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Play Until the Whistle Blows: Sportsmanship as the Outcome of *Thirdness*

Tamba Nlandu

There appears to be a common misunderstanding in almost all earlier and current accounts of sportsmanship. Most, if not all, of these accounts try to establish an alleged identity between sportsmanship and a moral virtue of some kind. Among others, sportsmanship has been identified with such virtues as honor, generosity, magnanimity, integrity, genuine concern for others, fairness, and fair play.¹ Among other sport theorists, for instance, Peter J. Arnold identifies sportsmanship not with a single moral virtue but rather with “a form of social union,” “a means in the promotion of pleasure,” and “a form of altruism” or some type of combination of these “three views” (1). What emerges out of one’s critical examination of these accounts is the fact that, as Peter J. Arnold rightly acknowledges, “the term *sportsmanship* and its relation to sport and morality is a more complex and subtle one than is commonly supposed” (1: p. 164).

Unlike these accounts, the current article relies on Charles S. Peirce’s notion of epistemic mediation to offer an account of sportsmanship that is consistent with the empirical nature of sporting activities. Accordingly, sportsmanship derives from the local demands of each particular sporting activity. In this sense, sportsmanship is understood to be the result of a generalization of meaning, which is referred to here in Peircean terminology as *thirdness*. Such generalization of meaning, we argue, appears to be a necessary aspect of sport education, especially for children and youth, if one hopes to avoid the current undue reliance on the power of referees and officials. Thus, we hope to show, for instance, that the command “Play until the whistle blows!” seems to suggest that the proper realization of sporting activities must be totally dependent upon the power conferred, somewhat by default, to the referees and officials. This attitude is mistaken because, as Robert Simon points out correctly,

We also need to consider the role of officials and referees in sports. Should we conclude that since opponents in many forms of organized competition delegate responsibility for enforcement of the rules to officials in full knowledge that officials sometimes make mistakes, the decisions of officials should be accepted as ethically final? Alternately, do participants have obligations not to accept unearned benefits arising from particularly egregious official errors,

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especially those that involve misapplication of the rules rather than “judgment calls” about whether a rule was violated? (15: p. 63)

In light of these fundamental questions raised by Simon, this article offers a view of sportsmanship that aims at putting back some of the powers currently conferred to referees and officials into the hands of the sport educators and, hopefully, those of the sport participants themselves. Hence, we shall argue that (1) sportsmanship is an ideal of sport *alone*, whereas such virtues as fairness, honor, altruism, companionship, generosity, etc., are applicable to almost all human activities involving human interaction and transactions ranging from sport to war; (2) it is not as such a single virtue but rather a collection of virtues (both intellectual and moral), that is, a collection of positive qualities related to a wide range of diverse and particular sporting activities; (3) it is, therefore, not identical to any single one of the virtues mentioned previously. For instance, in its sport application, fairness understood as a disposition to behave according to principles that would be mutually acceptable after critical reflection to other sport participants, does not necessarily entail that a particular sporting activity would be conducted in accordance with its rules and “ethos” or even in accordance with the spirit of the local demands of the activity. Indeed, in some sporting activities, one might be fair without being a good sport as illustrated by the case of the gamesman. Likewise, generosity, for example, might not always be the mark of the good sport as illustrated by the case of a soccer player who decides to generously give up a goal against her own team to save her opponents from the embarrassment of a blowout.

First, we shall begin by examining some sport cases that illustrate the need to put back the power of rule enforcement into sport education and sportsmanship. Then, we shall discuss some oversights of some of the earlier and current accounts of sportsmanship, and in the process, we shall offer our own perspective. Later, we shall show that the pragmatic perspective we are offering is founded in a Peircean conception of human nature, which construes a human to be a being of habit and reasonableness. Finally, we shall show that our pragmatic account of sportsmanship is consistent not only with Peirce’s conception of human nature but also with John Dewey’s view of adaptability, which we construe to be an extension of Peirce’s notion of thirdness, because both accounts are rooted in a dynamic conception of habit. Accordingly, we shall show how sportsmanship might never be final insofar as it evolves through trial and error and through the diversity and plurality of human experience.

1. Sportsmanship and Sport Education

The following scenarios raise some fundamental questions about sportsmanship and its relation to sport youth education, in particular, and sport education, in general.

First, consider what has been referred to as the “hand of God scenario.” During the 1986 soccer World Cup, Diego Maradona, the best player in the world at the time and perhaps even the best player in the history of soccer, deliberately punched the ball into the goal, past the England goalkeeper Peter Shilton, and scored one of his two goals, which helped his team, Argentina, reach the next stage (semifinals) of the tournament. Not long ago, on June 9, 2007, another very promising young

star of world soccer, namely Lionel Messi, replicated Maradona's feat during a 2–2 draw which helped his team, F.C. Barcelona of Spain, keep pace with their archrival Real Madrid in their pursuit for the 2007 season title. In both of these two cases, the defining rule of soccer was deliberately violated, and the game officials, without the benefit of a slow-motion replay, were unable to do justice to both the game of soccer and the victimized opponents.

Second, consider what might be called the “foot-out-of-bounds scenario.” In basketball, a player whose foot is out of bounds is not supposed to touch the ball even if the ball is still on the field of play. Suppose that player A, who has noticed that player B, an opponent, has participated in play while stepping out of bounds, decides to stop playing and demands that the ball be handed back to her team for the proper restart. Does it make sense to blame player A for not playing to the whistle? What happens if the game is being played without the service of a referee as is the case in most pick-up or practice games?

