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# ETHICS, NATIONALISM, AND THE IMAGINED COMMUNITY: THE CASE AGAINST INTER-NATIONAL SPORT<sup>1</sup>

**John Gleaves and Matthew Llewellyn**

*The focus of this article will be sport predicated on contests between nation-states, or what we will call inter-national sport, at the elite level. While much literature on the politics of sport has focused on the proper role of the nation-state in regards to specific sport issues, few have questioned whether elite sport ought to involve nationalism as part of its competition. Most who have defended such sport argue that the benefits of nationalism and the national identity outweigh any potential unintended harm. In this article, we question these conclusions by arguing that both lusory and ethical considerations undermine elite sport's emphasis on inter-national contests. We will be trying to argue that these artifacts no longer should play a primary role in determining eligibility or serving as the basis for determining competitive sides. We will make this argument by focusing on the ethical dilemmas posed specifically by inter-national competition including international discord and reduced quality of competition. We also argue that promoting national differences does not serve a useful lusory role in elite sport. However, we will concede that Morgan's respect for the narratives associated with sport indicate that national identity may continue playing a limited role in elite sporting contests. So while we make an exception for a soft national cultural narrative, we conclude that such arguments taken together indicate that national identities ought to have a much diminished role, if any at all, in elite sport.*

KEYWORDS sport; nationalism; ethics

*'Well, everyone knows Custer died at Little Bighorn. What this book presupposes is... maybe he didn't?'*

Eli Cash

## **Preface**

Eli Cash's words in the film *The Royal Tenenbaums* strike the audience as humorous both because of his pretentiousness and his presupposition's obvious

absurdity. The audience can laugh because as a statement of fact, General Custer *did* die at the Battle of Little Bighorn. Similarly, the suggestion that elite sport could and perhaps should cease to be predicated on competitions between nations strikes many as equally humorous, because the idea seems both overly academic (since many dismissively point out that it will never happen) and absurd (since how else would one conduct international sport?). Everyone knows that elite sport is best played between nations. But what this work presupposes is...maybe it isn't?

### Introduction

A large swath of elite sport involves contests between national teams or athletes representing their individual nations. This includes not just the Olympic Games, but also international football (soccer), test cricket, and various world championships in sports from archery and athletics to volleyball and wrestling as well as elite disabled competition. Much scholarly literature already exists on this topic including the appropriateness of nationality, nationalism, and the proper role of the nation-state in regards to specific sport issues (Hardman and Jones 2010; Iorweth, Jones, and Hardman 2010; Morgan 2000). Yet no scholar, to our knowledge, has asked whether nationalism ought to have any place in elite sport. This silence entails an assumption that the benefits of nationality in sport and the national identity promoted through sport outweigh many of the drawbacks associated with it (Dixon 2000; Hardman and Iorweth 2012). Even those (Gomberg 2000) arguing for a *laissez-faire* approach to athletes' national representations still accept inter-national sport as the accepted paradigm for elite sport.

This assumption is questionable for a number of reasons. What about the cases where sport nationalism exacerbated national chauvinisms, xenophobia, or various prejudicial biases? While the press often focuses on moments of inclusion, fans know that inter-national sport can stoke undesirable sentiments toward opponents. There are many examples of fans taunting or assaulting their opponents. Victories and losses can drive wedges between neighboring nations and reignite old hatreds. Particularly fraught contests can devolve into what Orwell (1968) labeled in 1945 'war minus the shooting'. Thus even if philosophers can defend the ideal, critics can argue that the practice remains so ethically unpalatable as to call the entire endeavor into question.

So which side is correct? In fact, neither. While the former position is overly naive, the latter is overly cynical. Taking inter-national sport either at its best or at its worst ignores the crucial assumptions that frame the entire debate. Only by examining these assumptions can we evaluate the appropriate role of inter-national sport. Our point of departure from previous articles discussing nationalism is our attempt to appreciate that nationalism is, as

Anderson (2006) argued, cultural artifacts of a particular kind. Predicating elite sport on competitions between nation-states or athletes representing their respective nations is, therefore, itself a cultural artifact – one which presents both ethical and lusory harms to sport. For this reason, we conclude that national allegiance should no longer play a primary role, in so far as determining eligibility, establishing criteria for competition, or providing the basis for selecting competitive sides, in elite sporting contests.

### **Nationalism and Inter-Nationalism in Sport**

Before we tackle the heart of the argument, it is important to define key terms. First, we label sporting competitions between nation-states 'inter-national sport'. In inter-national sport, athletes represent 'their' country, whether it has become theirs through birth, residence, marriage, ancestry, immigration, political asylum, or any of the other ways that people obtain their national status. Inter-national sport differs from international sport, which should be understood as sport that involves people from more than one nation but not necessarily playing in opposition to each other based on their national affiliation. Examples of international sport exist in most professional sport, where athletes compete for clubs or trade teams alongside athletes from other nations. Inter-national sport, on the other hand, stipulates that athletes compete for their own country and play against athletes from another country. In team sports, this requirement means that one nation's team competes against another nation's team. In individual sports, athletes often qualify for inter-national events through national competitions because many inter-national sports limit the number of athletes a particular country can enter into the contest.

