Journal of the Philosophy of Sport, 2005, 32, 127-132.

Competitive Sports, Disability, and Problems of Justice in Sports

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A "level playing field" is a stock metaphor for equality. Despite its status as a near-cliché, however, the metaphor has been given limited theoretical attention. Deliberately tilting the field so that one set of contestants must consistently run uphill while their opponents get a downhill ride is perhaps a clear violation of the metaphor. But what of a bumpy field, where luck frequently plays a role in how the ball bounces, to play on another metaphor? Such a field is not "level" in the most obvious sense, but it may afford all contestants an equal chance, unless the bumps are concentrated on one side of the field and the contestants do not switch sides in an appropriately balanced way. But note this last qualification: If the bumps are concentrated around one goal, and it is an advantage to be attacking that goal at the end of the game, the field may not be level at all. And what of a field that is designed to fit some characteristics of players better than other characteristics? For example, a basketball court with baskets at different heights would play quite differently from a court where all baskets are 12 feet high. A soccer pitch with smaller goals would perhaps reward goalies with different physical endowments than the goal as it is presently shaped. These questions about the relationship between players and playing fields reach to the heart of how we understand sports, disability, and equality itself. These issues are the subject of this special section.

Functions of Sport and the Problem of Categorization

Consider first the function of sport. Accounts of what sports might be "for" vary from individual physical or personal development to community inclusiveness, to the demonstration of excellence, to entertainment with very high economic stakes. In this issue, Carwyn Jones understands sport in terms of the development of various forms of human excellence. Pinter, Filipcic, Solar, and Smrdu understand sport principally in terms of individual physical and personal development. Neither of these accounts centers on the high-stakes, entertainment value of sports such as the National Football League in the United States or the Premiership in British football (soccer).

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Different views of the function of sport are surely relevant to different circumstances. School physical education programs in early grades, such as those discussed by Pinter et al., should be aimed at developing the personal and physical characteristics of all children. The function of education should also be integrative, bringing difference together in community, no less in sport than in other areas of learning—at least, in a Deweyite view of education.[1] But these are perhaps the easier cases, for they involve principally noncompetitive models of what sport might be.

Even in venues that are aimed principally at personal development, however, there are difficult questions about how to make inclusion really work. For example, some students will have different levels of skill at different activities. Physical development requires activities that develop skills for students (or in later years for adults) with very different physical and mental characteristics—differences in height, weight, agility, sex, and cunning, to name a few. Personal development, as Pinter, Filipcic, Solar, and Smrdu point out, requires activities that allow all to succeed so that the self-esteem of some is not hostage to the capacities of others. Those whose skills develop less slowly, or fail to develop at all, can be frustrated when they must work together with those for whom skills develop with apparently little effort. Those whose skills develop relatively easily are also frustrated when they have to hold back to avoid hurting or humiliating others. They are also frustrated when they cannot practice their skills and develop them to the highest level because others cannot reach their level—and this frustration may be intensified if their higher levels of skill are also the function of significant effort on their part, which they would like to see rewarded, if only by the opportunity to play at the highest level. These issues arise in team sports very obviously—consider the strategy in youth soccer in which a dominant team is required to pass the ball to every team member before attempting to score another goal. But they also may arise in individual sports—consider a skiing trip on which all students have to stay on the less challenging slopes because only a few can manage the more difficult ones and it is not practical for a small group of teachers to supervise everyone on all of the slopes at once.

Designing educational forms of sport that meet goals of individual development of capacities and self-esteem is thus not simple. New forms of activities are perhaps the best strategy. Consider as an example obstacle courses that require a group to figure out how to get through a complex set of challenges without leaving anyone behind. Such courses require teamwork and strategy; everyone can contribute to achievement of the final result, using physical features as different as very small size or additional weight or working out problem-solving strategies. The course can be designed and redesigned with the characteristics and skills of the participants in mind so that it continues to provide challenges and development for everyone. This approach, however, contributes to an apparent divorce between sport as education and sport as competition.

To the extent that youth sports are modeled on the higher profile entertainment sports—basketball, American football, soccer, baseball, golf, hockey, skiing, and even track and field or bicycle racing—competitive sports will evolve outside of the educational environment. It certainly seems fair to say that youth sports as they are practiced in the United States today increasingly involve more highly differentiated forms of competition on the entertainment model. Talented athletes are encouraged by parents and coaches to play on travel teams, to play year-round, and to concentrate on a single sport. These developments are decried in the media

and in educational circles, but they appear unrelenting at the present time.[2] After all, they may have advantages for the athletes who participate successfully: the fun of travel teams, scholarships to summer camps or even sports-oriented academies, college scholarships, and the remote hope of vast economic rewards.