Finally, consider the infamous Roy Carroll's “goal-line-fumble scenario.” On January 4, 2005, Roy Carroll, the Manchester United goalkeeper, fumbled the ball over his goal line in a 0–0 draw between his team and Tottenham Spurs. Because the ball had been kicked by Pedro Mendes from almost the center line, it was impossible for the linesman to make the proper call despite the fact that the goalkeeper could be seen by almost everyone in the stadium retrieving the ball a yard deep from his goal line before putting it back into play. The rule states that the linesperson can only validate a goal from a goal-line vantage point. Therefore, even with some degree of certainty, it would have been inappropriate for him to validate that goal. One wonders here whether the burden of good sportsmanship should not ultimately fall on Roy Carroll who, taking full responsibility for his blunder, should have stopped play and handed the ball over to the match official for the appropriate restart, which should have been a kickoff by Manchester United after the referee would have had awarded a clearly deserved goal to Tottenham.

One would hope that these incidents were simply marginal and would only involve particular skill levels, say, professional and highly competitive amateur leagues, where concerns for the extrinsic goods of sport are so great that they would lead some sport participants to such unsporting behaviors. Unfortunately, most sport participants from players to spectators have witnessed similar incidents as they continue to occur in all types of sporting activities. Whereas most of these incidents have ended up being blamed on the game officials by the media, coaches, and spectators, one has to wonder whether they should not instead be regarded as blunders of our youth-sport education or even that of the poor coaching work being done by managers and coaches of highly competitive leagues. Following these types of high-profile violations of the spirit of the game, one would expect the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and its regional and national associations to raise fundamental questions concerning poor coaching techniques and deceptive youth-sport education. Instead, FIFA president Sepp Blatter and his team were quick to endorse the proposed trial of a microchipped ball, which would improve game officials' goal-line decision making without interruption of play. Should not managers and coaches educate their players to take stock of their mistakes and do justice to the opponents and, by the same token, to the game itself?

On the positive side, for instance, some of us might have noticed the progressive disappearance of the dropped ball rule at almost all competitive levels of soccer,

especially in the case of player injuries or other restarts caused by unexpected incidents. After such incidents, the rule requires the referee to restart play by dropping the ball between two opponents. The rule also explicitly states that anything resulting from that act is deemed to be within the rules of soccer. Therefore, there would be nothing inappropriate for a player to score a goal immediately after gaining possession of the ball from the dropped ball rule. In most recent cases of restarts resulting from unexpected incidents, however, the dropped ball has been deliberately returned to the team in possession at the time of the stoppage. Apparently, most sport participants have learned from a few infamous cases (such as the case of that Arsenal player to whom Robert Simon and others refer), which some have, unfortunately, attributed to cultural differences rather than poor sport education, that victory achieved through an “undeserved” ball possession might not be significant at all.

Therefore, some additional fundamental questions arise from these scenarios: Can these types of incidents be prevented without recourse to some sort of legal code emphasizing punishment? How do these scenarios relate to the quality of sport education offered to our youth today? Although it might be too late to teach self-enforcing good sportsmanship to the Diego Maradonas, Lionel Messis, or Roy Carrolls of today, can today’s children be taught to engage in sport activities in a way that would lessen or perhaps eliminate the occurrence of such incidents in their adult sport life? Finally, is there a conception of sportsmanship that would be consistent with such sport education, one that emphasizes the fostering of positive qualities and habits such as those exhibited in the case of the slowly disappearing dropped-ball rule in soccer?

This brings us to the account of sportsmanship we intend to advocate in the current discussion. On this account, sportsmanship stems from a generalization of meaning. In other terms, we intend to show in the ensuing discussion that sportsmanship is the outcome of a process of *thirdness*, to use Charles S. Peirce’s term. That is, it is a whole or totality whose somewhat realized ideals make the realization of particular instances of sport possible. Here, *thirdness* refers to the fact that each participant in a particular game brings into the game her own understanding of the activity, which must be reconciled with that of all other participants for the activity to turn into a shared experience enjoyable by all. Without this reconciliation of meaning, which follows the confrontation of individual participants’ understandings of the game, and which is achieved through the mediation of a common understanding of the various rules, means, goals, and instances of the game, it would make no sense to speak of, say, a game of tennis or hockey. On this account, each individual participant’s experience of each particular instance of a particular game might be construed to be a *first*, which must be followed by a *second* (i.e., the confrontation with other participants’ experience), which in turn must be elevated to a *third* (i.e., to a generalized experience reconcilable with past, present, and future experiences of the game).

This means, to play a game—say a game of basketball—one must be able to reach a certain level of shared meaning consistent with that reached by all other participants. Because basketball games cover a wide range of skill levels, physical demands, degrees of awareness or consciousness, and intended goals, talk of sportsmanship becomes plausible only insofar as each participant understands objectively the peculiar aims of each game. This objectivity stems from the fact

that sport at bottom involves play, which as Johan Huizinga correctly points out, “creates order, *is* order,” because

Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme. The least deviation from it “spoils the game,” robs it of its character and makes it worthless. (6: p. 6)

2. A Brief Critical Examination of Some Views of Sportsmanship

The overall sentiment, which emerges out of much of what has been written on the nature, status, and value of sportsmanship in both sport and life in general, appears to be a deep discomfort, which sometimes culminates in an undeniable confusion between sportsmanship and the various goals of sport or even the various virtues of ethics, in general. Indeed, among the multitude of discourses pertaining to the issue of sportsmanship, there appears to be none that clearly captures the nature of sportsmanship as it essentially involves and results from the activity of sport. William Lad Sessions’s “Sportsmanship as Honor” is a good example of a discourse that recognizes the shortcomings of previous attempts at defining sportsmanship only to fall into the same misguided methodology that had hindered his predecessors’ efforts.

