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Chapter Twelve

Coming to Terms with Play, Game, Sport, and Athletics

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In 1990, Graves stated: "There are few words in the English language which have such a multiplicity of divergent meanings as the word sport" (p. 877). When words such as play, game, and athletics are added to the discussion, the confusion of meanings seems to increase exponentially. What does it all mean when someone says, "They showed good sportsmanship playing a game of basketball at the Athletic Centre?" Were they just playing, like two children playing with dolls? If they were just playing, is that not incongruous with an athletic contest? Statements such as "playing a game at the Athletic Centre" open up a multitude of questions.

The need to carefully define play, game, sport, and athletics is important in at least two respects. The first concerns the confusion of language. Millar suggested that the term play had become a "linguistic waste-paper basket badly in need of being cleaned up" (1968, p. 11). Keating commented: "Basic terms such as play, game, sport have been extended by common and careless usage to the point of meaninglessness" (1978, p. i; also Giddens, 1964, p. 81). This confusion needs to be rectified.

In the second respect academics need clarity. Tangen notes: "Both the historians and sociologists need a definition that manages to include all the activities—both ancient and modern—that they intuitively will accept as sport and exclude all those they consider as non-sport" (1985, p.18; see also Metheny, 1969, p. 59). Meier stated that the "plethora of postulations previously forwarded . . . are most often fraught with numerous inadequacies." Nevertheless, he argued that it "should be possible to critically analyze the concept, make some sense of the complexity and variability of the term, and overcome limited or myopic views to produce an adequate and precise definition of sport which is acceptable, beneficial and, hopefully, stimulating to further sport sociology research" (1981, p. 8l).

There are some, particularly phenomenologists, who feel such an endeavor cannot be done. Neale suggests: "Play is as illusive as the wind and can no more be caught by theory than the wind can be trapped in a paper bag" (1967, p. 68; Kleinman, 1968, p. 33; Steen, 1978, p. 59). From a non-essentialist perspective, McBride argues that the term sport is "both vague and ambiguous" and that it is "logically impossible to define the concept" (1975, pp. 9-10). To this he adds,

Perhaps we should rejoice that "sport" is not a precise concept. If it were, we would probably not be considering matters such as this and it is highly unlikely that there would exist a society such as ours. As Michael Scriven puts it: "When a precise definition is possible, one may be sure the term defined is either a new technical term or one not of great importance for scientific or philosophical issues . . ." (Scriven, 1966, p. 8). Justus Hartnack, in speaking of Wittgenstein's attack on essentialism, puts it even stronger when he says, "It is arguable that no concept of philosophical interest can be defined" (Hartnack, 1965, p. 71). (McBride, 1975, p. 10).

But just because it is not of philosophic interest does not mean it cannot be done or that a definition would not be helpful. Finally, Ziff criticizes the drawing of conceptual boundaries by stating: "That's a dull matter left to linguists and lexicographers. . . . Drawing boundaries and fixing conceptual limits is generally unproductive. Anyway, examples of sports are easy to come by" (Ziff, 1974, p. 93). Then there are those like VanderZwaag who argue that a "philosophy is characterized most by the formulation of its problems than by solution of them" (1969, p. 56). Yet, for the non-academic and academic, it would be helpful to define play, game, sport, and athletics for the two reasons stated earlier. But perhaps I should do as Suits did in his 1977 Presidential Address to his fellow philosophers and give a 15-second pause for terminal Wittgensteinians, soundly opposed to constructing definitions, an opportunity to leave the room (Suits, 1977, p. 115).

In developing a definition, several principles were used. The definition needed to be simple, honest, and accurate. Reductionistic perspectives that look at these concepts from only a psychosocial, biological, anthropological, or other perspective were considered too narrow. The definition should be understood by non-academics and be both precise and ambiguous. Thomas declared: "It is noteworthy that such a largely semantic venture cannot be limited entirely by common usage of these terms, and neither can this usage be totally ignored since it may reflect the evolutionary status of sport in culture" (1976, p. 37). Or as Champlain posits, our definition should "be responsible to the community of users" (1977, p. 105; Morgan, 1977, p. 29). McBride advises: "A definition is too narrow if it excludes instances that would ordinarily (conventionally) be included. A definition is too broad if it includes instances that would ordinarily (conventionally) not be included" (1975, p. 6; & 1979). Morgan warns against becoming "definition mongers" who "simply insist on essences and precise definitions while ignoring altogether any problems of ambiguity" (1977, p. 28). Though Schmitz argues that "ordinary usage is the usage of ordinary men, and not that of scientists or philosophers" (1977), it is the intention of this paper to develop a definition in conventional language that will be useful to academics. What do we mean then, when we say play, game, sport, or athletics?

