

Play, Sport, and Dialogue as Pathways to Peace?

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This essay considers how play, sport, and dialogue may be used as pathways to peace. In *Homo Ludens* (1949), a pioneering classic of cultural history, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, describes play as an informal voluntary activity according to guided rules accepted freely under limits of space and time. The purpose is to create an atmosphere of tension, joy, and consciousness that it is different from ordinary life. It requires that daily concerns and disputes be suspended to make play possible. This playful character of sport fosters opportunities for dialogue. Agreeing to play with others, including those from unfamiliar cultural backgrounds, under the same rules creates the possibility of recognizing one another as partners, at least under the specific circumstances. These range from spontaneous and informal play, such as in family gardens, in parks or beach recreation, through more organized but still recreational amateur sports such as community marathons and team sports; with the degree of organization and formality increasing to the point of professional sports that are recreational in the sense of being mass entertainments.

It is important to remember that while exercise may be taken alone, play takes place with another or others, and usually in competition with them, however relaxed and informal, this may be. The play or the game is an opportunity for building relationships that may go beyond the moment of play. For example, it is through play that parents find opportunities for developing tender and mutually enjoyable relations with their children. It is also through play that children learn to cooperate and come to understand, respect, and repeat the informal patterns that allow the game to continue, and by which they acquire the informal and formal rules that enable civil society and peaceful community. It is a dialogue of common learning, as Zimmermann and Morgan explain.

Again, as Reid says: "Engaging in athletic competition with someone different in any number of ways helps not only to overcome stereotypes and confirm our common humanity but also, perhaps more important, to tolerate and even appreciate our differences." Sport shows it is possible to strive for common objectives under the same rules with people from various cultural backgrounds. Yet again, it is often claimed that sport educates in the simple moralities of supporting teammates, respecting opponents, valuing effort and resilience. For example, the French-Algerian writer and Nobel Prize Laureate Albert Camus observed, of his experience as a young football goalkeeper with Racing Universitaire d'Alger (RUA), that: "After many years during which I saw many things, what I know most surely about morality and the duty of man I owe to sport and learned it in the RUA." However, such claims for the moral excellence of sport are disputed as Bäck has pointed out.

Another aspect to be considered is the relationship between biology and culture, registered as corporeality, as identified by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss. He describes, for example, the differences in elementary and sportive body techniques of English and French soldiers during the First World War, as an illustration of a cultural inscription in using the body. Hence, physiology and psychology are not enough to explain human gesture, as "...it is also necessary to know the traditions which impose it." Again, from the phenomenological perspective of the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, when a gesture is used, nature and culture are entwined. Sportive gesture, for instance, brings together technique, expression, tradition, and novelty. Such a dialogical perspective considers human movement always as a relational happening. From this, it may be assumed that even universal sports and games, such as football or running, promote a cultural encounter.

Again, play and sport may open spaces for new forms of expression. For example, sport, until modern times predominantly a male activity, is now an opportunity for female liberation and empowerment. There is also now the controversial question of transgenderism in sport. Moreover, the corporeal encounter of sports and games takes place in conditions of intense contact. When playing a game, it is necessary to give full attention to and connection with the environment and with others, including teammates and opponents. Much more than a set of characteristics, the Other's body is revealed through its living movements. It is with the Other that one experiences certain existential experiences, including love, hate, fear. According to Schrag, this being with the other reveals two existential qualities: alienation and communication. The Other's corporeality also presents itself as an obstacle, as an instrument, or as an authentic opportunity for dialogue and mutual fulfilment.

According to Martin Buber, in authentic dialogue, the *Other* is not considered an object, and such an encounter is not free of conflict as different perspectives do not always match. In sport, a contest is established from the outset. However, play and sport situate conflict differently from everyday life. The corporeal dimension helps players to understand their potential and limits, and they relate to the *Other* with empathy and respect. Respect, in this case, is the recognition that the potential of the opponent may be greater than one's own. Moreover, players allow themselves to develop tactics and strategy guided by the opponent's gesture and performance. Each contest is both a challenge and an invitation. It is a *dialogue*, with or without words, in which gestures wait for an unknown response that in turn becomes a new question for yet another response. This is to accept the Other's freedom to pose questions and challenges. It is an exemplary experience of the sports field. Children always play together; regardless of different language skills, players build teams or start a game spontaneously, because of the power of the invitation, of the issues raised by the other's gestures and techniques.

A famous example of such a sporting respectful friendship is that forged at the Olympic Games between Alain Mimoun, a French Algerian, and the Czechoslovak Emil Zátopek, both long-distance runners. Mimoun has been acclaimed by *Athlétisme Magazine* as "The French Athlete of the 20th Century". Zátopek is considered one of the greatest runners of all time, with five Olympic medals and many world records. He is famous for the historic feat at the Helsinki Olympics in 1952 when he won, the 5,000 metres, the 10,000 metres, and the marathon. The two athletes met many times in competitions, with Mimoun known as Zátopek's "shadow", as he was always in second place until he won the marathon at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. Despite their competition, the two athletes were great personal friends and, as Richard Askwith has noted, Zátopek said of the relationship: "Great is the victory, but greater still is the friendship."

