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THE FIGHT FOR THE MORAL SOUL
OF MODERN SPORT

Dueling Amateur and Professional Conceptions of Sport
in the Early Modern Olympic Games, 1896–1924

As I remark in the Introduction, the resumption of the modern Olympic Games at the turn of the twentieth century was notable not just because it was an important contributing factor to the remarkable ascendance of sport as a major social, cultural, and political force across Europe and North America but because it set the moral tone for sport for the rest of the twentieth century and beyond. Its outsized significance in this latter regard can be traced to the epic battle for the moral soul of modern sport that was waged during this historical period; the conflict pitted a mainly English gentleman-amateur conception against a mainly American professional conception of athletic endeavor. My ultimate aim in critically probing this epic clash over the point and purpose of athletic endeavor and of the moral outlook suited to its full blossoming is to show what crucial role ethical conventions of sport play in its moral reckoning. But for present purposes I first want to establish how wide and deep this split between these two factions of the international athletic community was; I also want to show what light it sheds on the possibilities and limits of moral argument and moral progress in and, by implication, outside of the world of sport. There is much to be learned, or so I claim, when communities of inquiry and the norms they rely on to make moral sense of valued social practices like sport are so at odds with one another that they are at a loss of how to morally adjudicate their differences because they cannot see eye to eye on the purpose and value of sport itself.
The seedbed of the gentleman-amateur conception of sport was, as oft observed, the English public schools, which, for those of us on the other side of the pond, were what we called and still call private schools and are reserved mainly for the youth of the upper-class elite. This fact is, of course, why we often think of amateur sport as a predominantly aristocratic concoction defined by patrician virtues and a contemptuous disdain of the working class. Much has been made of this public-school origin story and of the social snobbery it traded in and exploited to exclude manual laborers and their kind from its precious athletic ranks. Too much, in my estimation. For if amateur sport were nothing more than a public-school phenomenon confined to the well-bred and well-heeled, then its account of sport would be little more than a faint blip on our athletic radar screen. That it counted for considerably more than this had to do with its enthusiastic embrace by an ascendant professional middle class that owed its elevated social status to the rise of capitalism.

This new middle class of rising professionals took to amateur sport because of its meritocratic character, which fit nicely with its unfavorable view of landed wealth (and its favorable view of active, movable capital), and of an aristocratic patronage system that shunned open competition and disparaged merit based on achievement rather than social status. The fusion of upper-middle-class and aristocratic elements led to a redefinition of the gentleman, “away from the rural squire or courtly fops of the eighteenth century prominence and towards a more broadly responsible, self-disciplined, functional elite capable of retaining the leadership of a more ‘modern’ society” (Baker 2004, 4). This redefinition of the gentleman, as might be expected, prompted a redefinition of the gentleman-amateur athlete, in which the notion of sport as a competitive practice in which merit had to be earned rather than bestowed, rubbed off the harder elite social class edges of the older amateurism. On the American side, as Mark Dyreson notes, the cause of amateur sport was further advanced by a “new group of progressive, professionally oriented, college educated Americans,” whose numbers made up the bulk of the American Olympic team that dominated the early games (1998, 40).

Why this emerging liberal and professional elite found amateur sport more to its liking than professional sport, given the great pride its members took in their own professional training and expertise, is often chalked up to their contempt for the working class and/or to their view that sport was too trivial an affair to be undertaken in a professional, meritocratic manner. But
as Norman Baker and others have pointed out, while the residual influence of aristocratic practice still had a grip on this new professional class, its affinity for amateur sport likely had more to do with its own early development, in which it saw its professional acumen in commerce and trade as more craft-like than businesslike—that is, as more of an art than an applied science (2004, 8).

It should be apparent from what has been said thus far, then, that the idea that gentlemanly amateur sport was some sort of monolithic conception made up exclusively of aristocratic features and distinctly patrician virtues is, at best, a myth and, at worst, a blatant falsehood. Rather, it was an amalgam of aristocratic and middle-class professional aspirations and values that put stock in honest competition and meritorious athletic accomplishments. This coupling of the old elements of the aristocratic outlook and the new elements of the professional retained the former’s endorsement of the classical ideal of the beauty of the well-proportioned body in motion and the greater aesthetic value of the all-around performer over the specialist.

Amateur Sportsmanship

At the core of the gentlemanly creed of sportsmanship was, as is well known, an implacable opposition to any form of financial remuneration for athletic engagement. To be sure, that entrenched wariness of the monetary motive in amateur athletic affairs was, in its earliest aristocratic iteration, an unmistakable form of social class snobbery intended to keep “menial” laborers from infiltrating its ranks. But in its more mature phase, as observed, social snobbery mostly gave way to genuine concern on the part of devotees of amateur sport of the morally deleterious effects of mixing money and athletic accomplishment. As one American enthusiast of Anglophile sport of the time smartly put it, “The social status of the [athlete] is not important except as it concerns his ethics.” That means, he continued, that competing in sport “must always be open to all who show they are qualified; no social snobbery can be tolerated, yet it is very important to realize that a certain class of men, non-amateur in spirit and action . . . must either be educated or barred” (Crowther 1907, 502). This latter grouping of nonamateur athletes was singled out for moral derision, not for being born into the wrong social class but for harboring motives for participating in sport that were considered un sporting because they were unethical.1

Just what all those who lacked the amateur athletic spirit were to be educated about to render them temperamentally fit for sport—or expelled from sport for being uneducable—was, of course, the ideals of gentlemanly
sportsmanship. The central ideal was that of taking up and pursuing sport for the sake of sport itself. The only motive and reason thought suited to athletic engagement by amateurs was for the sheer pleasure and “fun” of it (Crowther 1907, 502). That meant that there was not only no place for mercenaries in amateur sport but no place for any instrumentalist types who conceived and pursued sport as a means rather than an end in itself. This is, to say the least, a strong view, since even the mere presence of extrinsic motives and reasons in the, to borrow Bernard Williams’s phrase, “subjective motivational sets” of would-be amateur athletes was deemed morally disqualifying (1981, 102).

