

Eye of the Beholder

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In the 2018 UEFA Champions league quarter-final, Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo timed a magnificent over-head 'bicycle kick' to send the ball zipping into the top right-hand corner of the Juventus goal. He received a standing ovation from the crowd and his coach, Zinedine Zidane, commented that 'it was one of the most beautiful goals in the history of football'. And whilst it may be that particular goals, such as Ronaldo's, leave spectators in raptures, football itself is referred to as 'the beautiful game'. The question then is whether this moniker is simply a football aficionado's partisan bias, or whether there is something intrinsic to the game itself. I will make an argument for the latter: that there is an inherent capacity for beauty in football that is not shared by other sports.

That is not to say that all instances of football are beautiful. Indeed, football can be an ugly and brutal game, as the 2010 World Cup final between Holland and Spain, amongst others, attests. Rather I will make the argument that the platonic ideal of football has an aesthetics that is far greater than that of golf, rugby, basketball or any other sport for that matter. The reasons I will give stem from the nature of the constitutive rules of the game, football's relation to the four dimensions of space and time, and its capacity for demonstrating excellence of physical skill.

One of the reasons for the global attraction of the game of football is its simplicity. All it requires is a 'play-area' with designated goals and a ball that can be moved via the feet. This means it can be played on the dusty, potholed streets of the world's poorest communities or the lush, manicured grass and perfectly levelled ground of the world's top clubs. The rules are relatively simple, and the fundamental physical requirements are low, which means that the game is open for children and adults alike to enjoy as a participant or spectator. The comment, 'I don't really understand the game', is never said about football in the way that is said about other sports. And yet this simplicity belies its capacity for immense complexity. The calculations that would be required to break Ronaldo's goal into a mathematical model of angles, energy requirements and biomechanical efficiency would keep an Oxford professor occupied for at least the duration of a football season.

The reason that football allows for both simplicity and complexity is in constitutive rules. These are the rules that designate the game of football (rather than any other game), such as, not using the hands to make contact with the ball, or a goal being awarded if it crosses the goal line. This permits an enormous variety of possibilities to move the ball and get it to cross the line. The three dimensions of space allow for the ball to travel in a multitude of directions – forwards, backwards, sideways, upwards and downwards – and the direction of travel can change quickly. It can be kicked loftily from one end to the other, dribbled mesmerizingly around moving opposition, balanced on the end of the foot before being brought to the ground, weaved around the body from the shoulder to the turf or fired on a spinning arc into the corner of the goal. The presence of others on a pitch enhances the possibilities of travel in space since the ball can travel between players and across various planes. The lofted through-ball can fall at the feet of a player running at full pace, who generates the energy to shoot it at almost 100mph past the keeper and into the net. Equally, the precise short-range triangular passing as players negotiate their way up the pitch has a metronomic rhythm that creates a sense of the sublime – tic, toc, tic, toc.

Football has the potential to create a dramatic spectacle that draws upon the emotions and leaves spectators as well as players exhausted. In this sense, it is the very definition of art. One of the reasons for this is the part that time plays in heightening the senses. The way in which we experience the passing of time in football demonstrates that it is not as ordered and consistent as the scientific version suggests. Time contracts and expands depending on what is happening on the field of play. At the beginning of a game, time feels leisurely and enduring; full of possibilities but with no pressure. Even when an early goal is conceded, fans are measured in their response. They feel optimistic that they have all the time in the world for their team to make amends. However, as the match progresses, the pressure of time becomes unbearable. The sense of the clock ticking down intensifies the atmosphere as one team is desperate to hold on to their lead, whilst the other is anxious to reduce the deficit. For the team in the lead, time cannot go fast enough; for the team behind, time is running away too quickly. It is the psychological pressure and subjective experience of time that adds to the drama and causes some teams and players to crumble whilst others raise their game above all expectation. Football as a time-limited game is more open to this dramatic spectacle than other sports due to its low scoring nature. In higher scoring time-limited sports, such as rugby or basketball, it is more difficult for

teams to come back from large deficits. In football, when the difference is often a single goal, any mistake or piece of inspiration may change the outcome of the game.

The restriction of time enhances the drama of the game when the outcome matters. For purist conceptions of beauty, the outcome is incidental. This debate has been played out in the academic literature: it is better to be a purist or a partisan when watching sport? The purist is the spectator who has no interest in the final result but rather who just wishes to see 'a good (beautiful) game'. The partisan, in contrast, is the die-hard fan who cares little about the nature of the game but instead, only cares about the result. I have argued elsewhere that these two extremes are unlikely to be the perspective of any real sports fan.¹ A true partisan is merely a gambler, whilst the purist doesn't understand the nature of sport at all since the result gives a game its frame for meaning. Whilst it is true that the football fan cares whether their team wins or not, they also want to see their team win well, as illustrated by Nick Hornby in his novel 'Fever Pitch' where, as an Arsenal fan, he despaired at the dullness of their play.