To be sure, skills developed in the more inclusive activities designed for educational settings, such as agility or strategy, will potentially transfer to the competitive setting. But this transfer may appear more remote than direct participation in the competitive activity itself. The difficulty is, then, to ensure that sport for education remains valued and valuable—a source of self-esteem and self-development for all—in light of the social pressures of adult entertainment sports. Prohibitory strategies such as not allowing participation in competitive leagues or camps for children under a certain age (say, age 12) postpone but do not eliminate the tension. Perhaps the best strategy is to emphasize the many different possible uses of sport for adults—how being physically active or using one's physical body in whatever ways are possible contributes to health, self-esteem, and the achievement of many goods over a lifetime. In a world in which competitive sport for entertainment carries much of the glamour and economic reward, however, the risk is that these emphases will pale by comparison.

At the level of competitive sports, moreover, issues of categorization are significant. Sports such as boxing and wrestling categorize by weight; sports such as football, where weight surely matters, do not. Carwyn Jones, in his contribution, analyzes how these issues of categorization arise for sports in which athletes are both people with disabilities and the sport is highly competitive, driven both by economics and by entertainment. An example is ice sledge hockey for athletes with lower body impairments.[3] Sledge hockey is as fast paced and hard hitting as ice hockey; for the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, for example, scalpers' tickets for the final game between the United States and Norway, which the United States won 4–3 in double overtime, went for as much as $100.[4] Jones considers in detail how the Paralympics have attempted to generate categorizations that are both entertaining and fair. This requires striking a very difficult balance between categories that are sufficiently broad to provide compelling competition yet sufficiently well defined so that people with relevantly similar skills are paired against each other. Jones points out that this balance may require redefinition in different contexts, an ongoing struggle for the Paralympic movement.

Golf is a particularly telling example of the complexity of issues of categorization. The Casey Martin case famously brought both the issue of disability and the issue of how the sport is to be understood to the forefront.[5] Martin is a professional golfer with Klippel-Trenaunay-Webber syndrome, a congenital impairment of the circulatory system in his right leg that makes walking both painful and physically damaging. In college and in competition leading to qualification for the PGA tour, Martin played golf with a cart. When the PGA tour refused to allow him to use a cart, Martin brought a lawsuit under the ADA, in which the United States Supreme Court ultimately held that the PGA tour was a public accommodation and that allowing Martin a cart would not be a fundamental alteration of the game of golf. Golf is about shot making, not walking, and use of a cart would not, in Martin's case, give him an unfair advantage over other golfers.

Contrast the *Martin* decision—much criticized—with the more recent efforts of Annika Sorenstam and Michelle Wie to play in men's professional golf events.

Although golf courses are routinely designed with men's and women's tees, women playing in men's events tee off from the same location as the men—the professional tees set for the given event. I have found no suggestion—despite extensive reading of commentary on these events—that it should have been otherwise. In missing qualifying for the 2004 Sony open by one stroke, Wie achieved an average drive length just under the average for the field.[6] In 2005, Wie just missed qualifying for the men's John Deere open but qualified for the men's U.S. Amateur Public Links Championship, where she reached the quarterfinals. Sorenstam's effort on the men's tour—her invitation to the Colonial Open in 2003—was only slightly less successful.[7] The appearance of women on the men's tour has proved highly popular, but commentators are concerned about the ultimate economic effect on the women's tour if stars such as Wie routinely leave the women's tour for men's events.[8]

As Jones outlines for the Paralympics, how categories in sports are designed to generate roughly equal competition thus may have significant consequences for the entertainment and economic value of high-profile sports. And if high-profile sports do affect youth sports, at least indirectly, how these issues are resolved may pose tensions for the educational goals of sports envisioned by Pinter, Filipcic, Solar, and Smrdu. The stakes of resolving issues of categorization in sports thus extend far beyond the Paralympics, as Jones discerns.

Disability and the Conventional Nature of Sport

In disability studies, the classic categorizations are impairment, disability, and handicap. An impairment is a physical or mental anomaly that affects functioning. For example, a loss of muscle in a leg is an impairment if it results in altered movement or strength. A disability is the effect of the impairment on what the individual is able to do in the world. Loss of leg strength is a disability in a world of stairs, where leg strength is required to mount high staircases in order to negotiate the world. A handicap is a disability that results in a competitive disadvantage. Loss of leg strength is a handicap in a sport such as soccer—although presumably less so in a sport such as arm wrestling or a competitive activity such as poker.

The "medical" model of disability rights takes the issue of equality to be principally about impairments of the individual, with the emphasis on "curing" or "correcting" the impairment. The "social" model, by contrast, takes the problem of equality as design in the world, on the recognition that there are many possible world designs, only some of which result in disabilities for individuals with impairments. In a world without stairs, for example, leg strength is of much less consequence than in a world such as Machu Picchu, in which stairs are very high and must persistently be negotiated.

