

**Introduction: Sport—A Psychoanalytic Inquiry.**

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### **Introduction: Sport—A Psychoanalytic Inquiry**

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## **Introduction: Sport—A Psychoanalytic Inquiry**

Jack Black and Joseph S. Reynoso

Getting stuck: Why sport and psychoanalysis?

The underlying contention guiding this collection is that psychoanalysis can provide a novel approach to theorising our investments in sport. When exploring, examining, discussing, and debating the fascination and frustrations that characterizes sport, what this collection will consider are the very ways in which we become “stuck” in sport. For us, getting “stuck” helpfully describes the degree to which one can both be interested in sport, following a particular team or training regularly, while also being frustrated, angered, and undermined by sport (grievances, which, in most cases, in no way discount or prevent one’s very love of sport).

What compounds this contradiction is that a psychoanalytic approach to sport does not necessarily provide or outline any answers to the problems of sport. Rather, we double-down on the fact there is no rational explanation as to why millions of people choose to partake in strenuous forms of physical exclusion for years on end, with the only reward being a medal or personal best for the lucky few—not to mention the multitudes who choose to watch these athletic spectacles. Certainly, this is not to say that sport does not have its explanations. We are all too familiar with the cliched responses and tired explanations: “it makes me feel good”, “it keeps me busy”, “it releases endorphins”, “I enjoy the social-side”, “my Dad followed this team, so, in a way, I’m continuing the tradition”. What goes amiss in such routine responses is *why* this specific activity—sport, in whatever form—is chosen? When so much of sport requires one to partake in choices that fundamentally affect one’s life, then we require a theoretical space in which we can begin to ask important questions of both sport and ourselves.

On this basis, sport is not necessarily detached from our lives, a mere weekend past-time, separate from the world of work (although it can be described as such); instead, as this collection will assert, a psychoanalytic account of sport can allow us to question and explore what it is that makes us human and what is it about our inherent sociality that makes sport such an important part of so many lives. To do so, requires an investigation into the desires, fears, and fantasises that underscore the subject—the very phenomena that psychoanalysis seeks to examine.

To be clear, the following collection should not be so easily associated with the far more popular, sport psychology. While we remain open to the importance of psychological investigations of the subject and sport, as well as the various psychological approaches, theories, and methodologies that this discipline encourages, we seek to deliberately move away from overly focusing on the study of athletic behaviour and psychological motivation. Too often, we see the study of psychology as happily succumbing to a discourse that seeks only to make athletes, at whatever level of performance, “better”. This cognitive and behavioural approach focuses predominantly on conscious processes of action, promulgating “a form of ‘ego psychology’ ... concerned with adapting people to society instead of enabling them to question it” (Parker 2023). Without discounting the important work that goes into measuring and quantifying the conscious psychic and mental processes of athletes, the focus of this collection will be to consider how a psychoanalytic theory can afford a unique insight into the cultural and political significance of sport.

For this reason, the focus of this collection works adjacent to clinical accounts of psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup> What the following chapters will provide is an application of psychoanalytic concepts that critically reflect upon the importance of sport, while, at the same time, using sport as an important site for psychoanalytic inquiry. Whether it be exploring the dynamic potentialities of the athletic body (Part I), the psychoanalytic significances of “the coach” (Part II), the tensions and frustrations that emerge from the athlete-fan relationship (Part III), the role of sport in defining and comprising one’s identity (Part IV), or uncovering the creativity of play and its fundamental connections to sport (Part V), in each case, we draw specific attention to the problems, contradictions, antagonisms, and tensions that underscore our relations to sport. In this regard, we hope that this collection paves the way in providing an academic companionship between sport and psychoanalytic theory; one that will allow us to explore a number of important gaps in both psychoanalytic theory and sport itself.

Importantly, it is by following Freud’s original investigations into what makes being human such an uncomfortable experience, that the application of psychoanalysis belies any quick critique. These critiques have coalesced with some rather unhelpful generalizations, often at the behest of a media perception that propagates a number of popular inaccuracies regarding psychoanalysis. Much of this stands opposed to the numerous benefits of psychoanalytic theory, including its

various schools and adherents, which, in both their application and confrontation, collectively provide an unexplored insight into the social practices, actions, and behaviours of the sport's fan and participant.

Furthermore, critically addressing and analysing sport through a psychoanalytic lens can allow us to shed light on the antagonisms and contradictions that sport creates for both its proponents and detractors. This can begin to tackle the myths, fantasies, and overly positive appraisals that characterise the organisation and management of sport—most notable when, at the start of major international sporting competitions, such as the FIFA World Cup or Olympic Games, we are suddenly subjected to pontified declarations of sport's inherent importance and its capacity to cure the world of its intractable problems (poverty, cultural/ethnic conflict, racism, etc.). In view of such assessments, debating what sport is and how we define and relate to it remains an important point of contention—one in which a psychoanalytic interpretation of sport must approach.

#### On psychoanalysis

With its focus on the peculiarity of the subject and society, the practice of psychoanalysis has evolved a clinical practice that seeks to examine and explore these very peculiarities. Beginning with Sigmund Freud in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, psychoanalysis marked a significant departure from traditional psychological and psychiatric approaches, while also playing a pivotal role in the development of modern psychology and psychotherapy. Influenced by the work of Josef Breuer, a physician who used “talking cure” methods to treat patients with hysterical symptoms, Freud's studies in neurology and his encounters with works of philosophy, such as, Friedrich Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, helped to shape his psychoanalytic practice. In a number of important works, including *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1953 [1900]) and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1960 [1901]), Freud introduced several key concepts, including the unconscious, the Oedipus complex, and libido, while also laying the groundwork for psychoanalysis as a distinct field of study. Following the formation of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society in 1902, psychoanalysis gained prominence and expanded internationally through the work of Carl Jung, Alfred Adler, Melanie Klein, and Jacques Lacan, all of whom developed their own psychoanalytic theories and concepts.