In this way, inter-national sport often turns athletes into cultural representatives for their nation-state. For the athletes, whose participation presupposes some national affiliation, there is an implied solidarity with the citizens of the nation they represent. The athlete, or the national team, becomes a symbol of the nation itself. As E. J. Hobsbawm captures, 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people' (1992, p. 143). This relationship promotes national pride or identity through sporting performances. At the same time, inter-national sport is believed to act as a vehicle for internationalism and pacifism as it permits nations, even those at conflict, to come together for 'healthy' competition. Perhaps, while the two sides bat cricket balls (India-Pakistan cricket) or square off over table tennis (U.S. Table Tennis tours with China), a mutual respect – or at least tolerance – emerges. If nothing else, popular thinking assumes that inter-national sporting contests can at least diffuse larger political tensions as two opposing nations contest each other on the pitch rather than the actual battlefields.

However, this model of inter-national sport also – whether accidentally or intentionally – assumes elite-level sporting contests. Elite-level sport has certain principles that distinguish it from other forms of sport such as recreational or competitive sport or pedagogical sport designed to teach moral values. Elite sport, including Paralympic sport, often values determining athletic supremacy over other values such as inclusion or enjoyment which are often valued in recreational sport.<sup>2</sup> It also assumes a certain degree of talent, separating elite sport from competitive amateur or youth league sport. Additionally, elite sport values athletic merit over other characteristics such as religion, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.<sup>3</sup> Other forms of sport, such as the Maccabiah Games, the Gay Games, or the Highland Games, focus on identity, participation, and culture rather than determining comparative excellence. For such games, the criterion for inclusion is not talent but identity, and winning truly takes second to participation. For most inter-national sport, including FIFA's men's and women's World Cups, the Olympic and Paralympic Games, and many world championships, the emphasis is not on participation or identity but determining the best teams or athletes in the world. Even when selections are made based on gender, weight class, or disability, the idea is to compare like individuals on relevant athletic talent.

Critics might argue, however, that inter-national contests such as the Olympic Games are about more than elite sport. Rather than being about determining athletic superiority, Parry (2006) and Reid (2006), among others, have argued that the Olympic Games promote virtuous behaviors such as peace, inclusion, and tolerance. These humanistic values, so true believers in the Olympic Movement might argue, still take precedence over elite sporting contest. As the founder of the Modern Olympic Games, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, once said 'the most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part'. But even if we grant the Olympic Games are about more than simply elite sport and exclude them from our argument, other inter-national competitions will not escape scrutiny. In fact, most inter-national sport exists outside of the Olympic Games themselves. Many sports hold annual or semi-annual world championships that still rely on the inter-national model. International football through the World Cup or European Championships or test-match cricket rely solely on inter-national sides, and some sports like ski racing or swimming feature inter-national sides exclusively. Thus the case against inter-national sport matters even if one considers the Olympic Games or the Paralympic Games to be about more than just elite sport.

At the same time, it might be misleading to allow that humanistic virtues constitute or have ever constituted the core of the Olympic Games. The Games are far from inclusive, as they are composed of the most elite athletes from around the world. The focus on winners and medalists places the elite qualities of sport at the center of the Games. In practice, then, the Olympic Games really

are a quadrennial celebration of the fastest, highest, and strongest, not of those who simply choose to participate. The Games' status rests on the fact that Olympic success is arguably the highest sporting achievement any athlete can possibly achieve. Cynics might even suggest that the Olympic Games only promote additional virtues as good public relations or advertising, all the while knowing that if the Games were anything less than competitions featuring the most elite, few would tune in. So, whether the Games themselves are or are not purely about elite sport, their status as a promoter of elite sport means that its practice of promoting inter-national sport qualifies the Games for consideration here.

Returning to inter-national competition, we have thus far assumed that the idea of 'nation' is clear. But our argument requires a more robust idea of nation, as well as nationality. In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson explains that 'a nation is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign' (2006, p. 7). Anderson characterizes such communities as imagined since 'the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (2006, p. 6). Yet Anderson explains that this imagined idea of nationality, or rather nation-ness, is a contemporary phenomenon dating from the late eighteenth century that resulted from particular historical forces linked to the industrial revolution including mass publishing in the vernacular and the declining acceptance of divine right of rule (2006, p. 4). In other words, although we talk about ancient Japan or Greece as if there was political continuity to today's incarnations, the ancients did not share 'the image of communion' despite common language, religion or ethnicity. Rather, the idea of nationality is a modern cultural invention tied to post-industrial revolution historical events and easily transferable to various communities.

