

Aggerholm, K., Ronglan, L. T. (2012). Having the last laugh: The value of humour in invasion games. *Sport, ethics and philosophy*, 6, 336-352.

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# **HAVING THE LAST LAUGH: THE VALUE OF HUMOUR IN INVASION GAMES**

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## *Abstract*

This paper provides an existential analysis of humour as a social virtue in invasion games at the elite sport level. The main argument is that humour in this particular context can be valuable both in the competitive social training environment and in game performance. This is investigated through philosophical and psychological conceptualisations of humour that are used to reveal and analyse the appearance and possible value of a humorous approach in various social situations experienced during invasion games and the associated training situations. It is concluded that humour can help balance and structure the social training environment as well as facilitate creative game performance. On this basis it is suggested that the existential perspectives on humour presented could make a fruitful contribution to talent development in the domain of invasion games.

## **Introduction**

Football and team handball training sessions in Nordic countries are highly competitive, but at the same time there can be a lot of laughter and humour. The term humour is derived from Latin where it means “moisture” or “fluid” and in this domain it certainly appears to be the crucial liquid for ensuring smooth social relations between the players. To a large extent groupings and individual relationships seem to be built on the ability to share a laugh. In the dressing room humour and wittiness are the governing social conventions, much more so than other ways of communication. There can be many different intentions, appearances, roles and functions of laughter and humour in this context. The scope of this paper is to investigate the possible value of humour in relation to the social structures both on and off the playing field. Through an existential analysis, drawing on both philosophical and psychological conceptualisations of humour, the paper will reveal and analyse the role of humour in the social configurations that youth players take part in. It will explore how humour is related to the social context of performing and learning and will thus provide an existential perspective on talent development within invasion games, understood as team sports characterised by direct confrontations with opponents on the field (i.e. football, rugby, basketball and team handball). The main argument that will be unfolded is that the competitive social environments and the conflictual game structure in this domain of elite sport makes a humorous attitude particularly

relevant, as it can facilitate advantageous ways of coping with situations that arise both on and off the playing field.

Of the many phenomena that can cause laughter in a training environment (sarcasm, satire, irony, coincidence, etc.) this paper will focus on humour, which Aristotle (2004, 78-79) described through wittiness as a *social virtue*. Humour is in this perspective not a question of “the more the better”. It is about doing the right thing at the right moment by being quick-witted (*eutrapelos*), which Aristotle identifies as the mean state between clownish buffoons that go too far in their humour and the boorish with no sense of humour. This notion of humour, as a characteristic of an intermediate position, forms the basis of the existential analysis of humour in this paper and will also be referred to as an *existential attitude*.

To describe humour as an existential attitude is an attempt to analyse it as an immanently relational phenomenon. In order to embrace both the individual and social aspect of the relation, the analysis will be structured and informed by Mead's (2005, 173 ff.) notion of the self, as a synthesis of a) the individual “I” and b) the social “Me”. These dimensions are steps in the development of the self and allow the analytical weight to be on the individual contribution in the first part of the analysis and the normative social context in the second part.

## 1. Play

In this first part of the paper the humorous attitude will be considered in relation to the first step in the development of self, the "I". According to Mead (2005, 177-185) this part of the self is related to the personal freedom and its actions are guided by impulses. It is dominated by the awareness of oneself in relation to the present situation, and it can account for the player's individuality, uniqueness and originality. Mead furthermore describes how play can illustrate an activity on this level of development, which points to the first characteristic to be highlighted in relation to a humorous attitude: *playfulness*. Playing is fun. Just ask young talented players why they play football, and the first thing you will normally hear is: because it is fun! But the relation also goes the other way. Fun takes playfulness. This aspect of humour was promoted by Kant (2007, 159-160) who, in his analysis of aesthetic judgement, described how humour is related to the free play of sensations and the playing with aesthetic ideas. This playful aspect in what he terms *the game of wit* is identified as a source of lively gratification, which in Kant's analysis "springs merely from the change of the representations in the power of judgement, which, while unproductive of any thought conveying an interest, yet enlivens the mind." (ibid., 160) The same aspect was noticed by the German philosopher Fisher, who's concept of "playful judgement" Freud (2007, 26) referred to in his analysis of the joke.