Fast forward almost 125 years, and psychoanalysis as a body of thought is one that has permeated beyond its origins in the consulting room to represent a “climate of opinion”, to quote W.H. Auden’s (1940) memorialization of Freud. Perhaps it is more accurate to say, psychoanalysis has become a body of *thoughts*, contrary to its depiction by critics through the years as an antiquated model unchanged since Freud’s early monograph *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1950 [1895]). Whether through ego psychology, interpersonal, object relations, self-psychology, or the relational orientation (just to name a few), the various schools of psychoanalytic thought, alongside the quantitative empirical research that has accompanied it, have developed and expanded its investigations in method, practice, and scope. One only needs to peruse the *Textbook of Psychoanalysis* (Gabbard, Litowitz, and Williams 2012) to see the non-clinical sections devoted to psychoanalytic contributions to topic and fields of thought as diverse as anthropology, film, literature, music, and the visual arts. A broader web search would result in psychoanalytic articles, books, conferences, and videos in recent years devoted to architecture, climate change, comedy, race, poverty, the Sopranos, and war.

Consequently, this collection aims to address the limited attention to sport in the expanding breadth of psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, by looking towards the interstices that underlie psychology, the social sciences, and the humanities, there exists a variety of sporting sub-disciplines examining the psychological, physiological, sociological, and political importance of sport. Whereas the study of sport encourages a decidedly multidisciplinary as well as interdisciplinary account of the subject and society, the benefits of a psychoanalytic approach have, unfortunately, been left unexplored.<sup>2</sup> It is in the psychoanalytic study of sport, therefore, that the contradictions inherent to the subject can be avowed; or, to put it another way, what we disavow in our sporting spectatorship or participation affords us the opportunity to see how our unconscious is structured. Consequently, by way of expounding a psychoanalytic account of sport, this collection offers a return to one of Freud’s (1923/1961) essential concepts: the unconscious. Indeed, it is in exploring the unconscious and its various ramifications in sport that this collection will provide a critical consideration of sport’s psychoanalytic significance. In order to achieve this, however, let us first consider and introduce the unconscious.

Sport and the unconscious

There is, it would seem, no need to do many of things we end-up doing: whether this be consuming excessive amounts of food; deliberately saying something that will hurt a friend or loved one; or returning once again to our team's stadium in hope of a run of bad form to end, or for the recent success to be maintained. While attending the games of your local team may not initially be conceived as a self-destructive activity, the drive to do so nonetheless strikes a formal comparison to those who choose to partake in, for example, a six-day, ultramarathon in the Sahara Desert (such as those who compete in *Marathon des Sables* [Cherrington et al. 2020]).<sup>3</sup> Similarly, whereas repeatedly being punched in the face may require no further explanation for those choosing not to partake in boxing, for the many that do, the activity itself becomes an important part of their very being—something more than the simple suggestion that it keeps one fit, lets off steam, or provides structure to the day. Equally, though no one would ever deny the importance of their family, when a close family birthday clashes with the “big game”, then, one's closest familial ties are immediately put to the test (even when you inevitably choose the family occasion, you're always left “checking the score”). While in either case the sporting fan and participant may be conscious of what it is they are doing, the unconscious desires, fantasies, and fears that drive them to do so are not always so readily made sense of, or even understood.

Instead, competing in sport can often belie any rational explanation, speaking instead to an unconscious enjoyment that, in many ways, works against one's well-being. For this reason, in order to make sense of the unconscious processes that permeate the subject we cannot look to the individual. Popular perceptions of clinical psychoanalysis are perhaps too easily associated with images of the couch—an inherently individualistic practice that has unfortunately marginalised psychoanalysis as a “quack” practice. In such cases, the unconscious is perceived as residing deep within the individual and beset by their own internal pathologies.

In contrast, the aim of psychoanalysis is “to provide a rigorous logic of subjectivity which is not ‘purely subjective’ in the derogatory sense, the one which would make it a mixture of individual whim, insight and ingenuity rather than a method” (Thwaites 2007, 4), but which regards the subject as constituted by the social—and by this we mean the very desires, fantasies, values, and beliefs that constitute the social field, through which the subject is constituted. What is more, these desires, fantasies, values, and beliefs are not simply socially acquired; that is,

they do not prescribe a consistent process of social acculturation but emerge as part of a dialectical process that locates the inconsistencies of the subject as interdependent to the contradictions and antagonisms that underwrite the social relations we share. In other words, the “Subject is not simply an autonomous, free agent, but it is also not simply a mere effect of the structure as fully consistent in itself. It is rather an effect of the gap in this structure, of its inherent inconsistency or incompleteness” (Zupančič 2018, 1). Under this light, what the unconscious reveals is the deep interdependence between subjects and their environments. Due to the various social relations that the subject relies upon, there is in psychoanalysis no boundary between the subject and the social; instead, what constitutes the social interdependences that undergird “the human” is the fecundity of the unconscious.

