BEAUTY IN PLAY: AESTHETICS FOR ATHLETES

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I

There are two major issues to which an adequate aesthetics of sport must address itself.[1] The first is how "the aesthetic" is to be interpreted. On one hand, we have the view[2] that anything can be viewed aesthetically because the aesthetic is a concept which is applied to objects rather than to the content of some set of objects. So quite naturally (and trivially) sports can be viewed this way. On the other hand, there is a view[3] that for objects to be considered aesthetically they must first be identified as art or art forms. So those who wish to argue for an aesthetics of sport must first establish that sport is art, and then go on to its aesthetic dimension. There is some affinity between this view and the one which presupposes "the aesthetic" as the content of an object rather than a concept or point of view.

The second issue centers around the meaning of "sport" and its relation to other categories. How does the aesthetic apply to sports? Does the aesthetic apply to all sports or only to some of them? Is it incidental to their endeavor? Or, are aesthetic considerations and feelings integral to the sporting activity? These questions are not easily answered, and important categorical decisions have to be made in formulating a theory. There are some philosophers who are skeptical of such an enterprise. Professor L. A. Reid expresses serious reservations as to how far the terms artistic and aesthetic apply to sport situations (p. 15). For him, in the last analysis, sport is not art and the activities of a sportsman are different from those of an artist. Paul Ziff[4] thinks that there are no significant problems which would fall under the rubric, the aesthetics of sport.

In his Introduction to the book, *Readings in the Aesthetics of Sport*, Mr. Masterson says "that sport and art are subjects that do not go well together seems to be a feature of our way of thinking . . . Certainly aesthetic theory has rarely associated sport with art" (p. 1). He then adds that "there would seem to be some need for serious attention to be paid to the connection between art and sport and this volume offers a variety of approaches" (p. 2). The skeptics would say there is no need for serious attention and that we would do better to keep aesthetics in the domain where it belongs, or to focus on problems in connection with sports which are epistemological, linguistic, and logical in character.

At the other extreme we have someone, like Hans Keller who thinks that "while there is beauty in sport there is essentially no beauty in art. It

is the task of aesthetics to examine the concept of beauty itself" (p. 89). I guess this is the real reason why aesthetics has been so *dreary*[5]—it has been examining the wrong things all this time! Sports are, for Keller, the proper objects of aesthetics—not art.

However, let us see what kind of case can be made for an aesthetics of sport, since all the contributors, with the exception of Professor Reid, think that a viable one is in the offing.

II

Since the advent of such movements as impressionism, cubism and abstractionism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Western Art has never been the same. Its traditional art forms, music, painting, etc., began to find new forms of artistic expression in their company. For instance, film and dance have been added as art forms. As of late, there are many who are arguing that Sport should be included. Let me go back to Masterson's remarks. He vaguely states that there is *some need* for serious attention to be paid to the connection between sport and art. What is this so-called need Masterson speaks of? Perhaps it is *educational*, because one of the reasons why sport and art are not associated with each other is that they are not *appreciated* or *experienced* that way. I am reminded of a splendid passage from Sir Herbert Read's *The Tenth Muse*:

> We are miseducated into a condition of aesthetic insensibility, then the full appreciation of art would depend on another kind of education, for great art may be infinitely complex. There is such a thing as the education of the senses, and skill itself, which all great art demands, is an education of the senses. It is true that we do not need to be a skillful player to appreciate great music or (to mention another form of art) a great game of tennis. But we must possess and develop an intuitive understanding of skill, which is perhaps based on an imaginative participation in these skills—we anticipate, and mentally imitate, every minute and subtle action of the artist. But this is not knowledge in the scholastic sense. It is an instinctive activity.[6]

It could be that the same situation exists in sport for the reasons which Read gave for art, because a similar kind of understanding or knowledge is involved. As Read adds, "Art is an elaborate discipline, a relentless struggle with intractable materials, and unless the public appreciates this creative process, its instinctive approach to art will not penetrate to the inner court, where enjoyment is most intense" (p. 293). What is it that we recognize in front of us when we are engaged (imaginatively or otherwise) in this "instinctive activity?" Is Read's statement on art equally true of sports? Is what Read speaks of what is lacking in our appreciation of sports? What is it that we need to see in order to see sport as art? In response to these questions, most advocates of the sport as art thesis argue that these activities share certain *aesthetic qualities* in common and that these characteristics are the ground for the analogy. I shall discuss in turn

each of these qualities or features which make up the present aesthetics of sport.

