

## The Compatibility of Zero-Sum Logic and Mutualism in Sport

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### Abstract:

This essay argues that within competitive sport zero-sum logic and the theory of mutualism are compatible and complementary. Drawing on Robert Simon's theory of mutualism and Scott Kretchmar's argument for zero-sum logic, this article shows how athletes can strive for a clear-cut victory and shared benefits such as athletic excellence fully and wholeheartedly at the same time. This paper will also consider how acknowledgment of this dynamic could advance understandings for ethical theories for sport. It will then conclude by describing a subjective approach that will make the affinity of zero-sum logic and mutualism more accessible for sports people.

**Keywords:** Competition | zero-sum logic | mutualism | broad internalism | athletic identity

### Article:

In the article 'Competition, Redemption, and Hope,' Scott Kretchmar (2012) stakes his case for what he calls 'red blooded competition' (101). Kretchmar argues for bringing back and embracing the zero-sum logic of sport, win or lose, all or nothing. He pines for the drama and meaning such experiences provide, where competitors become engulfed in the adulation of victory and the pain of defeat. To the question of whether winning or playing well is the most important thing, Kretchmar answers with force: winning and losing should be at the forefront of awareness and winning should be the goal. Sport ethicists should thus allow and promote an emphasis on victory.

Kretchmar's approach is meant to be a challenge to Robert Simon's (2015) theory of 'mutualism,' which depicts competitors as collaborators, agreeing to play the same game by the same rules and try their best in order to produce the highest possible level of 'athletic excellence.'<sup>1</sup> Simon devised mutualism to safeguard sport from the ethical problems that zero-sum logic appears to embolden. Yet, in responding to Kretchmar, Simon has neither disagreed nor abandoned his stance. Rather, he maintains, 'the pursuit of victory' can take place 'within a mutually accepted framework' and therefore 'an emphasis on winning is not incompatible with mutualism but instead adds to the richness of the theory' (Simon, Torres, and Hager 2015, 53).

Simon does not go into any more depth regarding how and why this is so. And, at first, the compatibility between Kretchmar's view and Simon's seems contradictory. How can sport be all about winning and about shared excellences? If players view sport as a mutual quest for excellence, does that not mean disregarding or at least devaluing victory? Is not sport then no longer a zero-sum situation? If the 'mutually accepted framework' of sport is one of zero-sum logic, has not winning then overridden the possibility of additional values that should be shared? Zero-sum logic seems to fly in the face of mutualism and vice versa.

I believe, however, there are ways to show that Simon's intuition is correct. Accepting the zero-sum logic of sport and playing sport as if it were a mutual quest for athletic excellence are compatible and even complementary ways in which to compete. Athletes can strive for a clear-cut victory and promote excellence fully and wholeheartedly at the same time. In this essay, I attempt to provide a more nuanced defense and analysis of this claim. I also consider how acknowledgment of the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism could advance understandings of ethical theories for sport. I then conclude by examining a subjective approach that I suggest will make the affinity of zero-sum logic and mutualism more accessible.

### **The problem of competition in sport**

People engage in sports for many reasons – health and fitness, friendship and communal bonds, leisure and stress relief, to name a few. But most sports are also fundamentally competitions. As defined by their rules, such sports consist of a framework where athletes compare abilities and try to 'win' by virtue of superior performances, perhaps by scoring more points, lifting more weight, or traversing a certain distance faster than one's opponents. In these instances, even if it is not the main motivator for participation, athletes hope to outperform others and see their triumph materialize 'on paper' in a victory.<sup>2</sup>

Several ethical questions arise in this process. How central of a motivator should victory be? Should the intent to win be one's primary reason for participation? How should competitors and fans from opposing sides view and treat each other? Some critics of competition go so far as to argue that because winning and losing are essential to competitive sport, such activities inevitably become morally problematic. The thinking behind these reflections is grounded on the idea that competitive sports are true zero-sum situations. Zero-sum logic recognizes that wins and losses are the only possible outcomes of competitive sport and thus all that matter.<sup>3</sup> In certain sports, a tie may also be possible. View all notes 'Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing,' as the saying goes.<sup>4</sup>

Acknowledging the presence of this perspective, scholars note that competitive sports seem to require individuals to enjoy the misfortunes of their opponents, leading them to find delight when others experience a loss of self-esteem or humiliation (Kohn 1986). Such a scenario would also seem to drown out other admirable goods produced through sport or physical activity, such as self-knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, health, friendship, excellence, or intrinsic enjoyment. Moreover, from a zero-sum perspective, when a person strives for victory, they not only attempt to obtain their desired goal. They also by definition work to prevent others from gaining similar or equal rewards. Since someone wins that means someone else must lose. Hence, it would appear a competitor of this ilk is acting in a symptomatically unethical way. They have privileged their own position, narrowly, impartially, and selfishly grasping at their own wants, while disregarding the perspectives, experiences, wishes, and hopes of others. Such an athlete may even come to objectify, despise, and deride their opponents, viewing them as mere means,

obstacles to be overcome or enemies to be conquered. At its worst, as this line of reasoning goes, zero-sum competitive sports are characteristically self-interested endeavors that lead to the diminishment of moral values, the psychological harm of one's opponents, and the devaluation and dehumanization of other people.