The relevance of the unconscious is revealed at the interstices of the subject and the social. Sitting beyond the confines of the individual, the unconscious resides in those moments of contradiction that relay the very messiness of the subject’s relation to the world as well as the other subjects they interact with. Sport is not immune to these dynamics (Black and Reynoso forthcoming). Whereas, in his account of the unconscious, ‘Freud directed his attention towards the border of the outside-inside division of the human and its Other’ (Thakur and Dickstein 2018, 4), it is in accordance with this border that the contradictions and distortions that underlie the unconscious are, to a certain extent, actively pursued in the case of sport.<sup>4</sup>

If the unconscious reveals anything it is that what is perceived to be external to the subject is more often than not internally significant to them—indeed, an integral part of the subject, which is also radically Other. This underscores the fact that the unconscious can never be located in the individual. Here, “the unconscious is not a subjective distortion of the objective world, it is first and foremost an indication of a fundamental inconsistency of the objective world itself, which—as such, that is as inconsistent—allows for and generates its own (subjective) distortions” (Zupančič 2008, 16). These inconsistencies can be identified in the various antagonisms that intersect the social field; antagonisms that bear witness to the fact that one’s problems are always forged in accordance with one’s inherent sociality.

Given this, we can begin to see why for the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, “the unconscious is politics” (2023). Again, this is not a politicization of the self, but an intent to examine how the very actions and beliefs that one may hold dear—indeed, that one may consider to be fundamental to one’s sense of self—are

only ever brought to light in one's social activity (Hanlon and Žižek 2001). This positions the unconscious as revealing that which speaks to the very ways in which one is both subjected to but also subjectivized by the sociocultural dynamics in which one exists in. In making sense of one's actions, belief, and behaviours one is always and unrelentingly marked by that which the subject may not necessarily be aware of, but which nonetheless intrudes and introduces itself upon one's social relations and thinking.

This proposes that there is always something Other to the subject; that one's very beliefs and actions may not be consciously recognised by the subject, but, nevertheless, become reproduced in their social relations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the slips that permeate one's speech, from where Lacan asserted that "the unconscious is the Other's discourse" (2006, 10, italics removed). For Lacan, "It is this discourse, which is to say, *the signifying field* in all its ambiguities and unintended enunciations, in all its attempted evasions and slippages of meaning, this signifying field *as it is spoken by the subject*, that, in effect, *is the unconscious*" (Hook 2018, 42, italics in original). This is not to suggest that the subject is nothing more than an empty vessel, through which the Other's discourse is mindlessly recited on behalf of the subject. On the contrary, while the subject has agency, such agency is always dependent on a "social bond", or, as Lacan refers to, a discourse (Žižek and Salecl 1996, 32). Accordingly, while any articulation is subjected to a discourse that is not of the subject's choosing, it is through this very discourse that the subject is required to make meaning—a meaning that is just as much predicated on acts of miscommunication as it is in one's capacity to communicate effectively (Black 2021). In fact, where else can we begin to see the effects of the unconscious than in the mistakes, failures, and miscommunications that befall the sporting athlete? Indeed, the missed shot, the unrequired foul, or the sudden slip, all suggest an unconscious manifestation, a parapraxis, in one's conscious actions.

These descriptions endow the unconscious a strange topology, functioning from both within and outside the subject and revealing that which constitutes the subject, but which can never be known. Importantly, "The unconscious does not refer to things inaccessible to consciousness and does not mean the opposite of consciousness; it rather refers to an active and ongoing process: the work of censorship, substitution, and condensation when facing impossibility, conflict, deadlock, and impediment" (Zupančič 2016, 219). Rather than working in opposition

to consciousness, what the unconscious prescribes is a remainder: something from “outside” that complicates our consciousness, residing in the gaps that belie one’s conscious experiences. Simply put, we can determine that what the unconscious reveals is that there is always more than what meets the eye. It is these unconscious processes that serve to constitute the subject, but which also suggest something about the social relations that one partakes in.

We may function quite happily in ignoring the residing impact of these gaps and disavowing their affects; yet this nonetheless endows the unconscious an important role in psychoanalytic investigations: no matter the treatment, psychoanalysis can never function to eradicate the unconscious. Instead, attempts to identify the unconscious will always end in failure, but it is at this point of failure that the new is forged. Indeed, new perspectives, new social relations, and new problems are established which serve only to emphasise the irreducibility of the unconscious and its affects.

In light of this, we draw a direct line between the intractable unconscious and the inherent antagonisms and contradictions that sport exposes. This is perhaps best seen in the ephemeral nature of the sporting success: a success which, once achieved, is always immediately followed by the proceeding season, the forthcoming qualifiers, the next bout. While this speaks to the relation between sport and desire, it also opens a path through which the political nature of the unconscious is experienced (Lacan 2023). In much the same way that there is no escaping the unconscious and its political affects, there is also no escape through sport. While characterizations of sport may suggest that it provides an escape from the humdrum of our day-to-day lives, an opportunity to let off steam and ignore the myriad of problems that encroach upon our daily existence, such characterizations belie the fact that “those who consciously seek flight from the reality of the world and its politics betray themselves in the ways supporting a favorite team delivers individuals into the politics of the world just the same” (Reynoso 2021, 598).

