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Abstract

Teamwork in sport presents a variety of special challenges and satisfactions. It requires an integration of talents and contributions from individual **team** members, which is a practical achievement, and it represents a shared pursuit, which is a moral achievement. In its best instances **team** sport allows members to transform individual interests into a common interest, and in the process discover of part of their own identities. Teamwork is made intelligible by the collective pursuit of victory, but moral requirements importantly condition that activity. To some extent, the dynamic of **team** sport instantiates a basic experience of human sociality.

Keywords: [Competition](#), [Integration](#), [Individualism](#), [Community](#), [Development](#), [selfhood](#),

Introduction: Teamwork in Sport and Life

One of the first lessons we learn in sport is the importance of teamwork. We are told that teamwork is a principle of optimal performance and, quite in addition to its instrumental **value**, that it represents something of a sports virtue. To be called a 'good **team** player' seems to connote something nobler than 'a talented player' or even 'a well-trained player', although such a preference would seem to betray a number of assumptions. First, it suggests that – at least from one perspective – talent is less significant than its proper development because the mere fact of talent is a matter of fortune, whereas the proper development of talent deserves our moral respect. Second, the exaltation of teamwork suggests that, while the development of talent is always admirable in itself, even better is the integration of that development into a larger purpose, since one's development could be driven by purely selfish desires.

These assumptions require some discussion. First, the development point is perfectionist; it suggests that sport is a morally serious enterprise involving a testing of some sort, a willingness to exert oneself against a pre-determined standard, or against another competitor (or perhaps both).¹ Of course, not everyone experiences sport this way; some are content to enjoy it as nothing more than a playful diversion, and we should not diminish the **value** of that satisfaction. But, increasingly, sport is understood to be a form of life in which the effort to do one's best stands as something of a condition of genuine participation. Steven Connor summarizes this attitude: 'The unarticulated rule that governs the playing of every sport is not a prohibition but a positive imperative. It is the injunction that one must try to win' ([2011Skultety, S. 2011. "Categories of Competition." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 5 \(4\): 433–446.10.1080/17511321.2011.561255, 172](#)). The commitment to do one's best – measured largely, although not exclusively, by competitive success – takes on added significance in **team** sports, for reasons that I hope to articulate in this article. Second,

the integration point evidences a broadly communitarian outlook; it suggests that participation in a collective enterprise, such as a team sport, provides an occasion for individuals to blend their talents and energies in a common pursuit, and thereby, perhaps, realize some important feature of their personhood. If it is indeed nobler to be a good teammate than simply a great individual performer – a suggestion requiring considerable clarification and argument – teamwork as an interpersonal achievement would appear to have practical, moral, and even ontological significance.²

A further assumption is that the principle of teamwork presents roughly the same challenge to all players, regardless of their natural abilities or their level of play. Every team member – from the gifted player for whom everything comes naturally and easily to the more modestly talented player who struggles to hold his own and feels fortunate to have made the team – is expected to recognize and honor the team principle. To be sure, because of different abilities and different roles within a team, the practical challenge of what teamwork requires from the members will vary, as I will explain below, but what we might call the moral challenge of teamwork applies equally. The implicit understanding is: ‘No one is bigger than the team. No matter how good or bad you are you must respect this foundational principle. If you do, you will be forgiven all other shortcomings’. This last statement might appear a bit strong but, properly understood, the principle of teamwork encompasses implied duties such as the obligations to give maximum effort and to respect the rules of the contest. What one does as a member of a team reflects on everybody, at least to some extent. Even in a sport culture that tolerates – and perhaps encourages – the outrageous, we almost never hear explicit transgressions of the teamwork principle, even if individual behavior does not always live up to the ideal. A team member knows instinctively that he cannot even hint that he would put his own self-interest before that of the team because such an attitude, no matter who expresses it, strikes everyone as indefensible, even unspeakable. However great a player might be in other respects, were we to judge him or her a less than excellent teammate, we would have to significantly qualify our estimation of this individual’s greatness.

These values – perfectionism, community, and equality – provide a moral context for an appreciation of teamwork in sport, and together explain why it is especially appropriate in youth sport education. It is sometimes suggested that the team dynamic in sport serves as a metaphor for some ‘real life’ lessons – for instance, that healthy social interaction requires a cooperative spirit, that efficiency in corporate activities is promoted by the embrace of specific roles, and that the best individuals devote themselves to purposes larger than their own self-interest. Those who celebrate sport, particularly those who emphasize its formative benefits, often hold these lessons out as examples of what sports can teach particularly well.

My own philosophical interest in the subject might very well stem from a remark I heard as a high school basketball player, which I have always considered to be the most intelligent thing I ever heard in school. My coach said: ‘You never look better individually than when you play as a member of a team’.³ This remark has always struck me as a rather profound, although somewhat paradoxical; it implies that somehow through the subordination of one’s self-interest to the group interest, one’s self-interest is better

promoted. This is a curious thing to say, but if true, it suggests something relevant not only to the dynamics of a sports team, but also, possibly, to the dynamics of our social lives. My coach's remark actually broaches one of the central questions of social philosophy, namely, the relationship of the individual to the larger community. How do the efforts, desires, interests, and identities of individuals find expression and meaning within the larger community? Is there a natural or appropriate relationship here, and what is the criterion of successful integration? It certainly is not obvious my coach was right in his contention – either as a basketball appeal or as a commentary on the nature of self – and so we must explore the issue critically.

Teamwork in sport is complex, encompassing many varieties and many dimensions, but we can probably begin with a provisional definition: teamwork in sport is the commitment of individual players to one another and to a common purpose in the context of a shared athletic enterprise. Nearly all of the key terms in this outline are worthy of serious discussion and permit of different understandings.

This article addresses two issues: First, what is the nature and moral significance of teamwork in sport? Second, how legitimate is the analogy between teamwork in sports and teamwork in the social context?

