

## Good Games as Athletic Beauty: Why Soccer Is Rightly Called 'The Beautiful Game'

Good afternoon. Thank you Ridvan for your kind introduction and for your invitation to present at this wonderful conference. My talk today will be an overview of some of the philosophical ideas and arguments regarding sport and beauty as well as my own reflections on them. I will start with some introductory remarks.

First, I feel the necessity to admit that I feel slightly fraudulent standing here. Prepare yourself but I will admit at the outset that I am not a great fan of soccer. If you were ask me what sport I most watch (and have most played), it would be rugby. To me, rugby provides the most total encapsulation of human capacities and skills. I rarely watch football and until the Euro2016 football championships began, I would hesitate at naming more than a couple of players representing my home nation, England, in this year's tournament.

However, perhaps this fact provides a greater weight to the argument that I am about to make regarding soccer, which I will henceforth refer to as football. The argument I will make is that football rightly deserves the label 'the beautiful game'.

To do this I will consider the following questions: 'what aesthetic criteria should be applied to judge sporting contests?' and 'what particular features does football have, in relation to these aesthetic criteria that other sports do not possess?'

Some of the content from this talk is taken from a chapter in my most recent book: *Philosophy of Sport: Key Questions*, whilst other parts are taken from a recently published paper in the *Journal Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*. The rest is further reflection upon those published pieces.

It is interesting, I think to note, that one of the questions first considered in what can be labelled the philosophy of sport literature was not about doping or other perennial ethical matters, or about the nature of competition or even sport itself, but rather it was whether sport had anything important to say about aesthetics. The American philosopher, Paul Ziff<sup>1</sup> argued philosophers ought not to waste time considering the aesthetics of sport. He was notably forthright in his view:

---

<sup>1</sup> Ziff, P. (1974) A Fine Forehand. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. 1:92-109.

*Research devoted to the aesthetics of sport can accomplish nothing. There is nothing there to be accomplished. Worse, it would not only contribute to the vaunted dreariness of aesthetics it could serve to delay even impede other possibly significant research.*<sup>2</sup>

Strong stuff indeed. Ziff may just have been being provocative but regardless, I hope that this conference, and my paper as part of it, demonstrates that he was wrong.

I first wish to draw your attention to the most commonly cited difference between what is called purposive sports, and aesthetic sports. This distinction was first, as far as I know, promoted by the philosopher David Best who is best known for his thesis that sport is not, and cannot be art.<sup>3</sup> Purposive sports are those sports which contain a clear pre-lusory goal which are independent of the means to reach that goal. So a pre-lusory goal is effectively the aim of the game which designates the winner; such as the team that has scored the most goals after 90 minutes, or the first person to cross a designated line or the person who first reaches a particular number of points. Purposive sports are often cited as exemplars of sport; such as football, cricket and tennis, but they also include track and field sports and most combat sports. They are the sports where there is a clear measurement for winning. Aesthetic sports, in contrast, are those which focus upon and judge the movement of the body, and where the pre-lusory goal is less clear and are wholly dependent on the means, that is the way the goal is achieved. Typical examples of aesthetic sports are gymnastics, figure skating, high-board diving and skateboarding.

The differences between purposive and aesthetic sports are often related to how the pre-lusory goal is achieved. For example, in football, a goal is worth the same amount of points regardless of whether it was the result of several pin-point accurate passes and a spectacular half-volley from the edge of the box into the top right hand corner of the net, or whether it came from a goal mouth scramble and a ricochet off a defending player. What matters in these purposive sports is that the pre-lusory goal is achieved within the rules; i.e. if the ball has crossed the goal-line without a preceding foul. In contrast, the pre-lusory goal for aesthetic sports is less clear. In the pommel horse for instance, marks are awarded for specific elements such as swings, holds and dismounts. It is the way in which the competitor achieves these elements that gains or loses points: for example, it matters *how* a competitor gets into a handstand position and how well they hold it, not merely that they managed to attain a handstand.