Gaskin and Masterson suggest that what must be perceived and recognized is *athletic form* (p. 154), and they develop this notion on the basis of an analogy with artistic form.[7] They quote (p. 153) Herbert Read as saying: "We speak of the form of the athlete and we mean very much the same when we speak of the form of a work of art."[8] What is Read suggesting here by this use of "form"? It becomes clear when we supply the rest of his comment: "An athlete is in good form when he carries no superfluous flesh; when his muscles are strong, his carriage good, his movements economical." Now these *could be* those features which would lead one to aesthetic appreciation. But these are not the most important ones, and moreover they are not the ones which Gaskin and Masterson have in mind, except the economy of movement. Only the last feature is a necessary condition for the notion of athletic form. For instance, a tennis player can exhibit "good form" or athletic form and be overweight, flabby, and not in the best of physical condition (i.e., Wertz). He could, however, still have the classic, fluid strokes. In fact we say this of many middle-aged tennis players, golfers and swimmers, aside from their hero, George Blanda. (There are many Vic Bradens around the courts.) So what we perceive, and what we are moved by when we aesthetically contemplate an athletic event is not what Read means by "good form," but a use of that phrase which reflects

> (*F*) Our knowledge of the given performance in addition to its use in describing the action or movement of the players taking place.

(*F*) should be read as what Read earlier referred to as skill as an education of the senses. This is something like what Gaskin and Masterson had in mind. Why bother with this point? Because the former use is one that it is important to qualify, for it is what first comes to mind when discussions of "form" take place. The term applies more to the movement of the athlete than to the athlete himself; witness the world heavy weight weight-lifters for a vivid example.

More importantly associated with the notion of athletic form which is found in movement by several of the writers is *continuity*. There is a certain "flow" or organic (i.e., non-mechanical) movement to a player's actions, which we as spectators many times label as "natural" in appreciating his or her stroke, swing, pitch or kick. As David Aspin asserts:

> . . . I would place sporting activities very firmly within that class of activities and performances and achievements that are properly spoken of as exhibiting aesthetic qualities and coming up to the highest aesthetic standards. Thus, aesthetic movement in sport is not simply skilled movement; it has, as well as that, certain qualities of excellence that are *distinctly* appraised, such as, say:

> flowing movement over a full range; perfect balance and poise; symmetrical movement with a good line (where the latter is often curving, as in the flight of an implement used in sport). These are actions, performances, outcomes that we perceive, attend to, are stimulated by, and judge as excellent, as *aesthetic*. (pp. 132-3)

A good example of Aspin's characterization is Arnold Palmer's account of golf and its magic (which I quote from Gaskin and Masterson's essay):

> It is gratifying and tantalising, precise and unpredictable, it requires complete concentration and total relaxation. It satisfies the soul and frustrates the intellect. It is at the same time rewarding and maddening. What other people may find in poetry or art museums I find in the flight of a good drive–the white ball sailing up into that blue sky, growing smaller and smaller then suddenly reaching its apex, curving, falling and finally dropping to the turf to roll some more, just the way I planned it. (pp. 152-3)

What is it that make a *good* drive? What do we mean when we remark to one another after watching Palmer tee off, "That sure was a good drive"? The best answer the book has to offer for sports in general is the one Gaskin and Masterson formulate.

