and important question. Some see modern sport as embodying all the worst instincts of an industrialized culture—such as codification, commercialization, and militarism—while others see it as a 'rival aesthetic to art' (42) due to its increased artificiality.

Chapter Two, 'Space,' focuses initially on the significance of the modern stadium, which doubly sets off space, first against its natural environs, and second against the playing space that is contains. The latter demarcation must be very precise, both for reasons of scoring conventions (e.g., whether a ball is in or out) and also to effect an absolute divide between the protagonists and the spectators. The spectators, very often high above and yet always at the periphery of the action, do have a way to enter the playing space, through crowd noise. Modern stadia have sequestered sport in much the same way that music halls have sequestered music, making each chambered and consequently ubiquitous.

Chapter Three, 'Time,' explores the distinction between absolute and immanent time, according to which we contrast games like basketball and baseball. With no clock, a baseball game continues until certain actions are completed, but even in basketball there are breaks and time-outs, and so game time is never identical to the 'monochrome homogeneity' of real time (71). Competitive advantages within a contest, such as large leads, ultimately translate into temporal advantages, conceived either absolutely or immanently. In this sense, competitors play *in* time and *with* time. Furthermore, modern sports have increasingly acquired their own calendars and have become standardized, largely for commercial reasons.

Chapter Four, 'Movement,' studies the ecstatic projection of the human body, which is especially pronounced in sport because in sport, the body strives, as it were, to go beyond itself. This is an ancient puzzle, famously associated with the paradoxes of Zeno: how is motion even possible if a body is always located, at any one instant, in a specific here and now? Sport suggests a resource to address this riddle because it involves anticipatory movement, which implies that the agent is simultaneously both here and on the way to there (and not merely as a

psychological projection). A body must somehow be both a discontinuous object as well as a participant in a continuum if we are to solve the ancient riddle. Another interesting observation turns on the distinction between absolute and accented motion. An example of the latter variety would be the impartation of spin on a ball, which factors prominently in many sports.

Chapter Five, 'Equipment,' explains how sports are defined by their characteristic equipment, even if more efficient instruments are available for the constitutive tasks. Connor presents a particularly important discussion about what might be considered the quintessential sport equipment, the ball, which is characterized by its spherical shape and its elasticity. These properties are further enhanced by technological advances such as the development of the lawn mower, which made uniform and predictable the surface of some playing fields, and rubber, which 'actualized the essential reversibility of values … that sports explore'' (140).

Chapter Six, 'Rules,' analyzes the constitutive function of rules, which essentially create sporting events by providing them with objectives, permissible actions, and scoring methods. For this reason rules are more 'implacable' (146) than regulatory laws, because one who would disrespect rules does so on pain of self-contradiction, especially the unarticulated rule that one must try to win. More abstractly, rules provide a way to translate the fluid activity of the event into something objective and quantifiable, which introduces a new perspective on the contingencies of sport. Quantification lends itself naturally to statistical analysis, probability studies, and gambling.

Chapter Seven, 'Winning,' develops the central theme of competition. Paradoxically, in our modern understanding of sport, 'playing' requires seriousness about the outcome, which, although decisive, is no longer brutal in its manifestation. And yet there is brutality lurking around modern sport, as concerns about the relationship between violence and competition remain with us. Connor ends his discussion with some fascinating speculation about the future of sport. He imagines a gradual phasing out of rule-governed competitions and a return to encounters with 'the nonhuman world of things and forces', as we see in extreme sports (210).

Connor aptly describes his work as 'cultural phenomenology' (14) because it recognizes sport as an important and evolving principle of our collective self-understanding. At the same time, the book manages to evoke a sense of delight and discovery as it explores the subject, with a fresh observation on virtually every page.

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