The Relative Value of Teamwork

We must consider teamwork in the context of other values that inform team sport. Teamwork as a value is neither self-explanatory nor self-justifying: no one joins a team solely or even primarily to be a good teammate or to exercise their teamwork virtue. To join a team is to take up the project that the team unit pursues, which in competitive sport is defined as victory. It follows that any exercise of teamwork that does not in principle enhance the prospects for victory is incomplete or misguided.

The point I suggest here is not psychological but rather structural or metaphysical. It is undoubtedly true – and perfectly legitimate – that a host of psychological states will animate the efforts of any particular team. Let us imagine a team comprised of individuals with different motives (or different understandings of their motives) for joining the team: some play for the exercise; some play for the camaraderie; some play in order to impress family and friends; some play to partake in a team effort; and some play just for fun. However sincere these explanations might be, I want to suggest that none of them could be considered complete without reference to something beyond these proximate explanations, because the individuals have chosen to engage in an activity that possesses its own inherent nature and integrity. We must distinguish two issues here: *why* the players participate and *what* the players are doing. The latter issue enjoys a conceptual priority, which affects our estimation of the proximate explanations.

To the extent that the activity pursued can be accurately described as competitive team sport, competitive success – victory – is the value that makes the other values, including teamwork, ultimately intelligible. In saying this I do not denigrate the value of teamwork but rather situate it within a broader conceptual framework. My

account parallels the one Aristotle ([1999](#)Aristotle. 1999. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by M. [Ostwald](#). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.) presents in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where he sets out the relationship between moral virtue and the attainment of happiness (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle sometimes talks about virtue as an end-in-itself, as something we would choose even if no further advantage would come from it, but more precisely he tells us that virtue is something we choose partly as a means toward – or, better, as a constituent of – something else.

What is always chosen as an end in itself and never as a means to something else is called final in an unqualified sense. This description seems to apply to happiness about all else: for we always choose happiness as an end in itself and never for the sake of something else. Honor, pleasure, intelligence, and all virtue we choose partly for themselves – for we would choose each of them even if no further advantage would accrue from them – but we also choose them partly for the sake of happiness, because we assume it is through them that we will be happy. (1097a33 – 1097b5)

Aristotle's means-end schema indicates neither a temporal nor a utilitarian relationship among the various goods, but rather a statement about their relative **value**. Because moral virtue necessarily refers to something beyond itself in order to gain its full intelligibility, it cannot be considered the ultimate **value** in human agency.⁴ In similar fashion, although teamwork represents an intrinsic good in **competitiveteam** sport, it too refers to something beyond itself and therefore cannot be considered the ultimate good of its activity.

A number of objections arise here: First, one might argue that victory is not an ultimate **value**, even within the artificial confines of competitive sport, because sport by its very nature deals with 'unnecessary obstacles' (Suits [2005](#)Suits, B. 2005. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. 2nd ed. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press., 55). To illustrate the point, one could just as easily think of **team** sport as one of many leisurely activities, all of which gain their intelligibility as occasions to have fun (similar constructions could be with other ultimate **values**). This approach – which we might call the 'fun paradigm' – gains plausibility on account of so many unhealthy experiences in competitive sport, particularly when the obsession to win causes players to regard their opponents with contempt, or to consider the rules and referees as obstacles preventing the attainment of their goals, or to experience wildly inappropriate reactions to success or failure. Confronted with these all-too-familiar scenarios, it is perhaps natural and appropriate to remark: 'Look, the whole point here is to have fun. Play the game the right way, respect your teammates and your opponents, and don't worry about who comes out on top, because in the long run the final tally is just a footnote'.

This seems like good advice, even to me, but I would argue that the corrective merits of this response do not conflict with the structural account presented above. For one, it is incomplete to assert that 'the whole point here is to have fun' because that begs the question of what kind of fun the participants are seeking. There is no such thing as fun *simpliciter*; there are different kinds of fun (or pleasure or enjoyment, etc.) corresponding to different kinds of activities, as Aristotle explained in the tenth book of the *Ethics*: 'pleasures differ in kind ... each pleasure is intimately connected with the

activity which it completes' (1175a22 – 30). In short, before we can talk about the fun or any of the other values associated with an activity we must understand the nature of the activity itself. Even within a conventional activity there is a structure that provides intelligibility to the components of the activity, and which disallows arbitrary assignments of value.

Second, one might suggest that, rather than proposing an alternative principle as we did with the 'fun paradigm', we should dispense altogether with the attempt to identify a single ultimate value in team sport. According to this approach – which we might call the 'pluralist paradigm' – all of the goods that constitute team sport make irreducible claims, and so the challenge is to find the proper balance among them – which might vary according to the occasion, the level of play, the attitudes of the players, and so forth.⁵ The pluralist paradigm denies a lexical priority to any basic value vis-à-vis the others.

Despite its initial plausibility, I would argue that this objection misunderstands the nature of these values and, especially, their interrelationship. The pluralist paradigm assumes that the manifold values in team sport compete with one another for expression in something like a zero-sum relationship; it supposes, for example, that a greater emphasis on winning implies a lesser appreciation for the virtue of teamwork, or the enjoyment of the competition, etc. But this is false in principle, and usually – although not always – in fact. In the best instances of competitive team sport these values actually reinforce one another, as a greater desire for victory typically means a greater commitment to the principle of teamwork, an increased respect for one's opponent, and a more satisfying experience in the competition, etc. All the values should be given optimal expression, and when any of them are deficient the proper remedy is usually direct attention to it rather than diminishing one of the other values.

It is impossible to deny, however, that conflicts can arise between these values and, in particular, between the principle of teamwork and the pursuit of victory. In the next section, I discuss a well-known case that illustrates such a conflict and attempt to clarify the issues that must be considered when confronted with such tensions. For now, and as a way of summarizing this section, I would suggest that even where conflicts arise – and, in particular, even in those cases in which the principle of teamwork requires that the pursuit of victory is compromised in some fashion – the conceptual relationship I have outlined remains true: teamwork as a value necessarily refers to a value beyond itself for its intelligibility, and this value is competitive success by the team. The emphasis on the ultimate principle of victory in competitive team sport is not a restatement of the famous Vince Lombardi line, nor does it argue that in those cases of a genuine conflict the pursuit of victory necessarily trumps the obligations of teamwork.⁶ In other words, 'ultimate' implies neither exclusive nor overriding. But it does suggest that in the normal situation the structural goal of the team's agency has a strong *prima facie* priority over other values that support or make possible this agency.

