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## Sport as part of a meaningful life

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### ABSTRACT

My purpose in this article is to raise the problem of meaning in sport. The problem has two aspects. One is whether sport has any meaning in itself. The other is about how sport can be a part of a meaningful life. While I touch upon the first problem, my discussion's main thrust is about the second aspect. I start with clarifying the notion of 'meaning', the possible sources of meaning, and the idea of 'leading a meaningful life'. I distinguish between two views, the existentialist notion of meaning as created and the metaphysical view that meaning is something we find. I then look at the relation between meaning and value. I argue that while value is characterized by showing an internal unity in complexity, meaning is characterized by connecting elements into a pattern with a goal. I then ask if meaning can stand on its own legs and how value can ground meaning? I then show how people can integrate sports in their lives to lead more well-balanced and meaningful lives. I end by discussing some parallels between the debate about meaning in sport and the discussion of the moral character of sport.

**KEYWORDS** Sport; meaning; value; life

### Introduction

My purpose in this article is to raise the problem of meaning in sport. The problem has two aspects. One is whether sport has any meaning in itself. The other is about how sport can be a part of a meaningful life. While I touch upon the first problem, my discussion's main thrust will be about the second aspect.

Relatively little has been written on sport and meaning, or sport as part of a meaningful life, from a sport philosophical perspective. While the early collection of sport philosophical articles by Gerber and Morgan (1979) had a section on sport as a meaningful experience, later article collections, like the one by Hardman and Jones (2010), did not take up the problem of meaning in sport. Neither recent monographs like the ones by Connor (2011), Papineau (2017, or Morgan (2020) nor the recent handbooks by Torres (2014) and McNamee and Morgan (2015) address the problem of meaning in sport.

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Part of the problem may be that sport is endlessly complex and resists easy extractions of meaning. In his book *The Meaning of Sport*, sportswriter Simon Barnes (2006) argues that there is no single meaning to extract: 'Sport is everything: sport is nothing. Sport is important: sport is trivial. Sport is packed with meaning: sport means nothing'. (Barnes 2006, Kindle edition, Locations 4027–4122). Other authors think otherwise. Kretchmar (2000) has argued for the importance of meaning in physical education and suggested promoting activities and sports that are intrinsically meaningful and can lead to longtime commitments to sporting cultures or subcultures. Similarly, Ilundáin-Agurruza's (2014) argues that sport and play can be important for meaningful and lifelong learning. Physical education, play, and sports focusing on holistic human movement, body, and mind, can make our lives more meaningful and possibly more enjoyable.

Meaning is a fundamental problem in existentialist philosophy. In his presentation of existential philosophy and sport Aggerholm (2015) shows how people can create existential meaning in and through sport. In an article by Aggerholm and Breivik (2020), meaning-making in outdoor life and soccer is discussed using three existential attitudes: being, having, and belonging, as interpretative key factors. The importance of meaning is also evidenced by Fezell (2013) in his book *Sport, Philosophy, and Good Lives*, where he argues that the ultimate attraction of sport is related to our quest for meaning in life. Striving for meaning is probably more important for many sportspersons than the quest for competitive victory or public recognition. A similar view about the importance of striving as meaning-making is forwarded by; Russell (2020).

While sport philosophers study the importance of meaning and the meaning-making process in sport, empirical studies try to identify the more concrete and specific different meanings people experience in and through sport. These studies typically borrow concepts from more well-developed empirical research areas, such as meaning in life, work, or leisure, etc. (see Ronkainen et al. (2020a, 2020b).

While some authors have addressed the problem of meaning in sport, the meaning-problem has in relatively few cases been center-stage. Consequently, there has not been an on-going discussion of meaning in sport, what meaning means, the role it has, which position it can hold in people's lives. Therefore, my aim in this article is to put meaning center-stage and invite further discussions of meaning in sport. The focus will not primarily be on the meaning of sport as such, but rather how sports (in a broad sense) can be a part of a meaningful life. This is because sport may have meaning in itself but may increase its meaningfulness by being integrated into the broader life context. The article is explorative, which means that my goal is not to defend and discuss one specific theory but rather show how the field of meaning can be opened up in a sport context and give rise to new

perspectives. I have here used some of Nozick's (1981, 1989) key ideas and distinctions. I will most of the time take the participant view, but on some occasions include a spectator perspective.

