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## **Simon on luck and desert in sport: a review and some comments**

**Key Words:** Robert L. Simon, luck, chance, sport

### **Introduction**

During the 1000-meter short track speed skating event of the 2002 Salt Lake Winter Olympic Games, a series of extraordinary situations arose.<sup>1</sup> The Australian skater Steven Bradbury won what is perhaps the most unexpected gold medal in Olympic history. In the quarterfinal, Bradbury finished third. However, as number two Canadian favorite Marc Gagnon was disqualified for having obstructed another skater, Bradbury proceeded to the semifinal. Here he skated defensively to exploit possibilities if faster skaters collided and fell. As three of his competitors fell, Bradbury came in second and proceeded to the final. History repeated itself. In the last round, with Bradbury lagging 15 meters behind, all four competitors crashed and fell. Bradbury passed the finishing line as the winner and became the first Winter Olympic champion of the Southern Hemisphere.

The story of Steven Bradbury raises many questions. To some, he became a cult figure and an example of the significance of never giving in and of the possibilities of the underdog. Others criticized the competition and argued that it failed, as 'the best skater' did not win. A third, more systematic perspective implied a discussion of the very set up and rules of short track speed skating and the role of chance and luck versus merit and desert. Clearly, competitions with improbable outcomes challenge our ideas of the meaning and value of sport.

Hence, issues of chance and luck have become a debated topic in the philosophy of games and sport. Modern classics such as Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (2001) provide detailed discussions of chance and luck in play and games. Scholars such as de Wachter (1985), Morgan (1985), Loland (2002), Kretchmar (2012), Kobiela (2014) and Mumford (2014) discuss more explicitly competitive sport. As in most other areas of the philosophy of sport, Robert Simon has offered important insights here as well. In his *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* paper 'Deserving to Be Lucky: Reflections on the Role of Luck and Desert in Sports' Simon (2007) not only explores the role of luck but situates the discussion in the context of merit and desert and the very meaning of winning and losing in sport. After a brief conceptual clarification I will present an overview of and explore further Simon's ideas.

## Luck and chance

Rescher (1995, 28) claims: 'Luck is a matter of having something good or bad happen that lies outside the horizon of effective foreseeability'. This rather general definition seems to capture everyday use of the term as it refers to outcomes of our actions, considered both good and bad, seemingly beyond our control. For our purpose here, a further distinction between 'chance' and 'luck' will be of relevance.

Often, 'chance' refers to events in which individuals experience no possibility for influence. One example is dice games, which are referred to as games of chance. Typically, chance in sport is found in the drawing of starting positions in individual and team games, or in the drawing of start numbers in individual sports. Another and more fundamental example of a chance event is human conception. Among millions of competitors, one particular sperm cell penetrates an ovum and results in a unique genetic make up. Genetic outcomes are referred to as results of 'the natural lottery', or in Simon's (2007, 18) words, a matter of 'constitutive luck'.

'Luck', good or bad, is used when individuals act with intentions of bringing about particular states of affairs but where the outcome is different and over which the agent experiences partial and sometimes total lack of control. Different from chance, the agent has the possibility of influencing luck events, among other things with improved knowledge and/or skill. Bradbury's competitors in the short track speed skating race misjudged their capabilities and lost control. They could have chosen better tactical maneuvers and realized their intentions to a larger extent.

It is worth noticing that chance and luck as defined here take the perspective of an agent. There are other perspectives.<sup>2</sup> For example, from an external point of view, physical events experienced as chance and luck can be explained mechanistically. Knowing the initial conditions, movements of dices or of a short track speed skater can be mechanistically explained and predicted. In principle, outcomes of the 'natural lottery' can be explained and perhaps even predicted based on detailed insights into the genetic characteristics of each semen cell and ovum, semen cell speed and energy levels, the hydrodynamics of the womb, et cetera. However, to the dice player, the short track speed skater, or the individual being conceived, outcomes seem beyond control and matters of chance and luck. In this context, and similar to Simon, I will concentrate on chance and luck in sport from the perspective of the agents involved.

As seen in the Bradbury case, often chance and luck events are followed by discussions of responsibility and of individual and/or collective merit and desert. A well executed attack in soccer ending with a superior shot and a goal gives rise to praise and admiration. The goal was deserved. But sometimes a completely failed kick on the ball, or what Simon (2007, 15-16) refers to as a 'fluke', may result in a goal as well. As such, the goal is not a matter of desert-based merit.

