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Good Games as Athletic Beauty: Why Association Football Is Rightly Called ‘The Beautiful Game’¹

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Introduction

Association football, or soccer, has long been regarded as holding a special place in the sports world for its global reach and accessibility. One of the reasons given for its success is its simplicity; all that is required is a spherical object that can be kicked towards a target. It is parodied as a ‘gentleman’s game played by thugs’ which reflects its history as a working-class sport, but it also tellingly notes football’s inherent capacity for beauty. The fact that it is perceived as a ‘gentleman’s game’ suggests an element of refinement and class. As such, it is colloquially called ‘the beautiful game’². The question then is whether it deserves such a moniker, and if so, why. There are two supplementary questions that will help to answer this. First, what criteria should be applied to judge the aesthetic value of sport? Second, what is the relationship between these criteria and the sport of football? I will begin by considering the former.

One of the first debates articulated in the academic literature in the philosophy of sport was not about doping or cheating, or the nature of competition or sport itself, but rather whether sport had anything important to say about aesthetics. The American philosopher Paul Ziff (1974) argued philosophers ought not to waste time considering the aesthetics of sport and was notably forthright in his view:

Research devoted to the aesthetics of sport can accomplish nothing. There is nothing there to be accomplished. Worse, it would not only contribute to the vaunted dreariness of aesthetics, it could serve to delay even impede other possibly significant research (Ziff, 1974, p.93).

Strong stuff indeed. Ziff may have been deliberately provocative but regardless, he was wrong. Aesthetics is at the heart of sport, and is ultimately what gives it its value. The aesthetics of sport, whether via the phenomenological raw-sense it provides us with, or through a more concrete articulation of beauty, is a fundamental reason that sport exists in the lives of many.

Aesthetic and Purposive Sports

Often, when the aesthetics of sport is considered, the sports that are cited as exemplars are those in which beauty is a central element in determining outcome: sports such as figure skating, gymnastics and synchronized swimming. As such, sport is often divided into two clear

types: sports whereby beauty matters in the outcome, and sports whereby beauty is irrelevant in determining it. The former are known as aesthetic sports, the latter as purposive sports. This distinction was first articulated by David Best (1978) who is largely known for his thesis that sport is not, and cannot be art. Purposive sports are those sports which contain a clear pre-lusory goal which is independent of the means to reach that goal.³ A pre-lusory goal is effectively the aim of the game; such as putting a ball into a net (e.g. football, hockey, netball), crossing a designated line (e.g. running, sailing, cycling, rowing), or getting a ball or other object into a court (e.g. tennis, badminton, volleyball). The means for attaining the pre-lusory goal specifies how the goal may be achieved, i.e. through the use of the feet, a bicycle, or racquet. Purposive sports, such as football, cricket and tennis, are often cited as exemplars of sport but they also include track and field and most combat sports. They are the sports where there is a clear measurement for winning. Aesthetic sports, in contrast, are those which focus upon and judge the movement of the body, and where the pre-lusory goal is less clear and is wholly dependent on the means. There is no independent pre-lusory goal of aesthetic sports such as gymnastics, figure skating, high-board diving and skateboarding. The lusory purpose is only intelligible via the means itself.

This difference can be explained more clearly by considering specific examples. In football, a goal is worth the same amount of points whether it was the result of several pin-point accurate passes and a spectacular half-volley from the edge of the box into the top right-hand corner of the net, or whether it came from a goal mouth scramble and a ricochet off a defending player. What matters in these purposive sports is that the pre-lusory goal is achieved via the accepted means and within the rules; i.e. if the ball has crossed the goal-line without a preceding foul. In contrast, the pre-lusory goal for aesthetic sports is more difficult to establish. In the pommel horse for instance, marks are awarded for swings, holds and dismounts. But, contrary to a goal being scored in football, it is the way in which the competitor achieves these elements that determines how many points are awarded: it matters *how* a competitor gets into a handstand position and how well they hold it, not merely that they managed to orientate themselves in an upside-down position with their weight supported on their hands.