However, the dialogue that takes place in sport can engender conflicts that cannot be contained or resolved easily. Gumbrecht reminds us of the fascination that some spectators have for an outbreak of fighting in a sport that rejects acceptance of the rules. However, such violence makes more evident the elegance and inventiveness of those who avoid disrespectful behaviour even in stressful situations during sports competitions; and the acceptance that rules must be reasserted if the contest is to resume. As Gumbrecht points out, sporting behaviour does not mean giving an opponent an advantage. Indeed, discovering that one opponent is letting the other win is seen as an humiliation. In extreme disadvantage, what can be rethought are the conditions of the game, but not the principle of dialogue. Consequently, play and sport offer possibilities as pathways to peace. However, if the aim is to create a mental and emotional disposition for peace sport must remain on firm ethical ground, but this can and does change. Human life is organic, and it is essential to be

attentive to concerns such as gender equality, prejudices, racism, and environmental sustainability. The conduct of sport is affected by each of these and itself contributes to their resolution.

In modern times the idea that play and sport may promote peace and bring people together has had global resonance and is recognized by international organizations such as the United Nations (UN). Various programmes and campaigns rely upon sport to promote, among others, respect, tolerance, the empowerment of minorities, and social inclusion. For example, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) claims that: "Providing a common playground, sport has a unique power to mobilize and inspire in every region of the world". Nonetheless, there are controversial and negative aspects to be considered, chiefly in professional sport and high-level competition with their massive financial rewards, and national prestige. These include doping and other aids to cheating, corruption, consumption, racism, and excessive competitiveness. Such elements are distractions from the path to peace that sport may otherwise offer.

The modern Olympic Movement is inspired by the example of the Olympic Games of Greek antiquity when the Olympic truce offered protection during the festival. The *Olympic Charter* now states: "The goal of Olympism is to place sport at the service of the harmonious development of humankind, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity." This has not meant that the modern Olympic Games have been invariably in support of peace. During the First and the Second World Wars, it was the Games that were suspended, not the military conflict. Again, the 1936 Berlin Olympics held in Nazi Germany was a notorious example of sport used for political and racial propaganda. There are other examples, such as the United States-led boycott of the Moscow Summer Olympics of 1980, in protest against Soviet military action in Afghanistan, and the retaliatory boycott by the Soviet Union and its allies of the Los Angeles Summer Olympics of 1984.

Heather Reid says that three lessons about peace may be learned from Olympic sport: "First, that we must deliberately set aside a time and place for it; second, that we must recognize others' equality; and third, that we must respect one another's differences within the larger world community." This echoes the principles of the Olympics of Greek antiquity and Reid reminds us of the religious character of ancient festivals, and the atmosphere of common ritual, friendship, and solidarity reminiscent of religion that is found in today's sportive mega-events, where spectacle is part of the mass entertainment. Nowadays, 'Sport for Peace' is on the agenda of the United Nations, with the International Olympic Committee considering the notion of an "Olympic Truce." As Masumoto points out, the attempt to revive such a commitment is accompanied by controversy and may be considered utopian.

However, the dialogical nature of play and sport does influence the process of building peace. For example, Eichberg and Levinsen provide examples from an educational perspective through which sport has enabled conflict management between both individuals and communities and contributed to a culture of peace. They highlight the power of what they describe as Popular Movement Culture, that displays 'the Other' in diversity. It is commented that: "Popular football is not identical with the competitive sport of soccer as it is standardized at local, national and international levels after centrally fixed rules. A rich spectrum of football practice all over Europe shows how people play football in other ways." In other words, the coming together of people through sport enables them to learn about unfamiliar cultures, appreciate diversity, and the value of peaceful relations with others. The example is given of a football festival in the Balkans that has contributed to inter-ethnic reconciliation. The festival was the first multi-ethnic event, including Muslim refugee children, to take place in Srebrenica after the civil war. Similar examples are found

elsewhere in the world, by which an atmosphere of fun and games heals children emotionally after the horrors of conflict. Indeed, people of all ages, cultures, and beliefs, who have been in conflict may be brought together through sports and games to transcend their differences. The festival character and playfulness of sports events foster human encounter and the peaceful building of cultural relationships, as Huizinga illustrated in his famous book. Again, as Saura, Matta, and Zimmermann show there is also a growing recognition of the value of traditional sports and games (TSG) in sustaining cultural heritage, the empowerment of indigenous communities, environmental sustainability, and recognizing the humanity present in all cultures.

In conclusion, we do not, however, share the utopian naivety of a linear claim that play and sports are clear pathways to a peaceful world. In practice, the political and commercial instrumentalization of sports and games, at both professional and popular recreational levels impoverish the experience and bring negative consequences. Nevertheless, we do believe that play and sport remain profound manifestations of human culture and capacity for self-expression to and with others. Hence, they provide powerful and regular opportunities to bring people together for common and enjoyable purposes in a peaceful atmosphere. As Brown and Morgan point out, this has implications for the building of a culture of peace through informal learning and non-formal and non-formal education, of which play, and sport are important aspects. However, it is essential to enhance the ethical dimension to the conduct of play and sport. This recognizes that peaceful and inclusive societies depend on an ethical debate that recognizes both common humanity and cultural differences. As Morgan observed in a recent essay on Hannah Arendt, it is a mistake to institutionalize such dialogue or to develop it according to “correct” formulae as: ‘This does not consider sufficiently complexities such as history and culture with their normative values and power relations. In practice dialogue is dependent on disposition and situation and is often difficult to initiate, let alone sustain’. It is here that play, and sport may contribute. They are not panaceas for solving conflict, but they do bring together people who have different perspectives. The readiness of people to play a game spontaneously and informally, or to take part in more formal organized sport, is already an openness to dialogue, without which a sustained *peace* cannot be achieved.

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