[Show video clips]

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p93.

<sup>3</sup> Best, D. (1978). *Philosophy and Human Movement*. London: George Allen & Unwin

Whilst this distinction - between purposive and aesthetic sports - might draw our attention to the immediate salient differences between two different types of sporting competition, we must not over-play this distinction. Indeed, when considered more closely the sharp distinction starts to disappear.

At first glance, it may appear that aesthetic sports are judged subjectively. For we may argue that aesthetics refers to judgements about sensory perception and emotional effect. The subjective view of aesthetics asserts that appreciation of beauty cannot be held to any objective standard. It is merely individual preference in the same way that some people prefer chocolate to cheese. However, even in this example there is some room for narrowing down food preferences. Although two people may differ as to whether they like chocolate or cheese, the same cannot be said for whether they would prefer to eat faeces or rice. Anyone who stated the former would be categorised as insane or a joker. This dismissal of a pure 'anything goes' subjectivity can also be applied to aesthetic sports. Anyone who judges a belly-flop into the pool as being aesthetically beautiful would not be taken seriously.

It is not simply the case that aesthetic sports are judged by the subjective preferences of the judges. The rules of sport will always dictate objective elements that the competitor needs to adhere to. So for aesthetic sports, such as gymnastics, figure-skating, snowboarding, skateboarding, surfing and high-board diving, it is the adherence to the rules of the sport that matter, not how beautifully or gracefully the performers carry out those rules. Marks are not awarded on aesthetic qualities but rather for carrying out a series of movements in accordance with the judging criteria. One could imagine for example, a gymnast using a vault as a prop in a beautiful dance, but this would not score any points since it does not fulfil the rules of vaulting. The rules of gymnastic vaulting specify the points to be deducted for particular actions in take-off and landing as well as the points to be awarded for particular successful actions during. It also includes point deduction for auxiliary elements such as starting before a flag is raised and using a spotter.<sup>4</sup> In so called aesthetic sports, points are not awarded for aesthetic beauty or for the emotional impact that a gymnastic performance might have, and this explains why although some performances might have the crowd in raptures it does not necessarily translate to overall competition victory.

---

<sup>4</sup> The *Fédération Internationale De Gymnastique* provides very detailed guidance as to how to award and when to deduct points. See for instance: [http://www.fig-gymnastics.com/publicdir/rules/files/mag/MAG%20CoP%202013-2016%20\(FRA%20ENG%20ESP\)%20Feb%202013.pdf](http://www.fig-gymnastics.com/publicdir/rules/files/mag/MAG%20CoP%202013-2016%20(FRA%20ENG%20ESP)%20Feb%202013.pdf)

In this respect we might say that there are objective standards of beauty, and one of these is that beauty equates with skill. The athletes that we often admire the most are the ones that make everything look easy. Such effortless smoothness often disguises a great degree of skill as novices find out when they attempt to replicate such actions. That there is often an equation between beauty, elegance and simplicity is something that scientists and mathematicians have noted in their considerations of scientific and mathematical theory. The best solutions to problems are those that strip away all unnecessary excess and it is within this simplicity that we find an aesthetic beauty. Within sport, biomechanical efficiency is more likely to lead to successful outcome and this is revealed through an aesthetic appreciation. Whether the reason is one of human nature or human culture, it seems that we simply prefer the look of biomechanically efficient actions. In order to highlight this further it is worth exploring the way in which points are awarded in 'aesthetic sports'.

