

Exploring the Psychoanalytic Dimensions of Sport: An Introduction to Sport and Psychoanalysis

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Introduction

The intersection of sport and psychoanalysis presents a fascinating and often overlooked area of inquiry. At first glance, the two fields may seem irreconcilable: sport is typically associated with physicality, competition, and entertainment, while psychoanalysis examines the ramifications of the unconscious, our capacity to live with unsatiable desire, and the ambivalences, contradictions, and tensions that come to structure subjectivity, including, at its heart, the subject's relation to the social world. What have sport and psychoanalysis got in common when one requires the physicality and frustration of the sporting encounter, while the other entails lying down and reflecting on oneself (albeit a rather stereotypical depiction more commonly associated with the popular depiction of psychoanalysis in television and film). However, it is this apparent disparity which makes the relationship between sport and psychoanalysis so compelling—a relation which *Sport and Psychoanalysis* will seek to examine, explore, and expand.

The (In)significance of sport: pursuing a psychoanalytic inquiry of sport

Sport is more than an arena of play. Instead, it is a domain where our deep-seated fantasies, unconscious desires, and social tensions are performed, repeated, and negotiated (Black & Reynoso, 2024a). What psychoanalysis provides is the tools to decode these performances, thus challenging the assumption that sport exists outside the domain of critical thought (Black, 2024; Greif, 2010). Certainly, sport's significance is often underestimated because it appears to lack the seriousness that other activities may provide—an expendable pastime for spectators and participants alike, which bears no significance upon one's cultural and intellectual development. But this dismissal fails to grasp the weight that sport carries; bound as it is with national pride, communal identity, personal aspiration, and historical narratives of triumph and failure. Whether we recognize it, or not, sport plays a crucial role in shaping the way we think, feel, and interact with the world. It is precisely this paradox—the seriousness of something seemingly frivolous—that makes sport an essential site for psychoanalytic exploration.

For this reason, it is tempting to think of sport as a mere escape from reality, a temporary diversion from the burdens of everyday life. But, as psychoanalysis teaches us, our relationship with fiction is never so simple (Freud, 1908; Pfaller, 2014; Žižek, 2012). Rather than offering an exit from reality, sport creates a structured space where we experience emotions with unparalleled intensity—joy, despair, anxiety, hope—all within the tightly controlled framework of rules, rituals, and symbols (Elias & Dunning, 2008; Seligman, 2010). On this basis, psychoanalytic theory allows us to interrogate the mechanisms that allows sport to be so affectively charged: the transference of desire onto teams and players, the symbolic investments we make in outcomes, and the collective identifications that turn disparate individuals into collective fans. This is nowhere more evident than in the peculiarity of the sports fan—a subject whose devotion, rage, and euphoria far exceed the direct consequences of the game itself (Archer & Wojtowicz, 2024; Bernstein, 2024; Bowen, 2024; Carnochan, 2010; Cushman, 2024; Rabinovich, 2024; Rivera, 2024; Tuber & Tocaty, 2024). Here, the fan's investment is not simply in the team but in the symbolic function that the team serves within their psychic economy.

Consequently, amidst the overwhelming emotional investment, the spectacle, the hero worship, the obscene enjoyment of victory and the cruel pleasure in another's defeat, sport provides a sanctioned space for those intensities that so often exceed the ordinary. It is this excess that manifests in sport's most controversial aspects: violence, corruption, doping scandals, and financial greed (Blackshaw & Crabbe, 2004). A psychoanalytic reading does not simply denounce these elements as external to sport but recognizes them as constitutive of it. As a result, sport is not a utopian realm free from the contradictions of society, it is, instead, a microcosm where those contradictions play out in exaggerated forms (Black & Reynoso, 2024a, 2024b; Geal, 2024; Greenshields, 2024; More, 2024).

