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When a Foul is Not a Foul: Strategic Fouling and the Creativity of Self-Limitation

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Abstract

Strategic fouls can be defined as deliberate rule violations undertaken for tactical advantage in circumstances where sanction is anticipated and treated as a cost of action. They are distinguished from cheating not by moral innocence but by their structural relation to enforcement. Whereas cheating depends upon clandestine evasion, the strategic foul remains intelligible, and can still 'work', even when detected and punished, precisely because it presupposes the continuing authority of the rule-system it exploits. This article examines the phenomenon of strategic fouling by offering a critical analysis of its moral, regulatory, and psychoanalytic dimensions. In particular, it explores how such actions are embedded within the logic of competitive play, revealing a tacit legitimacy, despite their formal illegality. Drawing on the work of J.S. Russell, the article situates strategic fouling within a broader category of tolerated transgression, which, enhances, rather than undermines, the experience of play. Coupled with a psychoanalytic perspective, it is argued that strategic fouls exemplify the creative potential of self-limitation. That is, rules and constraints do not inhibit freedom but serve as conditions for inventive action and ethical deliberation. With regard to relevant examples, such as Luis Suárez's 2010 handball, the article concludes that strategic fouling reveals sport as a site of moral ambiguity and creative agency, where the subject confronts and constitutes itself through the contradictions of rule-bound play.

Keywords

Play; psychoanalysis; self-limitation; Lacan; ethics; transgression; subjectivity

Introduction: Strategic Fouls… A Calculated Transgression?

In the 2020 European Championship final, between England and Italy, England's Bukayo Saka, attempting to break forward, had his collar noticeably pulled back by the veteran Italian defender, Giorgi Chiellini, in the 96th-minute—an unmistakable professional foul. The act, which earned Chiellini a yellow card, was a clear example of a strategic infringement designed to stop a potentially dangerous attack. Widely understood, and, perhaps, even celebrated as a 'necessary foul' (by non-England fans, at least), the intentional pull back functioned to prevent a likely goal-scoring opportunity.[1]

Equally, in basketball, routinely fouling an opponent in the final seconds of a game to stop the clock, forcing free throws, and, thus, regaining possession, was often referred to as a 'Hack-a-Shaq' tactic, named after the basketball centre, Shaquille O'Neal. This involved intentionally fouling poor free-throw shooters, like O'Neal, in order to exploit their weakness at the line. Coaches, particularly Gregg Popovich of the San Antonio Spurs, used this method extensively in close games to control the clock and reduce scoring efficiency (Wong, 2025). Although controversial, the tactic was within the rules and widely employed until the NBA modified regulations to curb its effectiveness (Wright, 2024).[2]

Taking the above into consideration, this article will examine the phenomenon of strategic fouls in sport. Set against the complex moral and regulatory frameworks that govern sporting conduct, the article interrogates the contradiction that the strategic foul reveals: namely, are strategic fouls genuine violations of the rules, or do they represent a different, perhaps even sophisticated, form of rule engagement, one that upholds the logic of the game precisely by breaching its codified terms? In exploring this tension, Russell's defence of strategic fouling is considered in relation to his account of sport as 'a species of play' (2017a, 26). Following the contention that strategic fouling, while morally fraught, can be viewed as a

playful and competitive transgression—what Russell (2017a) refers to as 'competitive shenanigans'—the discussion considers how such conduct exposes the constitutive limits of regulatory authority, highlighting the ambiguous space between formal compliance and the tacit norms of competitive play. Where this article diverges, however, is in the importance it provides to the role of creativity in making sense of the strategic foul. Far from stifling inventiveness, it is instead argued that sport's formal regulations provide the conditions for creative expression, tactical improvisation, and aesthetic decision-making, all of which, to varying degrees, encompass the strategic foul. Drawing from Lacanian psychoanalysis, it is proposed that creativity arises not from the absence of restriction, but from the subject's engagement with lack and self-limitation. In so doing, the article concludes by arguing that the phenomenon of strategic fouling offers a window into forms of moral deliberation that extend beyond sport, illuminating how the subject is marked by self-division and constituted through acts of self-limitation (Lacan, 2004). In sum, it is concluded that strategic fouling affords a creative and affective return to the limit that grounds our subjectivity.

