

# DO DESPORTO ON SPORTS

theoria vs praxis

Edited by Constantino Pereira Martins

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**FUNDAÇÃO DO DESPORTO**  
SPORTS FOUNDATION



*Vida vivida, vida pensada*

In memory of Professor Sílvio Lima and Mestre Moniz Pereira

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## Dedicatória

Ao Professor Manuel Sérgio  
que com ele reaprendi que um amigo é um tesouro.

E que durante a sua prelecção em Novembro de 2020, ecoou em mim a seguinte frase:  
o homem é uma nuvem com raiz.

Ao meu filho Guilherme,  
luz dos meus dias.

*A estranha arte da vida*

*O mundo grita vitória  
e nós embalados  
gritamos com ele  
das bancadas alheios  
à arte de saber perder;  
a única sabedoria da vida.*

*E é como esconder  
e enterrar maus poemas  
sob os escombros  
de má prosa académica.*

*E é como  
ser viajante da lua  
sob um mundo solar.*

## **AGRADECIMENTOS AKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Professor Nuno Ferro, remembering the years we shared.

In that same exercise of memory, I reminisce and bring to mind all the sports and mates with whom I have shared training, playing, pain, laughter, sweat, and all the joys of sport. In different stages of life, in different settings, in different countries. But from them all, I must thank my first coach José Carlos Vidal Pereira that gave me Basketball. Since our club no longer exists, old times will go on with those shared hoop memories on top of empty ruins.

To underline the crucial role that the *Fundação do Desporto* (Sport Foundation) played in making possible the existence of this book, and in particular to Doutor Paulo Marcolino for his trust.

Last but not the least, Professor Mário Santiago de Carvalho, Scientific Coordinator of *IEF* in Coimbra University, for the support, receptivity and welcoming through the years I have collaborated with the Institute of Philosophical Studies in Coimbra.

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# Body and World Fluidity: An Introductory Phenomenology to Being a Sportsperson

### Introduction

This chapter provides an introductory phenomenology to being a sportsperson by characterizing it as the quintessential type of 'body and world fluidity', with three main dimensions for phenomenological analysis, description and application. It presents and argues for these three dimensions – the bodily, psychological and social – because a phenomenology of sport has never really been established and could thereby benefit from a set framework on which to build, expand and nuance. The chapter therefore seeks to establish some basic phenomenological elements to being a sportsperson in order to foster further theory, discussion and application.

The chapter is broken up into five main sections. The first will give a very brief and selective review of some of the most relevant strides already made in the philosophy and phenomenology of sport over the years, as well as highlight some of the literature's gaps and main shortcomings. The bulk of the paper then presents the introductory phenomenology to being a sportsperson, broken up into three main dimensions which are all however intertwined in everyday reality and experience. First, the second section outlines sport as a highly specialized and attuned form of perception, where an exemplary use of the 'lived body' (*Leib* in German) in a particular formatted world is always at the core. Sport as unparalleled knowhow, as opposed to knowing that, will also be presented here, particularly in the context of development through practice and training. This will lead to the second dimension (section three), namely the more psychological, where discipline, training, competition, teamwork, emotion and other predominant factors and traits will also be outlined and described. The last dimension (section four) will then consider the broader social and cultural significance of sport, not just from the side of professional athletes but also from the side of amateurs and billions of fans. I aim for a balanced if short appraisal regarding some of the advantages of sport (e.g. physical and mental health), as well as some of its potential dangers and pitfalls (e.g. addiction and tribalism) if followed in more radical, obsessive or even impassioned manners. The chapter will finish with some final remarks based on the analyses, particularly considering (post-)Covid times and the place – and absence – of sport therein, as well as factoring

in the upcoming possible future domination of a new phenomenological breed of sport, esports.

All levels of analysis are necessary if we are to get a much-needed theoretical basis for understanding the main experiences, mechanics and values in sport. Moreover, I believe a descriptive phenomenological approach should strike the right balance between theory on one side, and applying this to concrete cases, phenomena and experiences on the other. All of this is especially relevant right now as we still undergo sporting restrictions and “live” sports without fans due to Covid-19, as it shines an even sharper spotlight on sport’s absolutely essential physical, psychological and societal place in many of our lives, and what we are missing in these months and years.

