

CAN SPORT BE CONSIDERED A PERFORMANCE?
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Given that sports matches and performances function in very similar material contexts – a group of persons passively observe another group, active but smaller, execute a set of verbal and/or bodily gestures – it might be concluded that the former might be envisaged as a subset of the latter. That conclusion is, we shall see, neither axiomatic nor a proposition whose truth can be easily demonstrated. Most obviously, sport is necessarily and immediately physically competitive, a performance – apparently – is not. Indeed, the very words that we use for each category militate *a priori* against equating the two. The fact that in ordinary language we cannot interchange the two labels implies that the activities they denote are distinct from one another, perhaps mutually exclusive.

“Sport” (< Lat. *deporto*, carry away) is a diversion from more serious activities and hence possesses pejorative connotations; “performance” (< Late Lat. *performo*, to confer a definitive shape on something) connotes a positive activity. We label participants in sport as “athletes” (< Greek *athlos*, a contest for a prize) or as “players” (< OE *plegan*, amuse oneself).¹ We definitely do not label them as “performers.”² We reserve that term and its cognate “performance” primarily for musicians, singers, dancers, and actors (a category that includes clowns and other circus entertainers) and for the activities they execute. This labelling distinction reflects the prevailing imaginary, which sees sport as the unbridled, physical antithesis to performance activities; these are conceived to be essentially controlled and cerebral. This distinction is perhaps simplistic, but it is none the less a persistent common place and

¹ The word “players” can be applied to actors and musicians, but only collectively.

² On a more popular level, “performers” may be labeled “entertainers,” but this word is also never applied to athletes.

thus an obstacle to a clear understanding of the parallels and similarities that *perhaps* place sport and performance into a relation that is at least analogous if not synonymous.

Let us begin by defining more precisely the words involved. “Sport” consists of a set of *autotelic physical contests or competitions*,³ each of which *publicly* pits two or more athletes or teams of athletes against each other, with the goal of determining which is the better or best; in the general parlance, which is the winner and which (ones) is/are the loser(s). I will, however, for the sake of brevity, use “sport” by itself to denote an actual athletic contest that is either Olympic, professional, or high-level amateur (e.g., the “open” golf and tennis tournaments).

“Performance” here will mean a *publicly* available spectacle, whether theatrical, cinematic, musical, or choreographic, in which actors, musicians, vocalists, and dancers recite or sing verbal texts, act out sets of gestures, or instrumentally execute classical or popular melodies. Under “choreographic” I include all forms of corporeal gestural sequences, whether ostentatiously rhythmic, e.g., dance, or simply rigorously timed, as in all forms of circus acts and acrobatic and gymnastic feats. I will not include performative speech such as defined by J. L. Austin in *How to do things with words* (1962).

This definition of sport identifies four constituent elements; are they possibly also constituent to performances? The first of these is “autotelicity.” Like a sports contest, a performance is an end in itself; it produces no material good or service, though it may generate other activities such as the near riot that followed the premiere of Stravinsky’s *Sacre du printemps* (Paris, May 1913). Sports have also incited riots, though the motivations for these have often

³ I have borrowed this definition from Allen Guttmann, *Sports Spectators*, New York, 1986.

been unclear.⁴ “Autotelicity” is thus common to sport and to performance and makes them in this sense at least comparable.

Secondly, both sport and performance always provide space and accommodation (for free or for purchase) so that people may observe what the athletes and performers are actually doing. So again, the two share a similarity, but here there are two caveats. The people who are present at a performance are grouped collectively under the label “audience” (< Lat. *audio*, to hear) while those who witness sport are labeled individually as “spectators” (< Lat. *specto*, to look at).⁵ And the space provided for an audience is called a theatre or a hall or an auditorium and it has room for a few hundred people, while spectators are accommodated in an arena or a stadium that can seat several tens of thousands.⁶

In this context it should also be mentioned that by convention there is an invisible barrier that separates both athletes and performers from the audience/spectators. This barrier is called the “fourth wall” in theatrical parlance: the people on the stage and on the field of play pretend no one is watching or listening to them, while the watchers/listeners are restrained by rule and convention from interfering in the sport/performance action.⁷

Again, this fourth wall is not the same in sport as in performance. In the latter, the audience sits on one side of the wall, the performers execute their roles on the other side and project their action – the “message,” if you will – in a single

⁴ Performances and sports may also generate financial gain, but that is a separate issue, semiotically secondary or incidental to their actual happening).