Who is a Good Teammate?

The above ordering complicates the nature of teamwork because it shows that its exercise involves prudential judgment, as does all virtue. For example, let's say Bill is the best shooter on his basketball team, and he is also dedicated to the ideal of team play. It would *not* be a good example of this ideal if Bill were to distribute shots among his teammates in some 'unselfish' or egalitarian manner, because such a strategy would actually hurt the team's chances for victory (all things being equal). Of course, he has to be smart about this: almost everybody likes to shoot the ball, and so to judiciously give some shots to the defensive specialist and to the rebounder will pay dividends to everyone in the long run. But, generally speaking, if Bill – as the best shooter on the team – passes the ball around equally and indiscriminately to everyone, in some clumsy attempt to play the game 'correctly', he is guilty of basketball incompetence at best, and cowardice at worst. What he should do is assert himself by taking more than his 'fair share' of shots, and especially insist on taking the critical shots when the game is on the line. If he fails to do so, he is letting the team down, even though he might attempt to justify himself, ironically enough, by invoking his commitment to team play.

Now let's consider Bill's opposite – whom I will call Bob – a thoroughly selfish player who doesn't worry about team success and doesn't worry about offending his teammates. Bob is the type of player who takes more than his fair share of shots and continues to do so even when he is having a bad day, always in the committed belief that the next one is going in and it will start him on a hot streak. Basketball people sometimes describe this kind of player as having 'no conscience' – which is a fair enough criticism, but it must be understood that this charge is usually uttered with some degree of admiration. Why? Because Bob is tough; he is hard-working, he is disciplined, and he is focused on his goals. He doesn't carry the burden of victory the way a good-willed player like Bill does, and perhaps partly for this reason and partly because of his superior talent, he does more than anyone on the team to contribute to team success. His individual excellence usually, although not always, compensates for his self-centered approach.

An obvious question now presents itself: between Bill and Bob, who is the better teammate? The answer to that question probably turns on which of the following two questions one considers the more helpful gloss: With whom would you prefer to play? Who gives you a better chance to win? The initial preference for many will be to play with Bill although, depending on the stakes of the contest, one might admit a willingness to play with Bob because he offers a better chance of winning. Perhaps the question needs to be further specified: With whom would you prefer to play in a one-off game, such as a qualifying game for a tournament, or a championship final? With whom with you prefer to play with long term, for example, over the course of a season? The reminder here is that playing together over the course of a season is a relationship, whereas in a one-off game we might be more tolerant of something that we could not live long term. We should not understand the alternatives as simple opposition between success (presumably favoring the talented but selfish Bob) and quality of experience (favoring the well-meaning but unfocused Bill) because some of Bob's shortcomings will normally translate into less effective team play, even in the short term, if only because of team morale.

However one sizes up Bill and Bob, it should be obvious that each has his teamwork virtues and vices – and most teams have various incarnations of the two types. In order to answer the question about the better teammate it will be necessary to study the nature of the teamwork relationship, but this initial contrast exposes some inadequate answers:

First, the ideal of teamwork cannot be defined solely in psychological terms; indeed, we might go so far as to say that good will is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of being a good teammate. On the one hand, Bill shows us that having good will is not sufficient if one lacks prudential judgment to translate it into effective action. Bill's teammates will undoubtedly appreciate his attempt to include them fully in the team's offensive opportunities, but only to a certain point, because they want to win as well. Indeed it is incumbent upon them, as good teammates, to put Bill in a position – both physically and emotionally – to take his shots. Translating his apparent good will into successful play is a team effort. On the other hand, Bob shows us that good will is not a necessary condition for making important contributions to team success for, despite his covert motivation, he may very well produce a great deal of satisfaction for the group – after all, winning solves a lot of problems (although not all). I described Bob above as 'thoroughly selfish' but he probably is not blatantly selfish; his obsession with his own statistics might be a fairly well-hidden secret and, if he has any savvy at all, he will remember to say things that consistently evoke the spirit of teamwork, if only because he wants the ball. To use Kantian language, Bob might be an example of someone who acts according to duty but not out of sense of duty, i.e., he does the right thing but for the wrong reason. In that sense, Bob's commitment to the team is not 'pure'.⁷

Second, the ideal of teamwork is not tantamount to some simple concept of unselfishness, or equality, or inclusiveness, etc., taken from social philosophy and then grafted onto the sports arena. These moral concepts are themselves enormously challenging issues in social philosophy, so we cannot assume that we know what they require in general. For example, the concept of 'unselfishness' seems simple enough, but any expression of this value must begin with an understanding of who the individual 'self' is, in much the same way my basketball example tried to show. The gifted artist or the gifted philosopher, for example, who doesn't let anything or anybody get in the way of the work, and who acts arrogantly and with a sense of entitlement, might actually contribute more to society than those cooperative sorts who, with their slave moralities, would never dream of being so single-minded and assertive. That is to say, the artist might be like the good shooter who contributes more to the common good precisely because of his or her insistence on what we might call the 'privileges of talent'.⁸ But, more to the point, we cannot assume that social ideals directly inform sport because they are distinct (although not completely separate) forms of life. The sport arena is a voluntary engagement structured by 'constitutive rules' (Suits 2005 Suits, B. 2005. *The Grasshopper: Games, Life, and Utopia*. 2nd ed. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press., 51), and directed toward specific objectives, such as victory. Competitive teams are typically not fully inclusive because not everyone makes the cut, and even among those that do their association depends upon continuing effectiveness in pursuit of a specific

objective. Our understanding, therefore, of who is a good teammate depends upon a sport-specific notion of 'good'.