I will start with a clarification of the notion of 'meaning', the possible sources of meaning, and the idea of 'leading a meaningful life'. I will then look at the relation between meaning and value. Can meaning stand on its own legs, or can value ground meaning? I will then discuss how people can integrate different sport types in their lives and contribute to a well-balanced and meaningful life.

## The meaning of 'meaning' – the various types of meaning

What is 'meaning'? The concept of meaning is debated from many angles among philosophers. I have found Nozick's identification and discussion of varieties of meaning fruitful. Nozick (1981) identifies eight different ways that the concept of meaning is used:

- (1) Meaning as external causal relationship: 'This means war'.
- (2) Meaning as external referential or semantic relation: 'Brother means male sibling'.
- (3) Meaning as intention or purpose: 'did you really mean that'?
- (4) Meaning as lesson: 'Gandhi's success means that nonviolent techniques sometimes can win over force'.
- (5) Meaning as personal significance, importance, value, mattering: 'You mean a lot to me'.
- (6) Meaning as objective meaningfulness: importance, significance of historical events
- (7) Meaning as intrinsic meaningfulness: objective meaning in itself – scientific theories, mathematical theorems.
- (8) Meaning as total resultant meaning: The sum total and web of something's meanings.

(see Nozick [1981] *Philosophical Explanations*, 574–575)

Relevant to our discussion is interpretation number 3: Meaning as intention or purpose. At least in competitive sport, the central purpose is to win by following the rules and the sport's specific ethos. One must play to win; otherwise, the meaning (= purpose) of a sport breaks down. Thus, the athletes are, consciously or not, led by an intention to win, which is determined and defined by the specific construction and set-up of the sport (goals, rules, ethos, equipment, arena).

Also interpretation number 5 is important in sport settings. It is about the personal or existential meaning (= significance) a sport has for me. The personal meaning can be of many kinds, such as beating a specific

competitor, succeeding with a new technique, improving from the last game, getting a specific emotional high, be together with teammates, and so on. Personal meanings have changed through historical time periods, and they may change over a person's life course.

Interpretation number 6 is also relevant. Sport may have objective meaningfulness, for example through big sport organizations, such as IOC, and the historical and social impact of specific sporting events such as Olympic games, big tournaments, or events such as boycotts and demonstrations.

Interpretation number 7, intrinsic meaningfulness, can be found in a well-composed sport, as a structure of rules (the idea) or as a 'beautiful game' (a specific instantiation of the rule structure). According to a *formalist* account, the rule structure, like the theory-structure in a science, is enough to define a sport's meaning. Other theories of sport (*broad internalism*, *conventionalism* and *institutionalism*) argue that one must include a broader general interpretative framework or social and historical conventions if one wants to identify the meaning of sport.

Interpretation number 8, meaning as total resultant meaning, is also relevant for sport. It would sum up and integrate all the different meanings sport can have in a person's life. The total meaning would then include the meaningfulness of exercising bodily and mental sporting skills as well as the corresponding existential, aesthetic and moral meaning-aspects. The total resultant meaning should not be restricted to individuals but can sum up the web of meanings sport can have for practitioners and supporters in a local community or in a nation.

Following Nozick's interpretation scheme, we can thus identify patterns of meaning in sport from the participant's intention to the role sport plays in society. Meaning in sport can be about the personal meaning of a sport for the participant (3), the intrinsic meaningfulness of sport itself (7), the total web of meanings in a sporting life (8), and the objective meaningfulness or impact of sport on the broader society (6). In the following discussion, especially personal meaning, intrinsic meaning, and total web of meanings in people's lives is important.

## **Creating meaning versus finding meaning**

There is a basic problem concerning meaning, especially in relation to meaning in people's lives, that I first want to clarify. Is meaning something we can find, something which exists before us or independent of us? Or is meaning something we have to create? In the Western philosophical tradition, both alternatives are represented. According to one view, there is an objective meaning in history, society and one's life. There is an order of meaning which one must seek and find. According to the other view there is no objective meaning laid down in the universe, society, or life.

One has to create meaning for oneself. We can exemplify this by two extreme versions, individualistic existentialism versus holistic Western metaphysics.

