Process and the Sport Experience

Douglas R. Hochstetler

Modernized sport emphasizes the product, the measurable results of competition. This paper examines the process in sport and in particular, the aspect of struggle. Several possibilities exist for developing a sport ethos where process is understood and valued. Practitioners need to cultivate an intimate relationship with their respective practice and reflect on the process as they play. An additional method involves promoting process through narrative. Approaching sport with an appreciation for process creates space for improving sport. Practitioners may observe and experience a wide variety of sport values. Because of this understanding, they are more likely to appreciate their practice and take great strides to uphold its ethical framework. Finally, they gain knowledge of the entire continuum of sport experience.

In his article “Recovering Humanity: Movement, Sport, and Nature,” Doug Anderson (2001) describes opportunities for humans to become recreated through the medium of movement and sport. Using the transcendentalists, and in particular Thoreau, to make his case, Anderson argues for the recreative potential of movement. Participation in physical activity such as sport, particularly in nature, gets us away from what Anderson calls the “closure of civilization.”

Sport is not always viewed in this transformative light, however. The broader population in North America remains steadfastly focused on the product of competition. The largest concern is the end result, indicated primarily by numbers on the scoreboard. Gibson (1993) observed that “it is the blindness to internal goods in sport that leads to the valuation of results over performance. There is a quality of experience that can only be obtained through the practice of specific sports” (p. 72). Yet many individuals miss the transformative power of sport as a practice. As Novak (1976) noted:

The author is with the Kinesiology Department at Penn State Berks-Lehigh Valley College, Fogelsville, PA. E-mail: dxh174@psu.edu.
There are priests who mumble through the Mass, lovers who read letters over a naked shoulder in love’s embrace, teachers who detest students, pedants who shrink from original ideas. So also, there are athletes, fans, and sportswriters who never grasp the beauty or the treasure entrusted them. (p. 121)

The purpose of this paper is to suggest that process is an essential and often overlooked element in competition and sport. The process experience is fundamental in a logical sense, for arriving at ends such as winning or losing (products) entails many steps of moving toward (process). In order to highlight the assets of process, I will focus on the nature of struggle in sport. This is not a claim for competition without any concern for winning. However, with today’s excess focus on the product, I suggest we examine the process of sport. By emphasizing the process element, we may find many overlooked benefits for sport. I will also suggest possibilities for developing process-sensitive sport.

Most of my experience as an athlete and coach has been at interscholastic and intercollegiate levels. This is the type of competitive situation I have in mind when I refer to sport. I recognize there are other venues for competition, from informal backyard volleyball to the professional ranks. Process certainly relates to these levels as well, albeit in different ways. It is high school and college sport, however, that garner the focus of this paper.

The Meaning of Process

By process I mean the journey of sport experience, not only those endpoints in sport (e.g., completing a period, crossing the finish line, besting an arch rival) but also those elements of sport that happen in between—the stages or phases of the competitive project. Each sport has its own competitive seasons, from pre-season to inseason to postseason to offseason. Process involves occurrences that happen during these time periods, the changes of individual and team attitudes, values, and hopes. Process also includes experiences—with other athletes, with coaches, with officials, opponents, and fans. These in-between periods and events are crucial for understanding and appreciating sport.

Athletes change over time. Their histories develop as they come in contact with people, events, and ideas that impact their lives. Not all of these occasions are major ones; some changes occur in relatively small ways. As Novak (1976) contends, “most of an athletic career is prose, not poetry: boredom and discipline, not drama” (p. 159). Part of understanding sport, then, is paying attention to the prose, the everyday, the arduous and repetitive, the discipline. Sport understood in this manner focuses on processes rather than on states of affairs. The emphasis is on change, evolving experience, and striving rather than on the quiescence of achievement.

Philosopher Alfred Whitehead wrote at length about the importance of process in human experience. In his book Process and Reality, Whitehead (1969) defined process as “the flux of things” (p. 240). On another occasion, Whitehead (1961) argued that “the very essence of real actuality—that is, of the completely real—is process. Thus each actual thing is only to be understood in terms of its becoming and perishing” (p. 274). Frankenberry (2000) compared the process
paradigm to cooking. She said, “Wherever one studies the production of novel togetherness—whether in the physical, the biological, or the cultural dimensions of the universe—one finds the becoming of patterned process. To understand the Raw and the Cooked, one must theorize the Cooking as well” (pp. 352-353). Shifting to the sport arena, one could argue that in order to understand the untrained human being and the veteran athlete, it becomes important to theorize the training as well.