Whilst the distinction between purposive and aesthetic sports might draw our attention to the immediate salient differences between two different types of sporting competition, it must not be over-played. Indeed, when considered more closely the sharpness of the divide starts to disappear. At first glance, it may appear that aesthetic sports are judged subjectively. For we might argue that aesthetics refers to judgements about perceptual stimuli and emotional effect. The subjective view of aesthetics asserts that appreciation of beauty cannot be held to any objective standard. It is merely individual preference in the same way that some people prefer chocolate to cheese. Yet, it is not the case that aesthetic sports are adjudicated by the subjective preferences of the judges. The rules of sport will always dictate objective elements that the competitor needs to adhere to. So for aesthetic sports, such as gymnastics, figure-skating, snowboarding, skateboarding, surfing and high-board diving, it is the adherence to the rules of the sport that matters, not how beautifully or gracefully the performers carry out those rules. Marks are not awarded on pure subjective preference but rather for carrying out a series of movements in accordance with specified criteria. One could imagine for example, a gymnast

using a vault as a prop in a beautiful dance, but this would not score any points since it does not fulfil the rules of vaulting. The rules of gymnastic vaulting specify the points to be deducted for particular actions in take-off and landing as well as the points to be awarded for particular successful actions during performance. It also includes point deduction for auxiliary elements such as starting before a flag is raised and using a spotter.⁴ In so-called aesthetic sports, points are not awarded purely for subjective preference or emotional affect, which explains why some performances might leave the crowd in raptures but does not translate to overall competition victory. Ultimately, the rules of the sport are the final arbiter in what constitutes a good or bad performance, even though the development of these rules may originate from an aesthetic judgement.

Athletic Skill as Beauty

In this respect, we might say that there are objective standards of beauty, and one of these is that beauty equates with skill. The athletes that we often admire the most are the ones that make everything look easy. Such effortless smoothness often disguises a great degree of skill, as novices find out when they attempt to replicate such actions. That there is often an equation between beauty, elegance and simplicity is something that scientists and mathematicians have noted in their considerations of scientific and mathematical theory. The best solutions to problems are those that strip away all unnecessary excess and the pureness that results shows itself in its beauty. Thomas Kuhn (1969), for one, noted how aesthetic considerations are a motivational factor in dismissing or accepting theories and producing paradigm shifts in the way we understand a phenomenon:

In the sciences [the aesthetic] is... a tool: a criterion of choice between theories that are in other respects comparable, or a guide to the imagination seeking a key to the solution of an intractable puzzle (Kuhn, 1969, p.342).

This is often the case within sport too; biomechanical efficiency is more likely to lead to successful outcome and this is revealed through an aesthetic appreciation. Whether the reason is one of human nature or human culture, biomechanically efficient actions often match our subjective tastes: efficient, smooth actions are more aesthetically pleasing than jarring, inefficient actions. In order to highlight this further, it is worth considering methods of scoring in 'aesthetic sports'.

In so-called aesthetic sports, points are awarded according to the success of an athlete carrying out proscribed movements (for example, a round-off in gymnastics or a hardflip in skateboarding) yet such movements are valued because of the correlation between skill and beauty. Falling on the floor, no matter how intentional, is not valued because it does not equate with skill. There are obviously difficult judgements to be made between badly executed (ugly) and difficult actions, and perfectly executed (beautiful) but easier actions. This is a judgement that both performers and adjudicators have to make, but generally more points are awarded to the latter—that is, to perfectly executed but slightly less complex actions—than the former. In

high-board diving for example, a competitor will state the difficulty of dive that they will attempt, with each dive being worth a pre-set number of points (the greater the difficulty of dive, the more points it is worth). Points are deducted for any detraction from the perfect dive. As such, a diver will generally attempt the most difficult dive that they have perfected in order to gain themselves the most points. In diving, it is better to perform a simple dive perfectly, than a complex dive poorly.

It must be noted however, that there are exceptions to the rule that skill always equates with beauty. Most of these exceptions exist in the so-called purposive sports, since as highlighted earlier, there is a separation between the pre-lusory goal and the means by which it is achieved. The New York Times said of the great distance runner, Emil Zatopek:

Bobbing, weaving, staggering, gyrating, clutching his torso, slinging supplicating glances toward the heavens, he ran like a man with a noose around his neck. He seemed on the verge of strangulation (Litsky, 2000).

Zatopek, whilst certainly a skillful runner as demonstrated by his success, was not an aesthetically beautiful runner by any stretch of the imagination. There are also many footballers who are not renowned for their skill but rather for their brute strength and aggression. The so-called 'hard men' of football are celebrated, not because they demonstrate any great beauty or even skill, but because their success comes from their capacity to intimidate and cause injury to others, thus increasing the likelihood of victory for their team (Davis & Ryall, 2017). However, whilst the correlation between skill and beauty may appear to be more contingent in the purposive sports, there are occasional athletes in aesthetic sports too, that are renowned for their 'sketchy' style and yet are still considered incredibly skillful. The skateboarder Rodney Mullen belonged to this category. Mullen was lauded for his creativity in developing novel tricks and moves that others went on to aesthetically perfect.