Strategic Fouling and the Logic of Sanction

In many sports, there exists a recognised category of rule-breaking conduct that is performed openly and deliberately, not as a lapse in discipline or accidental infringement, but as a calculated act whereby the expected sanction is outweighed by the anticipated strategic or competitive gain. Commonly referred to as 'strategic fouls', 'professional fouls', or 'tactical fouls', such actions exemplify a pragmatic approach to the rules of play (Imbrišević, 2020; Russell, 2017a). Here, transgression is not necessarily a deviation from the logic of competition but an integral, and even rational, feature of it. Accordingly, while such infractions are frequently accepted, or at least understood within sporting cultures as legitimate tools for

achieving success—further revealing the complex moral and regulatory frameworks that govern sporting conduct and the contradictory role of rule-breaking in the pursuit of advantage—the notion that rules are straightforwardly 'broken' is open to debate (Moore, 2017). Strategic fouls, while formally infringing the rules of play, often operate within a tacitly accepted logic of the game, wherein penalties (such as, free kicks, yellow cards, or time-outs) are not only anticipated but incorporated into competitive decision-making. This raises the question of whether such actions constitute genuine violations or whether they reflect an alternative mode of rule-following, one in which the letter of the law is violated but the structure and expectations of the game are upheld.

For Fraleigh (2003), sport remains a rule-defined test of athletic skill, so that strategic fouls become morally unacceptable when they involve deliberate violations that interfere with the specific skills, challenges, and competencies that the game is designed to measure and test. In this regard, strategic fouls fall outside the legitimate boundaries of sporting conduct because they do not engage with the core demands of the contest, but, instead, undermine them. Through bypassing the agreed-upon tests of excellence, in favour of tactical advantage, strategic fouls compromise the integrity of competition, and, as a result, represent a failure to honour the essential conditions under which athletic excellence is to be demonstrated.

This is potentially exacerbated when strategic fouling is treated not as an occasional infraction but as a patterned, repeated tactic. Even if the fouler accepts the sanction, repeated strategic fouls can cumulatively reconfigure what is being tested, so that the contest risks shifting from the display of the sport's constitutive skills to the management of stoppages and sanctions. That said, in such cases, the ability to complete a strategic foul does not necessarily suggest that the athletic test is being bypassed but may instead indicate that the penalty has become insufficient to protecting the sport's intended form.[3] This is also why strategic fouling is never simply a private tactic. Its permissibility is indexed to thresholds of frequency and

intensity beyond which the practice ceases to appear as tolerable, and, thus, begins to erode the very conditions that make the game recognisable.

For this reason, we can, following Fraleigh, further distinguish between the strategic foul and 'cheating'. Where cheating involves hiding actions that would normally result in sanctions, thereby escaping accountability, such behaviour not only breaks established rules and codifications but also undermines the fairness of the contest by circumventing the integrity of the particular sporting event (MacRae, 2025). Subsequently, cheating represents both a functional breach of rules and a moral transgression, due to it undermining the reciprocal responsibilities that sustain competitive equity. While cheating entails covertly breaking regulations, with the intent to evade detection and penalty, thereby engaging in deceptive conduct that compromises the fairness and integrity of sporting contest (Fraleigh, 2003), in contrast, strategic fouling is characterised by deliberate infractions committed with the practical expectation that they will be noticed and sanctioned as part of a broader tactical calculation. This expectation is not equivalent to confession or the absence of any performative protest. In many sports, gestures of innocence often function within the interactions between competitor and officiator, and, thus, do not alter the fact that the sanction is already built into the agent's reasoning. Accordingly, the relevant contrast is not whether the actor would prefer non-sanction, but whether the tactic is constitutively organised around concealment (cheating) or instead incorporates the likelihood of sanction as part of its operative logic (strategic fouling), so that non-detection is a contingent bonus rather than a condition of success. Though the legitimacy of strategic fouls remains a subject of ethical debate (Flynn, 2017; Fraleigh, 2003; Matz, 2022; Simon, 2005), examples of strategic fouling reveal the contested and recognised practices of competitive sporting strategies (Edmondson, 2021; Staunton, 2019).[4]

What tends to be under-considered in discussions of strategic fouling, however, is this *expectation*: i.e., the intentional, tactical reasoning that represents a purposeful manipulation of

the game's internal logic. Indeed, when the infraction becomes part of a calculable risk, we can acknowledge the extent to which lawful play and foul play are, in most sporting instances, conceived as negotiated and contextually contingent forms of play. As Russell explains, 'strategic fouls are like paying a toll to cross a bridge, rather than a penalty for doing something that is wrong or deserving of criticism for other reasons' (2017a, 36).[5]

What this reveals is that while athletic competition is often framed through elevated ideals of fairness and discipline its actual practices too often include actions that depart from official expectations (Black and Reynoso, 2024a, 2024b; Black et al., 2024; Coakley, 2015; Blackshaw and Crabbe, 2004; Hoberman, 1992; Hughes and Coakley, 1991). Ranging from overt violations to covert manipulations, including the use of performance-enhancing substances, whether strategic fouls are openly condemned or even praised within partisan contexts, it is clear that such fouls do not simply undermine the system of sporting value(s), but, instead, contradictorily reaffirm that system by demonstrating its presence through its breach. In fact, in the case of a typical sporting foul, 'the temptation to violate a prohibition [in sport] is always there', so much so that 'it seems impossible to resist the temptation, even when players are meticulously monitored by referees, codes, and cameras' (Meeuwsen and Zwart, 2023, 53). As a result, departures from codified conduct are not incidental, but, rather, central to the psychosocial dynamics of competitive environments (Black and Reynoso, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). What this exposes are the tensions between formal athletic regulations and the desires that these regulations both propose and struggle to contain (Greenshields, 2024; Merson, 2021). These desires find expression in moments of excess, which are embedded within the broader cultural experience of sport (Black, 2023; Reynoso, 2021). As Free notes, 'rule transgressions are integral to sport's lived culture' (2008, 291).