Similarly, the idea of sport between nation-states is equally a modern cultural invention. The spread of sport on an international scale has its roots in industrial Great Britain. Fuelled by the twin-forces of industrialization and urbanization, modern competitive sport flourished throughout the British Isles during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the *Pax Britannica*, an age of unrivalled British commercial and naval power that preceded Waterloo, the British introduced sporting pastimes to foreign lands, first in their colonies (Australia, North America, New Zealand, the Indian sub-continent), and later in Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa. With the seed planted, sport moved from the local to the international level through the establishment of international federations that guaranteed that rules and regulations would be consistent and respected the world over. On March 27, 1871, the first inter-national sporting contest took place between the English rugby team and its Scottish counterpart. In 1877 it was Ireland's turn to take on England, and in 1881

England played against the Welsh. By the early 1900s national teams and representatives were competing against each other on a regular basis in rugby, rowing, and association football. The establishment of major international sporting competitions heightened the regularity of contests between nation-states. In particular, the modern Olympic Games, revived in 1894 by Pierre de Coubertin, took place for the first time in Athens in 1896. A Frenchman, Jules Rimet, also took the lead in establishing the football world cup in 1930. Most of the major world championships were created before World War II: ice-skating in 1896, shooting in 1897, tennis in 1900, gymnastics in 1903, fencing and cycling in 1921 and skiing in 1937.

Unsurprisingly, as nation states took hold around the globe, sport came to reflect the era's epiphenomenal interest in nationalism. Physical recreation (of which sport is a category) has long mirrored particular social or cultural values. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz noted this phenomenon in his influential essay "'Deep Play,' Notes On Balinese Cockfighting' (1973). Geertz advocated reading sporting events as texts illuminating fundamental cultural patterns, whether the texts were Balinese cockfights or American baseball. Geertz concluded that sports function as stories that a group 'tells themselves about themselves' insofar as groups embed their worldview, values, mores, and social customs in their sport. These stories that groups and individuals tell themselves about themselves become meaningful narratives. Meaningful narratives are descriptive stories that weave factual events into an explanatory narrative. Meaningful narratives obviously exist outside of sport, but it is because sport provides meaningful narratives that it is valued above ludic distraction. The reason why people play sports, watch sports, coach sports, and generally involve sports in their lives is that sports provide an avenue for deriving meaning about ourselves and our communities. Without such meaning, sport could be seen as wasted energy serving no purpose which could not be satisfied better by other pleasant distractions. What make sport's meaning particularly appealing is that the meaningful experiences become *our* narratives. We naturally incorporate meaningful moments in sport into how we see ourselves. In other words, we use meaningful narratives to inform us of who we are. They become stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Since sports are creations by communities, they cannot help but reflect those communities' values. The original Greek Olympics reflected Greek society's fascination with military and the body. Modern British sports – especially team sports including football, rugby, and cricket – similarly reflect the fascination of the British at their inception with the modern military and empire. In the case of inter-national sports, peoples' shared fascination with the new political nation-state in the late nineteenth century fused with their evolving modern sporting competitions. Newly formed ex-colonial nations could now compete against their former masters. Old nations measured their waxing or



waning fortitude against their former dominions. At the very least, the trials and tribulations of a nation's athletes gave an embodied presence to an imagined community while crafting a narrative about the nation-state.

And this is how inter-national sports became the dominant model for elite sport by the twentieth century. Imagined communities elect their best athletes to represent their communal selves in competition with the best athletes from other imagined communities to provide cultural texts about themselves. More simply put, nations compete against other nations in sporting contests as a way to tell stories about themselves. But the question remains whether this current state of affairs should remain the state of affairs. Should national affiliation extend beyond an interesting bit of biographical data and actually shape elite sport? To this question, we answer 'no' for two reasons. First, inter-national sport presents unredeemable ethical harms, and second, inter-national sport harms lusory aspects of sport. Taken together, these two reasons indicate that sporting organizations should remove nationalism from elite sport.

### The Ethical Case

Ethical cases for or against nationalism in sport have typically operated on a harm/benefit model, with most scholars arguing that the benefits of inter-national sport outweigh its harms. These benefits usually involve positive national identity and increased international harmony for both players and fans. To be sure, enough examples exist to support this thesis (and it would be a waste of time to enumerate all of them here so we grant that there are many, many examples). Yet it is hard to overlook that on the whole, inter-national sport presents an ethically mixed bag. Experts on both sides could match examples where positive results emerge with an equal number of cases where such competition reaffirms national, political, religious, racial and ethnic divisions between countries (and again, it would take up too much time to list the many examples). Honest scholars would admit that simply looking at the consequences of inter-national sport is, at best, ambiguous, and those who do examine consequences are often prone to intellectual cherry-picking.

This ambiguity, however, shows two things. First, inter-national sport does not appear to be a categorical or necessary good. Too many examples contradict this claim. Second, any utilitarian or consequentialist justification for inter-national sport involves subjectively judging so many complex cases that any conclusion would likely prove dubious and controversial. Although scholars can imagine instances where inter-national sport promotes good, the practice itself remains ethically ambiguous. The idea that inter-national sport promotes ethical goods such as better citizens or international harmony is similar to the oft-touted argument that playing sport builds character. Sport *can* build a per-

son's character if individuals take appropriate actions to ensure such a result. Unfortunately, sport can also promote unsavory aspects of human behavior when it is put to poor use. Likewise, inter-national sport *can* promote peace and harmony but can also promote jingoistic biases and retrench perceived differences.