My examples of Bob and Bill are imaginary profiles but we can now consider a famous case of a real-life player whose words and actions were deemed to be detrimental to her team, leading to a decision that was both controversial and consequential. In 2007 Hope Solo was the star goalkeeper for the US Women's soccer team. Despite the fact that she was the established starter, her coach, Greg Ryan, decided to play the back-up goal-keeper, Brianna Scurry, in the World Cup semifinal match against Brazil. The USA lost 4–0, prompting a public outburst by Solo against both her coach and her teammate Scurry: 'It was the wrong decision and I think everybody that knows anything about the game knows that. There's no doubt in mind I would have made those saves. And the fact of the matter is, it's not 2004 anymore'.⁹This remark exemplifies what I earlier characterized as an unspeakable transgression of the principle of teamwork, and the penalty for her insubordination was severe: Solo was suspended for the bronze medal game, not permitted to attend the medal ceremony, nor even allowed to take the team flight home.

Solo's words were out of line, no question about that. But before we discuss her violation let us play devil's advocate for a moment: Why would Coach Ryan start Scurry instead of Solo in this match? Does he not have an obligation to all the players, including Solo, to give the team the very best chance to win, especially in such an important match? His decision is usually described as strategic – perhaps he was playing a hunch due to the fact that Scurry had played well against Brazil three years earlier – but it is hard to believe that other factors were not involved, particularly when one hears how long it took the team to accept Solo back as a member, even after a public apology. Whatever the reasoning for the original benching, there are two possible justifications for Coach Ryan's subsequent disciplining of Solo (remember, they still have a bronze medal match to play). The first is a long-term, ultimately utilitarian, policy decision: the coach says in effect that the team will not behave in this manner because it is a recipe for dissension and competitive failure. Suspending a good player might hurt in the short-term cost, but it will prove cost-effective in the long term. The second justification grounds itself instead on deontological principle; it ignores the competitive implications of the decision and announces, in effect, that this conduct will simply not be tolerated, no matter what the cost. This is not the way teammates treat one another.

J. Brent Crouch provides an insightful analysis of this case, drawing on the communitarian logic of Josiah Royce. According to Royce, a community is formed when individual members pledge themselves to a common cause, thus forming a relationship he calls 'loyalty' (1995Royce, J. 1995. *The Philosophy of Loyalty*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press., 17). In the formation of the community, the cause takes on a greater significance than any individual. Crouch suggests that this logic supports the typical understanding of the player's role in the team:

The individual's loyal relation to the cause is *not* the same as the cause's relations to the individual: the cause lies on a higher level than the individual. Royce argues that this

hierarchy implies that the cause and the community it forms are both more *real* and more *valuable* than the individuals who are loyal to it. (2009Crouch, J. B. 2009. "Gender, Sports, and the Ethics of Teammates: Toward an Outline of a Philosophy of Sport in the American Grain." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 23 (2): 118–127., 122)

The priority of the cause with respect to the community further implies the priority of what Crouch calls the 'vertical relation' of loyalty to the cause as compared to the 'horizontal' relations among the community members. In the context of the 2007 World Cup, all of this would suggest that notwithstanding the ill will generated by Solo's comments, it was of lesser significance than the principle of loyalty to the cause. But the reaction by the coach and the players belie this ordering:

For what is apparent is that Solo's teammates clearly thought that her actions violated norms governing their relations as teammates and further, that these relations were somehow more valuable (and perhaps more real) than whatever loyalty they possessed to the cause of winning the gold (2009Crouch, J. B. 2009. "Gender, Sports, and the Ethics of Teammates: Toward an Outline of a Philosophy of Sport in the American Grain." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 23 (2): 118–127., 124).

Crouch explains the decision as an *inversion* of the typical communitarian model; it appears to regard the horizontal relations as primary, and the vertical relation as derivative.

Concretely, a coach might express this in the context of an elimination tournament as follows: Don't focus on respecting and caring for our relations to one another so that we may win, but think of our *team* this way: if we don't win, our season will end, and while we'll still have relations to one another, we won't have *just these particular* relations. (2009Crouch, J. B. 2009. "Gender, Sports, and the Ethics of Teammates: Toward an Outline of a Philosophy of Sport in the American Grain." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 23 (2): 118–127., 125)

This discussion elucidates a number of important issues. *First*, in determining whether or not the coach made the right decision – both the original benching and the subsequent suspension – we need to consider the interests and the rights of all involved. The published reports seem to indicate unanimous (or near unanimous) support of the coach's decisions by the players. Even if it was, it is conceivable that there were some players who would have preferred to let Solo play, assuming she gives the *team* the best chance to win. Imagine the following scenario (whether it is in fact true is irrelevant for discussion purposes): the veteran players on the *team* preferred to win or lose with the veteran Scurry for a variety of personal and strategic reasons, a feeling shared by the coach. But some players might have had mixed feelings about this decision, particularly the younger players who would be participating in their first World Cup. Even if an actual vote was taken, we know that group dynamics are complex, and therefore it is possible that these players felt compelled to support the decision, even though they were throwing away their hard-earned opportunity. In addition, there is the issue of fairness to Solo (particularly if the original benching was influenced by non-

strategic reasons), and the fact that the team was representing the United States, which involves the interests of many people not inside that locker room.