For American audiences, the kinds of contradiction that riddle subjectivity come to bear in the sporting example par excellence... the Sunday football game. Prefigured as an escape from politics and the ills of the world, one is nonetheless participating in the celebration of militarism that has come to frame the contemporary presentation (especially after 9/11) of professional athletic events, as writers like Dave Zirin (2008) have discussed in depth. From the outcry against Colin Kaepernick’s

genuflection to protest black death by police, or athletes showing support for the queer community with various rainbow gear, many spectators decry the visible entry of politics into the field of play, without consciously realizing what their outrage also reveals. As a reminder that the unconscious should be looked for more at the surface than depth, the upset of the fan at a political display on the basketball court can only laughably be claimed as protecting the sanctity of an apolitical space. The distress contrarily reveals the fan's reaction to the possible interruption of the enjoyment that accompanies the disavowal of the knowledge that everything about attending a sporting event reflects the geopolitical imprint of our capitalistic times.

Broadly applied, it is through the unconscious that we can begin to trace what sport is but also how it is used; that is, its role and function within society, including the importance that it carries. Sport provides a context in which the unconscious is crystalized, forged in the social bonds that sport maintains and exacerbates, including the comradery experienced between teammates as well as the division and violence it can evoke between rival fans. There are unconscious satisfactions derived from these experiences, which go beyond the mere activity of sport. In fact, what this speaks to is the inherent insignificance of sport: its rules and regulations are all invented, the time and money spent on it bears no wider importance, and the drama and excitement it establishes is mostly contrived via a global media-sport complex that demands our enthrallment, just as much as our anger and distaste (Maguire 2011 see also Black 2021). Thus, while sport is inherently “nothing”, it nonetheless means “something” for a vast majority of the world's population—including its detractors (Black and Reynoso forthcoming). It is only when conceived through our desire, fantasies, and fears that sport's unique significance can be observed.

One important area where these observations can be made is in the unconscious repetitions that sport evokes. Whether it be consecutive fixtures and seasons, the annual tournaments, or the multiple weekly training sessions, so much of sport relies upon repetition. It was this repetition that troubled Freud, noticing as he did the various repetitions that constituted the lives of his patients. Whether this was apparent in their dreams or mistakes, it was in their speech that Freud identified the importance of repetition for the subject. It would seem that it is this same repetition that underlies our investment in sport. No matter the defeat, no matter the failure, sport, for many, requires one to return, once more, to the gym or the training ground.

It is in this sporting repetition that a way to the unconscious in sport and the enjoyment it evokes can be traced.

Furthermore, what we hope to have emphasized in these opening remarks is the underlying concern that psychoanalysis offers no cure. In psychoanalysis, there is no life beyond the antagonisms and contradictions that underlie our unconscious investment in sport. When the approach of ego-psychology is to overcome the resistances that the unconscious prescribes (Miller 1995), it is, on the contrary, in our unconscious repetitions that sport's psychoanalytic importance can be acknowledged. What sport provides is the opportunity to encounter and engage with the unconscious.

For this reason, we locate our psychoanalytic approach to sport in the unconscious desire, fantasies, and fears that underscore our enjoyment—an enjoyment that is paradoxically reflected in both the fleeting sporting success, but also, more importantly, in the enjoyment that is obtained in the very subversion of this success: the inevitable disappointment and defeat which in no way prevents one from returning to the sport they love. It is in this sense that we can begin to uncover why sport's appeal, as well as the inequality it relies upon, proves so intractably significant. It is in approaching this significance that what makes sport so appealing may in fact be the very inequity that it sustains and encourages. This is not to downplay or ignore those attempts that seek to tackle sporting injustices, especially those centred on encouraging wider participation at both global and local levels, rather it is to appreciate the fact that our very enjoyment in sport—the fantasies it sustains and the desire it evokes—is obstinately related to the contradictions it provides. In drawing out the significance of this contradiction, we briefly elucidate on the unconscious desires, fantasies, and fears that constitute our enjoyment in sport.

#### Exploring the unconscious desires, fantasies, and fears of sport

One way of developing a nuanced understanding of the unconscious processes that underlies our participation in sport is through the desire it evokes. Vaczi asserts, "Sport are a field of desire that is not limited to the desire for the goal" (2016, 300). In fact, despite the possibility of sporting success, every victory remains fleeting: we lose more than we ever win. Whether it be the prospect of the forthcoming fixture or the possibility of the knockout punch, success is haunted by its failure and an unconscious desire to tolerate, overcome, and repeat loss. This bespeaks the important

contention that it is not necessarily the end result which underscores our interests in sport, but the unique way it maintains our enjoyment *through* failure and loss (Black 2023). Whereas desire can only be sustained in its repeated failure, in the case of sport, all sporting success is immediately and inevitably shadowed by the next event. Interestingly, the significance of desire and the realization of success may, for some, leave them without the desire to continue. Five-days after winning the 2016 Formula One World Title, Nico Rosberg retired from the sport. In his Facebook post, the driver noted, “I have climbed my mountain, I am on the peak”, with the world title proving to be the “one thing” he had spent his career working towards (Hodgetts 2016).

Key here is the extent to which our enjoyment is not necessarily tied to overcoming the sporting “obstacle”—the impossible achievement, the knockout punch, the world-record—but to the obstacle itself. That is, what speaks to our sporting enjoyment is the obstacle it erects *and* the unconscious enjoyment we receive from the various obstacles that sport erects. Importantly, these obstacles are not simple prohibitions, but integral to the very purpose and nature of sport. All sporting activities require some obstacle for which the subject, or their team, must enjoy beyond the simple accomplishment of its overcoming—even if this overcoming results in sporting success.