Now, of course elite sport is characterised by competitive environments and an invasion game is a rather agonistic activity where ambitions are high and the players are often paid to do their job on the field. For that reason play may be considered as incompatible with the fundamental nature of contest and competition. Feezell (2010, 162 ff.) has recently argued against such accounts, among which he places the works of Suits and Kohn, and writes that play is not antagonistic to elite sport and can take place within a serious, rule-governed, goal-oriented and even professional performance. Still, the playful dimension can easily be forgotten in elite sport, where extreme structuring and the sense of seriousness can mean that practice degenerates into mechanical rule following. In talent development this can be expressed as an overly result-oriented and dogmatic approach to development. In such cases if humour were to be encouraged it could provide a counterweight and remind players and coaches of the basic and primary fascination of playing the game. Humour can help balance things and in elite sport this can provide a relief for the players. This is humour's primary quality according to the "relief theory of humour" (Morreall 2009, 15 ff.). Freud is often referred to in relation to this approach to humour and according to his understanding of joking and wittiness, humour can help release psychic energy (Ruch 2008, 29). Viewed from this perspective, fun and laughter in the elite level invasion game context, especially before training sessions, can be seen as a way to release the pressure of competition and cope with performance anxiety. As mentioned, Kant noticed how wit

can enliven the mind and how the changing free play of sensations can be a source of gratification, which he understood as pleasant sensations and bodily wellbeing. It is therefore reasonable to assume that a humorous player would feel motivated because of the inner joy experienced through the playful activity.

Apart from providing a release from pressure, playfulness can also be related to other aspects of motivation in elite environments permeated with tension. In his study of creativity Koestler (1964, 504-509) has shown how the "ludic behaviour" in humour is the purest manifestation of exploratory behaviour motivated by what he terms "the exploratory drive". This describes how humour is related to motivation as a pleasurable excitement. It is a quite different use of humour by which tension is not released but embraced or even built up. It can therefore account for the humourist's sense of pleasure in the imbalances and exciting tensions experienced during game play.

This motivational perspective is also relevant when it comes to learning. According to Koestler (1964, 506) the exploratory drive is essential to the process of learning and in the long term the desire to explore that comes with a humorous attitude, can assist players in keeping motivated, it can urge them on to keep developing the level of their game, and thereby facilitate the learning processes. In the training environment this could mean that the humourist would observe teammates as they struggle to learn the specific skills of the game and impress the coach

or their peers. They focus on acquiring specific and well-defined skills, commonly considered as necessary to perform in the right way. This is of course necessary, but the player with a humorous outlook would not find it sufficient. The humourist will also seek a sense of wonder, novelty, curiosity and puzzlement, which can be incentives to learn and provide spontaneous flashes of insight that keep the players going. Likewise humorous players can abstract from dogmatic wisdom and are likely to find coaches who preach conclusive truths on how to play the game mildly amusing.

### *1.1. Distancing*

In his ontological account of play, Gadamer (2004, 105) pointed to how play allows the player to take the concrete and attribute it with new meaning. We can all probably recall play situations where, for example a branch became a rifle. This explains how for the humourist performance does not need only be a response to the environment, but can be an abstraction or a questioning of it as well. Through a *playful distancing* the humourist transcends the borders of the self and the actual world, which allows the player to risk losing oneself in the activity and thereby gaining new possibilities of performance. It challenges the real and opens new possibilities. In elite invasion games this was exemplified by the excellent Russian handball player Kazakievitch who in the 1980s, questioned the necessity of “shooting hard” to score goals



and started to bend the ball (make the ball “spin”) in order to trick the goalie instead. His playful distancing from the conventions contributed to a renewal of the practical handball discourse. Anja Andersen provided a similar Nordic example of a playful approach in the 1990s with her innovative feinting and shooting combinations.

Humour as an existential attitude can contribute to this because humour involves distance. Charlie Chaplin stated the spatial aspect of this by saying that life is a tragedy in close up, but a comedy in long shot. The temporal aspect of the distance is expressed in the classic phrase that comedy equals tragedy plus time. In this existential analysis distancing will refer to the intentional stance of the subject player and it is related to the engaged and active production of humour in the social situation.<sup>1</sup> The playful attitude connected to humour can throw light on how the humourist looks towards the possible by being at an *intentional distance* from the game situations. The humorous player has a drive for curious experimenting with the given and the ability to see situations as possibilities and not just the facts. Ribeiro (2008) has focused exclusively on this aspect of humour suggesting that humour takes an act of reflective distancing, as opposed to a unreflective engagedness in life. His main argument is that humour is intimately connected to the willingness and desire to adopt a reflective, distanced orientation toward something in the world. In a game context, Kretchmar (1982) has presented a similar

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to be confused with Morreall’s (2009, 28 ff.) notion of detached, disengaged and disinterested pleasure enjoyed in amusement.

phenomenon as he analysed abstract thinking in sport performances. In his analysis, “distancing” oneself from the surrounding milieu plays a crucial role as a prerequisite for creative performance in sport, which he described in phenomenological terms as an intentional distance to the object of consciousness and an abstraction from the embodied intentionality (ibid., 8). He related this kind of behaviour to Goldstein’s analysis of “abstract attitude”, which in a study by Goldstein & Scheerer (1941) was contrasted to the “concrete attitude”, both describing “capacity levels of the total personality” (ibid., 2). It was this distinction that inspired Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological description of grasping and pointing as concrete and abstract movement respectively (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 138 ff.). Now, by associating a humorous attitude to the latter, it can be argued that this phenomenon can account for the humourist’s ability and desire to “point to the possible”, an attitude about which Kretchmar gives the following description in relation to an athlete:

The performer who adopts such a posture toward his world can see connections between two or more phenomena which do not belong intrinsically together. He can grasp the essence of a theme and a context, break up wholes, isolate parts and recombine them into new wholes. He can also plan ahead "ideationally," acting on the basis of what is "merely possible." (Kretchmar 1982, 14)

This kind of behaviour depicts the player’s ability to perform creatively. It allows the player to see new connections in apparently familiar situations, which can result in alternative

solutions to problems and unconventional ways of performing. Unlike some teammates, the humourist only sees this habitual relation to the world as a precondition for performance. In terms of the player's development this can be taken to have a facilitating effect.