Based on my experiences with, my reading about, and my reflecting on physically active play, games, sport, and athletics, I propose the following model (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Physically Active Play & Games

Play | Playful Game | Sport | Athletics
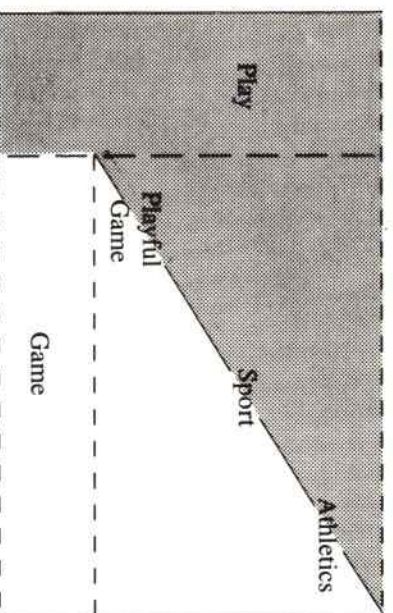
Game

Game

Play = A freely chosen consciousness intent on the enjoyable and non-traditional use of resources primarily committed to instrumental purposes. This is best realized when personal conflicts have been resolved.

Game = The voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles-hindrances (Suits, 1973, p. 55).

/ = Level of commitment to overcoming unnecessary obstacles.

Playful Game = A greater commitment to play than to successfully overcoming unnecessary obstacles.

Sport = A roughly balanced commitment to play and to successfully overcoming unnecessary obstacles.

Athletics = A greater commitment to successfully overcoming unnecessary obstacles than to play.

The model submitted is meant to represent physically active play and games, or bodily contests. The definitions for play and game are most influenced by Suits (1973; 1977) while the model is a significantly revised version of Salter's (1980). The dashed and open lines around the model indicate that these concepts are not boxed in to be understood exclusively in the context of the model; there are more games than physically active ones. There are no lines separating the continuum from playful games, sport, and athletics, because it is not always clear when exactly a playful game becomes sport, or sport becomes athletics. Therefore all these lines have not been drawn to permit reasonable ambiguity. There is a dashed line separating play from games because when play attempts to overcome unnecessary obstacles it becomes a game.

Play is perhaps the most important topic to deal with. Neale notes that the church historically equated play with immaturity and perhaps ungodliness. "They could not permit themselves to be irreverent. And like David's wife, their lives were made barren by the Lord. Despite a clear call, man has refused to delight in and enjoy his God" (Neale, 1969, p. 175). Later he added:

The Christians who work out their salvation with fear and trembling before their fellow men are secular workers . . . they work for their own sake. The reward is hell, the hell that is eternal work. It is no wonder many believers have noted that they would be bored and unhappy in heaven. They are too well adjusted to the future eternity which is their likely lot. Who could be more reverent before God than the working Satan, and who could be less reverent than the playing cherubim? (Neale, 1969, pp. 175-176).

But what does scripture say about play? When God promised Israel he would return to bless Jerusalem, a sign of that blessing was city streets "filled with boys and girls playing there" (Zechariah 8:5). Isaiah (11:8-9) recounts for us that in the new heaven and new earth children will be playing at the mouth of the hole of the asp and not be injured. Jesus himself states that "unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Furthermore, God opens scripture in a garden and closes it in a city filled with gardens. In the middle of the Bible there is a note about the Leviathan which God had made to "frolic" where the "ships go to and fro" (Psalm 104:26). Based on this, why do we play? Not to recapitulate our ancestors. Not in an autotelic sense, as if to absolutize an aspect of creation, but to honor and enjoy a playful God, for "from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever! Amen" (Romans 11:36).

Though I have tried to refrain from a reductionistic approach, the proposed definitions, particularly of play, most closely fall into the realm of psychology. This acceptance is largely because I see play as an attitude, or what Roochnik and Hyland refer to as a "stance" (Roochnik, 1975; Hyland, 1984).

Giddens argues that games "are not always play" (1964, p. 73). I would argue that they never are. Play and game are related as singing is to song. One can play a game, or sing a song, but one cannot game a play or song a sing, and song is never sing, in the same way as game is never play. In this connection the model also deals with Meier's suggestion that "although not all games are sports, all sports are games. . . . It has not been demonstrated that sports cannot also be games simultaneously" (Meier, 1981, pp. 91, 94). To illustrate these points a game of basketball can be participated in as an athletic contest (for example, professional or college ball), as a sport (for example, most recreational leagues), or as a playful game (for example, an informal pick-up game over lunch), but never as pure play.