⁵ Note that “to hear” is connotated passively, “to look at” actively.

⁶ It is true that since the 1960s some extremely popular performers – the Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, Taylor Swift – have performed to huge audiences in filled-to-capacity sport stadiums, but these are very much exceptions to the rule.

⁷ In earlier times it was common in opera performances for the lead singers to break both convention and character by singing their famous arias directly to the audience.

direction. In sport, the fourth wall is oval or circular, the spectators surround the athletes, and the action is projected in many different directions at once. An audience receives a single message, spectators – depending on their point of observation – receive different messages simultaneously.⁸ Semiotically, what is significant here is that the existence of the “fourth wall” theoretically implies that there is no contact between performers and athletes on one side and the audience and spectators on the other, no shared “touching” that would facilitate the passing of the message.⁹

The third constituent is physicality, i.e., the expenditure of bodily energy in order to achieve some goal. Here the difference is more pronounced. “Performances” are, to be sure, very often physical, not only in the choreographic sense, but also in the very fact of having to produce the vocal sounds, play a musical instrument, and execute the gestures and movements that are required by a play, a concert, an opera or any other staged production. But the intended goal of a performance is to entertain, perhaps to move the audience sitting on the other side of the fourth wall.

In sport, the energy expended by an athlete has as its goal to achieve victory by overcoming the antagonistic energy expended simultaneously by the opponent(s). The physicality of sport is thus obviously linked to the fourth defining constituent, competition. Sport is a physical contest that I will describe as intra-competitive: the opponents are in the same space together and the contest is immediate. On the contrary, the performer’s expended energy is not aimed at countering the energy expended by the other performers in the orchestra pit or on the stage with him or her.¹⁰

⁸ In theatre in the round and performances by small musical ensembles the audience may more or less surround the performers in a way that is similar to sport.

⁹ “Contact” derives from the Latin *tango*, to touch, prefixed by *cum*, together.

The physicality of a performance may none the less be implicitly in the service of a competition, but I will define this dimension of a performance as extra-competitive, a signifier I will explore further below.

Despite, then, some fragmentary similarities, sport and performance do differ fundamentally. Indeed, the word “performance” itself raises *ab initio* difficulties that inhibit us from categorizing sport as one of the subsets normally denoted by that label. “Performance,” we have said above, basically means the conferring of a shape on something. In English that “something” is, however, not a physical object: we do not describe painting, sculpting or architecture as a performance.¹¹ The word most frequently denotes the execution of a text or a programme or a set of directions or instructions (e.g., a musical score) that already exists, that specifies a mostly unalterable sequence of words, musical sounds, and bodily gestures, and that may indeed have existed for several centuries and be already well known. On the other hand, if the “something” as I have defined it, is brand new, then its execution is not so much a “performance” as it is a “creation,” a “premiere.” Sport falls into neither of these categories. Sports spectators know in general terms what is going to happen on the field of play, but in specific terms each hockey, or baseball, or soccer match is different from every other hockey, or baseball, or soccer match that has ever been or will ever be played.

¹⁰ Even when the text of a play calls for an antagonistic physical confrontation, as in the duel in *Hamlet* 5.2, the actors’ movements have been choreographed so that the confrontation is only apparent.

¹¹It is true that in the past some artists invited acquaintances to come on a specific day of the week to watch them paint and so, on those occasions, were “performing”; hence the line between creating art and performing the act of creation can definitely be blurred.