### *1.2. Difference*

Seeing opportunities and possibilities in the game gives the humourist player a potential to make a difference. According to "the incongruity theory of humour" this is the main reason behind a laugh (Critchley 2002; Morreall 2009; Shaw 2010). Pascal, Schopenhauer, Kant and Kierkegaard are among the most prominent exponents of this perspective on humour and Morreall (2009, 11) has defined how a laugh, according to this perspective, occurs when "something or event we perceive or think about violates our normal mental patterns and normal expectations." In accordance with this the humourist player would be able to perform original solutions to coping with game situations whenever needed. In a game context this can prove valuable, as the situations experienced by the players in invasion games are characterised by contingency and continuous reconfiguration (Aggerholm, Jespersen, and Ronglan 2011, 346). A fundamental condition for any player in the game is therefore that the solutions to "game problems" are never given. On the playing field, actions could always be different. Sartre has expressed this by stating that: "In reality sport is a free transformation of the worldly

environment into the supporting element of the action. This fact makes it creative like art." (Sartre 2003, 602). Therefore, in a sense players in invasion games can hardly avoid making a difference. Creativity becomes a demand, and taking Sartre's famous statement: "We are condemned to freedom" (Sartre 2003, 485) into the context of invasion games, it can be stated that players are *condemned to creativity*. This obviously makes expert coping a matter of more than just doing *something*. Of course, sometimes during a game performing habitually and according to conventions is enough and appropriate, and not doing it might be 'too creative', and therefore an inappropriate solution. But sometimes, at least, an expert player must perform rather than conform. This is where a humorous attitude can be of great value. Seeing opportunities and possibilities in the game gives the humourist a potential to make a qualitative difference by doing *something else*.

But while Sartre did not pay attention to humour as a solution to the contingent relation to the world, Kierkegaard insisted that humour played an important role in coping with the relations of existence, characterised by what he consistently referred to as *contradictions*. From his perspective contradictions can both be tragic and comic, depending on how they are met by the individual: "The comic comprehension creates the contradiction or lets it appear by bearing a way out in mind, therefore the contradiction is painless. The tragic comprehension sees the contradiction and despairs of a way out." (Kierkegaard 2010a, 397-398, my translation). This

illustrates how a humorous attitude can be more constructive than a tragic outlook in game situations. It also shows how a humorous attitude can both create contradictions and enable the player to see them. This has the benefit of allowing players to be open to contradictory situations and seek incongruity for example by taking shots from unexpected angles and attempting opportunistic raids. The Danish striker, Preben Elkjær provided good examples of this kind of behaviour in the 1980s. In social situations it can be used to reveal and arrest contradictory opinions or instructions from coaches or teammates. From an existential perspective the presence of humour and laughter in training environments can pose a sharp contrast to the mechanical and instrumental approach to playing and learning performed by some coaches. Bergson (2010) argued that laughter and humour can ridicule and correct the person acting mechanically like a machine into acting like a human being again. In this respect humour can play a crucial corrective role. In a recent debate on playing styles in Norway, a Danish Youth National coach (Keld Bordinggaard) illustrated this as his Norwegian colleague (Nils Johan Semb) got carried away and announced that Norway could be world famous for their zone-defence system. The Danish coach replied that this could very well be the case, but to his knowledge no prizes had yet been awarded for zone-defence systems. With this short remark he arrested the apparent contradiction that lies in focusing too seriously and exclusively on one aspect of the game and at the same time he expressed a difference, by making it very clear that he was in favour of

something else, in this case a more qualitative and holistic approach. In the same way a player could use humour to arrest the contradictions of coaches who get carried away with statistics, systems, instrumental and mechanical explanations of performance or gravity. Of course it is never easy to criticise an authority, but that is exactly where humour can help, if it is justified, by hiding the seriousness behind the jest (this aspect will be elaborated in the next section). This role of humour can be related to the liberating effect of humour in the social environment (Mindess 1971) and if it is performed well humour can help identify and challenge unsustainable norms and conventions.