The main method and referencing style of this chapter will be rather general, in that I will use my expertise in phenomenology to outline and assemble what I see to be the main useful phenomenological concepts and insights to apply to sport, without focusing on any particular phenomenologist per se, although my sources will of course be made clear when required. Thus, although there are sometimes massive differences between various phenomenologists, perhaps even basic ones, I will focus on some of the concepts and insights which they all more or less agree upon, or which can at least be taken up and applied in a useful general manner. This is because this is a work of applied phenomenology, where the subject matter (viz. being a sportsperson) is ultimately more significant than the origin, theory and nuance of the concepts themselves.

## **1. A Very Brief and Selective Review of Some Philosophy and Phenomenology of Sport**

The philosophy of sport field as we know it today initially arose out of classical analyses of other related concepts, not least play, games and bodily movement and consciousness, among which was Huizinga’s seminal 1938 book *Homo Ludens* (2016; see also: Feezell, 2013, pp. 1-28; Lunt and Dyreson, 2014, p. 29). It was then in the 1960s that the philosophy of sport became an ‘independent field of study’ (Torres, 2014, p. 1), with many different theories created and debated (see: Reid, 2012; Simon, 2014), from more analytic ones and types of ‘formalism’ (see: Kretchmar, 2014; also: Simon, 2014, p. 85), to insights and discussions of the more continental variety (see: Moe, 2014). Quite early on the domain gained some publicity and even had a televised symposium in the US in 1972 (Torres, 2014, p. 9). The philosophy of sport has thus been varied over the years, spanning the supposed philosophical divide and also ranging from highly general and abstract theories to very specific characterizations or debates with regard to particular sports or issues (e.g. doping and cheating). Nevertheless, what is also clear is that, barring a rather sustained flurry in the first half of the 2010s, the philosophy of sport has never cemented itself as an established subdomain, with the

theory, insights, discoveries and debates remaining rather sporadic, with one pair of commentators (Lunt and Dyreson, 2014, pp. 31-32) even claiming it is only because of some basic philosophical interest in human movement that philosophy of sport just about ‘resists extinction with a hardy fortitude’ (id.: 32) from the immense pressure exerted by more popular and reductionistic natural and hard sciences.

With regard to the most pertinent insights and debates coming from the philosophy of sport, there have been extremely interesting accounts providing a quite detailed aesthetics (Edgar, 2013a; Mumford, 2014) and hermeneutics (Edgar, 2013b) of the subject matter. In these accounts, phenomenologically significant ideas such as Goodman’s notion of ‘worldmaking’ (see: Krein, 2008; Edgar, 2013b, pp. 141 and 162); sport as an aesthetic spectacle, attitude of framing or even a ‘non-reality’ (Edgar, 2013a, pp. 80 and 94; and 2013b, p. 155); issues of finitude, skill and chance (Edgar, 2013b, p. 161); and the essential nature of sport as a contest (see: *ibid.*, p. 162; also: Mumford, 2012, chs. 10 and 14) are all explored in quite some depth. Mumford’s book (2012) also touches upon crucial issues of drama, collective emotion and allegiance in *watching* sport, which will also be of significance here. Feezell’s book (2013) for its part provides in-depth analyses of a good number of the possibly more damaging sides to playing and watching sports, for instance the dangers of unhappiness and failure in partaking in or following sport (see: Feezell, 2013, p/ 29), which is a side to sport theory that has been underemphasized and underinvestigated, and it will also be addressed a little here too. Lastly, philosophically and phenomenologically pertinent ideas like the difference between knowing that and knowing how (Breivik, 2014); the difference between immanent bodily self-consciousness and being ‘in the zone’ as opposed to more explicitly reflective and cerebral states (see: Vannatta, 2008, p. 64); sport aesthetics and even ethics as on a scale between partisanship and purism (Mumford, 2012, chs. 2-3; Feezell, 2013, pp. 73-74); and even how hypercapitalistic structures are increasingly corrupting sport (Morgan, 2014) are all significant issues to which I hope to modestly contribute to varying degrees by providing a tripartite phenomenological framework.

As for the phenomenology of sport, there has been a fair deal of work too, although substantially less given it is a subdomain. There have even been repeated calls for more sustained efforts (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007; Allen-Collinson, 2009), but they have not really materialized. Even when larger dedicated works have appeared (Martínková and Parry (eds.), 2012), a lot of the focus has either been on the nature of phenomenology itself more than it applied to sport; or the points of application have been hyperfocused (for instance: Aggerholm, Jespersen and Ronglan, 2012; Breivik, 2012; Vannatta, 2012).