The current discussion aims, however, at showing that although Sessions, for instance, correctly identifies a somewhat illusory coincidence between sportsmanship and morality as one of the major sources of the discomfort referred to previously, he still goes on to construe sportsmanship to be a moral category of some sort. Indeed, Sessions explicitly claims that “this coincidence is precisely what Sportsmanship as Honor denies” (14: p. 52), but he still assigns a moral virtue of the all-embracing type, namely *trustworthiness*, the central normative role in distinguishing the good sportsman, that is, the person of honor, from the poor sportsman.

Unlike Sessions and his predecessors, this discussion approaches the concept of sportsmanship in light of Charles S. Peirce’s pragmatic maxim, which in its basic formulation reads as follows:

Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearing you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your conception of those effects is the WHOLE of your conception of the object. (12: p. 110)

Accordingly, sportsmanship is construed to be not merely an instance of what Bernard Suits terms the *lusory attitude*, that is, “the knowing acceptance of constitutive rules just so the activity made possible by such acceptance can occur,” (17: p. 11) something that could serve as the locus of Sessions’s honor, nor is it merely a moral category as James W. Keating understands it. Rather, it is the outcome of a process of epistemic mediation, that is, a product of a process of habit formation, which seeks to instill in the sport participant a variety of rules of action conducive to the proper realization of peculiar instances of sport. Conceived in this way,

sportsmanship becomes an ideal whose instances of realization might vary from sport to sport, time to time, and culture to culture. For this reason, any attempt at capturing once for all the totality of habits or virtues (intellectual or moral, to use Aristotle's terms) inherent in the concept of sportsmanship through a definition is obviously doomed to fail. Here, I am in agreement with Randolph M. Feezell when he writes:

What is the essence of sportsmanship? I tend to think that the question is misleading and the phenomenon is dispersed in our experience in innumerable particular instances. We ought to be hesitant about attributing to this notion an abstract unity that is not found in experience. (5: p. 158)

For instance, to be a good sport in basketball, therefore, means to act in a way that would make the particular game being played not only possible but also meaningful, that is, to act in a way capable of turning the subjective experience of each participant into an objective, shared experience enjoyable for all participants. As such, sportsmanship entails the proper understanding of not only the formal rules of the game but also a concrete understanding of the regulative rules and ethos of each particular game. Here is where children's positive sport education becomes extremely relevant to the concept of sportsmanship.

It appears to be an established fact that children, especially in their younger age, engage in sporting activities with the sole purposes of playing or having fun. Their lack of concern for the external goods of sport, say, the fame and fortune, which might result from such goals as winning, the search for excellence, or simply the desire for domination over one's opponent(s), makes them ideal targets for the fixation of positive game habits. For children still unspoiled by the adults' confused conceptions of the goals of sport, the game, though perhaps still subject to some degree of interpretation, is the same for all participants. It is, indeed, not unusual to find cases of under-10-year-old players gracefully willing to give advantage to their opponents even when the game officials have made the wrong call. There appears to be enough evidence for us to argue that younger children are likely to understand how their enjoyment of a particular game depends on the well-being and enjoyment of their opponents, whom they often construe to be friends rather than enemies.

In light of these remarks, sportsmanship, we shall argue, concerns all those who are, in any degree, participants in the activity of sport: players, coaches, officials, administrators, and spectators. Although it would be absurd to expect the same degree of sportsmanship realization from such a wide range of participants, we must acknowledge the fact that one can only become a good or poor sport through participation in sporting activities. Indeed, because sportsmanship encompasses a wide variety of habits, all of which can only be developed through participation and through trial and error, one must be wary of any attempt at definition that overlooks the fact that the concept of sportsmanship is one that is open to ideal experimentation. This is why my agreement with Feezell ends when his appeal to Aristotle culminates with the same type of abstract conception he had objected to in the passage quoted earlier in the article. Indeed, he claims, "sportsmanship is a mean between excessive seriousness, which misunderstands the importance of the play-spirit, and an excessive sense of playfulness, which might be called frivolity and

misunderstands the importance of victory and achievement when play is competitive” (5: p. 158). Although it is correct to expect some degree of seriousness from the sport participant, we would argue here that what Feezell refers to as “the virtue of sportsmanship” is rather an ensemble of rules of action, that is, a collection of ideals, each of which would lead the behavior of a particular sport participant to be labeled as a “good sport” or “poor sport.” In addition, Feezell’s conception appears to render the concept of sportsmanship wholly subjective and incapable of passing the test of trial and error. There appears to be, at least in my mind, no doubt about the type of virtues which would have turned Diego Maradona, Lionel Messi, and Roy Carroll, in the scenarios discussed earlier, from villains to moral sport role models: humility and courage, that is, the ability to recognize one’s mistakes and the courage to stop play and demand that the game official cancel the goal, in the case of Maradona and Messi, or demand that the game official award the goal to the opposing team, in the case of Roy Carroll. Therefore, because sportsmanship is particular to each game and determined by its own rules and ethos, its demands are local. For instance, whereas humility and courage would have done justice to the game officials or to the opponents or even to the game of soccer itself in the aforementioned examples, one would expect not only compassion but also generosity from the opponents of an injured cyclist, for instance, or patience from a player subjected to ridicule and abusive language by an opponent. Therefore, the whole of the concept of sportsmanship consists of a totality of locally game-applicable ideals, which, in the long run, are likely to contribute to the proper realization of each instance of game playing.

