



Just a Game? Sport and Psychoanalytic Theory

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Abstract Sport poses a number of important and no less significant questions, which, on the face of it, may not necessarily seem very important or significant to begin with – a peculiarity that we believe to be integral to sport itself. This article introduces, explores and outlines the psychoanalytic significance of this peculiarity. It explores how the emotions stirred by sport are intertwined with a realm of fiction and fantasy. Despite its lack of practical utility, sport carries an undeniable gravity, encapsulating the aspirations of communities, nations and continents. As a result, psychoanalysis can be used to critically reflect on the purpose and meaning of sport: that is, why do we need sport, and why, for large sections of the world’s population, do we rely on it? Ultimately, while psychoanalysis maintains a unique relation to a variety of unexpected fields of study – including art, culture and neuroscience – we seek to add to this expanding list of inquiry by including sport in this critical domain. By utilising sport as a platform to elucidate psychoanalytic concepts, it is recognised that sport can also prompt questions for psychoanalysis. In so doing, theoretical discussions on the social, cultural and political dimensions of sport through psychoanalytic theory are introduced and applied.

Keywords fantasy · lack/excess · sport studies · politics · fandom

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Introduction

There is an oddness that characterises sport. The manufacturing of certain rules and regulations which dictate how a particular game or activity can be completed; the manic fervour which suddenly takes hold amongst a large crowd, town or city with the success of the ‘local’ team; and the endless, unretrievable hours spent training or watching sport, all collectively encompass an activity, which, for many, bears no interest or relevance. For those situated in the latter category, sports are often considered a ‘less serious’ pursuit; not as fulfilling or rewarding as learning to play an instrument or attending the opera, theatre or cinema. Both the discipline and its study are perceived as outside the purview of the well educated: *who needs the Super Bowl, when one has Shakespeare and Chaucer to explicate the significances of the human condition?* According to this point of view, serious issues are not the domain of sport. As a result, sport is conceived as nothing more than an escape, a form of entertainment that has no impact or significance on wider society or the development of one’s own prudent pursuits.

Amidst such critique, a certain irrationality is believed to plague the sports fan. The dedicating of personal expense, both time and money, to the triviality of sport means that whether performing in professional or amateur competitions, or in the time spent watching live sporting events, the devotion that sport can entail presents admonition from fans and detractors alike. Even for its most critical of fans – and here we can assume that the French sociologist and philosopher, Jean-Marie Brohm (1978), a former PE teacher, and later radical critic of sport, must have had *some* interest in sport – sport is characterised as an ‘opium of the people’ and an apparatus of ideology. For the detractors, or, better put, the disbelievers, one’s very ignorance towards sport can serve as a source of pride: their lack of interest and knowledge of certain sporting stars; their failure to engage with the excitement surrounding the coverage of notable events; and their sense of remove from the anxiety and unease which encapsulates those waiting on the precipice of the sporting occasion or final result, are all, in their own bizarre manner, forms of expression that the incredulous remains confidently, and rather smugly, oblivious towards.

The editors of this special issue, and the articles within, subscribe to a very different perspective. For us, sport poses a number of important and no less significant questions, which, on the face of it, may not necessarily seem very important or significant to begin with – a peculiarity that we believe to be integral to sport itself. Though sport can elicit a certain level of pleasurable activity, as well as more arduous forms of personal and social sacrifice (the long hours spent training or dedicated to maintaining one’s participation in sport, be it professionally or amateurly), in either case, it is clear that one’s relation to sport demands a strange, excessive commitment on behalf of the subject. Indeed, while many consume certain quantities of food and alcohol during sporting events – the half-time pie and pint at Saturday afternoon football games in the UK; the hot dog and beer hat at the baseball stadium – what underscores all these activities is that they do not necessarily require sport in order to be completed and enjoyed. Many can, and do, find alternative activities that allow one to partake in excessive behaviours, be it



drinking, eating or dressing in certain attire. As Tarver asks: ‘Why not, for example, just go straight for the drinking, eating, and socializing, since these are pleasurable on their own?’ (2017, p. 24). In fact, while ‘the pleasure of victory is, one might imagine, no small motivation to endure the work of sports fandom’ (Tarver, 2017, p. 24), such pleasure and its enjoyment is closely related to sport’s inherent lack of utility – a position which chimes with the irrationality and lack of seriousness that underscores the ignorance of those uninterested in sport. Whether this lack of utility locates the sporting event in accordance with the sublime (McGowan, 2018), one’s enjoyment in sport is a self-imposed compliance to the very incredulity – or, rather, the excess – that its disparagers profess.