The inauguration of the modern Olympic Games was an attempt to breathe new life into the amateur ideal of sport for the sake of sport itself. By the last decade of the nineteenth century, the profit motive had already begun to exert an appreciable influence on the motives and actions of social actors to include, of course, athletes. Mindful of this incipient upsurge of economic motives in and outside of sport, enthusiasts of the modern Olympics hoped that the games would serve as a purifying force, that they would, in Dyreson’s apt words, “set new standards for sport by replacing the scramble for the ‘almighty dollar’ with the quest for the simple olive branch” (1998, 39). Of course, this hope that the Olympics might reset our moral compass by pointing us in the direction of sport for sport’s sake explains why these international athletic contests became such an important moral flashpoint for amateurs who saw as their mission to save sport from the professionals in their midst and, as we shall soon see, for professionals who sought to do the same with regard to their amateur foes.

Being educated in the ways of amateur sport also required being educated to act as a gentleman on and off the field. To play sport like a gentleman was to play in a composed, disciplined, and virtuous way. Emotional outbursts or acts of violence were strictly forbidden. Excess enthusiasm for sport was, unsurprisingly, likewise frowned on and considered dangerously monomaniacal, if not borderline fanatical. Naturally, then, the gentleman athlete was supposed to “be generous in victory” and gallant in defeat (Whitney 1908a, 766). Being considerate to one’s opponents was a moral imperative. The same, of course, went for the rules, which were not to be tampered with or exploited to one’s advantage. But this respect for the rules, for abiding by their letter and spirit, reflected no rule fetishism on their part. As Samuel Crowther declared, “We have rules enough; sport is not made by rules” (1907, 502). Rather, to amateurs’ way of thinking, sport is made by the gentlemanly manner in which it is taken up, in which how one acquits oneself in the game is of at least equal importance to the demonstration of athletic brilliance it-
self. To be called a true sportsman, then, “does not refer to the quality of the play but to the quality of conduct in play” (Whitney 1908a, 766).

Winning from an Amateur Perspective

That amateurs prided themselves on engaging in sport for the sheer intrinsic joy of the game itself, and in a gentlemanly fashion that discouraged overzealous efforts to come out on top, should not be taken to mean that trying to win was of no concern to them, that the emphasis on the quality of one’s athletic conduct made athletic striving irrelevant, even ethically odious. On the contrary, amateurs competed vigorously and intensely. But in doing so, they maintained what Baker calls “a contained competitiveness” (2004, 1), the basic idea of which is plain enough to see: “Anything carried to its extreme becomes its contrary” (Collier 1898, 386). Victory thus counted for something to amateurs, but it did not count for everything or, notably, the most important thing. As one contemporaneous spokesperson of the amateur athletic scene pithily put it, “As for victory, it is regarded as a pleasant possibility but by no means an essential of self-respect” (Corbin 1901, 3).

One important reason why amateurs cautioned against putting too much emphasis on winning is that they attributed the “obsession” over it to the influx of money in sport (Whitney 1908a, 766). The allure of monetary prizes in sport, they claimed, encourages athletes to fixate on the outcome of the contest rather than the actual competition itself (Crowther 1907, 501). Money corrupts sport, therefore, because it interjects, as Anthony Trollope, the well-known English novelist of the Victorian era, wrote, “a desire to follow too well a pursuit which to be pleasurable, should be a pleasure” (quoted in LaVaque-Manty 2009, 99). These amateurs were fully cognizant that the joy of competition itself requires at the very least that they try to win and that pleasurable competitors have to strive to outdo their opponents rather than merely indulge them; however, they also understood that when money rides on the outcome, the desire for pleasurable competition is too often overridden by the desire for victory. Because the desire to win fueled by money typically weakens, if not supplants, rather than strengthens the desire to engage in sport for the sake of the game itself, amateurs regarded it as an alien desire that should not be allowed to upend the intrinsic pleasure sport provides when rightly pursued.