Nevertheless, perhaps it is these exceptions that give the rule its credibility since the athletes that are most celebrated are the ones that make extreme skill appear effortless. The fleeting footwork of Messi, Maradona, Suarez or Cruyff as they weave their way through defenders exemplifies the highest form of skill in football. Keeping a ball in total control with one's feet whilst others attempt to wrest it away demonstrates a capacity that few possess. The use of a spherical object that can ricochet away at the slightest of touches and feet that are designed to allow us to balance and walk and are not renowned for flexibility or dexterity, highlights the elegant simplicity of the sport itself. To balance, turn, sprint and navigate moving obstacles whilst controlling a ball at the same time is a feat that few can manage. When it is done well, the grace, rhythm and fluidity appears as a choreographed dance.

It seems then that there is a correlation between skill and beauty. And whilst this might manifest itself most clearly in aesthetic sports due to the way in which outcome is determined by the means it occurs, even in purposive sports such as football a skillful goal is appreciated more than a goal that results from a player's mistake or error. Athletic skill then is the first aesthetic category that should form the basis of an aesthetics of sport.

Sport as a Meaningful Experience

Ziff's sentiments on the philosophical value of sporting aesthetics was a response to Paul Kuntz' (1974) paper 'Aesthetics Applies to Sports as Well as to the Arts'. In it, Kuntz argued that sports have an important aesthetic value that can be appreciated by both the performer and the spectator. This is found in the beauty, joy and kinaesthetic empathy that we find in sport. It is the aesthetic element attached to sport that gives it value. Kuntz cites Roger Bannister's account of running to demonstrate how sport mirrors that of other arts, such as music, in providing a deep emotional quality that makes us want to engage with it. Bannister himself pointed to the aesthetic element of sport as the key reason for why he wanted to do it, and his diary reflects this account:

I was running now, and a fresh rhythm entered my body. No longer conscious of my movement I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamed existed. From intense moments like this, love of running can grow (Bannister, 1956, p.11-12).

This account of sport's aesthetic value for participants demonstrates that although competition is an important element in defining what sport is, it does not fully account for why people do it. A deep phenomenological aesthetic account of the value of sport is exemplified in many sporting biographies like Bannister's. It runs throughout sporting literature and is recorded in sporting memories. Kuntz wished to show that the aesthetic qualities that we ascribe to the arts, such as music, theatre and fine art, can be equally applied to sport. Sport provides similar meaning, affects our emotions and creates dramatic spectacle, albeit via different means.

Whilst sport more generally may provide an emotional force for many, football is doubtless *the* global game and arguably there is something that the sport of football captures that other sports do not. The meaningfulness associated with football has been considered by scholars such as Wisnik (2008), Illundáin (2006) and Campos (2010). Illundáin argues that football has an intrinsic and cultural value that transcends other external goods of sport, such as money and prestige. Football holds a narrative that mirrors life itself but in such a way that enables a creative expression that is meaningful to both individuals and entire communities. It allows us to move from the ordinary into the extraordinary and enables "us to find rich meanings at a transcendental level that may be instrumental for confronting life and its problems" (Illundáin, 2006, p.83). More generally, sport provides a narrative in our lives that both complements and transcends other aspects of our daily activities and is paradoxical in that it is both trivial and of ultimate import. Playing or watching sport makes little sense when isolated from its internal goods—there is no good reason to expend energy in trying to get a ball into the back of a net. And yet, for those that are engaged in this endeavor, it holds immense value. It is part of a good life.

This in itself perhaps points to one of the obvious aesthetic categories that can be applied to sport: the emotional effect and the dramatic spectacle that it provides us with. All sports can induce a powerful aesthetic effect in certain situations. Indeed, it is the competitive nature of

sports that gives rise to this. What this means for football in particular as opposed to other sports is a point I will return to later in regard to the concept of drama as a consequence of time-limitedness. Nevertheless, the second aesthetic category that can be formed is that of meaningful experience.

E-Games and T-Games

Up to now, I have given a general overview of some of the debates that have been considered in the philosophy of sport literature in order to consider some over-arching aesthetic categories. However, whilst I have attempted to highlight how these categories might apply to football, advocates of other sports could quite easily do the same. As such, there does not seem to be anything particular to football to be deserving of the moniker 'the beautiful game'. To give credence to football above other sports, I will turn to a discussion that is founded on Kretchmar's (2005) paper entitled 'Game Flaws'. In it, Kretchmar argues that sports such as football are structurally, morally and aesthetically inferior to games such as golf. The argument rests upon a distinction between what he calls t-games, and what he calls e-games.