While most scholars acknowledge these vices are not inherent to competitive sport, some see the structure of such activities as promoting or perhaps inclining people toward ethically problematic outcomes. John Russell (2014), for example, makes this claim by presenting two connected critiques. He notes that to promote athletic excellence, competitive sports 'naturally' engage 'morally suspect or malign motivations' such as dislike, jealousy, and even hatred toward others (Russell 2014, 232). In other words, in sport, moral excellence and athletic excellence often come into tension.<sup>5</sup> Russell observes further that sport seems unique in this respect, as other forums of excellence, such as scientific research, film, music, or literature, do not share an equivalent pitfall. The reason for this, Russell (2014) explains, is that competitive sport 'contains within itself a corrupt ideal of value' predicated on 'partisan success.' Athletes judge themselves in comparison to others, institutionalizing a striving for 'relative excellence' rather than 'ideal excellence' or 'excellence for its own sake' (Russell 2014, 232, 237, 239). The upshot is people devaluing their own and other's moral worth. As Russell (2014) writes, 'competitive sport conceptually requires striving to win over others,' whereas other arenas of excellence 'measure success by a common [non-partisan] objective,' such as 'knowledge or artistic value' (237, 235). The 'idea of sporting competition itself,' Russell (2014) therefore asserts, 'values a certain conception of success that ... is morally flawed' (230). On this view, although it might not be all bad all the time, there are at least 'problematic elements ... internal or fundamental to [competitive] sport' (Russell 2014, 229).

As a result of this type of analysis, sport philosophers have worked to conceptualize and organize competitive sport in ways that prevent it from descending toward its darker proclivities. In this effort, scholars often take the strategy of aiming to 'moderate' or 'reform' zero-sum logic. For example, Drew Hyland (1978) argues competition should be understood as a 'form of friendship,' a cooperative 'striving or questioning together toward excellence,' enabling greater 'fulfillment' or 'completeness' for everyone involved (35). Hyland (1990) claims focusing on shared 'ethical values' will 'moderate the too exclusive emphasis on winning,' which he fears leads to alienation (39). Similarly, Randolph Feezell (1986) calls for competitive sport to embody an 'Aristotelian mean' between 'excessive seriousness, which misunderstands the importance of the play-spirit, and an excessive sense of playfulness, which might be called frivolity and which misunderstands the importance of victory' (10). In this case, maintaining an awareness of the intrinsic enjoyment of sport becomes the moderator of an unwarranted obsession with winning. For his part, Russell (2014) suggests 'reforming competitive sport' by keeping records of aggregate progress and highlighting judged sports like figure skating and diving. He believes this will create a focus on 'striving to contribute to the collective advancement of human sporting excellence and de-emphasize the pursuit of relative excellence through ritualized personal conflict' (241). With the help of friendship, play, and aggregate measures of excellence, Hyland, Feezell, and Russell call attention to mutual benefits produced through sporting contests, while eschewing the importance of winning and losing. They thus attempt to shield competitive sport from its baser predispositions.

### **Simon's mutualism**

Numerous other sport philosophers have dealt with problems arising from competition in this vein (e.g. Dixon 1992; McNamee 2008) and Simon, is among them. He is unconvinced that competitive sports are ethically irredeemable. And, the key to arguing this point, he likewise claims, is to acknowledge that sports need not be governed by strict zero-sum reasoning. Although competitive sports always involve winners and losers, that does not mean that winning and losing are the only possible – or even most prominent – outcomes of value. There are many ways to make this point. All one needs to do is highlight positive ‘shared benefits’ for all those involved in a sporting contest. Along with friendship (Hyland 1978), play (Feezell 1986), and aggregate excellence (Russell 2014), sport scholars have pointed to values such as self-knowledge (e.g. Fraleigh 1984), drama through uncertainty (e.g. Kretchmar 1975; Loland 2002), improved performances (e.g. English 2017), beauty (e.g. Torres 2012), experiences of freedom (e.g. Schiller 1965), and peak experiences (e.g. Csikszentmihalyi 1990), among others. As the citations above indicate, Kretchmar himself has conceptualized competition in this way in the past. Indeed, he and Tim Elcombe (2007) constructed an argument ‘in defense of competition,’ claiming that sporting contests hold unique value because of their ability to create communal challenges, promote coherent personal narratives, foster specific skills, and cultivate virtue. To them, competitive sport enables perhaps the most comprehensive shared benefit of all – ‘human flourishing’ (Kretchmar and Elcombe 2007, 188).<sup>6</sup>

The crux of Simon’s position follows a similar path. In competitive sports, victory and defeat are not the only meaningful outcomes. As Simon contends, the rules of sport are drawn up not merely to produce a winner and a loser, but to inspire and promote athletic excellence overall.<sup>7</sup> Simon believes that competitors work together in this respect, mutually agreeing to follow the same rules, strive their hardest, and thereby create challenges for each other – pushing all to excel, advancing skills, showcasing complex abilities, and exhibiting rigorous determination. Although athletes aim for victory, more importantly, they aspire to embody athletic perfection. And in this effort, they become partners rather than adversaries. As Simon (2015) writes, ‘the principle value of athletic competition lies not in winning but in overcoming the challenge a worthy opponent presents. On this view competition presupposes a *cooperative* effort by competitors to generate the best possible challenge to the other’ (46). Simon thus (2015) asserts that ‘competition in sport should be regarded not as a zero-sum game but as a mutually acceptable quest for excellence through challenge’ (47).