I will return later to this distinction between sport and performance and between performance and creations.

There are none the less places where these seeming boundaries that divide sport from performance are not quite impermeable. For example, a performance is not overtly a contest, but it may well have some competitive features.¹² Leaving aside such specific contests as the Warsaw Chopin Piano Competition and its multiple imitators, I will focus on the *raison d'être* of performances. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was premiered before 1595 and has been staged and filmed countless times in the intervening 430 years. Since at least the 18th century not one of these subsequent performances has executed the full text of the play and some of them altered the order of the scenes and replaced bits of the text with other words. All of these changes have been intended to “improve” the play – e.g., make it more stage- or film-manageable in various ways or more relevant for a contemporary audience; or more likely to attract a sufficiently large paying audience.

But these alterations also imply comparison, i.e., competition: Baz Luhrman's 1996 film of *R&J* is deemed by critics and audiences either to be better than or to be not as good as Zeffirelli's 1968 version. I.e., in undertaking a film version of *R&J*, Luhrman must have consciously been intending to outdo his predecessor. In a larger sense stage and film producers are competing with, i.e., hoping to attract a larger audience than, other performances of different plays and films that are available to the public in the same city at the same time. This is the extra-competitive dimension of performance, and it is often essential to

¹² In Rome in 1708 or 1709, G.-F. Handel and Domenico Scarlatti, both 23 or 24 at the time, competed playing the harpsichord and the organ. Scarlatti was judged a superior harpsichordist, Handel a superior organist.

its very existence. But it is not the same thing as the competition that occurs on the field of play.

Similarly, the coach of a sports team intends to outdo both the immediate opponents and also to have his/her team classed as better than other teams that have existed in the past: e.g., will the 2026 Toronto Blue Jays be a better/worse team than the 2025 Blue Jays? Competition with rivals, both immediate and previous, seems thus to be endemic to both sport and performance, but in sport it is the intra-competitive dimension that dominates, focusing on the opponents in the here and now, while the extra-competitive dimension is either unavoidable or more nostalgic than anything else.

Further, success in sport is objectively measured by numbers that signify points scored, time spent, heights reached, weights lifted, distance covered, etc. Performance competitions (in the wide sense of that word) may be quantified by the relative number of tickets sold, but victory lies more often in the subjective judgment of the critics and the audience. And it is where the judgmental factor coincides, in a sense, with the physical factor that sport and performance also come together. Ballet, modern dance, high wire, and acrobatic acts, though all “performances” because they are tightly scripted and judged in those terms by the audience, require an expenditure of energy very much akin to that expended by athletes such as weightlifters, javelin throwers, long jumpers, pole vaulters, etc. On the other side, skaters and gymnasts expend the same kind of energy and their activities are equally tightly scripted. They are all representations of series of pre-specified timed movements, of programmed sequences, partially determined by the rules of the competitions, partially invented as permissible variations by the athletes and their coaches. Victory is expressed in numbers, but these numbers are not quantitative since they are not objectively measured or timed but are for the most

part reached subjectively by the members of the judging panel. Skating and gymnastics are however classed as sports competitions, though they really resemble some categories of performances. And, of course, professional wrestling as produced by W[orld] W[restling] E[ntertainment] is a performance dressed up to resemble a sport. Seen from this angle, sport and performance may in fact spill over into each other and be envisioned not so much as polar opposites but as enterprises that each occupy a place in a continuity that is characterized by the increasing role played by subjective judgment and the decreasing role played by objective numbers.