The t in t-games signifies time. The e in e-games signifies event. Kretchmar divides sports up in this way to distinguish between those that have a time-limit in which to be played, e.g. football being a game of 90 minutes; and those that end when a set amount of actions has taken place, e.g. after 18 holes have been played. According to Kretchmar, any game or sport which is limited by a set time, such as football, rugby, hockey, handball, or basketball, is inferior to games that end only after completing a particular number of actions, such as golf, tennis, shooting, high board diving, or vaulting.

The flaw that Kretchmar argues is inherent in t-games is related to the notion of skill, which as discussed, is an integral element in the aesthetics of sport. Kretchmar's criticism is based on his claim that t-games are not able to show athletic skill as much as e-games. He argues that event-regulated games are structurally designed to promote a positive and consistent test of the skills that define that game (he calls these 'skillful interchanges' or SIs). In contrast, time-regulated games can reward gamesmanship, which is antithetical to testing the skills inherent to that game. Kretchmar provides the example of golf to illustrate his point: golf is an event-regulated game whereby the result is determined by the number of shots taken to complete 18 holes. It is not constrained by time and therefore it does not matter if you rush around the course as quickly as possible or spend a degree of time assessing the lie of each ball before taking a shot. If golf was time-regulated, it would mean that the result is determined by which player had the lowest score after a set time, say four hours. This could mean that a player who was winning at the 3 hour 15 minute mark could spend the next 45 minutes pretending to line up their next shot whilst never actually taking it.⁵ As such, rather than being a consistent test of game-related skill, i.e. the ability to hit a ball accurately, the last 45 minutes are taken up by time-wasting. Kretchmar concludes that since t-games allow for time-wasting rather than a demonstration of skill, they are inherently flawed.

In support of Kretchmar's view, it does seem to be the case that criticism is often directed towards t-games for the time-wasting behavior they appear to reward, for instance, retreating to a negative defensive strategy in order to hold on to a lead or avoid defeat. In regard to football, for instance, time is often wasted by making unnecessary substitutions, kicking the ball back to the goal-keeper, keeping the ball in the corner and feigning injury. Whilst the clock ticks down, the skills being tested are arguably not those inherent to the game that is being played. Although such behavior is generally frowned upon, spectators and officials are often resigned to the fact that such behavior is not explicitly against the rules. In this Kretchmar is right, time-wasting does not demonstrate the type of skill that we wish to see in sport and therefore has negligible aesthetic merit.

This leads to Kretchmar's moral criticism of games such as football: because they are limited by time, they provide an incentive to play the game badly. Time-wasting is a way of spoiling not enhancing sport. Yet, the ability to waste time is often contingent to victory. It therefore rewards an instrumental approach to game-playing since stalling and other non-game related behavior become the most rational action for players to take in order to win. In contrast, in event-regulated games, such actions would never be rational whatever attitude it is played with (whether intrinsic / amateur or instrumental / professional). Kretchmar appears to be right here: there is something morally distasteful about a game which rewards attempts to avoid playing it. Yet, as Paul Davis (2006) notes in his critique, it is doubtful as to whether time-wasting occurs as much in reality as Kretchmar suggests. One of the reasons it may not occur as often as Kretchmar's theory supposes is perhaps due to the phenomenological and lusory desire to 'play the game' and the meaningful experience it gives participants.

Nevertheless, Kretchmar argues that such instrumental attitudes based upon the structural defects of t-games result in behavior that is not aesthetically conducive to a good game. According to Kretchmar, teams and individuals are motivated to take any action that runs down the clock and these actions are antithetical to the qualities that we are attracted to when we play and watch sport. Simply put, Kretchmar asserts that the structural flaws in t-games mean they will also be aesthetically deficient.

The problem with limiting a game by time is that it leads to two equally unsatisfactory outcomes. Either we are left wondering who might have won if the game lasted as long as is necessary for the integral skills to be fully tested (as in the case of score or no-score draws), or we are left with a dull and tedious game that has been decided before the time has expired (since teams will often try to protect leads by time-wasting). As Kretchmar notes:

In time-regulated games, (...) [w]e might experience a full complement of testing opportunities during a set period of time. Or we might not. And when we do not, we might feel cheated. After all, we built the game to be played for, say, 40 minutes—not to be played for 25 or 30, with the remainder spent in relatively nonskillful inactivity. In short, it would be odd to construct an artificial test for the purpose of determining who is better at solving a gratuitous problem, only to have a game structure that (on occasion) favors the individual who refuses to address that very problem (Kretchmar, 2005, p.41).