The principled, measured manner in which amateurs regarded winning, of course, was reflected in their ethical regard for their fellow opponents. This was true especially of their strict notion of and adherence to fair competition. The gentleman athlete was not someone, it was proudly proclaimed, who would intentionally break the rules or entertain “tricks” that might rattle
or otherwise put their opponents off their game. And as was the case with practically everything amateurs of this era said, they not only “talked” a good game in this respect but “played” one as well. Just how strictly they insisted fair play be interpreted and observed in sport can be gleaned from a hypothetical example floated by Price Collier, one of their chief spokespeople. Imagine, Collier asked his readers, a tennis player who accidentally drops his racket in the middle of a contested point: “What gentleman athlete,” he exclaimed disapprovingly, “cares to make his point against a helpless antagonist?” (1898, 387). Lest anyone think this example is more so expressive of a single, privileged sport, tennis, rather than of amateur sport as a whole, I cite another well-known exponent of the amateur point of view who instructed scullers in their races at Henley that if any of their opponents happened to run into the “piles,” the only fair thing to do was to wait for them to recover rather than to exploit their misfortune by opening a big lead over them (Whitney 1908b, 248). We can thus be assured that what went down for fairness in amateur sports like tennis and sculling also went down for premier amateur athletic events like the Olympic Games, because the games put amateur virtues like fairness under an enormous spotlight that made any deviance from them that much easier to detect and so censure.2

Amateurs’ measured approach to winning is further apparent in the relaxed way they trained and prepared for competitions. Obviously, excessive training does not comport with the idea of restrained athletic striving. Indeed, elite English track athletes of this early modern period typically trained three or four days a week and on other days went for long strolls (Corbin 1901, 34). Such a scarcely taxing regimen is uncharacteristic of not only contemporary elite athletes but also so-called contemporary workout “warriors,” who put in long hours of hard training just for the sake of basic physical fitness and health without any thought of testing their athletic mettle. This amateur aversion to overtraining was also meant to ensure the athletic body was “not wrenched out of its natural rhythm and forced into extreme patterns” (Holt 2006, 366), not turned into, as one admirer of amateur sport at the turn of the twentieth century colorfully put it, “a distorted animal machine” (quoted in Dyreson 1998, 39). “Everything in moderation” nicely sums up the amateur outlook not just on athletic success and training but on its overarching athletic ethos.

Amateurism, Instrumental Reason, Strategy, and Specialization

It is not just excessive training, however, that offended the amateur sensibility but rationalized training methods designed to boost athletic performance by incorporating the best available scientific evidence and the latest tech-
nological developments. Obviously, such a rationalized scientific approach to sport is incompatible with amateurism’s restrained approach to winning and overzealous athletic effort. But it is also incompatible with the amateur suspicion of what we today call instrumental reason. Instrumental reason is, roughly speaking, a means-based rather than ends-based form of rationality. That is, it is the view that ratiocination is essentially a matter of discovering and selecting the most efficient means to achieve ends like winning; these ends are not themselves said to be amenable to rational analysis or evaluation because they merely express our preferences for certain kinds of outcomes. The enlistment of science to improve athletic performance is anathema to the amateur point of view not only because it reflects an untrammeled concern for winning but also because it further reflects an overly narrow and technical view of athletic endeavor itself.

This wariness of scientific and technological interventions in sport touches on another cardinal tenet of amateurism—namely, its privileging of broad competence over narrow technical expertise both on and off the field. The roots of this idealization of broad competence run deep in amateurism. Indeed, they are grounded in both the aristocratic and liberal professional strands of the amateur outlook in which members of the former attributed their self-proclaimed capacity to be “natural leaders of society” to their breadth of vision that was supposedly unavailable to the narrowly focused and trained (Baker 2004, 9); members of the latter attributed their rapid ascendance in society as the twentieth century dawned to their wide learning as further evidenced by their perhaps more well-known ideal of the liberally educated citizen (LaVaque-Manty 2009, 100). The amateur misgivings about the wholesale application of science to sport can thus be traced to its valorization of all-around knowledge and proficiency.

The amateur loathing of instrumental reason, however, extended well beyond scientific and technological efforts to enhance athletic performance and targeted as well the use of strategy in sport. Strategy was a particularly attractive critical target for devotees of amateur sport because it was considered not just another variety of instrumental reason but an especially slick and pernicious one that introduced all sorts of trickery and deceit into athletic contests. Indeed, to amateurs the true sporting spirit is one devoid of any trace of “calculation,” of tactics and strategies that are nothing if not “calculated” efforts to use one’s opponents and the rules to one’s competitive advantage (Hibbard 1900, 601). As noted, tactical efforts to rattle opponents and throw them off their game were maligned by amateurs as ungentlemanly. But amateurs were similarly dismissive of strategies in sports like cycling in which teammates try to box in their opponents to give their lead rider an edge and in footraces in which teammates do the same or set a pace for one another
to ensure one of them crosses the finish line first. Such seemingly innocuous in-competition tactics, to our present-day eyes at least, were condemned by amateurs as egregious forms of “collusion,” as not true competitions at all but dodgy athletic simulacra (Whitney 1908b, 248). In other words, they were far too calculating to qualify as sporting to amateur athletes. Indeed, to their way of thinking, strategy was not a bona fide athletic skill because it was not what competitive sports were supposed to test.

Professional coaches were further condemned as interlopers in sport because what they added to the athletic mix, according to the amateur point of view, was little more than a bag of slick tricks to coax victory out of defeat precisely by applying their strategic acumen. To be sure, the main knock against professional coaches was that they were paid to ply their craft. But because their craft was essentially one of devising clever tactics to improve their charges’ chances of winning, they were similarly rebuked for practicing a craft that had no rightful place in amateur sport. Of course, the fact that coaches were paid for their strategic wizardry is itself a given for the amateur crowd, since it regards the profit motive as the source of all such tactical tomfoolery, as a market creation that has managed to insinuate itself into the heart of not only athletic affairs but practically all human affairs. And because the coaches’ tricks of the trade were indeed tricks, their effectiveness required they be kept secret from their competitors. So it is no surprise that American observers of the English rowing scene in the early decades of the twentieth century were dumbstruck regarding, as one American commentator of that time wrote, the utter “absence of any secrecy or attempt to deceive as to time trials, test rows, style of rowing, or rigging of boats” (Withington 1914, 104). That English athletic competitions were entirely an open book affair, in which practically everything was shared with opponents and the public alike, was attributed by this same commentator to the fact that English coaches were not hired hands (105).

