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Elements of excellence

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ABSTRACT

'Excellence' underpins debates within sports ethics from the nature of sport to the permissibility of doping. Despite the central role that excellence occupies in ethical reasoning about sport, it has garnered more support than scrutiny in the literature. Little has been said about how this value can be advanced or undermined. This paper addresses that lacuna by demonstrating that excellence has a complexity that has previously gone unnoticed. Specifically, excellence has four distinct elements: the 'cluster of excellence', the 'quantum of excellence', the 'clarity of excellence', and the 'balance of excellence'. Correspondingly, excellence can be advanced or undermined in any of four ways. This analysis yields the 'Excellence Principle' – a principle that provides a *desideratum* for any broad internalist (i.e. interpretivist) theory of sport and a normative framework with which to undertake excellence-based reasoning in sports ethics.

KEYWORDS Sports ethics; excellence; interpretivism; broad internalism; normative theories of sport; enhancement

Introduction¹

Play, fairness, inclusion, and beauty are central sporting values, but 'excellence' occupies a privileged place in sports ethics (Berman 2011; Russell 1999; Simon, Torres, and Hager 2015). What is the nature of sporting excellence and how should it inform ethical reasoning about sport? The value of sport resides principally in its providing an avenue by which admirable human skills and capacities can be tested, cultivated, and manifested. This contrasts with luck-based activities. We might envy, but we do not admire, those who win the lottery. To succeed in the lottery requires no discernible skill. Sport is different. While the bounce of a ball or the vagaries of the weather may play an important role in the outcome of competition, the constitutive rules of sport restrict athletes' agency so that victory can be reliably achieved only by the exercise of certain skills and capacities. For example, to ensure that the high jump is determined by jumping skills, the rules limit participants' lusus

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options so that trampolining and ladder-climbing are prohibited. Similarly, boxing restricts participants' agency to ensure that skills in pistol shooting and sword fighting are prohibited so punching skills determine the contest.

The rules that govern a practice should be designed to protect the internal goods of that practice. If sport is an excellence-based activity, and a particular sport promotes excellence successfully, then there is *pro tanto* reason (i.e. normatively significant but defeasible reason) to prohibit within that sport any change to existing practice that would undermine the display of such excellences. But what does it mean to undermine the display of sporting excellence?

Leading proponents of the dominant normative theory of sport 'broad internalism' (also known as 'interpretivism') locate the point and purpose of sport in its providing an arena for the display of distinctive types of excellence. Robert L. Simon argues that competition is morally justifiable when conceived as a 'mutual quest for excellence'. On this view, sport is at its best when it is a co-operative activity in which competitors facilitate each other's striving for excellence by providing an appropriately demanding challenge that best elicits the excellence that each possesses (Simon, Torres, and Hager 2015, 53; Simon 2014, 91–93). This conception of competition assumes that we can advance or pursue excellence to greater or lesser degrees in different competitive contexts. However, little guidance is provided about what it means for excellence to be advanced or impeded. Simon's aim was not to articulate the nature of excellence but to establish that, at its best, the relation between competitors is *cooperative* rather than *adversarial*.

J.S. Russell contends that the fundamental interpretive principle in sport is what he calls the 'first principle of games adjudication': 'Rules should be interpreted in such a manner that the excellences embodied in achieving the lusory goal of the game are not undermined but are maintained and fostered' (Russell 1999, 35). While the context in which this principle is expounded concerns the conduct of officials, specifically referees, the principle is designed to extend also to the stewardship of sports by institutions such as sports governing bodies. This principle relies on the idea that excellences can be 'undermined', 'maintained', and 'fostered'. However, beyond illustrative examples, little formal guidance is provided about how excellences might be so affected. Again, Russell's primary focus was not on the nature of excellence itself but in establishing the significance of excellence-based interpretive principles for ethical reasoning in sport.

The philosophy of sport lacks a theory of excellence. The existing literature, exemplified by Simon and Russell, establishes both that excellence is a central sporting value and that steps should be taken to protect excellence in the design of norms, rules, and practices within sport. Discussion of how this can be achieved remains at a high level of generality. Yet, the ability to identify when a sport manifests more or less excellence or different forms of

excellence is central to our deliberations about the value and ethics of sport in general and of particular sports. The concept of excellence is invoked in fundamental debates about the nature of sport to applied debates concerning the moral status of doping, but excellence-based arguments have relied on our intuitive understanding of the concept. While broad internalists who view sport as excellence-based should be especially concerned with this lacuna, as broad internalism remains incomplete in the absence of such an account, anyone who counts excellence among the sporting values should care about its contours.