In the Western metaphysical tradition, the holistic view has dominated. Central from Plato through Medieval theology to Kant was the idea of a true world, a heavenly world. This world was objectively founded, in most cases by the notion of God as Creator. Life was then seen as a journey towards redemption. The journey was depicted as a story, a narrative, of single lives and mankind, from the creation of the world to the judgment day and the new earth and the new heaven. This view is characteristic of what Young (2003) calls *true-world philosophies*. According to this view there is a deeper pattern of meaning that one has to find, and this pattern is laid down by the true world characteristics. In sport it would mean that there are a pattern and meaning in sport according to the true world characteristics. This is echoed in Plato's idea that 'man has been constructed as a toy for God, and this, in fact, is the finest thing about him. All of us then, men and women alike, must fall in with our role and spend life in making our play as perfect as possible' (Plato, *The Laws, Book VIII, 803 c*). Another version is the Christian idea that God the Creator has not only made a plan for the universe and the history of humankind, but for every single human being. To find meaning in life and sport one must consequently be willing to follow God's plan for one's life, for instance, as exemplified by Eric Lidell in his unwillingness to compete on Sundays.

The holistic meaning can in secularized versions come from what your country expects from you, from the local community, your club, or coaches. Meaning is already there; it is something you find. Athletes at higher performance levels find meaning in training programs, competition schedules, and career plans set up by elite sport organizations. Or the plan for one's career and development can be set up by your parents, in most cases your father, as in Tiger Woods' case.

The existentialist view has a different background story. Here there is no plan for the universe, for society, or for the individual. Each of us has to choose how to live. There is no 'essence before existence', no pre-ordained meaning to find and to follow. Meaning has to be created by the individual in total freedom. Existentialist philosophers argued that finitude (death) is a precondition for meaning, and we have to decide how to live face to face with this ultimate fact. The possibility of meaninglessness is always hanging over us. Camus famously begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* by saying that 'There is but one serious philosophical problem and that is suicide'. My life is worth living if, but only if, I can create some meaning in it (see Young 2003). Creating meaning is also taking place on a social and cultural level. In secular societies, there is a social construction of reality and thus also of meaning. The

individual may thus take the socially constructed meaning as something given, something to find. The lonely existentialist individual that creates meaning in total freedom may thus be a rare specimen.

Whether we have to create meaning or find meaning, the meaning of life can be of many kinds: 'The meaning (point, purpose, goal) of my life, if it has one, is my fundamental project – whether that be to gain “eternal bliss”, to be virtuous, to become a famous rock star or simply to watch over my children’s growth and development’ (Young 2003, 5). To create or find meaning is thus important. It cannot be replaced by simple utilitarian pleasure-maximization. This is somewhat humorously evidenced by Nietzsche: ‘Nietzsche says (taking a swipe at Bentham’s “Utilitarian” maxim that right action is an action which promotes the greatest amount of pleasure for the greatest number): “Man does not seek pleasure; only the Englishman does.” What “man” seeks, he continues, is “meaning”’ (Young 2003, 5).

## A meaningful life

According to the distinctions made earlier sport can have personal meaning and total resultant meaning. Sport can have personal meaning for me a) as a valuable activity, b) in the involvement here and now, and c) also as part of my life project, as integrated in the total context of my life. This larger context increases the meaning sport has for me here and now.

But how can we come closer to identifying the characteristics of a meaningful life? Nozick (1981, 578) suggests the following characteristics of a meaningful life:

- (1) ) 'A life organized according to a plan and hierarchy of goals that integrates and directs the life.
- (2) ) Having certain features of structure, pattern, and detail that the person intends his life to have, and so forth;
- (3) ) he lives transparently so others can see the life-plan his life is based upon, and
- (4) ) thereby learn a lesson from his life,
- (5) ) a lesson involving a positive evaluation of these weighty and intended features in the life plan he transparently lives’.

From this definition of meaning in life, we can draw two consequences: a) For something to be meaningful it must have some direction or directedness (plan and hierarchy of goals). It must point to something. It must have a purpose or goal. b) The second feature of meaning is connectedness. Parts of one’s life must be connected into a structure, a pattern, like the words in a meaningful sentence. One’s life can thus become an intended whole.

These two features of a meaningful life seem fundamental. In addition, Nozick comes up with three less apparent features. In a meaningful life, the person lives transparently, which means that the meaning is not hidden. One lives in the open and not in secrecy or disguise – at least not when it comes to the central life-defining goals. Furthermore, other people can learn a lesson that involves a positive evaluation of the person's life. This means that there is an ethical aspect involved. A meaningful life is imbued with ethical qualities. To satisfy these criteria, sport must be an intended and regular activity in one's life. Sport is not only what one happens to pursue or be involved in haphazardly and now and then. It is not recreation by chance.