In so-called aesthetic sports, points are awarded according to the success of an athlete carrying out proscribed movements (for example, a round-off in gymnastics or a hardflip in skateboarding) yet such movements are valued precisely for the aesthetic beauty that they provide and would be explained by a correlation between skill and beauty. Falling on the floor, no matter how intentional, is not valued because it does not equate with skill, is therefore not beautiful and therefore will not be awarded points. There are obviously difficult judgments to be made however between badly executed (ugly) and difficult actions, and perfectly executed (beautiful) but easier actions. This is a judgement that both performers and adjudicators have to make, but generally more points are awarded to the latter – that is, to perfectly executed but slightly less complex actions - than the former. In high-board diving for example, a competitor will state the difficulty of dive that they will attempt, with each dive being worth a pre-set number of points (generally, the greater the difficulty the more points may be awarded). These points are based on a perfect dive and points are deducted for anything less than this. As such, a diver will generally attempt the most difficult dive that they have perfected in order to gain themselves the most points.

So, it seems that there is a correlation between skill and beauty. Even in so called purposive sports such as football, we would prefer to see a skilful goal rather than a goal as a result of mistake or lack of skill (although I will say more about this in a minute). So athletic skill, I will argue, is the first and foremost aesthetic criterion that should be applied in sport.

There are however exceptions to the rule, and these are most notable in the so-called purposive sports. There are many examples of successful athletes that have unattractive styles. The New York Herald- Tribune said of the great distance runner, Emil Zatopek:

*Bobbing, weaving, staggering, gyrating, clutching his torso, slinging supplicating glances toward the heavens, he ran like a man with a noose around his neck. He seemed on the verge of strangulation.*<sup>5</sup>

Zatopek, whilst certainly a skilful runner as demonstrated by his success, was not an aesthetically beautiful runner by any stretch of the imagination. I'm sure that many of you would be able to cite particular footballers who are also not renowned for their skill but rather their brute strength and aggression. I am currently writing a paper with Paul Davis on these so called 'hard men' of football, whose success comes from their capacity to intimidate and cause injury to others. However, whilst the correlation between skill and beauty may appear to be less contingent in the purposive sports, there are occasional athletes in aesthetic sports too, that are renowned for their 'sketchy' – and I use that term in a technical way - style and yet are still considered the most skilful. The skateboarder, Rodney Mullen, was in this category. So whilst we might wish to distinguish between purposive and aesthetic sports, there are arguably far more similarities between them than we might initially believe. I don't think we should take this distinction too seriously. This will have a bearing on my later argument regarding the aesthetic qualities attached to the purposive game of football.

You may remember Paul Ziff's sentiments about the aesthetics of sport that I quoted at the beginning. His paper was in response to one by Paul Kuntz entitled 'Aesthetics Applies to Sports as Well as to the Arts'<sup>6</sup>. In it, Kuntz argued that sports have an important aesthetic value that can be appreciated by both the performer and the spectator. This is found in the beauty, joy and kinaesthetic empathy that we find in sport. It is the aesthetic value attached to sport that gives it value. He argued, "it is the high emotional quality, like that of music, that makes sports worthwhile"<sup>7</sup>. Kuntz cited Roger Bannister's account of running to provide support for this view. In it, Bannister points to the aesthetic element of sport as the key motivational factor for participating:

*I was running now, and a fresh rhythm entered my body. No longer conscious of my movement I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty, a source I never dreamed existed. From intense moments like this, love of running can grow.*<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> NEW YORK TIMES. (2000) 'Zatopek, 78, Ungainly Running Star, Dies'. 23 November 2000.

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/23/sports/23ZATO.html>> [accessed June 2013]

<sup>6</sup> Kuntz, P. (1974) Aesthetics Applies to Sports as Well as to the Arts. *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. 1:6-35.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p20.

<sup>8</sup> Bannister, R. (1956) *The Four Minute Mile*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. pp. 11-12

This account of sport's aesthetic value, particularly for participants, demonstrates that although competition is an important element in defining what sport is, it does not fully account for people take part in it. An aesthetic account of the value of sport is exemplified in many sporting biographies like Bannister's and runs throughout sporting literature and recorded in sporting memories. Kuntz wished to show that the aesthetic qualities that we ascribe to the arts, such as music, theatre and fine art, can be equally applied to sport. Sport provides similar meaning, affects our emotions and creates dramatic spectacle, albeit via a different means.