All of this is brought to bear in the case of the sports fan, for whom it is their very *distance* to the sporting action taking place on field or on screen, which underscores the peculiarity of their practice. Whether watching live, or through some other medium (television or online), the fanatic exuberance that comes to characterise the dedicated fan, even the neutral, interested observer, is one wherein the screams and shouts directed at the field or television screen are a far cry from the athletic performance: the fan is not the one performing and whether win or lose, why does it matter ... there’s always another game, another season, another tournament? Instead, it is with regard to the peculiarity of sport that we can begin to determine its psychoanalytic significance.

The Reality of Our Sporting Fictions

Notably, both sport and psychoanalysis endeavour to reveal how we do not act in view of our own self-interest. Instead, our capacity to desire is always marked by the ability to continue desiring, so much so that desire, and our own self-interest, can never be sated. In the context of sport, we can consider how this relation to desire is marked by a dialectic of lack (the ubiquity of the sporting failure) and excess (the time spent training for, or watching, sport and the moment of emphatic joy and jubilation encompassed in the sporting victory) (Reynoso, 2021). In the case of the latter, the very importance of sport is founded upon a desire that is excessively achieved in an unending pursuit of the sporting achievement – the end-of-season trophy, the world record or personal best. Yet, such success is always ‘perpetuated in the very inequity that our unconscious sporting desires evoke’ (Black, 2023, p. 62), one in which ‘the subject’s unconscious subversion of desire and the enjoyment therein’ (Black, 2023, p. 62) underwrites the immanence of our sporting failures – failures that are felt by the vast majority of sports fans and its participants; failures that nonetheless maintain our desire. In this sense, the sporting endeavour functions to expose the contradictions of a sporting desire that is paradoxically quelled and maintained by the ‘always next year’.

Furthermore, what underpins this dialectic of lack and excess is encompassed in what sport can reveal about the inherent fantasies and fictions that comprise our psychical and social relations. As Žižek has argued, rather than focus on ‘distinguish[ing] between fiction and reality’ one must ‘focus on the *reality of fictions*’ (2022, p. 23), so much so that what becomes apparent is that it is in the



form of the fiction that our social interactions – including our institutions, customs and beliefs – are constituted. In contrast to critical theories of sport (Brohm, 1978; Morgan, 1994), which conceive of our relation to the fictions, illusions and fantasies that characterise sport as nothing more than the effect of an alienation that must be abandoned, we contest that sport's value rests in delivering and maintaining such a fantasmatic framework. In short, the very affects that sport can elicit are mediated through, but also constituted in, a reality of fiction and fantasy. This is nowhere more apparent than in the 'as if' nature of sport. An activity which remains devoid of any seriousness or utility, but which at the same time conveys an unescapable seriousness – an 'all or nothing' mantra (as evident in the title of the popular Amazon football series) that comes to encapsulate the very hopes and dreams of a specific locale, country or continent.

It is for this reason that sport does not present an escape from 'reality'; an escape that is separate to, or removed from, the mundanity of 'everyday' life. Amidst an arbitrary array of sporting rules and regulations, it is within the bounds of sport's consigned limitations that a variety of irrational fantasies meet the utter insignificance of the sporting achievement and its protracted endeavour. Importantly, this stands apart from those assertions that succumb to prescribing sport a religious fervour. Herein, 'the sports spectacle is at the centre of an almost religious fetishism in which sports become a surrogate religion and its stars demigods', culminating in a 'transcendence from the banality and suffering of everyday life' (Kellner, 2003, p. 69). Yet, 'to say that sports offers an escape is to fail to ask the more complicated questions of what one is escaping from and into' (Reynoso, 2021, p. 597). There remains no escape from the politics of the world in the domain of sport. Instead, 'sports fandom demonstrates how those who consciously seek flight from the reality of the world and its politics betray themselves in the ways supporting a favorite team delivers individuals into the politics of the world just the same' (Reynoso, 2021, p. 598).