Process involves viewing products or end results, such as winning and losing, home runs and strikeouts, as part of the process as well. In one sense, process is focused on the details of experiences. Runners focus throughout an individual training run, cognizant of the tension in their hands, the sound of shoes treading upon a wood chip trail, split times at set intervals, and even their own thoughts and ruminations. They are conscious of every aspect of the running experience. In another sense, process involves a more “distant lens” perspective, placing discrete experiences within the context of time and change. For example, the college pitcher is able to reflect on her athletic career, recognizing changes or shifts in her attitude toward baseball, the level of commitment to coaches, teammates, and the game and also the development of both speed and accuracy of delivery. Experience allows this player to evaluate and reflect on individual moments against a backdrop of personal history.

In order to fully understand and evaluate process in sport, athletes must experience, recognize, and reflect on every aspect of sport. Wrong turns, traffic jams, and driving rain is just as much a part of the journey as is interstate driving, air conditioning, and of course, getting there. All moments and discrete experiences are valuable in terms of understanding and appreciating the fullness of sport.

**Relationship Between Process and Product**

Process and product, of course, are inherently related. If the process of sport is a journey, this implies that sport is shaped by one or more destinations. In turn, these end-products help to give direction and meaning to the journey itself. We value sport in part because we strive to win each contest or achieve a personal best. End points, such as winning and losing, are often described in terms of product but are certainly part of the process as well. Athletes and coaches experience achievement and failure repeatedly throughout their competitive careers. These end points take on new meaning when viewed reflectively as part of the overall sport process. In this sense, then, there is a distinct link between the process and product of sport.

Product (the end result) is also shaped in part by the process. I remember playing Little League baseball and our team winning a local championship. My memory of this result is tainted, however, because of the inappropriate behavior on the part of some of our fans. Parents routinely yelled at both umpires and opposing players and coaches, at times even causing game stoppages. My teammates and I just wanted to play the game. The parents influenced the experience and ultimately the process, and we were left with a product (league championship) that was somewhat tarnished as a result.

On the other hand, if we have enjoyed or found meaning in the process, we are more likely to feel at peace with the outcome, regardless of the result. Our best experiences in sport—such as the “good sports contest” described by Fraleigh
(1984)—are times when we achieve excellence that is rich with aspects of the process. Even after winning a championship or experiencing a successful season, we reflect on, and perhaps value most, the process aspects of sport. We remember teammates, discussions on bus trips, struggling through preseason conditioning, brilliant performances, anticipation of the first day of practice, and of course the challenge and excitement of competition.

Exemplars of Process

Philosopher H.D. Thoreau provides an exemplar of the process-sensitive life. Writing in *Walden*, Thoreau said he wanted to

live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience. (cited in Bode, 1982, p. 344)

Thoreau focused on discrete moments of life around him. He had a broad appreciation for life, a deep understanding of the practice of living. He paid full attention to the detail of a variety of practices—surveying, making pencils, working as a handyman, and writing. As he walked throughout the woods, he came in contact with various animals, plants, and other individuals as well. He was determined to experience as much of life as possible, both the good and the bad. Thoreau could be viewed as the consummate participant in the sense that he was not content to sit on the sidelines of life but was determined to play the entire game. He was also focused in a broader sense as well, placing the individual moments in the context of both his own experience and the world around him.

Thoreau spoke of experiencing life, partly through the process of change. He described the seasons—the warmth and light of summer—and of the harsh conditions of winter. Thoreau described winter not as a time of avoidance or neglect, but rather part of the natural process. His essay, “Wild Apples” (1854), is a testament to this belief that harsh conditions generate an apple with a richer quality and, ultimately, taste. Thoreau admired the wild apples for they “have hung in the wind and frost and rain till they have absorbed the qualities of the weather or season, and thus are highly seasoned, and they pierce and sting and permeate us with their spirit” (p. 382-383). Perhaps those athletes and coaches who fully experience the “winter” of competition are wild and seasoned in a similar way.

