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To cite this article: Andy Harvey (12 Sep 2023): “Nothing is funnier than suffering”. Sport as a comic and perverse aesthetic practice, Sport, Ethics and Philosophy, DOI: [10.1080/17511321.2023.2256988](https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2023.2256988)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2023.2256988>



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Published online: 12 Sep 2023.



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“Nothing is funnier than suffering”. Sport as a comic and perverse aesthetic practice

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ABSTRACT

The article takes up diverse strands of psychoanalytic thinking to investigate how desire is manifested in male team sporting environments. In particular, it is posited that sporting desire shares a remarkable structural similarity to the joking relationship in that they both work through the overcoming of obstacles. In doing so unconscious desires are long-circuited and only emerge in radically altered form, upending traditional gender and sexual subjectivities in the process. The paper explores the concept of desire from perspectives that are either straightforwardly psychoanalytic or heavily influenced by psychoanalytic thought. Initially, I examine desire from a Freudian viewpoint before looking at how Jacques Lacan extended Freudian analysis through a linguistic lens. I then explore desire in terms developed by Gilles Deleuze before turning, in the second part of the paper, to an examination of the work of George Bataille to consider the desire of sport through the mechanism of the joke to trace the complex routing that it often takes.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 August 2023
Accepted 5 September 2023

KEYWORDS

Psychoanalysis; desire; jokes; gender; sexuality

Introduction

The quote in the title, taken from Samuel Beckett’s *Fin de Partie*, encapsulates the core thesis of this paper—that attempts at the construction of an exclusive heteronormative masculinity through participation in team sports that privilege physical aggression, with its attendant pain and injury—are tragi-comic pursuits that unconsciously achieve the opposite of their intended aim. The article begins by exploring the critical psychoanalytic concept of desire before focussing on its vagaries in team sports in the male team environment. It is acknowledged that women’s sport has achieved significant cultural importance over the past few years, and work on the libidinal drives within women’s teams would be equally important and instructive, but they lie outside of the scope of this article that is limited to male team sports only. The paper commences by making some general observations about desire as it relates to sport and concludes by examining these as phenomena of male team sports. As such, it does not make universal claims about sport and desire but instead suggests a psychoanalytic explanatory framework to comprehend

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the specificities of how desire is manifested in a sporting context that help to construct certain forms of orthodox masculinity. Three inter-related questions speak of, to, and about desire and sport. Firstly, how can psychoanalytic desire—the unconscious forces for life, for love, and for death—be thought of in relation to the desires to strive, to compete, and to win that motivate sports' participants? Secondly, how might participation in sport act as a sort of containment strategy for channelling these unconscious desires for life, love and death? Finally, what fissures and cracks might be produced by such a strategy and how are these manifested in the social realm of sport? Psychoanalytic theory can help explain the peculiarities of sporting life with all its trivialities, excesses, cultural ubiquity, personal and physical commitments, and, importantly, its libidinous undercurrents. Moreover, participation in sport might, to some extent, be thought to lie outside of rational action, a realm of 'knowledge' that psychoanalysis has made its own. As FREE (2008) notes:

Regular commitment to organized, competitive sports involving serious injury risks, persevering despite injury, inflicting and enduring pain, claiming victory in arbitrarily decided and distinguished objectives, risking the psychological humiliation and self-doubt of failure, and competing despite inevitable career decline may be considered somewhat irrational. (pp. - 273–4)

The millions of sports participants who risk these sorts of physical and psychological traumas might easily be thought of as participating in something that lies somewhere beyond rationality. I suggest that, in the male team sport environment, this 'beyond' may involve an obscure desire to encounter unsettling experiences of gender and sexuality that call into question an orthodox understanding of heterosexual masculinity. More speculatively, I postulate that we can uncover the obscure pathways of the desire of sport through an analogy with the joke where, according to psychoanalytic understanding, desire is radically transformed and altered in a similar way as one finds in dreams or parapraxes.

This article owes a significant debt to Flieger's *The Purloined Punchline: Freud's Comic Theory and the Postmodern Text* (FLIEGER 1991) in which she deploys sporting metaphors of playing and gaming to show how psychoanalysis, poststructuralist theory and postmodern literature exploit the deferral of meaning as a tactic to stir up the reader's desire. But what if the reverse is also true and sport is like the postmodern text, an excessive practice that signifies a great deal without ever providing any final answers? Perhaps, sport is a fundamentally comic and perverse aesthetic practice through which desire is routed the long way round as a means to avoid its own fulfilment: a practice that infinitely defers all meaning while, paradoxically, offering a philosophical motor of change, especially where gendered and sexual subjectivities are concerned, and when the final whistle merely marks the signal to start again.