What Ronaldo's goal illustrated was how space and time was traversed. The ball travelled through the air from side-line to penalty area to the back of the net. But arguably what was more remarkable was the way in which Ronaldo contorted his body backwards and upside-down, leaping four feet into the air to connect with it perfectly. This leads on to the final reason why football has a tendency towards beauty, and that is its capacity for the demonstration of physical excellence.

Scientists and mathematicians have often noted the relationship between beauty and simplicity and the sign of a good athlete is someone who has the ability to make complex actions look easy. In sport, the beautiful equates with efficiency of action. Actions that are smooth and flowing and which do not expend unnecessary energy are the ones that are most admired. The stationary player who traps the ball at her foot, then accelerates past a defender by pushing the ball just enough ahead of her, before firing it into the back of the net with no indication of effort or stretch, exemplifies beauty in a way that a player who lets the ball bobble around and who requires several poor and ungainly lunges at a shot, does not. Excellence of skill in a sport such as football, requires an astute phenomenological awareness of where the body is in space and time, and to be able to control and manipulate it in relation to the ball and others

¹ Chapter 19 in Ryall, E. (2016) *Philosophy of Sport: Key Questions*. London: Bloomsbury.

on the pitch. Whilst Ronaldo made no rational or conscious calculations in respect of this, his bodily awareness of its capacities and limitations, and his ability to accurately judge the trajectory of a moving ball, makes this feat all the more remarkable and breath-taking.

Whilst excellence of skill is demonstrative of beauty, excellence of original skill heightens this capacity further. The footballers that are remembered are not the ones who may be the best when compared against the standards of today, but they are remembered because they were the first. Johan Cruyff holds his place in the history books because of his conjuring trick with the ball in the 1974 World Cup against Sweden. The 'Cruyff turn' as it became known, demonstrated an originality and excellence of skill that continues to astound today. Similarly, Mane Garrincha perfected the ability to mesmerise defenders by drawing them in one direction and leaving the ball where it was before running back to collect it and the defender flat-footed. And arguably football's greatest ever player, Diego Maradona, is known for the way in which the ball appeared to be magnetically attached to his boot. All these players were unique in their excellence. They did things that no-one else could do or had done before.

Whilst all sports allow for original skill, the nature of football extends the area where this originality can be shown. Whilst Dick Fosbury and Jan Boklöv revolutionised the sports of high jumping and ski jumping respectively, there are few others around them. The capacity for originality in these linear sports are limited. In football, it is almost endless.

One of the differences between football and linear sports, such as athletics, swimming, or ski-jumping is that it is multi-skilled. Skill can be divided into 'closed' and 'open': closed skills are those whereby variables can be controlled and the test of skill remains the same; open skills are more complex (usually a non-predetermined sequence of closed skills) and require adaptation to changing variables. An example of a closed skill is a golf shot from the tee or kicking a ball into an undefended net from the penalty spot. An example of an open skill is dribbling a basketball around an active defender to shoot into the net or passing to a moving player whilst avoiding a tackle in football. Due to its intrinsic nature, football allows for a much greater demonstration of open skill than other sports. The place of closed skills is few and far between – kick offs and goal kicks perhaps being the only examples. Even a penalty kick requires reaction to

the movements of the goalkeeper. Open skills are considered more valuable than closed skills due to their variability increasing difficulty, and this is one of the reasons football is better than golf.²

The beauty of sport is that it continuously requires innovation and adaptation whilst remaining the same. The simple rules of football provide a better avenue for this than other sports that have evolved over time. Watching a game of football from the 1970s is not too different from watching a game today. In contrast, the sport of rugby has changed significantly as law makers have attempted to make the game more aesthetically appealing to a wider audience. Rugby union is not the same game that it was twenty years ago. The purity of football means that there are far fewer calls or reasons for similar change. Although technology may have enabled a greater level of skill to be shown; in the lighter balls, more consistent playing pitches, and the fitness of players, the game itself still closely resembles the one that was played 50 years ago, and the one that is played today by amateurs in local leagues around the world.

So, whilst there are clearly elements of football that are not beautiful – the simulation, abuse of referees, racism, misogyny, homophobia and hooliganism – the ideal of football has a capacity for beauty that surpasses that of other sports. Its simplicity, drama and opportunity for excellence of original skill illustrates its richness, breadth and depth. It demonstrates why it is the global game that has pervaded the human psyche and remains rightly known as ‘the beautiful game’.

² I make a much more detailed argument of this in Ryall, E. (2015) ‘Good Games and Penalty Shoot-Outs’ in *Sports, Ethics and Philosophy*, 9(2), pp.205-213, and Ryall, E. (2018) ‘Good Games as Athletic Beauty: Why Association Football Is Rightly Called ‘The Beautiful Game’ in R. Askin, C. Diederich, and A Bieri, (eds.) *The Aesthetics, Poetics and Rhetoric of Soccer*, London: Routledge.