Although few would argue that the goal should be cancelled, some would argue that, if decisive of the outcome, the goal spoiled the competition.

### **Luck and desert in sport**

Simon (2007) departs from these points and turns to Dixon's (1999) Skill Thesis for a response. The thesis claims that sport competitions are tests of competitors' skills designed to determine which opponent is more skillful in the sport being played. If luck has decisive impact it spoils competitions, as it is not linked to skill. Simon associates the Skill Thesis with a position he refers to as eliminativism: the quest for minimizing or at best eliminating impact of luck in sport.

With a series of illustrative examples Simon challenges eliminativism. In what he calls the weak amendment to the Skill Thesis, the view is that luck does not necessarily undermine good contests. Some manifestations of luck may even enhance it. A core example is Tiger Wood's brilliant and decisive shot in the final round of the 2005 Masters golf tournament. Wood was lucky in the sense that he probably would succeed only in one out of a high number of attempts. However, although not being in full control over the shot, Wood exerted, say, 95% control and would have been close to hitting the hole on every attempt. Simon's point is that good athletes put themselves in position for luck to strike. They experience positional luck. Wood's superior skills made luck probable. A less skillful player would be in less control and in most attempts further away from the hole. Simon even takes a further step and formulates what he calls a strong amendment to the Skill Thesis. In situations of positional luck it makes sense to say that Woods, and other skilled athletes in similar situations, *deserve* to be lucky (Simon 2007, 15).

What, then, can be said of uncontrollable events in which individuals do not experience any control at all? Simon's example of a fluke is a failed shot by a soccer player. Due to an improbable gust of wind the fluke actually ends up as a goal. Proponents of the Skill Thesis may go along with the workings of positional good luck but consider decisive flukes a source of failed competitions. Again, Simon disagrees and points to a broad interpretation of athletic skills. Among such skills is the ability to cope with uncontrollable events and flukes. The winning athlete should acknowledge the fluke and take the victory with modesty, the losing athlete should take his loss with calm, dignity and resilience. Typically, in tennis there is the custom of raising the hand and acknowledge the impact of luck when one scores a point with a net touch. Players mutually acknowledge that this particular point was in part lucky. No player however would dream of contesting it. Flukes, although rare at the highest level, belong to 'the name of the game'. In Simon's view, coping well with good and bad luck is part of the skills of a good athlete.

In a next section of the essay, informed by Nagel's (1991) discussion of moral luck and based on an article by David Carr (1999), Simon discusses whether

attributing individual desert to superior performance can be justified in sport (and life). Carr argues that to a large extent our genetic endowments and our capabilities and skills (including sport performances) are the products of processes over which we have no or little control. These processes start with ‘the natural lottery’ and proceeds with an infinite number of genetic and environmental interactions all the way up to the moment of performance. Behind a good sport performance are usually a fortunate genetic make up, fortunate conditions within which to grow up and learn and develop sporting skills, the good fortune of avoiding serious injury, and of being in good shape of the day of performance. Hence, Carr argues that specific sporting skills have marginal moral relevance.

Simon takes on a different route. A sense of responsibility, merit and desert is constitutive of moral life. Simon acknowledges the difficulties of distinguishing between what we can and cannot control and be held responsible for, and argues for what he calls ‘a flexible interaction model’ (Simon 2007, 19). Moreover, and in disagreement with Carr, Simon argues that athletic skills cannot be distinguished from moral qualities. There is a clear parallel here to his view on the impact of luck in competitions. As it is difficult to distinguish between what is actually under control of the athlete and a matter of luck, it is difficult to draw clear lines between controllable and uncontrollable elements of human development and performance. What distinguishes elite athletes however from the second best is not necessarily a luckier draw in the natural lottery but self-control, dedication, responsibility, and innate character traits, which at least to a certain extent are outcomes of processes over which individuals experience control and responsibility. Simon (2007, 20) underlines that ‘...it is how one uses one’s gifts, and not the mere possession of them, that is crucial’.

Simon proceeds by arguing why a sense of responsibility, merit and desert in sport morally matters. Building on among others John Rawls, he refers to desert-based claims on merit as crucial to the development of self-respect, and in a mutual acknowledgement among competitors of their status as free and responsible moral agents. In terms of value to society sport may not compete with practices such as education, or medicine. On the other hand, as Simon comments, we should not underestimate the moral potential of a ‘well-designed’ sporting game. Actually, Simon considers sport to have a particularly strong potential in the development of self-respect and core qualities of personhood. If practiced within a sound moral framework sport opens for a mutual, non-instrumental exploration among competitors of athletic and human excellence. Good sport can be a significant element in a good life and in a good society.