There have of course been some very good insights here too along the way. Pertinent concepts from Husserl (Müller, 2012; Vannatta, 2008), Heidegger (Hogeveen, 2012; Martínková,

2012; Müller, 2012), Sartre (Culbertson, 2012) and Merleau-Ponty (Breivik, 2014, p. 204; Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007, p. 117; Hogeveen, 2012; Standal and Moe, 2012) have all been picked up upon and employed, and indeed I will be using and building upon a number of these here. Hockey and Allen-Collinson (2007, p. 120) also emphasize the role of the senses, including the intriguing centrality of respiration in sport. McLaughlin and Torres (2012) highlight the importance of intersubjectivity and horizontality in playing sport, and these elements are ones which I will emphasize here as well.

Generally though, too often the insights get bogged down in, or are sidelined by, discussions of theory and methodology, and thereby forego keeping an eye on the prize of capturing the actual phenomenological texture to being a sportsperson or fan. Vannatta (2008) has probably provided the most foundational but also applicable account to date by taking up Husserl's powerful and complex notion of 'passive synthesis', showing how it operates in play and sport, where knowhow, bodily instinct and learning, and habit in a lived dynamic with reflection and other more cerebral aspects all come to the fore.

I cannot of course cover all of these interesting issues and insights sufficiently in one chapter. Nevertheless, I think an introductory phenomenology to being a sportsperson which is neither steeped in the technicalities of a particular phenomenologist, nor overfocused on a particular aspect or sport, would be a good contribution to a number of these themes in the literature, and could even help systematize them a bit more. It will be a rather tricky balancing act, but one I now attempt through a three-level phenomenological analysis regarding the nature of being (and often watching) a sportsperson, first on the immediate bodily (perceptual) level (section two); then the psychological and reflective (section three); and finally the more social and cultural (section four).

## **2. First Dimension: Sport as a Specialized and (Highly) Attuned Form of Perception**

I am taking 'sport' in a wide sense from the most basic amateur pastimes and gatherings all the way up to the higher echelons of the professional ranks. Even though this is my – and I think a commonsense – understanding of sport, I think it is particularly in the professional ranks where it comes through as a highly specialized and attuned form of *perception*.

In phenomenology, perception is contrasted with many different types of conscious experience, not least imagination. Imagination can be taken in a very broad sense, ranging from memories to even being involved in our perceptions (see: O'Shiel, 2019). However, when taken in the narrower technical sense of 'phantasy' (e.g. imagining a unicorn), as Husserl famously did ([1898-1925] 2005), it is in direct contrast with perception. In a nutshell, phantasy (so imagination in the narrow

sense) is about irrealities of the mind, whereas perceptions are about realities of the world and its bodies.

Accepting this distinction at face value, although any athlete might use phantasy to imagine certain sporting scenarios and the like, perhaps even in-game, given the physics-based nature of all traditional sports it is safe to say it is primarily about perception from this perspective. I would even go as far to say that sport is actually one of the quintessential forms of perception, due to its multisensorial complexity, its immanence and anchorage in the living, active body (*Leib*), along with its many objects and intersubjective intricacies. It is, then, regardless of the particular sport, one of the most complete ways to experience physical reality in a certain arrangement, as well as our own bodies and physical capacities in relation to this arrangement. Indeed, it is perhaps only on a par with the perceptual richness of sex and food in our cultures and relationships.

Phenomenologically there are whole worlds to cover here. I wish to highlight some of the most salient perceptual features of sport from a classical phenomenological – i.e. Husserl to Merleau-Ponty – perspective. In a nutshell, sport is essentially perceptual with regard to the physical self (lived body); a particular formatted physical world (‘worldmaking’ – see: Edgar, 2013b, pp. 140-143; Krein, 2008); and others (opponents and teammates).

First of all, although perception in general and by definition makes use of all the senses, sports train and refine them to levels where particular people end up being able to do a few things with their body (catch a ball, hit a ball, run a certain distance) in such specialized and attuned ways that they at times appear superhuman and heroic. In phenomenology this can be explained through a distinction between two types of ‘bodies’, namely between *Körper* and *Leibe*. The first involves physical bodies in all their basic physics and mechanics obeying natural laws, and sportspeople certainly need an intuitive knowledge of this, as do we all. On top of this, though, as living individual beings there also comes our immediate and first-hand experience of our own bodies, which phenomenology names, stemming from Husserl ([1918-1926] 2001, p. 584), the ‘lived body’ perspective. This immediate first-hand perspective we all live and breathe every day automatically gives us direct access to the whole world of perceptual bodies, living (e.g. teammates and opponents) and not (e.g. a ball). Being a sportsperson at bottom involves being able to use your lived body to various degrees of proficiency within the format and rules of the particular sport – a kind of ‘embodied learning’ as Standal and Moe (2012) emphasize with reference to Merleau-Ponty. Starting with natural gifts and talents you are given genetically (e.g. a certain height), training and dedication is a whole process of honing and developing one’s lived body in order to become an exemplary tool or medium of the chosen sport, and thus it is an expert or specialized form of *Zuhandenheit* (‘ready-to-handness’), to use one of Heidegger’s famous concepts from *Being and Time* ([1927] 2012; see also: Hogeveen, 2012). This can range all the way from a casual