They define sport (as well as art) as:

> (*S*) The resolution of problems intrinsic to the medium in search for the ideal. (p. 153)

Let me give (*S*) an interpretation. *The medium* in sports is human movement governed by rules. *The intrinsic problems* are those of timing, stroke production, placement, etc., and *the resolution* is the practice to get it right. "Getting it right" is the achievement or close approximation of *an ideal form* (see pp. 153-4, 135, 141), and the notion of "getting it right" is an important aspect of both the artistic and athletic enterprises. Notice that there is a close parallel between Read's former characterization of art as a relentless struggle with intractable materials, etc., and Gaskin and Masterson's.

At this stage there are several good discussions of the concept of *mastery*. Great Sport (and not just sport with a small "s"–such as the way this author plays tennis) comes about when "the players," as Carlisle puts it, "having mastered the skills, can then express the 'medium' " (p. 26) itself. The great athletes express the language of movement, or better yet, it is *embodied* in them. In his study "Sport and Art–the Concept of Mastery," Keller discusses the connotations of the word master which from general usage implies the ideas of genius and teacher. He notes–drawing on his background in music–that

> mastery is developed from a recognized craft according to accepted rules, and this means that practice is a necessity. In art, the term practice is used, but in sport it is usually called training. In either sphere, it is skill that is being practised, and developed into mastery. (p. 91)

Keller goes on to talk about some of the inherent dangers in practice in both spheres. Practice with the aim of mastery in mind is worthless unless it is based on considerable natural talent. (Some coaches weigh this as the most important trait in an athlete.) Most of the near-creative performers–geniuses–Keller observes, are suspicious of routine-like mastery and hate training and practice (p. 92), although top-flight tennis players, e.g., Chris Evert and Rod Laver, *do* practice several hours a day, every day, to get the rough edges off their strokes. When athletes become performers and a lot of money is involved in their success, practice plays a larger role in their preparation for the game or match. (The same applies to golf, too, in addition to most other professional sports. After all, they are first of all *physical activities*, which implies that whatever skills are involved they must be exercised if they are to be kept.)

I have discussed thus far *athletic form*, *continuity*, and *mastery*. Before I mention the other aesthetic qualities, I want to introduce them by way of an argument between L. A. Reid and Carlisle, because where they belong is debatable. Reid bases his skepticism of an aesthetics of sport on the following consideration: "One has to distinguish carefully between *sporting* intentions and purposes not as such normally aesthetic at all, and the *aesthetic* values which may arise incidentally in the performances of sports, games, athletics, gymnastics" (p. 15, see also p. 17). Carlisle's rebuttal is worth quoting in detail:

> The main function of sport is that it serves as a basis for the exercise of skill, with physical prowess. This is usually put by saying that the end of sport (the winning) and the rules are there to make the activity more interesting. Change the rules or ends and the game alters, and of course the game can be improved or weakened by such changes. Rules are subservient to a better game. However, the intention to win is not aesthetically irrelevant nor sporting irrelevant, for it is this which gives a game its form. *To have a good game then is the crux of the matter, and it is this intention which is the primary intention in sport.* Of course there is pleasure in winning for performer and fan, but the real sportsman's joy, and the real fan's too, comes from successful performance. Joy in sport is not just equated with victory, nor is the winning team necessarily the best team. (pp. 24-5; my italics)

So for Carlisle, appreciation of sports requires a kind of understanding which is more than instrumental or purposive. It requires evaluations (in addition to the ones mentioned above) that are closely associated with art forms. They are *expressive* (*i.e., symbolic*) *and evocative* (*i.e., emotional*) *elements* seen in the movements of players; *intellectual beauty* seen in their play-solutions to problems marked by such things as lack of error, use of original, economical, difficult, and spectacular maneuvers against an equally matched opponent. This state of affairs aids in bringing about *dramatic unity*. Great sport has drama–the challenge and conflict set the

stage for dramatic tension. We see it build or wane as the game progresses, finally reaching its climax towards the end. A game's unity is impaired if there are penalties; they break up a game's wholeness and continuity. Gaskin and Masterson and Carlisle think that these qualities are integral to sport.