In the case of football, Oakley (2018) reflects upon such deliverance as a 'self-elected madness' (p. 2), noting that:

football offers us the possibility of manageable doses of self-elected madness. A madness that is essential for a sane life ... football provides us with our own utterly personal and yet simultaneously collective—as in programmed—delusional system: a universe organised around the fixtures. For vast swathes of the population football sets up an unrelenting conflict, a form of queasiness in the face of this madness which so possesses, so enraptures, so appropriates, so grips. (p. 5)

Following Oakley, we can consider how, in addition to football, the very madness of sport does not propose a revered acceptance of its madness; nor does such madness require that we simply accept, and thus normalise, sport's unique capacity to clearly render culturally sanctioned forms of being as well as its broader ideological adherences: instead, there is no return to normal to which the subject of sport can be accommodated. On the contrary, what characterises sport's madness, indeed, what assumes the fervour and passion that underpins one's devotion to and frustrations with sport, is that this madness is acknowledged and accepted by the



sporting subject. That is, despite the fact that there are, at present, numerous athletes (both known and unknown) competing under performance-enhancing supplements; in plain view of the financial irregularities that plague our favourite sports team; in full awareness that, despite one's efforts, the possibility of 'making it' in professional sport remains slim to none; and with the knowledge that one's team may, at any time, be uprooted and moved to some distant location, we, nonetheless, continue to partake, and ultimately 'believe', in the sporting spectacle as well as the very fantasies and fictions it establishes. More importantly, this presents to us the field in which psychoanalytic theory can begin to critically question the way sport comprises and shapes our social and psychical relations.

What such pursuit provides is the capacity to aver our own excess through the fantasy it delivers, indeed, through the ways in which our sporting compulsions are not inherent to the individual sporting fan(atic) – a madness that belongs simply to them – but are instead externalised in our social actions and interactions. In its encounter with excess and failure, sport affords 'a type of symbolic scaffolding' (Hook, 2018, p. 139) that does not simply underscore our sociality, but which, in succumbing to such excess, reveals the dramatisation of our psychic disavowal (Sbriglia, 2017). Thus, what sport reveals – in fact, what it routinely stages and performs through its various winners, losers, comebacks and knockdowns – are the fictions and fantasies that assemble to structure and underpin our day-to-day lives. The suspicions that this can establish for the psychoanalytic reader is one embedded in the criticism that sport evokes.

The Problem with Sport

Sport continues to maintain a social significance for vast swathes of the global population. While sport can be used, and, indeed, has been used, to perpetuate certain ideas and values, the popularity of sport has seen it adopted and adapted by a variety of social institutions from the media to religion. Sporting events encourage global television audiences during international athletic spectacles like the Olympic Games, FIFA World Cup, Super Bowl and Tour de France, which go on to spawn significant media attention. This, again, draws attention to the ubiquity of sports, even for those who have little interest. Whether or not one actively seeks to watch these events, they remain important points of discussion and debate, professing heroic stories and narratives of entertainment that enthrall as well as anger both admirers and detractors. Family relationships, friendships and even marriages can be marked by the supporting of a particular team and the detest towards another. The success or, more likely, the failure, of one's favourite team can result in ecstatic joy or downright misery, with the team encapsulating, for many, one's own personal identity. This is not to ignore the billions who play and participate in sport: including the lucky few, good enough to earn money through their abilities, either professionally or semi-professionally, as well as the many amateurs, who, despite family and work commitments, manage to find the time to train and participate at various levels of competition. In such cases, competing in sport holds a special



importance amongst its participants, often signalling significant moments in an individual's life.