hobby and form of exercise to the realms of elite athletes who can achieve things with their lived bodies that no one has ever done before (e.g. a world record), and might never do again. Here Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'intertwinement' (see: [1964] 1968: 130-155) also seems to ring very true, where the perfect athlete's whole psychophysiological being ('flesh' in Merleau-Ponty's terms) must be experienced as in quite perfect harmony and unison with a set physical environment. Such apexes are only even possible through a complex dynamic of gradually learning through imitation and instruction; rule following and trial and error; and also more explicit thoughts and reflections. To be proficient the capacities have to seep into your lived body to the extent that they become second or even first nature, as indeed some top athletes think they were simply born to kick a football, shoot hoops, or climb a mountain on a bike. Generally this is a dynamic which in philosophy is characterized not only by a Heideggerian distinction between *Zuhandenheit* and *Vorhandenheit* ('present-at-handness', i.e. more objective knowledge and cognition), but also more generally between knowing how (more bodily and habitual) and knowing that (more propositional and reflective). In today's sporting industries, the latter is a massive element in that athletes study opponents, their own techniques, wins and losses, and basically strive to improve or remain at the top through all means necessary, including statistical and data analyses of every facet of the sport and its performances (see also: Beivik, 2014). At the end of the day though, for the athlete it comes down the moment itself, for you (and your team) to perform and execute what you have dedicated your whole living body to learn, be and do.

While training might involve active imagination, as well as theory and propositional knowledge (i.e. knowing that), from this perspective sport engagement is primarily, on the most immediate experiential level at least, a special type of developed knowhow that is honed through hours and whole lifetimes of practice and improvement – including of course moments or whole stretches of reflection and more cognitive bits of knowledge and insight. Sport is thus one of the pinnacles of bodily knowledge and expertise in an immediately lived, perceptual manner. Indeed, for those few who reach the top, they can become so adept and masterful at their craft that they are significantly ahead of even their nearest competitors. Moreover, generally one can be so in the perceptual zone in one's sporting activity that there are reports of everything passing by as if in slow motion, perhaps because one has reached heights and levels of fluidity that hardly anyone ever has before – a kind of ultimate bodily inspiration and rapture if you will, which can be a sheer joy to watch and must be quite divine to live.

This brings in another key phenomenological dynamic in this immediate lived dimension, one that has already been touched upon in some of the literature (McLaughlin and Torres, 2012). Much sport is very fast-paced, and even when it is not it is highly considered, precise, skilful and technical. All sports use props of some kind, even if it is merely one's own body, and one has to

become adept at using these elements and objects with intrinsic reference to the rules of the game and the formats and realities of the course, field or whatever. Thus, until rather recently (i.e. esports – more on this in the last section), sport has always been a kind of formatted perception in the sense that our physical and phenomenal reality is given extra rules, obstacles or objects to be used and overcome in certain ways.

Reality always has an inherent horizontality, which again is another key concept from Husserl (for instance: [1918-1926] 2001, p. 56; see also: McLaughlin and Torres, 2012). In a nutshell, this states that there are always spatial and temporal horizons to every single perceptual experience and act, whether they be ‘inner’ spatial horizons of always being able to inspect objects in more detail (e.g. looking closer); or ‘outer’ as in the fact that perceptual experiences continue endlessly both spatially and temporally – there is always more to see and come. This horizontality is in the very structure of all perception. What is interesting about sport is that it usually formats or limits this boundless horizontality. An NBA basketball game is 48 minutes long; a pitch has clear lines where play can occur; and the precision needed in some sports (examples: NFL, golf, shooting) is of such a meticulousness both spatially and/or temporally that it can befuddle the mind. Thus the inherent horizontality of perception is precisely manipulated, restricted or otherwise formatted in sport so as to make the bodily situation challenging and exciting, both for those who play and watch.