A common philosophical critique of the incongruity theory of humour is the “irrationality objection” (Morreall 2009, 13). If humour is to have any relevance in team sport it cannot be irrational, but as mentioned above, coping with game situations calls for a special kind of rationality, and though the humourist player may be "multi-level-headed" or double-minded, as opposed to level-headed or single-minded teammates, making a difference through a creative performance does not mean the player should behave irrationally. To describe the special rationality in humour Koestler (1964, 35 ff.) introduced the term *bisociation*. This is obviously a counterpart to mere association and can be used to draw a distinction between the routine skills of performing on a single plane and the creative act that operates on more than one plane. From this follows, that the humorous player is able to perceive a situation or event in two habitually

incompatible associative contexts. When it comes to humour in general, this requires knowledge of the contexts. In invasion games for a performance to be creative and not simply silly, it requires the player to combine a variety of solid technical skills appropriate to the situation. The shot from an unexpected angle or distance is only creative if the player succeeds, which Preben Elkjær, by the way, often did.

Another important aspect of Koestler's account of humour is the nature of difference. According to him the bisociative rationality can describe the pattern underlying all varieties of creativity, which he narrows down in order to identify the creative process in three highly intertwined realms of being: art, science and humour. In art the tension of incompatibility is solved through juxtaposition (ah), in scientific discovery it is solved through fusion (aha) and in humour it is solved through collision (haha). This ability of the humourist points to an obvious competitive advantage, as the humorous attitude can create a comic effect by making two mutually incompatible associative contexts collide explosively (Koestler 1964, 35). In that respect the quick-witted comments, snappy comebacks and ready repartees in discourses within the training environment can be seen as a kind of *psychological warm up* where the humorous atmosphere allows the players to get ready to change the game and cope with the sudden changes of game patterns on the field.

This incongruity and originality is in contrast with a description of expert performance as acted out intuitively in a dynamic equilibrium with the environment (Dreyfus 2002, 378). A totally balanced situation is no fun and as pointed out previously, game situations are not always balanced and stable. Therefore it is fortunate that the humourist enjoys coping with disequilibrium and is not afraid to bring the situation and/or the opponent(s) out of balance. Humour takes imbalance and in this respect a humorous approach is in accordance with the characteristics of the open game situations in invasion games.

### *1.3. Seriousness*

A common objection to humour in relation to elite sport is that there is a time for fun and a time to get serious. But humour and seriousness are not opposites. According to the Danish poet, Piet Hein, one who takes jest only as jest, and seriousness only as seriousness, has actually misunderstood both. So the humorous player can be very serious, but the seriousness of humour may, however, be subtle and only realised afterwards. Kierkegaard (2010b, 260) identified how a person in irony says something seriously, which is not meant seriously, whilst in humour a person says something as a jest, which is meant seriously. Høffding (1967, 70) condensed this to state that “in irony there is jest behind seriousness, in humour there is seriousness behind jest.” This dimension of humour was apparent in the example above, where humour was used to



correct others. But the element of seriousness also seems to be shared by humour and play because for elite players, playing is only fun when taken seriously. Gadamer has described this quality of play in the following way: "Seriousness is not merely something that calls us away from play; rather, seriousness in playing is necessary to make the play wholly play. Someone who doesn't take the game seriously is a spoilsport." (Gadamer 2004, 103) But it is a special kind of seriousness that rules in playful activities, a kind of sacred *playful seriousness* not to be confused with the seriousness outside the playful activity (ibid.) The presence of humour in elite sport can therefore be seen as a contrast to the gravity that regularly surrounds matches. If this is not suspended it has the potential to destroy the playful seriousness by removing focus from the joy and playfulness of the game. In invasion games this means that too much attention to the importance of the game and what is at stake, can actually hinder the players in playing the game. In such instances a humorous attitude would be a quality of what in a Nietzschean perspective could be termed "the superplayer" (Nietzsche 1999), who defies the spirit of gravity and the grave concerns surrounding important matches, and instead enjoys the liberated lightness of a humorous and playful approach to challenge. Sartre's (2003) distinction between play and the spirit of seriousness (*l'esprit de sérieux*) can help refine this idea. He described how a serious attitude "involves starting from the world and attributing more reality to the world than to oneself" (ibid., 601). In that case players may forget to make use of their subjectivity (freedom)

and instead take themselves for objects subordinated to the world. To avoid this kind of seriousness while still enjoying the sacred seriousness of playing, it seems valid to claim that a humorous attitude can be of value.

Furthermore, from a psychological perspective the seriousness can be supported and facilitated by the emotional background of a humorous attitude: aggression. Koestler (1964, 53-58) analyses this phenomenon, as he points to the difference in the quality and chemical composition of the emotions related to the different ways of being creative mentioned earlier. Whilst the rational approach is detached from emotions, the aesthetic attitude relies on a participatory tendency controlled by the parasympathetic system whose activation is inward directed and cathartic. On the contrary, Koestler suggests that the emotional charge behind humour is aggression and self-assertion. But it is not always obvious, as in the vicious tackle or other explicit markings, because "the aggressive charge detonated in laughter need not be gunpowder; a grain of Attic salt is enough to act as catalyst" (ibid., 53). In the course of his analysis the grain of salt, which must be present in the narrative to make us laugh, turns out to be a drop of adrenalin. This allows Koestler (Koestler 1964, 255 ff.) to conclude that the body system related to humour is the sympathetic-adrenal system, which is directly related to increased excitability of the muscles, to aggression, arousal and alertness. A humorous attitude galvanises the body into activity and the humourist player can thus be observed to be wide

awake, quick to see advantages and ready to act aggressively on them. This is not opposed to the playful approach to the game initially described. Feinberg (1978, 27 ff.) has conceptualised it in his psychological account of humour through the notion of "playful aggression". Though it may seem like a rough attitude, this points to why humour can be a favourable strategy when it comes to invasion games.

