



Unpacking competition: On the possibilities of a minor sport



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ABSTRACT

In this article, I conceptualize defensive playing in table tennis by analyzing it from the viewpoint of affective philosophy (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 1987). The spatial and emotional aspects of the atmosphere of such play are investigated through an autoethnography of company table tennis. By using my ownbody as an “instrument of research” (Longhurst et al., 2008), I practically evoke and feed on the tension between modern competitive sport and “sport for all” (Eichberg, 2010). It is suggested that the defensive stance in table tennis might be seen as a trajectory toward a “minor sport” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 1987), i.e. as a mild resistance to the competitive ethos of sport.

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1. The emotional and spatial aspects of contests

‘[T]he whole thing looks senseless enough but in its own way perfectly finished’; such too are Blumfeld’s ping-pong balls.

Deleuze and Guattari, 1986: 48

The match is about to start. I don’t know how to fold out the table and she doesn’t help me. She stands there, watches me try just to sniff at my failures. I feel dumb. There are mirrors on one side of the hall and I feel awkward playing with them as a backdrop. I also need more space to back. I hate it when I cannot return a smash because there is a wall in the way. Balls must have the space to develop as much speed as they can. So, I ask her if maybe we could turn the table, and she sniffs at me again, but we do so anyway. We warm up. I see that my teammate has already started his match, and my opponent asks me if I am ready. It feels good and it all comes back to me: the angle of the wrist, knees bend, the decent distance from the table. Like throwing flat rocks on surface of the sea, making them soar. The match starts. She is good. She is a slugger. The rock hard smashes surprise me at first because of their swiftness and how they appear from nothing with so little effort. I lose the first game

before getting a grip and finding my position. Then I start to do what I have always done, taking four steps back and just return the balls. Better. I hit her side of the table repeatedly well within reach of her, but eventually one of her smashes will go out. And so they do. I feel joy. This is what I do, and I know that I will stand a chance against her. ... After winning also the third game I approach her as if to thank her for a good game, but she scornfully asks me if I thought that it was already over. She is really annoying. ... We have now won two games each. I really want to win, because of her rude way, because it is my first match, because I want to show my teammate that my way of playing is the best. Our hitherto fiercest duels are now taking place, and she is not doing so many mistakes, and neither am I. I am feeling really warmed up and begin to add even more spin to my slices. She has started to cough heavily, and the time between the rallies is getting longer. She tells me it’s her asthma. Eventually her asthma wins and so do I (Field notes).

Just like Blumfeld, in Kafka’s (2011) eponymous novel, the woman in this intriguing match of company sport table tennis is an elderly person in distress, because of being pursued by the continuous hammering of small celluloid balls. Save for this remarkable sportswoman and myself, another major player in the coming discussions could also be discerned in the match above: my defensive way of playing table tennis. This article concerns the emotional and spatial aspects of the competitive element in sport.

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Empirically, the tension between “sport for all” (Eichberg, 2010) and “modern competitive sport” (Loland, 2002) will be addressed via an ethnographic account of company sport table tennis. Theoretically, same tension will be discussed with the conceptual pair of “minor” and “major” practices (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986, 1987). Furthermore, this article is discussed in relation to current debates about the body and emotions in the field of cultural geography (Bains and Nash, 2006; Bondi, 2005; Colls, 2012; Curti et al., 2011; Dawney, 2011; Longhurst et al., 2008; Pile, 2010).

Many sorts of movement are displayed in the match described above. With the words of Henning Eichberg (2010): “[t]he term ‘movement’ covers three very different human dimensions: bodily, emotional and social movement” (ibid.: 8). According to Eichberg, one central task for scholars of body culture is to show how these dimensions are connected. Thus, a new philosophy of sport could be heralded: a philosophy of sport for all. “Sport for all” is an umbrella term for physical cultural practices with the aim to improve public health and to social relations. Since 1986, IOC (International Olympic Committee) throws an annual sport for all-conference. In *Bodily Democracy: Towards a Philosophy of Sport for All*, Eichberg (ibid.) defines his area of research slightly differently by claiming that:

Larger parts of what nowadays is called ‘sport for all’ are non-competitive and are derived from traditions of gymnastics, dance, festivity, outdoor activities, rambling, and games, rather than from classical modern sports (ibid.: 2).