Critics may also point out that removing international requirements may harm underrepresented nations.<sup>4</sup> Athletes from certain nations may not be able to compete if their means for qualifying on the basis of national affiliation are removed and they are unable to match the talent of athletes from 'better' nations. On the surface, this does not present a problem. Elite sport is meant to have the best athletes competing together, and thus individuals or teams with less talent can be fairly excluded. But critics note that such sporting 'talent' is really predicated on wealth. As Loland defends, characteristics such as wealth, geography, or luck are not characteristics people wish sports to test (Loland 2002). By ensuring that athletes from 'developing' or 'disadvantaged' regions have spots to compete, sporting organizations are more inclusive.

While such arguments seemingly show respect for diversity, in fact they are laden with bias. Statistical evidence does not support the fact that developing nations could not compete with wealthier nations. At the Olympic Games, a nation's gross domestic product per capita (which is the best measure of a nation's wealth) does not predict their medal count per capita (Silver 2012). Moreover, the sport in the Olympic Games that shows the least competitive balance is badminton, where nearly 85% of the medals in the last four Olympics have been shared by China, Indonesia, and South Korea. In fact, of the four sports with the least competitive balance (badminton, table tennis, rhythmic gymnastics, and beach volleyball), only one of them is dominated by a nation ranked in the top twenty of GDP per capita (Silver 2012). At the same time, sailing, which is among the most expensive sports in the Olympic games, has the most competitive balance with only 29% of the medals captured by its top three nations, and having 27 other nations win at least one medal during the last four Olympic games (Silver 2012). Therefore, the idea that international sport benefits developing nations is misguided as developing nations, despite economic inequalities, are able to be competitive without special places reserved for their athletes and in some sports would become more dominant if they could send qualify more athletes.

Critics also point out that inter-national sport encourages the dissemination of sports through its geographic requirements, which is ultimately a positive benefit. By allocating spots in elite sports to countries within regions where a particular sport is less popular, they are encouraging the growth of that sport within the country. For example, ensuring that Australasian countries can send football teams to the World Cup boosts the interest for the sport within the region.

Yet this thinking has a number of flaws. First, this practice historically tends to reinforce the superiority of western sports and thus western nations. By 'making room' for countries who could not qualify on their own merits, sporting organizations provide a stage for embarrassment as the more powerful sides inevitably rout the athletes from these nations. Admittedly, one of these nations occasionally scores an impressive upset over a more powerful side, but such upsets are rare. In fact, in the last three FIFA Men's World Cup Finals, not one team ranked outside of the top 50 has qualified for a game in the knockout round. Moreover, the participation and usual defeat of such underpowered nations does little to support the sustained growth of the sport in the athletes' home region.

Most importantly, however, this view of sporting dissemination fails to justify why those nations *need* those sports in the first place. For example, why does New Zealand need a spot for football when it has a perfectly good national sport of its own? Why do African nations *need* to compete in basketball? In fact, history shows that the spread of Western sports, of which the Olympic Games is predominantly comprised, is tied to colonization and Western imperialism. Today, inter-national sport reaffirms old power dynamics and cultural hegemony, all in the name of 'internationalism'. Thus, advocating inter-national sport as a vehicle for spreading sport around the world shows undesirable biases toward traditional western powers.

Admittedly, thus far we have only shed doubt on inter-national sport's ethical status. We have not yet leveled an argument that inter-national sport is categorically problematic. This aspect of our argument requires recalling Geertz's previously cited dictum that sport is a story 'we tell ourselves about ourselves'. Nowhere is this truer than with inter-national sport. Inter-national sport helps craft narratives about nations and their place in the world. Consider again the narratives told through football's World Cup, arguably the most inter-national sporting contest with 220 nations vying to qualify. Every four years, national narratives are resurrected or reinvented as select players (increasingly not born in the nations they represent) come to embody their imagined community's characteristics. There are the 'beautiful and free-flowing' Brazilians, the 'industrious and organized' Germans, or even the somewhat derogatory 'talented but undisciplined' African and 'small and tricky' Asians. In matches, old political rivalries resume (as with the Russians and the Poles) and the balance of old colonial power shifts (as with the Argentines and the English). These stories are overgeneralizations predicated upon useful fictions, yet the global football community embraces these stories as meaningful narratives.