## **2. Game**

It has now been argued that humour as an existential attitude is related to playfulness and various derived aspects of it. As has been shown, the playful approach does not make humour irrational and the potential values of humour on this level of analysis are hopefully made evident. But for it to be effective in the competitive domain it is crucial to pay closer attention to the rules, norms and values in the social context of the environment and the game. Training environments within invasion games are competitive social contexts permeated with opposition, contest and confrontation, where the focal objective for the players during performance is to overcome resistance to reach the common goal (Aggerholm, Jespersen, and Ronglan 2011, 346-347). This kind of situation puts specific demands on the social skills of the players, and this second part of the analysis will focus on how a humorous attitude can help players cope in the

dynamic and normative social configurations of the training environment and when playing a game.

Returning to Mead's account of the self it is interesting to find that he describes the transition from the individual self "I" to the social self "Me" through a distinction between play and game. The main difference is that in playful activity it is enough to take over another's roles and specific attitudes, but when participants in the social process of the game, the players must be ready to take over the attitudes of every other player on the team. This happens, according to Mead (2005, 182 ff.), through the organisation of attitudes into a general and socially organised tendency to perform a relevant complex of responses in relation to "the generalised other". This institutionalisation of one's individuality is the social constraint that enables the player to act appropriately within the social group and be a team player. This social aspect is crucial in invasion games, because even if the relationship to opponent(s) is one of conflict, the players in a game are at the same time interdependent. When it comes to humour, the most obvious way to illustrate the importance of a shared understanding is to consider what happens when you try and tell a joke in a different language – often the meaning horizons do not meet so the audience cannot decode the signs with the result that there is no laughter response. The same phenomenon can be observed in invasion games when a first division team meets a third division team. This means a change in social habits, which can make it very hard for the players to perform feints,

passes, etc., the way they usually do in the first division. In existential philosophy the sympathetic relation to the object is one aspect that distinguishes mature humour from its immature counterpart, irony (Kierkegaard 2010a, 425). This is apparent in the friendly teasing and well-meant witticism in the training environment, where humour can foster a feeling of cohesion within the group and consolidate the team spirit. But in the game this sympathy is often hard to see in relation to opponents. Still, in sport one can observe a particular kind of empathy in the shape of a distinct respect for both the opponent and the game, which appears as sportsmanship and fair play in the course of striving for victory. So humour, both on and off the field, relies on a shared meaning in order to work. In both cases the performance requires recognition of our dependency upon the other(s) and in that sense we have every reason to shake the opponents hand after a match.

This social context of humour also provides a framing, which Gruner (1997, 14) refers to as a “play frame”. Within this it is okay to play around and you can get away with saying things that are normally not acceptable. Teammates can make fun of each other and laugh at things that would cause offense if said by someone outside the play frame. The same phenomenon is prevalent within invasion games. The field is in this regard a kind of stylised theatre where behaviour is highly institutionalised and it is acceptable to do things that would in other contexts be considered impolite, hostile, violent or just weird. So the humourist would know that the

performance takes place in a distinct reality and therefore perform according to the logic and rules of the game. The framing is socially or culturally defined when it comes to humour in the social environment. Here small cues and signs tell the players when they are within the humorous. In the sport context the frame is more formally defined and like any behaviour the creative act has to be within the constitutive rules. No matter how funny and creative it is, it is not allowed to break the rules.

Still, the funniest and most creative acts are often the ones that cross the line just a tiny bit. A beautiful old example can be found in Galeano's description of Giuseppe Meazza's penalty in the semi-final of the 1938 World Cup: "Meazza began his run up, and just when he was about to execute the kick, he dropped his shorts. The crowd was stupefied and the referee nearly swallowed his whistle. But Meazza, never pausing, grabbed his pants with one hand and sent the goalkeeper, disarmed by laughter, down to defeat." (Galeano 2003, 71) Less admirable examples can be found in humour with a touch of tragedy. Black humour, and joking about things that might not (yet) be legitimate to joke about, for example, can stimulate a strange guilty laughter, partly because of the knowledge that it is wrong to laugh about it. The humorous jest can also be just too malicious and inappropriate, e.g. the ridiculing of minorities. In a similar way a

performance can become "too creative", which is "not good sport".<sup>2</sup> So the play frame is both the possibility and the limit of how humour and creativity can be acted out. An example of this could be observed in a 2010 Champions League match between FC Barcelona and FC Copenhagen when Da Pinto, the goalkeeper of FC Barcelona, imitated a referee whistle to make Carlos Santin, the FC Copenhagen striker, stop his almost free raid towards the goal. Da Pinto was after the match banned for two matches. His performance was simply too creative. What gave him away was that the camera caught him laughing and celebrating his successful performance by punching his own chest. This illustrates the domain specific limits to humour, but it also points to a fundamental social motive for humour: superiority.