According to Russell (2017a), the ethical defensibility of deliberate rule infractions, when used as a competitive tactic, can shed new light on the legitimacy of strategic fouls,

especially when considered in the context of play. For Russell, there remains a compelling argument regarding how calculated infringements can enhance the overall experience of competition. Insofar as a more nuanced appreciation of the relationship between sport and play enables a considered analysis of these controversial practices, which acknowledges their potential to enrich sporting contests, despite the ethical dilemmas they introduce, Russell proposes that 'a better understanding of play and the connection between sport and play can help us to accept (the troubling to some) idea of strategic fouling even at the expense of the moral costs they pose' (2017a, 32).

It is important to note that the relationship between sport and play, can, in Russell's view, reveal how strategic fouls capture a specific tension in sport—indeed, they are acts that raise legitimate ethical concerns but are still regarded as part of the broader frame of contest. These forms of conduct, which might include subtle manipulation or efforts to mislead officials, appear regularly in athletic settings and reflect the complex interplay between moral evaluation and the potentially permissive atmosphere surrounding competitive engagement. 'They are', as Russell asserts, '"shenanigans", that is, morally objectionable or doubtful activities that are tolerable even if we have sound reasons for moral misgivings about them. ("High jinks" and "antics" are other words that do similar work.)' (2017a, 32-33). He continues: 'Shenanigans are frequently part of play, and because sport is regarded a species of play, we should not be surprised to find them there. Let's call these tolerated morally questionable behaviours in sport "competitive shenanigans"' (Russell, 2017a, 33). Such 'competitive shenanigans' are integral to the lived reality of sporting environments, where lines between acceptable strategy and objectionable conduct remain subject to ongoing negotiation. What is more, as Russell argues, shenanigans 'should be tolerated in sport' (2017b, 104), later arguing that competitive competition would be diminished, if removed (Russell, 2018).

There is certainly something to be said for the extent to which such 'shenanigans' chime with Farred's (2014) account of the rogue in sport. Where 'sport has always had a peculiar love and admiration for the rogue, despite the threat that this figure poses' (Farred, 2014, 12), Farred considers how this disruptive figure exposes a fundamental fragility to the law in sport. In fact, when we consider that competitive activity always resists total control, that, in other words, it cannot fully anticipate or contain the contingencies that unfold sporting competition, then, such 'competitive shenanigans' are not mere expressions of a certain volatility within sport, but also that which is often held in the highest esteem. Here, the disruptive agent—the rogue—though destabilising, is admired, revealing an enduring ambivalence toward the figure who challenges order from within.

Play's Contradictions

As Huizinga famously contested, it is play that remains 'outside "ordinary" life' (1949, 13). Indeed, human engagement in playful activities spans a wide range of expressions, from impulsive movement and stress release to modes of informal learning and imaginative rehearsing of social scenarios (Black, 2024). Often perceived as aimless or purely recreational, as Suits (1978) explains, any game, which is played, involves willingly embracing challenges that serve no external function, beyond the pursual of the experience itself. Cast as an exceptional domain, distinct from routine existence, play's very distinctiveness arises in relation to the monotony of everyday life, thus giving rise to the conditions in which imaginative and inventive play takes place (Black, 2024; Caillos, 2001).

Yet, according to Russell, the idea that play exists separate to 'ordinary life 'has to be examined carefully, for play arguably constitutes the largest part of the everyday lives of many people' (2017a, 32). Indeed, 'Think of young persons and those lucky enough to golf

recreationally every day. Play is their ordinary life' (Russell, 2017a, 32). We might further qualify this point by reflecting on Huizinga's (1949) concern that the increasing regulation of sport threatens the ludic quality of play. Insofar as play has often been framed as a realm of freedom—an activity undertaken for its own sake, detached from instrumental ends, etc.—sport, by contrast, has been defined by its competitive intensity and increasingly professionalised demands (Hoberman, 1992). This distinction is not a simple displacement of play but reveals a more complex dynamic in which the codified restrictions of sport—its rules, tactical systems, and institutional frameworks—reflect its capacity to sustain affective investment, even when the stakes appear trivial, or when failure seems inevitable (Black, 2024). Here, the passionate attachment of players and spectators alike often stems not from outcomes alone, but from the unpredictable drama that play introduces (Pfaller, 2014). In this light, the tension between play and sport should not be viewed as a binary opposition, but as a dynamic interplay. On the one hand, the imaginative force of play animates the seriousness of sport, while, on the other, sport channels and disciplines the openness of play (Black, 2024).