Still, quantification rears its head in sport in ways that performance rejects. Sports fields are uniformly sized according to the particular sport and victory must be achieved within a specific temporal (or otherwise determined) framework: 90 minutes for soccer, one hour for football and hockey, 40 minutes for basketball, 21 days for the Tour de France, etc.).¹³ A sports match that does not last – or that exceeds – the specified time would be invalid. Except in the case of boxing (and occasionally tennis), where one opponent may admit defeat and end the match without having been officially beaten, sports contests must last the full specified time, even if one of the teams is losing by such a lopsided score that defeat is inevitable. Similarly, in team sports, the number of athletes competing is rigorously stipulated; to have more or fewer athletes active on the terrain is an infraction that is penalized in a variety of ways according to the sport involved. It is also the case that if a professional sports contest has been scheduled, it has to take place or be postponed to a later date. In

¹³ Baseball and cricket games are measured by non-temporal, but still formal, quantified, precise criteria.

these senses then sport is performative, in the ceremonial or ritualistic meaning of that term.

A performance, for the most part, is not judged or otherwise determined quantitatively nor is it limited or regulated by time, space, or the number of performers. The stage of a concert hall may be occupied one evening by 1,030 musicians performing Mahler's 8th symphony (90 minutes), the next evening by a single piano recitalist playing Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (60 minutes). No rule or convention requires that the symphony be shortened or that the *Variations* be lengthened. Or that the performance areas of concert halls be of a precisely regulated size. Or that the same number of musicians be present on stage. Or indeed that it must take place even if no audience has bothered to attend.

We have earlier contrasted two kinds of performances: the execution of an already existing play, ballet, opera, or piece of music, as opposed to the execution of a generically identical work that has, however, never been formerly presented; and we have said that the latter ought more properly be called a "creation" or a "premiere." The audience – the addressee – does not know of what the message is going to consist. It might seem that sport contests, if they are "performances," ought to be classed in the latter category, since no sports match duplicates any match that has previously been played and so it – the match equals the message - consists in large part of unpredictable elements. But that classification is perhaps a bit simplistic. In fact, all forms of sport competitions are programmed or scripted, if not exactly in the same way or to the same degree as gymnastics and figure skating, or in a larger sense, as a play or a symphony. Coaches and managers have devised a strategy, not simply on a game-to-game basis, but for the entire season. And behind that strategy lies an often-voluminous printed text: the sport's rule book. In a sense, then, each sport contest is a realization of that text – with this

difference: the opposing team has also devised a strategy based on that same text. A sport contest is thus equivalent to an impossible performance where two versions of the same play or the same music would be performed simultaneously in the same theatre in front of the same audience.

A theatrical director will have a particular understanding and interpretation of the play they are producing and thus a strategy composed of various tactics that will, ideally, result in that interpretation being made clear. Or, in other words, prove to be a winner. However, because athletes are dealing with both accidents – a bad bounce, a player’s injury – and the constant antagonistic response from their opponents, coaches are constantly obliged to alter on the spot, if not their strategy, at least their tactics. Theatre directors and symphony conductors are almost never required to alter their strategy or tactics because of some drastically unforeseen event that demands instant redress. Performances impose almost zero spontaneity on their practitioners; sport imposes a constantly high level of positive reaction.¹⁴

Penultimately, in this catalog of differences and contrasts, we come to the matter of costume. In a performance this may be dictated by convention or tradition or practicality. Symphony orchestra and recital musicians commonly wear what is loosely defined as evening clothes; classical ballet dancers wear extremely tight-fitting leotards that will not impede their movements. Actors wear costumes and make-up that identify their character and perhaps the historical period in which the play is set. But nothing in this area is actually stipulated by some external, rule-making body and actors and musicians may be wearing on stage what

¹⁴ Accidents occasionally mar performances – opera singers have actually died on stage – but the usual reaction has been either to pretend the accident, if trivial, didn’t happen or to simply cancel the remainder of the performance. The tactics and the strategy do not change.

looks to be ordinary street clothes if that is what the director has stipulated in order for their strategy to be achieved.