## *2.2. Superiority*

To act appropriate in accordance with the team, to share a meaning horizon and to fit in the social framing is of course only part of the game. In a competitive environment there is always internal competition and in invasion games there are also the counter-intentions of the opponent(s). So the social situation in this domain is not only a matter of co-existence, which makes it relevant also to comprehend humour as a tool of power and explore how humour is

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<sup>2</sup> Here it is worth noticing, that in many domains creativity has a distinct negative connotation related to cheating, e.g. in creative accounting.

linked to the manifestation and subversion of power structures. In humour research theories with a prominent focus on this dimension usually come under the label “superiority theory of humour” (Critchley 2002; Martin 2007; Davies 2009; Morreall 2009). This perspective on humour has many variants and can be traced back to Plato whilst in contemporary humour research it is commonly acknowledged to have its roots in the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (Morreall 2009, 4-9). The general conception of this kind of humour is that laughter is always evoked by situations that involve our own sense of superiority. As mentioned earlier this can make humour the means for humiliating and correcting another through laughter (Bergson 2010) and examples of it can be seen when players try to surpass or discomfort a rival (Koestler 1964, 85). Even if this aspect of humour might prove, as Morreall (2009, 9) argues, to be neither necessary nor sufficient, it certainly plays a role when humour is used in a competitive context. According to Billig (2005) conflictual relations make humour and ridicule an essential element of social life, as it has the power to change social order and challenge conventions and norms. This is an obvious role of humour in the social training environment, and it certainly holds the key to negotiating and redefining one’s place in the social hierarchy. The friendly teasing is competitive in its own playful way; it is about getting on top, from where you can then embrace the other and laugh. It could be added that from the beginning, humour also depends on social



positions. In a strong hierarchy it seems like it is often more important who you laugh at than what you laugh at, and a newcomer cannot just enter the humour collective.

Gruner (1997, 8 ff.) is a keen advocate for this perspective and in his so-called “Laugh/Win” theory he states that there is no humour without aggression and feeling of superiority. He argues that humour is like a game, and however pleasant and nice humour can seem it can always be explained through superiority, aggression, hostility, ridicule or degradation. It can be fun and entertaining, but it is also competition, keeping score and finding a winner and a loser. Furthermore, according to Gruner’s argument it is possible to take laughter, not literally, but as a metaphor for winning: “laughing equals winning”, which in its broadest sense means "getting what you want" (Gruner 1997, 8). Luckily the struggle takes place within the play frame, so that the markings of superiority, under normal circumstances unacceptable, or at least inappropriate, are experienced as legitimate and mostly celebrated.

Even though the humourist acts within the play frame, sardonic laughter at the opponent(s) hardly complies with fair play and explicitly laughing at others during the game is usually considered not to be “good sport” (McNamee 2008, 129 ff. and 145 ff. Quoted in Eichberg 2009, 293). But taken metaphorically, the celebratory gestures following a successful performance can be seen as ritualised laughter of triumph, which Eichberg (2009, 293-294) has described as a “laughter of superiority”. This kind of gesturing is very common in most team sports and fits

very well into the culture of competition in modern sport. But the degree and type of laughter is very contextual and depends on the sport discipline. In football, as a contrast to for example tennis, it is normal and legitimate to celebrate a triumph “with visible and audible gestures. This has developed more and more excessively towards ritualised choreographies of laughter in the stadium, face to face with the public" (Eichberg 2009, 293-294). This kind of laughter can also be a way of producing and communicating collective efficacy (Ronglan 2007). The joint cheering and the celebration of small victories during a game is not just a legitimate part of performance; it is an integrated part of the game confrontation, where team members display collective faith and strength to reduce the opponents’ efficacy. This way of demonstrating superiority is very obvious in rugby when the “Haka” is performed by the All Blacks in front of the opponent before the match starts, but it can also be found in the ritualised singing in the dressing room after winning a game.

However, usually the intended use of humour is not to end up laughing, but to make others laugh. This can of course still involve the sense of superiority, but no longer in the sense of top-down laughter at someone. It is the feeling of superiority that comes from causing a specific reaction, a laugh, in the recipient. In the following sections the analysis will aim to demonstrate how the techniques that produces a laugh in the social setting also have the possibility of producing an advantageous situation in the game.

### *2.3. The build up*

The good humourists would remember from their young and immature days, how they as cheap comedians would just pile it on. Now, as more mature persons, they would have realised that it is not always a good strategy to go straight to the point. The bisociative originality goes a long way, but it is only part of the story and the good humorous players have realised the value of building up tension.