While these brief descriptions reflect upon the positive effects that sport can have, there remains an underside of greed, corruption and violence – all of which stands opposed to the values and beliefs that sport so emphatically professes. While we remain fully aware of the possible corruption of certain officials; of the proven bribery that occurs in the awarding of global mega-events; and of the violence that sport can ignite, both on and off the field of play, such problems exist in addition to the feelings of anxiety, distress, loneliness and depression that are established in accordance with notable figures, such as coaches and fellow teammates. With regard to the former, one's distress and desire in sport is easily provoked through the relationship that one can have with one's coach and training team, leading to dejection and possible self-harm (McMahon & McGannon, 2021; Mountjoy & Edwards, 2022; Ryall, 2019; Smith, 2020). While we remain fully aware of sport's problems and pitfalls, the sportswashing and corruption, we can, through a psychoanalytical reading of sport, understand how these very problems prove constitutive of sport, and, more importantly, our enjoyment in it. Sport is corrupt, and so are we.

We can go further here and make the claim that sport does not elicit change – at least not in the way that widely recited discourses on sports development suggest. It is not a force for good that can help eradicate social problems. To pursue such an argument, one would have to suggest that sport stands separate to society, removed that is from the social, political and economic structures we inhabit – clearly, this is not the case. Instead, sport exposes tensions within society, bringing to light the very problems, ambiguities and contradictions that underlie both the subject *and* society.

More to the point, the mass emotion that encapsulates the spectating of sport, the highs and lows afforded by the sporting encounter, and the various ways in which individuals can collectively embody a particular team or competitor (often, through various forms of collective significance, such as shirts, hats, face paint, flags, etc.), are all symbolically rendered in one's relation to sport. In effect, 'sports are a central individual and relational arena for the constant interplay of hubris and humility. We push ourselves to great achievements, hunger for accolades from others, and publicly surrender to the outcome of our efforts' (Cooper, 2010, p. 511).

To make sense of these efforts, this special issue proposes a psychoanalytic interpretation of sport, where the significance of sport for psychoanalytic inquiry reveals an important and, at present, understudied point of investigation – perhaps even, a missed one. In 1936, Lacan left the International Psychoanalytical Association's (IPA) annual meeting, frustrated by the response to his presented paper – an early version of the mirror stage. Instead, Lacan attended the Olympic Games ... proving, for us at least, that even a Lacanian can like sport.



Sport and Psychoanalytic Theory

The study of sport, often referred to as sport science or sport studies, is a multidisciplinary field that examines various aspects of sport and physical activity. Over the years, this has evolved and expanded to encompass a wide range of disciplines and methodologies. This includes aspects of exercise physiology, biomechanics, sports medicine and sport nutrition, all of which examine human physiology, human movement, the treatment and prevention of sport injuries, and the dietary and nutritional optimisation of athletic performance and their inevitable rehabilitation and recovery. There is also sports management and sport analytics. Where the areas of sports marketing, finance and governance are considered in the former, the evaluation and comparison of athlete performance and coaching strategies are considered in the latter. Studies within sport history identify the social, cultural and political significance of sport and its relations to society over time.

Where we position this current issue on psychoanalysis and sport is in relation to what has typically been conceived as sport psychology and the sociology of sport. Yet, while we move away from the positivist, egocentric focus of much of contemporary sport psychology – an albeit vast discipline, incorporating multiple psychological theories and approaches that too easily fall into the trap of accommodating sport's inherent contradictions – the articles in this special issue focus on the importance of providing an examination of the subject as interdependent to the cultural and political importance of sport and its function in society. In keeping with the psychosocial focus of much of contemporary psychoanalysis, this collection examines and explores the relations between the subject and the social. While this speaks to the importance of sport for both the subject and society, we believe it also allows us to contribute to broader debates within the philosophy of sport and its exploration of the ethical significances underpinning our sporting interactions. Insofar as we promote the extent to which psychoanalytic theory can challenge and elicit the interrogations that we seek to make of both sport and society, this nonetheless requires complicating traditional narratives on sport through a psychoanalytic lens that takes seriously the tensions, contradictions and ambivalences that underpin sport's significance.

Such questioning remains inherent to psychoanalytic inquiry, which, in the case of sport, can be used to critically examine the fantasies and fictions that underpin sport's global ubiquity. Specifically, for this special issue, psychoanalysis is used to reflect critically on the use of sport: that is, why do we need sport, and why, for large sections of the world's population, do we rely on it? Where psychoanalysis maintains a unique relation to a variety of unexpected fields of study, including art, culture and neuroscience, we seek to add to this expanding list of inquiry by including sport in this critical domain.