Hence, consider the case of the often-uttered command, “Play until the whistle blows.” Any educated and attentive observer, who has been around sporting events such as children soccer games involving players from preelementary school to high-school age, might still have a recollection of such absurd commands being uttered by coaches, parents, team managers, and even players themselves. Most, if not all, of these participants in sporting activities appear to be totally unaware of the contradiction inherent in such commands.

In fact, these types of statements represent a crude violation of the spirit of the game, especially when they originate from those who are entrusted with the power to serve as teachers of the game. Although it might seem reasonable to claim that such violations of the spirit of the game might simply result from a lack of awareness of one’s responsibilities as a coach, player, team manager, parent, or else, it illustrates the depth of the challenges stemming from the various misunderstandings of the concept of sportsmanship. “Play until the whistle blows” appears to violate no particular constitutive or penalty-invoking rules or even ethos of a particular game. It highlights, however, a sport educator’s or participant’s inability to recognize one’s responsibilities, which, by the way, are implicit in the promise one makes when one chooses to coach, manage, or play a particular game.

Indeed, to choose to participate, in whatever capacity, in a particular sporting activity is to choose to conduct it by its rules using the means determined by these rules to achieve a specific goal determined by the rules. Thus, any attempt at teaching players to play until the whistle blows is clearly an attempt at using means that would knowingly be more efficient than the ones prescribed by the rules, and as such it is an attempt at fostering habits that would ruin the proper conduct of the game. For instance, in a basketball game it would be an obvious violation

of the spirit of the game for a coach to instruct players to play until the whistle blows even when they are aware of the fact that they have violated the foot-out-of-bounds rule discussed earlier. The logical consequence of such commands on the behavior of children and young adults during sporting activities seems to be an unnecessary reliance on the power conferred by default to the officials. No wonder why referees and umpires have become a necessity even for games played by the youngest of our children.

One must be careful here not to underestimate the complexity of this issue, however. Indeed, although it is correct to say that educating players to play until the whistle blows tends to encourage players to take advantage of rule violations not sanctioned by the game officials, we must acknowledge here that the issue poses an interesting dilemma. One wonders what would happen to a game involving players who constantly stop play to avoid being labeled “bad sport” every time they believe that they have gained advantage from either a foul (deliberate or accidental) or rule violation that has gone unnoticed by the referee. What would happen to most cases of trifling such as accidental handballs in soccer or incidental contacts in football, which are often placed under the discretion of the referees? Would the players have to know the significance of the advantage gained through such trifling instances before they stop play or would any minimal advantage be sufficient for taking such action? Should, for instance, all cases of gamesmanship be regarded as violations of the spirit of the game?

Although these questions appear to be legitimate, they actually put an undue stress on the value of game officials. First of all, one must acknowledge the fact that the majority of sporting activities occur without the benefit of officials. Such sporting activities include, among others, training sessions, backyard games, and pick-up games, which rely mostly on the participants’ self-regulation for their occurrence and enjoyment.

Second, there here appears to be a need to distinguish between the concepts of sportsmanship and gamesmanship. It seems appropriate to construe the opposite of sportsmanship to be gamesmanship rather than poor sportsmanship, because the latter implies a lack in those qualities necessary for successful (in the moral sense) participation. Indeed, such a lack might simply be the result of ignorance about the rules of the game or inappropriate sport education.

Hence, one appears to be justified in disagreeing with those who construe gamesmanship to be almost an instance of “strategic deception,” rather than one of “definitional deception,” to use Kathleen M. Pearson’s terms (10: pp. 83–84). Furthermore, one is also a little bit puzzled by such accounts of gamesmanship as the one offered by Nicholas Dixon when he begins by claiming that “unlike cheating, it [gamesmanship] does not involve violating the rules of the games in the hope of avoiding detection,” but ends up arguing that “an athlete or team that successfully uses gamesmanship as a major weapon in securing victory may not deserve to win in the sense of being the best athlete or team” (4: p. 55). Whereas it might be correct to claim, as Dixon does, that “perhaps what all gamesmanship has in common is an apparent violation of the *spirit* of a game” (4: p. 55), it seems more appropriate to construe all recourses to gamesmanship as instances of deliberate violation of the spirit of the game. That is to say that, because gamesmanship focuses solely on winning as the goal of sporting activities, it tends to foster the

fixation of habits of action and thought, which in the long run eventually lead to poor sportsmanship.

Therefore, it appears also necessary at this point to distinguish between sportsmanship and fair play. In fact, the gamesman might expect his or her opponents to use, as he or she would, all means necessary for securing victory even if such means include a recourse to more efficient means for achieving the goal of a specific sport or athletic competition than the ones allowed by the rules. Although such expectation might well be founded in the notion of fair play, it certainly does not involve the concept of sportsmanship, which necessarily requires from the sport participants not only their submission to the rules but also their deliberate adherence to the spirit of the sporting activity in question. Take, for instance, the case of a game of basketball during which the referee *consistently* misses the foot-out-of-bounds violations. As long as the gamesman and his or her opponent agree upon the referee's consistent misapplication of the rules of the game, the gamesman would find nothing wrong in the fact that the game continues to be played even after such violations. To the contrary, the sportsman would argue against such misuses of the notion of fair play.

