

## On Meaningfulness in Sport Competition

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There is a contention that sport can never be truly fair given that there are always inequalities between competitors: differences in height or metabolism, age, training, skill, etc. including differences that result from social inequalities, such as opportunities to develop abilities as a consequence of class, wealth, location, and so on. If we follow such considerations to their endpoint it is clear that absolute fairness is impossible simply because no two competitors are identical and therefore cannot be precisely matched. Of course, if held in good faith, this is a defeatist view: the problem is too difficult, we can't ever solve it, let's give up on fairness. It is a view expressed in the UCI's revised regulations for the inclusion of transwomen in the female category in cycling, specifically,

“The intention for separating athletes into male and female categories is to provide women athletes with meaningful competition. It would be reasonable therefore to allow transgender to compete with other female athletes if their inclusion guarantees fair and meaningful competitions. It may not be necessary, or even possible, to eliminate all individual advantages held by a transgender. It is paramount, however, that all athletes competing have a chance to succeed, albeit not necessarily an equal chance and in line with the true essence of sport.”<sup>1</sup>

Apart from some versions of this claim put forward in evident bad faith, there are several things wrong with this view of “meaningful competition”, not least of which is its explicit abandonment of some central principles of sport.

### Measurement and Categories

There are several reasons why this view is fundamentally misconceived and they will be examined in some detail in turn. These are:

- (1) Fairness does not require equality across all measurable characteristics.
- (2) Not all differences are necessarily relevant to a given competitive situation.
- (3) Such a set of considerations would lead us to one of two outcomes:
  - (a) the elimination of all competition, because any would be unfair, or
  - (b) the elimination of any limitations on competition, on the grounds that since it is all unfair anyway, there is no reason to limit its conditions.

(1) The notion that if competitors cannot be perfectly matched then fairness is unachievable rests on a false dichotomy: equivalence or nothing. Even so, if competitors are identical in abilities, it isn't a priori obvious that nothing could be gained from the competition. It is a

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<sup>1</sup>Union Cycliste Internationale (UCI). “Eligibility regulations for transgender athletes: Update to 2020 regulations”. July 2022

spectator's fallacy that such a match would be boring and therefore worthless (it might actually be the only truly fulfilling match for the competitors), and it would suppose (as some do) that draws are inherently bad sport outcomes, for which there are ample spectator perspective based counterexamples.<sup>2</sup> But following the more reasonable assumption that competitors will not be identical in abilities, we are not committed to jettisoning competition categories just because there will be differences. The available alternatives are not restricted to absolute equivalence *or* unregulated *mélée*; we might also consider a degree of tolerable versus intolerable "unfairness", though I think this is likely to turn out to be fully within a reasonable interpretation of fairness. Thus, we can look for ways to organise competition so that people with similar but not identical abilities could test themselves against each other. What we would want to avoid would be categories where one competitor, or group of competitors, had a significantly diminished opportunity to succeed, or to demonstrate the skills specific to the sport that they had developed. "Significantly diminished" is a vague description and so we will need some specificity for what constitutes too much loss of opportunity.

To deal with this properly we need to take into account some central and defining features of sport as such, especially, why sport (generally) involves competition regardless of whether we are talking about "competitive" or "recreational" sport. Any given sport is defined by a set of intrinsic activities, which activities can be enjoyed by participants for their own sake, but which, because it is a physical activity extending through time and space and involving the movement of at least one circumscribed physical body, is also an event whose episodes are subject to comparison as isolated instantiations of the activity. Even if one, e.g., runs alone, one's runs can be compared, whether as faster/slower, easier/harder, smoother, more enjoyable, longer/shorter, etc. When we participate in sport with others, we not only compare our own times, distances, etc., but we compare these results against those of others. The measure we use to interpret our achievement and our progress (or regress) is both absolute and relative: so many minutes or metres *and* in comparison with other participants. Individuals acting in isolation can choose to ignore these interpersonal comparisons and so, to an extent, can those participating socially.