Notably, a psychoanalytic study of these contradictions reveals a tension between the violence and antagonism that pervades much of sport and the moments of care, sportsmanship, and social bonding that occasionally emerge. These moments—such as assisting an injured opponent or offering emotional support in the midst of fierce competition—serve as disruptions to the more obvious display of aggression and individualism that often define the sporting arena. These contradictions are integral to the experience of sport, where aggression and tenderness coexist in a fragile and complex dynamic, revealing the ways in which sport both reflects and challenges societal norms and desire.

Counterintuitively, sport is, above all, a realm of failure: for every champion crowned, countless others are left to dwell on their shortcomings (Black, 2023; Harvey, 2024; Merson, 2021, 2024; Reynoso, 2021). Even within victory, the horizon of another competition, another challenge, another test ensures that no success is ever final. This repetition sustains an unending desire—the athlete's pursuit of perfection, the fan's longing for the next win, the perpetual cycle of competition. The paradox, of course, is that sporting fulfilment never arrives. The season restarts, the records are beaten, and the game begins anew. It is this unrelenting dynamic that gives sport its hold over us—it offers the illusion of completeness while constantly reminding us of our fundamental incompleteness.

Sport, then, is not separate to our lives, but a concentrated form of it. It is a space in which our deepest fears, anxieties, and desires are condensed and played out. The heartbreak of a missed penalty, the ecstasy of a last-minute goal, the shame of a public defeat—these moments are not simply emotional responses but encounters with the fundamental structures of our subjectivity. Indeed, to study sport psychoanalytically is to take seriously the idea that our most passionate investments often emerge where we least expect them (Reynoso, 2021). On this basis, sport's (in)significance is precisely its power: it is a space that appears trivial but carries immense weight, a domain in which our desires are rehearsed, our fantasies staged, and our contradictions laid bare. In the end, sport is not an escape from the world—it is one of the places where we encounter it most fully.

Paths of play and pursuit: avenues and aims of inquiry in sport and psychoanalysis

In accordance with the wider development of a psychoanalytic consideration of sport, this section seeks not only to apply psychoanalysis to sport, but also to consider how sport might, in turn, pose new questions for psychoanalysis. In meeting this aim, we encourage a critical investigation of sport from across the various schools of psychoanalytic thought in order to explore the significance of sport both for the subject and society. Contributions will demonstrate that sport is not merely an application of psychoanalytic theory but a site that actively challenges and expands our understanding of psychoanalysis itself. In doing so, the section aims to unsettle both fields. If sport is more than just entertainment—posing, instead, a terrain where the most fundamental aspects of the subject and society are played out in visible forms of socially sanctioned transgression—then, it also the case that it is an activity performed in the full acknowledgement and acceptance of the violence, pain, and injury that it can produce. While the psychoanalytic study of sport is not limited to the following themes and topics, by way of encouraging further investigation, we offer several avenues of inquiry to help underline the significance of psychoanalytical investigation.

First, one area where sport challenges psychoanalytic thought is in the realm of embodiment. Psychoanalysis has traditionally focused on the body as a site of symptoms, drives, and unconscious meaning, but sport offers a different perspective: the body as a vehicle for performance, discipline, and mastery. The tension between the body as subject and the body as object is particularly acute in sport, where athletes must navigate the paradox of being both in control of their physicality while also being

subjected to the demands of external expectations. Psychoanalysis allows us to critically interrogate this paradox, revealing how sporting embodiment is not merely about mastery and control but also about the negotiation of fundamental tensions that structure human subjectivity (Petrucci, 2010).

Second, there is the issue of transgression. Where sport is governed by strict rules and regulations, it is also a space where rule-breaking is both inevitable, and, at times, perversely celebrated. From doping to match-fixing, from on-field aggression to off-field scandals, the enjoyment of sport often hinges on moments where the boundary between permissible and impermissible is blurred. Psychoanalysis allows us to explore the deeper structures of this phenomenon, questioning why transgression is not simply condemned, but, in certain ways, integral to the enjoyment of sport itself.