This paper develops the theoretical resources to test how norms, rules, and practices can advance or undermine the pursuit of 'excellence' within sport. Excellence cannot be protected or fostered until we appreciate its contours and the variety of ways that it may be undermined.

I argue that sporting excellence admits four distinct elements:

- (1) Cluster of excellence;
- (2) Quantum of excellence;
- (3) Clarity of excellence; and
- (4) Balance of excellence.

From these four elements of sporting excellence arise four ways that excellence can be advanced or undermined.

These elements of excellence form a single interpretivist principle called the 'Excellence Principle'. This principle is ethically prior to the rules and conventions of a sport, and it should be used to evaluate and interpret them. While I limit my application of the Excellence Principle to sport, I leave open the possibility that it may illuminate ethical reasoning in other excellence-based normative domains such as musical performance or academic assessment.

The paper proceeds in five sections. In [sections 1–4](#), I describe in turn each of the four elements of excellence. In [section 5](#), the strands of previous sections are drawn together and the discussion culminates in the formulation of the Excellence Principle. First, however, I clarify the concept of 'sporting excellence' and I specify two limitations on the scope of the paper.

Sporting excellence is constituted by physical, intellectual, and volitional capacities that are conducive to the achievement of winning (within the permitted means) in a given sport. 'Excellence' in this context is not comparative (i.e. not measured against the performance of others). Rather, it is meant functionally as exemplary of admirable human capabilities that assist one in completing a particular task.

Such excellences are not necessarily conducive to human flourishing. Indeed, excellence in sport can often be achieved only at a significant cost to an athlete's health and education, for example. So, a tension may arise

between sporting excellence and the flourishing of the athlete *qua* person.² Moreover, sporting excellences are not necessarily useful in life beyond sport – a topspin backhand has no value beyond the tennis court. However, the skills and capacities that constitute sporting excellence are admirable because they facilitate our gaining mastery of difficult challenges. The challenges posed by valuable sports such as athletics, soccer, and tennis make demands of our body, mind, and will. Achievements in these sports are valuable not only in themselves but also for what they reveal about us on account of the difficulty of the process required to secure them.

Sporting excellences are not reducible to physical skills and capacities. They include skills and capacities of the mind and the will. So, resilience is a sporting excellence just as much as speed endurance (Russell 2015), and leadership is a sporting excellence (in team sports) just as much as hand-eye coordination (Devine 2021). Common to all sporting excellences is that they are conducive to the achievement of a sport's lusory goal (i.e. winning).

Finally, I note three restrictions on the scope of my argument. Firstly, my concern is with sporting excellence, that is, excellence in sports performance. This is distinct from 'sports-related excellence'. Activities such as managing a club or coaching a team are sports-related activities. My interest is with sporting excellence – the excellence of the sportsperson *qua* sportsperson.

Secondly, I leave aside the prior epistemological question of how we can identify what excellences define particular sports. I assume such excellences can be identified reliably.³ My project addresses how we should reason about those excellences once they have been identified.

Thirdly, I assume that sport is excellence-based – that the testing, cultivation, and display of sporting excellence are the defining purposes of sporting competition.⁴ The broad internalist tradition, exemplified by Simon and Russell, provides the paradigm example of a normative framework that views excellence as the principal internal sporting value. However, my discussion is relevant not just to broad internalism but to any normative theory of sport that counts excellence among its internal values.

I turn now to my account of the four elements of excellence, beginning with the cluster of excellence.

1. Cluster of Excellence

The first element of excellence is enumerative. No sport tests every sporting excellence. Each sport is designed to test only a specific sub-set of possible sporting excellences. The javelin is designed to test throwing ability, not catching ability; boxing is designed to test punching ability, not kicking ability; and the marathon is designed to test running ability, not swimming ability. Moreover, each sport tests more than one type of excellence: the marathon tests (among other things) speed endurance, technical proficiency,

mental toughness, and strategic nous. The set of excellences that a sport is designed to test is that sport's 'cluster of excellence'. Some sports may test a small set of excellences, especially those that require the repetition of a single type of action (e.g. the 100 m sprint, weightlifting, or pistol shooting). Multi-faceted sports (e.g. tennis, rugby union, triathlon) may include a much larger number of excellences within their cluster.