Furthermore, sport must satisfy the second criterion of connectedness. It must have a regular place, a connection with other activities one pursues, whether that be a contrast or continuation with some other activities. It must be a part of some order in one's life. In elite sport or in lifestyle sports these two features of purpose and connectedness are quite obvious. But also at lower levels sport has for many an essential place with direction and connectedness.

The next features of transparency and learning are less obvious. In contrast to play, which can be surrounded by secrecy and disguise, sport is open, the rules are not hidden, the results are transparent. Similarly, according to Nozick's view, sport is a transparent part of a person's life that other people can see and learn from. We can be inspired by other people's joyful and enthusiastic sporting activities. Or be impressed by their striving and efforts, the way they handle resistance and defeats, and so on. This is not only the case with elite sport but with dedicated sport at different levels and of different types.

The last point about the possibility of learning a lesson from dedicated sportspersons fits very well with the idea of the sportsperson as a good example, a role model. To live a meaningful life, the athlete should live transparently (no trickery, doping) so that other people can learn a lesson from the athlete's life and career and be inspired to lead a life with similar qualities. Thus, there are ethical aspects and qualities inherent in the sporting life, surely at elite level, and, according to this view, among engaged sportspersons at more moderate skill levels.

Some questions will arise here:

- (1) ) What is implied in Nietzsche's idea that we seek meaning? Meaning can be construed as an abstract idea or ideal, as a hypostatized entity that we should somehow try to grasp and get hold of. But this may be a futile attempt and a self-effacing end since meaning in many cases seems to be a by-product of some other pursuit or dedicated striving. I think that my analysis, building on Nozick, can give us some help here. Our focus should not be on meaning as such, but rather on activities and pursuits, for example sports, that we value and then see how these



can connect with other parts of our lives to a meaningful whole. It is not meaning per se but what we most value that should guide our pursuits and then indirectly lead us to a meaningful whole.

- (2) ) Is the idea of a life plan too intellectualistic and prudent? An existentialist and anarchist version would be a life lived more free, creative, changing, diverse, with no *pre-hoc plan* but a plan made up as one goes, or even made up *post-hoc*. Could such a life without a deliberate life plan be lived transparently, with a positive lesson to learn for others? This cannot be ruled out. Such a life could also be inspiring since it would encompass values such as freedom and creativity. In many cases, one could also argue that such a life had an implicit life plan that gradually unfolded through adherence to principles such as freedom and creativity.
- (3) ) A more serious objection would be that the idea of a life plan is misguided since there is no meaning in life and consequently not in sport. According to philosopher and climber Peter Wessel Zapffe (1996), there is a mismatch between our quest for meaning and the universe's total meaninglessness. We are morally overequipped and search for morals and meaning where there is none. Climbing, like other sports, is therefore as meaningless as life itself. This did not prevent Zapffe to find lacunas of joy and enthusiasm in his climbing adventures. An existentialist would say that his climbing-with-joy was his meaning-creating practice, even if his theory was nihilistic. In his bleak pessimism, he nevertheless scratched some joy from climbing, maybe as a sort of substitute for meaning.
- (4) ) Is the idea of a life-plan too individualistic? Can we also talk about meaning as part of 'life plans' for teams, communities of practice, clubs, fans and other larger acting entities? Can we talk about meaning as important in the life of a club? Meaning would then be something like the plan or the project that the club tries to realize. Or it could in retrospect, be the role it has fulfilled in the local community and for its members. As mentioned earlier, individuals may find meaning in participating in the common meaning-creating projects of teams, clubs, and local communities. In many cases, the individual and personal life plan, at least for some time, merge with the plan of the team or club one is a member of.
- (5) ) Is sport as part of a life-plan best exemplified in elite sport where one's life for some years is totally centered around training and competitions? The training plan is here the backbone of one's life plan. Even better examples may be lifestyle sports such as extreme sports, risk sports, action sports etc. Here, individuals and groups creatively develop sporting lifestyles with specific equipment, techniques, rules, clothing, and slang to build up a set of common meanings and values.

One's life is then lived inside one of these group-developed sporting worlds. I would argue that also for people with more modest ambitions sport, training, fitness, or recreation can become an important part of 'the way I want to lead my life' – but without being center stage.