Second, Crouch provocatively suggests that the team inverted the normal ordering between loyalty to the cause and the relationship within the team. According to that model, the cause that the team pursues, while important in itself, ultimately possesses value because it provides an occasion for the interpersonal experience and commitment of the players. Crouch argues that the inverted model 'captures the experience' (2009Crouch, J. B. 2009. "Gender, Sports, and the Ethics of Teammates: Toward an Outline of a Philosophy of Sport in the American Grain." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 23 (2): 118–127., 125) of many players, particularly when they reflect upon their careers later because at that point the wins and losses matter less than the human experiences of the team competition. As an experiential report this rings very true. But the inverted model confronts some issues. The type of closeness that the players share is one forged in the fires of competition, where it matters very much how seriously the team pursues its common goal. To some extent, the depth of the bond to one another would seem to be a function of the commitment to the cause (although not necessarily to the team's success in this pursuit). Crouch allows that the players can always have a relationship with one another as human beings when the competition ends, but *just these particular* relations (author's emphasis) are not guaranteed without success and further play – these particular relations are, in other words, precious and cannot be created simply through the good will of individuals. Another issue is that many teams do not bond the way Crouch describes, simply because the opportunity does not present itself. Certainly, teammates owe one another something as an implication of their common purpose (as I discuss in the next section) but they do not all develop lasting relationships, for a variety of reasons. Many teams come together for relatively short periods of time, for example in pick-up games; other teams function well together out of a sense of respect and common purpose, but are not otherwise particularly close, simply due to a lack of personal chemistry. The inverted model does not explain these experiences as well.

Although I have presented a few hesitations about the explanatory power of the inverted model, I do not disagree with the decision Coach Ryan made when he suspended Solo after her post-game remarks (I have no opinion about him benching Solo for the Brazil game, because coaches often play hunches about match-ups, so this could have been simply strategic). What Solo said about her teammate Scurry crossed a line and justified a strong response – but how can I explain this in view of my emphasis on winning as the ultimate principle of competitive team sport? The key is to distinguish between teamwork as a good ultimately made intelligible by the overarching principle of victory, and the relationship between teammates, which is a moral issue governed by considerations of justice.

What Teammates Owe One Another

The previous sections make evident that however much we emphasize the importance of success in the team's collective endeavor, it matters *how* that success is achieved. An

inevitable tension exists, therefore, between the end and the means, setting up the classic utilitarianism-deontology debate. To understand this tension we need to outline the formation and the internal dynamics of a **team**.

When individual players become teammates they tacitly accept the terms of something like a social contract; they pledge to join their purposes together in pursuit of a common goal, and thereby pledge to regard one another as equal partners in this bond – ‘equal’ in a moral sense, although with non-identical roles, as I suggested in the first section. A **team** player, therefore, always honors both commitments, which to some extent reinforce one another, although they are distinguishable and they can – as in the case of Solo Hope – conflict. The resolution of this conflict turns on a fundamental meta-ethical question: which takes precedence between the right and the good?

The utilitarian position prioritizes the good or, more precisely, defines the good so broadly that it effectively absorbs the right, as John Stuart Mill implies: ‘actions are right in proportion that they tend to promote happiness’ (1979, 7). Utilitarians would argue that violations of (what is provisionally taken to be) the right are overridden by considerations of the greater good. Accordingly, we can make an argument for selfish Bob as the better teammate because of his productivity, despite his evident (or, perhaps, not-so-evident) disregard for his teammates. His motives, his disrespect for his teammates, and his violations of the **team** commitment are all less significant than the result. If Bob is the better teammate, this is the argument. The deontological position, in contrast, sets out threshold conditions under which the good may be pursued. Deontology refuses the seductive pull of maximization schemes: even if some greater good might result, there are certain principles that cannot be transgressed. The position expresses Immanuel Kant’s non-consequentialist critique of utilitarian ethics: ‘Thus the moral worth of an action does not lie in the effect which is expected from it, or in any principle of action that has to borrow its motive from this expected effect’ (1995, 17). If Bill is the better teammate, the argument must be that the results do not matter as much as the moral principle that inspires his respect for and inclusiveness with regard to his teammates.

We often extol the virtue of **team** unity but to some extent it embodies the moral tension considered here. On the one hand, when players pledge themselves to one another they consolidate a singular purpose, promoting efficient corporate agency. This is the strict vertical sense of teamwork that I have discussed above, which makes reference to victory for its intelligibility. But, on the other hand, this ideal of unity obliterates the distinction between individuals, which is not only empirically impossible but, more importantly, effectively concedes the issue to the utilitarian exaltation of the good. As John Rawls remind us in his well-known critique: ‘The striking feature of the utilitarian view of justice is that it does not matter, except indirectly, how this sum of satisfactions is distributed among individuals any more than it matters, except indirectly, how one man distributes his satisfactions over time’ ([1971Rawls, J.](#) 1971. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 26).

The process of unification, therefore, at the same time furthers the good of the **team** project and threatens to obscure the individual claims within the **team**,

because it attempts to break down the barriers of *mine* and *thine*. Aristotle's ideal of friendship expresses this understanding: 'when people are friends they have no need of justice' (1155a26–27). But Aristotle's statement does not seem plausible as a straightforward description; better, in my opinion, would be to read this passage as asserting that there is no need for justice not because friendship *eliminates* justice – it always serves as the basis for friendship, or else the friendship is without *value* – but because friendship *transcends* justice. So also within a *teamdynamics*: we commit ourselves to a larger purpose and thereby agree to carry each others' burdens in that spirit, all in the name of the *teams'* interest, but there is a distinction between sharing and exploiting. When that line is crossed the player essentially breaks a contractual obligation to the *team* and treats his or her teammate(s) with less than due respect. The bad faith of Bob, for example, violates the Kantian principle of respect for rational beings as ends-in-themselves because instead of honoring the common pledge that he made with his teammates, he uses them as props in his own personal agenda.

In this context, we can understand Coach Ryan's decision in the Hope Solo case. Ryan believed Solo's derisive comments about her teammate violated a fundamental *team* principle and his suspension of Solo showed that he cared less about winning than he did about honoring this principle. At first blush this decision would appear to conflict with my argument that winning is the ultimate principle of teamwork; it suggests that there is something more fundamental than victory in *team* sport, which can trump this principle of victory when conflict arises. Because I agree with Coach Ryan's decision I must offer an explanation of how this tension can be resolved.