Changes to a sport can alter the sport's cluster of excellence. For example, if the scrum were removed from rugby union then a whole set of excellences around effective scrummaging would be lost from the sport. This change would *contract* the sport's cluster of excellence: mastery of fewer excellences than before would be necessary for exemplary performance in that sport. Similarly, if one of the three disciplines were removed from the triathlon, the sport's cluster of excellence would contract: excellence in the sport would require mastery of a narrower set of excellences. Conversely, if the scrum were integrated into soccer then the cluster of excellence in soccer would *expand*. If a fourth discipline – say, target shooting – were added to the triathlon, that sport's cluster of excellence would also thereby expand.

Sometimes it becomes apparent that a sport's rules and conventions have not been designed with the requisite precision to preclude excellences that are not part of the sport's cluster of excellence from determining the outcome of competition. Russell recounts the famous Louisville vs. Brooklyn baseball game from 1887 in which the framing of baseball's rules at the time prohibited base runners from interfering with fielders (Russell 1999, 28). A literal reading of the rules implied that any non-base runner was free to interfere with fielders. If the rules had been followed to the letter, this would have allowed excellences in wrestling to enter baseball's cluster of excellence, as non-base runners attempted to wrestle fielders to the ground. However, baseball is a hitting, throwing, catching, and running sport – not a combat sport. So, the expansion of the sport's cluster of excellence to include wrestling excellence would have betrayed the essence of the sport. Consequently, the umpire had to appeal to, or perhaps even create, an implied rule that also prohibited non-base runners from interfering with catchers (Russell 1999, 28).

Conversely, a sport's cluster of excellence may contract. Consider the use of closed-circuit radios in road cycling. Radios can provide a useful means for team cars to relay important safety information to riders such as oncoming hazards, but they are principally used to convey strategic race information to riders. From the perspective of excellence, their use squeezes out an important excellence from the sport's cluster of excellence. While their use is widespread in professional events, such communication technology is not permitted in international events such as the Olympics. In these events, riders must exercise the ability to 'read' a race, to grasp its unfolding dynamics, to attend to competitors' progress, to identify breakaway groups and how many riders they contain, to gauge how far ahead or behind they are, to determine

how fast one needs to ride to maintain a lead or close a gap. These skills are prime examples of what Kretchmar and Elcombe call 'excellences of winning' (Kretchmar and Elcombe 2007, 189). Such judgment requires a finely tuned perceptual capacity to remain strategically alert to an opponents' movements, and it encourages teamwork to pool such information among teammates. All of these skills are exercised while riders are pushed to their physical limits. However, the use of radios renders these skills redundant as riders can depend on transmissions from team support staff who gather the relevant information on their behalf.⁵ Consequently, these perceptual racing skills are removed from the sport's cluster of excellence.

Two different conceptions of the cluster of excellence can be distinguished: the 'permitted' cluster and the 'active' cluster. The permitted cluster is constituted by excellences the exercise of which is permissible under the rules. By contrast, the active cluster is constituted by the excellences that determine the outcome of contests in the sport *as it is played*. The active cluster comprises excellences that are typically displayed in the performances of successful participants in the sport. As we will see below, not all excellences that are permitted under the rules are displayed at all times. Sports can develop so that certain excellences are overlooked or reduced in significance in the performances of those successful in the sport. So, the active cluster may be smaller than the permitted cluster.

Conversely, when cheating is widespread in a sport, the active cluster can become more expansive than the permitted cluster as athletes employ means (sometimes even skillful means (Leaman 2007, 205)) which are not permitted by the rules. The expansion of the active cluster beyond the confines of the permitted cluster is rarely, if ever, legitimate. Indeed, one way to explain the wrongness of cheating in many instances is that it expands the active cluster beyond the outer boundaries of the permitted cluster.

It is also necessary to distinguish between two different ways that the composition of a cluster of excellence can change – contraction and expansion. Take the case of contraction. There are two ways that a cluster of excellence can contract. The most obvious way is for the constitutive rules of a sport to change so that the display of certain excellences is prohibited. A second way is for a sport to develop so that certain excellences are rarely exhibited by successful participants. This may be on account of it no longer being advantageous, even if still permissible, to display such excellences, or it may be a matter of fashion with certain styles of play that do not involve particular excellences gaining prominence at particular times. In cases where an excellence fades into obscurity not on account of a rule change but through trends in playing styles, there has been no *formal* contraction of the cluster, there has been an *effective* contraction of the cluster (as the active cluster contracts to form a subset of the permitted cluster).