And here is where inter-national sport becomes inherently problematic. People assume the narratives crafted by and around their national teams represent themselves even when they do not and that the performances of other nations' athletes represent those nations when they do not. The meaningful

narratives created by inter-national sport are inauthentic narratives that promote falsehoods disguised as truths both to fans and athletes. This substitution of fiction for truth is the fundamental problem with inter-national sport. Individuals cannot assume that their national team's success reflects their own individual prowess.<sup>4</sup> When the United States' men's ice hockey team defeated the Soviet Union at the 1980 Lake Placid Olympic Games, many used this sporting event as a statement about larger political issues. The narrative became 'capitalism defeats communism' and 'a victory for democracy', as if the United States' political structure or national character ultimately defeated its inferior counterpart in a hockey game. On the other hand, when in the 2012 UEFA Champion's League final Chelsea defeated Bayern Munich in penalty kicks, little was said touting 'England over Germany' or even 'London over Munich' because this elite sporting match was not an inter-national competition.<sup>5</sup>

False narratives are not contingent but fundamental parts of inter-national sport. They cannot be removed as long as elite sport is predicated upon competition between nations. Athletes representing a particular imagined community and playing against another imagined community generates an imagined narrative about real sets of people. The delegation of a group as representative of the whole necessarily causes transference. But the success or failure of the nation's representatives does not compute back to individuals represented in the community. Any narrative told by or about the national team has, at best, only the most tenuous link back to the individual of that nation, and very often no link whatsoever. To see this point, the failure by many African nations to win swimming medals could be read as a narrative about the swimming capabilities of peoples in Africa. Certainly in this instance we think it is wrong to universalize. But consider a converse case: the dominance of the United States' national basketball teams since 1992. Many within the United States interpreted their country's success as a meaningful narrative about themselves. Similarly, people across the globe took the U.S.'s basketball victory as a narrative about the country itself. But like with African swimming, it would be wrong to assume that the success of these players in any way reflects on the basketball prowess of any given individual in the United States. If a nation's representatives cannot create authentic narratives in any meaningful sense, then sports should not divide athletes along national boundaries.

But why are inauthentic narratives categorically problematic rather than simply another concern for consequentialist calculation? Identifying with the wrong version of our individual or community's narratives makes our lives something false, incapable of fulfilling the moral ideals of honesty and truth. At the same time, it opens the door to inauthentic history, as we try to remake our stories to be something more flattering. By generating narratives on dubious foundations, we engage in a self-deception that makes authenticity impossible. We engage in a kind of national 'bad faith;' we make ourselves into

something we are not; we avoid seeing something we wish wasn't true but in fact is. The meaningful narrative is no longer meaningful. These narratives become even more ethically problematic when they are used to reaffirm unethical imbalances of power, racial stereotypes, religious intolerance, or any other form of prejudice. Additionally, the ethical case against inauthentic narratives is not a consequentialist argument but a categorical one: inauthentic narrative cannot be counterbalanced against authentic ones. Rather, our commitment to truth, as Kant more eloquently argued, is a categorical imperative, not a utilitarian outcome. Therefore, if we accept that sport is a place where we create stories for ourselves about ourselves, then we have a moral obligation to ensure that these stories reflect truths about ourselves

Critics, however, might accept that inter-national sport creates inauthentic narratives as obvious (does anyone really believe the U.S. victory in hockey proved communism was inferior to capitalism?) but that such false narratives are only contingent parts of inter-national sport. Critics might also point out that although the narratives are factually false, they lead us to truths. Like literature, such fictitious stories do not deceive maliciously but rather subtly communicate truths that would be harder to accept or even recognize if presented simply as 'fact'. The problem, however, with both of these readings is that inter-national sport makes sport about these false narratives such that members of a nation have no choice but to accept the results of competitions as reflections of themselves even when they do not wish to. When the Welsh rugby team wins, some Welsh citizens feel proud of themselves but not all Welsh citizens do. Some may not enjoy rugby or may feel alienated by rugby culture. For them rugby does not represent the shared Welsh community. Similarly, a Brazilian may resent the assumptions that she possesses innate football talent or an American the belief that he is an expert at basketball.

Even for those who do take pride in Welsh success, problems remain. For example, on what legitimate basis do such feelings rest? Perhaps if they played, coached, or officiated the sport within their homeland, they could share in this pride. But at best, the individuals who are a few degrees removed account for only a small percentage of all proud fans of Welsh national rugby. Additionally, one might argue that tax revenues contributed to a national team's success, but such claims ultimately reduce to buying a team's success, and success predicated upon wealth is an undesirable aspect of sport. Unless members of the represented imagined community can authentically claim that their nation's side reflects upon themselves, then using sport to tell stories about a nation or to create national identity encourages individuals to adopt inauthentic narratives.

Critics might argue that while inter-national sport has been shown to be – at least in theory – morally justified (Dixon 2000; Iorweth, Jones, and Hardman 2010; Morgan 2000) sport devoid of national narratives lacks any

redeeming ethical framework and that the inauthentic narrative critique returns to a consequentialist analysis which we previously dismissed. However, freeing elite sport from inter-national contests does not mean that it also lacks moral grounding. Indeed, ordinary morality does not stop where sports starts. As Simon (2010) has shown, moral arguments about doping, gender, violence and many other applied issues in sport ethics remain normatively grounded despite not appealing to any inter-national moral framework. In other words, elite sport still must meet basic moral standards even if athletes do not compete for their nations. If we believe with Socrates that 'the unexamined life is not worth living', then surely neither is the inauthentic one. In that sense, inauthentic narratives provide an ethical reason not to support inter-national sport.