The amateur valuing of broad competence over narrow technical brilliance also explains its strong opposition to athletic specialization. Such specialization was frowned on in amateur circles, not just because of its narrow focus but as well for its aesthetic unbecomingness. Amateurs were very much aesthetic connoisseurs of sport, which, as previously remarked, derived from their admiration of the ancient Athenian ideal of beauty and its central notion of proportionality. Proportionality applied as much to the well-proportioned body, as opposed to the heavily muscled specialized body, as it did to the athletic all-rounder, who played a variety of sports well, as opposed to one dazzlingly (Holt 2006, 364). The amateur disdain for the athletic specialist, then, was as much a product of his lack of broad competence as it was his lack of aesthetic regard for sport, of his failure to have the good aesthetic sense to
develop as many of his athletic capacities as possible and engage in as many sports as he could manage.

Amateurism and Game Officials

The remarkable respect players and coaches were enjoined to accord game officials charged with safeguarding the fairness and integrity of athletic competitions further distinguished the amateur conception of sport from its professional rival. What was remarkable in this regard was that not only were challenges to their rulings and calls considered beyond the pale, but they were to be accepted without complaint of any kind, even if wrong. The high regard afforded referees and umpires under the amateur code of conduct was not primarily owed to their knowledge and grasp of the rules or to their technical competency in discharging their adjudicative responsibilities, but rather to the crucial ethical role they were obligated to play in upholding the integrity of the game. To be sure, unknowledgeable and/or technically incompetent game officials were not kindly looked on in amateur circles; they were banished if not at least minimally knowledgeable and competent. But ethically challenged game officials were another matter entirely, since even minimal lapses in their ethical judgment were considered unacceptable. Their main task in ensuring the ethical integrity of athletic contests meant that the decisions they rendered had to be in keeping with the central interests of the game itself (Baker 2004, 2). Further, because amateurs were of the firm conviction that paying athletes corrupts sport by introducing a monetary motive that fuels an excessive concern for winning and all manner of deceit and trickery, it is unsurprising that they held the same conviction regarding paying game officials. They thus insisted that game officials take up their adjudicatory duties voluntarily out of love for the game. As long as the officials played their role out of fidelity to the game itself, and acted in good faith, players were obligated to accept their rulings without exception, even when wrong. Furthermore, any attempt by players or coaches “to bulldoze umpires and judges out of making decisions unfavorable to you” or to work officials to get more favorable calls later in the game was strictly verboten (Whitney 1908a, 766). This confirms yet again that the amateur conception of sport put ethical concerns regarding the integrity of sport over any conflicting technical or instrumental concerns motivated by the desire to win.

Amateurism Summarized

In summary, amateurism is a complex notion made up of a number of historically contingent interrelated parts that defy easy categorization. Above all, it
extolled a gentlemanly athletic life in which the point of sport was to wring as much pleasure out of athletic engagement as individuals could muster. That required they focus their attention on the joy of athletic struggle itself rather than any satisfaction they might derive from having bested their opponents. That also required their motive for taking up sport be principally about pursuing sport for the sake of sport itself and free of any ulterior motives and purposes. Sport, then, was not to be sullied by money or overseriousness or an excessively strenuous pursuit of victory. Further, fair play was paramount; instrumental designs on sport were greatly discouraged; strategy was abhorred; professional coaches were ostracized; moderation and a sense of proportion in all things athletic were valorized. The thread that runs through all of these various strands of amateur sport was a keen awareness and wariness of the corrupting effects of money, of the professional pay-for-play athlete. The worry professional sport posed for devotees of amateur sport was not mere social classism or a concern that they could not compete successfully against their paid opponents in the Olympic Games and other competitions; it was what they adjudged to be a profound existential threat to a gentlemanly way of life that they thought absolutely crucial to ethical sport, to an athletic form of life that showcases our better angels as athletes and human agents. A letter penned by Dr. Edmund Ware, former headmaster of Eton, captures well this deep amateur apprehension regarding the growing influence of money in sport and of the encroachment of the professional athlete into the heretofore mainly amateur English athletic world: “I do earnestly desire that our amateur [athletes] . . . be preserved from the deadly inroad of professionalism, which is already making a business of so much that ought to be pleasure, and threatens to crush the life out of the sports of ‘merrie’ England” (quoted in Corbin 1901, 6).