2. Quantum of Excellence

The second element of excellence is quantitative. A sport's quantum of excellence concerns the amount of excellence that is, or can be, actualised in a sport. Changes can be made to sports that reduce or increase the extent to which excellence can be realized within them.

From the perspective of excellence, there is *pro tanto* reason against any norm, policy, or practice that would reduce the quantum of excellence in a sport: more excellence is better than less, provided the excellences involved are drawn from the sport's cluster of excellence. Consider the shift from amateur to professional sport: such a change allows athletes more time, better resources, and better coaching to perfect the various skills that the sport tests and to develop their bodies to be more finely tuned to the physical demands of the sport. As a result, the average level of play at the elite level typically improves and sporting excellence is more fully realised among participants than before – in short, the quantum of excellence has increased.

Conversely, consider the adoption of a playing surface that can be used only for short periods of the year, for example, grass tennis courts. The widespread installation of such courts at the expense of all-weather alternatives would likely result in a reduction in the quantum of excellence within tennis, because players would have limited access to practice facilities and competitive opportunities during the times of year when courts are unsuitable for play.

While the rules are an important determinant of the quantum of excellence, this element of excellence is not shaped solely by the rules. It can be shaped also by practices within the rules. Anything that influences the standard of play within a sport can alter its quantum of excellence. So, if a biomechanically superior technique were discovered (e.g. the Fosbury flop in the high jump or the overarm serve in tennis) and widely adopted within a sport, this would increase the sport's quantum of excellence despite no rule change having occurred.

There may be good all things considered reason to adopt measures that would limit the quantum of excellence within a sport. For example, a concern for children's well-being, students' academic performance, or equality of opportunity may justify measures that limit the quantum of excellence.

Consider rules that restrict training time or exposure to competition. Such rules are sometimes found in university athletics to ensure that student-athletes are afforded sufficient time to pursue their studies.⁶ Such rules are also found in professional sport where they are designed to mitigate the risks posed by overplaying and overtraining to the well-being and sporting development of junior athletes who compete professionally.⁷ If the loss of practice

time and competitive experience stifle player development, then such measures decrease the sport's quantum of excellence (albeit in the service of worthy competing values).⁸ Egalitarian policies that limit wealthy athletes' access to exclusive training facilities or expensive equipment on account of their inaccessibility to athletes with fewer financial resources may also reduce the quantum of excellence, albeit to advance another important sporting value – equality of opportunity.

3. Clarity of Excellence

The third aspect of excellence is perceptual. Excellence should not only be done, it should be seen to be done. Excellence should not only be *manifest*, it should be *observable* – there is a publicity requirement to sporting excellence. The clarity of excellence is the perceptibility of sporting excellence and the degree to which it can be disentangled from other determinants of performance. The clarity of excellence concerns both whether the excellences that feature in a sport's cluster can be discerned at all and whether the extent of their contribution to performance can be discerned accurately.

Such clarity is crucial to 'judged sports' such as gymnastics or figure-skating where competition outcomes are based on scoring by judges. Perceptibility is essential for the evaluation of excellent performance by fans and spectators as well: unless we can perceive that excellence has been displayed, we cannot reasonably admire or criticise the athlete. Moreover, the idea of sporting competition as a 'test' implies that the skills being tested should be verifiably executed: a test is fit for purpose only if the extent to which the candidate displays the desired skills and capacities within the permitted limits can be perceived by the tester (e.g. the audience, judges, or officials).⁹ So, there is a clear reason to protect our ability to distinguish an athlete's excellence from non-excellence based contributions to their performance. The clarity of excellence is important both to achieve an accurate appreciation of excellent performance and to ensure reliable rule application.

Take the case of archery. One of the key skills that elite archers exhibit is the ability to remain perfectly still in the heat of competition. The tiniest movement – even trembling caused by their heartbeat – could compromise the accuracy of their shot. So, archers develop psychological techniques to slow their heartbeat during competition so that they can release the bow string between beats. However, beta blockers can provide the same calming physiological effect as mastery of the relevant psychological techniques for a panicked archer who has little control over their heartbeat. Consequently, beta-blockers render a core archery skill more difficult to discern – the same outcome can be achieved by those who use beta-blockers as those who master skills in stress management, because both alleviate the physiological performance-inhibiting effects of stress. The drug obscures whether an

archer's apparent imperviousness to stress is due to pharmacology or psychology, where only the latter is indicative of sporting excellence. Some supposed enhancements can obscure rather than advance excellence (Sandel 2007, ch. 2).