This in itself perhaps points to one of the obvious aesthetic categories that can be applied to sport; the emotional effect and the dramatic spectacle that it provides us with.

I don't think that it would be controversial to argue that all sports can induce a powerful aesthetic effect in certain situations. Indeed, it is the very competitive nature of them that gives rise to this and this is a point I will move on to later when I raise the issue of drama as a consequence of time-limitedness.

The notion of a dramatic spectacle highlights another debate in the aesthetics of sport literature: the value between purism and partisanship.

Sports fans are often separated into two types of spectator: those that value particular aspects of sport generally (such as aesthetic beauty or excellence of skill) regardless of who is performing those actions, and those that value particular teams or individuals regardless of their performance.

Nicholas Dixon, who first distinguished between these types, describes them as follows:

*The 'partisan' is a loyal supporter of a team to which she may have a personal connection or which she may have sworn to support by dint of mere familiarity. The 'purist', in contrast, supports the team that he thinks exemplifies the highest virtues of the game [and virtues here, I think can reasonably encompass, moral, physical and aesthetic virtues], but his allegiance is flexible.<sup>9</sup>*

Stephen Mumford argues that Dixon's description of a purist is misleading, and I would agree with him. Dixon's purist seems to make a conscious decision to support a team or an individual based on the style of performance that they give and their allegiance will change according to whether the team or individual continues to uphold these standards. Dixon appears to be describing a fickle partisan with purist tendencies. In contrast, a true purist has no affiliation to a team or individual at all: they will value the action in its entirety regardless of who is carrying it out. As Mumford notes, "A

---

<sup>9</sup> Dixon, N. (2007) The Ethics of Supporting Sports Teams. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. In W. J. Morgan (Ed.) *Ethics in Sport* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Leeds: Human Kinetics. p441.

true supporter of the virtues of the sport could have no team allegiance because in any game or passage of play, which team plays virtuously could alternate rapidly.”<sup>10</sup>

On first inspection, it appears that the purist is the true sports fan since they value the intrinsic goods of sport, namely pure athletic excellence. Purists have no pre-determined allegiance and merely wish for a good game that demonstrates the highest levels of physical skill, which as we've noted, often correlates with an aesthetic beauty. In contrast, the partisan is merely interested in the result, however it is achieved. Dixon goes on to make a moral judgement about this, arguing that merely being interested in the result is to hold an instrumental approach towards the value of sport which leads to all sort of corrupt practices such as cheating and violence. On this basis, the purist who watches sport for its aesthetic elements is morally superior to the partisan.

However, from both a practical and philosophical perspective, arguably there can be no such thing as a true purist in sport (if that isn't tautological); there can be no such thing as someone whose only interest in sport is the aesthetic qualities that it demonstrates. A purist is someone who sees sport merely as a series of skilful and artistic actions. Yet, sport only makes sense in its context of competition.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, one may argue that the total purist is not watching sport at all – all they are seeing is the movement of bodies with no interest in the purpose or goal of that movement. The general consensus among scholars then is that those that enjoy sport are both purists and partisans, and it is both of these elements that provide us with an aesthetic experience. Perhaps another aesthetic quality we can add is the notion of meaningful experience. This highlights the most paradoxical aspect of sport, that to truly enjoy it we must take it deadly seriously whilst at the same knowing that its arbitrary rules mean it is not serious at all. As Bernard Suits defined it; it is the attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles that we put in the way simply to enable the game itself to exist.

Up to now, I have given a very general overview of some of the debates that have been considered in the philosophy of sport literature to provide a context for more specific discussion on the aesthetics of football in order to show how football rightly deserves the moniker 'the beautiful game'. I am now going to go in to what might seem a particularly technical and academic debate that focuses upon Scott Kretchmar's paper, written in 2005, entitled 'Game Flaws'. In this paper, Scott Kretchmar essentially proposed that sports such as football are structurally, morally and

---

<sup>10</sup> Mumford, S. (2013) *Watching Sport*. London: Routledge. p16.