There are, of course, sport practitioners that exemplify the process-sensitive life as well. One example is British miler Roger Bannister, the first human to break the four-minute mile barrier. After running the mile at White City Stadium, Bannister (1955) noted that running “expressed something of my attitude to life in the only way it could be expressed, and it was this that gave me the thrill. It was intensity of living, joy in struggle, freedom in toil, satisfaction at the mental and physical cost” (p. 382-383). Perhaps those athletes and coaches who fully experience the “winter” of competition are wild and seasoned in a similar way.

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end result did not consume him, however. Bannister became keenly aware of, through his time as an athlete, much of the richness of movement. He wrote, “we run, not because we think it is doing us good, but because we enjoy it and cannot help ourselves... the urge to struggle lies latent in everyone” (p. 248-249). Bannister realized the importance for humans to find a practice in which to participate.

**Relationship Between Process of Sport and Process Orientation**

Other professionals refer to sport and process as well. Sport psychologists frequently categorize athletes as either product oriented or process oriented. The product oriented athlete values and finds meaning in the end result—usually winning. Along with winning, these individuals participate because of the tangible rewards and adulation and view their competitors as obstacles. The process oriented individual tends to place value on a broader scale, finding meaning in the activity itself. They emphasize aspects such as participation, striving for team or personal excellence, aesthetic sensitivity, and rapport with competitors (LeUnes & Nation, 2002).

This psychological understanding of process orientation, however, falls short of what I term the process of sport. While it captures a greater share of the sport experience than does the product focus, and while process allows the athlete or coach to see the larger picture and importance of competition, it typically leaves out or undervalues some aspects of the sport experience, such as struggle, pain, boredom, grinding repetition, which are important in understanding the human significance of competition.

**Competition**

Hyland (1988) defined competition by looking at its root—*competitus* meaning “to question together, to strive together” (p. 236). His aim was to reduce the element of alienation within competition, replacing it with the possibility and need for friendship. Alienation from opponents takes on a variety of modes ranging from mild irritation to all-out fights between competitors. Friendship, as Hyland describes it, involves pushing each other to achieve new heights and possibilities, the demand “that each be the best that he or she can be” (p. 236). Hyland focused on the *together* part of competition. By way of contrast, my aim is to look at the *striving* part. Through this striving, expressed in terms of change over time, I want to suggest another possible approach to competition in order to realize the fullness and richness that is available. I want to examine the process aspect of sport—and in particular, the part of the process of sport where struggle is most likely to occur.

The process element is often overlooked. The majority of North American society focuses on scores, records, and statistics. Athletes and coaches direct energy to immediate tasks, setting short-term goals and aiming toward larger ones. Fans scan the sport pages to find how their favorite athlete or team performed. Fantasy football and baseball leagues derive meaning from individual player statistics and records.

Process in this society may be too abstract, too monotonous or slow for many people to recognize. Attention to this kind of detail, as Thoreau demonstrated
by chronicling the tedious process of ice melting, takes great patience and powers of observation. Change is often subtle, with minor shifts and currents rather than cataclysmic events. Noticing the process of a single game is complex enough. It is much more difficult to examine the process of sport over the lifetime of an individual.

The element of struggle, in particular, is overlooked and undervalued as well. We value the struggle aspect of competition, as long as this struggle ends with victory. The media portrays stories of athletes who rise to athletic greatness from dismal conditions or unfortunate tragedy. But they rarely record the athletes and teams who struggle and do not succeed (Chicago Cubs notwithstanding), or even those who come close, like the Buffalo Bills or Boston Red Sox.

It is not possible to completely delineate the entire range of process aspects of sport. These aspects are unique to individual sports, histories, and seasons. But it is important to outline a few of these aspects to begin. Sport is, after all, richly textured. Sport holds both the exciting and the drab—the brilliant touchdown completion and constant grinding in the trenches. Sport involves striving toward and achieving excellence (Simon, 1991) and also dwelling in the mediocre. Sport involves gaining knowledge (Fraleigh, 1984) and also living with uncertainty and ambiguity. Sport involves developing friendships (Hyland, 1988), but at times it may also be a backdrop for isolation, distrust, and even alienation.