Kretchmar asserts that in the majority of t-games, the outcome has been decided before full time has elapsed. He contrasts this with event-regulated games, such as golf, tennis and snooker, whereby it is always logically possible for the opposition to claw their way back into the game; as illustrated by examples such as Ben Ainslie's inspired victory in the 2013 America Cup which saw Team Oracle turn around an 8-1 deficit to win 9-8, Europe's Ryder Cup victory in 2012, or England's Ashes test win at Headingley in 1981. In contrast to t-games, in e-games, such as tennis or golf, it is not over until it is over.

The limitation with Kretchmar's claim, however, is that although this may be the case in the high-scoring t-games he cites (e.g. rugby or basketball), where it is unlikely that a team will come back from a double figure deficit in the latter stages, it is far from the norm in lower scoring t-games such as football whereby the victor rarely attains more than a two-goal advantage. Such a small deficit as is the case in many games of football can, and does, frequently get overturned in the dying minutes of a game.

Sport as Dramatic Spectacle

It is at this point where Kretchmar's argument fundamentally fails. Despite the fact that the victory and the end of the game are logically dependent on one another in e-games, it is t-games that allow for a more dramatic spectacle which provides greater aesthetic value. Contrary to Kretchmar's argument that limited time reduces the value of these sports, it is the very restriction of time that enhances its value. It is this aesthetic element of dramatic spectacle that provides a greater value to t-games and is what makes them worthwhile and popular. The discernor of the good game wishes to see the 'sweet-tension of uncertainty of outcome.'⁶ But contrary to Kretchmar's assertion, it is a time constraint that can heighten this possibility. Kretchmar's argument that e-games are superior to t-games is based on his assertion that e-games provide a fuller test of integral skills and it is this that primarily determines the good game. However, this assumption is incorrect. Arguably part of the value of a good game lies in the aesthetic element of the 'sweet tension of uncertainty' that each individual game provides. Although a few examples of great sporting come-backs in e-games were illustrated previously, a more empirical analysis (in contrast to Kretchmar's anecdotal evidence) might well demonstrate that this is more, rather than less, common in t-games than e-games. Kretchmar's purism and his focus on the ratio of skillful interchanges to non-skillful interchanges neglects the aesthetic value for which the rationing of time provides. Although he notes the global popularity of football, he dismisses it as an exception and insists that the most popular games for both playing and spectating are event-regulated ones. Such a claim, however, seems doubtful.

Stephen Mumford (2013) draws upon Heidegger to illustrate this point further. Heidegger notes that we are time limited creatures and therefore time is of utmost importance to us in our lives. Sport, Mumford argues, mirrors the structure of our lives. We know that we must 'beat the clock' to get the things we want, and that 'time waits for no man':

[A] time-limitation also enhances the dynamic of the sport: teams that trail have to play with more urgency and be more adventurous and risk taking. This creates the danger of conceding a goal from a rapid breakaway, which is one of the most exciting things to see in football. There is also a tactical battle to impose your desired pace on the game as the winning team seek to slow it down and the trailing team seek to speed it up. Such a contest can make for high drama as each goal in a game can change the dynamic, teams going from being content with their game situation, and seeking to hold it, to a position where they require a change in the game situation. Contrary to Kretchmar's (2007: 329-31) claim, therefore, it does not seem that all stalling in a sport should be corrected. Some of it may contribute to the spectacle and chime with our time-limited view on the world (Mumford, 2013, p.24).

Kreft (2014; 2012) too argues that drama is at the heart of the aesthetics of sport. Good sport provides a theatre in which human action, constrained by time and space, is worth watching. It is compelling and absorbing. Football in particular allows for this absorption since the drama and tension rises throughout the match. Whilst the game might ebb and flow in its rhythm and advantage, the ticking of the clock and the relative paucity of goals means that the theatre in which it is played makes the prospect of a compelling narrative all the more likely. Pity the spectator that walks out of the stadium five minutes before the final whistle to discover the game has been turned on its head.

Purism or Partisanship?

