

Desire, Sacrifice, and the Sport Ethic: A Psychoanalytic Reappraisal

BLACK, Jack <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1595-5083>>

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Desire, Sacrifice, and the Sport Ethic: A Psychoanalytic Reappraisal

Jack Black, PhD

Associate Professor of Culture, Media, and Sport, School of Sport and Physical Activity, Sheffield Hallam University, UK

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Abstract

In this paper, I reconsider why the concept of the sport ethic, first theorised by Hughes and Coakley (1991) as a cultural framework demanding commitment, distinction, risk, and the denial of limitation, continues to dominate sport despite its well-documented harms. While critical scholarship has exposed the sport ethic’s role in legitimating injury, overtraining, and self-destructive overconformity, its persistence cannot be fully explained by conscious intention or ideological manipulation. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, the paper argues that the sport ethic endures because it is sustained by desire, unconscious enjoyment (*jouissance*), and sacrifice. Athletes and fans do not merely comply with the ethic, they desire the very sacrifices it demands, deriving enjoyment from pain, excess, and the pursuit of impossible ideals. The ethic’s contradictory character—sacrificing the ‘good’ of wellbeing and fairness and exalting the ‘useless’ pursuit of victory—illustrates how enjoyment attaches to loss rather than attainment. The paper concludes that the sport ethic cannot be overcome through moral reform, since it is rooted in the subject’s constitutive relation to desire. Instead, an ethical engagement with sport requires confronting and inhabiting its contradictions, or, refusing blind conformity while remaining faithful to one’s desire. In this way, sport emerges as a privileged site for examining the entanglement of desire, sacrifice, and enjoyment in contemporary culture.

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