As mentioned in the introduction humour is, according to Aristotle (2004) a social virtue characterising the mean state and an intermediate position. It is not just a question of “the more the merrier” and as Polonius says in Hamlet: “brevity is the soul of the wit”. In accordance with this, Koestler (1964, 82 ff.) described how the process of building up tension involves the technique of implication, which he also referred to as an exercise of economy. The technique of implication, as opposed to mechanical behaviour, has the potential to make the listener or the opponent fill the gap of what is implied from the expression. In invasion games this phenomenon is often very concrete, as the player without the ball tries to anticipate the moves made by the opponent with the ball by “filling in the gap” between the current position and the expected course of play. This means that the opponent is lifted out of a passive role and compelled to take action. By intentionally implying a certain development to come, well knowing that the real intentions are directed elsewhere, the humourist rules and is in a favourable position to create a

laugh in the social environment or surpass the opponent on the field. Just as the humourist would know that making things too explicit can cause boredom for the listeners and therefore create no laughs, the humorous player in invasion games would know that explicit behaviour is harmless and leads to no victory. This is of course not always true, but it is certain that it will not move the opponents in the wrong direction.

This kind of humorous behaviour can be interpreted as a sign of maturity. In Kierkegaard's (2010a, 219-220) existential account of humour this is a crucial characteristic, opposed to the immaturity of the ironic attitude. From this perspective humour involves a self knowledge, which Høffding (1967, 57) describes through the Aristotelian concept of "megalopsyki". This represents a realistic awareness of one's own value, allowing humorous players to know their limitations. It enables the humourist to perform the right self-asserting strategies, which allows such players to make use of the humorous approach in order to construct the offensive play of the team, which is quite a different kind of creativity than the merely playful one. The humourist can build up and not just tear down.

Invasion games were earlier identified to be games of balanced tension between two opposing teams. In order to win the humourist needs to cope with the tension and make use of it to gain an advantage. The contest of invasion games necessarily involves two opposing parties and in this context the humourist would know that the expressions communicated must create

suspense and facilitate a desired flow of associations in the opponents. This may involve intentional use of suggestive techniques such as *selection* of the relevant gestures to perform, *simplification* of them in order to keep the attention of the opponent and the *exaggeration* of them in order to build up certain expectations and increase the effect (Koestler 1964, 83). A common situation that can illustrate this is when a player pretends to prepare a shot through sketchy yet overdone moves, in order to trigger the opponents' habitual response. In this case the intention of the player is to maintain or increase the tension rather than reduce it, the enjoyment of which is hard for some motivation theories to grasp. The conflict with the other(s) causes what the player would sense as the sweet tension of uncertainty of the outcome, built up by the closeness of the contest as an inherent part of the game (Kretchmar 1975). The techniques described here are complementary and can be combined with similar techniques, such as rhythm and repetition, which allow a temporal aspect to the performance. The repetition of something apparently misguided can actually prove funny in the social environment or effective in the game if the performer bears a way out in mind (c.f. Kierkegaard). Anja Andersen proved this in the conclusive moment of the Handball World Championships bronze-final match against Norway in 1995, where during the last minutes of the game she performed the same shot over and over again and seemingly "lost" the duel against her direct opponent every time. Then suddenly, on

the fifth occasion the circumstance arose, she changed her movement, surprised her opponent and won the decisive duel.

#### *2.4 Tearing it down*

This last example shows how, once the tension is created and expectations are built up, there needs to be a surprise in order to cause a laugh. Here an important skill is *timing*. The humourist knows when to deliver the punch line, and as mentioned earlier, in the social context of elite sport the punch is preferably a “bisociative shock” (Koestler 1964, 84). For the humourist to make the other "homo ridens" burst into a triumphant explosion of tension when their expectations are fooled, and for the humorous player to gain an advantage from the pretence that built up expectations, it is necessary that the two habitually incompatible associations collide in an explosion. If the transition is not sudden it is unlikely to cause the intended surprise.

This kind of incongruity is a significant element of both humour and creative game performance. Still, incongruous situations are not necessarily funny and not all divergent and original performances are creative. So there has to be an element of novelty for something to be funny; yet, in philosophical terms, novelty may be necessary but not in itself sufficient to explain either humour or creative game performance. Theorists subscribing to the superiority theory would claim that the “missing link” to a certain laugh is to state an eminency in oneself and the