The first part of the paper explores the concept of desire from perspectives that are either straightforwardly psychoanalytic or heavily influenced by psychoanalysis. Initially, I examine desire from a Freudian viewpoint before looking at how Jacques Lacan extended Freudian thought through a linguistic lens. I then explore desire in terms developed by Gilles Deleuze before turning, in the second part of the paper, to an

examination of the work of George Bataille as well as to Flieger's text with the aim to consider the desire of sport through the mechanism of the joke to trace the complex routing that it often takes.

Sport and desire

Psychoanalytic desire is something of a Hydra of a beast—multi-faceted, often dangerous, always obscure and extremely persistent. Attempts to cut off its head or suppress it only result in its eruption elsewhere in our lives—especially in our dreams, in our (mis)speech, in our jokes, and in the games (sporting and otherwise) that we play. Unconscious psychoanalytic desire, hidden from our conscious minds, can only make itself known through its displacement on to multiple other desires—for sustenance, for affection, for success—that are expressed in our daily existence. Organised games may be one of the most universal manifestations of such psychic transpositions. FREUD (1955) seemed to think so, declaring that the pleasure of sport, 'replaces sexual enjoyment by pleasure in movement, and forces sexual activity back to one of its auto-erotic components' (p. 122n). For some sports' participants these sexual desires become quite explicit. For the early 'gay' rights pioneer, Edward CARPENTER (1916), writing at about the same time as Freud, sport came to stand in for same-sex sexual desire at a time when it was fiercely condemned. Reminiscing about his public schooldays, he recalls:

I dreamed about [older boys] at night, absorbed them with my eyes in the day, watched them at cricket, loved to press against them unnoticed in a football melly, or even to get accidentally hurt by one of them at hockey. (p.29)

Psychoanalytic desire in its classic Freudian formulation is always sexual and related to how we learn to manage (or fail to do so) socially acceptable relationships and objects. In *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905), Freud understood desire to be the incestuous desire of the child for the mother: a desire that is experienced in childhood but is repressed as part of the unconscious, only to re-emerge in adolescence as displaced upon a new object choice, often, but not by no means always, a person of the opposite sex. This should not be taken to mean that all adult love is an inauthentic simulacrum of an original love for the mother but that the mother-child love affair shapes the unconscious drives that become evidenced in sexual and other desires in later life. In *On Narcissism: An Introduction* (1914), Freud developed his theory of desire to postulate that there is a rival for the love of the mother—namely the love for self that precedes any love for another. This narcissistic love is essentially born from the desire for life or survival and helps to structure the love an infant will have for others. As COHEN (2005) notes, put 'simply, the infant only returns the love he receives' (p.93). In the period after the trauma of the First World War, Freud sought to understand the seemingly irrational phenomenon of mass killing that he witnessed. Controversially, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he theorised that, in addition to the desires for love and for life, a third, darker, desire haunts us, namely that we all harbour a desire for our own demise, otherwise known as the death drive. To simplify somewhat, these desires are inextricably entangled such that each feed off the other and co-exist in productive—and sometimes destructive—tension. The most critical feature of all these desires is that they are not experienced directly but only erupt to the surface of consciousness radically altered and occluded. As Freud

suggests, sports' participation may be symptomatic of a host of unconscious drives, often of a forbidden sexual nature, that stimulate us to push the body beyond its limitations. Sport, in other words, enacts the scenes of love, life and death in their mutual embrace.

However, as complex as Freudian psychoanalytic desire may seem, such understandings of sport can run the risk of becoming highly reductive—that it is simply a straightforward displacement of other, unconscious, desires mostly of a sexual nature. To an extent, this is a problem with Freud's own writing since in *Three Essays* he seems to say that all adult love is, in some way, a repeat performance of the infant's desire for the mother. It is easy to 'read off' sport as a simple mirror of these primal scenes thereby failing to adequately acknowledge the complexity of desire and the way it is exhibited. An example of this kind of reductive psychoanalytic theorising is Adrian Stokes' work where he posits that rummaging for the ball in the rugby scrum amounts to reaching through the mother's womb to claim the 'rich loot of the father's genitals' (cited in Free, 276). Such analysis helps to highlight the sexual symbolism that takes centre stage in many sports but remains unsatisfactory as a 'Route One' direct approach to uncovering the desire of sport which fails to properly account for desire's more convoluted mechanisms for making itself known, thereby failing to do justice to the complexities of psychoanalytic understandings of desire.