The key is to distinguish the moral principles that govern the teammate relationship against the other *values*, particularly victory, that inform the *team* activity. The moral principles I have in mind – contractual implications of respect and fairness, which have the status to override concerns about winning and losing – are not, strictly speaking, *values* of the collective agency of the *team*. Rather, they *condition* that agency; they represent the inviolable terms of the *team's* collectivity itself. Let us contrast two inquiries: First, let us consider the interplay of *values* such as physical exercise, enjoyment, and victory in *team* sport; second, consider the relative claims of these *values* against the imperatives of justice. The first question is a structural investigation revealing, as I have suggested, the ultimacy of the *value* of victory. The second is a category mistake; the imperatives of justice are not to be weighed against other goods because they make a different – and more absolute – type of claim. They enjoy their status precisely because they stand, so to speak, outside, or prior to, the activity itself.

Perhaps a parallel would be helpful here. In corporate activities such as business and politics we observe a similar tension between the defining goods of the enterprise and the moral conditions of the activity. Even though the world of business, for example, has its own defining *values* and conventions – for the sake of illustration we can simply say the generation of profits – it does not insulate its participants against the requirements of justice. We should never accept the argument, in other words, that a corporation's discriminatory practices could be justified as 'just business' because whenever a clear violation occurs, justice should trump the profit principle. But, having said that, it makes

no sense to say that the ultimate objective of business activity is to come together to treat one another with respect. Business people come together for a specific purpose, and yet their pursuit is subject to definite moral conditions. Similarly in sport; the Solo case shows how a conflict between the ultimate principle (victory) and the moral pre-conditions of that activity can arise, and how it should be handled.

This discussion suggests a certain ambiguity in the term 'teamwork'. In a narrow sense, teamwork refers to the combined efforts of the team in pursuit of its goal, which accords it less-than-ultimate value, as I have argued above. In a broader sense, however, we might include in the notion of teamwork the moral imperatives that derive from the team's social contract, which I have sketched out in this section. Conflicts are possible: one could be a bad teammate in the narrow sense, but not an immoral teammate (someone similar to Bill), just as one could be a good teammate in a narrow sense, but an immoral or disrespectful teammate (perhaps an exaggerated case of Bob). The first case presents no conceptual difficulties; we simply encourage and help Bill translate his good intentions into effective action. Bob is the tougher question; our answers here would seem to express our deepest meta-ethical commitments. If one were willing to tolerate Bob's disrespect for his teammates or coaches so long as he continued to produce, one would thereby endorse utilitarianism (of course, if his behavior became such a problem that the team started losing, there is no issue, as he would then be a bad teammate in both senses). If one were not willing to tolerate behavior that crossed a line (defined here broadly as violations of contractual obligations and the Kantian principle of respect, which will always be a matter of judgment) even for the sake of victory, one would adopt the deontological principle according to which the right trumps the good.

It seems certain that Bob, as I have imagined him, deserves some blame, but a question remains about precisely how we criticize him: Is he a bad teammate or can we say that he is a bad person whose moral failings simply become manifest in a sport context? The answer to this question turns on the nature of the pledge the teammates make to one another (do they make the pledge as teammates, or as persons?), and even more basically, the relation of sport to the larger moral order. My own approach would be strictly deontological and, furthermore, inclined to interpret Bob's failings as personal (again, imagining, for purposes of illustration, a serious transgression). The fundamental moral imperatives apply to and condition every social institution, even if we acknowledge the special rules and principles that pertain to specific institutions.

Before closing this section, I should briefly mention two distinctions that further specify the demands of teamwork, both of which pertain generally to the relationships among teammates, although not necessarily in a moral sense. First, there are both tangible and intangible aspects to teamwork. By the former I understand practical skills, such as the knowledge of how to maximize a teammate's talent – how and when to pass her the ball, or the capacity to adjust to different players' tendencies, etc. By the latter I understand gestures, words of support and encouragement, suggestions and instructions, and the like. Very often these are virtues of team leaders: the older or more established players make newcomers feel welcome in the group, pick them up when they makes mistakes or go through slumps, and infuse energy into the locker room. To

some extent this is simply a matter of personality but, nevertheless, everyone who has ever played on a team knows how valuable this kind of contribution can be to the actual experience of playing on a team.

Second, there are both cooperative and competitive aspects of teamwork. The former should be obvious at this point, but the latter provides an interesting – and potentially problematic – aspect to team interaction. We should not forget that a good deal, if not most, of the time teammates spend together is in preparation for their events, and so they sharpen their skills in contest with one another (this is a point emphasized by Crouch as well). A good practice player pushes her teammates; indeed we sometimes hear players and coaches say that an event was won in the practices leading up to it, because members of the team who would not even see action in the event itself had maintained the highest level of performance against their teammates. There is another issue here, however, and this is the potential problem: the bench warmers not only prepare the starters for action, but, typically, they also want their jobs. A healthy competition within a team is both natural and productive, but it must be carefully monitored or it becomes counterproductive.

Dimensions of Teamwork

I have used basketball as my example up to this point because my paper stems from a remark made by a basketball coach, and also because basketball allows us easy visualization of some of the trade-offs that team play involves. But, obviously, there are different kinds of team sports and correspondingly different kinds of teamwork. All of them are interesting and worthy of discussion, but my particular interest is in the kind of team structure that presents a possible tension between an individual interest and a team interest. I will list four basic varieties of teamwork, in increasing order of this tension:

1. In some sports teamwork is simply a matter of *arithmetic*: each player competes individually and team success is determined through a cumulative score. Other than the intangible aspects of teamwork, which be significant here, this variety does not really allow for teamwork at all because a player cannot help his or her teammate directly, and it therefore presents no conflict between individual and collective interest. In a real sense, however, arithmetical teammates depend upon each other's performance for team success and, possibly, for continuation of play.
2. In other sports, teamwork is a matter of *coordination*. In these sports individuals might still operate independently for the most part, but there might be critical exchanges or interactions, such as the passes of the baton in a relay race, and so their teamwork involves more than just the intangibles of the arithmetic variety.
3. In other sports, such as baseball or American football, teamwork characteristically requires the acceptance of strictly defined roles within something like a *corporate* structure. Some roles are more glamorous or more enjoyable than others, and some strategies in these sports require individual sacrifices for their execution. For

example, some players will be asked to block so that others can score, and even a star player might be asked to run a decoy route to draw defensive attention away from the intended play.

