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Revaluing Sports

Abstract: Devaluing attitudes toward athletes, sports, and fans who are intensely involved in sports are pervasive, especially among well-educated people. Sports are viewed as a respite from life's hardships and serious pursuits—but not as serious pursuits themselves. If we acknowledge, however, that sports are essentially about play, and if we believe that playing is a vital developmental and lifelong need, then we may view people who are consumed with sports as deeply engaged in a critical activity: play. Moreover, in a world where virtual experience has largely supplanted embodied experience, involvement in sports—especially playing sports—may be an invaluable way to stay connected to a deep, ancient, and partially lost aspect of ourselves.

Keywords: sports, play, demons, transitional space, lacrosse, putting

> *"It is in playing, and only in playing, that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self.*
>
> *"The natural thing is playing, and the highly sophisticated twentieth-century phenomenon is psychoanalysis."*
>
> —D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

SPORTS HAVE PLAYED A HUGE ROLE IN MY LIFE—in my personal development and identity and as a source of meaning, pleasure, and fulfillment. I imagine this statement evoking a range of reactions in readers, including curiosity, surprise, and for some, mild disdain. For the sake of argument, let's assume there is at least a kernel of truth to this conjecture. If we assume that some analytic readers will feel a bit taken aback or put off knowing that sports have had an enormous impact on my life, let's ask why they might feel this way. Why would a fellow analyst's being passionate about sports not resonate with psychoanalytic readers, or at least be unremarkable?

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I think of psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic therapists[1] as less athletic and less interested in sports than the average American. If I'm right, and not simply stereotyping, then many analysts, whose involvement in sports is less intense than my own, could well think it a bit strange, even suspect, that a colleague's development and identity were profoundly shaped by sports. Some might even think of this colleague as something other than a serious analyst.

The Devaluation of Sports[2]

I do not think that the less athletic bent of the average psychoanalyst fully explains that type of emotional response to another analyst's affirming the importance of sports in his life. For attitudes of devaluation toward sports and athletes are not limited to analysts—nor to people uninvolved with sports—but are more pervasive, especially among well-educated, intellectual people, who sometimes devalue sports fans and athletes without even knowing they do it. This observation is based primarily, but not solely, on my personal impressions over many years.

People who are intensely involved with sports, including sports-obsessed fans, are viewed, often unconsciously, as philistines. Sports are thought of as less "serious" pursuits than, say, opera, theater, dance, or film. Unlike the arts, sports do not set out to address serious issues. Sports are seen—at least among "serious" people—as a form of light entertainment, a diversion or escape from the important issues of life. Justice Antonin Scalia reflected this view in his opinion in a Supreme Court case in which he rejected the idea that the Court "could determine the essential nature of golf." Scalia wrote, "[I]t is the very nature of a game to have no object except amusement (that's what distinguishes games from productive activity)" (PGA Tour v. Martin, 2001, in Sandel, 2009, p. 205).

Although there is respect for professional athletes' abilities and athletes are often adulated and glorified in our culture, well-educated professionals commonly see them—and others who make their living mainly

[1] Henceforth I will use "psychoanalyst" to refer to anyone who practices psychoanalytic therapy.

[2] Sports and athletes—especially professionals—are also worshiped in our culture; my focus here is on one side of this dialectic.

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through physical labor—as mentally inferior[3] and perceive what they do as relatively unimportant. Athletes may be lumped into the category "jocks," which is often preceded by the word "dumb." "Dumb jocks" may be the male equivalent of "dumb blondes," derogatory epithets that reduce a group of people to a lower realm. The denigration of physical labor, sports, athletes, and fans corresponds to a general devaluation of the physical, bodily realm of human experience in our culture. It also corresponds to a shift away from the Greek ideal of a sound mind and body, according to which a well-developed mind and a fit body were essential to be a complete human being. The Olympic Games began in Greece partly because the Greeks believed that organized games help the mind and body achieve equilibrium.

I think these prevailing notions and attitudes help explain why Irwin Hirsch, in the introduction to this issue, notes that he feels "silly" writing in a "scholarly journal" about his intense emotional reactions to his favorite teams' wins or losses, especially with readers who are not serious about sports, and that he often feels it reflects his "immaturity." His wariness of colleagues' judgments reflects his awareness of the pervasiveness of the views I have described.