### **Meaning and value – can meaning support itself, or must it be grounded in something valuable?**

It seems that something can get its meaning, and thus be meaningful, by being part of a larger meaning-structure. A feint or a dribble in football is meaningful as part of the attack. The attack is set up according to a strategy and a game plan. The game plan is set up according to the goals and rules of a particular sport. Taking part in the particular sport must in the end have some meaning for the participants. Without a terminal meaning the meaning-structure will collapse. The dribble derives its meaning by being part of this larger goal-supported structure. This means that finding or creating meaning refers to something beyond itself, a larger whole or context. A meaningful element is connected to something beyond its border. In the end of the chain there must be a terminal meaning, which has meaning in itself. But there is another possibility, as argued by Nozick: 'The chain that grounds meaning cannot terminate in something worthless, but it need not end with something that somehow is intrinsically meaningful; it can rest upon something valuable' (Nozick 1981, 610).

Something that has intrinsic value can thus ground the meaning structure. Nozick argues that value involves some form of integration within its boundaries. This contrasts with meaning, which must have some connection between or across boundaries. But if meaning can terminate in something valuable, this value must be intrinsic. Otherwise, if it were extrinsic, we would need to find the intrinsic value that could ground the extrinsic value.

If one primarily practices sport to improve one's health, sport has extrinsic value, and health is the intrinsic value. This means that the ultimate meaning of one's sport practice is not some intrinsic value of sport but improving one's health. If one practices sport to experience the qualities that the sport-practice itself offers, like the execution of sport-specific capacities and skills, these values are intrinsic.

Nozick tries to come closer to what intrinsic value means and argues: 'Something has intrinsic value, I suggest, to the degree that it is organically unified. Its organic unity is its value. At any rate, it is a structure of organic unity that constitutes value's structure' (Nozick 1989, 164). Such intrinsic value structure can be exemplified in works of art, scientific theories, and the natural world. And I would add that this can also be found in the world of sport. Characteristic for value is 'unity in diversity' or organic unity: 'The

greater the diversity that gets unified, the greater the organic unity; and also the tighter the unity to which diversity is brought, the greater the organic unity' (Nozick 1989, 164).

Organic unity is realized in sport through sport's specific goal, the rules and ethos that regulate and limit the practice, all developed through the background knowledge and the values (the idea of sport) that comes with sport as an institution. By taking part in sport people can experience the intrinsic values and meanings that come with such participation.

Nozick's view of value structure as unity in complexity would have some implications for sport. It would imply that complex sports with a high degree of organic unity would have a higher value than those with lower organic unity. But there would also be a trade-off between complexity and unity in many cases. One could consequently argue that while a hundred-meter sprint, say in a Usain Bolt version, has a lot of unity, perfected stream-lined skill execution, but little complexity, a soccer game has a very high complexity, but less unification, if not at the highest Barcelona level.

Complexity can be understood and contextualized in different ways. It could mean complexity concerning how many different skills and capacities participants need to display when engaged in the sport. It could also mean the complexity of the rules, the number of team participants, the variety of roles on positions, etc. While the first perspective focus on the participant view, the second lean more towards the spectator viewpoint.

### **Unity in complexity – some variations**

One can look at sport from the outside as an event structure, a spectacle, a visible configuration of movements and bodies, directed towards a competitive end state. But one can also take a look from the inside, from the participant point of view, and look at the capacities and skills, the strategic reasoning, which contributes to the performance as it unfolds.

Let us take a closer look at Nozick's idea of value as unity in complexity. Some critics have argued that it is diffuse and general. But it seems to give, at least *prima facie*, some interesting results. Let us look at decathlon and football (soccer), which are both candidates for exhibiting a very high degree of unity in complexity. The decathlon's complexity is related to entirely different movement types and skills: jumping, throwing, running. From a spectator's point of view, these are experienced as separate events, one after the other. It is a series of events, and the unity is a such not very strong.

From the inside, seen from the participant's point of view, the connection between the events become much stronger, since it is the same embodied athlete with the same dedicated mind that produces quite diverse moves and

feats. The unity becomes evident through one and the same body and its display of different types of skills. I think it is fair to say that decathlon thus produces high unity in complexity primarily through the participant's lens.

In football (soccer), the complexity is also evident, in the use of feet, head, and body, in the dribbles, passes, and shots. There is a high degree of complexity with 22 players in movement and fast reactions and split-second decisions. Here it is evident also from a spectator point of view that the complexity is relatively high. The players interact during the same time slot, all over the field, and in complex ways. The players also experience this. The different sections and parts of the game change fast, with sudden shifts between attack and defense. There is also a complexity of physical skills, based on precise perceptions and cognitions. Actions and reactions have to be combined and executed fast. The unity in a football match thus depends on many factors. At high levels and with a clear tactic, the game can run like there were a hidden hand behind the moves and passes. At lower levels and with teams having a bad day, a game can be quite chaotic, with little unity in complexity. However, in contrast to decathlon football have unity in complexity executed and expressed during the same time sequence.