Two different conceptions of 'clarity' should be distinguished: an epistemological and an ontological conception. This distinction is best illustrated using the case of Formula 1 racing. A common complaint about this sport is that it remains unclear to what extent success depends on the driver's skill and to what extent it depends on the driver's car. The ontological conception of the clarity of excellence concerns the contribution of driving to race performance. We might argue that the driver's contribution is too low compared to the car's – the car is doing too much of the work. This is a claim not about perceptibility of excellence but about the actual contribution of the driver's excellence (relative to the car's) to the overall racing performance. By contrast, the epistemological conception concerns the knowability of the driver's contribution. We may find that the driver's contribution is indeterminate – it is not discoverable – or we may find that we can detect some contribution from the driver but we can't determine the extent of their contribution. I use clarity of excellence in the epistemological rather than the ontological sense. I do not object to a driver's contribution compared to their car being relatively low provided this can be determined and the responsibility for performance – and associated praise and blame – adjusted accordingly.

To whom must excellence be perceptible, according to the clarity of excellence argument? Should it be apparent to fans, officials, pundits, coaches, or players themselves? The speed and nuances of an excellent performance in fast-moving sports such as fencing or gymnastics, for example, may not be readily apparent to anyone other than an expert observer, and even experts may require a slow-motion replay to appreciate a performance properly. The clarity argument is grounded in a concern that our evaluation of a performance should be highly sensitive to the type and degree of excellence displayed by the athlete. Clarity requires that excellence be discernible at least to experts and officials (though not necessarily to the novice or casual observer). The well-informed judge is the most authoritative evaluator of performances, so their evaluations of performances are most likely to correctly perceive the truth of the matter. It is also important that officials can perceive the display of excellence as such evaluations can be intrinsic to their role, especially in judged sports. However, it is important that excellence should be perceptible not only to experts and officials but also to players themselves. The ability to appreciate the extent to which one is responsible for one's own performance is an important aspect of the experience of sport. An athlete could experience little sense of developing mastery if they could

not discern the extent to which their performance reflected excellence that they had exhibited. So, clarity is a concern that arises even in unofficiated contests held in the absence of spectators.

It might be objected that the cluster and clarity of excellence ideas are equivalent or that clarity concerns are reducible to cluster concerns. For example, one might argue that the cycling radio case grounds a cluster concern rather than a clarity concern. Riders retain the option to ride without radios, so the cluster remains unchanged. A rider who chooses not to rely on radio communication, but instead relies on their own perceptual skills, can still display the skills that are purportedly lost from the cluster by the admissibility of radio use. So, it remains *conceivable* that the rider could exhibit the desired perceptual racing skills by forgoing radio use. The display of these excellences is not precluded by the permissibility of radio use, even if actual radio use would preclude the demonstration of these excellences. The rider can elect not to use radios or they may choose to ignore information received through the radio and rely on their own judgment.

However, while the perceptual excellences may remain within the sport's *permitted* cluster of excellence, they would be effectively squeezed out of the *active* cluster, because, given the choice, it would be imprudent for riders to rely on their fallible perceptual skills (especially as they experience physical exhaustion) rather than the more reliable information communicated from team cars. Moreover, it might be unclear that this excellence had been squeezed out of the active cluster, as riders retain the option to forgo the benefit of radio communication. If radio use were prohibited, this uncertainty could be resolved and greater clarity of excellence could be achieved, because we could be sure that the riders did not benefit from radio communications. So, the use of this technology triggers both (active) cluster and clarity concerns.

Equally, in the archery case, were the sport's rules to allow the use of beta-blockers, spectators (and indeed the athlete) would find it difficult to disentangle the extent of the athlete's contribution to their performance from that of beta-blockers. Widespread use of beta-blockers would squeeze out stress-management skills from the sport's active cluster. Additionally, the difficulty of identifying which athletes used beta-blockers and the extent of the benefit they derive from them would create a clarity worry. So, as above, this example generates both (active) cluster and clarity concerns.