R. K. Elliott and L. A. Reid think not; the qualities are at best incidental. Elliott holds that

> The goddess of sport is not Beauty but Victory, a jealous goddess who demands an absolute homage. Every act performed by the player or athlete must be for the sake of victory, without so much as a side-glance in the direction of beauty. *A game is a good one if it is played hard and skillfully, irrespective of its aesthetic merit or lack of merit.* (p. 111; my italics)

So here is one of the major issues that the authors raise and one which is not satisfactorily resolved. Carlisle and Elliott have different notions of what *a good game* consists. For Elliott, it is interior to the game itself—a well-played game. For Carlisle, games are to be viewed teleologically—keeping in mind the end or intention to play—a successful, better game.

The crucial question at present is

> (*Q*) Is the aesthetic (merit or appraisal or perception, etc.) incidental or integral to sports?

Carlisle, Gaskin and Masterson, and Aspin think that it is integral. Reid and Elliott believe that it is incidental. Part of the reason why these latter gentlemen think so is that they emphasize or conceive of "the aesthetic" as being a *disinterested activity* which requires some sort of detachment (psychic distance), and hence, an aesthetic object is one which may be viewed as something worthy of observation and attention for its own sake apart from any instrumental value or purpose. When the aesthetic is characterized this way, one can see why Reid and Elliott hold the position they do. But there is more to it than this; see Aspin and Carlisle's interpretation of "the aesthetic."

Perhaps the way to solve the issue is not to argue about the aesthetic, but to do as Paul Ziff (see note 4) and as David Best (see note 2) have done—to examine sports to see what different features or qualities which we call aesthetic fall under some sports and what qualities apply to other sports. (These qualities may not be the same ones, or their predominance may be less with some than with other sports.) So a more careful look at sports needs to be made.[9]

NOTES

[1] I have dealt with this topic in greater detail in "Toward a Sports Aesthetic," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 11 (1977). The present essay is an abbreviated version of the above review article.

[2] See David Best, "The Aesthetic in Sport," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 14 (Summer 1974), 197f; and reprinted in *Journal of Human Movement Studies*, 1 (March 1975), 41f. See also Professor Saw's methodological statement in note 5.

[3] E.g., L. A. Reid, "Sport, the Aesthetic and Art," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 18 (Summer 1970), 249; and his essay in the anthology, *Readings in the Aesthetics of Sport*, H. T. A. Whiting and D. W. Masterson, eds. (London: Lepus Books, 1974), entitled, "Aesthetics and Education," pp. 5-20. Almost all the contributors to the anthology hold to this view, too. (Parenthetical references will be made to this anthology.)

[4] Paul Ziff, "A Fine Forehand," *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1 (September 1974), p. 105. Ziff's remark has been hotly contested in later issues of that journal.

[5] See John Passmore, "The Dreariness of Aesthetics," reprinted in *Essays in Aesthetics and Language*, William Elton, ed. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1959), ch. III; pp. 37ff. Perhaps sports will save aesthetics from the Kingdom of Dullness.

Ruth L. Saw makes the following, related pronouncement: "We hear much more often a 'beautiful stroke' in cricket than in painting, and many of our moral judgments have an aesthetic flavor. An action may be bold, dashing, mean, underhanded, unimaginative, cringing, fine, as well as right or wrong. Aesthetic adjectives and adverbs may occur in *any* context, and part of our job (the aesthetician's) is to separate out the various uses and establish their interrelationships," in her *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Anchor Books ed.; Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1971), pp. 27-8; my italics. One of the reasons why we hear more about beauty in sports than in the arts is that we witness the production of the strokes. Just think what painting would be like if it could be view likewise, i.e., as a performance exhibiting physical skills.

[6] Herbert Read, *The Tenth Muse: Essays in Criticism* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 292.

[7] Their work (sec. 11) entitled "The Work of Art in Sport" also appeared in the *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, 1 (September 1974), 36-66; minus the accompanying pictures.

[8] Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972), p. 36. As I will explain above, what Read means by "form" is not the same as Gaskin and Masterson mean, and hence he doesn't really support their argument.

[9] This I have done in another paper entitled "Are Sports Art Forms?" I wish to gratefully acknowledge the TCU Research Foundation for its support of my studies.

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