### The Lusory Arguments

While many scholars have focused on inter-national sport's ethical dimensions, far fewer have discussed its lusory dimensions. However, the lusory effects of inter-national sport deserve consideration because the rules that establish inter-national sport alter a game in a number of relevant ways. Unlike ethical issues, changes that affect a sport's lusory dimensions are not *inherently* bad or good. Rather, they affect the lusory experience for both athletes and spectators which can harm or improve the game playing experience.

At some point, any lusory argument rests on the idea that one particular style of play (play being loosely defined as a voluntary autotelic activity) is superior to an alternative style of play. This can be arguing for competitive sport over participatory sport, such as football over rock climbing, or it can be about the best way to play a particular sport, such as attack-oriented football over defense-oriented football. In either case, lusory arguments rely on some 'Archimedean point' that explains what sports (as a subset of games) are fundamentally about. In our case, we hold to Geertz's point that games are texts which reflect cultural and social narratives usually situated within particular times and places. In that sense, sport is fundamentally about creating authentic meaningful narratives for individuals and cultures. And if sport is about meaningful narratives, then its events should be structured to ensure that they facilitate creating meaningful narratives.

However, inter-national sport is caught in a fundamental dilemma that undermines its ability to provide the desired meaningful narrative – its pursuit of false narratives (be they national supremacy, on the one hand, or inclusion, international harmony, etc., on the other) precludes its being the best venue, or even a good one, for elite sport. As mentioned earlier, elite sport's meaningful narrative is about establishing athletic supremacy and assumes that talent and merit, rather than luck or privilege, determines the outcome. With inter-national sport, many sports limit the number of places awarded to athletes

from any one nation or the number of teams that can represent any particular country. For example, in Olympic track and field events, countries can only enter three athletes per event. Additionally, countries can only enter one team in international tournaments such as the World Cup. However, it may be the case (and in many instances this *is* the case) that the limits on a nation's representatives require leaving better athletes (or teams) at home. For example, the fourth best men's table tennis player from China is also the fourth best table tennis player in the world. If China can only send three table tennis players to an international tournament, then some talented athletes are left home simply because of their nationality, not their athletic merit.

Such a scenario denies athletes and fans the ability to derive elite sport's most meaningful narrative: comparisons among the absolute best athletes. Instead, talented athletes from the same country are substituted for lesser athletes from other countries for the sake of supposed inclusiveness. For those athletes who do qualify for the tournament, the omission of athletes based on nationality undermines the lusory aspects of the tournament by casting doubt on the outcome's accuracy. Even if the best athlete did compete and win, the athletes who finish farther down the rankings have no idea of their real ranking since the contest excluded potentially better athletes. A hypothetical athlete might have finished seventh in the Olympic table tennis tournament but not know whether the numerous Chinese athletes left at home would have finished above or below their placing. This missing information undermines the ability to derive a meaningful narrative about comparative rankings.

Similarly, in inter-national team sports, national requirements harm the events in numerous ways. In the World Cup football tournament, FIFA's regional requirements ensure that talented teams are left home while lower-ranked teams receive entries. Indeed, at the 2010 Men's FIFA World Cup, five teams ranked in FIFA's top 25 (four of which were from Europe) were left out of the 32-team tournament while teams ranked 45th (Japan) 47th (South Korea), 78th (New Zealand), 83rd (South Africa), and 105th (North Korea) received entries. Even if one argues that the higher-ranked teams were omitted from the World Cup because they failed to qualify, the fact that their qualification matches came against superior sides that happened to be in their region questions the fairness of the selection process. Additionally, many talented individuals who should be competing among the best 32 teams in the world stayed home either because of their national side's depth, as in the case with Brazil or Spain, or because of their national side's weakness, as was the case with many players who play for the top-flight clubs but are not fortunate enough to hail from top-flight nations.

If elite sport aims to create athletic contests between the best athletes in order to determine athletic supremacy, then athletes who can qualify on their athletic merit should not be omitted because of their national affiliation.

Omitting better athletes in favor of lesser athletes harms competitors, who miss out on better athletic challenges, and the spectators, who miss out on witnessing the best athletic contests.

One might argue that such harms are easily avoided if sporting organizations stopped limiting the number of participants each nation is allowed to enter. Why not allow Jamaica to send as many sprinters as they believe can compete to the Olympics Games or Brazil to enter more than one team in the World Cup? Doing away with these restrictions would certainly be a lusory improvement. But keeping athletes as national representatives competing against other nations still has lusory harms.