Simon is convinced that when competitive sport is treated as a ‘mutual quest,’ it becomes ethically defensible, for the egoist and selfish attributes that used to weigh it down suddenly dissipate. As Simon (2015) argues, moreover, this explanation paints the constitutive parts of competitive sport – rules, goals, winners, and losers – in their ‘best moral and aesthetic light’ (47). Notably, while Simon admits (2015) ‘winning normally is a major criterion of competitive success,’ through the lens of mutualism it is ‘hardly the only one’ (51). It remains true that only one side wins, but both parties can produce excellent athletic performances in the face of physical trials. Win or lose, all sides can therefore ‘succeed.’ In truth, from this point of view, competitors assist each other toward this end.

### **Kretchmar’s defense of zero-sum logic**

Kretchmar agrees that competitive sport can be ethically defensible. However, he has come to view dispensing with or de-emphasizing zero-sum logic as undesirable. This has led him not only to challenge Simon’s theory, but to backtrack on some of his own reflections about

competition. As noted above, he previously defended competitive sport based on its ability to promote human flourishing for all involved (Kretchmar and Elcombe 2007). Yet, more recently, Kretchmar provides three observations to explain why he now prefers prioritizing winning and losing rather than shared benefits such as athletic excellence or other virtues. For one, Kretchmar points out that, from a practical perspective, competitors want the experience of having won – not just trying to win, enjoying an activity, or striving for excellence. They want to own or possess a victory, to carry it with them after a contest is over. Competitors are often not really motivated by questing for excellence, per se. If that were the case, if an athlete's primary aim was excellence, Kretchmar speculates they would find competitive sport much less engaging. There are many ways to work toward excellence without the means of competition. Second, Kretchmar notes that the claim that shared benefits ameliorates the harm of losing is experientially untrue, especially during and immediately after a competition. This is another practical point. The sting of defeat remains real, even within excellently played, well-fought contests. Even athletes that view their opponents as collaborators often work toward ends that cause their competitive partners emotional distress.

Acknowledging these two facts sheds light on Kretchmar's third and most significant assertion. Indeed, Kretchmar is not that troubled by the presumptive realities mentioned above. For he claims the desire to earn a victory and avoid a painful defeat is part of what makes sport so gripping. In other words, the meanings and dramas that sport provides are largely derived from accepting a contest's zero-sum logic – of treating wins and losses as carrying the utmost importance. When we tell competitors to focus on shared benefits instead of winning and losing, Kretchmar predicts the dramatic appeal of sport will abate. To follow Simon and treat sport as 'only a game,' where winning and losing are superficial outcomes that do not matter that much will thus result in the diminishment of something very much worthwhile. As Kretchmar argues, to maintain the drama and meaning that brought us to sport in the first place, we must retain zero-sum perspectives.

Given this position, Kretchmar is left to the task of showing how sport can be treated as a zero-sum affair, with competitors focused squarely on winning and losing, while at the same time remaining ethically permissible. He pursues this effort through two routes. The first is what Kretchmar calls 'mitigation.' This is a form of the moderation strategy. It refers to the notion that even though a competitor may view winning or losing as the only or most important outcome in sport, one can take this perspective and display qualities traditionally associated with good sportspersonship, such as having respect for opponents, officials, coaches, and the rules. Wanting to win above all else and adhering to these moral norms need not be mutually exclusive.

Nonetheless, this is the least Kretchmar thinks we can do. More substantially, he points to a second option – what he calls opportunities for 'transcendence.' This refers to realizing that zero-sum logic in sport is not like zero-sum logic in endeavors such as war or love. In sport, competitors can 'play again tomorrow' (Kretchmar 2012, 109). This is to say that athletes will be able to overcome an undesirable outcome today by constructing a new and positive one in the future. Rather than ameliorate the pain of defeat with the pleasure and achievement of shared excellent performances, the defeated gets the chance to transcend their loss and disappointment by turning their focus to new opportunities for victory. The 'salve for the wounds of defeat is not found in backward looking rationalizations,' Kretchmar (2012) claims, 'but forward-looking preparations and projects as well as new meanings that are associated with return engagements' (107). The inherent variability in sport due to inconsistent performances, chance events, umpire

errors, undetected strategies, and imperfect scoring, along with the prospect of improved skills makes this an especially rich suggestion, for no two competitions will ever go exactly the same. Meanings attached to the desire to win in the future therefore become the antidote for a painful loss of the past. In this way, trying to win need not be selfish or dehumanizing. Rather, it will create meaningful drama today and again tomorrow. As such, according to Kretchmar, the zero-sum logic of sport is redeemed. There is no longer an ethical reason to dispense with it nor the emphasis on winning that it brings forth. There is no need, Kretchmar gladly reports, to give away the source of sport's dramatic potential.

### **The compatibility of the theories**

Simon and Kretchmar appear at odds – one favoring the shared benefit of excellence and the other leaning toward zero-sum experiences founded on winning and losing. In the first case, athletic perfection inspires performance. In the second, the prospect of winning and losing motivates behavior. Nonetheless, the position of this paper is that seeing sport as a mutual quest for excellence through challenge and as a zero-sum contest are compatible points of view. This is not to say these perspectives must go together but that in principle they can do so. The first way to show how this works is to point out that the claim that competitive zero-sum sports are inherently egotistical and selfish lacks merit and depth. The nature of zero-sum competitive sport is not itself the problem and it does not necessarily need to be fixed.