infirmity of others. This is not the place to discuss whether this is always the case, but it is interesting in relation to creative performance in invasion games because it can describe how the incongruity has to be positively related to the social meaning of competition. This means that in invasion games the creative game performance is only creative if it leads to an advantageous situation for you and your team. In the same sense humour is related to the social meaning. It is only humour if somebody laughs at it, or at least acknowledges it, maybe just with a smile. The strange story with no point is just not funny and the weird whim on the field leading to nothing is just not creative. Therefore the original contribution from the players can be refined in the social context of the game where it is not enough for the humourist to have fun through spontaneous acts. The humorous player has to transcend the social habits of his opponents while still performing in accordance with the generalised self. That takes a more advanced transition than described earlier; it takes a *social difference*. But it also means that every creative or humorous performance does not have to involve transcending individual habits. Sometimes the player just sticks to a well-known repertoire of habitual performance. In humour this is called a joke. On the field it is called a feint. As Kant (2007, 162) noted “the joke must have something in it capable of momentarily deceiving us.” So the structure of the joke is very similar to that of the feint; the joke is to humour what the feint is to creative game performance. Therefore, just as a humourist can deceive expectations and cause laughter by telling a joke, the humorous player can transcend

social expectations and gain an advantage by performing feints. This means that the creative performance may actually be well prepared, studied, practiced and refined over a long period of time. As the comedian has jokes, the humorous player has a repertoire of moves to pick from in the game situation, some of which may even be conceptualised as for example the Ronaldo feint, the banana kick, etc.

At this point an objection to the argument could be that such conventionalised performance by the player would not count as a genuine sense of humour or creative performance. This is a very valid concern if humour and creativity is regarded as an individual phenomenon. But the feint (as the joke) is not just about transcending individual habits. Both humour and game creativity are genuinely social phenomena and just as telling a joke to yourself is unheard of, it would be pointless as you would already know the point, in the same way you cannot intentionally feint yourself. That it happens unintentionally all the time is another story, not unlike the way people can find themselves being involuntarily funny. The point is that both rely on the humorous player's social habits and as a social and situational phenomenon the creative endeavour of the humourist is always about *doing the right thing at the right moment*. Therefore the humourist player is one that manages to balance the fulfilment versus nonfulfilment of expectations, rather than continuously strive for original solutions. Humour is a social virtue and



as Koestler (1964, 109) puts it, in any context the time must be ripe for the bisociative syntheses for the performance to be creative.

However, whilst humour and creativity both rely on a shared horizon of meaning, if the opponent(s) or the audience knows the feint or the joke too well, they will not be effective or funny anymore. Therefore the humorous player knows when it is time to use new strategies, which points to another temporal aspect of humour. Like styles of playing the game, new humour genres evolve all the time, and others are forgotten and vanish. This is due to the fact that both performances must be *fresh* in order to transcend expectations and be effective. Therefore the humourist knows that what is experienced as successful performance in one match may not work next time. From it follows that the humorous player is not keen on learning a specific system "to the letter". What an existential attitude related to humour could teach a player is to maintain curiosity and take nothing for granted, which from a developmental perspective is a valuable attitude. In this sense humour can facilitate learning processes, not only in an individual perspective as seen in the first part of the analysis, but also within the social context of the game.

### **Concluding remarks**

This paper has explored the role of humour in elite sport providing an argument for the value of humour as an existential attitude of players in the social contexts of invasion games.

Humour, regarded as a social virtue, means doing the right thing at the right moment. In the social environment the analysis has described how humour can provide relief from dogmatic and overly structured approaches and help players cope with pressure, tension and anxiety. The analysis has shown how humorous players are more likely to reveal and arrest contradictions, which points to the corrective and liberating role humour can play by spotting and challenging unsustainable norms and conventions. Moreover, in the social hierarchy of training environments, it has been demonstrated how humour can play a role in manifesting, subverting and changing power structures.

From a performance perspective the analysis has pointed to specific qualities related to a humorous attitude to the game. First of all it can be linked to a playful approach to the game, which can be a vehicle of motivation and enable a playful distancing from game situations. This can help creatively balancing the demand for qualitative differences and create or cope with contradictory and imbalanced game situations. The playful approach connected to a humorous attitude can also support a particular kind of playful seriousness and aggression, in contrast to concern and gravity. In the social configuration of the game, the second part of the paper has pointed out how humour can assist in striving for superiority, which in the game would mean the gaining of an advantage, and how ritualised laughter can be a manifestation of this superiority in game confrontation. In relation to the striving for superiority, it has been demonstrated how

humorous techniques for transcending expectations, that produce a laugh in the social environment, also have the possibility of producing an advantageous situation on the playing field through creative game performance.

By analysing various individual and social aspects of how a humorous attitude can influence players' approaches to performing and learning in the domain, the existential analysis of the phenomenon has illustrated the possibilities that lie in considering humour as an important dimension of talent development. This can provide an argument for not taking humour in the presented domain of elite sport for granted or dismiss it as merely frivolous distraction and amusement. Instead, the role of humour in training environments should be recognised, the value of it in talent development should be acknowledged and the presence of it should be nurtured, as the social virtue it is.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper was made possible through a research grant from Team Danmark and is part of an on going research project on Danish talent development based at Aarhus University. The authors wish to thank the editor for encouraging the idea at an earlier stage and an anonymous reviewer for extended and constructive critique on an earlier version of this paper.

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