However, cluster and clarity concerns are analytically distinct. For example, the removal of the scrum from rugby union would generate a cluster concern as the sport's cluster of excellence would thereby contract. This change would not obscure the display of the remaining excellences though, so no clarity concern would arise. Conversely, running the 100 m with a gale-force tailwind generated by a wind generator would

create a clarity but not a cluster concern. The tailwind may obscure the extent to which the performance is a result of the athlete's running excellence, but the wind would not alter the range of excellences that the runner displays.

4. Balance of Excellence¹⁰

The fourth and final element of excellence is relational. It concerns the structure of relative importance between excellences within a sport's cluster. The excellences within a sport's cluster are intended to display a specific hierarchical relation. While each excellence within a sport's cluster are appropriate determinants of contests to *some* degree, some excellences within the cluster should be more significant than others. We care not only that certain excellences are tested, we care also that they contribute to the performances of those successful in the sport to a certain degree.

Our concern here is with those who exemplify superior performance. Those who are unsuccessful in the sport do not threaten the sport's balance of excellence. Simone Biles (gymnastics), Tom Brady (American football), Pelé (soccer), and Serena Williams (tennis) are exemplars of sporting excellence ('exemplars of excellence').¹¹ They provide vivid examples of what it means to exhibit the skills and capacities tested in their respective sports. While the aforementioned athletes provide the clearest examples of those whose style of play should inform evaluations of the prevailing balance of excellence in a sport, the exemplars of excellence category is more inclusive than virtuoso performers alone. Quite how broad that category should be drawn is a further question, but it should be limited to those who have achieved a high level of mastery in the sport.

A balance of excellence concern arises when a change to how a sport is played by those who are successful within it elevates the relative importance of certain excellences over others within the sport's cluster in a way that is inconsistent with the intended relationship between the excellences around which the sport is organised. Some excellences should contribute more than others to the performances of exemplars of excellence. If an excellence that should contribute significantly to performance is relegated to only a minor or peripheral role, and (perhaps as a result) another excellence that should play a minor role is elevated in significance, then the balance of excellence has been disrupted and is likely to require correction.

For example, throwing is a peripheral, but relevant, excellence for outfield players in soccer. A throw-in is used as a means to restart play. Other than increasing the throwing team's chances of retaining the ball, throw-ins rarely lead directly to goals. However, if players were to improve their throwing skills¹² or balls were re-designed to travel through the air more easily such that a throw-in became a highly significant offensive opportunity then

soccer's balance of excellence would change as throwing would gain a new prominence in the outcome of matches. In that event, it may be necessary to regulate throw-ins to limit the distance that one may throw the ball.

The frequent use of referee technology could also change a sport's balance of excellence, for example, if such referrals trigger prolonged stoppages in play. Steps to increase accuracy in refereeing may alter a sport's balance of excellence as the sport becomes more anaerobic on account of play being punctuated by stoppages while decisions are referred to the refereeing technology.¹³

The Wimbledon Tennis Championships during the 1990's and early 2000's provides an especially clear example of a balance of excellence concern. The men's championship of this period was dominated by powerful servers: Boris Becker, Michael Stich, Pete Sampras, Richard Krajicek, and Goran Ivanisevic all won the singles title with playing-styles based on a dominant serve. The significant advantage of powerful serving meant that there was little chance for less powerful, more strategic players to win. Tennis is a sport that prizes strategic nous and tactical acumen within its cluster of excellence, but such skills faded in significance in an era of dominant servers who relied on rallies lasting no more than four shots. To arrest this trend, changes were made to playing conditions in Wimbledon to elevate those strategic excellences once again. Principally, the composition and hardness of the courts were altered to encourage higher and more consistent bounces and, consequently, longer rallies. (Traikos 2014; Henderson 2002).¹⁴ These changes were designed to restore the desired balance of excellence at least in the sport's most prestigious tournament. As a result of these changes, baseline players came to the fore again and Lleyton Hewitt, Rafael Nadal, Andy Murray and others have won Wimbledon without dominant serves.

Such changes coincided with the development of polyester strings. These strings allow players to generate large amounts of spin, thereby making it easier to hit sharply angled shots to evade volleyers and to dip the ball sharply over the net so that volleyers are forced to execute difficult volleys. This change further elevated baseline play and effectively eliminated the serve-and-volley strategy in men's professional tennis. The aforementioned rebalancing of playing conditions coupled with this development in string technology that moved the sport further in the same direction may constitute an overcorrection that requires a new recalibration so that serve-and-volley tennis (in addition to baseline play) can again become a viable strategy in men's tennis (Devine 2020).