The two principal movements in sport for people with disabilities—the Paralympics and the Special Olympics—diverge on the goal of sports. In the Paralympic movement, as Jones details, the goal is to develop highly competitive, highly visible, and economically viable sporting events for elite athletes with disabilities. Many competitors in the Paralympics, such as skiers Alison Pearl and Muffy Davis, were established as elite athletes before injury or illness occurred, but others, such as skier Mary Riddell, have congenital impairments. As the statement of purpose of the Paralympic Games avers, the games emphasize "the participants' athletic

achievements rather than their disability."[9] Categorization in the Paralympics is based on similarity of impairment, as Jones discusses.

The Special Olympics, by contrast, emphasize the self-development of the individual athlete. The Web site of the Special Olympics characterizes the movement as providing "year-round sports training and athletic competition to more than 1.7 million people with mental retardation in more than 150 countries,"[10] "Divisioning," in the Special Olympics, is based on prior competitive results, in addition to age and gender, not on impairment or the estimated effect of the impairment on performance. Groupings of athletes are to be arranged so that the highest and lowest scores of athletes are as similar as possible.[11] The result is that athletes are encouraged to improve in competition against those who have had very similar achievements; they are not placed in competitive settings in which their results indicate they might be at a significant disadvantage. The Special Olympics oath for athletes expresses both the competitive and the individual support aspects of the movement: "Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt."[12] Whether the fact that Paralympic features athletes with physical disabilities, whereas the Special Olympics feature athletes with intellectual impairments, should make such a crucial difference to categorization is a topic for another article.

The issue of categorization in sports presses the importance of the difference between a focus on impairment, disability, and handicap. As Jones's article so clearly explores, how sports are designed is a conventional feature of the world.[13] The rules of sports are characteristics of the world that create handicaps for some players but not for others. This is not simply an issue about athletes with disabilities, however. "Handicapping" is a recognized feature of sports such as amateur golf or horse racing. But as Jones's discussion of the issue of categorization in the Paralympics so clearly demonstrates, handicapping is present in all sports. It is all a matter of the rules of eligibility and the rules of the sport as played.

Conclusion

With the recognition of the conventional nature of categorization in sports comes the susceptibility of that categorization to analysis in terms of principles of justice. Therein lies the crucial link between the articles that follow. For if pressures from the categorization decisions that are made in entertainment sports filter back into youth sports, questions of justice that may appear less pressing at the professional level may be far more telling at the lower levels of sport. Pinder et al. defend a model of youth sports in which all can receive the benefits of sports—a model that surely furthers equality of opportunity in the sense of fair equality of opportunity.[14] Entertainment sports that feature athletes highly paid based on skill do not further equality of opportunity except in the sense that everyone has the same formal opportunity to compete. Robert Nozick famously contended that there is nothing unjust about Wilt Chamberlain's becoming very rich if everyone is willing to pay to see him play basketball.[15] If the categorizations in entertainment sports have a significant practical impact on youth sports, however, their role in promoting fair equality of opportunity is likely to weaken. If categorizations in sports are conventional, as so convincingly demonstrated by Jones, they are subject to reexamination in terms of theories of justice. If Pinder et al. are right about the importance of youth sports for promoting fair equality of opportunity, and if I am right about the

difficulties of separating youth from professional sports, the problems of justice raised by categorizations at the professional levels are significant indeed.

Notes

[1]See, e.g., Amy Gutmann. *Democratic Education*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999; John Dewey. Democracy and Education. New York: Macmillan, 1916.

[2]E.g., Bill Pennington, "Doctors See a Big Rise in Injuries as Young Athletes Train Nonstop." *New York Times*. Sect. A, col. 1, p. 1 (February 22, 2005).

[3]See the Web site of the International Paralympic Committee: www.paralympic.org/release/Winter_Sports/Ice_Sledge_Hockey/ (accessed August 20, 2005). The eligibility requirement for sledge hockey is a permanent disability in the lower part of the body that is obvious and makes ordinary ice-skating impossible.

[4]Personal knowledge of the author—I bought one. It was one of the most exciting sports events I have ever attended.

[5]*PGA Tour, Inc. v. Martin*, 532 U.S. 661 (2001).

[6]http://golf.about.com/cs/womensgolf/a/michellewie.htm (accessed August 20, 2005).

[7]Sorenstam missed the cut by four strokes. www.pgatour.com/u/ce/feature/0,1977,837190,00.html (accessed August 20, 2005).

[8]E.g., Selena Roberts. "Where the Boys Are, There She Is." *New York Times*. Sect. 4, col. 1, p. 14, July 17, 2005. Roberts writes, "No wonder the L.P.G.A. is nervous about Wie. It cannot afford to lose golf's starlet to a man's world."

[9]www.paralympic.org/release/Main_Sections_Menu/Paralympic_Games/ (accessed August 20, 2005).

[10]www.specialolympics.org/Special+Olympics+Public+Website/default.htm (accessed August 20, 2005).