Importantly, we do not seek to use psychoanalysis in order to come to terms with the problems inherent to sport – psychoanalysis is not a cure. In fact, while it is perhaps difficult to understand why someone would subject themselves to the anxiety, disappointment and failure that so often characterises our sporting



experiences, not least the time and money that our sporting activities require, equally, psychoanalytic inquiry is not concerned with providing or producing satisfaction. There is nothing ‘normal’ in consuming sport, and, by extension, there is no attempt to achieve the ‘normal’ in analysis. Instead, psychoanalysis involves acknowledging, understanding and possibly transforming one’s constitutive dissatisfaction. This locates psychoanalysis beyond the comforts of any satisfaction, of which sport plays an important role in revealing.

On this basis, psychoanalysis provides ‘an intrinsically social, objective, and critical dimension’ that ‘is never simply about the individuals and their (more or less intimate) problems’ (Zupančič, 2008, p. 3). Cautioning against the ego, one’s words, ideas, beliefs and fears are, under psychoanalytic interpretation, intimately related to the enjoyment that underpins our social interactions in sport, including moments of tension, aggression and resistance. It is in this sense that psychoanalysis ‘offers ways of thinking not just of the individual, but of those dimensions which are always intimately part of the individual, though they incessantly spill over those boundaries into questions of the social, and the cultural, and the ideological’ (Thwaites, 2007, p. 3). Accordingly, what encompasses the subject – including the social positions they may occupy as well as the particular sociocultural orientations they adopt in navigating the social realms they inhabit – are those unspoken and unspeakable processes that traverse the cultural and the subjective (Frosh et al., 2003).

In Sport, More Than Sport

For this very reason, sport is not something that can be confined to psychological, physiological or even sociological investigation. There is instead that which resides within sport, which goes beyond mere play or competitive competition, especially when considering what is commonly referred to as the instinctual. There is no immediacy in sport, but rather a complex coalescence of meaningful action that symbolically mediates that which emerges from the contradictions, ambivalences, and tensions that underscore the subject’s social interdependence.

It is these unconscious conflicts – one’s desires and anxieties – that are reflected in the relationships that one holds, but also the sociocultural conditions that one exists in – sport included. The inter-dynamics at play here infuse the unconscious with a variety of social practices, beliefs and institutions, affording psychoanalysis a valuable influence in understanding how sport and society function to shape the subject and vice versa. From the subject to society, from culture to the individual, sport’s significance allows us to comment upon the intriguing interstices of the unconscious at play.

Ultimately, in light of the above, we echo Hansell’s assertion that ‘sports has a natural kinship with psychoanalysis because both involve the interrelationships among the intrapsychic, interpersonal, and social realms’ (2010, pp. 541–542). Moreover, much like the analytic session, no sporting encounter is ever the same, with its very contingency matched only by the fact that neither sport nor analysis ‘go to plan’. This once again dislodges any therapeutic advancement. For Marini,



‘without turning psychoanalysis into Samaritan help which, indeed, is not its role, one should nevertheless hope to acquire with it the strength to assume life ... that is, its pleasure as well as its sufferings’ (1986/1992, p. 30).

Whether or not our pleasures and sufferings can be managed or dissolved, sport’s role within society is to act as a carrier of these expressions – emphatically demonstrating both the pleasure and suffering of our ‘common unhappiness’ in the sporting endeavour (Freud & Breuer, 1895/2004). The perspective that psychoanalysis can provide in grounding our analysis of these expressions is one that is reflected in the variance of any psychoanalytic inquiry. As Johanssen and Krüger explain: ‘Perhaps more so than other disciplines, psychoanalysis is at variance with itself and divided into different schools’ (2022, p. 10). Here, psychoanalysis echoes sport via one’s adherence to a ‘theoretical club’, insofar as each major school of psychoanalytic thought – or ‘club’ – provides its own distinct accent in accounting for the origin, character and fate of our wishes. While, as spectators and participants, the arena of sport can showcase Freudian oedipal plots to aggress towards an omnipotent rival, Kleinian paranoia of the other’s attack and envy of its surplus, Kohutian aims towards merger with the idealised other, and the Lacanian *jouissance* of what remains inherently, but tantalisingly, unresolved, at the same time, sport can also challenge Bionian conceptions of group life assumptions, expand Winnicottian notions of play and creativity, and query relational emphases on recognition and mutuality. Amidst such ‘competition’, we echo the sentiments of Johanssen and Kruger who ‘agree with those moderating voices ... that mediate between, and find productive perspectives in, the various schools, without regressing into an anything goes attitude’ (2022, p. 10), an approach that we believe is reflected in the following articles.