Finally, you also always have opponents and often teammates. This adds another crucial element to the immediate experience of any sport, the intersubjective element, where one either has to battle with oneself in order to set the best time and beat all others (e.g. a time trial); or one concurrently races with others in the heat of battle (e.g. a race); or you and yours take on another group in order to outdo them in an orchestrated opposed exchange. The techniques and theories of any sport here explode to infinity. What remains on this basic level is that one’s bodily connectivity and fluency in the sport is also always being constantly compared with one’s opponents, and/or complemented by one’s teammates. Indeed, legendary teams throughout the history of sport (e.g. the Brazil soccer team of the 1960s) have been so famous thanks to their almost preternatural ability to know exactly where their teammates might be, and also sense precisely and immediately what is required in order to attain the crucial competitive advantage in order to achieve one’s goal, which moreover is often executed in an aesthetically beautiful or even artistic (see: Edgar, 2013a) way. This too, in the heat of the moment, must happen in a highly attuned manner, although it of course is only possible after countless hours of training and perfection. In this manner, on top of an exemplary body and world fluidity in a certain challenging perceptual scenario, team sports also strive after perfect intersubjective fluidity on the perceptual level as well.

In sum, then, being a sportsperson in the most immediate dimension (perception) is a paradigmatic case of body and world fluidity, usually including others (opponents and teammates),

which perfects certain formatted types of perception and bodily activity through one's own skill, training, execution and also teamwork.

### **3. Second Dimension: Key Psychological Elements**

Of course, with humans along with the physical is always the mental; in everyday experiential reality these are indivisible. Even further, the very concept of 'lived body' (*Leib*) implies a psychically active, inherently 'intertwined' (Merleau-Ponty, [1964] 1968, pp. 130-155) form of life, engaging with its environment in particular ways. However, these 'ways' are so immanent in the most immediate bodily and perceptual dimension (the preceding section) that they usually lack the more explicitly mental tonality of more personal and psychological reflections and cognitions.

On the other hand, there are many sports (e.g. tennis, golf, boxing even), if not the majority, where the 'mental side' is as if not more important than the physical. It is all about 'the top two inches' one sometimes hears, i.e. the brain and mind; you can have all the ability, skill and talent in the world, but if the 'top two inches' are not 'on it' the rest can become rather inconsequential, at least in the top professional ranks. Taking this into account, one may say that the two, the physical and the mental, absolutely need each other and are in a constant dynamic throughout any sporting activity, and they can only really be separated through theoretical analysis.

To go into a bit more detail, there are certain aspects which are definitely nearly always intertwined with your actual performance, like confidence in your ability; or the well-known phenomena of momentum, ascendancy and shifts in competition; or even the history of stats and records that individual athletes or teams might try to block out regarding a certain opponent, so as not to take anything for granted in the actual game ('one point or game at a time'). Interesting again here would be moments of more explicit thought or reflection (like a tennis player deciding where and how to serve; or a soccer player deciding on a spot for a penalty), and how this relates to the actual action (the serve; the penalty) as well as the bigger context (match point; to win the World Cup) and how this latter can affect the other elements. Methods and theories can vary enormously, but generally when an athlete is 'in the zone' (see: Vannatta, 2008, p. 64) everything seems to flow with an almost detached supremacy. This perspective, a popular one, insinuates that 'thinking too much' in those moments is precisely when one buckles to the pressure.

On top of this basic psychophysical dynamic, I can also name a few general psychological categories and traits which are the most significant when it comes to developing, improving and perfecting one's sporting craft.

First of all are discipline and training. From the most casual sportsperson to the most serious and dedicated, all have to practice or train at least a bit. When this becomes professional it takes over one's whole life, right down to what you eat and when and how you sleep. It thus takes great resolve, dedication and sacrifice, which includes great mental strength too. Athletes indeed often talk about 'all the hard work finally paying off', dreams 'coming true' and the like. This also comes with social rhetoric, as in always respecting and not underestimating your opponent, being a gracious winner and loser, giving modest interviews and saying 'the right things' and so on – all elements go into an ethos of a proper and professional sportsperson, an exemplary character and even a role model (cf. Feezell, 2013, pp. 131-154; Mumford, 2012, ch. 11), and indeed many teams and individuals now employ sports psychologists to help with all of this and more.

The second main element, related to this, is competition and the drive and will to win. Many of the most notable elite sportspeople (e.g. Tom Brady) are noted to have had an almost obsessive competitive streak from a very early age, which drives them to train harder, practice more and generally go to lengths few or literally no one else would, eventually allowing them to finish top of their particular domain for a while, or even for years. Sport is about hierarchies and winning by definition, and the momentous narratives which come therefrom, from Sunday League to Super Bowls. Those at the summit usually have a mental drive and resolve to win and be the best at nearly all (legitimate) costs. When this is achieved for those select few, a powerful legacy is created. It is, in a way, one way to reach relative immortality within human life and history (as is having children, works of art, books and the like) – in short be inscribed in the register of human achievement and culture.