<sup>11</sup> This is considered by Stephen Mumford (2012) in his paper, 'Emotions and Aesthetics: an Inevitable Trade-Off?' *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*. 39 (2)

aesthetically inferior to games such as golf. His fundamental argument rests upon a distinction between what he calls t-games, and what he calls e-games.

The t in t-games signify time. The e in e-games signify event. T-games are those games which are bounded or limited by a particular timeframe. So, according to Kretchmar, any game or sport which is limited by a set time, such as football, rugby, hockey, handball, basketball, is inferior to games that end only after completing a particular or a set number of actions, such as golf, tennis, shooting, high board diving, vaulting. Football is a sport that is limited by time in that the team with the most goals after 90 minutes is declared the winner; this is the case whether ten goals have been scored or only one. This contrasts with other sports, such as golf and badminton where the attainment of a designated end determines the outcome; in golf it is after 18 holes have been played, in badminton, after a player has reached 21 points.

As I said, Kretchmar provides three flaws of t-games to support the conclusion that football is inferior to golf; a logical flaw, a moral flaw and an aesthetic flaw. All of these flaws, according to Kretchmar, are based on a limitation regarding the demonstration of athletic skill. Essentially he argues that t-games are not able to show athletic skill as much as e-games. Whilst this might sound a bit odd, I will attempt to outline the essence of his argument as charitably as possible, before I show how it is wrong.

Kretchmar argues that e-regulated games are structurally superior to t-games because they promote a positive and consistent test of the skills that define that game (he calls these 'skilful interchanges' or SIs). In contrast, time-regulated games can reward gamesmanship, which is antithetical to testing the skills inherent to that game. Kretchmar provides the example of golf to illustrate: golf is an event-regulated game whereby the result is determined by the number of shots taken to complete 18 holes. It is not constrained by time and therefore it doesn't matter if you rush around the course as quickly as possible or spend a degree of time assessing the lie of each ball. If golf was time-regulated, it would mean that the result is determined by which player had the lowest score after a set time, say four hours. This could mean that a player who was winning at the 3 hour 15 minute mark could (deliberately) hit her ball into the rough and spend the next 45 minutes looking for it before being declared the winner. As such, rather than being a consistent test of game-related skill, i.e. the ability to hit a ball accurately, the last 45 minutes is taken up by the skill of looking for a ball or appearing to look for it. Kretchmar concludes time-regulated games are therefore not a consistent test of skill which is the exemplar of a good game. In support of Kretchmar's view, it does seem to be the case that criticism is often directed towards t-games for the time-wasting behaviour it appears to reward, for instance, retreating to a negative defensive strategy in order to hold on to a

lead or avoid defeat. Time is often wasted by making unnecessary substitutions, kicking the ball back to the goal-keeper, keeping the ball in the corner and feigning injury. Whilst the clock ticks down, the skills being tested are arguably not those inherent to the game that is being played. Although such behaviour is generally frowned upon, by the neutral fan in particular but also by those with more partisan tendencies too, spectators and officials are often resigned to the fact that such behaviour is not explicitly against the rules. In this I believe Kretchmar is right, time wasting in the examples I've cited, does not demonstrate any athletic skill and therefore has negligible aesthetic merit. Time wasting is a way of spoiling not enhancing sport.

This leads to Kretchmar's moral criticism of games such as football. Because they are limited by time, they provide an incentive to play the game badly. Essentially they reward an instrumental approach to game-playing. When the amateur ethos of playing the game for the sake of itself diminishes, and a more instrumental attitude takes over, stalling and other non-game related behaviour become the most rational action. In contrast, in event-regulated games, such actions would never be rational whatever attitude (whether intrinsic / amateur or instrumental / professional) it is played with.