In sport, we interact with people, with both the promise and uncertainty that such interactions bring. In sport we develop tenacity and perseverance. We learn to cope with injury and disappointment and deal with success, failures, and events that are difficult to identify as either one. Sport provides, in many ways, the opportunity for conversation—during travel time, while on a training run, or even in the midst of competition. We may anticipate an upcoming event, wallow in a lost match, or relish the feeling of a well-placed shot. At times, our legs may feel sluggish, weighted to the ground. At other times, we may feel in control of our breathing, floating across the terrain. Sport holds too much to be reduced to the final outcome of competition alone. We attain only the bread crumbs of sport’s potential if we approach sport in this short-sighted way. It is reductionistic to place all of our attention on the product of competition. Our intent is to achieve excellence, gain knowledge, and develop friendships. But when we do not, the richness of sport may still entice us to participate. Through reflection, we may realize this breadth of experience and place individual moments of struggle against a larger backdrop.

One aspect of the sport process, one noticeably absent from much attention, is struggle. By struggle, I mean those moments of sport that are difficult, unpleasant—those times that are tough to endure. Struggle is one part of the becoming and perishing that practitioners experience. Through sport, we become engaged with a variety of problems and undertakings. During competition, we experience the mundane, boring, repetitive, tough, unpleasant, anxious, the inconsequential outcomes, and the defeats. When facing difficult situations and moments, we change in the way we perceive teammates, opponents, the sport, and ourselves. By noting the importance of struggle, then we may better understand the nature of competitive sport. Morford (1973) suggested three decades ago that sport had lost some of the agon qualities embraced by the Greeks. He argued that “we have made sport a place where I will prove myself rather than know myself—therefore, I must win,
which is the outcome, not merely fight the good fight, which is the process” (p. 86). This sense of proving oneself is evidenced in the verbal taunts, often referred to as “smack,” which at times escalates into physical violence and bench-clearing brawls.

Individual attitudes vary with respect to struggle. Some view difficult times as an opportunity or challenge. The upstart Anaheim Angels faced the New York Yankees as clear underdogs in the 2002 American League Championship series, yet the Angels saw this problem as a tremendous opportunity. Others faced with struggle may view it as toil or despair (especially when the struggle happens over an extended period of time). When there is little joy in the doing, when the practice may even become unbearable, the practitioner may discontinue rather than persist in the struggle.

Struggle can also involve how one deals with an aspect of product, the winning and losing, achievement and failure. For instance, those athletes at highly successful institutions may find it difficult to deal with the media pressure related to achievement. Coaches in these programs may be inundated with requests for speaking engagements and charity appearances. Struggle relates to the product in the sense of losing as well. In fact, struggle and losing seem to be more closely aligned. We think of teams that are going through a losing season as “struggling.” Losing or even facing mediocrity is difficult and hard to endure as part of the sport process. As Roth (1973) wrote,

Losing is tedious. Losing is exhausting. Losing is uninteresting. Losing is depressing. Losing is boring. Losing is debilitating. Losing is compromising. Losing is shameful. . . . The sooner we get rid of losing the happier everyone will be. (p. 287-288)

Yet, competition logically entails the possibility of losing. Without this, after all, there would be no possibility of winning or of experiencing competitive sport.

The pursuit of excellence is a crucial approach to sport. Athletes in competitive sport, at all levels and in both individual and team competition, strive to perform to their best capabilities. Achieving excellence regularly may not always occur, however. There may be times when, while aiming at excellence, we experience struggle through mediocre performance or even stinging defeat. How do we view those occasions when we do not attain excellence? Having a bad day on the golf course is not somehow less of a sporting experience than a bogey-free round. We may experience considerably less pleasure on these sub-par occasions and might even be tempted to wrap our clubs around the nearest tree, but these times are not somehow non-sport or anti-sport. For a great majority of individuals, these are very much part of our sport experience. We do not have, nor should we expect, transcendent rounds every time we tee off. Yet when they do occur, we relish the moment. While striving for excellence, we know that it is not possible to attain this level of perfection regularly. This is the nature of sport and life. Yet through these moments of struggle or mediocrity, the attentive and reflective practitioner may experience insight in ways previously unknown.