Finally, there is the issue of fandom. While sport appears to be a domain of external competition, it is equally a space of deep psychic investment, where, most notably, the fan's identification with teams and athletes exceeds rational calculation and utility. Fans do not simply watch sport, more often than not they live through it through emotional highs and lows that are dictated by events that they do not control (Engle, 2024). Accordingly, from collective euphoria to bitter resentment, from idolization to scapegoating, the fan's devotion is as much about the symbolic stakes of sport as it is about the game itself. Psychoanalysis enables us to interrogate these investments, highlighting how fandom is a means of organizing and negotiating our deepest fears, identifications, and social antagonisms.

In addition to the above, we see further topics of investigation across the following areas: the underlying unconscious desires, fears, and fantasies that drive our engagement with sport as participants and spectators, asking why it is that we choose to partake in or watch sport; the cultural and political significance of sport, such as analysing sport's inherent importance as often declared during major events, as well as its purported capacity to solve global issues; the psychoanalytic significance of 'the coach' as a figure of authority, including the identification of inequalities and underlying discrepancies in coaching; the part of sport in defining and comprising one's identity, considering the interplay between conscious desires and unconscious conflicts in identity formation; the creativity of play and its fundamental connections to sport; the unconscious motivations behind seemingly irrational sporting behaviours and attachments, including excessive training, repeated attendance to one's favourite club despite their failures, as well as prioritizing sport over family; the social significance of sport, encompassing community, identity, and belonging, while also exacerbating corruption, violence, anxiety, and distress; the ethical significances underpinning our sporting interactions, exploring how psychoanalytic theory can challenge traditional narratives and the ambivalences therein; the psychoanalytic experience of live sporting events and media broadcasts; drug, gambling, and alcohol abuse; as well as racial, gender, class, and disabled inequalities in sport.

It is in view of the above that the *Sport and Psychoanalysis* section provides an invitation to scholars to challenge the deep affinities between sport and psychoanalysis, as well as to contest and provoke the assertion to take sport seriously—not despite its absurdities, but because of them. By way of achieving this we accept the following submissions.

Original research

We invite scholars to contribute original research articles that explore the rich and complex intersections of sport and psychoanalysis. This journal will provide a unique platform for in-depth investigations into the unconscious dynamics of sporting experience, desire, embodiment, fandom, and performance. We welcome diverse theoretical and methodological approaches that challenge assumptions, expand psychoanalytic inquiry, and illuminate the role of sport in shaping subjectivity and society. Traditional research papers, employing qualitative and/or quantitative research, and clinical reports from professionals working directly with athletes—such as, sports psychologists, coaches, and counsellors—are invited to submit.

Review articles

We encourage scholars to submit review articles that critically engage with the intersections of sport and psychoanalysis. This journal welcomes comprehensive analyses of key debates, emerging trends, and

foundational texts that shape our understanding of the psycho-social significance of sport. Whether synthesizing existing research, reassessing theoretical frameworks, or mapping new directions for inquiry, review articles will play a vital role in advancing this field.

Film, television, and documentary reviews

We support scholars to submit reviews of film, television, or documentaries that explore the relationship between sport and psychoanalysis through screen media. The journal welcomes analyses that depict, but also explore, sport, athletes, fandom, or competition, using psychoanalytic concepts that uncover and examine themes of identity, obsession, trauma, or *jouissance*, across various forms of audiovisual media. In particular, these reviews will offer a critical space to rethink the significance of sport and its depiction.

Conclusion: challenging, unveiling, and exploring the psychoanalytic dimensions of sport

In concluding this editorial introduction, the intersection of sport and psychoanalysis can help challenge assumptions that level sport as beyond critical thought, instead revealing its profound entanglement with fundamental aspects of human experience. To study sport psychoanalytically is to take seriously the idea that the most significant psychic and social investments often manifest in unexpected places. Thus, we invite scholars to explore the profound affinities between sport and psychoanalysis through original research, theoretical reflections, and analyses of media and culture. Ultimately, *Sport and Psychoanalysis* will underscore the value of psychoanalysis in revealing the unconscious forces that shape our deep investment in sport, urging us to ask not only why we engage with sport, but also why, for so many, it remains an essential and inescapable part of our lives.

Disclosure statement

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