However, despite this tension, Russell (2017a) doubles-down on play's separation from the moral confines of everyday life. In fact, where 'seminal discussions of play have emphasized the disengagement of play from everyday life, including from morality', it is 'This latter understanding of play, and of sport as play, [which] allows us to better recognize the complexity and depth of sport and its potential to contribute positively to athletic experience and human lives generally' (Russell, 2017a, 27). Accordingly, while much of the philosophical literature on play emphasizes its detachment from ordinary life, including conventional moral norms, applying this perspective to sporting competition reveals the extent to which morally troubling conduct is readily accommodated within the playful logic of sport (Russell, 2017a).

In this respect, sport, as a constructed realm, with its own internal logic, operates independently of the normative structures that govern everyday social interactions, where,

within sport's constructed sphere, ordinary emotional or ethical expectations—such as, empathy or restraint—are often suspended in favour of the single-minded pursuit of sporting success.[6] Here, the tendency to excuse such acts under the guise of, 'it's just part of the game', reflects the very way in which play's disconnection from everyday life not only legitimates, but, at times, conceals, the ethical ambiguities embedded in competitive sport. As Russell (2017a) notes, it is this structural detachment from 'ordinary life', which can help account for the tolerance of practices that would otherwise appear objectionable, including strategic fouls. Ultimately:

> just as some acceptable instances of humour can raise moral concerns that are tolerated because of humour's disengagement and because of its highly prized ability to amuse and delight, sport's similar disengagement as play supports a similar conclusion about strategic fouling. (Russell, 2017a, 35-36).

Yet, within an environment where everyday norms are suspended, and the boundaries of 'acceptable' behaviour are shaped by the internal grammar of competition, the function of formal regulation becomes particularly important. In line with the above, it is precisely because sport *playfully* permits the temporary relaxation of conventional ethical commitments that its regulatory structures (i.e., its rules and regulations) preserve the integrity of the contest itself. In this respect, rules enable the separation of a legitimate competition from conduct that merely asserts the freedom afforded by play's detachment from everyday life.

Therefore, in strategic fouling, regulation is not merely an external limit on play but part of play's competitive logic, where enforcement is anticipated, and the sanction is treated as a cost within practical reasoning rather than as a deterrent. The key point, then, is not that rules are 'broken' in the ordinary sense, but that rule-authority is presupposed and strategically

inhabited, so that transgression functions only insofar as the rule-system retains its legitimacy. In effect, creativity in sport emerges not through escaping limitation, but through an inventive relation to the limit.

Importantly, the limit here is not merely formal (i.e., that sanctions exist), but social and structural insofar as the strategic foul functions as a meaningful transgression only against a background of relatively stable compliance. If strategic fouling became generalised—if the 'rogue' became the norm—the foul would no longer punctuate play but displace it, thereby undermining the very test and shared intelligibility on which the tactic depends (Farred, 2014). For example, if we consider the familiar 'professional foul' in football, where, a defender deliberately pulls back an attacker to stop a promising counterattack, accepting a yellow card as the price of preventing a high-quality chance (as in the aforementioned late foul by Chiellini late foul on Saka), then, what makes this tactic intelligible as a *strategic* foul is precisely that it remains exceptional against a broader pattern in which most transitions are allowed to unfold. If, by contrast, teams treated every incipient break in the same way, systematically converting open play into stoppages, then the contest would tend to shift away from the display of the sport's constitutive skills (such as, timing, combination play, defensive positioning under pressure) toward the management of cautions and dismissals. In that scenario the tactic would undermine the shared 'test' on which it depends, and its tolerability would erode because its efficacy presupposes that others, most of the time, do not adopt the same maxim. The agent's creative liberty is therefore always relational rather than solitary, so that moral deliberation cannot be reduced to the individual's willingness to accept punishment. It must also register the practice's dependency on, and potential exploitation of, a collectively maintained order. Indeed, an ambivalence already suggested by sport's admiration for the rogue, an admiration that would certainly dissipate if there were too many rogues to follow.

