

**Sport and the Unconscious: Enjoyment, Failure, and the Divided Subject [abstract only]**

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## **Sport and the Unconscious: Enjoyment, Failure, and the Divided Subject**

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### **Abstract**

This talk examines sport as a privileged cultural site for thinking about the unconscious. Drawing on a Lacanian approach to psychoanalysis, it asks why sport matters so intensely when its outcomes are often fleeting, and, most of the time, inconsequential. Rather than treating sport simply as entertainment, as a key marker of one's identity, or as an opportunity to improve one's health and wellbeing, we can consider how sport stages the divided subject.

Following this, the talk will begin by outlining why psychoanalysis offers a distinctive contribution to the critical study of sport. While sociological and critical theories remain essential for analysing power and inequality across sport's various institutions, psychoanalysis asks why subjects remain attached to practices that frustrate, disappoint, or even injure them. It then addresses common misconceptions of the unconscious, challenging the view that it is merely a hidden container of irrational impulses. For Lacan, the unconscious is structured through language and becomes legible in attachments that exceed conscious intention. Accordingly, through examples that draw from our common sporting failures, including penalty shootouts, injury, and fandom, as well as well-known sporting icons and moments, such as Simone Biles, Gareth Southgate, Luis Suárez, and the racialised abuse following England's Euro 2020 defeat, the talk highlights how sport makes the unconscious uniquely visible. In doing so, we can explore how athletes and supporters become bound to repeated disappointments, and why such attachments cannot be explained by rational interest alone.

The final section considers the ethical and political implications of reading sport psychoanalytically. It argues that sport's promises of inclusion and progress must also be examined through unconscious enjoyment and fantasy. In doing so, the talk suggests that sport is not merely an object to which psychoanalysis can be applied, but an essential site where the unconscious is vividly performed in contemporary social, cultural, and political life. This serves to underwrite sport's importance for critical analysis today.

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