

WHAT FICTIONALISTS GET WRONG ABOUT THE VALUE OF WINNING

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THE SHEER NUMBER of fans who watch sports and cheer on their favorite individual athletes and teams is astonishing. For instance, global television broadcasts for the summer Olympic Games typically attract over three billion people, while the television audience of the World Cup in football typically ranges from three to five billion people. The national audience for major sporting events is no less astonishing: the US television audience for the 2024 summer Olympic Games was over thirty million, and that for the 2024 Super Bowl was close to a 124 million.¹ But it is not just the sheer number of fans who watch and follow these sports that is eye opening but rather the typical passionate fervor in which they watch and follow them as well. Indeed, they often act as if their very lives depend upon whether the players or teams they root for come out on top.

But the wide following that such games attract and the passionate responses of their fans they induce pose a puzzle. For it is puzzling to many why enthusiasts of sports get so emotionally caught up and absorbed in the outcome of games in spite of the fact that those outcomes rarely if ever have any appreciable bearing on their ordinary lives. In short, there seems to be a radical disconnect between fans' over-the-top emotional engagement in whether or not their favorite players or teams succeed and the scant value of winning itself. It might be tempting to write off the masses who flock to such games as simply irrational, as going all in for game outcomes that have little if any value to speak of—outcomes that in the larger scheme of things, simply do not matter. Surely, however, simply dismissing what such an impressively large number of people take with utmost seriousness and passionately follow is the height of intellectual arrogance.

Fortunately, some philosophers at least have taken the puzzle of sports seriously. The philosophers I have particularly in mind follow Kendall Walton's lead in his article "It's Only a Game!"² In it, Walton suggests that make-believe is

1 Figures are from the Roadtrips webpage "Sports Events," <https://www.roadtrips.com> (accessed November 6, 2025).

2 Walton, "It's Only a Game!" Hereafter, this article is cited parenthetically. See also Baron-Schmitt, "Who Cares About Winning?"; Borge, *The Philosophy of Football*; and Moore,

what accounts for fans' preoccupation with winning. I call such philosophers *fictionalists* because the case they make for the make-believe character of sports fandom rests on an analogy between the puzzle of fiction and the aforementioned puzzle of sports.

The puzzle of fiction concerns how it is that enthusiasts of fictional films, stories, and plays manage to get emotionally caught up in characters who do not exist and made-up stories about them. The explanation, fictionalists suggest, is, roughly, that enthusiasts pretend that such characters exist and that the stories about them are real (76). By make-believing that these fictional characters actually exist—that, for example, Willy Loman is a real person or that the menacing green slime on the screen is a real monster—audience members are induced to emotionally respond to them in ways that are phenomenologically similar to how they emotionally respond to events in real life. They are able, as it were, to “feel” for Willy Loman’s unenviable plight, to pity him, or to “feel” that the slime poses a danger to them and thus to fear it. However, they know full well that Willy Loman does not exist and that the slime is merely an image projected on the screen. So, Walton claims, they do not “literally” pity Willy Loman but only “quasi-pity” him, and they do not “literally” fear the slime but only “quasi-fear” it. It is only fictionally true then that audiences pity Loman and fear the slime. Nevertheless, Walton insists, their pretense-generated experiences touch off genuine feelings, for example, of distress or of being emotionally unsettled by what they observe, even if they do not literally pity or literally fear these fictional entities.³

Fictionalists claim that a similar flight of imagination explains why sports fans care so much about game outcomes. In this case, however, what sports fans make believe is not, of course, that the players or teams they follow exist or that what happens to them is real but rather that winning by the players or teams they follow is much more important and valuable than they know it really is. If the explanations that fictionalists give to both puzzles is persuasive, then enthusiasts of the fictional arts and sports should need no reminding or reassuring that, as Walton writes, “It’s just a story; it’s just a game” (77). Nor

“Do You Really Hate Tom Brady?”