### **Luck and reliability and validity of performance evaluation**

I find his views on the role of luck and desert in sport convincing. Hence, my comments will be less a criticism than an extension and elaboration of his argument. More specifically, I will comment upon the challenge of what Simon calls eliminativism found in a weak version in Dixon (1999) and in a more explicit

version in Breivik (2000): the view that the impact of chance and luck should be minimized or at best be eliminated in sport.<sup>3</sup> By examining the way sporting games are set up and structured, I will try to show that the implications of eliminativism are counterproductive to their logic and 'inner' rationality and also to their moral relevance.

In my previous work I have discussed distributive justice in sport (Loland 2002). As a methodological device I likened a competition to a scientific experiment. In a just competition, requirements have to be met on reliability and validity of performance measurements, comparisons, and rankings. On the reliability side, one would have to make sure that all competitors were given identical conditions and that performances were measured and compared with accuracy and in identical ways. On the validity side, there would be a quest for strict correlation between measurements, comparisons and rankings of competitors, and the core variable in question: athletic performance. Main requirements are eliminativist ones. Uncontrollable elements such as chance and luck have to be eliminated or compensated for, and the operationalization of the variable 'athletic performance' has to be complete and accurate.

Although a useful methodological tool, in the discussions of sport justice limitations of the scientific experiment allegory became clear. If scientific rationality were to be followed completely, sport would have to be changed dramatically. Although identical conditions is an ideal in all sports, this is realized primarily in direct indoor sports where there is full control over external conditions and in which competitors compete simultaneously. Outdoor sports are problematic in this regard. In a football match a change of wind or a setting sun in the eyes for one team mean uneven conditions. Indirect competitions like most of the skiing disciplines are subject to even more changes in conditions. Varying wind, light and snow quality may significantly impact the possibilities of skiers to perform. Basically, if an eliminativist strategy is to be followed strictly, all sports ought to move into facilities with full control over external conditions, that is, indoor.

The question from a validity point of view concerns whether we really measure the variable in question, that is, athletic performances. Here, a strict eliminativist strategy would give even more dramatic changes. Firstly, the very measurement units in many sports would need revision. Some sports measure and compare performances in mathematic-physical entities. A swimming performance is measured on the accuracy of tenths and hundreds of a second. In weight lifting the measurement unit is kilograms, and in the javelin throw meters and centimeters. If requirements on identical external conditions are met, measurements and comparisons seem valid. Performances are operationalized in exact and objectively measurable entities.

In sports with sport-specific measurement units, the situation is different. In team ball games performances are evaluated in goals, and in netball games in points, games and sets. A closer look at these sports demonstrates a considerable amount of inaccuracy and openness for uncontrollable impact. Even if external

conditions are under control, luck exerts its impact. Although being inferior in performance, sometimes soccer teams win with a lucky goal. Games with higher goal or point scores are exposed to uncontrollable events as well. Imagine the decisive moments of a tiebreak in tennis between X and Y. X responds brilliantly and returns a good shot with technical and tactical excellence. The ball hits the top of the net and rolls down on X's side. X failed to control the final margins of the curve of the ball, has bad luck and loses the tiebreak. Imagine then an alternative outcome where X fails and hits the ball with the racket frame resulting in a wild loop passing over Y and landing on Y's base line. X lacks control but is lucky and wins the point on a fluke. A good performance resulted in losing a point, a failed performance in winning it. In a tight match, this event may even be decisive of the outcome.

If, as in the scientific experiment, we want to eliminate the impact of flukes and achieve complete correlation between the variable of interest (soccer and tennis performance), and a final ranking of competitors, significant improvements have to be made. In low scoring games such as soccer, one strategy could be differentiation of scores as for example in basketball. Scoring inside the penalty box could give one point, goals from outside the penalty box three points. A further step could be teams of referees to reward goals based on extraordinary performances with, say, a maximum of five points. Still, as the tennis example demonstrates, this would not eliminate luck. In a rigid eliminatist laboratory experiment scheme of thought, the ideal would be operationalization of performance in accurate, objective measurement units, that is, in mathematical-physical entities. For example, future imaging and computerization of ball games could provide advanced schemes of individual and team performance criteria that could dramatically increase correlation between what is considered good performance, and competitive outcomes. The best performing athlete or team would always be on top of the final ranking.