Consider a farming analogy, speaking to the value of struggle in our practices. Aldous Hawthorn (2002) wrote, “The struggle I have chosen is the undertaking of agriculture. This is no bleak prognosis. Farming is a molten thing, something
that happens under extreme conditions. I like that my life is hewn. I like that what I have is earned. I like thickness and substance, both physical and spiritual, and that is what I have” (p. 33-34). Sport too is molten, changing from practice to game to postseason, preseason to season to postseason. Thickness and substance, and those individuals who represent these elements, are invaluable aspects of sport. We devote ourselves to a given sporting practice, and as a result, we experience many things, including struggle as part of the sport process. This commitment to the practice helps us persevere when training sessions are repetitive, parents abusive, or injuries persistent.

At times, struggle may appear especially barren. End results such as losing or experiencing mediocrity are not pleasant at all, and we certainly do not strive for these outcomes. Yet we experience defeat (as a product), and it becomes part of the sport process. Losing is, for the majority of practitioners, only too familiar and certainly part of sport. Apart from competitions where ties are accepted, half of all teams experience defeat on any given day. For those in sports such as cross-country or bike racing, the percentage is even higher. Several hundred athletes may toe the start line, but only one crosses the finish line in first place.

By examining the struggle and in particular defeat in sport, I certainly am not recommending we try to look for ways to lose in order to somehow struggle and experience more of life. Those players and coaches who always win are not somehow deficient in character. Yet these same individuals are missing an aspect of life that others, those that have experienced defeat, understand and even sometimes come to accept. There is a certain amount of knowledge available through the medium of struggle in sport. Through adversity, athletes and coaches may learn about perseverance, team unity, or individual drive. In fact, these individuals may even find they learn more about themselves through struggle than through times of success. Novak (1976), for example, recommended that one enter into rather than avoid defeat, to learn from defeat, not only to get better and win the next time, but to know more as well. He wanted to soak in the experience of losing rather than quickly dismissing it. Novak, like Thoreau, realized that struggle is a part of living. This said, we do not have to like defeat in order to learn from it and learn more about the thickness and substance of sport. By the same token, those individuals who never experience a taste of success are missing a key ingredient in the sport experience. Those that have only experienced the struggle of losing are incomplete without experiencing the struggle of victory as well.

We certainly need not abandon sport that constitutes some aspect of struggle, for it is part of sport. After all, the very nature of competition necessitates struggle against an opponent. Not all of our training runs can be transcendent or even pleasurable. Certainly, we hope to experience, at least on occasion, some of the sublime, but this may not occur every day. There may be seasons of struggle when practices are long and experiences of victory almost nonexistent. These periods, like the winter described by Thoreau, are full of “dark and sluggish hours.” But the winter season of life and sport is part of our experience nonetheless. Struggle also provides avenues for hope and opportunity to surface as well. Individuals who persist in times of trial inspire others to remain steadfast, committed to each other and their sport.
Development of Process-Focused Competition

If the process element of sport is to be valued, then there must be tangible ways to encourage and develop this type of mind-set. One possibility is for practitioners to cultivate relationships with their practice (MacIntyre, 1981). In this way, athletes focus on their sport as a craft and upon reflection, understand and appreciate the process. For runners, this involves learning about running—from training principles, to nutrition guidelines, to race strategies. These individuals strive to excel in their activity, setting goals and creating plans to achieve them. Through time, and over years of involvement with a particular sport, athletes can then experience a deeper appreciation for their practice and the experiential process. This may not happen with all athletes, of course. Some remain chained to a focus on the results. But others, however, through time, may develop the same kind of detailed focus as Bannister did with running. Once this sense of perception is developed, the athlete is in a much better position to both realize and value sport as a process.

The deeper the relationship with the practice and movement subculture (Kretchmar, 2000), the more likely practitioners appreciate the intricacies and finer points of the practice. Phil Jackson (1995), coach of the Los Angeles Lakers, exemplifies how coaches might foster this kind of appreciation with their athletes. Jackson recognizes the importance of attentiveness in this attitude. He writes that in “basketball—as in life—true joy comes from being fully present in each and every moment, not just when things are going your way” (p. 4). Jackson also realizes that in order for his players to realize the process, they need to become attentive to the practice. Unlike many coaches, Jackson limits his comments to players during games. During these times, he wants them to disconnect from him so they can connect with their teammates and basketball. Jackson constantly emphasizes the process aspect of sport with his players, creating training sessions with the intention of having his players become reacquainted with the spirit of play. He is not afraid of using unorthodox coaching methods in order to get this point across. At times, to promote the concept of mindfulness, his teams have conducted practice sessions in silence, in order to promote concentration and nonverbal communication (Jackson, 1995). For Jackson, the primary concern is with the practice of basketball. His love affair is with the activity rather than the result or winning. Jackson has been extremely successful in terms of product; he, unlike many coaches, however, sees past the narrow-minded product—only focus.