A Genealogy of the Professional Conception of Sport

The emergence of the liberal professional middle class in the late nineteenth century saw a great increase in people working in commerce as clerks and office workers, in civil service, in retail businesses, in management, and in the administrative ranks of trade unions (Holt 2006, 354; Baker 2004, 5). Their rapid ascendance triggered a profound social and cultural shift in the respect afforded people who earned their living by competing in the market, who made their mark by the sweat of their brow rather than the patronage of others. This shift further touched off a no less profound social and cultural shift in sport itself and, thus, a newfound respect for athletes who, by the dint of their hard work and effort, were able to accomplish unprecedented levels of athletic excellence. Earnest competition then became the norm in sport.
Because social and cultural shifts of this grand scale and significance in
and outside of sport never happen overnight, their initial emergence often
makes for strange bedfellows. Such was certainly the case with respect to
disciples of professional sport, who at first looked kindly on amateur sport
and the idea of engaging in sport for sport’s sake. To accommodate the ama-
teur creed, they simply redefined the notion of a gentlemanly athletic way of
life to make room for their evolving competitive, meritocratic ethos. But this
accommodation proved to be short-lived because it was racked from the out-
set by a deep tension that would eventually and inexorably consign it to the
dustbin of history. It soon became obvious to serious, achievement-oriented
professionals that the unserious, relaxed manner of gentleman athletes was
manifestly unsuited to their athletic aspirations. If they had any hope of
realizing their professional athletic aspirations, they now correctly surmised,
they would have to become serious, very serious, about all things athletic and
work diligently to achieve athletic success. This remarkable change in athletic
outlook ensured that these serious-minded athletes would be duly recognized
and rewarded for their achievements on the field.

The era of professional sport thus bore witness to a fundamental recon-
ceptualization of sport, of its main point and purpose, in which it went from
being a leisurely pastime, a paradigmatic avocation, to a serious undertak-
ing worthy of our utmost commitment and effort, a paradigmatic vocation.
This reconceptualization meant that the amateur view of “contained” athletic
striving could no longer be countenanced because it could no longer be re-
garded as intelligible. Indeed, from the professional vantage point, nothing
less than unstinting athletic striving was acceptable. But it would be a griev-
ous error to interpret this athletic reconceptualization as a transformation
from a moral notion of sport to an amoral, or even immoral, one. Rather,
as we shall see when we discuss the professional version of sportsmanship, it
actually amounted to a moral transformation in which the ethics of amateur
sport that constrained competitive fervor and an all-out pursuit of athletic ex-
cellence was replaced by an ethics of effort and merit in which serious intent
and a wholehearted pursuit of athletic excellence became both performatively
and ethically de rigeur. So not giving one’s all in sport was reconceived in
professional athletic circles as a concerning ethical lapse.

This reconceptualization of the proper aim of athletic endeavor wrought
by professional sport was occasioned as well by a fundamental transvaluation
of the value of amateur and professional sport. In the case of the former, the
value of amateur sport and its practitioners morphed from widely admired
lovers of sport to scorned, at best semi-competent, at worst incompetent,
dabblers in sport. In the case of the latter, the value of professional sport and
its practitioners morphed from loathed athletic mercenaries to highly skilled
and accomplished athletes celebrated for their competence (LaVaque-Manty, 2009, 100–101). The previously esteemed amateur all-rounder, good at a number of sports but not great at any one sport, was no longer to be venerated but castigated for his athletic dilettantism. In turn, the formerly frowned-on professional athletic specialist was no longer to be ostracized but venerated for his athletic brilliance.

Professional Sportsmanship

At the core of the professional creed of sportsmanship lies a deeply felt and strongly valued ethics of hard work that placed a premium on the desire to excel and, therefore, on seeking meritorious athletic achievement. Such athletic striving, previously morally reproached as an especially pernicious vice by the amateur athletic community, was, as a consequence of the transvaluation of values effected by the rise of professional sport, morally reconstituted as a sterling virtue of a life well led. As one op-ed favorable to the professional cause boldly put it, “Competitive sport is hard work and its crowning glory is achievement” (“The World” 1912, 638).

What deeply offended the professional athletic sensibility in this stunning reversal of moral outlook was the lackluster attitude of amateur athletes who cared more about having a pleasurable experience than achieving athletic distinction. From the professional perspective, not giving one’s all to one’s sport was a moral affront, a regrettable trivialization of sport and of modern life itself. So it should come as no surprise that devotees of professional sport decried the English ideal of sportsmanship that instilled in would-be athletes “a lack of desire to do [their] best” (Corbin 1901, 5). John Corbin, the author of these words and an exponent of American professional sport, declaimed further that “there is something peculiarly displeasing . . . that makes sportsmanship a young man’s ideal, and then permits, even encourages, him to do less at it than he reasonably and honorably can” (5). The problem with such a languid regard for sport, as far as the ascendant professional class was concerned, was not just a practical one that threatened future achievements in and outside sport but a moral one that threatened the very vitality of the human spirit itself, of our noble desire and special capacity to make the world over in our own self-image. Corbin’s lament of the danger the amateur ethos posed for athletes and the general public is wholly representative of the modern professional perspective: “To teach that transient personal convenience is better than thoroughness and devotion is, in any modern philosophy of life, the depth of immorality” (6).

This reconceptualization and valorization of professional sport thus played an important role in the elevation of the strenuous life above the
pleasurable life favored by amateur sport as the life most worth living, as the proverbial good life. Indeed, strenuousity in all human affairs of consequence became the preeminent reigning moral ideal of twentieth-century life. In the case of sport, however, this new ideal did its moral work not just by encouraging would-be athletes to pursue athletic excellence with gusto but also by discouraging athletes from taking that pursuit too far to the point that it became a troubling obsession.