Obviously, competition in sport can and does go awry. Athletes despise their opponents, view them as enemies, hope to cause them harm, and bend and break rules to win. However, one could argue it is the culture of competition in sport that should be understood as corrupt (Hyland 1990, 34–46). In other words, it is the culture surrounding how sportspeople and broader sport practices approach competition – not the nature of competitive sport itself – that should be deemed the moral culprit. Simon at times appears to assume scholars have argued in some convincing fashion that occurrences such as cheating and hatred toward opponents are not caused by culture or socialization but rather are derived from the structure of competitive sport itself. This is to an extent Russell's (2014) contention, claiming we at least 'need to consider seriously whether competitive sport contains within itself certain elements that are morally problematic and that account significantly for some of the moral failures that are associated with it' (232). Simon (2015) presents the dilemma similarly, writing that critics of competition argue 'competition is either inherently immoral or that it reinforces other social values that are undesirable' (39). But wanting to win in sport is not inherently or essentially irredeemable or selfish. Even if competitive sport creates a framework where morally problematic acts become more probable due to an emphasis on winning, it does not guarantee this result. It does not by definition entail unethical behavior. Rather, trying to win may be, as Simon's theory also speculates, a moral obligation.

The argument here is not to disagree with Russell that the comparative nature of competitive sport could prompt moral problems. It is to say, though, that we need not de-emphasize winning or 'comparative excellence' to ensure morally appropriate sporting contexts. It is very often the desire to win that leads athletes to train harder, hone their skills, study new strategies, and lift their overall level of play. In this way, seeing winning as the primary objective aids and inspires athletes to create advanced challenges for their opponents as well as perform better themselves. This may not be a competitor's first intention. That would be winning. But it is by striving for victory that competitors create meaningful obstacles for others to try and overcome. Put another

way, accepting zero-sum logic – doing all that one can to win within a sport’s rules and norms – is a mindset that promotes overall excellence amongst athletes. In a word, the zero-sum logic of sport incites excellent performances.<sup>8</sup> The point, again, is that the zero-sum logic of sport is not something that needs to be watered-down or balanced out. Full-fledged zero-sum logic can work as a co-conspirator toward higher levels of general athletic perfection. If this is recognized and acted upon, it should not only reveal the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism, but also help competitive sport live up to its moral promise.

Simon (2015) is then correct when he writes, ‘Underlying the good sport contest, in effect, is an implicit social contract under which both competitors accept the obligation to provide a challenge for opponents according to the rules of the sport’ (47). It should be emphasized, however, that the way to provide that challenge is to strive wholeheartedly to win. Kretchmar’s view becomes informative here as well, as he points out that the value of sport is often predicated on treating sporting contests as zero-sum affairs. For indeed, one will better fulfill their responsibility to provide a challenge to one’s opponents if they treat winning and losing with all seriousness. Zero-sum logic is therefore not a problem that mutualism overcomes. It is one of mutualism’s greatest assets. In sport, going all out to win is not necessarily selfish, mean, or dehumanizing. It will often be generous. By emphasizing winning, athletes, in a sense, ‘give’ each other meaningful challenges or tests which make values such as athletic excellence more possible.

Not every sports contest will fit this dynamic. Still, when it comes to athletes with comparable abilities, especially if competing at the highest levels, zero-sum perspectives are probably optimal. Imagine first that Rodger Federer played an average high-school tennis player. If Federer treats the match as a zero-sum arrangement it would not promote much athletic excellence or any other shared good. Federer would slaughter his opponent in minutes without much complexity, creativity, or effort. Furthermore, although Federer’s zero-sum attitude will surely produce a win for the tennis great, it is probably uncontroversial to claim that, because of the ease of victory, it would not be a very meaningful one. In this context, along with excellence, the meaningful drama that Kretchmar aims to promote through zero-sum logic can be employed as an added normative tool. The evaluative measure guiding Kretchmar’s thinking is the presence of a form of uncertainty that people find interesting and attractive. And, in this instance, consideration of meaningful drama will not recommend zero-sum reasoning on Federer’s part. Instead, the unlikelihood of ‘attractive uncertainty’ will mean it is probably best for him to focus primarily on potential shared benefits, perhaps turning his attention to values such as enjoyment, improvement (of the high school player), or health. In this case, reference to athletic excellence and meaningful drama will both recommend a de-emphasis on victory.

In contrast, imagine a second example, where Rodger Federer meets to play Rafael Nadal. Because Federer and Nadal both play tennis at such a high and equivalent level, for one to defeat the other, it will take all the energy, inventiveness, and skill either could produce. In this instance, the route to shared benefits, such as athletic excellence, is zero-sum logic. Note also that the prospect of producing meaningful drama will likewise recommend taking this approach. It is when Federer and Nadal view their match as producing only two possible outcomes – winning and losing – that they become compelled to give all they can to win and to simultaneously create the most sophisticated and meaningful challenges for one and other. Again, athletic excellence and meaningful drama work as separate measures that produce the

same normative recommendation. The result is excellence clashing with excellence in dramatic fashion. This is a game that both Simon and Kretchmar should appreciate.