- 3 The latter, what Walton calls the “positive” thesis of his make-believe theory—that audience members are genuinely emotionally moved, distressed, unsettled, or uplifted by what they may observe in a fictional play or watch in a film—is meant to complement his “negative” thesis—that they do not literally pity, fear, grieve, or admire fictional characters. Too many critics, he laments, have glommed on to his negative thesis, to the detriment of his positive thesis. As a result, he argues, they fail to see that his “make-believe theory was designed to help explain our emotional responses to fiction, not to call their very existence into question” (“Spelunking, Simulation, and Slime,” 275).

should passionate followers of sports worry, Walton further insists, that being a sports fan is irrational. The idea that fans temporarily lose their minds while watching sports, he insists, “is no more attractive than the idea readers of a story lose their senses, temporarily, and believe in goblins or magic rings” (77).

What is notable about the fictionalist solution to the puzzle of sports is that it defends the rationality of being a fan while conceding that the object of a fan’s great affection and care—winning—has no real value to speak of. Indeed, it is only because fictionalists reject that winning has any independent importance or value as an end in itself that they argue it can acquire such (fictional) importance and value only if observers pretend that it does. What is notable if not ingenious about the fictionalist solution, however, is what proves to be its undoing. For their main claim that being a fan is rational so long as we imaginatively inflate the value of winning founders on the very largely unargued supposition on which it is based: that winning is a valueless end. I argue, contrarily, that there is a very strong case to be made that winning is a valuable end, and that value has to do with the significant achievement that winning, rightly understood, represents. In my view, what is rational about being a fan is inextricably connected to the value that winning possesses as a form of human achievement, and therefore, it is that achievement value that explains and justifies why fans care so much about game outcomes. If I am right about this, then there is nothing irrational or odd about why those who watch sports fixate on game outcomes, nor *a fortiori* why those who play them try mightily to win—and so there is no puzzle that needs solving in fictionalist or other fanciful theoretical terms.

I

It is important from the outset to get clear about both what sorts of competitive games and sports and what kind of spectators and players are captured by the so-called puzzle of sports. The examples that fictionalists provide offer a helpful start in this direction, but as we see below, they prove highly misleading in one important respect.

The main examples that fictionalists entertain of spectators’ emotional engagement in games all involve top-level sports in which the players featured are highly competent, expert performers.⁴ In this vein, Nathaniel Baron-Schmitt asks us to consider a hypothetical fan named Dan who is “on the edge of his seat” as he intently watches his favorite professional American football team, the

4 As we see below, that spectators mostly root for expert, highly competent players and teams is crucial to my ensuing argument.

Dallas Cowboys, on television.⁵ Similarly, Walton poses the example of real-life Boston Red Sox baseball fans “scream[ing] their hearts out during the game” as they urge their team to victory (76). Finally, Joseph Moore calls attention to his own exuberant behavior as a fan watching Mikaela Schriffen’s stunning performance in a 2016 world alpine skiing competition as he and those around him ecstatically rejoice in her impressive victory.⁶

What we can glean from these examples of sports fans that in my estimation point us in the right direction in getting a grip on the puzzle of sports is, first of all, that the objects of fans’ highly charged emotional engagement are, one and all, complex, sophisticated competitive games and sports such as football and baseball. The second thing we can glean from them is that in virtue of the in-built formidable structural challenges that such sports pose, the focus of fans’ intense attention is largely on highly competent, expert players who have what it takes in the way of skill, ingenuity, and finesse, not to mention dedication to their crafts, to succeed at them.

Fictionalists thus hold that it is mainly sophisticated competitive games and sports and the corresponding highly accomplished and committed players that play them so well that draw spectators in the exceedingly large numbers they do and generate the emotional fervor characteristic of fans who take them in. So when fictionalists talk about the over-the-top emotional way in which fans root for the success of their favorite players or teams, they are not talking about simple, rudimentary children’s games such as tic-tac-toe or rock-paper-scissors—which provide players only a limited number of choices and possible strategies to pursue, require little in the way of skill or ingenuity, and are practically effortless to play—nor games of chance—which require no skill or ingenuity to play at all. That games of the latter two kinds do not figure in what fictionalists call the puzzle of sports is further borne out by empirical evidence. After all, children’s games and games of chance generate little to no fan interest to speak of, let alone the kind of fevered emotional behavior typical of fans of sophisticated games like baseball.