Once we start to make relative comparisons we need comparators that can tell us something useful about what we are comparing. We can compare unlike things: the speed of light and the speed of cheetahs, for example. In the case of sport, we could simply rank all human sprinters

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<sup>2</sup>The claim that draws are defective is based on the idea that the purpose of sport contests is to determine which of the contestants is *better*; draws fail to do so and so are *failed* contests. I do not share this view. See Warren Fraleigh, "An Examination of Relationships of Inherent, Intrinsic, Instrumental, and Contributive Values of the Good Sports Contest." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport X* (1984): 52-60, and (for an opposing view) Cesar R. Torres & Douglas W. McLaughlin (2003) "Indigestion?: An Apology for Ties", *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 30:2, 144-158, DOI: 10.1080/00948705.2003.9714640

by time over 100m or by 10km. This group would include all ages, both male and female, able-bodied, single- and double-amputee, highly trained, novice, clean and doped to the gills. The result might be mildly interesting, but it wouldn't really count as *sport* as opposed to census. Sport isn't just counting; it is the achievement of expertise in difficult physical tasks through training and competition and that competition has to have certain structural elements. We compete with and against other people and this circumstance makes a considerable difference to how we perform.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it "shouldn't" in some sport-calvinist sense but it nevertheless frequently does make a difference to one's commitment to doing one's best whether one is within reach of those against whom one races. More significantly for competitions that involve stages or levels of progression, such as heats, tournament rounds, or league divisions, and for the present discussion, there are good practical as well as moral reasons to ensure that competition stages are organised so as to ensure that each competitor faces an analogous challenge to any other. These reasons include (a) the profitable development of athletic excellence for the participants in their sport, (b) the reliability of the contest as diagnostic of present athletic development/excellence, and (c) the inclusion of as many participants in the activity as possible.

With respect to (a), competitors learn and progress by being challenged. No one is athletically developed by being blown out by, or by blowing out, their opposition. Granted, it *can* be pedagogically worthwhile to discover that one is not so brilliant as one thought, but even this is only useful when the one brought low by nemesis is able to respond positively, having learned not to take one's abilities for granted. This is part of appropriate challenge. But this is not the same as putting a fifth-tier team into the first division or 8 year olds against 25 year olds and expecting anyone to get anything sportingly useful out of it. Challenge should be answerable, but not a certainty; for sport to be sport, it should be possible for any competitor to either win or lose through their own athletic capacities.

Considerations (b) and (c) are closely connected. Reliable contests are ones that test relevantly similar contestants. There would be little point in having a shot-putter and a gymnast compete against each other for a place on the archery team if what we want to find is advanced archery skills. All the more so if we already know what sort of physical capacities and skills make for the best archers. It makes sense to test for archery skills amongst archers, but also to restrict the search to those archers with the characteristics that are required to excel over all other archers.

So, to determine which of the archers was "the best" we could simply have all of them compete against each other. But, suppose we have both male and female archers, 12, 30, and 60 year olds, novices, veterans, those training intensively and those occasionally on free weekends, and that all these categories are mixed up together, i.e., 12 year old female intensively training

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<sup>3</sup>Which can be brutally evident to anyone who has had to race alone, without any other competitors in the other lanes.

novices and 60 year old male veterans, etc. If we only select the single top archer and tell all the rest to go home we risk starving our archery programme of participants—and we give little incentive to our pool of archers to continue competing as some, maybe most, of them will only ever lose, and many will have little incentive to improve, both because they cannot win and because they are not usefully challenged (these considerations give a partial response to point (3) above). Their sport may well become objectively meaning~~less~~ for them because of the absence of progress even if they continue to gain subjective pleasure from shooting.

This is why inclusion and retention of participants in sport requires that we establish competition categories. These categories have to be wide enough to include participants with varying levels of accomplishment to provide those participants with a reasonable level of challenge but narrow enough to ensure that results are not a foregone conclusion nor participants put at undue risk of injury. Some category boundaries may be relatively arbitrary but many are not: sex, age, weight, skill level, etc. should all be defensible on sporting and safety grounds. Using such categories, then, allows us to determine the best athlete in a given sport taking into account their placing in a category. We need not, then, restrict our recognition of the “best” athlete in sport  $\phi$  to a single Battle Royale champion, but are able to determine objectively and fairly, the best male or female novice, male or female elite level, the best lightweight boxer or crew, and so on. And we give more people the opportunity to compete and develop in that sport.