In sport it is quite the opposite. The only persons allowed on the field of play are those who are wearing the uniform that the rulebook for that sport has specified, often in excruciating detail. Since no sport replicates the costumes of another sport, these outfits are obviously an element of communication. But before heading in that direction, let us note that some parts of these outfits – short pants in hockey, soccer, rugby, and basketball, knee breeches in football and baseball, the plus fours formerly worn by golfers – replicate the clothes worn ordinarily by prepubescent boys in the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries. Sport, it would seem, is fundamentally an escape from the cares of adulthood.¹⁵ A performance may provide an escape from day-to-day cares, but there is nothing generational about it.

That aside, the costumes/uniforms worn by athletes (like those worn by members of the military) signify that they have a specific function to fulfill within a specific context; in the case of sport, within the measured confines of the field of play. In other words, the costumes/uniforms taken together with the visibly and literally regulated surface constitute the code, the means by which the spectators understand that the athletes are executing, or are anticipating executing, a defined set of gestures that are tautologically meaningful only if executed by a person wearing that exact uniform in that exact space.¹⁶ The wearing of defined uniforms is thus performative and to this extent, athletes are performers in the same way as costumed clowns, high wire artists, ballet dancers wearing tutus and point shoes, etc.

¹⁵ English cricket players traditionally wore the standard costume of upper-class men on holiday: white pants and a white shirt open at the neck.

¹⁶ Anyone wearing such a costume outside those confines would appear misguided or even excentric.

That brings us to the audience/spectators, the addressees. I have stated above that both sport and performance are executed publicly, but that their public is denoted by different labels and is assembled in structures that differ in name, size, and configuration. Both enterprises, however, share this similarity that there is a first group of individuals carrying out actions – physical, verbal, musical – in an enclosed space, and a second group of individuals in an adjacent, distinct, and equally enclosed space who are observing the first group. In both cases the actions of the first group are materially unproductive and perhaps even bizarre – why are twelve women or men with sticks chasing a small black disc around an icy surface? why are a group of perhaps extravagantly costumed individuals strutting about a stage and singing in a language most of the audience does not understand? – as are the motivations of the observing group: why have they paid money in order to observe the actions of the first group – who, oddly enough, are pretending that the observing group is not there. Since that group has, however, paid money in order to be present, they are expecting that the action they observe will afford them some return on their expenditure. This return will not be material in nature – sport and performance do not generate goods and services – and must therefore be intangible. In other words, the actions of the performers/athletes must be cognitively and/or aesthetically and/or emotionally meaningful for the audience/spectators; some form of communication must be taking place. We know this to be true by the fact that the second group approves/disapproves the actions of the first group by applauding (or failing to applaud) and by making vocal sounds that are indicative of the degree to which they believe their expenditure has been rewarded. Clearly, in both performance and sport, the “fourth wall” is breached and contact – in the Jakobsonian sense –

made explicit, even if after the fact, after the communication of the message has been completed.

Since, apart from their reactions, the second group is largely passive throughout both sport and performance – spectators are frequently more raucous than audiences – they are clearly the addressee, but who – in both cases – is the addresser, the originator of the communication? Obviously, in the majority of cases it is not the athletes/performers: they are merely the hired help, engaged and paid in order to act out, to produce a material realization of the strategy that the coach/director/conductor has devised. They are hence only the agents (i.e., part of the medium) by which the message is transmitted. They generally possess no autonomy that would encourage them to vary from the instructions they have been given (see Appendix).

Leaving aside that situation, we now must ask, for both sport and performance, just what is the message being communicated? And what does its being communicated actually achieve? These are complicated questions. In the case of professional and Olympic sports, the communicators are those sports' governing bodies, e.g., FIFA, the NHL, the IOC, etc. These bodies are composed of the sets of teams' owners and, in the last example, delegates of the countries that participate. These bodies organize the contests and the schedules and draw up the rule books, so that each sports contest is a physical enactment of the idealized rules and decisions that the sports' governors have embodied in language.