However, the kind of fans that fictionalists showcase in their examples to shed light on this facet of the puzzle of sports is itself, alas, puzzling. That is because they allege that these fans hold oddly schizophrenic attitudes about game outcomes. On the one hand, fictionalists maintain that such fans care intensely while a game is in progress about how their favorite players or teams fare against their opponents and whether they will ultimately prevail over them. On the other hand, they maintain that as soon as the game is over, these same

5 Baron-Schmitt, “Who Cares About Winning?” 250.

6 Moore, “Do You Really Hate Tom Brady?” 245.

fans do not care one whit whether their favorite players or teams won or lost, if, that is, they even remember any longer whether they succeeded or failed.⁷ For example, Walton avers that “many” fans typically get emotionally carried away during the game but “forget the game quickly after it is over, much too quickly for people who care as much as they seem to during the game” (77). That is why he claims that the moment the game ends, these “avid” sports fans go back to living their lives “as though nothing much had happened—even if the home team suffered a devastating and humiliating defeat” (77). Similarly, Baron-Schmitt claims that Daniel “is on the edge of his seat” while the game is in progress but “will not spend any energy tomorrow lamenting a Cowboys defeat.”⁸ And Moore describes his own experience of being “overwhelmed with what can only be described as . . . euphoria” over Schrifin’s remarkable victory but confesses that his euphoria was short-lived, lasting, in his own words, “all of fifteen seconds, as my attention quickly shifts to beating the freezing crowd to the warm shuttle-bus that will take me back to my car.”⁹

What seems amiss about the odd attitudinal profile of the sports fans that fictionalists target in this regard, about what Baron-Schmitt aptly describes as their “casual but enthusiastic” outlook, is that most casual fans are anything but enthusiastic about how the players or teams they follow are faring during the game and about whether they succeeded or failed after the game; conversely, most enthusiastic fans are anything but casual about how the players or teams they follow are faring during the game and whether they succeeded or failed after the game. In fact, the anecdotal, observational, and statistical evidence shows convincingly that most fans who follow top-level sports fall squarely into the enthusiastic category, and the largest bloc of these enthusiastic fans is made up of partisan fans.¹⁰ It is these partisan enthusiastic types, I suggest, that are the kind of fans most disposed to exhibit the emotionally high-strung and overwrought behavior that fictionalists like Walton write about while a game is ongoing and the most disposed, *contra* fictionalist claims to the contrary, to celebrate and

7 Baron-Schmitt, “Who Cares About Winning?” 250.

8 Baron-Schmitt, “Who Cares About Winning?” 250.

9 Moore, “Do You Really Hate Tom Brady?” 245. In this same passage, Moore notes, “Not only is my euphoria ephemeral, but I have no inclination to act on it by, say, congratulating Mikaela.”

10 According to a 2023 American Sports Fanship Survey, 47 percent of Americans are “avid” or “involved” sports fans whose attitudes about winning nicely dovetail with those I call partisan enthusiastic fans. Twenty-six percent of those surveyed are described as “casual” fans, and the remaining 27 percent, who watch and follow sports only sporadically, are considered “nonfans.” The survey was conducted by the Siena College Research Institute and the Jandoli School of Communication at St. Bonaventure University. See <https://sri.siena.edu/american-sports-fanship-survey-2023/>.

revel in the successes of their favorite players and team or, as the case may be, to bemoan and despair their losses long after a game has concluded.¹¹