Sports and Psychoanalysis

While preparing to write this piece, I reflected on the meaning and purpose of sports in my life. As I began to recognize the depth and intensity of my lifelong involvement in sports, I realized that I share, with Dr. Hirsch, a slight, but palpable, feeling of embarrassment. Moreover, I realized that, although I love and value sports, paradoxically, I also devalue those who are intensely involved in sports.

Simply put, I relegate sports to a lower realm than psychoanalysis, even though I am as passionate about sports as I am about psychoanalysis. I hasten to add that the two realms are indeed related for me, since one result of training at the William Alanson White Institute, especially of my personal analysis, is that I learned to be more playful and spontaneous—and have more fun—when doing treatment. Consequently I am much

[3]Bill Littlefield (2010), host of the National Public Radio (NPR) sports show, "It's Only a Game," noted recently that "athletes are stereotyped for not being the sharpest tools in the box."

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more effective as a therapist. Playfulness, fun, and spontaneity were qualities I always experienced, and took for granted, when playing sports; but I never knew they were "allowed" in the consulting room. Prior to my training, my approach to analytic therapy primarily involved rigor, discipline, restraint, empathy, and thoughtfulness. While it still has these characteristics, the "sportslike" qualities have been added to the mix. Parenthetically, my greater personal engagement with patients provided the crucial context for the emergence and integration of play, spontaneity, and humor into my therapeutic conduct.

It's also likely that my passion for playing—born partly of my having spent an enormous amount of my childhood and early adulthood playing—shaped my analytic sensibility and penchant for playfulness in my work. Conversely, psychoanalysis has enriched my athletic experience; my personal treatment has helped me perform better and I have become far more attuned to the vast mental dimension in sports. Therefore the relationship between sports and psychoanalysis has been reciprocally beneficial.

Sports and Play

Sports essentially involve playing games. Playing games—all playing, for that matter—evokes images of children, since play is a central activity for children. In fact, it is often said that play is the work of children.

Conventional wisdom holds that mature adults outgrow, or shed, their passion for games and sports, which are viewed as remnants of childhood. Adults who are consumed or obsessed with sports must, therefore, have something wrong with them. Involvement in sports cannot possibly be as important as education, career, and family—can it?

Although adults who are consumed with sports may be considered immature, children's sports are often seen in many positive ways: they teach valuable life lessons; promote desirable qualities in children, such as discipline, determination, focus, and sportsmanship; provide healthy exercise; and enable parents and their children to connect. And sports can be viewed as an arena in which children can learn to handle emotions around winning and losing; feel comfortable and confident in their bodies; and acquire teamwork skills.

Failure and struggle in sports provide unique opportunities to grow. Teddy Kennedy, Jr., in his powerful eulogy for his father, Senator Edward

Kennedy (2009), movingly described how his dad's strength and unwavering confidence had inspired him to sled—and provided a lesson for life—shortly after his leg had been amputated:

> When I was 12 years old, I was diagnosed with bone cancer. And a few months after I lost my leg, there was a heavy snowfall over my childhood home outside Washington DC. My father went to the garage to get the old Flexible Flyer and asked me if I wanted to go sledding down the steep driveway. I was trying to get used to my new artificial leg. The hill was covered with ice and snow, it wasn't easy for me to walk. And the hill was very slick. As I struggled to walk, I slipped and I fell on the ice. And I started to cry and I said, "I can't do this." I said, "I'll never be able to climb up that hill." And he lifted me up in his strong, gentle arms and said something I will never forget. He said, "I know you can do it. There is nothing that you can't do. We're going to climb that hill together, even if it takes us all day." Sure enough, he held me around my waist and we slowly made it to the top. And you know, at age 12 losing your leg pretty much seems like the end of the world. But as I climbed onto his back and we flew down the hill that day, I knew he was right. I knew I was going to be OK. You see, my father taught me that even our most profound losses are survivable, and that it is what we do with that loss, our ability to transform it into a positive event, that is one of my father's greatest lessons.

In spite of its many virtues, sports and other forms of play are still viewed as preparation for real life. Although Winnicott (1971) recognized the central role that play has for adults as well as for children, and ethological and brain studies suggest that "play may be as important to (human and animal) life as sleeping and dreaming" (Brown, 1994, p. 8), many psychoanalysts, reflecting widely held views, undervalue the vital importance of play for adults. It is not surprising, then, that sports have been relegated to a peripheral role in adulthood.