4. In other sports the particular roles are more fluidly *interchangeable*, so while there might be a corporate structure for individual plays within the game or match, the roles constantly change throughout the event, as situations dictate. These sports allow for improvisation: the player who blocks or assists on one play might be the shooter on the next play, and so on. Basketball is an obvious example, as are – with something of an exception for the goal-keeper role – soccer, lacrosse, and hockey.

There is something of an organic development in this rough breakdown in that each variety possesses the characteristics of its predecessors; so, for example, all of the varieties are arithmetic in the sense that they involve some sort of an accumulation and dependency; the corporate and interchangeable varieties involves coordination in some way; and the interchangeable variety is at least episodically corporate. Generally speaking, the varieties increasingly present a structural tension between self-interest and collective-interest. It is readily apparent how the good of the **team** might require an individual to restrain his or her preferred mode of play, which might result in discomfort, frustration, confusion, or jealousy. Sometimes the stakes are even higher: scholarships and professional contracts might very well be at stake, and so the challenge to integrate roles and egos becomes even more difficult.

I argued in the previous section that it matters how a **team** wins, and there the focus was primarily moral. But there is what we might call an aesthetic quality in teamwork. Let us consider two championship **teams**, both of which honor the commitment of players to one another and achieve their collective goals as well. One might think, particularly in light of my emphasis on the ultimate good of winning and the threshold condition of justice, that these **teams** are for all intents and purposes indistinguishable. But there is no doubt that some championship **teams** give us more pleasure than others. Suppose one **team** has a truly remarkable player – someone like a Michael Jordan – who is so good he can largely carry the **team** through his individual ability. He does not disrespect his teammates, he involves them as much as possible in the game, but by general agreement he takes many more shots than anyone else, and in virtually all of the critical moments his teammates simply clear a side for him and let him go one-on-one. Consider now a second **team** that has no real standout talent – certainly nothing to match the brilliance of Jordan – but they have learned to play well together, and they succeed through greater interaction and reliance on one another. Everyone makes an indispensable contribution and the spotlight seems to shine on a different player every night. At times one can almost sense a remarkable blending of talents and personalities, like an artistic creation made out of scrap parts.¹⁰

Although the superstar's **team** does not deserve criticism – after all, they win in the most efficient manner available to them, and players respect one another – it is difficult to derive much pleasure from this kind of **team**. However spectacular the star player might be, the brand of basketball his **team** plays is boring and unattractive. The non-superstar **team**, on the other hand, displays the full beauty of the sport and, furthermore,

very often evidences something more than athletic interdependence and achievement. For both players and spectators, these are usually the 'best' and most satisfying teams.

Teamwork and the Social Construction of the Self

When my coach made his remark he was imploring us, in effect, to take a leap of faith, to pledge ourselves to one another, and to become a team rather than a collection of individuals. He did not present the pledge as obligatory (although, as I have suggested, the pledge creates obligations) but rather as an invitation to create something together and thereby to discover some part of ourselves. The appeal was ultimately one of self-interest: each of us would look better if we would stop trying to look good individually.

There are a couple of ways to understand this. First, one could consider the leap of faith an *investment strategy* according to which individuals forego immediate satisfactions, such as scoring a lot of points, for an opportunity to reap greater satisfactions, such as contributing to a more successful team effort. The implicit suggestion is that one would prefer to contribute in some fashion, large or small, to a winning team – or at least a team that is playing the 'right way' – rather than shine on a losing team because there is more glory or pleasure or attention in the latter. Needless to say, not everyone will be convinced by this offer. The second way to understand the team commitment is as an instantaneous or *transformative* experience for the players; the appeal is still to one's self-interest, but the commitment here redefines precisely what constitutes self-interest. This understanding does not depend upon a future dividend; it suggests that even if the team does not win, the players still look better individually and derive greater satisfaction from the engagement because of their manner of team play.

It should be obvious that according to either understanding the commitment involves risk, both because the reward is not a sure thing – after all, we are dealing with a sporting event, the results of which can never be certain – and because we must trust our fellow teammates to make the same pledge. Something like the 'prisoner's dilemma' thought process applies here partly because it would be difficult for an individual player to look good playing in a team way without the coordinating efforts of others doing the same. But while the investment understanding seems relatively straightforward (involving a short-term/long-term risk), the transformative understanding presents a different sort of risk, which I characterized above as paradoxical: How can I enhance my self-interest through redirection or redefinition of that self-interest?

To answer this we must contrast two conceptions of personhood, atomist (or individualist) and relational (or communitarian). The former understands the individual person to be ontologically prior to, and independent of, the various communal involvements that typically characterize human life. In a critical discussion, Charles Taylor associates atomism with the 'primacy-of-rights' political tradition and a 'purely instrumental view of society' (1992, 29). It is important that we do not caricature the position: atomism entails neither isolationism nor the personal vice of selfishness. Relationships are indeed real and important to the atomist, but they are voluntary constructs, logically secondary to the individuals who constitute them. Atomists will

therefore characteristically experience the commitment to a **team** cause as something of a sacrifice or an investment, although one that comes with the promise of a later (selfish) benefit.