To this extent, the articles included in this special issue use sport as a medium to explicate psychoanalytic ideas, while also dialectically thinking sport and psychoanalysis together. It is our contention that rather than simply applying psychoanalysis to sport, sport may ask questions of psychoanalysis as well. It is in this potential of thinking psychoanalysis and sport together that we actualise the richness of a theoretical examination of the social, cultural and political through the application of psychoanalytic theorising. In doing so, this special issue provides scope to interpret the relation between the various forms of sport and schools of psychoanalysis. Together, these schools offer critical insight into the relationship between sport and psychoanalysis, providing a unique, yet underexplored, account of the intrapsychic and interpersonal dimensions that underpin our sporting lives.

In This Special Issue

By critically exploring the meaning behind sports (in)significance, this special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* draws together key insights from psychoanalysis (including its various schools, approaches and theories) in order to examine the cultural, social and psychic significance of sport. In meeting this aim, each article underscores the value that psychoanalytic theory can provide for a critical study of sport. The underlying objective of this special issue is to develop a body of



literature that positions sport's unique capacity to shed light on a number of important topics. Across the 12 articles, this includes analyses of the live broadcasting of sporting events; fandom, and the racial dynamics of fan culture; examples of systemic abuse in sport; the use of performance-enhancing drugs; sport ethics; the paradoxes and creativity of play; the effect of eating disorders amongst athletes; and the depiction of sport in film. This is supplemented with a variety of psychoanalytic concepts (fetishistic disavowal, transference, drive, lamella, transitional phenomena, abjection, lack, interpassivity, *jouissance*) and sports (basketball, association football [soccer], basketball, gymnastics, bodybuilding, American football), which intersect across an assortment of clinical and cultural examples.

As is the case in any sport, we begin with failure. Namely, the 'queer art of failure', as drawn from the work of Halberstam (2011), and as applied to the context of sports and clinical experiences, underpins Molly Merson's 'When did we forget we were playing? Failure, play, and possibility in sport and clinical life'. Residing at the intersection of psychoanalytic and social theory, and navigating the theoretical insights of queer theory and Black feminist theory, Merson examines how our relation to play, as well as the freedom to play, is lodged against systemic forms of oppression and the unconscious processes that serve to maintain them. Interspersed with critical applications of the work of both Fanon and Klein, Merson encourages us to consider how the pervasive influence of racial capitalism, patriarchy, White supremacy and other dominating systems require an ethical praxis that redefines how we approach failure – one that goes beyond sport's usual win–loss dichotomy.

Outside of playing sport, for the majority, our relation to sport is constructed, framed and shaped by the live television sports broadcast – a media event that for the most notable of live sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup or Super Bowl, can enthrall large proportions of the world's population. However, examining the temporal gap between the real-time occurrence of a sports event and its televised presentation, a gap that imparts an aesthetic dynamism resembling a scripted series, is, in Ryan Engley's 'Being and Timeouts: Live Sports in the Psyche', a nonetheless *perceived immediacy*, which, in the formal structure of the televised sports broadcasts, results from the viewer's experience, rather than being an inherent characteristic of the content being broadcast. Through developing the unique assertion that the vitality of live sports is attributed to the viewer's psyche rather than the broadcast itself, Engley's argument is supported with key insights from television studies, and supplemented with the use of both Freudian and Lacanian concepts, including Freud's fetishistic disavowal and Lacan's 'the non-duped err'.