Freudian desire may be best thought of as an energy that constantly seeks its own satisfaction—in other words a psychic force that seeks to fill some sort of want or need. DE BATTISTA (2017) explicates the core of these ideas when she observes that:

The Freudian notion of desire is early linked to the effort toward motility and the difference between what is found and what is sought: negativity and lack that drive the indestructible pursuit of desire. Unconscious desire is then the core of our being. Desire irrigates us, innervates us and includes that vital and sexual dimension. (pp. 1–2)

To summarise in the words of Freud's most famous successor, Jacques LACAN (1998), 'desire is the essence of man' (p.275). Lacan's gendered language, which speaks as much of the woman it omits as to the man of which it tells, demonstrates, in its own phrasing, the Lacanian concept of desire as associated with lack, loss, absence and always conceived as a language. Paradoxically, despite Lacan's insistence on the centrality of language to human subjectivity, desire resists being spoken. Desire is not manifested in any positivity but only in the gaps and spaces of language and becomes present only through the trope of metonymy, of substitution, and the absence in being (LACAN 2013). According to the Lacanian model, desire is driven by lack. It 'can be articulated but is not articulable, it is irreducible to the demand and the necessity, cannot be named, cannot be sifted, it is of the order of the unconscious fault' (De Battista, 2). In other words, human beings are characterised by a fundamental sense of incompleteness that arises from our separation from the wholeness of the world. Desire is the product of our sense of lack which drives us to seek out objects, relationships and experiences that we believe will complete us. However, since this sense of lack is a fundamental aspect of human experience, we can never fully satisfy our desires, thereby ensuring a permanent motor for psychic and social life.

Lacanian interpretations of desire suggest that it is formed through the gaps of a language that is external to us and into which we are born, through which desire manifests only by way of absence. Such language will always be excessive to

communication and meaning. In *Football Delirium* (OAKLEY 2007), his psychoanalytically inflected meditation on the pains, pleasures, and perils of a passionate football supporter, Chris Oakley explores how the excess that is incumbent in such support acts as a release valve from other, more dangerous, passions, not least those of sex. For example, the taboo on close heterosexual male physicality is often forgotten in the hugs and kisses of straight men celebrating a goal, who would not otherwise engage in such behaviour in their daily lives. Developing this line of thought further, HARVEY and PIOTROWSKA (2013) argue that the excessiveness of some fans' behaviour might be seen as operating along a continuum that includes joy and hate, violence and love when viewed through a psychoanalytic lens that incorporates the unsettling affectual relations often found in large groups of men.

While the surplus emotional dynamics associated with sport are important, the language of sport also betrays its excessive desire. A skilled batter in cricket, wielding a potent phallic symbol, may 'penetrate the field' with a 'fierce stroke' that 'pierces the boundary'. A less fortunate one may be 'castled' by having the 'middle stump' flattened by a 'full length' delivery. In golf, the ball might be 'caressed' with a 'putter' into the 'heart of the hole'. In football, a player may 'deliver' a 'sweet pass' to a teammate or, alternatively, may 'score', perhaps even 'bursting the net' with a 'powerful shot'. It seems that sport is perpetually tethered to an overflowing sexual symbolism and this idea can be captured through the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* that is often associated with excess.

Jouissance is difficult to translate into English, since the most obvious word, enjoyment, does nothing to capture the aspects of pain and transgression that are essential to its understanding. Throughout his seminars, Lacan repeatedly discusses *jouissance* as something that is excessive to life, and which breaches the boundaries of simple pleasure. It is also a mistake to think of it simply in a sado-masochistic way (although there may be some elements of that to it) but to conceive it more as a kind of twisted, transgressive delight. However, it is a pleasure that may or may not be experienced as especially enjoyable. Perhaps, the exquisite anguish that many partisan sports fans feel during a tense match, barely able to watch between their fingers, brings us somewhere near to the experience. Critically, as Frosh (1994) explains, Lacanian *jouissance* is also specifically feminine, 'which leaves the masculine behind, something ineffable and whole, a complete experience of pleasure' (p.84). In psychoanalytic thought, the feminine is often associated, rightly or wrongly, with the body and *jouissance* will often take the form of a corporeal-psychic experience. Take the following admission from rugby player, David Ceasar (1999):

When I was playing rugby league . . . all that stuff - the aggro and the hurt I meted out, and the hurt I felt - was real and tangible, and it made me feel comfortable in my body, comfortable in my maleness. I felt like I belonged to something and what we were - smelly, sweaty, often hairy and plug-ugly - was alright. (p.6)

The author captures something of the experience of *jouissance* as transgressive pleasure and also alerts us, as will be discussed below, to the suggestion that there is something distinctly feminine in the scenario. The gratification that some contact sport players feel from mutual bodily contact is powerfully portrayed in a scene from DeLillo's *End Zone* (1986) of scratch Football in the snow, where the rules of the game are stripped down to the barest of necessities and the game turns into something primal, painful and pleasurable:

We kept playing, we kept hitting, and we were comforted by the noise and brunt of our bodies in contact, by the simple physical warmth generated through violent action, by the sight of each other, the torn clothing, the bruises and scratches, the wildness of all fourteen, numb, purple, coughing, white heads solemn in the healing snow. (p.196)

The scene is reminiscent of a bacchanalia where pleasure lies outside of language and where desire transcends pleasure, echoing Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which the human psyche is engaged in a constant battle between life, love and death. It is a rapturous moment, a soaring in the guts, which cannot be put into words or otherwise symbolised.