Of course in order for coaches to emphasize the process aspect of sport, they must have administrators (i.e., athletic directors, principals) that value the process as well. The administrator must place confidence in the coach and allow him/her the freedom to coach. These individuals need to provide job security for the coach long enough for the coach to develop his/her own program. Short-term contracts may encourage coaches to take shortcuts in achieving excellence, quick fixes to win rather than a sustained effort toward a goal within a process-sensitive environment. Of course a coach needs to make progress with the team, be working toward and at times experiencing excellence as well in order for many of the process elements to come about.

Another method of promoting the process element of sport is for athletes to reflect on the process as they play. Cyclists might recognize the thrill of sprinting
to catch the lead pack during a race or team practice or the smells of a newly mown field of hay. The golfer might notice the feel of a solid hit or seeing a deer skirt across the fairway at dusk. Coaches can teach not only strategy, skills, and so forth, but also the aesthetic element of sport as well. Athletes can tune into these feelings, taking in as much as they can from their sport experience.

There are several possibilities for teaching athletes to appreciate the process of sport. On the individual level, coaches and experienced athletes can share their own journey in their respective sport. Doing so inspires others to think of personal experiences as well. In terms of institutional levels, teaching a process-sensitive approach to sport would best be done at the youth sport levels. At this age, athletes are still likely to be enamored by the activity itself, perhaps not as apt to be engraioed with the “winning-is-everything” mentality. If these children are able to appreciate the process aspect of sport, hopefully their experience will transfer to the high school and college levels as well and on throughout their lives.

Reflection is certainly a key element in recognizing the process element in sport. One way for athletes to notice the process elements of sport—both the discrete moments and also the subtle changes—is through keeping a journal. This log may take on many forms, from a diary of events to thoughts on sport and life. Regardless of the style, the journal allows athletes to reflect on their sport experience. This act of writing and thinking about the experience may enable individuals to realize aspects of sport that may have otherwise remained latent.

A final method of promoting process in sport is through narrative (i.e., biography or autobiography). In this way, the journey of individual athletes, coaches, or teams can be ascertained, with the focus being on the gamut of sport experience. Many fans enjoy reading about their favorite athlete or coach in order to find out their secret for success or just to get a behind-the-scenes look into their lives. Those athletes or coaches who struggle in terms of achieving excellence rarely have their experience chronicled. To accurately represent the range of sport experiences and the process therein, there must be an avenue for telling the stories of these individuals. A recent example of this type of story is told by Pat Conroy (2002) in his book, My Losing Season. Conroy, author of The Lords of Discipline and The Prince of Tides, writes about his experience as a basketball player for the Citadel during the 1960s. During this season, Conroy learns about himself, his teammates, the game of basketball, and competitive sport in general.

Developing experience with anything—people, career, and sport—happens over an extended period of time. Smith (1968) wrote that “no item reveals itself fully and completely in an instant or in one encounter; repeated encounter is necessary, and this means that experience requires time and is involved in change” (p. 30). Some only realize the process of sport once their playing days are over. Tex Sample (2002) provides an example, reflecting on his experience as a baseball player:

I played too much with my will, what ever in hell that is. I was so determined to win, to do it right, that I missed too many opportunities to play out of my desire or, when I did so, I played out of a distorted desire. I tried too hard to prove too much and missed the chance to play. I channeled too much of my passion into determination and overwhelmed the aesthetic flows of the game. I am making no claim that I
would have played better, though it is hard to believe that I could not have played a little better since I was as bad as I was. But I would have played differently. My love of the game would not have been so consumed in extrinsic efforts to prove my manhood or to be a winner. Winning would not be eliminated, but had I enjoyed the dance more, the end of the ball would have taken a different turn. (p. 211-212)

Sport viewed in this light becomes a dance whereby intricate moves, the companionship of a partner, and feelings of exhaustion and exhilaration are appreciated as much as the outcome of a dance competition.