We have now seen that sport can have value in itself, and this value can ground meaning in various ways. A person doesn't need to refer to some value beyond sport, since sport can have intrinsic value. Furthermore, it is possible to base the various types of meaning (such as personal meaning or total resultant meaning) on the intrinsic value of sport or on the premise that sport can have meaning in itself, as a practice. I would now like to exemplify how sport from here can become part of a meaningful life.

### **Sport as part of a meaningful life in four existential dimensions**

Heidegger defined the human way of being (Dasein) as a 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger 1962). There is no division between the individual and the world that has to be overcome and bridged. We are already and all the time transcending toward the surrounding world, geared into it, connected with it. Through being-already there (Thrownness) and in a specific basic mood, we project our understanding towards future possibilities and relate to our immediate present surroundings. We thus live in a world based on projected meanings. We are world-making and creating/discovering meaning since we organize things in patterns and relationships of meaning, with an ultimate goal of taking care of ourselves in the world. Sport is a part of this world-making process.

Based on an article by Breivik (2020) I will argue that our being-in-the-world takes place in four different existential dimensions: I-Me, I-You, I-Society and I-Nature. The I-Me relation points to the unique existential relation the human being has to itself. The human being is self-referential,

has second-order thoughts, and can thus work on itself. For existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Marcel, Jaspers, and the younger Heidegger, the individual's relation to its own existence and the creation of possible meaning in life was the central problem. Much work by artists, painters, novelists, and poets is carved out from the self's inner life, from experiences and phantasies. In many cases, the meaning-making process is focused on practicing and striving, on perfecting and developing one's skills. *Individual sports*, like athletics and gymnastics, represent the I-Me relation. Here it is sufficient that there is just one individual athlete present for the sport to be realized in its basic form. Here, the basic meaning structure seems to be: 'What can I do with and through my body? How fast can I run 100 meters? How well can I perform a series of acrobatic moves in floor gymnastics?' A central value in individual sports like gymnastics or athletics is the unique and unitary display of complex bodily and mental capacities and skills. A central meaning in such sports may be the satisfaction of practicing and striving to develop and perfect one's sporting skills as an important part of one's life without direct interference from other athletes. I am on my own and can have control.

In the I-You dimension, the human being finds itself face-to-face with another person, a single 'You'. *Encounter sports*, like wrestling, boxing, and fencing, represent this dimension. Here one can look one' opponent directly in the eye and act and react instantly with the opponent. The situation can contain cooperation as well as conflict, in most sports conflict. Philosophers such as Buber and Levinas have underlined the existential importance and uniqueness of the I-You situation. Counselors and therapists experience this type of situation in their daily work. A basic meaning in encounter sports may be connected with the experience of handling direct physical action and reaction face to face with a single opponent. The meaning such sports can have in people's lives may relate to the experience and ability to handle direct physical conflict without losing one's temper and mental balance. In fact, one can be a good friend with many of one's toughest opponents. Competitive and emotional relationships may be different and may run in opposite directions.

The *I-They* dimension focus on the relation between the individual and the social group or the society. *Team sports* like rugby, soccer, and basketball may represent the I-Society relation. Many philosophers from Aristotle to Marx have underlined that no man is an island but part of the main. Humans are political animals, and many people have politics as full-time or part-time occupation. Team sports express basic social processes like *cooperation and conflict* and thus mimic territorial conflicts and wars. Having physical and technical skills, strategic competence, and the ability to 'read' the play, are essential capacities in order to succeed. A basic meaning in team sports seems to be a team's ability to succeed against another team by combining elements of skill, strategy, and chance in an optimal and unified way. The

meaning of team sports in people's lives may relate to the unique way of 'being together' with friends and 'enemies' while exercising a wide variety of skills and capacities to fight an opposing team.

The I-Nature relation focus on the human being's unique dependence and attachment to the natural environment. In an evolutionary sense, this is our home, where our bodies and skills were developed and refined. Philosophers from the Pre-Socratics to the deep ecologists have underlined our unique relation to the natural environment. The I-Nature relation is expressed in *nature sports* where it is a necessary condition that there is an interaction with some part of nature (a natural element, an animal, a landscape) and that this interaction with nature is the primary purpose of the sport. In nature sports such as climbing, skydiving, surfing, and skiing, there is direct interaction with nature even if nature does not intentionally 'act back' such as an adversary in encounter sports or team sports. A central value, and thus meaning, may reflect an adaptive process where the human being can handle the complex interaction with natural elements in a unified and skillful way. In people's lives, nature sports may represent a longing back and interaction with nature as our deep evolutionary and mythical background.