For both Freud and Lacan, albeit through different formulations, desire always returns, circuitously, to sex and sexuality. A rather different conception of desire was developed by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze who believed that it can be found everywhere in social life. 'Sleeping is a desire', Deleuze observes, 'walking is a desire. Listening to music, or making music, or writing, are desires. A spring, a winter, are desires. Old age is also a desire. Even death' (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987, p.95). That is not to say that Deleuze thought that sex had nothing to do with desire, but that it was just one dimension of it. Rather than driven by a lack, Deleuze believed that desire is, by contrast, productive, mobile, and constantly in flux—making, discarding and remaking new connections and occupying and abandoning different territories. According to MARKULA (2019), the Deleuzian concept of desire:

Does not refer to the individual feeling of passion or pleasure, but rather a process of production that gives impetus to all movement in society when not tamed within externally defined ideas ... benefiting capitalism. (p. 129)

Desire, therefore, has revolutionary potential if only it can be detached from the narrow pathways mapped out by the logic of capitalism and the systems of thought that sustain it.

In his provocative article, *Outta my End Zone: Sport and the Territorial Anus* (PRONGER 1999) Pronger deploys a Deleuzian conception of desire to argue that many sports, such as football, rugby, boxing and hockey involve the invading of the space of the other and the guarding of one's own territory. This mirrors the desire to hoard wealth and to secure private property in capitalist economic systems. Rather disappointingly, Pronger conflates these traits with a reductive sexual logic of the heterosexual masculine desire to penetrate the other and to prevent oneself from being penetrated in return so that defending the goal in football becomes a homophobic substitute for shielding one's anus from unwanted intrusion. However, Pronger's analysis does not do full justice to the promise of a productive Deleuzian desire that extends well beyond the satisfaction of a sexual lack. Pronger's view of competitive sport is equally pessimistic from a political revolutionary perspective since he sees little potential in a desire that is driven down routes already laid out by capitalism. Sport is, he says, a 'profoundly unethical way to organize desire' (p. 387).

Pronger's analysis fails to take into account the times when sport acts as productive of collective working-class culture that may challenge capitalist social relations. For example, the ground-breaking social historian, Richard HOGGART (1992), captured the sense of belonging that a successful rugby team generated as a source of local pride and its role in the creation of a distinct working-class identity: class solidarity might be generated on the sports' field as much as in the factories and mines. On similar lines, in his thesis on the

construction of masculine communities organised around the code of Rugby League, Spracklen (1996) argues that the history of the game is vital in producing an ‘imaginary community, “the game”, and how this sense of community defines the ideas of masculinity’ (p.3). An analysis of desire and sport from a Deleuzian perspective ought to give greater weight to these multiply productive expressions of desire than Pronger permits in his paper where he argues that sport is simply a mirror of oppressive capitalist economic relations. Pronger’s idea of sporting desire is conceived as a quest for possession or satisfaction governed by capitalism. Yet, the very fact that men repeatedly put themselves in the situation where they might be symbolically violated—after all, keeping a ‘clean sheet’ is not always possible—suggests that desire is making itself known rather more obliquely than Pronger allows. As discussed above, the *jouissance* of sport implies that male team bonding is saturated with something ineffably feminine to which men return time and time again in scenes that appear to be profoundly erotic yet also often quite comic. These are concepts to which it is now necessary to turn.