Moving from traditional media to social media, Miguel Rivera's article provides new insights into the racial complexities enveloped in NBA sports fandom. Indeed, the racial complexities within NBA sports fandom are deeply intertwined with the history, culture and demographics of both basketball and US society. Accordingly, in his article "What occurs in our times when the analysts speak of transference": Identification, *Jouissance*, and Race in NBA Fan Culture', Rivera examines the heightened affiliations of fans through their emotional investment in sporting events. Anchoring his discussion in the 'parasocial' dimension of online interactions, Rivera utilises Lacan's psychoanalytic insights on transference in order to reveal the complex racial dynamics present within NBA fan culture. Ultimately, it is contested



that if transformative racial justice within the current framework of NBA fandom is to be fostered, supporters must confront the inherent challenges present both within the league itself and within their own engagement with the sport.

The relationship between drugs and bodybuilding is a complex and controversial one, marked by both adherence to performance-enhancing substances and efforts to combat their use within the sport. The use of anabolic steroids, human growth hormone (HGH), insulin and diuretics to enhance muscle growth, strength and physical appearance, can help bodybuilders achieve the extreme levels of muscularity and definition demanded by competitive bodybuilding standards. However, the use of performance-enhancing drugs in bodybuilding is often associated with serious health risks and ethical concerns. In fact, according to Will Greenshields, the perplexities of the sport have, more recently, been confirmed in several fatalities that, for the uninvested, serves only to accentuate the sport's strangeness. Consequently, Greenshields's article, 'Death, *Jouissance* and the Bodybuilder', uses Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's death drive in order to make sense of what is conceived as an excessive reliance on drug use within the sport. Located in a variety of sources, Greenshields's analysis speaks to the 'crazy' enjoyment that entraps its participants, serving not to regulate, but rather understand the bodybuilder's *jouissance*.

In addition to drug use, at present, there remains diverging opinion regarding treatment for athletes suffering eating disorders. Athletes are at risk of succumbing to a variety of eating disorders, including anorexia nervosa and binge eating. Amidst a diversity of behavioural and cognitive behavioural approaches, Zane Dodd and Elissa Woodruff advocate for the potential of psychoanalysis to transform treatment for athletes with eating disorders. In their article, 'A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Eating Disorders in Athletes: Defensive and Facilitative Potentials', Dodd and Woodruff posit that participation in sport can offer a distinct avenue towards the recovery of athletes suffering from eating disorders. They follow this via the supportive dynamics of a therapeutic relationship that allows individuals to feel secure enough to engage in a curiosity-driven exploration of the metaphorical significance underlying their tangible connections to food and sport. Their approach is supplemented with the theories of both Winnicott and Bion.

Unfortunately, in recent times, women's gymnastics has been marred by a series of abuse scandals that shed light on sport's darker aspects. This emphasises the critical importance of examining the underlying dynamics that maintain the prevalence of hegemonic structures in sport. Consequently, through an examination of the historical evolution of gymnastics, Klaudia Wittmann, in her article 'The woman is perfected: A psychoanalytic reading of systemic abuse in women's artistic gymnastics', highlights how examples of systemic abuse are related to a libidinal economy of perfectionism. Exploring the role of sexual difference, Wittmann contends that women's gymnastics, based upon an aspiration to embody perfected femininity, is ultimately ensnared within deeply patriarchal structures of gendered oppression and subordination.

Sport has long been a popular subject for filmmakers, providing a rich tapestry of stories, characters and emotions for which film offers a platform for capturing the drama, excitement and human experience inherent in sport. While one of the primary ways in which sport and film intersect is through the depiction of athletes



and sporting events, additionally, sport films frequently delve into deeper themes such as identity, ambition, sacrifice and the pursuit of excellence. They provide a lens through which to explore broader social, cultural and political issues, reflecting the values, aspirations and challenges of society. Following this, Andrés Nicolás Rabinovich, in his article ‘Ideological Fan-tasy: Desire and Drive in Football Fanship Representations in Contemporary Argentine Cinema’, examines the portrayal of the soccer fan (*hincha*) in two Argentine films, Manuel Romero’s, *El hincha* (1951), and Marcos Carnevale’s, *El fútbol o yo* (2017). Utilising Slavoj Žižek’s notion of ideological fantasy, the article contends that these films act as a stage to showcase the dynamic interaction between the symbolic and imaginary realms. Through this interaction, they contribute to shaping a fabricated reality that obscures the fundamental truth of fans’ desires within the particular historical and political contexts in which they exist.