This aspect of drama highlights another debate in the aesthetics of sport: whether it is better to be a purist or partisan. Sports fans are often separated into two types of spectator: those that value particular aspects of sport generally (such as aesthetic beauty or excellence of skill) regardless of who is performing those actions, and those that value particular teams or individuals regardless of their performance. Nicholas Dixon (2007) describes them as follows:

The 'partisan' is a loyal supporter of a team to which she may have a personal connection or which she may have sworn to support by dint of mere familiarity. The 'purist', in contrast, supports the team that he thinks exemplifies the highest virtues of the game [and virtues here, I think can reasonably encompass, moral, physical and aesthetic virtues], but his allegiance is flexible (Dixon, 2007, p.441).

On this account, Kretchmar appears to be a purist, since he values the aesthetic elements of sport in the number of skillful interchanges that take place, rather than who wins the contest. However, Stephen Mumford argues that Dixon's description of a purist is misleading, and I would agree with him. Dixon's purist seems to make a conscious decision to support a team or an individual based on the style of performance that they give and their allegiance will change according to whether the team or individual continues to uphold these standards. As such, Dixon appears to be describing a fickle partisan with purist tendencies. In contrast, a true purist

has no affiliation to a team or individual at all: they will value the action in its entirety regardless of who is carrying it out. As Mumford (2013, p.16) notes, “A true supporter of the virtues of the sport could have no team allegiance because in any game or passage of play, which team plays virtuously could alternate rapidly.”

On first inspection, it appears that the purist is the true sports fan since they value the intrinsic goods of sport, namely aesthetic beauty, including pure athletic excellence. Purists have no pre-determined allegiance and merely wish for a good game that demonstrates the highest levels of physical skill and beauty. In contrast, the partisan is merely interested in the result, however it is achieved. Yet this is unacceptable for Dixon on moral grounds, since it reflects an instrumental approach towards the value of sport which leads to all sorts of corrupt practices such as cheating and violence. On this basis, the purist who watches sport for its aesthetic elements is morally superior to the partisan.

Yet ultimately the purist does not and cannot exist. Sport only makes sense in the context of competition, i.e. the desire to beat your opponents in attaining a pre-set goal whilst adhering to specified rules, and therefore the purist is not watching sport at all—they just watch the movement of bodies with no interest in the purpose or goal of that movement. Without recognizing the competitive purpose behind sport to rank, order and measure the participants in their physical skill, the concept of sport itself dissolves. Whilst there are dangers of falling into an instrumental (and corrupted) attitude, it is the partisan who can take advantage of the aesthetic categories of meaningful experience and dramatic spectacle. The time constraints of t-games, such as football, mean that as the clock ticks down, the partisan feels the sporting experience all the more intensely. Despite being ‘just a game’ it matters significantly whether *your* team can hold on to a narrow lead despite the pressure they are under defending attack after attack, or whether *their* team can squeeze back a goal in the dying seconds to take the game to penalties. Whilst the purist might appreciate the sporting skill in isolation, it is the partisan that feels its full effects. The upshot then is that those that enjoy sport are both purists and partisans, and it is a combination of both that provides us with a worthwhile aesthetic experience.

Football as the Beautiful Game

If we are able to reject part of Kretchmar’s argument on the aesthetic value that a restriction of time provides, there may also be a case to reject the premise on which Kretchmar bases his argument: that t-games provide a lesser test of valuable skills that are inherent to the game.

Kretchmar is correct in arguing that one of the key values in sport is the demonstration of athletic skill, and this is one of the aesthetic categories that has been previously identified. He is, however, wrong in his analysis of how skill relates to different types of sport. If we define skill as: “(...) acquired, intentional, and purposeful capacities to negotiate solutions to problematic situations” (Torres, 2000, p.84), then the problem in football is how to get the ball into the goal using only one’s feet (or at least not using the arms, hands or other prohibited means), whilst remaining in a defined area (the pitch), with only 10 other supporting players,