(2) Not all differences between competitors are relevant for determining categories or for ensuring fairness in competition. Categories exist, in part, to give us a boundary within which to measure performance. They do not eliminate variation but ensure that we are measuring items that are sufficiently alike for the measurement to have meaning. It is often charged, however, that sport categories are arbitrary and strict fairness impossible because there are differences between individuals such that unfair advantages cannot be ruled out: this objection manifests in the “what about tall girls/left-handers” question and usually ends up somewhere in the vicinity of Michael Phelps. Fairness requires that all participants have a reasonable possibility of challenging, and that everyone can win or lose; it does not require uniformity. But in these cases, what we have is a participant with *an* advantage, but one against which fellow competitors can adapt. There are ways to beat left-handers, tall girls, and swimmers with big feet. These are not insurmountable advantages, but ones that require an athletic or sport intelligence adaptation. It is only when there is no adaptation that can possibly allow success that the contest becomes meaningless and this is much more likely to be the case where the advantage is not one belonging to a random individual but that belongs to an entire category of individuals, who might in that case be justifiably placed in category of their own, as would be the case for distinctions on the basis of sex, age, weight, or level of expertise.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>This, of course, is about variation within a competition category rather than eligibility for that category. See Jim Parry & Irena Martínková (2021) “The logic of categorisation in sport,” *European Journal of Sport Science*, 21:11, 1485-1491, DOI: 10.1080/17461391.2021.1943715;

Thus, in response to point (3), the charge that human variation is so great that we should either eliminate competition altogether or remove all restrictions on it, since, either way, there is no set of restrictions that could be justifiable, due to the endless range of counterexamples, we can say this. Humans actually have some fairly predictable variations that can be used to construct categories; empirical research is available on the subject and should be relied upon here, along with careful analysis of the logic and requirements of sport as a human practice governed by rules. I do not take the “eliminate competition” option to be entirely serious. While sport need not entail competition, the vast majority of it does and it is not even utopian to suppose that it is eliminable from sport as people pursue it. Removing restrictions (categories), by contrast, is an option that should be resisted by anyone who sees sport as something that should be open to ordinary people, including women, children, and quite a few men, since its natural outcome is a radical shrinkage of participants. It is protection through categories that allows for a more democratic participation in sport.

### **Objective and Subjective Meaning**

No one knows what the IOC means by “meaningful sport”; it might simply mean that female athletes can be justifiably prevented from winning in their own category just so long as it isn’t too obvious (i.e., no “disproportionate” advantage). That aside, there are at least a couple of interpretations of “meaningful” (neither of which, I suspect, the IOC was thinking of), which correspond to a split between the public and the private. The public sense of “meaningful” has a social or objective inspectability while the private is subjective and potentially idiosyncratic. And, as is often the case, which should be seen as more important depends on what the point of sport is taken to be.

*If* the point of sport competition is the determination of which competitor is “the best”<sup>5</sup>, in other words, *if* the sports contest is a kind of diagnostic of the progress of development of sport-specific skills in the competitors, then sports contests are heuristic instruments in an epistemological exercise. They are designed to produce objective results—empirically verifiable data—that can be the ground of knowledge about particular athletes, effective training practices, human physiology and kinesiology, etc. which, depending on the sport they may do well or badly (games involving dynamic interactions between multiple participants do this less well than sports that concentrate on extremely narrowly defined movements by separately competing individuals). But getting that data depends on intelligent sampling: making sure that what you

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Irena Martínková, Jim Parry & Miroslav Imbrišević (2021) “Transgender Athletes and Principles of Sport Categorization: Why Genealogy and the Gendered Body Will Not Help”, *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, DOI: 10.1080/17511321.2021.1974530.

<sup>5</sup>K. Pearson, 1973. “Deception, Sportsmanship, and Ethics.” *Quest* 19: 115–118. doi:10.1080/00336297.1973.10519761.

collect isn't distorted by failing to account for relevant similarities and differences in the study population. The main concern here, however, is not about correct research methodology but the circumstance that what is revealed by sport competition is objective results that are open to public scrutiny and debate. The "meaningfulness" of the competition is likewise publically accessible and debatable.