Robert Geal’s article, ‘Football and Fetishism’, opens the journal’s ‘Counter-space’ section. Using the concept of the fetish as a way of highlighting how the world of professional association football functions to deflect attention from the inherent loss at the core of subjectivity, and the symbolic castration imposed by contemporary capitalism, Geal offers a unique appraisal that reflects on recent debates regarding the impact of sportswashing. Complemented with discussions on the nature of fandom and the subject’s relation to sport, Geal draws specific attention to the processes of disavowal that structure the fan’s relationship to football. Ultimately, he reveals how football functions to support the ideological illusion that seeks to ignore the centrality of loss for the subject.

How do we make sense of those athletes who seem to go ‘beyond’ the normal; not just in their achievements, but in the act of completing some sporting practice that fundamentally requires what would typically be considered as some excessive feat of endurance? Cameron More’s article, ‘Drive Beyond Body: the Undead *Jouissance* of Endurance Sports’, examines these questions by reflecting upon the sporting achievements of James Lawrence, who accomplished 100 Ironman triathlons in as many days; Courtney Dauwalter, a 240-mile ultramarathon competitor; and Eliud Kipchoge, the fastest marathoner in history. Supplementing these stories with his own experiences as an endurance athlete, More presents a conceptualisation of drive that explores how the endurance athlete exists within the boundaries of the ‘undead’. Complementing his analysis with insights from Heidegger and Lacan, More asserts that any biological rationale for explaining such extraordinary athletic accomplishments requires a comprehensive understanding of the relation between Lacan’s drive and lamella.

In addition to the peculiarities of the bodybuilder, there is also the sports fan. A devotee who continues to attribute what seems to be an excessive amount of time, energy and dedication to a club or individual, for whom, in majority of cases, they will never meet nor see live. Drawing upon Winnicott’s concept of transitional phenomena, and his wider insights into personality development, Steve Tuber and Karen Tocatly explore the fervent allegiances that characterise the sports fan. In their article, ‘Why do we act like fans? What would Winnicott say about it?’, they consider how our identificatory needs find a rich resource in athletes who are capable of extraordinary feats; with fans becoming engrossed in and attributing glamorous qualities to their heroes, while also demonising opposing teams and



players. In so doing, they shed light on how being a fan constitutes a genuine transitional phenomenon.

As evidenced in Stacy Thompson's 'The Interpassivity of Pick-up Soccer', the regular, amateur meet-up between friends can hold great importance for many. Yet, the ability to endure injuries, commit to rehabilitation, and sacrifice hours away from close friends and family just to partake in sport is, as Thompson argues, strangely downplayed by those participating. Rebuking any signs of taking it too seriously or forgetting that it is 'just a game', Thompson highlights how both himself and others are reluctant to openly acknowledge the genuine social importance that is attributed to soccer. Making sense of this, Thompson's analysis refers to critical commentaries of play, notably, the work Johan Huizinga, as well as the psychoanalytic insights of Žižek, in order to elaborate on, as well as apply, Robert Pfaller's conception of interpassivity. Together, these theorists are used to address the apparent contradiction between the intense attachments of a community of soccer players and the sport's minor status within their broader social reality.

To conclude the special issue, we have Kutte Jönsson's 'Abjection in sport: an ethical approach'. Taking to task the ethics of sport, Jönsson examines how 'gender cheaters', such as Caster Semenya, and doping users, who challenge and thereby threaten sports ideology, represent 'the outcasts' essential to sports organisations. Positioned as subversive actors, both defining and eroding established boundaries, Jönsson employs Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection in order to explore and highlight the paradoxes that underscore contemporary sport. Considering the examples of abjected bodies and abjected behaviours – examples of those athletes who question or exceed the somewhat restrictive cultural and ideological standards – he contests that when sport organisations dismiss athletes who defy culturally entrenched boundaries in sport, they themselves become abject entities, ultimately avoiding moral accountability.

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Declarations

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