One could argue that even after a beautifully played five-set grand slam final between two of the greatest tennis players of all time, there is still real and significant harm done to the loser. And zero-sum logic is the cause. Though the loser may have reached toward the heights of athletic perfection and experienced immense meaning through the drama of the match, it required zero-sum logic to get there. This reality has left the loser, in the end, with nothing except the pain of knowing all their efforts were in vain. Nonetheless, it should be underscored once more that this rather severe situation is not a necessary implication of employing zero-sum logic in sport. It is rather an oversimplified view that Simon and Kretchmar both help us overcome. Even if winning was the primary goal, that does not make ancillary benefits, such as excellence meaningless. One can both feel bad about losing and take solace in a well-fought struggle. Moreover, as Kretchmar's work reminds us, a loss in sport is not the same as losing a loved one or losing a war and the particular pain of such a defeat can soon be 'transcended.' One could argue any suffering that results from losing in sport, which is so great as to make sport unethical, would have to come from an overinflated sense of the importance of sport in general – not from the essential nature of zero-sum competition, victories, or losses in sporting contexts.<sup>9</sup>

After all, the work of both Simon and Kretchmar gives us reason to be hesitant about trying to fully do away with the pain and disappointment of a sporting loss. To further expose the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism, I would like to examine how the prospect of 'harm' from a loss in sport should not be understood as an ethical harm at all. Rather, it is something both theories discussed in this paper use and benefit from. The prospect of a painful loss can be part of what creates the motivation for excellence that Simon supports. It can also be part of what makes winning matter and creates the meaningful drama with which Kretchmar is concerned.

There are then multiple points here. As we just observed, the first is that suffering experienced due to a defeat in sport need not be that bad. At the same time, the pain of a sporting defeat has value because it puts the importance of excellence and the experience of winning into perspective. That 'pain' makes excellence more important, for excellence is the way to avoid it. Excellence is the way to win. Furthermore, that same anguish also makes winning that much more valuable in itself, for victory means such negative emotions will be far from one's consciousness, replaced with joy, relief, and satisfaction. All this, in turn, promotes greater tension over uncertain outcomes in sport, as competitors hope to avoid a distressing defeat and gain a fulfilling win through high quality athleticism. The prospect of a painful loss therefore infuses excellence, winning, and sport in general with meaning. It is part of what creates a context where each decision and maneuver becomes ripe with purpose and significance, motivating excellence and creating drama. In short, the prospect of losing enables greater appreciation for Simon's and Kretchmar's preferred goals of excellence and meaningful drama respectively.

The pain of losing thus becomes part of what draws us to sport. For many athletes, experiencing the sting of defeat is well-known and when they enter a sporting contest they are aware of what they are getting themselves into. Along with excellence and drama, such an experience is often presupposed. A painful loss is understood as a possibility, maybe even, to some extent, an invariable outcome. The risk of a hard end therefore appears to be an aspect of what many

athletes want to experience. Many athletes want to be in situations where victory and defeat are not only both possible, but where each is laden with real emotional baggage.

We could draw a comparison to watching a beloved character perish in a favorite television show. This is not a direct parallel. The loss of a character and loss of a sports contest are not identical. But, they have similarities that should strengthen the present considerations. One will probably identify more strongly with a loss in sport, as an athlete will have personal accountability and may consider their 'athletic identity' as central to their overall sense of self. This will make the pain of the loss more salient, more personal, and more 'real.' However, the emotional impact of both types of 'losses' depends on 'imaginative acceptance' – on opening oneself up to subjectively experiencing the results of an artificially constructed reality as legitimate. My claim, then, is that creating the framework where such a loss seems real is central to what makes television dramas and sport dramas meaningful and valuable.

A real emotional investment in a character and uncertainty regarding their fate becomes key to making a show interesting. Just as we accepted a level of authenticity in wins and losses in sport, we accept the fate of the character as somewhat genuine. When the character succumbs, because we have allowed ourselves to be swept up in the 'frame' of the show, we experience real grief and disappointment, just as we would with a sporting loss.<sup>10</sup> But, like in sport, this is a level of distress that still relies on our imagination and our openness to accepting the reality of the story. Perhaps the loss of this character will haunt us and we will regret their passing for years to come. The same could be true of a loss in a sports contest. Still, because both losses require a level of imaginative acceptance, they remain qualitatively different from a loss that did not entail such efforts. At the same instance, remember, the possibility that things would not work out well for our treasured character is part of why we found them worthy of our attention to begin with. The possibility of pain from the loss of the television persona – as with the pain of losing a sports contest – is a 'reality' we choose to endure to experience entertainment, drama, and meaning. In sport, it should be added, it is also an experience we may willingly engage to arouse greater athletic performances.

This analysis draws out another way in which Simon's and Kretchmar's views toward competition in sport are compatible. Even though Kretchmar wants to downplay the importance of shared benefits, he does not do so completely. It is just that for Kretchmar the main shared benefit found in sport is not athletic excellence. Instead, for Kretchmar, win or lose, all gain the benefit of an experience ripe with uncertainty, entertainment, and purpose. In this way, Kretchmar is his own kind of mutualist. While Simon is enticed by the mutual quest for athletic excellence through challenge, Kretchmar is attracted to a mutual quest for meaningful drama. Importantly, again, zero-sum logic helps foster both goods.