Playing With(in) the Rules

Although sport's formal rules are historically contingent, once codified they acquire an aura of necessity, functioning as if natural and immutable (Dervin, 1985). This ideological naturalisation is inseparable from the administrative infrastructures required to standardise and enforce regulation, through which sport is embedded within wider social arrangements of authority and legitimacy (Black, 2025; Gruneau, 1980). Governing institutions thereby do more than 'apply' rules, rather, they stabilise the symbolic force through which sport's value, meaning, and legitimacy are authorised.[7] This stabilisation, however, is never complete. Farred (2014) emphasises that the very structures that constitute sport (its rules, boundaries, and limits) are organised around an internal contradiction. Here, the desire for order always already harbours the potential for disorder. The formal designation of 'the rules of the game' is thus less a guarantee of stability than a symptomatic response to instability, a reactive attempt to contain what it simultaneously calls into being: the possibility of transgression, disruption, and excess (Farred, 2014; see also Black and Reynoso, 2024a, 2025). This is why the limits of sport must be repeatedly reinforced, not because they are secure, but because they are violable. Inasmuch as procedural codes and disciplinary protocols demarcate play, they also stage the conditions of their own possible undoing.

Rules, then, are best conceived as constitutive and precarious. As symbolic acts of containment, which found the game, while always risking the disclosure of their contingency, the question is not whether one can simply 'break' or ignore rules in the name of freedom, instead, the appearance of freedom is mediated by constraint and by the subject's negotiated relation to it.[8] While the abandonment of constraint can appear emancipatory, the apparent absence of limits can also conceal a deeper contingency (McGowan, 2025).[9] In this sense, the ambivalence of freedom is captured in the felt need for authorised regulation, what Oakley

succinctly describes as ‘the necessity that our games have rules, the need for referees’ (2018, 42).[10]

Creative Fouling

Sennett’s (2002) discussion of children’s marbles games is useful here because it clarifies how rules can function less as external prohibitions than as practices of self-distance, where domination is pursued, but only by being deferred and ritualised through agreed conventions. In effect, ‘the conventions of a child’s game put the child’s pleasure in dominating others at a distance, even though domination is the reason the game is played, even though domination is strongly desired throughout’ (Sennett, 2002, 319). In this sense, rule-bounded play foregrounds a paradox central to strategic fouling. The athlete’s ‘freedom’ is not the capacity to act without limit, but the capacity to act *through* limit, by inhabiting constraint as a condition of inventive action. Strategic fouls are therefore analytically revealing not simply because they transgress regulation, but because they stage a creative relation to the rule-system they presuppose, including the anticipated sanction that is accepted as part of play’s competitive grammar.

Certainly, as Russell acknowledges, ‘competitive shenanigans can encourage creativity and critical analysis and also make us think about morally objectionable strategies that may be employed against us outside sport’ (2017a, 36). The extension pursued here is not that sport and everyday life are equivalent, but that sport renders unusually visible a general problem of sanctioned transgression. That is, how agency is negotiated *through* a rule and the anticipated penalty that accompanies its breach. In fact, it is in encouraging such creativity that the relationship between play and sport remains one of ‘continuous tension’ (Black, 2024). Here, the excitement and seriousness of sport are forged through the creativity that play provides, such as that exemplified in the calculated use of the strategic foul. To put it bluntly, what the

strategic foul reveals is not simply an element of play within the rule-bounded nature of sport, but a level of creativity that reveals the inherent importance of self-limitation for the subject. It is in this respect that we can better account for the *expected* penalty that underscores the strategic foul (Fraleigh, 2003), and which points to a certain self-sabotage or self-limitation on behalf of the athlete.

Psychoanalytically, creativity can offer a unique account of the subject (Black, 2024; McGowan, 2025; Ruti, 2006). Drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan, we can consider how the creativity inherent in play is fundamentally tied to the subject's constitutive lack, what Lacan (2019) refers to as *manque-à-être* (want-to-be), or symbolic castration. Far from being a deficit to be overcome, lack functions as the very engine of desire and invention. The subject creates not despite this lack, but because of it; where play becomes a space in which the subject tentatively and temporarily negotiates this absence through symbolic activity. On this basis, creativity is more than a simple by-product of play, it is instead its essential condition; indeed, an improvised response to the impossibility of wholeness, a gesture that momentarily sustains the subject in relation to its own incompletion.

More to the point, subjective freedom does not arise from the fulfilment of desire or the attainment of a specific object, but from the subject's engagement with limits and obstacles (McNulty, 2014). In other words, rather than being stifled by constraint, creativity in play and sport is made possible through it. The codified rules of sport and the formal structures of play operate as generative constraints, enabling what Engley refers to as 'the fecundity of the limit' (2023, 745). This contradictory formulation challenges liberal conceptions of freedom as the absence of restriction or limitation, proposing instead that freedom emerges through the subject's confrontation with the structural limits that shape desire itself (Žižek, 2023). In the context of sport, while rules are often perceived as external constraints, as obstacles that delimit action and inhibit spontaneity, the case of the strategic foul illustrates that these rules can be

reimagined as generative structures that make creativity possible. This generative function is not confined to sport. In other rule-governed settings, regulation likewise operates as the medium through which action becomes intelligible and contestable, sometimes even allowing agents to incorporate anticipated sanction into practical reasoning. What varies across domains is the status of the rule, whether the breach tacitly affirms a shared framework, or whether it is staged as a challenge to that framework's legitimacy. To this extent, the obstacle, or the rules, provides a condition of possibility: a site through which the subject asserts agency, not by overcoming lack, but by enduring and negotiating it.