3. More on the Misconceptions of the Nature of Sportsmanship

In his search for what he terms “The Essence of Genuine Sportsmanship,” James W. Keating states that “in itself, sportsmanship is a spirit, an attitude, a manner or mode of interpreting an otherwise purely legal code” (7: p. 147). In other terms, he claims, sportsmanship is a moral category whose “purpose is to protect and cultivate the festive mood proper to an activity whose primary purpose is pleasant diversion, amusement, joy” (7: p. 147). Whereas such a concept of sportsmanship would be highly desirable in sports or athletics of any kind, it is easy to note that such an account of sportsmanship is founded on a false assumption. Indeed, what Keating's perspective provides is simply a description of what ought to be the attitude for any participant in a particular sporting or athletic activity. If this is correct, then it is fair to say that sportsmanship is something that the participant brings to the game, something independent of the very nature of sport. This perhaps explains Keating's temptation at equating the concept of sportsmanship with that of the “English gentlemanship.” It is exactly here, however, that lies the fallacy as Keating himself correctly discovers when he later notes that gentlemanship “is due principally to the general attitude of the gentleman toward life rather than to anything intrinsic to the game itself” (7: p. 147). This being the case, it makes sense to argue, against Keating, that sportsmanship is one of the internal goods of any sporting or athletic activity. As such it is not a mere attitude toward the game in which case such an attitude would be expected of the participants before their involvement in the activity. Instead, sportsmanship is an intrinsic element of the game the lack of which would render any practice of the game impossible. In this respect, sportsmanship represents an outcome of epistemic mediation, a necessary step toward the realization of any sporting or athletic activity. In reality, sportsmanship is a collection of ideals, which is separate from the attitude of the sport

participant. This means that those who participate in sport activities are expected to exhibit gradual improvement in their manners on the field of play, and, hopefully, also off the field, because sport offers an ideal teaching and learning environment. Unfortunately, in many sporting or athletic activities, sportsmanship often becomes a burden to the participants because of an unnecessary focus on penalty-invoking rules, which tends to suppress the positive educational goal of these activities, therefore turning sportsmanship into a legal code whose essential purpose is to punish bad behavior rather than fostering appropriate rules of action. There is enough evidence for this tragic misunderstanding of the concept of sportsmanship in the newly adopted rules, posted at many baseball stadiums, aimed at regulating the interaction between the visiting team players and the home team spectators. For instance, during a game played at Fenway Park in Boston in April 2005, after New York Yankees right fielder Gary Sheffield's move toward a batted ball into the right field corner was interrupted by two fans one of whom threw beer on Sheffield, the Boston Red Sox revoked the fans' season ticket privileges for the remainder of the season and claimed through their spokesman Mike Dee, chief operating officer at Fenway Park, that those fans had broken the club ticket holders' agreement, which states that "interfering with the play of the game in any way will not be tolerated and will be grounds for ejection from the premises, legal prosecution, recession of tickets, and cancellation of subscription privileges."² Obviously, missing from this strong statement is any attempt at educating spectators about the value of good sportsmanship, the need for respect for the opposing team and their well-being, or the expectation of excellence resulting from competing against excellent opponents. This same emphasis on punishment and legal prosecution can be found in almost all major league ballparks across the U.S. where fan interference with visiting players is treated, not as an issue of poor sportsmanship and sport education but rather as merely a matter of security and players' safety. Whereas players' personal safety and ballpark security are, indeed, a matter of vital importance, a better way to prevent issues of fan interference would be to educate the fans about the importance of good competition and the value of good opponents in the performance of their home team and in the overall growth of the sport. Major league baseball is not, unfortunately, alone in this distortion of the concept of sportsmanship.

For instance, in an attempt to strictly enforce its "sportsmanship rules," the Ohio High School Athletic Association requires of its officials the literal rendering of the following statement before any sport or athletic competition:

The national High School Federation and your state association require officials to enforce sportsmanship rules. High school athletics emphasize positive values. All of us have worked hard to create a sense of teamwork, respect, responsibility and perspective. We remind you that we expect good behavior and *will quickly penalize misconduct*. We encourage and appreciate your help. Let this competition reflect mutual respect among participants and officials. Coaches please certify that your players are legally equipped and uninformed according to the NFHS rules. Good luck and have a great contest!³

In fact, a careful examination of this statement makes it evident that statements such as this one can only add to the confusion already inherent in most of the existing conceptions of sportsmanship as they assume that, among other things, (1) all participants, that is, all players (this obviously excludes coaches, parents, school administrators, neutral spectators, team fans, etc.) are fully informed about the rules of sportsmanship to be enforced by the contest officials, (2) all participants have consciously and conscientiously “worked hard to create a sense of teamwork, respect, responsibility, and perspective,” whatever that means, (3) good behavior is behavior that reflects “mutual respect among all participants and officials,” and (4) the only matter of concern to the team coaches should be to ascertain that their players are “legally equipped and uniformed” according to the NFHS guidelines. Furthermore, a critical look at the NFHS sportsmanship Mission Statement leads one to wonder about the origin of the heavy emphasis placed on punishment, rather than education, in the OHSAA’s sportsmanship statement. Although the NFHS statement, like most mission statements, appears to be somewhat vague in many respects, it offers some significant improvement in the understanding of the goal of sportsmanship. The NFHS sportsmanship mission statement reads as follows:

Good sportsmanship is viewed by the National Federation of State High School Associations as a commitment to fair play, ethical behavior and integrity. In perception and practice, sportsmanship is defined as those qualities which are characterized by generosity and genuine concern for others. The ideals of sportsmanship apply equally to all activity disciplines. Individuals, regardless of their role in activities, are expected to be aware of their influence on the behavior of others and model good sportsmanship.⁴

First of all, without taking for granted the difficulties of understanding the concept of sportsmanship in terms of generosity or in terms of some allegedly equal application of such an ideal to “all activity disciplines,” it is interesting to note that this statement begins with a strong emphasis on positive values as the goal of sportsmanship, thus, distancing itself from the type of legal code implied by the OHSAA’s statement. Then, it makes an attempt at identifying some of the qualities characterizing good sportsmanship, as opposed to, say, “bad” sportsmanship.

Nevertheless, before we take up the task of elucidating the relationship between sportsmanship and habit, it seems important to acknowledge the insight of the NFHS sportsmanship statement because it construes sportsmanship to be not merely a virtue in itself but rather an ensemble of ideals to be pursued by the participants. Therefore, although it might well be quite difficult to define what such ideals as commitment to fair play, ethical behavior and integrity, generosity, and genuine concern for others, mean to participants in the various sporting and athletic activities, the NFHS statement at least points us in the right direction, one that should be concerned with the cultivation of positive habits or rules of action. What, then, is a habit? How does the fact of construing sportsmanship to be the outcome of a process of habit fixation improve our understanding of the concept of sportsmanship?

4. Habit Always Entails Thirdness or Generalization of Meaning⁵

As Charles S. Peirce points out, every act a human being performs can be defined in terms of its communicability. For, a human being at bottom is social, each of his acts is a habit of action that is public and general; that is, it cannot be thought of without the mediation of signs. For this reason, Peirce regards thought as essentially inferential, predictive, and expectative. Peirce maintains that thought is always symbolic, that is, general insofar as it is always communicable. Because sportsmanship seeks to foster rules of action that are believed to be *melioristic* (16: p. 6) for all participants, there appears to be a need for a language of thought capable of providing a basis for evaluating and predicting the success and failure of the various attempts at generalizing particular instances of play, which, in the long run, turn into habits worthy of conservation. Here *meliorism* means the ability of human action to improve the human condition.

Habit, therefore, as a “tendency toward generalization,” a tendency that resides in everything that is endowed with plasticity and capacity of evolution, provides a basis for such a language of thought. Although it might be found in the organic world, habit is essentially an element of the human mind. For, Peirce claims, the mind is “the most plastic of all things” (11: 7.515).⁷ In addition, there is, indeed, nothing more plastic than the minds of children, especially when it comes to the acquisition of game-related habits. Although it might not be clear whether a habit has to be construed to be a natural disposition or something that is acquired only through experience (i.e., by means of signs and symbols), in most cases, we might recognize with Peirce the existence of innate potentialities that have to be informed and developed by the acquisition of habits through experience. This means that each sport participant has a natural, innate disposition to take habits and to exercise a certain control over them. For a habit is at bottom a disposition of the mind, that is, a disposition to take reasonable action and to change course whenever necessary. Because thought fundamentally involves the general laws of nervous action, Peirce can then claim that a habit arises through its reactions to various stimuli of the natural and social world as soon as the nervous system forms patterns of reactions that tend to become easier on repetition and opens the possibility for new reactions to take place. Therefore, habit is the leading principle of all human action, because it paves the way to the improvement of the human condition through trial and error. Indeed, there appears to be no better place to ascertain Peirce’s claims than the field of sport. As was indicated earlier by our appeal to Johan Huizinga’s view of play, because sport has its foundation in play, and play demands strict adherence to its temporary and absolute order, sport, therefore, offers habit an internal, objective field for testing its practical effects on each participant. Thus, the good sport might be construed to be one whose actions become easier on repetition as each of these actions opens the possibility of new creative reactions. Indeed, the player who knows and plays by the rules of a particular game appears to have always more freedom of action and creative capacity for new ways of attaining instances of excellence.

The insights of Peirce’s conception of habit become even more illuminating of the concept of sportsmanship when one understands habits in themselves not as actions but rather as the guide of thought. Hence, because the purpose of thought

is the settlement of “a belief, a rule of action, a habit of thought,” a habit can be distinguished from action by the fact that it involves generality, whereas an action involves singularity. An action is simply an instance of a habit. Thus, insofar as Peirce considers a habit as a general principle, and because generality, by being of the essence of mind, is not something reducible to mere physical regularity, a habit becomes “a disposition or readiness to act, which will, or would, be carried out if the proper conditions are, or were to be realized” (8: p. 162). In other words, a habit might be either a “will-be” or a “would-be,” which involves, Peirce maintains, a real continuity because it regulates both actual and existent happenings that occur according to it (2: p. 385)⁸ Now when it comes to sporting activities, one might wonder, therefore, about the practical effects of habit on man’s conduct, specifically on the conduct of the sport participant.