Where the unconscious plays its role is in the act of disavowal that supports such enjoyment. Whether it be the personal-best, world-record, gold medal, match win, or break in a run of bad form, so much of sport is embroiled in the fetishization of this success (“this will be our year!”). In this way, the long-hoped for success is the fetishized object, for why else would one compete? However, to partake in such enjoyment is to disavow the very enjoyment that maintains such investment; an enjoyment that is achieved not just from the final sporting achievement, but from the failure and loss that maintains one’s investment in the sporting obstacle. Where the unconscious resides is in the desire not to know this knowledge. Too often, this enjoyment is disavowed by being chalked-up to tired explanations... “the injuries haven’t helped”, “the referee was against us”, “if only we’d signed *that* player”. In doing so, our enjoyment depends on the desire that sport evokes, one which no sporting success, however trivial, can reconcile.

It is in this way that sport can speak to the paradoxes that the unconscious presents. What our unconscious believes in sport is our own self-interest. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the time spent training, watching, or participating in

sport—activities which bear no social importance or significance beyond the competition they are put towards. In fact, despite the relative health benefits of competing in sport, benefits that we no doubt endorse, it is inevitable that at some point an injury, or worse, some life-threatening accident, will occur or will induce long-term damage. This is especially acute for former professional athletes, who all harbour and suffer from the lingering effects of an injury from their sporting careers. In many ways, it is against one's very self-interest that our enjoyment, desire, and disavowal come to bear: we disavow the unconscious sacrifice that sport requires in order to pursue our desire and enjoyment.

Fantasy helps to support this process. Where the obstacle proves constitutive of desire, fantasy is the frame through which the object's overcoming is formed. Sport is littered with fantasies of meritocracy, fair play, and underdog stories. This is not to say that these fantasies do not necessarily come true, but that in order to enjoy sport, adherence to the sporting fantasy is required. It is in our sporting fantasies for a past (nostalgia) or future (utopia) of plenitude that we are confronted with what we don't have. It is from this foundational place of the lacking subject that psychoanalysis begins theorizing and where every sporting endeavour begins. Whether one is a community centre basketball player, weekend coach for a youth hockey team, season ticket holder for the Los Angeles Lakers, fantasy sport enthusiast, or critical of the corrupting influence of the athletic world, sport always contains a transgressive fantasy, allowing us to push at the boundaries of "fair play", "sportsmanship", and "equality in competition", while, at the same time, balking at the remote possibility of these ideals ever being realised outside of sport itself.

In many ways, fantasy functions to allow the subject to avoid its own inconsistencies and social antagonisms. Here, fulfilment and loss are inextricably phrased in the desire of the Other, fantasies of the Other's enjoyment, and the obstructing or facilitating role the Other takes in the conscious pursuit of satisfaction. These obstructions present a transgression that always requires the fantasy of overcoming some presupposed limit. In sport, such limits may be erected in the final encounters of a close-run game, which require a decisive effort in order to overcome one's opponent. It is also there in the exaltation of those athletes who go beyond the limits of what is perceived to be possible; or, in the underdog story, where the capacity to overcome some internal limitation—a team of lesser ability, for instance—can, in their achievement, herald a moment of unexpected glorification. To achieve

this, however, athletes must continually be working towards and going beyond the limits of the ordinary.

Nevertheless, what remains apparent is that such limits are never fixed but continually moving, always re-erected in the following game, i.e., the next obstacle. Where fantasy proves so alluring is in the extent to which these limits can be overcome—the promise land which can only ever be reached at the end of the final. With its massive global monetary and cultural appeal, contemporary sport provides an unlimited but underutilized resource for the theoretical exploration of how these fantasies serve only to compound our sense of incompleteness, fuelled that is by desires that are grounded within a social matrix that is undoubtedly contingent. For this reason, fantasy plays a key role in managing our sporting contingencies, most notably, the relative uncertainty that undergirds every sporting encounter.

Though not without exception, from Freud (primary narcissism, Oedipus complex), to Klein (depressive and paranoid schizoid positions), to Lacan (lack), psychoanalytic theorizing has centred on how individuals and groups relate to loss, whether actual, perceived, or fantasized. As stated earlier, losing forms the base of the sporting worlds of athletes and fans more than the achievement and mastery that scaffolds it. Sport provides opportunities to communally deny, displace, but also perform, the anxieties and fears that accompany the subject's origins relating to absence. The precarity and contingency that guides athlete and fan experiences is often expressed as opportunities squandered, shots or targets being missed, something or someone being taken away, points dropped, injuries robbing potential, victories stolen, and teams or organizations being raided for talent. Sport provides the content to fill in the form by which desiring what we don't have is marked by the fear of it being lost—with all its attendant fantasies of envy and ecstasy. Unsurprisingly therefore, a variety of superstitions, compulsive behaviours, and personal rituals come to characterize how we relate and partake in sport. Whether this be the well-known lucky pair of socks or the special shirt which ensures the team's win, what such actions reveal are the unconscious fears that continually confront and haunt the athlete and fan. In the case of the former, this can lead to eating disorders, troubles in over-training, or a reliance on performance enhancing supplements.