In this context, such negotiation is reflected by the fact that the strategic foul is more than a simple transgression of rules for instrumental gain, but, rather, a self-imposed limit within the game's symbolic order that allows the player to exercise tactical intelligence, possibly even serving as a form of aesthetic decision-making (Kreft, 2012). Arguably, this becomes apparent when the athlete who commits a strategic foul is performing a kind of self-outwitting (Nietzsche, 1998), whereby they inhabit the rules so fully that their transgression becomes a form of mastery. In this sense, the strategic foul exemplifies how, within sport, creativity arises not through an escape from limits, but through their inventive negotiation.

For instance, if we conceive of the strategic foul as a form of creative self-limitation, then, as an example, we can turn to Luis Suárez's deliberate handball during the 2010 FIFA World Cup quarter-final between Uruguay and Ghana.[11] In the final moments of extra time, with Ghana certain to score the winning goal, Suárez intentionally handled the ball on the goal line. He was immediately sent off, and a penalty was awarded, yet, what proved controversial, and no less dramatic, was that Ghana missed the subsequent penalty, and Uruguay went on to win the match in the resulting penalty shootout. Suárez's action proved a decisive intervention. Crucially, his handball was not a rejection of the game's symbolic order, but an action that presupposed that order at its limit. Suárez acted in full awareness that dismissal was the

overwhelmingly likely response, effectively exchanging a near-certain sanction for the possibility that the ensuing penalty might be missed. Read this way, the Suárez case emphasizes the boundary between covert evasion and a transgression that works precisely by activating the game's sanctioning machinery. Suárez's action remains strategically intelligible precisely because the dismissal was the expected institutional response. The tactic activated the sanction in order to convert near-certain defeat into a rule-governed risk. In this sense, Suárez's strategic foul was not simply a rule violation for instrumental gain, but a form of creative self-limitation through which the athlete exercised tactical intelligence, and, arguably, aesthetic judgment (Kreft, 2012).[12]

In the case of the latter, the decision to foul was not accidental or clumsy, but a rapid intervention executed under extreme time-pressure. Although such actions are often retrospectively described by players and coaches as 'instinctive' or 'reflexive', this does not preclude strategic intelligibility. Where instinct names an embodied, pre-reflective decision that presupposes the rule-system and its likely sanction, converting near-certain defeat into a rule-sanctioned risk (a penalty is probable but not guaranteed), it is precisely this compressed form that lent the episode its dramatic and symbolic force. In this way, the act carried an aesthetic charge, which transformed a desperate defensive act into a moment of striking clarity and sporting tension, one that staged a meaningful encounter with the rules themselves. Following the foul, the act became a gesture that resonated across sporting cultures, provoking both condemnation and admiration, a testament, perhaps, to its affective and symbolic power (BBC Sport, 2022; Campeau, 2010; Fanin, 2020). In the end, rather than undermining the game, the foul dramatized its internal logic, bringing the structure of the rules into sharp relief.

Conclusion: Self-Limitation and the Strategic Foul

To conclude, I wish to assert that Russell's (2017a) observation that debates surrounding the limits of strategic fouling can prepare us for complex moral deliberation beyond sport, can itself highlight a crucial psychoanalytic insight: namely, that such acts expose the subject's self-division and capacity for self-limitation.[13] On the face of it, the strategic foul denotes both a tactical decision and a moment in which the athlete confronts competing imperatives. Whether one chooses to remain within the law or to transgress it knowingly, whether one sacrifices oneself for the team or upholds the symbolic integrity of the game, in each case, such competing desires and ideals can be used to expose the subject's self-division. In committing a strategic foul, the subject does not act freely in a simplistic, autonomous sense, but precisely within the boundaries of a structure that they have internalised and partially imposed upon themselves via their participation in the sporting activity.

It is in this regard that we can distinguish between sanctioned transgressions that remain system-affirming and those that are system-contesting.[14] In the case of system-affirming, the rule is treated as authoritative even when it is breached. Essentially, the sporting participant acknowledges the penalty and relies upon the continuing legitimacy of the framework that renders the transgression intelligible. Here, comparable dynamics appear in forms of regulatory manoeuvring, where actors exploit a rule, while depending upon the stability of the rule-system, as well as in minor administrative infractions that can be treated as a calculable cost rather than a deterrent. In the case of system contesting, the expectation to incur sanction is not a tactical cost within the practice but part of a public contestation of the rule's legitimacy, aimed at disclosing the law's inconsistency and demanding transformation.