Because sport appears to be essentially an activity of humankind, it seems necessary to begin with a short account of the nature of man. Man, as Peirce claims, lives in two worlds: an “inner” world and an “outer” world. The interaction between the two worlds is achieved by his acquired habits and his natural dispositions (11: 5.487). Man is part of a natural world in which he finds himself as endowed with the power of reason. Reason, according to him, is the capacity for critical review and control of actions and habits of action. In other words, it is the source of man’s power of self-control. This explains why, for instance, in a horse race at any level, one expects good sportsmanship from the jockey, not the horse, even if the horse is named Smarty Jones. For reason essentially involves the freedom to choose among various alternatives of one’s actions. It also allows for symbolizing those alternatives in the present.

Along with his reason, man has another distinctive power: consciousness. Although consciousness does not always imply the capacity of self-control, Peirce maintains that every being that possesses the power of self-control is necessarily endowed with consciousness. Hence, consciousness is a criterion of man, but it is not a sufficient one. It requires reason if man is to be regarded as a being that fundamentally differs from others because of his capacity of control and self-control. Thus, consciousness is mere spontaneity that needs to be supplemented by reasoning and habits. It is worth noting, however, that in most of its degrees, consciousness is something man has no control over except in the case of reflexive consciousness.

Human beings are, therefore, beings of actions and ideals. Their conduct is shaped according to the rules provided by their natural environment and by their consciousness and reason. Each of their ideals becomes an ideal of conduct, which turns to be a real potentiality for future action. Through trial and error, then, it becomes a habit, that is, a law of conduct. Because humans are endowed with the power to review, criticize, and control their ideals, they become, in the long run, capable of reviewing, criticizing, and controlling their own review, criticism, and control. Thus, from their habits emerges self-control.

According to Peirce, through the process of habit taking, every individual ideal tends to become an ultimate end applicable to every reasonable being. In sport, the more one plays a certain role (player, coach, manager, spectator, etc.) the more one becomes aware of the potentialities and limits of that particular role as he or she continually confronts his or her understanding of her role with those of the best in the activity. This means that sportsmanship is always local to each game and

determined by its own rules and ethos. Although it appears to be totally unsporting for the mother of a 10-year-old girl to expect victory from a little league hockey game, there would be nothing wrong in the respectful disapproval expressed by some spectators concerning the lack of effort displayed by some professional athletes.

Because reason appears to be the locus of man's power of self-control, with the addition of his power of deliberation, man becomes a being of habits, that is, of "rules, norms or general patterns" that are nothing but "acquired dispositions to act in a certain way rather than in another" (13: p. 127). Thus, habits provide the foundation of man's power to control his action, and even to control his own control. Yet it is important to note that consciousness, in all its degrees and in relation to habit, is *firstness*, whereas habit is always *thirdness*. On the other hand, one must distinguish among the various types of self-control those "inhibitions and coordinations." These entirely escape consciousness from the instinctive modes of self-control, which, in turn, must be distinguished from the type of self-control resulting from training, as well as the capacity to control one's own self-control by virtue of some moral rule and the power to control one's control of control, that is, when one undertakes to improve his rule in virtue of an esthetic ideal (11: 5.533). Thus, because a human being is, to some extent, rational, he has a purpose, which has to be achieved according to the general laws of nature. He has the power consciously to take habits through reflection. This general tendency to take habits is itself a habit. In the long run, through trial and error, human beings acquire the power to control and criticize their habits and then develop, modify, and correct their old patterns of action so that habits can never become totally and ineradicably fixed.

Obviously, the consequence of this process of habit acquisition when it comes to children's involvement in sport appears to be the development of patterns of action consistent with the particular training received from the various sport educators among whom coaches and parents play a major role. My own experience as a participant in soccer games as a player, from youth leagues through college and highly competitive amateur leagues to the most "relaxed" Wednesday and Friday evening coed or men's over-40 leagues, has reinforced my conviction that sportsmanship is essentially a matter of the fixation of positive game habits, which in the long run turn into ideals, norms, and principles involving the proper conduct of the game. This understanding has also been reinforced and enhanced by more than 15 years of working as a youth-soccer coach and official. I have learned over the years that poor sportsmanship has a lot to do with poor sport education. It is, therefore, incumbent on sport educators among whom I would include coaches, parents, team managers, officials, and even players, to instill in all sport participants the ability to fulfill in a responsible way their role on or off the field of play independently of the power conferred by default to the regulative rules of sport.

5. Sportsmanship Is an Ideal of Ideals

In light of Peirce's concept of habit, we can now clearly identify the good sport as a being of reasonableness in the sense that, on the field of play, he or she always strives to make reasonable choices. In this perspective, one cannot be a good sport without the interplay of reason and consciousness. Unless one shows evidence

of the capacity of control and self-control and evidence of the power to review, criticize, and control her ideals, one can never become a good sport. Fortunately, unlike real life, which does not always offer many second chances to remedy one's errors, sport offers the ideal setting for fostering these capacities and powers. This is true because the consequences of most mistakes occurring in particular sporting activities are, indeed, not serious at all unless they are not understood properly by those involved in these activities. When, however, the context of the play spirit in which these mistakes occur is properly recognized and also understood to be a separate and mostly insignificant aspect of the overall life of the sport participants, sport offers a unique setting for trial and error. Hence, sport education that emphasizes the cultivation of better ways of control and self-control, is, therefore, the ideal tool of sportsmanship. This means, as was indicated earlier by our recourse to the pragmatist maxim, because the practical effects of sportsmanship are a matter of trial and error, one must give up the illusion of a normative definition, which would encompass all the ideals of sportsmanship once for all. Instead, one must find in the dirt of real games those specific habits or virtues worth conserving because of their contribution to the proper conduct of these games and, at the same time, those habits or virtues, which must be discarded for having failed the test of our sportive experience. In this perspective, sportsmanship then becomes the language of thought of sporting activities, that is, a medium of communication and integration.