There is now one last point to consider related to the compatibility of zero-sum logic and shared benefits in competitive sport. Kretchmar points out that even when accepting zero-sum logic, wins and losses in sporting contexts need not weigh so heavily on us because athletes can play again tomorrow. As he puts it, they can 'transcend' their loss. This notion can be taken further by noting that losers are not the only ones who hope to play on. Winners do too. The list of athletes who have gained the highest accolades possible in their sport but continued to pursue more victories, while risking defeats, is plenty. Rodger Federer, Tom Brady, Serena Williams, Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt, and Michael Jordan are a few. Certainly, countless competitors have quickly returned to the athletic arena after a championship season. It is also telling that these athletes are

known as fierce competitors. It is probably uncontroversial to suggest that amid competition the athletes listed above see sport in zero-sum terms. Yet, after solidifying enough victories to be deemed the greatest athletes of their era, they subject themselves to zero-sum contests again and again. Since such athletes have won so much, one might wonder why, especially as they age and their abilities decline, they would continue down this path. One possible answer is that, although they view sport as zero-sum contests where losing is at some point inevitable, they are getting additional benefits out of their relentless pursuit of victory. The experiences of excellence and the drama such zero-sum contests produce continues drawing them back. Maintaining supremacy over time, measured by consecutive wins or multiple championship seasons, could be viewed as a special embodiment of excellence which is particularly impressive. Hoping and trying to reach such a level of achievement may also provide a certain form of drama that is especially ripe with meaning.<sup>11</sup> If this is the case, such elite-level athletes serve as prime examples of the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualist theories in sport.

### **Implications and considerations of compatibility**

Though a given sport may be a zero-sum contest, it may also be understood as a mutual quest where opponents help each other facilitate excellence and meaningful drama. In the past, the zero-sum element of sport has mistakenly been viewed by some as an ethical problem for sport philosophers and participants, something that needs to be moderated or reformed. However, this essay contends that zero-sum logic and the all-out emphasis on winning it encourages often becomes vital to fostering the shared value of excellence. Although this essay has focused on excellence and drama, it is likely that the struggle for victory – within a sport's rules and norms – will also promote added goods such as self-knowledge, improvement, beauty, or health.

If this is right, it may carry implications for ethical theories about sport. Sport philosophy literature has zeroed-in on the theory of broad internalism or interpretivism to explain best practices for ethical adjudications in sport. The theory holds the metaphysics of sport presupposes certain values. Sports are made up of rules that limit means to specific goals. The means allowed to reach these goals constitute certain physical skills and abilities (Suits 2007). Broad internalism claims that these elements only make sense when we consider the values or goods that underlie them. Simon (2000; 2015), for instance, asserts that the nature of sport presupposes athletic excellence. In turn, as broad internalism posits, sportspeople carry an ethical responsibility to 'maintain and foster' such excellences (Russell 1999).

In recent years, however, William J. Morgan (2012, 2018) has mustered an argument that this theory is insufficient because the nature and purpose of sport is context contingent. Distinct cultures, at various times and places, will conceptualize sport differently. And so, it is impossible to settle on any value or set of values to guide ethical decision-making in sport. This debate led others, such as Kretchmar (2015), to seek a middle ground, contending it might be optimal to employ a 'pluralistic' form of broad internalism that acknowledges multiple ethically defensible purposes for sport – all of which, depending on contextual factors, could become ethical guideposts.

The acknowledgement of the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism provides another prospect for advancing this debate. Not only might there be multiple possible normative values underlying sport, these diverse goods could function simultaneously. As alluded to earlier, it is possible that athletic excellence and meaningful drama could both operate as normative measures at the same time. Sport could presuppose both values at once and thus a combination or synthesis

of each should be referred to for moral adjudications. It seems likely that additional ethical criteria could overlap or become meshed in a similar manner. Self-knowledge, aesthetics, freedom, improvement, and health offer examples worth considering.

Interestingly, this could make ethical decisions in sport both easier and more difficult. Regarding the former, it may be possible for sportspeople driven by different values and conceptions of sport to compete together seamlessly. One of the problems that Morgan's contextual considerations and Kretchmar's 'pluralistic internalism' reveals is that it may happen that two parties meet on a playing field but disagree on the motivating values or purposes of sport. As Morgan (2012, 2018) argues, this would lead to an ethical impasse with which broad internalism would not have much to offer. For example, if one side sees sport as primarily about leisure and another sees it as about elite performance, fellow competitors will likely disagree on how to proceed in certain cases. Yet, the compatibility of mutualism and zero-sum logic shows that individuals or groups of athletes could carry different normative emphases with them into a match and, potentially, still get along just fine. As this paper suggests, embracing a challenge to foster excellence and playing to win for drama will often lead to the same ethical recommendations.

Nevertheless, this point lends itself to another more puzzling reflection. While Kretchmar (2015) presents pluralistic internalism as a list of options regarding the purpose of sport, as this paper now presumes, various combinations of values could operate in fusion. The purpose of sport could, in other words, be 'all the above.' Perhaps, moreover, following Morgan's (2018) 'historicist take,' sport could be about various combinations of different values to different extents depending on the social and historical situation. If this is the case, sport ethicists may want to construct a far more nuanced system for ethical adjudication that considers a multitude of possible combinations and foci. Although more complex and probably difficult to work through, such an approach may speak more accurately to the roadmap required for determining right and wrong in sport.

At the same time, the notion of integrated purposes could provide added insight into people's attraction to sport. If the 'best lights' of sport are multidimensional, not only does sport then foster values like athletic excellence, drama, friendship, beauty, improvement, and self-knowledge. It now appears to have the potential to accommodate and even merge these goods harmoniously. Sport's capability to bring about these outcomes in synthesis may be part of why it becomes enamoring to so many people. One wonders what other type of activity could cultivate such a diverse set of goods in an equivalent way.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, none of these implications are inevitable manifestations. Thus, as a final consideration, I would like to look at a subjective state that may make the integration of values such as winning and excellence more visible to and possible for sportspeople. Specifically, I want to discuss how different embodiments of identity will make the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism more coherent. Much of this essay has been conceptual, an argument about how sport competitions can function in principle. This last point is a practical one. Zero-sum logic in sport and mutualism are not conceptually at odds, but in concrete situations, based on how people subjectively experience sport, this could become hard to see.