In contrast, the relational understanding of the self argues that, in some important sense, the self does not exist prior to, nor independent of, the various roles one occupies in life. One *becomes* a self, as George Herbert Mead explains, through engagement with others:

The self has a character which is different from that of the physiological organism proper. The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process. (1962, 135)

The distinguishing characteristic of the self is reflexivity; the self becomes an object to itself and regards itself as a whole through the various social roles that define it. These roles allow the individual to 'get outside himself experientially' (1962, 154) and transition from consciousness to self-consciousness:

The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the particular standpoints of other individual members of the same social group, or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. (1962, 138)

Mead's interest is primarily social psychology but, significantly for our purposes, he uses sport examples to illustrate his contention that the self develops within the context of the organized community he calls the 'generalized other' (1962Mead, G. H. 1962. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press., 154). He describes a baseball player:

Each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled *by his being everyone else on that team*, at least in so far as those attitudes affect his own particular response. We get then an 'other' which is an organization of the attitudes of this involved in the same process. (1962Mead, G. H. 1962. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press., 154, emphasis added)

Mead's wording here helpfully reminds us of both the practical and ontological significance of this integration, which requires communication and skill, as well as a commitment to – and even identification with – each teammate. It follows that a player's commitment to a **team** is less a subordination of self-interest than a discovery of genuine selfhood and genuine self-interest. As with the atomistic conception it is important not to overstate the point: the relational self retains her individual identity even within the group dynamic – or else the imperatives of justice and respect would not apply – but **team** membership now transcends the individual identities.

A **team** is what logicians call a natural kind, which is a point of reference to which other realities, either constitutive of or abstracting from the natural kind, refer. A quarterback

or a shortstop or a midfielder does not exist by itself, even in the artificial world of sports, any more than a liver or a kidney exists by itself in the natural world. Players find their being in the team and therefore experience the team principle as empowering and liberating, rather than negating and constraining. That was the appeal held out by my coach: the integration would accord with the true nature of the game, so to speak, and would for that reason enhance all the values of the engagement. Furthermore, those who genuinely appreciate the sport will recognize the superiority of that functioning, which is why one looks better. This alerts us to what sensitive observation looks for in assessing performance: while we admire an exceptional performer who plays on a losing or even dysfunctional team, our praise often comes with an implicit qualification: we must imagine how this talent and this character would contribute to a fully integrated, successful team, because that is the ultimate standard. There are players who can do one but not the other; the great talent who cannot integrate is something of an empty promise, although the good teammate who could not individually star arguably produces even more satisfaction.

I suggested at the beginning of the paper that teamwork in sport might serve as a model for some 'real life' lessons. This does not imply that its significance is preparatory, because the sport instantiation is complete and meaningful in itself, but it does broach the issue of human sociality in general. One might understand team sport to be an outlet through which the self becomes fully human, all the while recognizing that the inclination can find other expressions. For example, we recognize similar, although not identical, interpersonal dynamics in the performing arts, in civic and political organizations, and even within community and religious organizations. These societies have distinctive goods – for example, in the arts successful integration is defined in terms of beauty rather than victory, and similarly for the other societies – but they all represent communal engagements that allow for the kind of personal transformation outlined above. At the most basic level, the conviction that the self transforms itself through communal integration is, possibly, a religious instinct, although that question is beyond the purview of the present discussion.

To some extent we can understand the atomist/relational debate to be a discussion of natural kinds, and so the social implications of teamwork – whether or not personhood emerges in social enterprises as proper play does in team contexts – turn on the strength of the sport analogy. Is there, in other words, a basic human need to take one's place within some group or a larger community, and to devote oneself to a larger interest, as teammates do? If there is, we can understand both the immediate appeal of the sport experience as well its formative influence. However different the various group enterprises might be, a relational conception of selfhood explains their common resonance, and some of the special goodness of sport. The teamwork ideal challenges us on a number of levels and manifests itself in a variety of expressions, but it offers to all participants in sport an opportunity to feel the simple and profound satisfaction of knowing that one belongs.

Notes

Notes

1. See articles by R. Scott Kretchmar ([1975Kretchmar, R. S.](#) 1975. "From Test to Contest: An Analysis of Two Kinds of Counterpoint in Sport." *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 2: 23–30.) and Steven Skultety ([2011Skultety, S.](#) 2011. "Categories of Competition." *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 5 (4): 433–446.10.1080/17511321.2011.561255).
2. There is no suggestion here that individual sports are in any way inferior to team sports, they simply present different challenges and have different dynamics, and so the question of integration does not apply.
3. Mark Wadach, Junior Varsity basketball Coach at Bishop Ludden High School in Syracuse, NY, sometime during the 1974–75 basketball season. I am certain that this is a nearly verbatim quote, at least in all the essentials. In any case, I use this remark as representative of the issue I want to explore.
4. Aristotle does not believe that the life of virtue is necessarily happy primarily because he has a profound appreciation for the contingencies of the practical order. He says in *Nicomachean Ethics* Book VII: 'But those who assert that a man is happy even on the rack, and even when great misfortunes befall, provided that he is good, are talking nonsense, whether they know it or not' (1153b19–23).
5. To some extent this contrast is similar to that drawn in business ethics between a 'stockholder' and 'stakeholder' conception of the corporation. The former define the being of the corporation in terms of its profit-seeking purpose, with all other considerations derivative (as long as one obeys the rules); the latter places the corporate manager in a multi-fiduciary role, answerable to the many values and interest that contribute to the operation of the corporation, and privileging none of them in principle.
6. Lombard is often reported to have said that 'Winning is not the most important thing; it is the only thing'. This is quoted in Robert L. Simon's *Fair Play* ([2009Simon, R. L.](#) 2009. *Fair Play: The Ethics of Sport*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press., 17) although, as Simon points out, Lombardi later disputed the accuracy of the quote.
7. See Kant's discussion in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, especially the Preface and Section I.
8. In this regard, see the discussion of 'slave and master morality' by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil* ([1989Nietzsche, F.](#) 1989. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by W. Kaufman. New York, NY: Random House.).
9. Quoted by Grant Wahl, Hard Return, *Sports Illustrated*, June 30th, 2008.
10. I am thinking of teams like the New York Knickerbockers of the early 1970's, which were composed of some great players but very few of them could have succeeded as

individual stars. Furthermore, the blending of diverse personalities and backgrounds, as detailed in Bill Bradley's *Life on the Run* ([1976Bradley, B. 1976. Life on the Run](#). New York: Bantam Books.), make the team dynamics even more remarkable and appealing.

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