I will return to an evaluation of the eliminatist strategy below. At this point it suffices to say that a rigid adherence to this strategy would change sport dramatically and approach a logic that seems alien to sporting games: a strict, scientific rationality in which a laboratory setting with no uncontrollable elements takes precedence over life in the real sporting world. The challenging question is why this should be an ideal for sport.

### **Should athletic performance be subject of desert-based merit?**

In the second part of his article Simon discusses the challenges of desert-based merit. His premise is that, from a pragmatic moral point of view, we can be held responsible for at least parts of our actions. Athletic performances are, at least to a certain extent, expressions of desert-based merit. Again, a closer look at the logic and set up of sporting games seems to strengthen Simon's point. Cases of classification and standardization of equipment are particularly illuminating.

Most sports also classify according to level of performance. Performance classification can be justified with reference to both a sense of fairness, and to a quest for tight competition. Most competitors prefer a meaningful and challenging opposition, and potential spectators have preferences for even and uncertain outcomes. Lop-sided contests appear as unfair and less attractive to the public.

More importantly, most sports classify according to age and biological sex, and some sports classify according to body size, primarily weight. Such classifications can be understood as expressions of a general fair equality of opportunity principle (Loland 2002). More specifically, classification schemes can be considered attempts on eliminating or compensating for certain inequalities between athletes with potentially significant and systematic impact on performance. These are inequalities that athletes cannot influence and/or control in any significant way and for which they therefore cannot be held responsible. A 100-meter sprint event without sex classification would probably end up with only men in the final heat. A boxing match between a heavy-weight and a feather-weight easily becomes a matter of body mass rather than of boxing skills. Competitions are set up to measure and compare performances that at least to a certain extent can be seen as outcomes of athletes' systematic development of their predispositions or talent. The further idea is that athletes have at least some degree of individual responsibility for this development and should receive at least some desert-based merit thereof.

The issue of fair equality of opportunity and classification is not a straightforward one. A strict following could lead to arguments about compensation for far more than inequalities in biological sex, body weight and age. We cannot be held responsible for genetic inequalities, neither for a series of environmental inequalities into which we are born and within which we live. Should all these inequalities be compensated for as well?

One solution is to see genetically determined biological sex and genetic dispositions for body size and weight as relatively static inequalities that are out of reasonable control of individuals (Loland 2002). Hence, classification can be justified. Inequalities in genetic predispositions to develop bio-motor qualities such as speed, strength, endurance, and motor skills, and even more sport specific techniques and tactics, are to a larger extent dynamic and can be affected by individual effort and systematic training. Therefore, there is less reason for classification.

There is no exact and precise way of distinguishing between controllable and uncontrollable elements. I am sympathetic to Simon's flexible interactive model. Neither is exact line-drawing necessary. The vision of performance that seems to underlie most sporting games is a combination of a series of dynamic predispositions with origins from the genetic lottery, and our attempts to develop them. Sport, says Murray (2007), is the admirable development of natural talent towards human excellence.

The challenge of justifying desert-based merit in sport concerns not only genetic inequalities but to a large extent environmental factors as well. One individual X may be raised in an affluent home and society with interest and competence in sport and athletic achievement. Another individual Y with identical motivation and genetic predispositions might be raised in a poor home and society with no sense for or competence in sport and athletic achievements. X and Y meet in competition with X having an obvious competitive advantage. Is X's athletic superiority a result of individual merit? My response would be no. This would be an inequality for which no one could be held responsible.

Again, a closer look at the logic and set up of sport demonstrates certain sensitivity to the issue, primarily in terms of compensation of resource inequalities in the competitive setting. The most obvious example is standardization of equipment. In the throwing events in track and field and in sailing there are standardization requirements, in ski jumping there are strict rules on the fabric and shape of jumping suits. The regulative idea is to evaluate performances for which the athlete can be said to have primary responsibility, and not let the financial power and external technological expertise decide the outcome.

Still, the possibility of compensating for resource inequalities in sport is dramatically underdeveloped. A brief look at the statistics of Olympic gold medal winners, or at champions of European football, illustrates that the developed and rich part of the world is the successful one. In elite sports at least, this probably represents the most serious challenge to the fair equality of opportunity principle. What can be done?