Coupled with this comes teamwork and cooperation, even for individual athletes. Indeed, especially nowadays there is no such thing as an individual sportsperson; they all have teams, from tennis stars like Nadal to elite gymnasts like Biles. Sport is thus inherently social and about teamwork, teamwork which however seeks precisely to beat other opponents and teams. It thus takes great mental cooperation and organization between all the various working parts and people, which can become aesthetically beautiful to watch once perfected. In team sports in particular all individuals are so in sync because of, as we have seen, an interbodily world fluidity where understanding and interchange is often in quite perfect harmony. In a sense, in these moments they are not even individuals anymore but perhaps a supreme kind of *Mitsein* ('being-with') – another Heideggerian concept ([1927] 2012).

Another major psychological category to highlight in sport is emotion, both for the particular sportsperson, their teammates and opponents, as well as for the wider social audiences, which can often be global (more on this in the next section). First of all, it is clear that sport and bodily activity are generally crucial for the emotional wellbeing for billions of people, both partaking and

watching. However, emotional attachments to particular athletes and teams can also become so strong and even obsessive it can be highly restrictive and damaging too (e.g. hatred of a rival team and all its people), fostering a kind of strong 'us versus them' mentality which can even contaminate your and your family's whole life (e.g. a Newcastle F.C. fan who refuses have anything red and white (= Sunderland, the fierce local rivals) in the house). Here as it is usually the case with emotion, it is wise to harness the ones which are person- and community-building and fight off the ones which are wantonly hostile and destructive. This is a tricky issue, because both playing and watching sport can be seen as a case of sublimation where aggressive tendencies are put to socially acceptable use, at least most of the time. However, it is precisely when emotion and aggression boil over that the sport and one's relation to it can devolve into damaging and abusive behaviours and a more general disrepute.

From the standpoint of the athletes at professional level, there are interesting avenues to investigate further here too, from one potential theory which says emotions get in the way of optimum performance, in that some of the top athletes (e.g. Serena Williams) even speak of a 'dead eye' feeling in crucial moments where all emotions vanish and the scene becomes as if detached, and yet one remains or even becomes immanently and hyperconcentrated with emotion only exploding on triumph; to another perspective or way of performing where emotions (e.g. anger at an error) are actually used to drive, fuel and improve your performance. Within sport you often have these two main characters generally too, including the narrative of contest and (bitter) rivalry constructed from them. This is often used in order to engage spectators even more by upping the tension and even the hostility. Indeed, throughout the history of sport there have been tales between fire and ice; goodness versus evil; those who play by the rules and those who do not; the experienced and boring winning machine versus the young, passionate and talented upstart. A classical example here would be the longstanding tennis rivalry between the cold 'Iceman' Björn Borg, and the passionate renegade John McEnroe. Both were extremely talented as well as the fact that they were quite equally matched, even though they approached their craft in very different ways, both stylistically and emotionally.

There is a whole world of psychological factors to consider in sport. However, these I believe are the main ones and make a good start. In a way sport can consume the whole psyche, from temporarily in a moment, to even the whole of your life. Indeed, depression after the highs of major triumphs in an illustrious career is quite common for the few people who have been to the summit, with it described as a kind of addictive euphoria like no other. This addictive nature to sport is even well-known in amateur ranks, where people go to ever-greater lengths for that newer challenge and ever-more ultimate endorphin or dopamine 'rush', which can actually unbalance one's body chemistry quite severely. This pattern has been jumped upon by capitalist markets nowadays too,

where many people now simply consume more energy in order to burn and build up more in a kind of strange addictive circle, from ‘gym rats’ to ultramarathons.

Professional moments of triumph must feel especially sublime. However, it can relatively cheapen the rest of one’s life thereafter, where one can not only become almost psychologically stuck (fixated) in one’s own legacy or moment – not only in one’s own mind but also in the minds of others; it can also leave one’s body (and even one’s mind) quite broken. Even fans might harken back to glory days and years. There is much more needed here in order to understand the complex phenomenological psychology of being a sportsperson and fan before, during and after the highs and lows, because although it can create extremely strong bonds and senses of allegiance (see: Mumford, 2012, ch. 13) and pride; and although it can format identities (see: *ibid.*) across whole nations or cultures in positive ways (national wonders and celebrations – e.g. the US’s 1980 4-3 ice hockey ‘Miracle on Ice’ victory against the USSR), it can do this in quite surprisingly powerfully negative ways (national traumas – e.g. Brazil’s 7-1 loss to Germany at their home 2014 World Cup semi-final) as well. It is to this wider social and cultural dimension we now turn.

