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# *The Philosophy of Sport*

*Martin A. Bertman*

'The task is the  
theoretical construction  
of an essential definition  
of sport'

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# Philosophy of Sport: Rules and Competitive Action

**Martin A. Bertman**

## **Dedication**

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To my friend of over twenty years: Professor Giuseppe Sorigi, President of CdLM Sport Management, I dedicate this book. Without his kindness and attention this work would not have been written.

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## A Note on the Author

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Martin Bertman is Docent Emeritus of Helsinki University, Department of Social and Political Philosophy. Since 2000, he has been Docent of the Instituto dello Sport of Universita di Teramo. He is President of the International Hobbes Association, and Chief Editor of *Hobbes Studies*, which he founded in 1988. He has published 6 books in addition to this Humanities EBook and *Classical American Pragmatism*, another Humanities EBook. He has also published 75 articles, several on sport, and lectured in 50 European Universities, and taught in France, Germany and Italy and in the State University of New York system for 20 years. He was educated at Syracuse, Columbia and Princeton Universities. (email: [mabertman@yahoo.com](mailto:mabertman@yahoo.com)).

# 1 Introduction

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## Orientation

As this book deals with the philosophy or theory of sport it must consider how experience guides our understanding of the subject. For the theorist, experience poses two problems: one of poverty and one of plenty. However much experience one has, in principle, it is only a fraction of what one may have. The future allows the door of experience to be open to reform thinking; if not for shifting interest entirely, it has the possibility of reforming a present interest by both introducing new factors for evaluation and changing the measurement of factors already in mind. On the other hand, the theorist seeking ordered principles for achieving a framework that fixes, if only hypothetically, our relation to the world must restrain by selection too many past experiences. This restraint includes the petrified accord given to conventional language; without conceptual interrogation, ambiguous similarities are referentially confused, impeding the achievement of a unified frame of reference under clear and distinct principles; here, language, dressed in style, is a meandering inebriant.

Human beings are inventive; we are aware of many sports and we must suppose that like other social products, say legal systems, sports unknown to us have existed. Certainly, we expect new sports in the future. This brings to mind two considerations. First, a factual matter: the large presence that sport has in the social life of human beings. Second, the task of providing a unified theoretical framework for sport; that is, some cogent whole for indefinite possible actual instances or played games and conceptual representations or kinds of games of sport. The first suggests psychological and biological determinants, not necessarily separated, driving human beings to sport and providing sport with personal and social value. The second seeks a framework or perspective for considering the obvious differences among sports; further, and most important for achieving a theoretical sport framework, that allows separating sport from games and contests inappropriately called sport. This task is the theoretical construction of an essential definition of sport.

In such a definition, by a construction involving the boundary of its object, here sport, truth is made by stipulation and therefore it is provisional. Once made, it can be changed, if not disregarded, when not suitable to the range and purpose of the human experience the definition's classification has sculpted. Such conceptual constructs create a 'what' that stands to a normative 'how'; that is, it relates to the interest specified by culture, personal inclination, and a deep human intuition of it as a social product. The 'how' is complex because it is divided among normative strands. Certainly, social context, that is conventions and institutional systems, provides an interest in creating a specific sport, constructed by definite rules.

Complex characteristics and relation, usually not clearly and harmoniously ordered for a particular person, are thus qualifiers of the personal and cultural normative judgement of social products like sport. This essay tries to engage these various matters. In the end, as a philosophy, the restlessness of thought must deal with the thorny ground of human identity (a general normative ground in intuition spliced with social and individual circumstance) for sport's human value.

### **Construction of the Definition of Sport**

Experience provides the broad understanding that sport is characterized by competition. Obviously, considering the variety of activities that are competitive, there is a need for specificity for qualifying sport's sort of competition. The first step in creating a theoretical framework recognizes sport, like all games, is an artificial construct: a social product. The construction of any particular sport, no matter how simple or complex, is a matter of the assemblage of rules to create the boundary within which competitive action has authority. This accepted the artificial conceptual determination of a particular sport is a specific creation of a constructed framework, known in principle to player and audience, for the excitement, the unpredictability, of action. The constitutive rules that create a particular sport are normative for its instantiation as a played event or game; consequently, the definition of a sport game has an essential epistemology; it is known fundamentally by its constitutive rules. In short, for the concept of sport, in actuality, specific constitutive rules set the authorized boundaries within which competitive play occurs. Sport is merely and intellectual determinant as is the sub-classification. The latter has a narrower experiential determination, which takes account of various kinds of competitors. For theoretical purposes this is a broad and practical classification, e.g. individuals, teams, humans with machines, humans with animals.

Artificial constructions of games, including sports, because of their narrowly determined character as an artificial or invented object, are completely determined and, therefore, they are practically but not theoretically burdened by changes that occur from without like the ongoing interpretation or adjustment to new conditions of civil laws or scientific paradigm shifts because of new evidence or logical fineness. The object, a particular sport, is not asserted hypothetically in terms of an ideal like a legal order or like a natural science truth. Because the conceptual character of a sport is determined as a distinct product when a fundamental or constitutive rule is changed, which of course is possible for any number of reasons, a new game exists, a new social artefact. Of course, such a rule may change where the new game is very similar to the old one, and for the sake of that similarity, one often calls it by the same name. Further, aside from these fundamental rules, complex games, especially team games, have regulative rules; that is, rules about secondary matters aiding the course of play, e.g. time-outs, player exchanges, etc. The change of regulative rules does not create a new sport. They often change in fact but do not alter the structure created by the constitutive rules.