The other sense of meaningfulness is not and insofar as its communication is attempted, it can only be done so indirectly. Thus, participation in a particular sport may be especially "meaningful" in some sense to an individual, or the winning/losing of a particular competition, in the sense that the subjective experience figures in an important or even defining way in their sense of self. It may be meaningful to themselves and their family because of how it makes them happy (or miserable), or what significance it plays in the narrative of their life and community. Perhaps they cannot imagine themselves without this activity, it becomes fixed in what they take to be their identity. But notice that these are all essentially private experiences. By this I do not mean to imply that they are either unimportant or do not exist, but that subjective experience by virtue of being subjective is experienced only by the subject experiencing it, and is not subject to objective scrutiny except insofar as it is mediated through objectively accessible means (speech, behaviour) that can then be interpreted by others.<sup>6</sup>

We may value subjective meaning over objective fact: many of us strongly value our participation in sporting activities that we know we are objectively rubbish at—this objectively verifiable athletic failure does not necessarily diminish the joy we receive from the performance of the activity. We may be quite indifferent to any of the available metrics of our sporting activity, or find these objective facts to be profoundly meaningful subjectively. The point is that "meaningfulness" can refer to either objective fact, i.e., something that can be verifiably true or false outside the subject, or subjective experience, and these are not identical. More precisely, subjective meaningfulness can be predicated on the objective, as when it depends on the achievement of certain objective measures of success ("it meant so much to me to win this game/race/trophy", etc.) or be independent of these measures, as when it is a matter of deep satisfaction gained by the moving through the activity itself.

This distinction has some important implications. Note the example of meaning gained through winning some competition (or, posting a personal best, etc.). The meaningfulness is contingent upon *actually winning*; that is, it is a subjective meaningfulness that can only be *valid* provided that the subject earn it through objectively defensible means, which are ordinarily set out by the sport's rules and practices. To "win" by cheating, for example, *may* generate subjective

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<sup>6</sup>This is something that we can get wrong; hence the importance of the interpretations of others. But this is a discussion for a different paper; see, e.g., Howe, "Bullshit as a Practical Strategy for Self-Deceptive Narrators" *Philosophical Forum* <https://doi.org/10.1111/phil.12318>.

satisfaction, but there is a case to be made that the satisfaction is delusional.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, badly structured sport, e.g., when categories are drawn too broadly, may permit participants to win inappropriately and thus for the meaningfulness of such wins to be questioned.<sup>8</sup> In this case, while the competition may be experienced by the participant as subjectively meaningful, this meaningfulness is strongly dependent on (the apprehension of) the objective circumstances of the competition. The other source of subjective meaningfulness, the experience of the activity's movement in and of itself, in effect, the phenomenal what-it-is-likeness of running, skiing, climbing, etc., is not subject to this sort of external querying and verification.

### **Are we owed meaningfulness?**

Which kind of meaningfulness we are talking about becomes especially important in determining whether sports participants have a right to meaningful sport. The objective meaningfulness of sport is reached by ensuring that the practice is structured in such a way as to provide several things: the opportunity for all individuals to develop excellence in the skills particular to the sport in which they are engaged; this includes providing competitive opportunities in which there is a possibility of winning and of losing for each competitor. This also requires a meaningful method of ranking participants, that is, of determining who is better at  $\varphi$  where confounding factors are ruled out. This describes a practice dedicated to both the wide dissemination of skills and the accurate appraisal of them in individuals.

Calling this “meaningful” competition, however, is misleading. It *is* meaningful in the very minimal sense that, without these conditions, sport would be *meaningless*, i.e., pointless. There is a sense in which sport is always meaningless, of course, in that it is a Sisyphean effort that must be constantly renewed: no champion is paramount, no victory settles sport for good; every game, every race must be re-played by the next competitors. It is incumbent upon each of us to find the meaning (in this individual sense) in our play, as with any exercise of our freedom. But this existential point does not persuade us to tolerate unfairness, and it is *fairness* that the aforementioned conditions demand. Meaningless sport in the objective sense is *unfair* sport, meaningless because there is no point playing it, and no point because there is no reliability or validity to its results, and because participants can have no assurance that their efforts contribute to excellence. If sport is unfair, its champions are fraudulent. We do not simply steal prizes, we steal truth.

It would make more sense, then, to avoid obfuscation and just declare whether sport should be

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<sup>7</sup>See Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2014.

<sup>8</sup>For example, some years ago a minor rowing club persuaded a former member who was at that point on the National team roster to compete for them in a local regatta. Asked how her race went, she muttered “it’s a joke”.

fair or not. But there isn't really a coherent option here. Unfair sport is self-defeating, at least as an attempt to reach a reliable answer to the question of "which of these competitors is better at the constitutive skills of the sport of  $\varphi$ ?" Many of us, and not only the very best, would like develop these skills and to know the answer to this question about themselves, and so fairness of competition matters all the way down through all the levels of sport—otherwise there would be no point wasting time and public goods on those who will never be world champions. Moreover, to enter into a competition is to do so under the normative expectation that it will be fair (much as we expect, in the sense of "demand" if not "anticipate", that our interlocutors will speak truthfully). In this sense, we are indeed owed "meaningfulness".