This leads into Kretchmar's third, and aesthetic, criticism of t-games. He argues that such instrumental attitudes based upon the structural defects of t-games result in behaviour that is not aesthetically conducive to a good game. Teams and individuals are motivated to take any action that runs down the clock and these actions are antithetical to the qualities that we are attracted to when we play and watch sport. Simply put, Kretchmar asserts that the structural flaws in t-games means they will also be aesthetically deficient.

The problem, according to Kretchmar, with limiting a game by time is that it leads to two equally unsatisfactory outcomes. Either we are left wondering who might have won if the game lasted as long as is necessary for the integral skills to be fully tested (as in the case of score or no-score draws), or we are left with a dull and tedious game that has been decided before the time has expired (since teams will often try to protect leads by time-wasting). As Kretchmar notes;

*In time-regulated games, [w]e might experience a full complement of testing opportunities during a set period of time. Or we might not. And when we do not, we might feel cheated. After all, we built the game to be played for, say, 40 minutes—not to be played for 25 or 30, with the remainder spent in relatively non skillful inactivity. In short, it would be odd to construct an artificial test for the purpose of determining who is better at solving a gratuitous problem, only to have a game structure that (on occasion) favors the individual who refuses to address that very problem.*

Kretchmar asserts that in the majority of t-games, the outcome has been decided before full time has elapsed. He contrasts this with event-regulated games, such as golf, tennis and snooker, whereby it is always logically possible for the opposition to claw their back into the game; as illustrated by examples such as, Ben Ainslie's inspired victory in the 2013 America Cup which saw Team Oracle turn around an 8-1 deficit to win 9-8, Europe's Ryder Cup victory in 2012, or England's Ashes test win at Headingley in 1981. In e-games, such as tennis or golf, it isn't over until it's over.

The problem with Kretchmar's claim however, is that although this may be the case in the high-scoring t-games such as rugby and basketball that he cites (and I will say here that he does not mention association football), where it is unlikely that a team will come back from a double figure deficit in the latter stages, it is far from the norm in lower scoring t-games such as football whereby the victor rarely attains more than a two goal advantage, and this can, and has been overturned in the dying minutes of a game. We have seen this several times already in Euro2016.

It is at this point therefore that I think Kretchmar makes his greatest error. Despite the fact that victory and the end of the game are logically dependent on one another in e-games, it is perhaps t-games that allow for a more dramatic spectacle which provides greater aesthetic value. In these cases, it is the very restriction of time that provides value. It is this aesthetic element that provides a greater value to t-games and makes them worthwhile and popular. The discernor of the good game wishes to see the 'sweet-tension of uncertainty of outcome', a phrase coined by Warren Fraleigh<sup>1</sup> But contrary to Kretchmar's assertion, it is a time constraint that can enhance this possibility. Kretchmar's argument that e-games are superior to t-games is based on his assertion that e-games provide a fuller test of integral skills and it is this that primarily determines the good game. However, this assumption is incorrect. Arguably part of the value of a good game lies in the aesthetic element of the 'sweet tension of uncertainty' that each individual game provides. Although a few examples of great sporting come-backs in e-games were illustrated previously, a more empirical (and less anecdotal) analysis might well demonstrate that this is more, rather than less, common in t-games than e-games. Kretchmar's purism and his focus on the ratio of skilful interchanges to non-skilful interchanges neglects the aesthetic value for which the rationing of time provides. Kretchmar seems to concede this when he notes the global popularity of football and the criticisms directed to golf and baseball for being 'boring'. Yet, and this is what I find rather surprising, is he later states that football is an exception and insists that the most popular games for both playing and spectating are event-regulated ones. Such a claim, however, seems doubtful.

Stephen Mumford draws upon Heidegger to illustrate this point further. Heidegger notes that we are time limited creatures and therefore time is of utmost importance to us in our lives. Sport, Mumford

argues, mirrors the structure of our lives. We know that we must 'beat the clock' to get the things we want, and that 'time waits for no man'.