An alternative point of view is that adults who are intensely involved in sports—as participants or fans—are deeply engaged in play, an essential ingredient of psychological health for adults. Intense involvement in sports for adults, according to this viewpoint, represents a continuation of childhood play and a way to fulfill essential needs.

As is the case for children, playing sports and being a fan can meet many vital adult needs and desires: it can provide a common ground for communication, connection, and community; an arena to experience and express passionate feelings and competitive aggression; a place to learn

to enjoy and value winning and bear the pain of losing; a place to confront anxiety and leave one's comfort zone; a respite from hardship and the quotidian; a source of pleasure and fun; an opportunity to be part of something larger than oneself; and a realm for grappling with, and mastering, personal challenges, inner struggles, and demons.

If play is an essential adult activity, sports can also be viewed as providing adults the opportunity to develop their capacities and learn to play, which, for many reasons, may have been stunted in childhood. Learning to play, as Winnicott (1971) elucidated, is a developmental achievement. It requires immersion in a transitional space between inner fantasy and external reality. Like art, it requires one to sustain the illusion of feeling that it matters deeply—and acting as if it were very real—yet knowing it is play and therefore not taking it too seriously. If it is taken too seriously, as Winnicott noted, one loses the ability to play.

If intense involvement in games or sports is to be psychologically valuable one must feel that it is very important but know that the results do not have ultimate significance Although I am referring here to optimal play, the "pathologies" of playing are rampant.

We know all too well the damage done by parents or coaches who act as if the results of games are life-or-death matters. We know, too, the potential harm done to children and adults by elevating or deifying winners and lavishing them with huge material rewards. The de-emphasis on competition and aggression has its own pitfalls and can be misguided if it is taken too far. In such a society, learning how to win graciously (feeling joyful and proud, and respectful of one's rival) and lose maturely (feeling bad but taking responsibility for one's mistakes without making excuses) is not easy. Learning how to win and lose is invaluable, though, for victories and defeats are normal, expectable experiences throughout life.

My Experience in Sports

My personal experience as an athlete and as a fan being the basis for much of what I have written so far, I would like to describe the role and function sports has played in my life.

While I was growing up, sports and games provided an invaluable way for me to express competitive aggression. The basketball court, baseball and football fields, ping-pong table, and golf course were places where I felt freer to express my competitive aggression than in any other place. My father had trouble tolerating challenges to his authority, and my

mother was easily injured, so I learned not to disagree or get angry. Instead I did my own thing under the radar and used sports as an outlet for expressing my competitiveness and aggressiveness. I discovered early on that I was very good at sports, and my older brother, also a good athlete, encouraged and helped me develop athletic skills as we played lots of games and sports together.

I wanted to do well in school and, when I got to high school, outperform my classmates. Yet, school was more private and less directly competitive than sports, which was direct, mano-a-mano, and more testosterone driven. When my father developed a major depression requiring hospitalization and ECT when I was 13 years old, sports were where I could express my competitive and aggressive feelings without (unconsciously) worrying that I might hurt him.

Because I was a natural athlete, sports also provided the opportunity for me to develop a strong sense of competence and confidence. I "specialized" in lacrosse, which I played in high school and college. I excelled in high school and as a college freshman, and my coaches expected me to go very far. For various reasons, however, I lost my passion for lacrosse as a sophomore and left the team. Had professional lacrosse existed (it was created years later but never attained much popularity, status, or financial rewards), I might have felt more enthusiastic about pursuing it further, but at the time I felt a little silly spending so much time and energy playing a kid's game when serious intellectual, existential and personal issues were engaging me more and more. Ultimately, though, my reasons for leaving lacrosse may have had as much to do with the loss of narcissistic gratification I had gotten from being a star in high school and as a college freshman. As a sophomore on the varsity, for the first time in many years I was not the starting crease attackman (the offense position I played). Moreover, the coach—with whom I felt little connection and for whom I had little affection—did not use me in the way I had been used for many years, that is, to score goals. Since I did not feel valued, supported, or encouraged—and hadn't had any therapy yet to help me understand what I felt without having to act on it—I quit the team, a decision I later regretted, mainly because I lost the chance to discover how good I could become at lacrosse.