Where the fictionalist account of sports fans goes wrong, I suggest, is the apparent melding of what are ostensibly two distinct categories of casual and (partisan) enthusiastic fans with hard-to-miss clashing attitudes about game outcomes into one phenomenologically peculiar and discordant category of the casual but enthusiastic fan. Why I think this ranks as a misstep is because there are precious few fans for whom this odd bivalent attitudinal profile is apposite—who at one moment are enthralled by the prospect that the players or teams they follow are on the cusp of winning and who mere moments later are utterly indifferent as to whether those same players or teams won or not. In short, most sports fans are just not this fickle when it comes to their attitudes about winning. Why I think this is a significant misstep on the part of fictionalists is because if their make-believe theory of sports fandom is to have any explanatory force or critical bite, it must account for a sufficiently large and representative sample of the emotional behavior of actual sports fans. Fickle sports fans are anything but such an inclusive, representative sample. That is not to say that there are no fans that have such fleeting and radically shifting attitudes about game outcomes.¹² Indeed, given the exceedingly large number of fans who go in for competitive games and sports, there are bound to be some fans who fit this curious attitudinal profile. At most, however, if the empirical evidence is to be believed, they comprise a tiny group of fringe outliers.¹³

- 11 The markedly different attitudinal profile of partisan enthusiastic fans is nicely illustrated by Kadlac's description of his own partisan allegiance to the football team Tottenham. As he writes, "when I watch Tottenham play, I care about the outcome of the game. This concern is not a mild preference in the way I might prefer ... an apple fritter rather than a glazed donut." Rather, whether Tottenham wins or loses, he continues, "will affect my emotions in the future," quite unlike whether his preference for an apple fritter goes unsatisfied because none are available. Such unfulfilled mild preferences, he notes, are quickly forgotten. "By contrast, if Tottenham wins, my mood will be lifted, not only in the immediate aftermath of the victory, but every time I think about that occasion. And should they lose, I will be disappointed—rolling over the various missed opportunities and mistakes in my head" (*The Ethics of Sport Fandom*, 57). In fact, many such fans remember the high moments of victories over heated rival players and teams, not to mention the bitter defeats, years after their occurrence. Walton's claim in that "many" fans quickly forget even "devastating and humiliating defeat[s]" of the home team does not stack up against the available empirical evidence ("It's Only a Game!" 77).
- 12 That is why I see no reason to doubt Moore's fictionalist description of himself as just such a fickle fan.
- 13 This is why I pay no mind to the other main argument that fictionalists make to show that fans only quasi-care about winning that zeroes in on the so-called fickle fan's on-again, off-again outlook on game outcomes.

To be clear, however, in calling into question the bona fides of a fickle fan as a reputable/representative sports fan type, I do not call into question the bona fides of a casual fan as a reputable/representative sports fan type. As already indicated, there is nothing out of the ordinary about the attitudinal profile of casual fans who, unlike fickle fans, are consistently blasé about who is winning both during and after the game, save occasional and brief frissons of emotion, and who, as noted, make up around 25 percent of the sports fan base. More importantly for my purposes, however, is that because casual fans are typically not greatly invested, emotionally or otherwise, in games or their outcomes, there is no reason to suppose that they need to rely on some sort of imaginative assist to engage with games. For casual fans not only do not *believe* winning matters but also do not generally *behave* like it matters.

However, if I am right that it is (partisan) enthusiastic fans' emotionally exaggerated obsession with winning that in part drives the notion that there is such a thing as the puzzle of sports, then there is at least a *prima facie* case to be made by fictionalists that such fans are incapable of such emotionally charged behavior unless they imaginatively inflate the value and importance of winning. As we have seen, this is precisely the claim that fictionalists advance by insisting that winning has little to no value or importance in itself and by insisting that for the great majority of fans, whether their favorite player or team wins has no appreciable bearing on the rest of their lives. It is in this respect that fictionalists suggest that sports fans' pretense-induced quasi-caring about game outcomes is "tantalizingly" similar to a playgoer's pretense-induced quasi-pity of Willy Loman and a filmgoer's quasi-fear of a slime monster. In the former case, of course, as previously remarked, the object of fans' make-believe is not the all too real players nor the all too real actions they take to win. Furthermore, in competitive games and sports, there is no script that has already been plotted out by some controlling author in the background, which the players faithfully follow and the fans are prescribed to respond to accordingly. Notwithstanding these obvious differences, however, fictionalists argue that it is the make-believe that winning matters that is the key to understanding spectators' remarkable emotional investment in game outcomes. As Walton writes, "superimposed on a modest genuine interest in the outcome, there is, frequently, a pretense of much greater concern" that does not come close to the actual value of that outcome (78). Walton further argues this modest interest in winning and the corresponding imaginative magnification of it do not simply coexist but rather reinforce one another. In his view, the feelings of excitement and pleasure that accompany this modest interest in winning serve as what he calls "props" in the make-believe amplification of its importance and value (78). It is therefore by make-believing that winning matters that fictionalists like Walton maintain spectators come to believe that it matters.