*[A] time-limitation also enhances the dynamic of the sport: teams that trail have to play with more urgency and be more adventurous and risk taking. This creates the danger of conceding a goal from a rapid breakaway, which is one of the most exciting things to see in football. There is also a tactical battle to impose your desired pace on the game as the winning team seek to slow it down and the trailing team seek to speed it up. Such a contest can make for high drama as each goal in a game can change the dynamic, teams going from being content with their game situation, and seeking to hold it, to a position where they require a change in the game situation. Contrary to Kretchmar's (2007: 329-31) claim, therefore, it does not seem that all stalling in a sport should be corrected. Some of it may contribute to the spectacle and chime with our time-limited view on the world.*

[Video]

If we are able to reject part of Kretchmar's argument on the aesthetic value that a restriction of time provides, there may also be a case to reject the premise on which Kretchmar basis his argument: that t-games provide a lesser test of valuable skills that are inherent to the game. And I repeat my initial claim that it is the demonstration of athletic skill that is a key aesthetic criterion in sport.

I wish now to return to the concept of skill to show further why Kretchmar was wrong in his analysis. Cesar Torres (2000) defines skill as: "...acquired, intentional, and purposeful capacities to negotiate solutions to problematic situations" (p84). Therefore, the problem in football is how to get the ball into the goal using only one's feet (or at least not using the arms, hands or other prohibited means such as a stick), whilst remaining in a defined area (the pitch), with only 10 other supporting players, whilst at the same time preventing the opposition from doing likewise. Conversely the problem in golf is to get the ball into the hole whilst using a specified club and negotiating hazards between the starting tee and the finishing hole. These skills are both physical and cognitive: the ability to know what to do and to be able to do it. The ability to solve these sporting problems are ultimately what Kretchmar meant by 'skilful interchanges' and is why Kretchmar argued that a game that maximises the number of skilful interchanges is superior to one that does not. However, I wish to argue that Kretchmar under-defines a skilful interchange and this leads to his flawed conclusion that football is inferior to golf.

A reasonable place to start this analysis is by considering the distinction between closed skills and open skills. 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. Torres asserts that open skills are much more valued than closed skills because closed skills tend to be restorative whereas open skills tend to be constitutive. This means that when the game breaks down, say in the case of the ball going out of the field of play, a simple and effective measure to restart the game is required. The simplest and most effective measure is via a closed skill; in the case of football, to throw the ball back on to the pitch. Torres argues that the further away the action is to the central skills required by the game, the simpler and more efficient it is likely to be. A throw-in in football is a perfect example of this. Football is a game that is primarily played with the feet; the skills inherent to the game are those which require the foot to control and manipulate the ball. The use of hands, in contrast, is prohibited with the exception of the goalkeeper who is allowed to use other aspects of her body in a designated area of the pitch in order to reduce the advantage given to the attacking player when shooting at goal. Since the game of football is predicated on the use of the feet, it might be reasonable to ask why, when the ball goes out of play along the sidelines, is the game then restarted with a throw-in rather than a kick-in? The answer, according to Torres, is that a throw-in is the most efficient way of restarting the game and allowing play to continue – I think we can make this assumption on the basis that we will default to using our hands over our feet. Whilst it may be accepted that closed skills may be developed and advanced in technique as is the case for the development of open skills (so techniques of the throw-in have developed in order to maximise range and accuracy in providing an advantage for the team in possession rather than merely an efficient way of restarting the game) the problems that closed and open skills attempt to solve differ. Moreover, the problems that are solved with open skills are much more interesting and arguably valuable, than those that require closed skills. It is this that highlights the problem with Kretchmar's argument and where he fails with his conception of skilful interchange. As such, the value of a game can be assessed in the opportunities it allows for the use of open skills rather than skills per-se. Football is a good game because it maximises the opportunity for a greater number of open skills to be demonstrated. The value of golf however is diminished because, in contrast, it is a game which predominantly requires closed skills. The differing values attached to different skills can be illustrated [here].