In that sense, athletes are performers in the same way as actors on stage doing a Shakespeare play. They are showing – more exactly, are trying to show – by their gestures just how abstract language can be perfectly materialized. The problem for sport is, as we have already stated, that other athletes are simultaneously trying to do the same thing in the same place and to do it better. And the decision as to which has succeeded will be determined

quantitatively, be thus undebatable, not by the subjective opinions of the audience and critics.

At this level the message being transmitted and received consists of a simple statement that embodies the intention behind it: athlete/team A is better than athlete/team B. And the “poetic” functions that makes that message more attractive and convincing lie in the physical grace and talent – or the sheer physical strength – with which the athletes accomplish their victory. From this point of view, we are getting into *Rezeptionstheorie* to the degree that it is this poetic dimension of sport that the spectators have paid to see and the addressers have to provide.

To conclude, then, we have to decide if sport is indeed a performance or a creation or something *sui generis*, though perhaps partaking of elements that are proper to one or both of the other two classes. Like the creations described by Paul Bouissac – the clown André’s bathtub act and the acrobatic feats of Netko and Lubov Yanchovi (*The Semiotics of Performance*, pp. 10 and 127-33) – a sports match is original; no one has ever seen it before. The circus acts are similarly original, but while it is impossible for anyone to see a particular sports match a second time, it is only unlikely that most people will see the circus acts a second time. In any case, the addressers – André and the Yanchovi – are the creators of the acts, but the meaning does not transcend the admonition to admire the demonstration of their ingenuity in devising the act and their talent in successfully executing it. A playwright or a composer has perhaps loftier goals in their creations, showing the audience in new ways the implications of human and social behaviour; or how musical sounds and timbres can portray feelings and thoughts that exceed the grasp of linguistic discourse.

The message conveyed by a performance, as I have defined the term, is the creation of the stage director or the orchestra conductor or the solo instrumentalist, who is saying to the

audience, “this is how Beethoven’s 5th symphony ought to sound in order to be fully understood” or “this is how you ought to perceive the deep meaning of *Romeo and Juliet*” or “this is how Chopin’s *Grande Polonaise* ought to be played if its full pianistic intensity is to be enjoyed.” To achieve their goals, they are at liberty to alter elements that the original text prescribed. Nothing constrains them from omitting a scene, changing the tempi, or modifying the specified volume of sound.

Like a performer, a sport’s coach begins with an existing text – the set of rules – but coaches cannot modify that text even to the slightest degree. And even though their aim is to interpret and exploit those rules in the same way that performers manipulate the texts that are their starting points, in order to demonstrate their full potential, sport coaches have to deal with two obstacles: the kind of contrary incidents that fall under the heading of the “bad bounce”; and the inescapable fact that they are facing opponents who are trying to simultaneously and antagonistically do exactly the same thing. Performers do not encounter opposition; opposition is fundamental to, is perhaps the *raison d’être* of sport.

Can we understand sport to be a subset of performance? Superficially yes, but fundamentally no

APPENDIX

Famous singers, instrumentalists, and actors tour all or part of the world putting on concerts and “one-person shows” and attract audiences that perhaps care less about what is being performed than being able to say that they saw the performer. The performer becomes the message. Famous athletes exert the same power of attraction. Spectators attend games for the chance of seeing the star execute some brilliant feat.¹⁷ However, sports stars cannot

display their talents except within the context of an arranged or scheduled contests. They cannot go on solo tours scoring goals, running 100 metres, or throwing forward passes because such activities would be meaningless outside the competitive frameworks organized by the sport's governing bodies. Unlike famous performers, they do not possess the autonomy needed to be the originators of a performative communication.

¹⁷ For example, my father told me (many years after the event) he had seen Babe Ruth, the famous 1920s-1930s baseball player and perhaps the first celebrity athlete, play in several games, but he didn't remember – or simply thought irrelevant – which teams Ruth's New York Yankees were playing against or which teams won.