One possibility is more extensive use of solidarity funds and extended transfer of resources and knowledge between sporting societies and cultures. However, sport cannot be expected to eradicate complex situations of resource inequalities at a societal or global level. Perhaps an alternative model for improving the situation comes from highly commercial American league sports? In the drafting system, less successful teams of the previous season have a possibility of recruiting the highest ranked new players first, and there are limits on wages and use of resources. This is not necessarily implemented for moral reasons. Tight competition attracts spectators and generates income. Still, it is not unreasonable to assume part of the justification is to meet expectations of fairness in the general public. Sport becomes less interesting if there is little desert-based merit to be attributed to athletes and teams.

### **The logic of sport and ludic rationality**

By and large, Simon's arguments and my comments are a defense of the role of luck in sport, and sometimes actually a 'praise of chance in sport' to use a phrase from Wachter (1985). Simon's defense is tied to his broad view of athletic skills. Firstly, Simon points out that luck often follows skill. Moreover, where luck does not follow skill good athletes handle unpredictability and good and bad luck with

calm, dignity, and resilience. This belongs to an extended athletic skill test and shows the connection between athletic skills and moral qualities. In my comments I have tried to show that Simon's ideas are embedded in the normative logic and set up of sporting games.

This 'praise of chance in sport' is in no way uncritical. As Simon is fully aware of, the impact of luck ought to be restricted. Sports are meritocratic practices. Outdoor sports such as track and field and ski jumping have rules defining limits to wind velocity. In heavy rain, soccer matches can be cancelled due to pitch conditions. Moreover, uncontrollable inequalities in external conditions are distributed in fair ways by the drawing of starting positions. I have argued, too, that rules on classification and standardization of equipment express a quest to control the impact of positional and constitutive luck (chance) and to cultivate primarily desert-based merit in performance.

Neither is the argument that the set up and practice of sports are always the normative guide or ideal. Sport is imperfect in many ways. Improving fair equality of opportunity is an ongoing struggle. My emphasis has been on what I interpret as a deeper normative logic underlying sporting games, which includes a restrictive acceptance of uncontrollable elements of chance and luck as advocated by Simon.

In contrast, and with eliminativism and scientific rationality as the ideal, all kinds of non-controllable elements should be eliminated or compensated for. External conditions should be laboratory-like. Performance-evaluation should be done in objective and accurate physical-mathematical entities. Eliminativism, at least in its rigid versions, would make sport into a less open and less complex human enterprise.

As Huizinga (1955) and Suits (1978) have shown, the logic of play and games is built on a different, non-instrumental scheme of reasoning. Athletic skill tests are not scientific experiments aiming at maximum reliability and validity to produce 'true', reproducible knowledge, but complex and in fact holistic explorations of human limitations and possibilities that 'invite winner and loser alike to "play again tomorrow"' (Kretchmar 2012, 101). Elsewhere I have spoken of the logic of sport as ludic rationality (Loland 1995). Realizing ludic rationality in sport means seeking the optimal balance between, on the one hand, equal opportunity to perform and sound and predictable performance criteria, and, on the other hand, openness for seemingly uncontrollable elements that are to be met with ambition but also with modesty and resilience. I believe this is what characterizes 'well-designed games', to use Simon's expression.

I started this essay with the case of short track speed skater Steven Bradbury who in a series of lucky event ended up as Olympic Champion. Was this a failed contest? Based on what is said above, and with the help of Simon's thoughtful analysis, the outcome can be defended. In this particular event, Bradbury's faster competitors failed in terms of risk taking and strategy, and Bradbury won due to sound insights into his own strengths and limitations. Indeed, he was lucky. An

identical competition the day before or the day after would probably have given a different outcome. But on this particular occasion, he won. Perhaps such openness for the unexpected is among the most important reasons for the immense and global popularity of sport in our time.

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<sup>1</sup> For a good overview of the events, see

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven\\_Bradbury\\_%28speed\\_skater%29](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven_Bradbury_%28speed_skater%29) (accessed August 20, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> For a good overview of philosophical interpretations of luck and empirical studies of the experience of luck in individuals and groups, see Pritchard and Smith (2004).

<sup>3</sup> My portrayal of eliminativism is not necessarily the views of Dixon and Breivik who I believe hold more moderate positions.