Therefore, because sport always involves communication, the sport participant must acquire through the various instances of play, language, and discourse, the capacity for integrating her individual experiences into those of her teammates, opponents, fans, etc. It is through learning and habit-formation that the various participants in sporting activities achieve the integration of the past into the present and make future expectations appear real to present experiences. It follows that sportsmanship as the outcome of a process of habit-formation is essentially dynamic because, as John Dewey is right to point out,

Communication not only increases the number and variety of habits, but tends to link them subtly together, and eventually to subject habit-formation in a particular case to the habit of recognizing that new modes of association will exact a new use of it. Thus habit is formed in view of possible future changes and does not harden so readily (3: p. 229).

Indeed, as one learns to play, officiate, manage, or simply watch a particular game or sport, one's needs and relationships with the social environment increase. Each acquired habit requires appropriate conditions for its execution. As habits increase in complexity and number, the participant is forced to find a method of inquiry, a method involving experimentation through trial and error. Consequently, the more each participant is capable of forming new habits, the more he or she increases his adaptability, sensitiveness, responsiveness, explosiveness, and susceptibility. As human beings we are endowed with these powers thanks to our capacity for social discourse and action. Children, especially in their younger age, offer the sport educator a plan ready to be filled with patterns and rules of action. From the fact that each sport participant is a being of habits, it follows that sportsmanship is not merely an attitude nor is it merely a virtue of sport or even a mere moral category. Instead, it is the outcome of a process of epistemic mediation, a process

of *thirdness* that gives meaning to the activity of sport, and serves as, in Peircean parlance, the logical *interpretant* that bridges the gap between behavior and meaning. As such, sportsmanship is the result of the process of instilling into the participant the various habits and rules of actions that have passed or are expected to pass the test of our sporting experience. This means that sportsmanship is always dynamic and its totality, though highly desirable, might never be captured by an abstract and simplistic definition.

All in all, if anyone is still unclear about our conception of sportsmanship, let us put it this way: The true champions of sportsmanship are perhaps not likely to be found among the sport theorists, sport ethicists, or “best” referees and sport officials. Instead, one would be well served to search among the multitude of sport educators ranging from the volunteer recreational coaches to the boxing trainers who, through the dirt of daily sport experiences, turn home and street villains into true sport participants who come to understand that sport is all about striving together toward the betterment of humankind. This is, however, a topic for another day.

Notes

1. In the ensuing discussion, the views offered by James W. Keating, Randolph M. Feezell, William Lad Sessions, and others who have contributed to this debate over the past few years will be examined.
2. Likewise, the Los Angeles Dodgers’ fan code of conduct posted on their club official Web page, for instance, contains 12 rules, none of which addresses the value of good opponents in the skill or business growth of their team. While rule #11 puts the usual emphasis on punishment stating that “fans must adhere to the Code of Conduct provisions or they will be subject to ejection without refund and revocation of season tickets and may also be in violation of city ordinances resulting in possible arrest and prosecution,” Rule #12, ironically, demands that fans “be courteous to Dodger Stadium neighbors upon entering and leaving the ballpark.” One would expect to see, at least, one of the 12 rules recommending that fans welcome the visiting team players and show some appreciation for everyone of their excellent play even in the face of a home team defeat. Indeed, without the visiting team, there would no game, no fun to be had by the fans, no money to be earned by the home club.
3. Every year at the start of the high school season, the National Federation and State High School Athletic Associations provide memos to be strictly followed by game referees and officials. A few years ago, the Ohio High School Soccer Athletic Association even included in its memo harsh punishment (ejection from the game) for foul and abusive language. The only problem was that it did not provide a criterion for judging the severity of every type of language abusive. One can only guess what happened during the season. A year later, the OHSAA finally came to the conclusion that perhaps it would be wiser to leave such powers indeterminate, that is, to the referees and officials’ discretion.
4. “Soccer Officials Memorandum,” Ohio High School Athletic Association, June 25, 2004, p. 38.
5. This section provides a summary of my discussion of Peirce’s account of habit for the reader unfamiliar with the notion of thirdness. For an extended discussion of this topic, refer to my “On Habit and Consciousness: A Peircean Critique of James’s Conception of Habit” (9: pp. 25–29). This paper discusses the oversights of a static conception of habit and contrasts them with the insights of a dynamic conception of habit.
6. The term *meliorism* is used here to refer to what John J. Sturhr calls the ability of human action to improve the human condition, which is a fundamental feature of American pragmatism.

Meliorism is construed to be a logical consequence of pragmatism, not intellectualism, and serves as a criterion for right action. To improve the human condition, we must rely on the small truths resulting from experimentation conducted on the practical effects of our ideas and ideals.

7. All references to the *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce* will hereafter follow both the JPS guidelines and those of the *Collected Papers*, which require that references be made to volume numbers and section numbers rather than volume numbers and page numbers.

8. For a more detailed account of this view see John Boler's "Habits of Thought" (2) and Peirce (11: 5.436).

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