The Emotional Power of Sports

The "thrill of victory and the agony of defeat," the phrase made famous by the opening to *ABC's Wide World of Sports,* captures an essential emotional

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truth for athletes and fans alike.[4] When I played sports as a kid, whether it was one-on-one basketball, stickball, or whiffleball with friends, or team sports in high school or college, I felt the same shifts in mood—elation and dejection—that Irwin Hirsch describes as a fan. As an adult, when I hit a great shot in golf, I am thrilled; when I have a great round of golf, I am in a very good mood for a couple of days.

Whether you're playing or watching them, intense involvement in sports can be mood altering and addictive. In high school and college, when I played well and scored goals, I felt excited and thrilled. I felt deeply pleased that I could do something that was really difficult and had taken me years to become adept at. The joy of execution, achieving a high level of athleticism, was the key ingredient and a powerful reward in itself. Sometimes, when I played exceptionally well—for example, when I scored six goals in one game in college—I felt an adrenaline rush that I would liken to a "peak" experience. When I was recognized for my lacrosse accomplishments with accolades and awards, I felt extremely validated and proud. It provided substantial narcissistic gratification, which might have been especially valuable because, for significant periods of my adolescence, I felt socially anxious and insecure, particularly with girls. In retrospect, I think sports was a vital source of self-esteem and bolstered my sense of masculinity.

Playing on a team and winning games and championships is unique. When my team won (90% of the time in high school), I felt great, and, if it was a close or important game, I felt elated. The shared joy of accomplishing it as a team—of doing it together—was powerful. When my team lost, especially if I had not performed well, I felt dejected. When my team lost and I had played well, it took some of the sting out of losing, but it still felt awful to lose.

For me as an adult, winning at sports feels far less important than it used to feel. Performing a sport very well, however, is still profoundly satisfying. I have gotten this feeling from softball and tennis, but mostly from golf, which has become a vital part of my life.

[4] There is another compelling aspect of sports: unlike psychoanalytic work, excellence in sports is demonstrable and measurable; it can be consensually validated. In sports there are winners and losers, records that can be broken, and awards based largely on objective data. Like music, it has a universal language that is understandable across space and time. Since most of life is more like psychoanalysis than sports—in the gray area—it is nice to have something unambiguous, or at least less ambiguous, in our lives. Few can argue with the claim that the NY Yankees are the greatest sports team in history; their 27 world championships are proof enough for most people.

I recently rediscovered how satisfying and mentally challenging it is to perform a sport well under the pressure of formal competition. This past June I won the 2nd annual New York "City Parks Putting Challenge," which involved winning one of nine qualifying events held around the city and then winning a three-stage contest against the other sectional winners. The contest was held at Trump Towers; Donald Trump spoke at the opening ceremonies; a P.G.A. tour professional provided commentary about putting during the competition; and I was interviewed for a story on a Chinese television station.

Effective psychoanalytic treatment played a vital role in my victory. Because I had done enough analytic work on my personal demons, I felt entitled to win. Therefore, I was able to vigorously and strategically prepare for the contest and put myself in the best position to win. Moreover I maintained my composure under pressure because I could feel tense and anxious without trying to suppress, avoid, or deny it and was thus able, paradoxically, to establish distance from my nerves and focus only on putting. Of course, I'm a very good putter, but my point is that addressing my internal Achilles' heel enabled me to use my abilities fully. It is a truism in sports that, once you reach a certain level of technical proficiency, performing your best in competition is mostly a mental matter, which is why so many athletes work on their mental games. In my opinion, though, most athletes and sports psychologists pay insufficient attention to unconscious factors that sabotage performance.

Playing games and sports as a kid was so rich an experience that not to preserve it into adulthood was unthinkable. Yet, for short periods in my life I have been uninvolved in sports; these were times when I felt somewhat depressed. Only later, when I felt better, did I realize that something I loved—this mood-altering activity—was missing. Might there be something defensive about the fact that sports has been a key part of my identity and self-esteem? Of course, but the value sports has afforded far outweighs its defensive or protective functions. Hirsch and Blumberg ask in their Introduction to this issue if intense involvement in sports can be a "substitute for intense commitments to matters that are more intrinsically important" and a defense against dealing adaptively with conflict and difficult feelings. Of course it can, but so, too, can intense involvement in any activity, including "serious" ones like psychoanalysis.