For both fans and athletes, inter-national sport encourages members of a nation to cheer for their stipulated national side. This often results in a type of '90-minute nationalism' where the enjoyment that comes from cheering for one's country supersedes appreciating elite athletic performances. Mumford (2011) has aptly labeled this type of patriotic spectator the 'partisan'. Although Mumford admits the partisan might feel excitement and emotion from watching their team win, this is a less desirable form of aesthetic engagement with sport. Mumford argues for a 'purist' perspective that cheers for neither side. The purist only hopes for a game that displays both sides' excellences. This model trades partisan emotional highs and lows for a much deeper and richer appreciation of a sport's aesthetic virtue. With nationalism in sport, fans mostly view sport as representative of themselves or their imagined communities and thus naturally take a partisan view of competition. This trades durable aesthetic enjoyment for the quick high of a partisan victory.

Thus, inter-national sport presents two lusory harms. First, it obscures lusory narratives, and second, it diminishes the aesthetic enjoyment of sport. These lusory harms, combined with the categorical ethical reasons for rejecting inter-national sport, lend rational justification to a position against inter-national sport which, we submit, turns out not to be so absurd after all.

### **Alternatives to Inter-National Sport**

The case becomes even more convincing when we consider alternatives to inter-national sport. Far from a Quixotic fight against the unchanging windmills of international sport for the sake of lofty and chivalrous but impractical ideals, imagining and implementing alternatives to inter-national sport is both easy and appealing. In fact, these alternatives already exist and even flourish.

Consider the current Champion's League used by the European Union of Football Associations to determine the best football club in Europe. Based on past success and success within the tournament, the Champion's League allots spots to clubs from European professional leagues to compete for a European club championship. Although some of the participating leagues have wrongly



implemented protectionist rules limiting foreign-born players, for the most part, the club teams comprise a truly international representation of players, often from multiple continents. Thus, even when Chelsea defeats Bayern Munchen in the final, the win is not seen as a win for England but rather a win that can be celebrated from the Ivory Coast to the Isle of Wight.

Similarly, in the Tour de France, teams of nine riders often come from nine separate countries. This cosmopolitan mix of athletes ensures that the best riders, regardless of national association, compete for cycling's top prize. In theory, the entire 198 participants in the Tour de France could all come from the same country or could represent 198 countries, since national allegiance plays no role in determining who can enter the Tour de France.

Such a model illustrates elite sport's ideal: the best competing against the best. The model requires that national status be irrelevant to the sporting competition. Of course, there might be downsides to removing national representation as a part of sport, including a likely reduction in national support. Too, the club model advocated for here carries its own ethical issues. Arguably those ethical issues are no worse (and perhaps better) than the national issues, but they are issues nonetheless.

Yet with a little work, elite sport might well thrive without the jingoistic national narratives that now drive so much of its popularity. Even supposing that financial support of sport by nations might decrease, such loss of funds is not too troublesome. First, many nations arguably spend money on elite sport that could be better spent promoting each nation's collective good. Second, the influence of money promotes many of the undesirable external goods that have been linked to corrupting of sporting practices, such that decreasing financial support may actually improve sport. Third, decreased financial support may also end the expensive national arms race that drives technological advances in sports such as sailing, cycling, luge, bobsleigh and many others. When the funds, made possible only by deep pocketed governments, dry up, athletes might find themselves on a more level playing field. Last, the decreased financial support for sport may decrease the current trend toward unsustainable mega-events and back toward intimate spectacles for sport aficionados. While critics might point to other tradeoffs, clearly removing national funding has some redeeming aspects that make the whole idea of sport free from nationalism much more appealing.

### **A Soft National Narrative**

As we have shown, the sporting landscape would be improved in many ways if an athletes' national status was irrelevant, yet we cannot ignore that nations are real communities, even if only in an imagined sense. People will naturally bond with other members of their community. Such bonds, whether

formed through mutual awareness, friendship, sport, family, or even common identification, do matter. So, even though elite sport should not force athletes to act as cultural representatives charged with creating narratives about nations, it is still reasonable that people from a community will share an affiliation and choose to support a person they are related (even if only imagined) to. To be sure, this shared identity is a far cry from the jingoistic national narratives in inter-national sport. Rather, the mutual support and kinship between athletes of a shared community, whether it be a nation, region, county, hometown, or family, forms what we call a soft narrative.

The soft national narrative emerges out of the organic connection people feel with their community. Even if athletes competed outside of inter-national sport, they would still *have* a nation or *come from* a particular place. In fact, athletes might have more than one significant connection, and thus more than one soft narrative, if they trained or lived somewhere other than where they were born. While such accidental facts no longer would determine their eligibility (as in the Olympic Games), they would of course still exist. As already holds with movie stars or musicians, athletes' national origin would matter much less than their performance, so that the soft narrative may add emotional resonance to the purist's appreciation without detracting from it in the way that partisanship necessarily does. Manchester United fans can enjoy the magical play of Ryan Giggs while knowing that he is Welsh in the same way that they can enjoy the music of Tom Jones. And a Welsh compatriot might revel in a member of their own community participating in top-flight football without the belief that somehow the individual's success reflects on their own. Those that assisted in Giggs' development might even take particular pride in his accomplishments because of their own efforts. This support, however, does not need to take the form of any representational relationship; the Welsh do not need to view Giggs as their cultural ambassador. If the supporter acts authentically, they do not interpret their community member's success as a reflection of themselves.