The Erotic “Comedy” of sport

The French philosopher, George Bataille (1986), influenced, *inter alia*, by Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, remarked that human subjectivity is formed through a type of cheating or trickery. ‘Human life’, he stated, ‘cannot follow without trembling—without cheating—the path that leads to death . . . [to] live at the limits of the possible and the impossible’ (p.161). For Bataille, the erotic is located in the arena of play since ‘in order to live sensually, we must play a naïve comedy’ (cited in Flieger, 267) and erotic transgression is ‘a dialectical moment of negativity that consolidates the law it transgresses’ (Flieger, 45). Desire, therefore, at least when it takes the form of eroticism, is dependent on that which is prohibited, yet, seemingly afraid of its own radical ontology, works to re-seal any fissures in the laws or customs that it seeks to contravene. The ‘naïve comedy’, or erotic cheating to which Bataille refers, stops short of the final gratification in death and obtains its partial fulfilment through a perpetual deferral of desire through the play of transgression that ultimately sustains its own prohibition. Contrary to the Freud of the *Three Essays*, Bataille conceives of erotic desire as an extreme experience, but not for satisfaction, but to lose oneself in the moment (MINGUY 2017), an attempt to dissolve the very notion of the subject. It might be thought of as ‘assenting to life up to the point of death’ (Bataille, 11). However, it also involves a form of cheating as we only ‘play at death in erotic abandonment (orgasm: *la petite mort*) without finally abolishing the limits between self and other’ (Flieger, 44). Bataille’s conception of desire foreshadows the work of Deleuze since he sees the potential of the self as an unlimited ‘manifestations of energies—chaotic and exuberant energies’ (Minguy, 42) that are in a state of perpetual flux but which we foreclose in systems of thought and being that prioritise identity categories or the essentialist subject. Eroticism can bring us close to breaking the limits of the self since we ‘desire to unleash the energies that are hidden under the veil of a limited self’ (ibid). According to Bataille, these forces are only fully set free at the moment of death. Erotic desire brings us close to the experience of death and enables us to access our unlimited self in communion with others.

Similar to Lacan’s notion of *jouissance*, Bataille’s principal argument is that erotic games require a sense of violation—forbidden fruit or play-acted death—in order to be sexual

rather than simply biological and psychoanalytic theory posits that all games are, in some sense, erotic. However, in sport (as in art), eroticism is veiled such that the desires motivating it are altered and deflected. According to Bataille, the inability to fully experience desire results in the compulsion to repeat, thus providing no exit. As Flieger observes:

In this ongoing game, desire activates the chain of repeated transgressions never achieving total gratification, this desire always exceeds any one incident of transgression and gives rise to infinite repetition. (p.50)

In a reading of desire inspired by Bataille, the playing of games that contain and regulate their transgressive and hostile nature has much to do with a mood of perverse aesthetic playfulness. The refrain, 'it's just a game' permits aggression to flourish and for dangerous sexualities and gendered ambiguities to bubble up to the surface while being disavowed through the defence of play. Playing mitigates and deflects from other hostile and/or sexual aims. A great deal of sport—or at least that part which is licensed to contravene norms found in wider society, such as violence, hostility, bodily violation, and same-sex intimacy—is based on transgression, on the performance of something forbidden, and derives its quotient of pleasure from the overcoming of such censorship. In this emotionally charged scenario, it is easy to see how homophobia might be let in through the 'back door' (if the pun might be excused) as desire seeks to close the disturbing fractures it has opened up. As queer theorist, SEDGWICK (1985) observes:

The fact that what goes on at football games [...] can look, with only a slight shift of optic, quite startlingly 'homosexual', is not most importantly an expression of the psychic origin of these institutions in a repressed or sublimated homosexual genitality. Instead, it is the coming to visibility of the normally implicit terms of a coercive double bind [...] For a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already crossed line from being 'interested in men'. (p. 89)

The result becomes, at least to my mind, something of a darkly ironic farce, since at the same moment that men come together in homosocial groups, they are also driven apart by the need continuously to reaffirm their heterosexual masculinity. However, the man's task of being seen to be heterosexual in the eyes of his peers is never complete and the job requires constant attention. The tragi-comic irony is that freely playing with other men is a sign of being close to achieving the status of a 'man's man'. At the same time achievement of the goal of a fully sutured heterosexual masculinity is continually being foreclosed by the suspicions of homosexuality that arise within the homosocial environment, thereby remaining tantalisingly forever out of reach. This type of 'comedy' has little to do with joy or gaiety but, as conceived by Bataille, is a laugh (*le rire*) that is hollow and deathly alerting us to the possibility that sports may involve something of a twisted joke played on the men who use it to try to prove their 'straight' credentials.

Sport, jokes and obstacles

To pursue this thought further, it should be recalled that Freud claimed that all expression of sexuality that is not purposeful to biological function and which is diverted from reproduction lies in the realm of the ‘perverse’. Yet, at the same time:

In the Three Essays on Sexuality (1905), Freud suggests that it is divorce from biology – and hence from need or purpose – that grounds human sexuality, since sexual desire is ‘laid on to’ the act of feeding, as an excessive and insatiable desire for the repetition of pleasure in excess of biological need’. (Flieger, 72)

Freud himself recognised the extreme normativity that such claims might lead to—recognising that kissing ‘falls under the category of the perverse’ (Cohen, 83). But as Cohen explains:

Freud’s innovation in the theory of sexuality was precisely to conceive the fundament of erotic life as an aimless and fickle *drive*, for which both the body and the external world provide infinitely various sources of pleasure. Insofar as sexuality is a drive, then all sexuality, including its ‘normal’ form, is by its very nature perverse. (ibid)

According to Freudian psychoanalytic logic, all cultural pursuits are a displacement of sexual desire. His reasoning demands that all such activities must also be thought of as aesthetic, perverse and revealing of underlying sexual meanings. A cultural practice that has leant itself to this sort of analysis is the joke—something about which Freud wrote extensively in *Jokes and their Relation the Unconscious* (1905). Freud believed that the joke, similar to the dream or to parapraxes, has the ability to shine a light on the workings of the unconscious as a turbulent whirlpool of sexual desire that is displaced on to the joke work itself, or, as I argue below, on to sporting practices that might be considered analogous to the practice of joking. If we defend sporting aggression, hostility, and forbidden sexual desire by deflecting these phenomena as part of a game, we do the same when we say something hurtful and immediately claim that it is ‘only a joke’.

Flieger explains that ‘if we then superimpose Freud’s notion of perversity . . . on the analogous notion of the aesthetic as that which is distinct from “serious needs”, we could say that in Freud’s view joking is both perverse and aesthetic in nature’ (p.76). Recalling that Freud believed that the pleasure of sport ‘replaces sexual enjoyment by pleasure in movement, and forces sexual activity back to one of its auto-erotic components’ (*supra*), what can be said of jokes might also be said of sport. In other words, the desire of sport can be seen as aesthetic, perverse, and analogous to the joking relationship. According to Freud, ‘jokes make possible the satisfaction of an instinct—whether lustful or hostile—in the face of an obstacle which stands in its way’ (Freud, *Jokes*, 101). Flieger glosses Freud’s understanding of the pathway of the joke work as follows:

The joke in its most evolved forms will nonetheless opt for detour or long-circuit since its pleasure yield is increased by the placing of obstacles in the path of final revelation. Freud’s statement that the ‘games founded on this economic pleasure make use of the mechanism of damming up only in order to increase the amount of such pleasure’ again valorizes the role of the obstacle in the joking game and emphasises the erotic nature of the titillating process by which joking prolongs and heightens pleasure . . . in the joking game of hide-and-seek, immediate gratification is deferred as a strategy to up the ante of the eventual pleasure pay-off. (p.74)

Flieger's analysis of the joke immediately recalls SUITS (1978) famous definition of sport in which he states that:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a state of affairs [preludory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude] (p.55)

In simpler terms, he goes on to remark that 'playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (ibid). Obstacles and long circuits provide sport with its unique characteristics: without them there can be no sport in same way as there can be no joke. Sport is not only analogous to jokes in its aesthetic and perverse characteristics (as we have seen, the same might be said for all cultural pursuits) but almost exactly replicates jokes in its structural formations. These processes—of a joke teller anxious to get to the punchline but needing to take the long way round for best comic effect—and of sports' participants pursuing their goal but being forced down long and circuitous routes—reflect Freud's understanding of the life and death drives when he writes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that:

There is as it were an oscillating rhythm in the life of organisms: the one group of instincts presses forward to reach the final goal of life as quickly as possible, the other flies back at a certain point on the way . . . to prolong the duration of the journey. (p.162)

In other words, sport and jokes share common drives of desire that involve a tussle between life, love and death. It should be no surprise that a psychoanalytic interpretation of sport would lead back to Suits since his own debt to psychoanalysis has been recognised in this journal. For example, Lopez-Frias (2021) draws on Freudian-inspired psychoanalysis to interrogate Suits's use of the Grasshopper's dream, arguing that Suits deploys psychoanalysis to criticise 'the glorification of work and repression of play in human society, especially in modern capitalist society' (p.251). In the sections that follow, I propose to extend this recent development in Suits's scholarship by interrogating the notion of the obstacle that unites joking and sporting structural practices.

In what ways do obstacles work in the joke formation and how do these implicate those found in sport? According to Flieger, there are three functions that the obstacle plays in telling a joke. The first role of the obstacle is that represented by the third person, or more generally societal norms. An obvious correlate here is the referee or umpire in sport and the laws of the game and rules of play that they interpret and enforce. In Lacanian terms, as developed by one of his most prominent commentators, Slavoj Žižek, this might be thought of as the Big Other which offers us our ticket into society via rules and laws that are ultimately self-imposed since they are products of the social order itself. The Symbolic Other impedes the shortest route to achieving the goal and starts a diverting long circuit. To take part in sport we need to submit to these laws in the same way as we have to submit to the pre-existing Symbolic Order if we are to enter and survive in society. A failure to do so would mean that we are not playing sport at all, or, in terms developed by Suits, we would be in breach of a constitutive law. Like the joke, which is designed to deflect hostile and/or sexual desires, sport is an aesthetic distraction from final solutions—a cheating of death as Bataille might say. Sports' participants enter into a Symbolic relation, mediated by the Other—embodied as the referee (and also the

spectators for whom they perform)—where the mode of their relationship is to maintain the desire that is initiated by the Symbolic. These onlookers act as obstacles to the direct satisfaction of lustful or hostile impulses and as guarantors of the deflection of desire from its original end towards socially acceptable outcomes. To summarise—the role of the first obstacle is to enact the price we need to pay to become part of the sporting community in the first place.