Evidently, strategic fouling belongs primarily to system-affirming, and this is precisely why, in the case of sport, it can clarify how creativity is generated through constraint. In fact, while this helps to specify how agency is constituted in relation to a limit, insofar as subjects are confronted with sustaining or exploiting the symbolic order within which their action is

recognised, what the strategic foul provides is an encounter with failure. That is, the strategic foul is a site where the subject encounters its failure, or its self-limitation—a self-limitation that mirrors the subject's foundational choice (Lacan, 2004). This dynamic is clarified by Flisfeder (2022), who, in view of Lacan's (2004) account of drive, reframes the subject's relation to failure not as pathological, but as structurally bound to the constitution of subjectivity itself.[15] According to Flisfeder, drive is not the compulsion to fail for its own sake, but the repetitive return to the subject's original act of self-limitation: the moment it chooses 'a representational signifier' (2022, 426), i.e., Lacan's 'subject of the signifier' (2006, 743). It is in accordance with this choice that the subject constitutes itself in relation to its lost object, while also, 'In the act of choosing—that is, of affirming a choice—the subject at the same time negates all the various other possible choices that were previously available to it, and in this way it emerges as a *desiring* subject' (Flisfeder, 2022, 427). As a consequence, our enjoyment (*jouissance*) does not reside in the fulfilment of desire, but in the act of circling loss, a repetition that the subject both affirms and negates.[16] The limit, then, is not external but dialectically imposed in the very act of becoming subject (of acceding to an act of self-limitation; of acceding to an act of choosing that inherently limits oneself [i.e., negates the other choices/options]) (Black, 2022).

The strategic foul can thus be understood not simply as a means to gain advantage, but as an inaugural act of affirmation and self-limitation within the subject's formation. Indeed, as a repetition of the subject's primal choice to limit itself in order to emerge as a desiring and ethically situated being, a creative and affectively charged return to the limit that grounds the subject is averred. In so doing, the moral ambiguity and deliberation involved in strategic fouling is not a failure of ethical clarity but a meaningful confrontation with the subject's constitutive division. In sport, as in life, such moments force the subject to encounter the very

condition of their agency: the self-imposed limit that defines what kind of (sporting) subject they are willing to be.

Notes

[1] Later, Chiellini would explain, '…I was convinced I could put my body between Saka and the ball, and let it go out of play. But he wriggled round me! When he wriggled round from behind and had that space to run into, my reaction was to grab him. And I grabbed him good!' (McAvoy, 2022). While, in the moments proceeding the foul, Chiellini would gesture towards his innocence, his example contrasts with that of the Manchester United player, Ole Gunnar Solskjær's, who, in 1998, committed a foul on Newcastle United's Rob Lee, thus stopping a far more likely goal scoring opportunity. Solskjær's foul was committed precisely in expectation of a red card and his immediate removal, which went uncontested by the player. The example remains an unusually explicit instance of a sanction being treated as the cost of preventing an opposition's attack.

[2] This tactic became so widely used and tacitly accepted within the NBA that it eventually took on a theatrical, almost tongue-in-cheek quality. A striking example occurred when Popovich instructed one of his players to intentionally foul Shaquille O'Neal just five seconds into a game. The foul had no tactical necessity at that early stage, serving more as a humorous acknowledgment of the now-routine nature of the strategy. As O'Neal turned to glance toward the Spurs's bench, Popovich met his gaze, smiled, and gave him two enthusiastic thumbs up. The moment encapsulated both the absurdity and the calculated logic of the 'Hack-a-Shaq' approach. An intentional exploitation of the rules so embedded in the competitive grammar of the game that it became an object of playful performance as much as strategic design. The incident has since become a meme. (Thanks to Jim Cherrington for recommending this example).

[3] As noted in the case of the 'Hack-a-Shaq' example, the regulatory response of the NBA suggested that when the infraction became dominant their intervention was required in order to restore the sport's competitiveness.

[4] In the case of football, the sportswriter, Michael Cox, notes, 'In a lot of cases, the offending player knows he will pick up a card and is happy to collect it to prevent the opposition breaking quickly. His side can get back into a good defensive position, and the attacking side has been robbed of a potentially crucial situation. By committing a foul, the defensive side is better off' (Cox, 2012).

[5] Certainly, some accounts distinguish between penalised acts that function as prohibitions and those that function as 'prices' within a practice (Eylon and Horowitz, 2018; Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000). In this regard, certain 'professional' fouls are not experienced as violations in a deep normative sense but as priced options internal to the game's operation, which would render them non-contradictory. While I acknowledge this possibility, the 'toll' metaphor remains descriptive (capturing how sanctions may be incorporated into tactical reasoning), and, as a result, the following discussion remains focused on how strategic fouling stages a transgressive relation to rule-authority, and why that relation is analytically productive for understanding self-limitation and creativity.