Feezell (2001) made a parallel assertion when he compared perceptions of 'our immediate involvement in sport' to perceptions of sport through the lens of Thomas Nagel's (1986) 'View From Nowhere.' Feezell realized personalized 'subjective' experiences often lead people to see

sport as of vital importance. However, to use Nagel's (1986) words, when 'we step back from our initial view of [sport] and form a new conception which has that view and its relation to the world as its object' sport appears trivial and insignificant (5). For the purposes of this paper, Feezell notes that from a 'detached' and thus more 'objective' perspective, the subjective desire to win diminishes. He also speculates that accepting a more objective view, to a certain degree, will bring broader goods produced through sport to light. As Feezell contends (2001), 'If, from a relatively objective viewpoint, we insist that sport is itself relatively trivial and insignificant, there is certainly also a standpoint outside of the immediacy of internal attachment that affirms the importance of moral qualities made possible by sport participation' (12). When we take a step back and try to imagine the world and our own subjectivity as objects to be observed, Feezell believes we will see the potential for virtues, such as courage, responsibility, and respect for others to emerge through sport.

Feezell's (2001) project begins as an ontological inquiry, attempting to reconcile the 'double consciousness' which he argues leads to the 'paradoxical nature of sport.' He aims to 'produce as much harmony as possible between the [two] perspectives' (10–11). This is akin to what I am doing in this essay, as I hope to unite a (perhaps more subjective) emphasis on winning with a (perhaps more objective) focus on shared benefits. And like Feezell, part of my solution is to recommend a certain subjective viewpoint. Feezell suggests taking the perspective of an 'athletic ironist.' That is, 'an attitude of detached awareness of incongruity,' where one embraces the absurdity 'of our devotion to triviality.' From this stance, as Feezell (2001) explains, subjective 'engagement is modified by objective detachment and ... detachment is mediated by immediate engagement' (11). This could work for zero-sum logic and mutualism. We could ironically accept the 'incongruity' of trying to win and produce share benefits at the same time.

Nonetheless, this is not my preferred option. My interest is not in reconciling different ontologies of sport engagement nor making sense of a detached view-from-nowhere. I am also not trying to seek a middle ground. My argument is for a full embrace of the 'subjective' desire to win (following Kretchmar) and enthusiastic acknowledgement of the more 'objective' shared values that competitive sport brings about (following Simon). Although Feezell (2001) wants to 'integrate' both perspectives and does not attempt to get rid of subjectivity altogether, ironically accepting the 'absurdity' of sport, he is clear that his analysis ultimately 'filters out ... the objective significance of the end of games, winning' (13). This is not something that I (nor Kretchmar) argue for.

My suggestion, rather, is that people will be more likely to understand the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism when they acknowledge that identities are performative and multifaceted. And, furthermore, that enactments of selfhood gain and lose relevance based on the context that one inhabits. Moreover, I would argue a key for grasping the relationship between zero-sum logic and mutualism is for competitors to embody a 'holistic identity' rather than an exclusive 'partisan athletic identity.' As sport psychologists Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993) theorize, within a multidimensional self-concept, sports participants identify as athletes to varying degrees and the salience of this social role or 'self-schema' influences how people process information.<sup>13</sup>

Note that I am using the term 'partisan athletic identity' in a narrow sense, referring to how sportspeople understand themselves and their allegiances in relation to zero-sum sports contests. My definition of partisan athletic identity equates to loyalty to oneself or one's team and thus a

strong commitment to winning within competitive sport. The notion underlying this reflection is that when people compete in sport, they are performing a social role that fits into a personal narrative or schema. From this lens, the embrace of zero-sum logic and the focus on winning that Kretchmar calls for could be read as a performance that fulfills one's role as a partisan athlete.

This is similar, but by no means exactly like, an actor entering onto a stage. Both actor and athlete fully embrace identities contingent to specific contexts. They presumably put everything they can into 'living' or 'performing' their 'part.' Notably, actors, by definition, are not as deeply defined by the theatrical roles they perform. On the other hand, an athlete's identity as an athlete often follows them into and throughout 'real life.' Being an athlete could even be the most conspicuous part of one's sense of self. When Kevin Costner steps off the set of *Bull Durham*, he does not see himself as an aging minor league baseball player. But, when LeBron James leaves the basketball court, he will still, one may expect, identify as a basketball player and an intense competitor.

It is, however, the prominence of one's partisan athletic role within an overall schema of identity that is my major concern. Namely, when people understand their identity as a partisan athlete as one of many roles that defines who they are, then the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism begins to make more sense. That is, when sportspeople compete, if they view themselves as playing a role or playing one of many roles that makes up a larger more holistic persona, then it will be easier to understand how one could embrace zero-sum logic *as a partisan athlete* while also appreciating the shared values that the pursuit of victory creates. Importantly, this is because such shared values will likely fit readily into one's other roles, such as a sporting 'purist' interested in skillful play, not to mention a friend, teacher, or parent concerned with goods such as companionship, fun, self-knowledge, improvement, or health.<sup>14</sup>