### **The well-balanced meaningful life**

As human beings, we can find value and thus meaning in each of the four dimensions. It could be meaningful for some people to get deeply involved in one of the dimensions and concentrate on team sports or nature sports. According to an ideal of a well-balanced and many-sided life, one could imagine that other people wanted to get experiences from sports representing each of the four dimensions. Through the life course, a person could become actively involved in a set of sports representing each of the four dimensions. It would mean less concentration and deep involvement in one dimension, but would give a more diverse, many-sided involvement. An exemplification of deep involvement in one dimension and one type of sport could be elite athletes' development. If one wants to excel as an elite athlete, one must become heavily involved in the chosen sport and gradually specialize from some time point. This will be at the cost of many-sidedness.

For most people, one-sided specialization is not the best option. Based on the fourfold, one could imagine developing a pedagogical program in school or in the local community where children could be introduced to a well-balanced repertoire of sports from all four dimensions. This could be followed up by reflecting on the existential uniqueness of each of the dimensions. In some contexts, like boxing, an adversary is hitting back. On floor gymnastics, I am on my own. In team sports, I have to interact with teammates and opponents and find my role. In nature sports, I can play with and on natural elements that follow natural laws.

But our involvement with activities in the four dimensions is not only about sport. People choose types of work that, to a large extent, represent specific dimensions. While being a sculptor expresses the I-Me relation, being a therapist expresses the I-You relation. While being a politician expresses the I-Society relation, being a forest ranger expresses the I-Nature relation.

Some people may find meaning in sport by choosing a sport from the same dimension as their work, others may prefer a sport from a different dimension to experience existential variety. The politician may seek lonely jogging as a contrast to the sociality of politics. The lonely writer may seek a team sport as an escape from lonely days of writing. The therapist may seek contrast to counseling by becoming engaged in white water kayaking. Different meaning patterns are possible, depending on personality type, lifestyle preferences, and differences in existential commitments. Meaning in sport is thus an essential part of a web of different activities and involvements connected in meaningful ways by some deliberate plan or (in many cases) by a hidden script that defines and directs how one's life will be composed and realized.

In this article, my focus has been on the structural aspects of value on meaning and not on the concrete content, the specific meanings and types of meaning people find in sport. These can be of intrinsic or extrinsic character. The structure of intrinsic value as unity in complexity opens up for concrete values connected with aesthetics (a beautiful game), ethics (fair play), knowledge (knowing how), skill (mastery). The idea of meaning as purposeful connectedness opens up for concrete experiences of meaning related to strong feelings (deep flow), religious feelings (transcendence), training (craftsmanship), friendship (solidarity). These meanings are intrinsic since they are experienced during the sporting practice and as parts of such practice. They are connected with and anchored in the sport itself.

In contrast to sport work has primarily extrinsic meaning. Nevertheless, people can find intrinsic meanings in work. Some point to the meaning of 'doing well' (craftsmanship), others point to 'doing good' (making the world better), and some to 'doing with' (bonds between co-workers) (Pratt, Pradies, and Lepisto 2013). Both 'doing well' and 'doing with' are meanings that we also find in sport contexts. And by its positive consequences (health, happiness, well-being) sport can also contribute to 'doing good'. In her comprehensive study of meaning in life Schnell (2020) finds that coherence, significance, orientation and belonging are key aspects of the experience of meaning. This fits well with our idea of meaning in a sporting life as a purposeful integration of a web of meanings according to some implicit or explicit life plan.

## Some clarifications and extensions

The idea of a life plan has been central in my discussion. As already mentioned, it may seem individualistic as 'my life plan'. Nozick's discussion focuses on the individual. But I have earlier argued that it can also be used as a plan for a team, a club, a sport organization, etc. While an existentialist approach would focus on the individual, a more communal approach will have a broader focus.