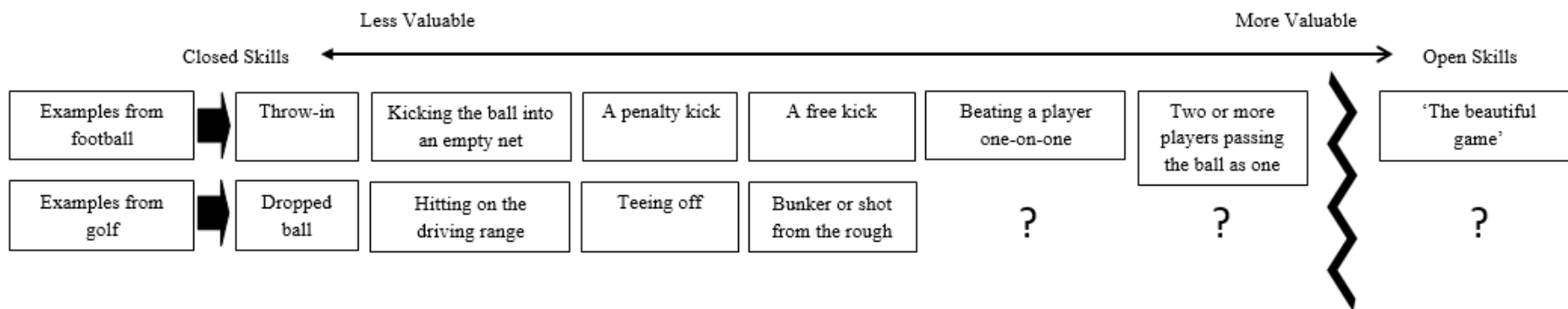
whilst at the same time preventing the opposition from doing likewise. Conversely, the problem in golf is to get the ball into the hole whilst using a specified club and negotiating hazards between the starting tee and the finishing hole. These skills are both physical and cognitive: the ability to know what to do and to be able to do it. The ability to solve these sporting problems is ultimately what Kretchmar means by 'skillful interchanges' and why Kretchmar argues that a game that maximizes the number of skillful interchanges is superior to one that does not. The issue, however, is that Kretchmar under-defines a skillful interchange and this leads to his flawed conclusion that football is inferior to golf.

This can be demonstrated by considering the distinction between closed skills and open skills. Closed skills are those whereby variables can be controlled and the test of skill remains the same. Open skills are more complex (usually a non-predetermined sequence of closed skills) and require adaptation to changing variables. An example of a closed skill is a golf shot from the tee or kicking a ball into an undefended net from the penalty spot. An example of an open skill is dribbling a basketball around an active defender to shoot into the net or passing to a moving player whilst avoiding a tackle in football. Torres (2000) asserts that open skills are much more valued than closed skills because closed skills tend to be restorative whereas open skills tend to be constitutive. This means that when the game breaks down, say in the case of the ball going out of the field of play, a simple and effective measure to restart the game is required. The simplest and most effective measure is via a closed skill; in the case of football, to throw the ball back on to the pitch. Torres argues that the further away the action is to the central skills required by the game, the simpler and more efficient it is likely to be. A throw-in in football is a perfect example of this. Football is a game that is primarily played with the feet; the skills inherent to the game are those which require the foot to control and manipulate the ball. The use of hands, in contrast, is prohibited with the exception of the goal-keeper who is allowed to use other aspects of her body in a designated area of the pitch in order to reduce the advantage given to the attacking player when shooting at goal. Since the game of football is predicated on the use of the feet, it might be reasonable to ask why, when the ball goes out of play along the sidelines, is the game then restarted with a throw-in rather than a kick-in? The answer, according to Torres, is that a throw-in is one of the most efficient ways of restarting the game and allowing play to continue. Whilst it may be accepted that closed skills may be developed and advanced in technique as is the case for the development of open skills (so techniques of the throw-in have developed in order to maximize range and accuracy in providing an advantage for the team in possession rather than merely an efficient way of restarting the game) the problems that closed and open skills attempt to solve, differ. Moreover, the problems that are solved with open skills are much more interesting and arguably valuable, than those that require closed skills. It is this aspect that points to the flaw in Kretchmar's argument and where he fails with his conception of skillful interchange. As such, the value of a game can be assessed in the opportunities it allows for the use of open skills rather than skills *per se*. Moreover, the fact that football is a team sport whereby a number of individuals demonstrate skill both concurrently and sequentially means that there is a greater fluidity and depth to the movement involved. Rather than the skill being linear as in the game of golf, the dynamic movement of the team acting together in the passing of a ball provides for a far greater account of skillful interchange than Kretchmar's one-dimensional analysis. The complexity of

a team moving together as one body to achieve a goal demonstrates a far greater level of skillful interchange, and thus aesthetic beauty, than one person conducting the closed skill of swinging a club to hit a ball—no matter how accurate the shot.

Football ultimately is an inherently good game because it maximizes the opportunity for a greater number of open skills to be demonstrated. The value of golf however is diminished because, in contrast, it is a game which predominantly requires closed skills. This can be illustrated in the types of skill that each game requires as set out in *Figure 1*. When presented in this way, it is clear that the game of football allows for a greater number of the more valuable skillful interchanges to be tested than games such as golf, as the opportunities for unpredictable or novel situations requiring the use of more valuable open skills arise to a much greater extent.

Figure 1. The relationship between open and closed skill and their corresponding value as a skilful interchange.