The Upshot of Process for Sport

It seems to me that appreciating or emphasizing process in sport has several tangible benefits. First, process gives credence to the variety of sport experiences available, a testimony to the richness of sport. It acknowledges the journey rather than only the result. As Kretchmar (1986) notes, “Athletes look forward to having won, yet do not want this condition to come too easily or quickly. The end of a contest, though it brings with it some knowledge, is also frequently experienced with a sense of loss” (p. 85). Participants do find meaning in the process of sport. They realize that competition includes many aspects and moments, but these experiences often appear dim when placed against the final result. Writer and runner Amby Burfoot (2002) writes about process in his running journals: “They [running journals] accept all workouts equally, the low key and boring as well as the sensational. Ninety-nine percent of the runs in my life have been unexceptional, and that’s just fine with me. Looking back over them, they feel familiar, like a well-worn flannel shirt” (p. 75). There is a sense that acknowledging the process in sport encourages us to continue our participation, even when the results may not be pleasant or desirable. Through commitment to the sport, we begin to see the gamut of available sport experiences.

By viewing sport in terms of process, we begin to view the continuum of experience as an integral part of sport rather than relegated to tangential status. We recognize the variety of experiences in sport, rather than repressing those aspects that may be nondescript or unpleasant. Like Thoreau, we pay attention to every season, attuned to the subtleties of change in winter as well as summer. In this way, the sport experience increases its richness in ways similar to Thoreau’s wild apples. It may be difficult to appreciate the boring, the tedious, and the strenuous. These aspects are, however, part of the sport experience just the same. To paraphrase Whitehead, sport is only to be understood in terms of its becoming and perishing. When we realize the subtleties of the sport process, we gain a deeper appreciation for the activity.

Viewing competition through the lens of process also provides meaning for the difficult moments. This enables athletes who experience injury, defeat, or arguments with teammates to place these situations in a larger context. Frankl (1984) uses the analogy of a movie to explain this phenomenon:

[a movie] consists of thousands upon thousands of individual pictures, and each of them makes sense and carries a meaning, yet the meaning of the whole film cannot be seen before its last sequence is shown.
However, we cannot understand the whole film without having first understood each of its components, each of the individual pictures. (p. 168)

It is when we view sport experience as a process that we can understand the meaning of individual frames or moments. By acknowledging the process aspect, we can experience sport in its entirety rather than avoiding the unpleasant. This is not to say we seek out sporting moments of struggle any more than one might seek out an illness or serious injury. When we do experience these times of struggle, however, we realize that these moments are part of sport—and life—and we proceed with a deeper understanding of our humanity.

Finally, through the aspect of process, we have a deeper value of sport and respect for rules and the craft. If winning, the end product is the only aspect of sport worth seeking or appreciating; then it becomes tempting to take short cuts in the pursuit of victory. This win-at-all-costs mentality is certainly prevalent today, with many ethical consequences. If, however, we view process as central to the sport experience, then we may agree with Fraleigh (1984) that someone who appreciates the process of competition may be able to acknowledge the good sports contest—perhaps the process focus even encourages or creates room for the good sports contest. Those who respect the process will take intentional steps to uphold their respective sport. They will work diligently to preserve both the tests and contests (Kretchmar, 1975) of their respective sports.

In conclusion, if the process of competition (the journey of various sport experiences) is inherently linked to the product of competition (achievement and failure), then it is important to further examine the product in light of the process. Perhaps there is greater complexity and richness in the end result of sport, just as is the case with the process of sport. This examination might place the experience of product in a different light.

References


Author Notes

1 There are also different types of intercollegiate athletic programs as well, from the Division III model to what some refer to as the “Big-Time” athletic model of Division I—where football and men’s basketball reign supreme.

2 Fraleigh describes a badminton contest between two individuals as an example of what he terms a “good sports contest.” The game is exemplary in terms of the level of play, competitiveness of opponents, and the display of sportsmanship. Having described this contest, Fraleigh goes on to develop a normative theory for sport in the book *Right Actions in Sport.*

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