To begin with the second point first, the strenuous life midwifed by professional sport had to contend with an emerging unbridled conception of winning fanned by capitalism that threatened to turn the passion for athletic distinction into the passion for the almighty dollar. As Casper Whitney warned at the time, the “get there” spirit responsible for strengthening modern sport in particular and our major American institutions in general needed “direction . . . [and] requires control in our sport as it does in our business” (1908a, 766). What sort of direction it needed, Whitney continued, was something that would ensure that “the slickness which enters into high finance” and that “has a tendency to creep into our athletics” was not allowed to have its way with our athletic affairs. For when it did intrude into our athletic affairs, he concluded, it would incite a “mad passion for money-making . . . as the highest expression of one’s endeavors” (766). The professional ideal of athletic strenuousity provided moral direction and counsel; it coupled its charge that athletes do their level best with the assertion that they do so in keeping with the meritocratic spirit of sport itself. The point of sport, its professional spokespeople never tired of pointing out, was to pursue athletic excellence, not the money and materialistic values that the market sometimes bestowed on such excellence that far too often pushed athletes to do untoward things. So on this first iteration of professional sport, the worry regarding the corrupting power of money persisted despite its weakening of amateurism’s unyielding opposition to paying athletes.

The strenuous athletic striving sanctioned by professional sportsmanship served not only as a moral antidote for slaking the mad passion for money but, in addition, as a moral antidote for checking the slothful tendencies of excessive consumerism, the other bugbear of the market. Because capitalist economies have to ensure they attract enough consumers who are able and willing to consume the products they peddle, the search for new and larger markets becomes increasingly important as their productive capabilities develop. Already by the 1890s, the national economy of the United States had become a mass consumer economy made possible by rising incomes and increased leisure time (Rader 2004, 126). As a consequence, many Americans began to think of themselves as consumers as much or more than they did as producers, in which the spending rather than the making of money
became a major preoccupation. In an ironic twist, the professional class, after having successfully installed the ethos of the strenuous life and, in the process, making short work of the indolent life of the gentry—and along with it the lethargy of amateur sport—found themselves confronted by a new, market-based indolence centered on passive consumership. This new idol of mass consumption included the consumption of commercialized sports. It was against this very consumer backdrop, however, that members of the professional class could proudly point to and tout professional sport as one important and widely admired form of life in which the strenuous life in all its glory and grandeur had survived relatively unscathed, despite the large wads of cash thrown at it by sport entrepreneurs. They were able to single out sport in this regard not by turning a blind eye to its own commercialization, but by pointing out that the masses that flocked to them were, regardless of their ostensible reasons for watching sport, treated to a vivid display of physical prowess that could not help but impress on them the values of an active, intensely physical life. We should not be surprised, then, that the professional playing fields of America and the vision of the athletic good life (sportsmanship) its proponents claimed they modeled became the rallying cry for the virtues of a strenuous life, one that exemplified, to their minds, a qualitatively higher way of living than the mere making or spending of money.

No account of professional sportsmanship could be complete, however, without remarking on the indispensable role fairness or equality played in it. Fair play was as integral to amateur sport as it was to professional sport. What is more, in each case it obligated athletes to honor the letter and spirit of the rules. Whereas the letter of the rules was in most instances one and the same for both athletic communities, their spirit was anything but. And therein lies the major difference that distinguished the moral meaning and force of fair play in each realm. In amateur sport, fairness mandated that athletes temper their competitive fervor to accord with the norms of the gentleman, while in professional sport, it mandated athletes put their whole heart and soul into their athletic pursuits to accord with the norms of professional competence and excellence. What often gets glossed over or left unremarked in the professional case, however, is how tight the weld was between equality and the kind of excellence it trafficked in. It mattered very much in professional sport that one achieved athletic acclaim fairly. As Mika LaVaque-Manty nicely puts the point, “conceptions of excellence have always presupposed a baseline of equality” (2009, 190). So while professional sport obligated athletes to give their all to sport, it also obligated them to fairly pursue their athletic dreams if their achievements were to count as genuine achievements at all. As professional sport became more and more focused on maintaining and surpass-
ing standards of excellence, on realizing its meritocratic aspirations, it also sought, not always consistently or successfully, to become more egalitarian. Its enthusiasts were well aware that if its athletic practices became less egalitarian, they would, per necessity, have to concede that they were less about athletic excellence than they claimed to be.

Winning from a Professional Perspective

American devotees of professional sport placed a much higher premium on winning than their English amateur predecessors. As an op-ed piece in 1912 exclaimed, “The greatest pleasure of all is winning . . . and the sensible man is he who takes all reasonable and legitimate means to that end” (“The World” 638). Any effort “to lessen the seriousness with which American [athletes] take [their] sport,” is, therefore, to be resisted (Whitney 1907, 488). That is not to say anything goes in this regard. After all, winning counts as a genuine achievement in professional circles only if it is achieved, among other things, fairly. Winning becomes problematic in their view only when it is trumped by the financial rewards that redound to winners and is, as a consequence, transformed into a mad passion for the almighty dollar. What was not questioned, however, was the will to win itself. Indeed, the “get there” spirit of American athletes to achieve athletic acclaim fairly was widely heralded by admirers of professional sport as no less than “the spirit of the land that made us [Americans] what we are—a spirit which, let us hope, will never be quenched” (Whitney 1908a, 766).