The notion of a 'plan' can also be problematized since it seems to indicate something rational and intellectual and something explicit and open. The concept of a plan may fit some cases of sport involvement but not all. It seems appropriate and relevant for elite athletes, lifestyle sport participants, and serious amateurs. But in many cases, the term 'project, or 'idea' may better indicate the more intuitive and process-oriented aspects of how we develop our lives according to some goal. I may thus have a vague or implicit idea of what I want to do with the sporting aspect of my life, but it is far from an explicit plan. Nevertheless, the idea of a 'plan' is an ideal-typical construct that may help us better understand how our sporting lives are implicitly or explicitly directed towards some clear or vague goal.

A third point is whether sporting life plans are created or found. I have left this open and pointed to two traditions in our Western culture. While some sport participants today still believe there is a metaphysical or 'true-world' basis for their sport plans, most people directly or indirectly find them as something created. This does not mean that they are created by themselves. They may have been adopted or induced from their sporting environment, parents, clubs, coaches, and the broader culture. This means that the found meanings did not originate from a true-world metaphysics but were created, not individually, but by collaborative processes inside specific socio-cultural and historical contexts. I do not with this exclude the possibility that single individuals may create quite innovative personal meanings in their sporting lives. But in most cases, individuals put their personal meaning stamp on historically transmitted communal meanings.

I have argued that meaning in sport ranges from the meaning of sport per se to personal meaning and the total web of meanings. There are some parallels between the meaning theory and the moral theory of sport. The *formalist* position in moral theory has a parallel in the internal meaning position, i.e., that the goals and rules of sport define the meaning of sport. *Broad internalism* implies that goals and rules are not enough but that the idea of sport, the implied attitudes and ethos, is necessary to solve ethical dilemmas in sport. In his recent book, Nguyen (2020) distinguishes between a winning and a striving attitude. In a winning-oriented attitude, all that matters is winning, but in the striving attitude, one must play to win, but the ultimate goal is not winning but the enjoyment of playing.



Here what I have called the personal meaning is quite different in the two cases, even if the striving and winning players may be playing the same game. Therefore, goals and rules are not enough, the personal attitude is necessary to define the personal meaning of a game. Finally, this personal difference in attitude may not be enough to account for a full understanding of sport's moral and meaningful aspects. As argued by Morgan (2020) only a *conventionalist* theory where the socio-historical background culture is taken into account can give a satisfactory account of all moral dilemmas in sport. The dispute between amateurs and professionals in the early history of the modern sport cannot, according to Morgan, be settled by the formalist or the broad internalist account but only by looking into the historical context and background of the dispute. Similarly, a full account of meaning in sport must not only be able to show how sport can be meaningful per se or for single persons but must show how what I have called 'the total web of meaning' can develop in different socio-cultural contexts.

### Summing up and conclusion

I have argued that there are three meanings of 'meaning' that are especially relevant for studying meaning in sport. 1) Sport can have intrinsic meaning or meaning in itself, as the realization of an idea containing a set of rules defining a specific purpose and goal, as well as an ethos and some social and historical conventions that guide the realization. The definition of sport will then imply the nature and meaning of sport. The meaning of sport will then vary according to the theory one holds (*formalism, broad internalism, conventionalism, institutionalism*, or other accounts). 2) Sport can have personal meaning for me, connected with my type of sport participation (or spectatorship) and the type of sport I am engaged in. 3) Sport can have meaning in the larger context of my life, by its role in my total web of meanings. My focus in this article has primarily been on the last question.

I further argued that meaning in life could come from two sources. In the Western tradition the role of God or the world of ideas have been the central meaning-making source. In secularized modern societies, meaning is not objectively given but something one has to create. Consequently, people can find meaning in sport as something given by traditions and history or something one has to create for oneself.

I then used Nozick's idea of leading a life according to a plan or a hierarchy of goals to see how sport could be an integrated part of one's life and show some valuable features that could inspire others. This is especially relevant in elite sport and lifestyle sport, but also at more moderate levels, such as in recreational sport.

If one's life will be based on a web of meanings, the web or structure must terminate in something that has intrinsic meaning or alternatively, has intrinsic value. With Nozick's conception of value as unity in complexity, I then discussed how various types of sport, such as decathlon or football, could best exemplify this view, in contrast to, for instance, 100 meter sprint. We could also use unity in complexity as a guiding principle for involvement in different types of sport throughout one's life. I used the fourfold model of individual sports, encounter sports, team sports, and nature sports to exemplify diverse involvements in a unified life. I argued that this manifold involvement could be used for pedagogical purposes and as guidance to a more complex and unified sporting life. Finally, I pointed to some parallels between a moral theory of sport and a meaning theory of sport.

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