In lieu of the above partial credential for an essential definition of sport, it is apt to defend an essential epistemological definition of sport from a contrary approach. The defence turns on narrowing and restricting the boundaries of a subject by essential determination and, importantly, by disregarding some experience and conventional language as either false or misleading. Admitting a ‘family resemblance’ among games but not considering that as indicative of an essential approach, the strong and influential opponent of the essentialist viewpoint is Ludwig Wittgenstein. In *Philosophical Investigations* (1945 §66) he wrote:

Don’t say: ‘There must be something, or they would not be called games’ —but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that.

Wittgenstein’s approach is a matter of the surface of activities conventionally projected into ordinary language. It lacks discrimination about the experience of the ordinary, the conventional. Wittgenstein has language dominate thinking rather than the reverse. Experience does provides at the surface, where Wittgenstein, remarking on the difficulty of that task, asks one to approach ‘family resemblances’; however, considering such a wide interest as sport, one wishes to harness interest by a conception that is clear and distinct and this is offered by essential conditions or characteris-

tics of sport. The organizing of experience in terms of a system and essential definitions, albeit pragmatically open to change, is perspicuous of the range of much of had and anticipated possible experience.

This is use or 'interest' in an essential definition, best solidified when its context is the broad thrust of human experience. Even in natural science, essential definitions are a usable approach; consider the following general observational fact of a man falling overboard a ship understood in one of several sciences. The perceptual impression for physics becomes a weight falling a distance in time, for biology say the function of the lungs during a sudden fall, for psychiatry, a suicide. Each science has its specific concepts and language, its conceptual framework where it talks about constitutive rules as laws of nature. The construction of a science is a functional system with norms for its interest, e.g. physics, chemistry, etc. Of course, even aside from qualifying variables like wind resistance or condition of lungs, each natural science is open to reformative change; but in 'working time' for fixing beliefs, the 'essential', artificially reified, conceptual framework offers the process of organization, securing an interest orientation. Without the pressure of reconstruction when dealing with classifying evidence, a game, including a sport, has the fixity of an artificial 'object.' It is like a painting, another brush stroke is regulative but a change of the colour relations is constitutive: a new object.

Like Wittgenstein, the usual approach of the social sciences opposes essentialism, e.g. by accepting the ambiguity or variance of the concept of culture. In the social sciences, the usual procedure is for facts to arrogate under 'family resemblance' without a fixed normative ground; thus, though there is given an assemblage of facts for a specific culture, a plurality of say cultures or societies, e.g. qualified into cannibalistic and non-cannibalistic, are specified with normative neutrality. This excludes, by implication, a universal human norm for culture. When a societal rule is specified in this approach, its normative ground is presented as merely the 'internal' relation of participant conformity to general values. By methodological implication, this prohibits providing trans-cultural norms.

In sport, the constitutive rules for a sport specify an authorized structure for an actual sport game but the essential definition of sport specifies norms of the transport determination; it remains on the level of concepts that are a meta-order for specific sport structures. Thus the conceptual system that creates a particular sport is grounded in the epistemological definition of sport; it is a specification normatively grounded by the definition's unified focus. The essentialist idea of sport as a conceptual construction has the additional purpose, beyond a particular sport, to help develop

a work ethics or task-responsibility, including sportsmanship, that refines the meaning of sport competition. Like constitutive rules, competition is a necessary factor in the essential definition. The action or play within the order of the construction of the particular sport has a functional relation in its instantiation to the meta-order of sport and the order created by specifying constitutive rules.

### **Dual Purpose Principle**

The principles of equality, moderation, and responsibility, though it is hard to qualify their use and consequently their meaning with precision, have an internal purpose to the construction of particular sports in their ground in the more abstract essential definition of sport. In a specific sport, the constitutive rules broadly provide an equal context or conditions for competition, the principle of moderation or balance, among other matters, relates to regulative rules for the smoothness of play and the principle of responsibility relates to sportsmanship, particularly in the action of play.

We therefore are to keep in mind these principles expressed by a particular sport's structure and the purpose of (responsible) play within a particular game. These rules have a normative character that determines the work ethic or task responsibility of sport participation for players, game-associates, say coaches and trainers, and sport audiences. This 'internal' value specification is limited, bounded as it is by purposes that can be found through its systematic conceptual structures; it is not a full ethics, which must consider action in the enlarged relation to an excellent life.

The other, the 'external' aspect of purpose of these principles arises when some social and cultural leeway occurs in allowing a contest to be a sport even when it bends or does not fully concur with the essential definition. Sometimes this is not a matter of a cultural personality or a social purpose but because of a natural factor that asserts an aspect that does not quite fit the essential definition, e.g. natural conditions that do not make an equal playing field. The actuality of conditions in such instances demands a plea for excuses to include the competition to be a sport. For example, the equal condition for competition is occasionally upset in boat racing because of considerable variations in weather and water conditions. Yet, a principle of moderation allows inclusion of this sort of contest as a sport; one takes such an 'uneven playing field' factor to be a matter of fortune, like a runner spraining a leg while in a foot race. Generally, one understands a normative ideal needs some adjustments by common-sense for allowable qualifications; so one might say, in general, to lie is immoral but, in a specific qualification, to lie in order to save the life of an innocent from a villain is moral.