Genius as an Aesthetic Value

The reason that open skills are more valuable than closed skills is that it allows for a greater range of aesthetic qualities to be demonstrated, including that of genius. Whilst skill often correlates with that which we find beautiful, if the skill also contains pure originality, it is this which makes the performance notable. This consideration of novel skill has led Teresa Lacerda and Stephen Mumford (2010) to argue that genius should be considered a valid aesthetic category in sport. It comprises five characteristics: creativity; innovation; originality; freedom; and inspiration for others to follow. They argue:

Seeing something allows us to experience its aesthetic features but seeing it for the first time gives us something that is not in the subsequent encounters. The genius at work provides us with such experiences when few others would be able to do so. This appreciation of the new—of novel successful strategies—is what rationally grounds our fascination with genius (Lacerda and Mumford, 2010, p.192).

Ultimately, they argue “the genius is one who is able to break out from the existing chains of convention” (Lacerda and Mumford, 2010, p.192). For example, Maradona demonstrated a vision and awareness in football that was unsurpassed. He was able to negotiate his way, seemingly effortlessly, past opposition players whilst continuing to keep control of the ball as in his infamous second goal against England in the 1986 World Cup when he received the ball in his own half and with his back to the opponent’s goal just to shake off two England players, run down the right wing evading two more players and finally fooling England goalkeeper Peter Shilton before nimbly putting the ball in the back of the net. In gymnastics, Schuschunova developed new linking movements between set gymnastic moves which brought a grace and fluidity to a routine that had not been seen before, whilst in ski-jump and high-jump, Boklöv and Fosbury developed new techniques in sport that enabled previous limits of human ability to be surpassed: Boklöv with the v-shape and Fosbury with his novel backward jumping technique. Whilst Lacerda and Mumford cite a variety of sporting geniuses in a range of different types of sport, there are arguably far more opportunities for the demonstration of genius in open and fluid sports such as football than in closed and static sports such as high-jumping. The scope for genius may well be dependent on whether the sports fundamentally are a test for open or closed skills. As noted in Figure 1., the nature of football as a fluid, multi-directional team game has far more scope for aesthetic beauty than static, linear individual sports such as golf: the possibility for original skill, meaningful experience and dramatic spectacle is so much greater.

Conclusion

To return to our initial questions, the aesthetic categories of sport can be summarized as follows. Sport provides us with a meaningful experience which can be a raw phenomenological experience, or is dependent on the narrative it provides as a dramatic spectacle. Having a partisan preference for who succeeds adds to this drama since good sport is ultimately the sweet

tension of uncertainty of outcome whereby the victor is unknown no matter how unequal the competition may at first seem. Furthermore, in contrast to Kretchmar's assertion, this dramatic spectacle is often enhanced, not diminished, by the constraint of time because as self-conscious creatures, the passing of time plays a fundamental part in understanding deeper philosophical questions about the meaning of life. Finally, it is athletic skill which underpins an aesthetics of sport, and within this, the scope for originality and creativity that is exemplified by sporting genius.

The particular sport of football allows for all of these qualities to flourish. With regards to the demonstration of athletic skill, its rules provide for a variety of skill to be demonstrated—speed, deftness, deception, power, agility, guile. Moreover, these skills are open skills that allow for a far greater creativity and originality compared to the relatively closed skills required by golf, snooker or other e-games. Lastly, football seems to be the sport that has its drama enhanced to the greatest extent by a restriction of time. Last minute goals that change the outcome are far more likely than in many other sports. The nature of football, and its relative paucity in goals, means that the aesthetic partisan is sitting on the edge of her seat waiting for a moment of release. It is these things together that demonstrate why football is rightly called 'the beautiful game'.

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¹ Some of the content for this chapter has been taken and adapted from previously published work in Ryall (2015).

² The origin of the phrase 'the beautiful game' is contested but since the latter half of the twentieth century it has become common vernacular for soccer.

³ The term pre-lusory goal was coined by Bernard Suits (1973) to distinguish the particular goal of a specific game from more general motivational goals, such as: to win, have fun or make friends.

⁴ The *Fédération Internationale De Gymnastique* (2017) for instance, provides very detailed guidance as to how to award and when to deduct points.

⁵ Kretchmar uses the example of (pretending) to look for a lost ball in the rough for 45 minutes but the laws of golf have since been changed so that a player is only able to spend 5 minutes looking for a ball.

⁶ This phrase has been attributed to Warren Fraleigh and developed further by Sigmund Loland (2002).