The model also helps deal with conflicts over the importance of competition. If play is defined as autotelic and absolutized as an inherent good, then the further we move away from it, as we usually do in an athletic contest, then the less good would be the game, or as Banham referred to it, "a swaggering barbarism" (1965, p. 64). We should therefore do away with competitive games or at least de-emphasize the importance of overcoming the unnecessary obstacles of a game. But it seems wiser to accept what Bowen proposed that "perverted play is a possibility just as much so as beneficial play" (1923, p. viii). I would suggest the same is true at all levels of game playing. Therefore, the point is for competitors in a game to agree beforehand what level of game they are participating in. Too often people accuse each other of being too competitive or not serious enough when what they are really talking about is the kind of game they are playing. The purpose of a game is not simply to outdo someone else, but it is to overcome obstacles in a mutually acceptable manner. Though games at all levels have the potential for good, not all levels are helpful to the participants. The question one needs to answer is what emphasis on overcoming unnecessary obstacles is appropriate in different situations. Having decided on a level for a particular situation does not necessarily mean that all other levels in other situations are bad. It simply means that you feel that you made the most helpful choice in your specific situation. One way athletic associations often do this is by specifying the length of the season—though coaches and players find ways to circumvent this by entering a team with all the same players in a different league.

It might be helpful for a moment to deal with the competitive purpose in a game. In this connection, Metheny's suggestion, though Weiss refers to it as exaggeration (1969, p. 151), is, I think, helpful. She writes: "The word competition, as derived from cum and pedere—literally, to strive with rather than against. The word contest has similar implication being derived from con and testare—to testify with another rather than against him" (1965, p. 40). This is a view that was later shared by Kretchmar (1973, p. 74). As Suits later put it: "In games one approves of one's goal being contested by an opponent precisely because one wants that goal to be contested" (1982, p. 758).

The model can also be applied individually to participants, or to groups or subgroups of participants. A player or a group of players may enter into a trophy-winning end-of-the-season final game with an athletic disposition—this season would be complete with try-outs, practices, special diets, exhibition games. . . . At half time a team is comfortable in the lead and each move matters less to the final outcome of the game; participants then begin to move the game to the level of sport. If the score gets too close, participants will likely focus more on successfully overcoming the unnecessary obstacles. But while the team moved the game from athletics to sport, perhaps one athlete, who wished to impress a spectator, continued to participate at an athletic level, because the athlete felt the successful resolution of unnecessary obstacles was more impressive. A romantic relationship that ended prior to a game may also have a reverse effect, when the

athlete's "head is not in the game." In other words, the athlete is not committed to efficiently overcoming unnecessary obstacles because her or his mind is focused on other "more important" matters.

There are various influences that incline people more towards athletics than play, or vice versa, for example: the presence of spectators, level of rewards, institutionalization, and rationalization. But these influence the commitment to overcoming unnecessary obstacles; they are not defining characteristics of game, sport, or athletics.

One argument against the proposed model could come, not surprisingly, from McBride. He points out:

Fishing, fencing, skiing, wrestling, track and field, swimming, auto racing, scuba diving, rock climbing, and thoroughbred racing are sports—they are not games. Badminton, football, curling, baseball . . . are sports and they are, also, games. . . . The instances of the extension of 'sport' are varied in at least two fundamental ways, some are games and some are not games (1975, p. 5).

But the model I have presented deals with that accusation both operationally and in common language. Is fishing not a game? Surely there are more efficient means to catch fish than with a little hook? Does it not become sport when the element of display is emphasized by the participants? Does it not become athletics when participants increase the importance of the outcome, as in a high-stakes fishing derby? The fact that we might not customarily refer to some of these activities by what they are does not mean that is not what they are. Suits makes this point when he talks about

• watching the earth dip—which anyone can do by facing east at dawn on a clear day. But we find that this activity is never called, nor is it customarily thought of, as watching the earth dip. It is always called, and almost always thought of, as watching the sun rise. So very often we call things by the wrong names because of cultural lag (1981, p. 72).

To this he concludes that not all games, for example, need not be called games, 'just that, in the absence of some further distinguishing property, they be acknowledged, upon further reflection, to be games" (Suits, 1981, p. 72).

I have not mentioned play in opposition to or as part of work. The focus of this paper has been on physically active play and games. But if I may, I would be inclined to agree with Burke when he notes that "the most satisfying kind of work, shares in the freedom and plasticity of play" (1971, p. 33). But this paper is not about work, it is about play.

Where do we go from here? In the context of the proposed model one must ask if it succeeded. That depends on whether or not the terms play, game, sport,

and athletics, and their relationships to each other, are made more clear to non-academics and academics. This evaluation I leave for others to determine. It is my hope that this model will provide a common language when we talk about play, game, sports, and athletics, so that the important discussion concerned with pleasing the Lord in each of these categories can be more fully realized.

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