But this isn't the only sense of "meaningful". As argued above, there is also the private or subjective feeling of something's meaningfulness to the participant in the action. Now, if "meaningful" is being used in this context to mean sport that isn't quite fair but in which some participant(s) do not have a "disproportionate advantage" (in the IOC's<sup>9</sup> markedly pusillanimous language), then meaningfulness has to either refer to objective fairness or the subjective satisfaction of participants. The only way that the former sense can operate is if competitors are participating in objectively reasonable and well-justified categories (as described above), which are ones in which no one can have a "disproportionate advantage", i.e., they are governed by a principle of fairness. If the appeal here is to the meaningfulness acquired in subjective satisfaction, one must assume that what is meant is that competitors (all of them?) must experience the contest as justified, i.e., the winners feel that they are justified in winning and the losers don't feel cheated. But, of course, one might feel either of these things without it being true.

Leaving aside the question of whether sport should be organised in such a way as to deliberately deceive its participants, such a principle does not stand up to scrutiny for the reason that how winners or losers feel about winning or losing is not entirely relevant to the project of sport *as a practice designed to develop and determine excellence in difficult physical movements*. It is arguably a defeatist principle, one that manages to be both irrationalist and unempirical, irrationalist in that it supposes that no better or principled solution can be found, and so gives up on the effort to find one that is both fair and maximally inclusive, and unempirical because it ignores an already extant wealth of evidence and seems to devalue objective measures of advantage in sport.

Sport gives many people a great deal of personal satisfaction and narrative coherence to their lives; that is not in dispute. But this meaningfulness and satisfaction are the outcome of, and

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<sup>9</sup>In the IOC's Framework of November 2021: "Framework on Fairness, Inclusion and Non-discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sex variations".  
<https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-releases-framework-on-fairness-inclusion-and-non-discrimination-on-the-basis-of-gender-identity-and-sex-variations>

hence dependent upon, a structured activity, a fundamental feature of which is the fairness of its procedures and distribution. Without fairness, this satisfaction and meaningfulness would be a much scarcer outcome of sporting activity.<sup>10</sup>

This then raises the question of whether any given individual's private experience of sport can be more important than the commitment to all competitors to ensure their interest in competing fairly—an outward facing social obligation we hold to our fellow participants. This would certainly qualify as a disproportionate shift in our obligations to fellow competitors. We do have an obligation to treat others fairly—this is central to justice. But individuals, free human beings, are responsible for their own choices as to meaningfulness. Unlike fairness, without which we cannot do sport properly, and although sport is a context within which many humans find meaningfulness, its failing to do so in any given instance does not mean that it is not sport. Meaningfulness in the sense of a subjective apprehension of personal existential or aesthetic value is not an essential constitutive element of sport. It may *enable* the retrieval of such values; it does not necessitate them, again, because this is something we are responsible for ourselves as the individual subjects we are.

Sport cannot function without fairness though it may offer considerable satisfaction to many of its participants without being fair. But that it may do so is not sufficient excuse for it to not be fair, because we nevertheless do have social obligations about treating others fairly, while we do not have obligations to ensure that others have specific aesthetic experiences. This circumstance adds further complication to any claim that there is a human right to sport. There can't be because sport, while a human good, is one that is subject to preference: some prefer sport to other forms of human movement and others have a positive antipathy to it. It is something that one might like to do and, insofar as one does, and one meets the sport requirements for participation, then one is bound by whatever duties of fairness apply as overriding any responsibility one could be said to have with respect to the subjective experiences of others.<sup>11</sup> We may reasonably be expected not to deliberately make other people miserable, but if others are miserable because we act fairly, justly, and fulfill our social obligations correctly, that is not something for which we can be held accountable.

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<sup>10</sup>Hence also the poverty of the narrativity approach (Gleaves and Lehrbach, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 43, 2 (2016): 311-326).

<sup>11</sup>Argued at some length in Howe, "Fair Fights and Foul" and in a shorter form in "Fair Game" Pike, Hilton, and Howe (2021), <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/biology-fairness-trans-inclusion-sport-paper/>.

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