With this in mind, consider if one's position as a partisan athlete were the cornerstone of their identity, the sole foundation of who they understood themselves to be. In such a case, it will be harder to understand the performative nature of one's position in sport. Being a partisan athlete will not seem like a role or part. It may not even appear as an aspect of the self. Instead, it could serve as the essence of one's personhood. This is certainly a mode of identity that manifests by degree. But for an individual near the far end of the spectrum as an exclusively partisan athlete, outcomes that define success and failure in sport will become the most, even only, relevant normative measure. In other words, it will be more challenging for a person who sees themselves as a partisan athlete and only a partisan athlete to acknowledge anything of value in sport beyond wins and losses. This person is trapped in an exclusive partisan athletic identity and thereby confined entirely to the morality of zero-sum logic. I suspect this narrowness occurs 'on the ground' to varying extents and works to prevent sportspeople from becoming aware of the theoretical compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism. Thus, I would recommend coming to competitive sport with the mindset of a multidimensional person, someone with many meaningful roles in sport and in life, a partisan athletic identity included.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this paper argues for maintaining but also seeing beyond an exclusive partisan athletic identity and thereby recognizing the compatibility of zero-sum logic and mutualism. Perhaps this requires a sense of irony. It likely also becomes easier to see when we understand our participation in competitive sport as one of many roles that constitutes who we are as a whole. Either way, if we can reach this realization, we will have pushed further toward the goal with

which Simon and Kretchmar both began. The argument for why competition in sport is defensible and desirable becomes stronger. In this light, competition can be understood as a zero-sum affair where competitors choose to treat winning and losing with all seriousness, knowing that by doing so they will produce more athletic excellence and meaningful drama generally. We could perhaps debate which should rank highest and become the priority: winning, excellence, or drama. Indeed, this prospect provides added insight into the complexity and challenge of forming ethical theories for sport. Yet, when we realize that in competitive sporting pursuits each of these goods can bolster and inspire the others, we could also celebrate the fact that we have found an activity where we may not have to trade one for the others. The winning and losing of zero-sum logic encourages excellence, for excellence is needed to win. Meanwhile, uncertainty about whether one will win or lose creates added drama and makes the quality of one's performance even more relevant. The greater the excellences performed amongst competitors, moreover, the more dramatic an experience will likely become. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, many other values that sport presupposes may function in a comparable way.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

### **Notes**

1. In considering Simon's work, I will cite the most recent addition of his book *Fair Play*. The most recent version (the fourth edition) is coauthored with Cesar R. Torres and Peter F. Hager. However, throughout this essay, I will credit Simon's theory of mutualism to him alone. This theory was clearly presented and fully developed in earlier editions of *Fair Play* where Simon was the sole author.
2. Eric Gilbertson (2016) argues that sportspeople can engage in competitions and be 'competitive' without desiring to win (or at least emphasizing winning). However, regarding the use of terms in this essay, 'to compete' and be 'competitive' will denote an attempt to win or outperform opponents. Gilbertson makes a fair point that sportspeople could enter and give their best within the framework of a competition and not want, intend, or try to win. Nevertheless, this athlete would perhaps be better described as challenging or *testing* themselves. That is, if one is not aiming to defeat or (at least) judge themselves against an opponent, if they are not *contesting*, then they are not 'competing' or being 'competitive.' This analysis fits with Kretchmar (1975).
3. In certain sports, a tie may also be possible.
4. Although often attributed to Vince Lombardi, UCLA football coach Henry Russell 'Red' Sanders probably deserves credit for this quotation, see Rosenbaum (1950).
5. Interestingly, rather than fearing competitors will act unethically to win, Russell (2014) worries athletes will do so to promote excellence. One of his main points is that athletic excellence and moral excellence may come into tension, leading sportspeople to have to choose between one or the other.

6. Kretchmar and Elcombe (2007) point to unique competitive skills such as ‘leading, taking the lead, holding a lead, gambling for a lead ... [and] intentionally and skillfully deceiving an opponent’ (189).

7. It is worth noting that Kretchmar’s critique is not only meant to be a challenge for Simon’s ‘mutual quest for excellence,’ but for all forms of mutualism or collaborative approaches to competitive sport.

8. This is not to say contests are the only way to incite athletic excellence. As Kretchmar points out (1975), simply testing oneself and trying to improve in a certain task can promote excellence as well. Still, certain skills and abilities may be provoked by contests where athletes compare themselves and aim for victories. It is also true there are skills and abilities distinct to contests, which require ‘higher levels of complexity, dynamism, and cooperation’ (Kretchmar and Elcombe 2007, 186), see note 6 as well.

9. This point is inspired by and parallels Dixon’s (1992) argument in defense of ‘running up the score on opponents.’

10. The idea that sport creates a ‘frame,’ where artificial drama is experienced as real, comes from Kretchmar (2012). Notably, Kretchmar relies on the work of Michael Polanyi and Prosch (1975) to articulate this idea.

11. One could suggest other explanations for the continued play of these athletes, such as monetary gain. However, many of the athletes mentioned above made or will likely make significant sums after their playing days. They certainly did not or will not need to continue playing to maintain their wealth and lifestyle. Because of their celebrity, they probably have generous opportunities beyond their careers as professional athletes. This proved true of Michael Jordan, for example. For athletes that play dangerous sports, such as professional football, it may even be in a person’s interest to retire sooner rather than later to maintain one’s health and quality of life.

12. I owe thanks to Santos Flores for bringing this point to my attention.

13. I owe thanks to Erin Reifsteck and Jamian Newton for introducing me to the concept of ‘athletic identity’ and its relevance in sport psychology.

14. This distinction between ‘partisan athletes’ and ‘sporting purists’ is inspired by and parallels Dixon’s (2001) analysis of fandom.

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