In any case, the non-competitiveness of sport for all is most uncertain. Two examples of sport for all practices, lifestyle surfing and Gay games, might testify to this. Even if the competitive rationale isn’t formalized in “lifestyle sports” (Wheaton, 2004) such as surfing (Evers, 2006; Waitt and Warren, 2008), such practices could be as hierarchical and exclusive as regular sports. Although the competitive drive is pivotal to Gay games, Probyn (2000) holds that it is glossed over discursively by references to notions such as ‘doing one’s best’ and ‘playing fair’. Even if company sport often is competitive, Eichberg utilizes it in his understanding of a sport for all. In Sweden, where the present research has been carried out, company sport is recognized for being in the service of the public health and of the social democratic welfare state (Bolling, 2005; Eichberg, 2010: 45–57). Eichberg acknowledges this dimension, but stresses the joyous and emotional aspects of physical cultural practice, perhaps even more. This article will address some of the ambiguities that arise from Eichberg’s treatise of sport for all and its opposition to competition. Notwithstanding, Eichberg is aware that the term ‘sport for all’ is a floating term:

From the beginning inner contradictions in sport for all have existed. When the concept was launched at the end of the 1960s, the fundamental idea was mostly ‘negative’: sport should not only be competitive like elite sport it had other, broader, goals. As soon as the definition as non-competitive sports was to be filled with positive contents, however, inner contradictions became visible: Was sport for all primarily a matter of health and exercise, or a matter of play and culture? (ibid.: 326, italics in original).

A philosophy of sport for all is needed, Eichberg claims, since philosophy of sport “to a large extent [has been] captured by the ideas of competitive elite sport ... [such as] the mythology of achievement and the normative moral philosophy of fairness” (ibid.: 3). In the present article, Loland’s (2002) treatise on fairness, *Fair Play: A Moral Norm System* is stipulated as a paradigmatic example in this vein. His work suggests that modern competitive

sport could be an arena for “human flourishing” (ibid.: xiii). For this end, adherence to formal rules is a first necessary step. The certain and exact spatial conditions demanded of a competitive sport setting could be seen as a material translation of such formal rules. But, according to Loland, this is not enough for fairness to arise. For modern competitive sport to be a meaningful arena for human beings to flourish in, it must be guided by a moral norm system, according to which sport practitioners ought to ‘do their best’ and ‘play to win’ – notions, which, accidentally, often appear in a western sport for all-discourse to gloss over the competitive drive in sport (Probyn, 2000: 20–22). But then again, the existence of concurrence in sport for all is hard to pinpoint. However, in the context of modern competitive sport, following the imperatives of ‘doing one’s best’ and ‘playing to win’ improves the chances of the emergence of a “sweet tension of uncertainty of outcome”, which:

is meant not as an essentialist claim about the core value of sport, but as a tentative description of a common, phenomenological structure of good sport experience, to which particular understandings of particular sports and particular competition can relate (ibid.: 149).

Eichberg could also be said to address phenomenological aspects of good sport experiences. The normative dimension of his programmatic call for a philosophy of sport for all (Eichberg, 2010), is that such a discipline could demonstrate how community, communality and, even, democracy is being built in a plethora of physical cultural practices. Even if this is a central main point in Eichberg’s manifesto, this article will only occasionally touch upon it. Instead, this article will address the unresolved tension in Eichberg’s work between ‘competitive sport’ and ‘sport for all’. And, I will do so, not by describing how the competitive element is glossed in sport for all-discourse, as Probyn (2000) proficiently does, but by conceptualizing its spatial practices, conditions and constitution. This is, to my knowing, a lack in this field of research. By the term ‘spatial’ I refer to bodily and material aspects of practices, and in my case of sport and competition. This emphasis is an operationalization carried out in order to complement the analytical model suggested by Eichberg, i.e. the one that suggests that scholars of body culture ought to focus connections between the bodily, emotional and social movement. More specifically, the developed defense that characterizes my way of playing table tennis will be put under scrutiny. This will enable me to follow Eichberg’s (2010: 4) advice “to develop a bottom-up mode from empirical body culture to philosophy”. At the same time, I’m hoping to be able to disentangle the complex and contested concept of competition, not least in relation to sport for all (and Eichberg’s usage of it). The aim of this article is to conceptualize the consequent and developed defensive stance in table tennis. How can this stance and its implications be described? How does the stance affect the collective tension of uncertainty, i.e. the ‘common, phenomenological structure of a good sport experience’?

2. From emotions to affects via atmosphere

Although Eichberg doesn’t exclude the possibility of the emergence of anger and aggression in sport for all settings, he holds that “social organization constitutes a framework stimulating certain *emotional atmospheres* in favor of others” (Eichberg, 2010: 14, italics added). He thus distinguishes between “broad sport”, “popular sports”, and “elite sport”. While the two first are said to be sets of practices that could give rise to emotional atmospheres of “joy, spontaneity and friendly togetherness” (ibid.: 17) and “surprise and becoming high in the here-and-now” (ibid.: 18), Eichberg’s

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