#### **4. Third Dimension: The Social and Cultural Significance of Sport**

The third and last main dimension of sport I wish to highlight and mark for further (phenomenological) study is one that has already come up a bit in the previous section, namely some of its key social and cultural aspects.

First of all, sports and exercise activities are of clear and crucial health benefits, and moreover bring whole communities, nations and even large swathes of the human world together, whether through performance, spectating or both. Top and even local sportspeople are often highly respected in our societies, and some (e.g. Pelé, Maradona, Messi) are absolutely revered by their supporters. There is a combative and even gladiatorial trope to sport that is ingrained into its narrative, structure and history, as well as our own psyches and emotions. Rivalries are often local, longstanding, very bitter and even violent (e.g. soccer hooliganism), with many tales of glorious victories over the old enemy, and also grave injustices. There are ‘I was there’ moments of victory which go down in fan folklore, and there are also genuine mournings and depressions after particularly difficult or dramatic losses. In this manner, sporting events not only knit whole groups and societies together, they are often a part of the local or national identity as well, for better *and* worse. Nowadays, the hypercapitalistic nature of most professional sports can hardly be understated either, with some (Morgan, 2014) claiming this is eroding the very nature and beauty of sport, including its honest and loyal fandom. Many sports are now global branding commodities, with absolutely everything

monetized. Here it might not any longer be about winning or losing for the skill or the glory for those in (financial) control, but simply because this makes good business sense by making more money through sometimes astronomical TV rights contracts, sponsorship deals and merchandise sales. Certain sports are indeed colossal industries now, with economies more powerful than some countries. The Olympics, for instance, often nearly bankrupts and/or alienates a host city – but it is still often gambled upon and sought, not least because it remains such a special privilege to host one of the oldest and most globally watched sporting spectacles.

In moderation or even not in moderation, sport can give one highs and lows that are on a par with some of the best and worst moments of your life, whether as a participant or a fan. The buzz of being idolized by thousands if not millions of people must be an unparalleled one. However, as I have also briefly touched upon, many also live the rest of their lives in great physical discomfort for those glorious five, ten or fifteen years at their peak, and thus it still often remains highly gladiatorial and quite an ultimate sacrifice. I would go even further and maintain that many top athletes are still gladiators in a certain sense. Some still die in the actual sport (examples: cyclists, racing drivers and boxers), and if not many of the high-impact variety (soccer, rugby, NFL) have broken bodies, and even minds, afterwards. It is in this sense a great sacrifice, the massive paychecks of the top sportspeople notwithstanding, because one can end up living in great pain, discomfort or even with hugely debilitating mental conditions (e.g. early dementia) for the rest of one's life. Indeed, concussion is now a major issue in many sports, with new and varyingly successful protocols in soccer, rugby and the NFL. Moreover, boxing has the unfortunate mantle where concussion is the *goal* of the contest, and not just a side effect. Thus sport, for all its health benefits, can also create major health challenges to serious participants in the long term, and some literally risk their whole future life when stepping onto the field, into a race car, or the ring.

These sacrifices might all be worth it if you end up winning. However, the fact is most do not and cannot by definition. Although most sportspeople triumph now and then, consistently doing it at a top level is rare ether indeed. This is why victors, and especially consistently dominant ones at the top levels, are so respected and revered, because they have to all intents and purposes defied all the odds by triumphing where 99.9999...% have not. Considering this, senses of failure and loss must actually predominate in most participants, because while there can only be one winner, there must by definition always be many losers (see: Feezell, 2013, p. 42). Is one victory worth a hundred or thousand defeats? Perhaps; perhaps even the *potential* for glory outweighs the repeated actual failures and pains. Hope is a niggly and delusive thing, for one can always in theory do better next time. Considering this, on amateur levels especially, surely sport is still just about fun for the most part? This optimism notwithstanding, loss, failure and many types of vulnerability (see: *ibid.*, pp. 45-48) – even on amateur levels – need to be considered and weighed more, including the long-term

physical and mental effects of putting your whole mind and body on the line time after time.