The lineup

As has been detailed, this collection will seek to examine the unconscious processes that both maintain but also undermine our interests in sport. Such enjoyment does not require some patronising detoxification, an assertion grounded firmly in the contention that sport presents some ideological mystification that its participants must be made aware of, and from which psychoanalysis can provide some sobering effect. Instead, the application of psychoanalysis in the following chapters will critically explore and examine the very antagonisms, tensions, and contradictions that dynamically pattern and shape our relation to sport. This includes both the subject and the social, cultural, and political institutions that frame our relations to sport and the social interactions it affords. Where psychoanalysis provides a novel opportunity to theoretically uncover these dynamics, sport, we argue, can play an important and facilitating role in uncovering the significance of these dynamics on both the subject and society.

Ultimately, we do not conceive of psychoanalysis as a one-stop shop to overcoming or ridding sport of its problems. As noted, our unconscious satisfactions and enjoyments are not so easily overlooked. Rather, what we draw attention to are the failures, disappointments, and unrelenting frustrations that underscore sport's appeal. Sport is not unique in eliciting such an appeal, yet it does provide a lens through which the contradictions inherent to its very appeal may be explored and the unconscious desires, fantasies, and fears that function to maintain some of its underlying injustices can be recognised. Psychoanalytically, the following chapters each provide their own distinct reflections on how the unconscious remains a relevant and important point of inquiry in the academic study of sport and its role within society.

In meeting this aim, the following chapters will be organised across five parts: Part I: The Athletic Body; Part II: Coaching; Part III: Fandom; Part IV: Identity; and Part V: Play. Together, each section will offer both theoretical and empirical support for examining sports from a range of psychoanalytic perspectives.

By investigating the psychoanalytic significance of embodiment in professional sports, Part I, "The Athletic Body", critically considers how the body remains a key site for cultural projection and fantasy within our sporting practices. The body, as a vessel of lived experiences, sensations, and expressions, emerges as a dynamic landscape under psychoanalytic investigation. While the psychoanalytic exploration of dreams, fantasies, and symbolism elucidates upon the various ways in

which the body communicates by expressing unarticulated emotions and conflicts, it is in the somatic manifestations of repressed memories and the symbolic significance of bodily symptoms that the body becomes a canvas upon which the unconscious is expressed. This invites us to explore the rich interconnections between mental and physical states, which serve to recognize the body as both a source of insight and a site of conflict in our sporting experiences.

In Chapter One, “Sport and the Erotic”, David McIvor proposes that while psychoanalysis can offer valuable insights into the pervasive influence of sports on the collective psyche, conventional psychoanalysis reveals a cultural bias against “lower” cultural activities such as athletics—a judgment that inherently dismisses the body in its less sublimated expressions. In contrast to such bias, McIvor explores how sports, with its dynamic interplay of bodies in space, unveils both the tapped and untapped potentials of the human body for connection and transformation. For McIvor, these potentials possess an inherently erotic nature, best approached through Freud’s exploration of infantile sexuality, which, he argues, helps to envision the broader emancipatory possibilities inherent in sports.

Drawing from a Lacanian framework, Chapter Two, “The athletic body: A Lacanian perspective”, involves Hub Zwart examining Lacan’s conceptualization of three distinct registers of bodily experience: the Real, the imaginary, and the symbolic body. This dynamic interplay reinvigorates Lacan’s conceptual perspective on the embodiment of individuals in the context of sports. With regard to historical examples, Zwart examines how this dynamic embodiment holds significance in contemporary discourses on sport, paying specific attention to a case study from the 2023 FIFA Women’s World Cup. In doing so, Zwart’s chapter asserts that a psychoanalysis of the body offers a valuable path to addressing the tensions, ambiguities, and paradoxes prevalent in modern sports, while also highlighting how sports practices can function as a captivating arena for psychoanalytical introspection.

It is widely accepted that effective coaching plays a pivotal role in sports, serving as a catalyst for athlete development, skill enhancement, and overall team success. Through implementing technical expertise as well as fostering leadership, motivation, and a positive team culture, the “successful” sports coach can help develop and progress an athlete’s personal growth while also succeed in the achievement of collective goals. Trust in the coach is a crucial factor, with athletes needing to have faith that their coach possesses the expertise to enhance their athletic

performance and the knowledge to win. Undertaking a critical perspective on the effects of coaching, Part II, “Coaching”, explores how psychoanalytic theory can help identify inequalities in coaching as well as underlying discrepancies related to the coach as a figure of authority. While coaching operates on the premise of “progress”, guiding individuals toward setting and achieving goals, unlocking their full potential, and fostering a proactive approach to life, psychoanalysis can offer a nuanced account of the tensions and complexities of coaching as it profoundly impacts the psychosocial well-being of athletes. Such an exploration invites us to reconsider the nature of coach-athlete relations: namely, the problems associated with the idealization of “the coach” (“the subject supposed to know”), and the effects of discrimination in coaching positions.

In this respect, Chapter Three, “The racial melancholia of aspiring black NFL head coaches”, sees Bradley A. Thomas examine the National Football League (NFL), and, specifically, the significant underrepresentation of Black individuals in head coaching positions. Viewed through the lens of grief, Thomas provides a psychoanalytic intervention into examples of racial melancholia and implicit bias. In this context, the unattainable idealized White racial perfection serves as the lost object, compounded by various ongoing forms of loss, such as, discrimination, racism, assimilation, diaspora, and the challenges related to homeland and language. Thomas’s chapter details how this collective experience underscores the need for broader societal recognition and action in order to address systemic issues surrounding diversity and inclusion in both professional sports and the larger societal context.