However, fictionalists qualify their make-believe account in one narrow respect. They concede that for *some* fans, winning really does matter if it instrumentally benefits them in some tangible way (78). For instance, winning very much matters to spectators who bet on sports and/or whose personal well-being is otherwise directly impacted. Such spectators, Walton and company acknowledge, need no imaginary assist to take winning seriously. Nonetheless, they hasten to point out, only a tiny fraction of sports fans stands to benefit from game outcomes materially or otherwise. So the exception they carve out for such fans does not, in their view, undermine or weaken their main thesis that for *most* or *many* fans, pretense is what lies behind the great importance and value they ascribe to winning.

The upshot of the fictionalist argument is thus that sports fans' intense emotional investment in game outcomes is a figment of their imagination. What is really going on, as fictionalists see it, is that many fans merely pick a player or team to root for arbitrarily or on a whim, perhaps because they take a fancy to their uniforms, perhaps because their friends are supporters of a particular player or team, or for countless other capricious factors (76). This inconsequential, modest, acquired interest in their favorite players' or teams' wins or losses is then bootstrapped by their make-believing that they have good reasons for their obsession over their successes and failures. Add to this, the pageantry that often accompany such games—the colorful banners, team logos, large numbers of people cheering in unison, which all serve as props to fuel the fans' imagination and fictional belief in the importance of these events—and we have all we need, according to fictionalists, to account for the striking mismatch between the remarkable enthusiasm that fans display in anticipation of its outcome and the utter triviality of that outcome. After all, to quote Walton once again, “it’s only a game.”¹⁴

14 Generally speaking, what fictionalists have to say about spectators' pretense that winning matters goes for players as well. However, they maintain that unlike actors on a stage, those who play games are mostly unaware of the pretense that lies behind their imaginary inflation of winning. See Borge, *The Philosophy of Football*, 207. That is because, as Walton writes, “it will not always be obvious whether and to what extent a competitor or spectator engages in make-believe. . . . We must [therefore] . . . leave room for tacit, implicit pretense, pretense that may not be evident even to the pretender” (“It’s Only a Game!” 82–83). Fictionalists also concede, just as they do for spectators (e.g., who bet on games), that winning really does matter to players who financially profit from their gameplay or derive prestige and fame from it. Since my focus is on spectators in this article, I confine whatever I have to say about players in this regard to how their gameplay importantly figures in the achievement value that, I argue, lies behind spectators' fixation on winning.

II

My critique of the fictionalist make-believe theory of sports fans' extraordinary emotional investment in game outcomes zeroes in on their failure to see that there are compelling reasons to think that it is the intrinsic achievement value of winning, properly understood, that lies behind and justifies fans' fixation on winning. But before I try to make that case, I must first clarify the conception of achievement that I have in mind here.

What I mean by *achievement* is mostly what its main proponents mean by it.¹⁵ First and foremost, as they see it, what distinguishes achievements from nonachievements is the "difficulty" involved in accomplishing the various goals and ends that govern them. Achievements are thus not a simple matter of accomplishing one's ends whatever they might be. For example, getting dressed in the morning is for most adult, able-bodied people in otherwise ordinary situations not an achievement in the relevant sense. Rather, it is only activities in which accomplishing one's ends is difficult to do that one can rightly be said to have accomplished something. By *difficulty*, Thomas Hurka primarily means how complex and challenging those activities prove to be.¹⁶ To rank as a genuine achievement, therefore, the activity must involve the exercise of sophisticated skills, ingenuity, and practical reasoning. The higher degree of those skills, the more varied the skills and the more complex steps involved in their execution, the greater the achievement. It also follows that accomplishing difficult (complex) goals requires intense effort, which is not simply a matter of how much total effort is expended but how much "*effort over a certain level of intensity*" is expended.¹⁷ Finally, if difficulty is the signature feature of achievement, it follows that a low probability of success in achieving an end is a further characteristic feature of achievement.¹⁸