Admittedly, if members of a community assume that the success of one of its members reflects onto the merits of the whole community, the soft national narratives risk turning into inauthentic narratives, but being proud of a compatriot's success or sad for their loss because of their bond through the imagined community does not entail inauthenticity or partisanship. When someone feels a connection with another individual – be they athlete, musician, or movie star – it is natural that they might support the individual's pursuits out of a shared sense of communion without the risk of being inauthentic in their support.

A soft national narrative expands the freedom to support athletes as people choose. When athletes no longer assume (or are assigned) roles as cultural representatives, citizens are no longer bound to cheer for athletes from

their country in the manner suggested by inter-national sport. If an athlete behaves badly or demonstrates undesirable qualities in their play, an individual is free to instead admire or appreciate any other athlete, including even one who happens to be from another country. Even better, a fan can take the position of Mumford's purist and support only the best form of sport rather than any particular athlete or team (2011, p. Chapter 2).

Such soft national narratives can also be morally defended. The type of internationalism that emerges with the soft national narratives is in line with the type of moderate patriotism articulated by Nathanson (1993) in his book *Patriotism, Morality, and Peace*. Nathanson defends moderate patriotism as a special or partial concern for one's country without the sort of exclusive or aggressive concern which entails harm or indifference to the wellbeing of other nations. The soft national narrative does not entail harm or ill-will to any other nation, nor does it even require a citizen to behave in a certain way toward their compatriots. Fans can, therefore, freely engage in sport without the clouded nationalistic interpretations endemic to inter-national sport. Authentic narratives organically occur through real community bonds. Thus a soft national narrative is both ethically justified as well as philosophically authentic.

### Conclusion

As we suggested at the outset, we intended to show that inter-national sport may not be the best model of elite sport. Even if it is the most dominant one, we have reason to question its continued existence. Since it provides ethically problematic, inauthentic narratives and presents lusory harms to both players and spectators, we have good reason to open a deeper debate on the necessity of inter-national sport. Further, there exist good models of elite sport that do not require nationalism as their competitive basis, but they do permit authentic, soft national narratives. For these reasons, we believe that inter-national sport is a cultural artifact whose time has passed.

To be sure, our argument is not intended to be the last word on the subject. Rather, it simply challenges the dominant view and shows that an alternative approach is conceivable and even demonstrably viable. Certainly more can be and should be said on the subject. As a community, we would do well to examine what motivations lie at the heart of inter-national sport. We should ask why we feel the need to preserve such sport, what benefits it offers, and if it promotes the best aspects of sport.

While it is unlikely that, despite how convincing our argument proves, inter-national sport will disappear tomorrow, scholars and fans can begin to think about elite sport differently. Today, the vast majority of the sport world conceives of elite sport in inter-national terms. But as we have argued, it

needn't be this way. Sport may even be better if it wasn't this way. And in the future, sport may no longer be this way at all. In the meantime, we must begin to reconsider how much, if at all, nationality matters in elite sport.

### Notes

1. The authors wish to thank Chad Carlson, Tim Lehrbach, and Ask Vest Christian-sen for their insights and efforts to improve previous drafts of this paper. Both have improved the work through their efforts, though any mistakes that remain belong solely to the authors.
2. Now critics might question whether the current model of elite sport survives ethical scrutiny, but such debates fall outside the scope of the paper. For our purposes, we side with Simon (2010, 17) that competition, including elite sport, is not inherently unethical but can be put to undesirable ends. In that sense, we wish to retain elite sport's ability to facilitate athletic excellence and deter-mine athletic supremacy and not turn sport into an instrument designed to instill moral conduct.
3. This separates elite sport from sports such as the Highland Games or the Gay Games, which assume certain characteristics as their starting point.
4. Now one important caveat remains. Imagining sporting competitions without nations does not mean that sporting organizations must similarly do away with respect for international diversity among its members. Maintaining healthy diversity among members of the IOC or FIFA or any other sporting organization is good. By having diverse members, sporting organizations can ensure respect for ethnic, religious, geographic, economic and other diversity among peoples.
5. This principle is shown most basically in logic. It is a fallacy to assume that rep-resentatives of a given set can be universalized to reflect the entire set they were drawn from.
6. Now some Chelsea partisans may attempt to infer some inauthentic narrative about themselves through Chelsea's victory much like national sides often do with national teams. Although such a move is still inauthentic, this risk is more palatable because no narrative is forced on Londoners or English. Rather, only those who self-select as a Chelsea fan can enjoy their team's victory. The differ-ence is that whatever narratives emerged, whether they were about the quality of leagues or the superiority of different tactical styles of play or even one's chosen team, the differences are not forced like they are on national teams.

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