There are of course a good number of people who do not enjoy participating in or watching sport at all. Nonetheless, for many it is an essential part of life, practicing, playing, coming together, following and supporting. Being a fan can be a family and even a regional or national tradition where, if emotions run high (as they often do) and along with the narratives, on top of great community building there are also dangers of rivalries and tribalism that can sometimes get out of hand and lead to actual physical and psychological damage and abuse. Indeed, it is all-too-common now for professional athletes to be abhorrently abused online after a perceived error, even by their own purported “fans”. In this manner, sociologically and culturally sport is clearly a part of what makes many if not all of us human; but like with many human interests and behaviours, it has its darker and well as its brighter aspects, where the inhuman and hateful also still raise their heads way too often.

Ultimately, sports as spectacles in human physical excellence and skill pull on much that is amazing and admirable about our species, not least how we use our lived bodies, teamwork and world fluidity to enact scenarios and build narratives that are often hardly imaginable or repeatable. They are thus kinds of never-ending soap operas of intrigue and skill and a key fabric of any human society, for enjoyment and entertainment, to learn skills, and to vent and sublimate stress and aggression. However, almost in the same stroke they can also get out of hand, foster negative emotion, behaviours and destructive tribalism, and there are therefore channels for obsession, addiction and abuse that must be guarded against and studied further.

## **5. Final Remarks: (Post-)Covid Times and eSport**

The discussion of sport in our societies and cultures is especially relevant right now as many of us still undergo significant sporting restrictions due to Covid-19. This shines an even sharper spotlight on sport’s absolutely essential physical, psychological and societal place, and what we have been missing in these months. Watching sport virtually while locked down has also provided solace and some outlets beyond our walls, albeit usually without real crowds and thus more imaginary and less glorious fanfare. Indeed, all kinds of athletes and amateurs have not been allowed to take part in their sports as they usually would, plus the fact that many professional events have been cancelled, postponed or adapted, often with small or no crowds. This made much of sport a more individual, lonely and even a digital spectacle rather than partaking in a live, societal event with raw unchanneled and unmediated emotion. It also meant the usual physical and mental health benefits were restricted or even stymied altogether. Here though too things changed and adapted, with

artificial crowd noise and new camera and virtual technologies showing the ever-increasing technological elements coming into sport. And beyond mere Covid-19, along with the growing use of data analytics in tactics there are now wider economic and even ethical issues coming to the fore, with some sports teams and organizations becoming so popular and wealthy that they are now, as I have already noted, more like corporations and businesses than just a place for healthy competition and entertainment.

What is more, esports is already a quite massive domain and activity, with many competitions and professional gamers who can make thousands or even millions of dollars often at an incredibly young age. eSport is especially significant because although the second and third dimensions outlined here might be able to be transposed with little difficulty, the nature of esports with reference perception is much more complex, and could even challenge ‘the very meaning of sport’ (Edgar, 2017, p. 153). Indeed, in most esports you only use a small portion of your body (mainly one’s hands), and although it requires a lot of agility and stamina in certain respects, it does not demand the overall peak physical and bodily fitness of most classical sports. This is because, crucially, the medium is inherently through screens or other virtual devices, so one’s actual body is not as involved as in a classical sporting activity and is rather a mere means used to control an avatar in a game. According to phenomenological theory (see: O’Shiel 2019), this makes esports of a different experiential structure, certainly not straightforward perception and rather a more transcendent type of virtual experience, where you compete and win on a transcendent, digital plane. Thus esports are of a different phenomenological structure even for the competitors, meaning they are not ultimately about the perceptual in any traditional phenomenological sense, and are most likely more of the imaginary structure and type of experience, in that the ultimate objects are digital and thus transcend many of the basic laws of immanent organic perception (see: *ibid.*). This could change a lot for the nature of sport and competition going forward, and therefore needs a lot more philosophical and phenomenological investigation too (see also: Edgar, 2017; van Hilvoorde, 2018).

Considering these last points, a comprehensive theory and phenomenology of sport, its people and fans would need to take in all of these factors if it is to provide the full complexity and nuance of sport in our lives, as well as note and pay attention to how many factors and dynamics are in constant development. eSport also raises a whole phenomenological paradigm shift from the perceptual to the virtual or imaginary, and so this is a domain that needs to be investigated a lot more within philosophy as well as other domains (psychology, sociology), especially considering it is most popular among younger people. Generally we have seen that sport is absolutely central to so many of us in so many fundamental dimensions. Finally, the digital age is revolutionizing not only how (in)active we are, but also perhaps the very nature and medium of sport itself.

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# DO DESPORTO ON SPORTS

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