It is important not to confuse the 'balance of excellence' with 'competitive balance'. Three different conceptions of competitive balance should be distinguished. A competitive balance might arise where similarly capable athletes or teams compete against each other such that there is no clear favorite prior to the contest. Competitive balance might also mean that, as a contest

unfolds, the outcome remains uncertain until the final stages. A third conception views competitive balance as a feature of rule design whereby rules should not bias competition in favour of certain competitors over others and rules should be designed to allow competitors to display sporting excellence (Russell 1999, 35–36). The first two conceptions of competitive balance concern the relation between competitors, specifically whether they are, or are expected to be, closely matched in playing standard. The third concerns both whether competitors enjoy formal equality under the rules and whether the rules are fit for purpose to govern a practice designed to encourage the display of sporting excellence.

The balance of excellence does not concern the relation between competitors, either in terms of playing standard or formal equality under the rules. Neither does the balance of excellence concern whether the rules allow competitors to display of sporting excellence. Rather, the balance of excellence concerns the relation between excellences that can be displayed in a sport. Specifically, the balance of excellence concerns whether the excellences within a sport's cluster of excellence stand in the desired relation to each other, with the display of the excellences that are deemed most important having greater significance in the way the sport is played by exemplars of excellence.

One might object that the balance of excellence hamstrings sport into a single mode of play. 'The' balance of excellence suggests that there is a specific balance – an equipoise – that can be achieved and anything that departs from that arrangement violates the balance of excellence. However, the balance of excellence is not a singular mode of play but admits a certain range – it specifies desired parameters of play. Different styles of, and trends in, play can approximate the sport's balance of excellence. Indeed, as in the tennis example, the balance of excellence may require space for a plurality of playing styles (e.g. baseliner and serve-and-volleyer).

The balance of excellence is analytically distinct from the cluster of excellence. It is possible to have a change to a sport's balance of excellence without any change occurring in the sport's cluster of excellence. For example, rugby may shift from being a running-oriented sport to a kicking-oriented sport if the sport's laws, their interpretation, or prevailing playing styles begin to favour the defending team. However, if such a change occurred, no excellence would drop out of the sport's cluster of excellence – one set of excellences around kicking would assume a heightened importance and another set of excellences around running with the ball in hand would diminish in importance within the cluster. Both sets of skills remain within the permitted and active clusters of excellence, but their relative importance within those clusters would have shifted. Conversely, the cluster of excellence could expand or contract without changing the sport's balance of excellence if, for example, an excellence within the permitted cluster, but not within the active cluster, dropped out of the permitted cluster.

So, the fourth way in which excellence may be undermined is where a rule, policy or practice disrupts the appropriate relation – the structure of relative importance – between excellences within the sport such that certain excellences assume undue importance at the expense of others.

Now that I have described the four elements of excellence, I turn to the normative principle to which they give rise – the Excellence Principle.

5. The Excellence Principle

Each of the four elements of excellence correspond to ways that excellence might be undermined ('eroders of excellence'):

- (1) Re-constitution of the cluster of excellence;
- (2) Reduction of the magnitude of excellence;
- (3) Obscuration of the clarity of excellence; and
- (4) Disruption of the balance of excellence.

When we combine these four eroders of excellence, we arrive at the 'Excellence Principle': *There is pro tanto reason to disallow in any given sport any change that would undermine the sport's proper cluster, quantum, clarity, or balance of excellence.*

While the Excellence Principle is not proposed as a complete single-principle normative theory of sport, it is proposed as a *desideratum* of any adequate broad internalist theory of sport (and, if broad internalism is true, then a desideratum of any normative theory of sport).¹⁵

This is not to say that a violation of the Excellence Principle is necessarily wrong, but such violations are wrong from the perspective of excellence. So, respecting the Excellence Principle does not guarantee the rightness of one's rule, policy, or practice. Excellence is one sporting value among many and it may be defeated by competing reasons. It may be morally justified or even morally required to violate some aspect of the Excellence Principle in the service of competing sporting values such as play, fairness, inclusion, or beauty, or in the service of external concerns such as commerce and entertainment. However, given the centrality of excellence to sport's purpose, there is at least defeasible reason to respect the Excellence Principle, even if countervailing reasons might justify its violation all things considered.