When presented in this way, it is clear that the game of football allows for a greater number of the more valuable skilful interchanges to be tested than in golf as the opportunities for unpredictable or

novel situations requiring the use of open skills arise to a much greater extent in football than in golf.

The reason that open skills are more valuable than closed skills is that it allows for a greater range of aesthetic qualities to be depicted. A key aesthetic quality is that of originality. It is this that provides the defence for much art, particularly modern art. Critics state 'anyone could have produced that, what makes it so special', when the answer comes back that 'anyone didn't'. Whilst skill often correlates with that which we find beautiful, if the skill also contains pure originality, it is that which makes the performance great. This has led Teresa Lacerda and Stephen Mumford to argue that the genius should be considered a valid aesthetic category in sport.

Whilst they do not wish to provide a restrictively analytical account of genius, Lacerda and Mumford provide five characteristics: creativity, innovation, originality, freedom, and inspiration for others to follow.

Ultimately, they argue "the genius is one who is able to break out from the existing chains of convention" and provide several examples to illustrate. Maradona demonstrated a vision and awareness in football that was unsurpassed. He was able to negotiate his way, seemingly effortlessly, past opposition players whilst continuing to keep control of the ball. Schuschunova's originality in developing new linking movements between set gymnastic moves brought a grace and fluidity to a routine that had not been seen before, whilst Boklöv and Fosbury developed new techniques in sport that enabled previous limits of human ability to be surpassed: Boklöv with the v-shape in ski-jumping, and Fosbury with his backward head-first jump in the high-jump. Now whilst Lacerda and Mumford cite a variety of sporting geniuses, I would argue that due to the arguments I presented earlier about open and closed skills, there are far more opportunities for genius in the sports such as football than in sports such as high-jumping. Arguable this is due to the type of sport that it is and whether the sports fundamentally test for open or closed skills.

For Lacerda and Mumford, it is the quality of genius that has the greatest aesthetic value in sport. The original always has greater aesthetic value simply because it is the original. They argue:

*Seeing something allows us to experience its aesthetic features but seeing it for the first time gives us something that is not in the subsequent encounters. The genius at work provides us with such experiences when few others would be able to do so. This appreciation of the new – of novel successful strategies – is what rationally grounds our fascination with genius.*

I wish to conclude by returning to my original two questions. What aesthetic criteria should be applied to judge sporting contests? And what particular features does football have, in relation to these aesthetic criteria that other sports do not possess?

I have suggested that the fundamental aesthetic criterion is that of athletic skill, but also in the context of sport, a criterion should be the dramatic spectacle that is dependent on competition itself, the notion of winning or losing. Having a partisan preference for who succeeds may add to this because good sport is ultimately the sweet tension of uncertainty of outcome, in essence, it's anyone's game. Being fixated on a narrow conception of aesthetic beauty, as suggested by Scott Kretchmar, neglects to appreciate the power of sport as a rule-bound, competitive activity that is both trivial and of deadly serious at the same time. Sport, holds paradoxical meaning for those involved in it. The dramatic spectacle that is sport is often enhanced, not diminished, by the constraint of time. The final criterion is the scope for originality and creativity that is exemplified by sporting genius.

So what's so special about football? What makes it rightly called the beautiful game. With regards to the demonstration of athletic skill, its rules allow for a variety of skill - speed, deftness, deception, power, agility. Moreover, these skills are open skills that allow for creativity and originality unlike the closed skills of golf, snooker or other e-games. Finally, football seems to be the sport that has its drama enhanced to the greatest extent by a restriction of time. Last minute goals that change the outcome are far more likely than in many other sports. The nature of football, and its relative paucity in goals, means that the aesthetic partisan is sitting on the edge of her seat waiting for a moment of release. It is these things together that demonstrate why football is the beautiful game.

---

<sup>i</sup> This phrase has been attributed to Warren Fraleigh (1984) and developed further by Sigmund Loland (2002).