In Chapter Four, “Psychoanalysis, mental coaching, and sports”, Robert Samuels contends that achieving improvement in most competitive pursuits hinges on embracing profound self-honesty. Yet, as Samuels outlines, psychoanalysis reveals a striking paradox: individuals not only frequently deceive others but also engage in self-deception. That is, even though we presume to have the most intimate knowledge of ourselves, we often engage in self-deception to shield and stabilize our self-concept and perceived control. While examples of mental coaching frequently reinforce an idealized image of the coach (“the one who knows”), such idealization can reinforce a destructive mode of dependency. To this end, Samuel explains how psychoanalysis can contribute to the growing field of mental coaching, by paying specific attention to the world of poker.

Part Three, “Fandom”, considers how psychoanalytic accounts of fandom offer a space through which to explore how, as active participants, fans invest emotionally and intellectually in chosen narratives that become mirrors in reflecting the subject’s aspirations, fears, and unresolved conflicts. For this reason, psychoanalytic concepts offer a unique opportunity to study the profound impact of fandom on personal development and the formation of cultural identities. As a prominent form of self-expression, offering a space for fans to grapple with the complexities of the world, what is left to be discovered is that sports fandom is no mere passive consumption of entertainment but a dynamic, participatory process that shapes and is shaped by the intricate workings of the subject and society. Accordingly, this section is supplemented with vignettes that survey the changing relationship between athletes and fans as well as the unique dynamics underpinning the individual sports fan and the larger sociocultural field—as well as the ambivalences therein. In doing so, the ethics of sport fandom and its association with anti-racist and feminist frameworks is considered.

In fact, while engaging in sports fandom can entail a form of imaginative play, where we immerse ourselves in the team’s identity and hold the belief that our support wields an influence over the players, such ‘make-believe’ hinges on collective assumptions shared within the fan community and broader society regarding the acceptable behaviour expected from athletes, teams, and fellow fans. When these assumptions begin to fracture, as exemplified by athletes taking political stances, it disrupts the fan’s fantasy world and can trigger conflict, as witnessed during recent instances like the U.S. national anthem protests. As a result, in Chapter Five, “Are we the champions? Sports fandom through the lens of pretend play and intersubjectivity”, Ben Bernstein examines the psycho-social disruption that occurs when athletes’ personal perspectives clash with fans’ expectations of them as objects of play.

David Cushman’s, “The psychoanalysis of basketball”, occupies Chapter Six, where he considers that while professional sports have long been immersed in compelling morality narratives, sparking heated discussions on issues like right versus wrong, strength versus weakness, and loyalty versus disloyalty, this dynamic is notably pronounced in the National Basketball Association (NBA), the premier professional basketball league globally. Cushman argues that Basketball, serves as a canvas onto which spectators project unspoken facets of their own psyche and broader cultural themes. Here, the act of watching a game can swiftly evoke themes of power,

transformation, failure, authenticity, and masculinity, creating a multifaceted experience that involves both sensory engagement and a defensive organization marked by splitting and projection. By employing psychoanalytic thinking, coupled with the use of six vignettes, Cushman examines how the intersection of psychoanalytic thought, NBA fandom, and the on-court actions of NBA players, offers a nuanced exploration of the intricate processes underlying fans' experiences, shedding light on the motivations and behaviours of NBA players and coaches.

Indeed, while sports fandom is deeply woven into contemporary culture, carrying substantial psychosocial costs linked to excessive identification with teams, leagues, and individual players, in the realm of politics and sports, organizations and industries actively promote and sustain campaigns that foster a perpetual tension with the perceived "opposition". As a result, behaviours of a questionable nature, rooted in morally unjust premises, and driven by an us-versus-them mentality, have become fundamental pillars of raucous crowd conduct in stadiums and on social media platforms alike. It is against these tensions that Chapter Seven, Monique S. Bowen's, "Cheering on solid ground: Plotting a developmental arc toward ethical fandom", serves to draw upon psychoanalytic theories spanning the past century, alongside modern approaches that integrate concepts of attachment and cultural positioning, in order to consider how a psychoanalysis of sports fandom can offer therapeutic frameworks. These frameworks, Bowen argues, help unravel the various motives underlying the phenomenon of sports fandom. By acknowledging the concurrent and reciprocal identifications occurring within a quasi-transference-countertransference milieu, we gain insight into our self/other representations as influential factors in shaping both distant and close attachment relationships.

The concept of identity remains a multifaceted tapestry woven from the threads of personal history, social influences, and unconscious motivations. Consequently, Part Four, "Identity", expounds upon how the nuances of identity formation in sport and through sport maintain a psychoanalytic importance. While our identities are dynamic and evolving entities, continually influenced by the interplay between conscious desires and unconscious conflicts, the internal struggles, and negotiations that individuals undergo in the process of constructing a cohesive sense of self through sport permits a deeper comprehension of the psychoanalytic significance of complex societal expectations and individual aspirations. Where

unexplored desires, fears, and unresolved conflicts reside, sport offers an important insight into the nature of identity and its impact on the subject and society.

For this reason, sport serves as a rich canvas for exploring the complex nature of identity and its inherent contradictions. Following this, Chapter Eight, “To know of Manny Pacquiao... The limits of identity under empire”, by Joseph S Reynoso, offers an extended analysis of the compelling appeal of Manny Pacquiao, the Filipino boxer-politician, both within the Philippines and as a broader symbol of Pan-Asian identity. Through exploring the potential for transcending our entrenched investment in identity, Reynoso contends that it is only by re-evaluating our attachment to figures embodying assertive forms of racial (and other) identity that a sustained examination of racial identity, emphasizing its unwitting involvement in perpetuating colonial and imperialistic mechanisms, can be forged. Indeed, by delving into Asian-American identities and drawing insights from psychoanalytic perspectives, Asian political studies, and Filipino scholarship, Reynoso elucidates on the intricate connection between traumatic loss and racial identity.