Conclusion

This article reveals complexity to the value of sporting excellence that had previously gone unnoticed. I have identified four elements of excellence and four corresponding ways in which excellence may be undermined in sport. I have argued that this account implies a principle called the Excellence Principle. The

Excellence Principle provides a normative framework that specifies what considerations should feature in an ethical concern for excellence in sport. Excellence-based arguments are only one among many different forms of argument that are relevant to ethical deliberation in sport. However, they are central to any approach to sports ethics that takes seriously the purpose of the activity.

This paper is programmatic. Each element of excellence needs to be explored in greater depth. Moreover, further research is required to determine whether and, in what circumstances, the four elements of excellence can conflict. For example, does a hierarchy or lexical priority exist between them, or, by contrast, should a balance be struck if they conflict? Consequently, the Excellence Principle is not yet fully formed. While more work remains, this analysis lays the foundation for a more nuanced and systematic understanding of the defining value of sports ethics.

Notes

1. For instructive comments and criticisms, I am indebted to Sanchita Aidasani, Alfred Archer, Alberto Carrio, Yuval Eylon, Paul Gaffney, Anneli Jefferson, Jon Pike, John Russell, Elisabeth Williams, and two anonymous reviewers. Thanks also to audiences at the International Association for the Philosophy of Sport Annual Conference, the Society for Applied Philosophy Annual Conference, and the University of Birmingham Philosophy Department.
2. Sporting excellence is not unique in its tension with human flourishing. The expression of virtue in life generally often comes at a cost to the agent. For example, honesty and courage often seem to have a loose connection to the agent's well-being.
3. On this question, I note Jon Pike's promising theory of 'local essentialism' about sport (e.g. Pike 2018).
4. Cf Kretchmar (2019), Morgan (2020), and Nguyen (2020).
5. The ability to read a race in the absence of radio support proved crucial in the Women's Road Race at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics. Anna Kiesenhofer, an unfancied amateur rider, was part of a group that broke away from the peloton early in the race and she was never caught. Race favourite Annemiek van Vleuten won silver but, on crossing the finishing line, wrongly believed that she had won gold. She had incorrectly counted the number of riders in the breakaway group, so she was unaware that Kiesenhofer had finished ahead of her (BBC Sport 2021).
6. For example, see the *NCAA Division I Manual 2021–22*, Art. 17.1.7 which specifies time limits on athletically related activities that may be required of student-athletes (National Collegiate Athletic Association 2021).
7. For example, see the *WTA Tour Official Rulebook 2022*, Section X – Age Eligibility and Player Development, (Women's Tennis Association 2022).
8. Such measures may increase the quantum of excellence *in the long run* if the measures allow affected players to enjoy longer careers or to achieve higher levels of excellence later in their careers than would have been attainable if their development had been hampered by earlier overtraining or overcompeting.

9. The complaint that Carwyn Jones et al raise about the scrummaging laws in rugby union might be understood as a concern that the clarity of scrummaging excellence is obscured to referees on the pitch. Consequently, referees are often unable to identify which team's scrummaging causes a scrum to collapse, for example (Jones, Hennessy, and Hardman 2019, 81–82).
10. I developed the balance of excellence argument first in an earlier paper (Devine 2011).
11. Exemplars of excellence should be distinguished from William J. Morgan's 'moral entrepreneurs'. While exemplars of excellence embody the excellences around which the sport is organised, moral entrepreneurs 'redescribe the point and purpose of sport' in ways 'not previously conceived or practiced' (Morgan 2020, 197–198). So, while exemplars of excellence best represent prevailing conceptions of sporting excellence, moral entrepreneurs advance an altogether new understanding of sporting excellence.
12. This long throw-in skill is perhaps best exhibited by Rory Delap (Sky Sports Football 2020).
13. In rugby union, the 2021 British and Irish Lions second test against South Africa is a case in point. The match included frequent referrals to the Television Match Official which amounted to a 14-minute stop in play (Meagher 2021).
14. Ball pressure was also reduced, but it is questionable whether this measure succeeded in weakening serve dominance (Magnus and Klaassen 1999).
15. I assume that the sports under discussion are morally defensible practices, so I bracket the question of whether the Excellence Principle is normative in morally repugnant sports (e.g. so called 'dwarf-tossing' or fights to the death).

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