Because the will to win in professional sport was regaled as the main reason for America’s growing dominance in the larger world, it was only natural that American successes in the Olympics were regarded as proof of America’s superior standing in that world. The games, of course, were a perfect venue in this respect, fielding a who’s who of nations all competing for top athletic honors that were widely covered by the local, national, and international presses. The Americans seized on the opportunity to demonstrate their athletic superiority by concentrating their main focus and energies on track and field, or what in those days was simply called “athletics,” the premier event of the Olympics. And it paid off in dividends as they racked up one success after another, dominating not only their main rival, the English, but the rest of the world in the 1896, 1900, 1904, and 1906 games. Much to the consternation of the English, the Americans proudly touted their athletic accomplishments with great fanfare and nary a trace of humility. They also made no bones about the fact that their athletic dominance was directly owed to their indomitable desire to win (Whitney 1908a, 766).
The emphasis on winning in the professional athletic community gave rise to a corresponding emphasis on the training and preparation for athletic competitions, not to mention in-game strategies and the necessity and importance of athletic specialization. Professional athletes were under no illusion that their strenuous pursuit of athletic distinction alone could get them to the athletic promised land unless informed by intelligent preparation, planning, and action. So in addition to long, arduous training that would make their amateur forebears blanche and greater attention to detail in practice, everything leading up to and including the actual competition was subjected to rational analysis. By rational analysis and intelligent planning and action, the professional athletic community meant the full deployment of instrumental reason, of carefully divining and incorporating the most efficient means to achieve athletic distinction in which the goal of athletic distinction was a given requiring neither rational scrutiny nor evaluation. Unlike amateur athletes, professional ones were not in the least allergic to instrumental reason; indeed, they were on the constant prowl for whatever means they could discover or conjure up to aid them in one-upping their opponents. Their willingness, nay eagerness, to seek out every competitive edge they could reflected the pragmatic tenor of the times, in which intelligent action was widely viewed as the panacea for solving the problems of contemporary social life.

It was in this rational, analytic vein that scientific expertise and knowledge became an important element of professional sport. To produce winning teams, it was now thought essential that people with scientific expertise be recruited to the cause of sport. The days of amateur athletes training on their own, unassisted by paid coaches and the like, was no longer tenable, let alone coherent, in the drastically changed professional athletic landscape. So it was no coincidence that paid coaches, physical trainers, and even nutritionists soon became staples of the new athletic order. Nor was it a coincidence that these recent recruits to the athletic scene, especially coaches, began to think of themselves more and more as body management experts and less and less as educators, least of all as moral educators. The role of these coaches and cadre of athletic experts was quite clear: to win games, not to instill moral character. As Donald Mrozek avers, this ushered in a new understanding of athletic achievement that “depended less on the character of the man than on the management science of the new experts who regulated his life” (1983, 102).

Whether enlisting science in the effort to produce winning teams and, in the process, sidelining amateur-based ethical concerns to give its trained experts full scope to work their magic was a good idea or not was quickly
and unequivocally answered in the affirmative as American successes in the Olympic Games piled up. So James Sullivan, a prominent leader of the American Olympic Committee, was not just whistling in the dark when, following the Americans’ overwhelming dominance in the 1896 Athens track-and-field events, he gushed, “Our men were trained scientifically. We go into athletic sport with an earnestness that other nations cannot understand; and our methods of training and practices were simply revelations to the foreigners” (quoted in Dyreson 1998, 132).

By playing the instrumental reason card, the Americans also opened the door to in-game strategies and tactics that the amateur athletic community had previously dismissed as unethical forms of collusion. Now boxing in one’s opponents in cycling or footraces, or having one’s teammates set the pace to improve a fellow teammate’s chances of winning, were viewed as not only sound tactics but ingenious ones. The same went for trick plays, which required secret practices so as not to give away carefully contrived strategic innovations (Mrozek 1983, 77). The English were openly critical of the Americans’ strategic turn, writing it off as “second rate” because it merely showed they “could only win by ‘tactics’” (Whitney 1909, 643). But winning by tactics, the Americans rebutted, was nothing to be ashamed of, since strategy is an important part of the mix of skills sports were designed to test. Indeed, from their professional perspective, honing one’s strategic skills is as integral to athletic achievement as honing one’s physical skills. If the English could not grasp this simple but crucial fact about athletic competition, they should simply admit, the American athletic establishment argued, that they are operating with an impoverished understanding of sport they would do well to jettison.

The Americans’ incorporation of strategy into sport signaled a new understanding of and approach to the rules that put it at further odds with its amateur predecessors. They were well aware of the means-limiting function of rules and were no less steadfast than amateur enthusiasts in their insistence that the rules be fairly enforced and observed by all athletic parties—though what they meant by fair play was not the same thing, since the Americans’ understanding of fairness was, as one critic put it, “sadly lacking . . . in the gentler feelings” (Crowther 1907, 499). But in accord with their own instrumental outlook, they viewed rules as “instruments for achieving their athletic goals” (Dyreson 1998, 145). That opened the door for a strategic approach to the rules, in which, among other things, looking for loopholes to exploit for competitive advantage became not only fair game but smart game. Sport thus became a battle of strategic wits that pitted coaches and players eager to exploit any gaps or ambiguities they found in the rules to their advantage against rule makers’ and rule enforcers’ intent on closing any such gaps and squeezing as much ambiguity out of the rules as possible to prevent such
exploitation (Mrozek 1983, 77). Such strategic rule probing and rule bending is evidence of the shift in the regard for the rules encouraged by professional sport, in which rule violations were increasingly viewed as a price to be paid for following a strategy rather than a punishment leveled for doing something wrong. That shift has become a mainstay of our contemporary athletic practice as Robert Simon (2007) and others have persuasively shown.