The function of the second obstacle identified by Flieger is that of censorship or propriety that influences the form of the joke by preventing a short-circuited fulfilment of desire. Such censorship recalls the Freudian notion of the superego, that aspect of the psyche that acts as a stern moral task master and is the source of our sense of guilt when we fall short, as we are destined to do, of its demanding strictures. If the third person obstacle reflects the laws of the game as embodied in a referee or umpire, this second obstacle can be associated with our internal boundaries to play not just by the rules, but also by the ethos of sport. These moral values have social origins but are incorporated into the psyche as the superego, so they are experienced internally. In spectator sport, the audience may be considered a ‘superego of sorts, the internalized oedipal Father, the conscience who witnesses and judges’ (Flieger, 214). The second obstacle helps to explain how cheating results in a form of internal death as it is ultimately a harm that we inflict on ourselves and upon which the superego will inflict the punishment of guilt. The role of the second obstacle is to provide us with a moral compass such that we do not just follow the strict rules of the game but also to ensure that we play according to the ethical standard of the community of participants. One might object that many sports participants do not follow such strict norms of behaviour. In football, for example, cheating in the form of diving or similar seems to be commonplace. In cricket, batters no longer ‘walk’ if they nick the ball. Naturally, psychoanalysis has it both ways here since it would posit that transgressions of the rules operate precisely to reinforce them since negations are never so uncertain than when they are being fiercely asserted. Alternatively, as Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (LASCH 1979) argued, in our contemporary times the superego, in the form of strict social traditions and values, has weakened to such an extent that it can no longer be said to produce a guilt-ridden hold upon us, thus leading to the dissolution of moral standards that are displayed in cheating.

The third function of obstacles in the joke work is perhaps more familiar to readers of *Suits*—it works to increase the pleasure of the punchline when, teased and befuddled, the listener finally ‘gets’ the joke. Or, in sport, when the difficulties imposed heighten the pleasure of achievement and is associated with the pursuit of excellence in sport. As Flieger writes about jokes, but which might be said of sport:

The process of creation is by definition unfinished, destined to repeat its long-circuit in a ceaseless striving after a primal satisfaction, in a prolonged detour *en route* to the final satisfaction, the quiescence of death. (p.100)

Sporting pleasure often ends in a form of symbolic death—the ball drops into the hole in golf; in tennis, shots fly out of court, into the net, or out of reach; goals in football or tries in rugby bring the game to a standstill and require a restart. In cricket, each ball concludes with a ‘dead ball’ situation until the next delivery is bowled. The long-circuit of pleasure is therefore always associated with a striving for a type of loss—to ‘put down’ a marker, to leave a putt ‘stone dead’, to ‘murder’ the bowling, to ‘kill off’ a football match, to ‘put

away' a volley and so on. When one considers that Freud's inspiration for identifying the death drive was the infant's game of *fort—da*, in which a toy was repeatedly thrown away and then recovered in an attempt at mastery over a traumatic loss, it is striking to see how many modern sports are constituted along similar lines. Death might be the ultimate pleasure but, as Bataille observed, in life it always involves a form of cheating as we only play at death thus inciting the desire to repeat—to go again, to restart the match, to play another game—in an endless cycle that never fully satisfies but which, paradoxically, keeps the sporting social engine running.

Sport, jokes and sexuality

Désir, in Lacanian terms, similar to Freud's notion of the aesthetic, is an unfulfilled force that persists long after biological needs have been met thus providing the mechanism to sustain the whole sporting edifice in perpetuity. The thesis of this paper is that the desire of sport cannot be simply mapped on to sexual desire in straightforward ways but takes the long route round. In fact, sport, like jokes, functions as a deflection mechanism for these desires so they can be transformed into more or less socially acceptable forms. Nevertheless, in psychoanalysis sex is never far away. Indeed, it is ever-present in some form or another. For example, in the male sports environment, close bonding, otherwise known as homosociality, is a perpetual feature and homophobia may emerge from the unsettling emotions associated with the incorporation of unconscious homosexual desire within the heterosexual matrix. Such incorporation may give rise to a number of comic formulations through subversive developments of Freud's proposition in *The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works* (1911) that:

'I (a man) love him' [can be transformed into] 'I do not *love* him – I *hate* him', [or] 'I do not love *him*, I love *her*' [or] 'It is not *I* who love the man – *she* loves him' [and finally, according to Freud], "*I do not love at all – I do not love any one*". (p.64)

As Sedgwick argues in *Epistemology of the Closet* (2008), there is one other possible transformation that,

underlies Freud's project so intimately that it does not occur to Freud to make it explicit, and far closer to the bone of the emergent homo-reading of what it means for a man to desire another man: 'I do not *love* him, I *am* him' (p.162).