Is it possible that a *lack* of intense involvement in some form of play, sport, or physical activity can also be defensive? Might it, for example, protect some people from feeling anxious, insecure, or uncomfortable with their bodies? Might it protect some from the emotional dangers of

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playing and entering a transitional space? Perhaps Hirsch's capacity for intense involvement in sports reflects his ability to engage deeply in play. Perhaps, too, it reflects his ability to feel and care deeply about things. While sports may be a replacement for deep involvement in "more pivotal life events," we cannot know this is the case for Hirsch, or anyone else, without knowing them very well.

Like Hirsch I have experienced profound joy and despondency as a fan. When, at age nine, I went to the 1964 World Series and saw Mickey Mantle (my boyhood hero) hit a home run to win the game on the first pitch in the bottom of the 9th inning, it was one of the most exciting moments of my childhood. While Yankee fans came to expect dramatic home runs from Mantle, this one was electrifying. I still remember the roar of the crowd, the exultation, and the sense that all was right with the world—a comforting, perhaps useful, illusion. When Joe Namath led the heavy underdog NY Jets to defeat the Baltimore Colts in the 1969 Super Bowl, I (and surely thousands of others) had similar feelings. These experiences made me feel connected to, or merged with, a powerful force beyond myself, perhaps similar to certain religious or spiritual experiences. Maybe fan experiences like these simply make us feel important, special, or powerful, or perhaps, in some cases, they substitute for thwarted early merger experiences with caretakers; these explanations, though, while surely true for some, seem reductionistic. I think it's far more likely that such a widespread phenomenon is based on something hard-wired and integral to human nature (Pinker, 2002).

Sports: Retaining Connection with Our Primal Nature

Ever since humans made the shift from hunter-gatherers to agrarian to industrial to postindustrial societies, we have become increasingly disconnected from our bodies and the natural world. As Paul Lippmann (2009) eloquently articulated, our connection to nature and ourselves may be more imperiled today than ever. Virtual, disembodied experience (computers, cell phones, PDA's), Lippmann noted, has gained ascendancy and replaced, to a large extent, embodied experience and contact with the natural world. In such a society intense involvement in sports and other bodily pursuits[5] may be a way for us continually to rediscover, recreate, and express a primal, instinctive, untamed or wild aspect of our

[5] My characterization of sports as physical is a matter of emphasis, since sports are more physically demanding than, say, psychoanalysis.

nature. According to Malcolm Slavin (personal communication, 2010), "This is not the id or instinctuality in Freud's sense, but rather a level of innate interconnectedness with the world that we partially lost (over several million years) when we 'traded' a far greater embeddedness in nature for our uniquely human capacity for language and the construction of meaning. This partial loss—this state of being in nature and apart from it[6]—endures in us as an ongoing tension as well as a sense of something missing—a "paradise lost."

As we came to rely increasingly on emotional, social, and mental skills, and less on innate physical and instinctual abilities, athletic and other bodily pursuits have become integral human activities. Our involvement in athletic play and other ritualized bodily activities—such as rock music and dance—may represent an ongoing, creative effort to retrieve our human connection with the larger natural world and "heal an unhealable breach at the core of our identity" (Slavin, personal communication, 2010).

As Freud (1930) recognized, the shift to creating complex social worlds and culture meant subordinating our passions and instincts—our wilder side—to reason. There is something wild, even risky, about sports. There are rules and boundaries, and raw physical aggression must be tempered by skill and strategy, but things can get out of control. People get hurt, sometimes killed, because of the danger inherent in the sport (football, skiing, boxing) or because of fans' or players' passions running amok (soccer stampedes, hockey and baseball brawls).

Far from being a light diversion from the real business of life or a sign of emotional immaturity, in many instances intense involvement in sports reveals and expresses an elemental and vital part of our nature. Sports, games, and intense bodily pursuits, as well as other activities, such as gardening, stargazing, and caring for and playing with pets, enable us to rediscover and retain our connection to an essential source of creativity and vitality, one with which we may always be vulnerable to losing touch.

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[6] Deep engagement in sports may also provide a vantage point, perspective, and grounding that helps us stand apart from—or outside—our dominant culture or subculture. Psychoanalytic treatment itself can and often does provide something very similar. This may be valuable for many reasons; for one, it enables us to counter powerful pressures to conform unthinkingly and overly accommodate to prevailing norms. By capitalizing on what I view as a universal aspiration to stand apart from—and deeply engage with—culture, psychoanalysis may be able to recapture some of its former credibility, respect, and status (Greif, work in progress).

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