[6] As Russell notes, ‘sport is also importantly disengaged from normal emotional and moral commitments found in the everyday. Thus, opponents’ vulnerabilities are ruthlessly exploited and sympathy and compassion for opponents is completely put aside within the terms of a contest’ (2017a, 35).
[7] For an Althusserian reading of governing bodies (e.g., IOC, WADA) as ideological apparatuses that reproduce the conditions under which sport is practised and understood, see He (2025) (see also Althusser [1994]).
[8] Here, Ruti notes that, ‘As a culture, we are used to thinking about restraint as primarily a negative characteristic because we live in a society dictated by the demands of consumer capitalism—a society that fetishizes abundance and equates freedom with unlimited choice’ (2006, 154).
[9] In relation to this point, and, to use a non-sporting example, McGowan (2025) challenges the conventional association of free verse with poetic liberation by exposing a fundamental contradiction at the heart of formal freedom. While the abandonment of traditional constraints may appear to emancipate the poet, this freedom, he argues, is structurally similar to the ideological conception of freedom under capitalism: an apparent absence of limits that conceals a deeper contingency. In free verse, the poet must still decide where the line ends, yet this decision is no longer dictated by form but by arbitrary or external factors. As such, the formal ‘freedom’ of free verse does not deliver an authentic liberation but instead performs a disavowal of constraint, masking the fact that unbridled freedom, without structure, is itself a kind of imprisonment. In the end, ‘The limitations of form do not cripple the possibilities for art but create them. These limits are generative’ (McGowan, 2025, 16).
[10] In reflecting on the relationship with the referee, Hook identifies a ‘truth-of-consensus’: indeed, a form of authorised truth that prevails not because it aligns with what actually occurred, but because it is institutionally ratified (2018, 20). As Hook notes, every sports fan intuitively grasps the fact that the referee’s decision, however flawed or contested, becomes the official version of events. What matters, ultimately, is not what really happened, but what is recognised as having happened within the symbolic framework of the game. This ‘meta-truth’ is thus performative rather than representational (Hook, 2018, 20). What is more, the legitimacy of this framework is very rarely questioned, even when decisions are disputed. What is upheld is the broader structure: the rules of the game and the referee’s mandate to enforce them.
[11] Referring to Luis Suárez is in no way intended to valorise him as a player or assume that his sporting talent prefigures his own sporting creativity. Indeed, the footballer may be better known for his repeated biting incidents, which are perhaps better perceived as unsporting and viscerally disturbing. Unlike a strategic foul, which operates within the symbolic logic of the game, and involves a calculated negotiation of rules for tactical advantage, biting is a clear case of cheating: it has no direct relation to gameplay, deliberately causes harm to an opposing player, offers no strategic value, and violates the basic ethical norms and physical integrity expected in sport. The only concession I’m willing to afford it is that much like sport, it’s a weird thing to do.
[12] As Webster notes, ‘aesthetic experience is the experience of letting the self, self-preservation, fall away’ (2011, 29). By accepting the loss of self-preservation, Suárez enacted a form of self-limitation through a decision that exemplifies how aesthetic judgment in sport may emerge precisely at the point where the athlete allows the self to fall away.
[13] Here, Russell asserts, ‘Even struggling with debates and decisions about the appropriate limits of strategic fouling, which are commonplace in sport, can prepare us for thinking about complex decisions where we weigh competing moral and other personal and perfectionist interests outside sport’ (2017a, 36).

[14] Outside of sport, a system-affirming transgression can be seen in cases where a rule-governed practice explicitly prices deviation, such as, terminating a fixed-term contract early and paying an agreed break-fee. Here the 'penalty' is incorporated into practical reasoning as a cost of action, and the legitimacy of the contractual framework is presupposed rather than disputed. By contrast, civil disobedience exemplifies system-contesting transgression. For instance, a public sit-in that knowingly violates trespass or public-order regulations and accepts arrest, not as a tactical cost within the practice, but as a communicative act aimed at contesting the law's claim to legitimacy and pressing for institutional change.
[15] The drive reveals Lacan's (2004) reworking of Freud's concept of the death drive by providing it a linguistic and structural significance. As the subject's compulsive return to a lost origin, or, the Real that resists symbolization, the drive denotes the insistence of repetition beyond pleasure, revealing the fundamental excess or failure at the core of enjoyment (*jouissance*), and, thus, is painful and/or disruptive.
[16] For Lacan (2004), and in view of Flisfeder's (2022) account, the subject finds satisfaction not in the object, but in the perpetual return to the moment that split it from the object, which sustains its own being as a desiring subject.

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