To take this insight one step further, in Lacanian theory, the distinctions between masculine and feminine, which are only ever linguistic, become blurred through the intermingling of the Imaginary and Symbolic registers which should be seen as coterminous and not distinct. Flieger argues that 'the joking paradigm demonstrates how interplay of recognition and misrecognition, bewilderment and illumination, passivity and activity established the essential plot or rhythm of any creative endeavour' (p.113). To further subvert the picture, OWENS (1992) notes that:

When Flieger schematises Freud's scenario, its homoerotic subplot rises to the surface: 'PART I: BOY MEETS GIRL ... PART II: BOY LOSES GIRL. ... PART III: JOKE CONQUERS ALL. ... EPILOGUE: BOY GETS BOY?'. (p. 229)

By way of example of this schematic, in the film version of Peter Gent's American Football novel *North Dallas Forty*, there is a scene in which two players fight over a girl. However, as EASTHOPE (1986) notes, 'they end up kissing with the quarterback commenting, "boy meets boy"' (p.72), comically capturing the underlying homoeroticism that saturates the all-male environment of team sports. However, even this is not the end of the story because 'in Lacan's version of Freud's transparent master narrative, the closing line seems to read [comically] neither BOY GETS GIRL nor BOY GETS BOY but BOY IS GIRL' (Flieger, 113). Lacan's lesson is that in the textual interplay of subjectivities involved in the joking process, the (male) joker may, in fact, also be 'female'.

It might follow that, in the context of male team sports, by doing their masculinity men are also performing their femininity. As Flieger concludes:

In Lacan's version, it becomes obvious that the supposedly distinct and gender-identified roles of the joking triangle are not only often interchangeable but are actually coincidental or superimposed: each player is active and passive, desiring and desired, giver and receiver, not only successively but simultaneously. (p.111)

Our male rugby player or fictional American Footballers, discussed above, who enjoy the pleasures and pains of each other's bodies in their supposed reinforcement of masculinity are doing nothing of the sort, but are, in fact, engaging in distinctly feminine practices not only through exquisite corporal-psychic experiences, otherwise known as *jouissance*, but also because sport structurally resembles the joking relationship that conflates gender roles. Thus, if we accept the thesis that the obstacles found in jokes and sport share the same functions, the desire of sport not only takes long and circuitous routes but ends up in some unexpected gender destinations. However, as we have seen, there is no real ending, only unfulfillment and the urge to repeat, perhaps driven by the unsettling suspicions that one's masculinity appears to be compromised in the very setting where it was promised that it would be affirmed, thus driving men's desire to play again in a doomed attempt to establish their heterosexuality. Perhaps, unconsciously it is not their straight masculinity that they wish to prove at all. Contrary to Pronger's analysis, the orthodox heterosexual man's compulsion to play sport may be about satisfying more obscure desires to be penetrated, to experience the feminine, to practise homoeroticism while telling themselves myths about being a 'man's man'.

Conclusion

In Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (*Fin de Partie*, BECKETT 1957), the play ends when one of the two characters, who have been 'playing' at verbal tennis for an hour, blows a whistle and throws it into the audience, thus bringing the audience into play as part of the play. Once the whistle has blown, it is a signal that the stage act might be ending but the ball is now very much in the court of the audience to continue the drama through interpretation and reinterpretation, in an inexhaustible manifestation of desire that continually seeks new paths to take. Death, in the form of the final curtain call, is cheated once more and re-emerges as the compulsion to repeat, to go again. Like the jokes that Freud perceived as veils for desire, sport follows similar contorted paths, resisting the 'Route One' of direct manifestations but which, instead, perpetually deflects and redirects desire's insistent

presence. Suits' voluntary obstacles of sport can be reworked as psychic barriers that spark the engine of desire, to set us on our way, to stage the scene and to initiate us in the social fold and, in doing so, to let loose a host of sexual desires and gender bending forces that emerge in unexpected ways when taking the long way round. A way that never finally reaches any destination but merely becomes the catalyst for starting all over again.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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