The push toward athletic specialization in this context requires little in the way of explanation. After all, as winning became the preeminent goal of professional sport and the standards of athletic perfection rose sharply given this new emphasis, achieving athletic distinction became a much more difficult matter requiring specialization in a particular sport. So long as simply doing well in sport was the aim, as it was for amateurs, it’s easy to see why the amateur community venerated athletes who could do a number of sports well rather than one or two exceedingly well. But when professional sport ushered in athletic perfection as the aim of sport, athletes, per necessity, trained their focus and energy typically on one sport. This substitution of the professional athletic specialist for the amateur all-rounder, however, was not just a practical necessity but a moral one as well. For if, as Kant famously claimed, “ought” implies “can” in moral affairs, professional athletes could likewise be held morally accountable for their actions on the field only in terms of their single-minded focus on the particular sport they chose to excel in. Holding them to moral account for taking such a single-minded focus—that is, for taking sport too seriously and strenuously, as those of the amateur persuasion did of their athletes—is a nonstarter in the professional case because that was not anything they could plausibly be asked, let alone commanded, to do.

Professional Sport and Game Officials

Professional athletes were no different than amateur ones in their insistence that game officials enforce the rules honestly and fairly. But if one were to surmise that the technical competence of umpires and referees became more important in professional sport given the emphasis on athletic excellence, one would be correct. After all, bad officiating can lead to bad competitive outcomes that undermine athletic excellence. That is why professionals, unlike amateurs, were not hesitant to take game officials to task for their errant calls; nor did they feel any need to constrain their emotions in doing so. Whitney was persuaded that this tendency of professional athletes “to kick at decisions”—that is, “to protest adverse decisions” of game officials—was a quintessentially American disposition (1908a, 766). It should also be said that American athletes were not above strategically “working” the referees,
a practice in which a coach or player vociferously protests calls early in the game in order to get more favorable calls later in the game.

But it would be a mistake to gloss over the fact that professional athletes were also ethical sticklers that umpires and referees get their calls right. For the professional emphasis on winning entailed that winning only counted for something if it was achieved fairly. The famous finish of the 1908 Olympic marathon held in London is instructive in this regard. When the lead Italian runner Dorando Pietri entered the stadium on the final lap but collapsed short of the finish line, only to be subsequently carried across it by British officials after they had given him a shot of strychnine to rouse him to action to no avail, the Americans launched a formal protest that resulted in Pietri’s disqualification and the awarding of first place to the second place finisher, the American John Hayes (Dyreson 1998, 141). The Americans’ protest was made in a fit of ethical pique, outraged they had to go to such formal lengths to overturn the initial official awarding of victory to Pietri under such unfair circumstances. This shows that ethical concerns were very much a part of the American professional athletes’ disposition to, as it were, “kick at” the errant decisions of game officials.

What to Morally Make of the Amateur-Professional Sport Divide

My reason for featuring this dispute between the amateur and professional athletic community over the purpose and moral import of sport as the starting point of my own moral inquiry is that it sheds important light on the formidable obstacles that stand in the way of giving sport the full moral accounting it warrants. Disputes of this conceptual and moral magnitude and of this concrete, on-the-ground kind test the limits of moral argument, of our capacity to persuade others of a different cast of mind how sport should be done. When we breach such limits, moral argument often gives way to bald moralizing, to moral recriminations traded back and forth between the relevant parties. We should not be surprised, therefore, that this is precisely what happened between the amateur and professional camps. The English charged the Americans, among other things, for being “boorishly serious and mechanically over prepared” (Baker 2004, 12); the Americans charged the English, among other things, for their smug contempt of professional sport as “half” owed to “prejudice, one quarter” owed to “ignorance, and the remaining quarter [to] stupidity” (Whitney 1909, 646).

Lurking behind these recriminations lies two fundamental moral questions for my purposes. First, disputes this deep and pervasive raise important
questions about the limits of moral argument itself, about whether they can be successfully resolved by rational inquiry, not to mention questions about the moral theories in which such arguments and rational inquiry are couched. Second, disputes of this kind also raise important questions about moral progress in social practices like sport, since they seem to call into question the very possibility of such moral progress, given that the history of sport is nothing if not the history of significant breaks or ruptures in what was considered morally acceptable conduct from one period to the next. The amateur-professional conflict in sport forces us to confront the issue of what a moral theory of sport must have going for it if it is to successfully navigate such a major divide in our views regarding the point and value of sport and if it is to serve as a substantive guide not only to judging right actions in sport at a specific point and time but also to evaluating future changes in our moral conceptions of sport.

It is with these two questions in mind that I proceed next to tackle the present moral theories of sport on the books—specifically the theory of formalism and the two iterations of broad internalism—to gauge how they measure up on both of these scores.