In Chapter Nine, “Homosexual football: perspectives from Lou Andreas-Salomé”, Rayyan Dabbous elucidates on how the psychoanalytic work of Lou Andreas-Salomé can shed light on the scarcity of openly gay and bisexual men in the realm of football. By establishing the argument that Andreas-Salomé’s herself personified the athletic ideal throughout her life, Dabbous introduces Andreas-Salomé’s theory of sublimation, before considering how footballers encompass various roles as free agents within the complex realm of probability. In doing so, Dabbous details how the responsibility of footballers extends toward truth and the unconscious, as opposed to focusing solely on conscious efforts to promote LGBTQ+ representation.

To conclude the collection, Part Five, “Play”, considers the significance of “play” as it pertains to sport and sporting practices. Indeed, from the games of childhood to the symbolic play of adulthood, psychoanalytic theory encourages us to unpick the profound connections between the ludic and the unconscious, shedding new light on the ways in which play comes to reflect the complexities of the human experience. Where play serves as a language through which the unconscious communicates—whether it is the tangible world of games or the intangible realm of fantasies—through play we navigate desire, conflict, and self-discovery, but also the creative forces that provide insight into unarticulated emotions, unresolved conflicts,

and hidden aspirations. This understanding elucidates on the clinical and social importance of play, which, with the support of clinical vignettes, allows us to identify how certain playful movements can invite new perspectives in therapy and in life.

To this extent, sports, such as baseball, can offer a rich terrain for psychoanalytic scrutiny, characterized by its tapestry of rituals, superstitions, and profound mental conditioning. While it remains amenable to a multitude of analogical interpretations, it can also yield insights of a more topological nature regarding the practice of analysis. Taking up this consideration, Chapter Ten, “Turning Two: Psychoanalysis and the Poetics of Pivoting, or Initial Thoughts for a Topology”, sees Patrick Scanlon examine how Jacques Lacan’s exploration of Borromean links—the Mobius strip and the torus—resonate within the realm of baseball: namely, how a distinctive event—the double play—mirrors the shape and motion of these geometric figures, while also sharing lexical parallels.

For Shani Samai-Moskovich, while psychoanalytic theory extensively explores the human body, a noticeable gap persists in understanding the development of the athletic dimension, which encompasses facets like the integration of body image into one’s self-concept and the experience of competence and joy through the acquisition of athletic skills. Consequently, in Chapter Eleven, “Becoming-ball: A schizo-soma ball movement”, Samai-Moskovich considers the athletic dimension within psychoanalytic theory through the application of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “becoming”. Indeed, while “becoming” can be easily grasped as a symbiotic process, an ongoing metamorphosis where individuals dissolve their boundaries and transform into something else, a continuous journey of “subjectification”, it is through an illustration of the concept of “becoming-ball” that Samai-Moskovich provides an examination of the prologue to Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997) as well as a clinical case. In each example, Samai-Moskovich explicates upon the notion of “becoming-ball” by exploring the connection between the athletic body and its role in facilitating mental transformation.

Though perceptions of play often intertwine with a pursuit of instinctual satisfaction—an imperative for all individuals, regardless of age—the characterization of play is one that usually sees it as diverging from the routines of everyday life. While these distinctions suggest a clear separation between the joy of play and the mundane aspects of ordinary existence, they actually hint at a deeper understanding of the creativity inherent in play. Following this path, the final chapter of the collection,

Chapter Twelve, “Play, sport, and the creativity of sublimation: Understanding the importance of unimportant activities”, sees Jack Black argue that a crucial element shared between play and sport lies in the creativity they engender, particularly in how creative acts are intricately linked to the lack constituting the Lacanian subject. Drawing on the Lacanian concept of sublimation, Black explores how the structured rules and regulations of sport assert and demand a recognition of the inherent limitations they impose. Contrary to perceiving these limits as hindrances to creativity, sublimation reveals that these limits are constitutive of creativity itself. In other words, the capacity to sublimate—to creatively manifest distinct physical or artistic expressions—resides in the routine and profound significance of playful and sporting activities, along with the inherent restrictions and constraints these activities impose. Ultimately, Black contests that it is through embracing these limits that one’s creativity can unveil an emancipatory potential within the realm of play and sport.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For this, we recommend the reader consider the *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* Special Issue, “Just a Game? Sport and Psychoanalytic Theory” (Black and Reynoso forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Across various disciplines and sub-disciplines, academic inquiries into sport have developed a wide array of topics, each employing their own theoretical and methodological approaches. All of this speaks to the physical, psychological, political, and sociological importance of sport and our relation to physical activity.

<sup>3</sup> The *Marathon des Sables* is a six-day ultramarathon completed in the Sahara Desert (Morocco).

<sup>4</sup> Thakur and Dickstein add, ‘Freud emphasized the border itself, the field in between, as what is really Other, this seeking to articulate what this Other entails; he called it the “unconscious” and determined its characteristics by way of analyses of its various effects in situations intersecting the then nascent fields of neurology, psychology, sociology, and anthropology’ (2018, 4).

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