The above three features spell out what counts as an achievement. What, though, is to be said about the value of achievement? My answer is again the same perfectionist answer that Hurka and company give to the value of

15 See Hurka, "Games and the Good"; Bradford, *Achievement*; and von Kriegstein, "On Being Difficult." I qualify my claim that I *mostly* follow what theorists of achievement have to say about it for two reasons. First, I do tweak some of the features they designate as necessary conditions for an activity to be an achievement to accommodate my focus on sports. Second and more importantly, I argue that one further necessary feature of what counts as an achievement that they do not mention is that the accomplishment of the goal of the activity in question must be *socially recognized* as an important and valuable goal in its own right if it is to be regarded as a genuine achievement.

16 Hurka, "Games and the Good," 221.

17 Bradford, *Achievement*, 49.

18 Von Kriegstein, "On Being Difficult," 55.

achievement rightly understood: the value of different kinds of achievement has to do with the exercise of those basic capacities that make us the distinctive human agents that we are. On this perfectionist view, the excellent exercise of those basic human capacities is intrinsically valuable.¹⁹ Bradford specifies two epistemic criteria for identifying what counts as basic human capacities. According to the first, basic human capacities are those whose exercise is “near universal” or “near inevitable.”²⁰ As George Sher puts it, basic human capacities are ones that almost “all human beings possess, and . . . must be one[s] whose exercise [their] possessors either can’t avoid at all, or else can avoid intermittently.”²¹ According to the second, a basic human capacity is one that is “intuitively worth developing,” and this idea derives from the fact that it is the exercise of those basic capacities that “make[s] us good as human beings.”²² It thus follows that we should intuitively regard the development of those capacities as worthwhile and valuable for their own sake.²³

The kinds of achievement that satisfy the three criteria specified above make up a special class of achievement—the sort that Bradford aptly calls “capital A achievements.”²⁴ They are special because of their exceptional character, because of the human excellences that are required to accomplish them. These are the kinds of achievement that evoke the awe and admiration of those who bear witness to them enriching their own lives in the process. What Bradford and company have in mind when they write about such especially significant achievements are, to name just a few, writing a scholarly paper that gets published in a well-respected peer-reviewed journal, having one’s paintings shown in a major gallery, writing a novel that is awarded a reputable literary prize, and so on.

Sports and the goal of winning in sports, I argue, belong in this special class as paradigmatic examples of stellar human achievement. But as noted, fictionalists claim otherwise because they regard winning to be a trivial goal that lacks the value—not to mention the complexity—that achievement theorists maintain is a signature feature of genuine achievements. As fictionalists like Baron-Schmitt see it, winning a game is an “odd, unimportant” one in which players try to get things like “an orange sphere . . . through a hoop” that

19 Bradford, *Achievement*, 115.

20 Bradford, *Achievement*, 116.

21 Sher, *Beyond Neutrality*, 199 (quoted in Bradford, *Achievement*, 116).

22 Bradford, *Achievement*, 117.

23 Bradford, *Achievement*, 116–17.

24 Bradford, *Achievement*, 4.

is weirdly suspended ten feet from the ground.²⁵ If one team manages to get an orange sphere through a hoop more times than the other, they are crowned the winner. Winning in other sports presumably can be similarly described in these same flat, austere physical terms. For example, winning a footrace can be described as simply crossing the finish line first, and winning a golf game can be described as getting a small ball into several small holes in the ground. What value can accomplishing such states of affairs possibly have, fictionalists incredulously ask, and what is especially difficult about getting a small ball into a small hole, they further incredulously ask. For if winning amounts to no more than getting orange spheres through hoops and the like, then as a standalone end, fictionalists find it inexplicable how humans could find value in such outcomes, much less care so greatly about them. Unless, of course, as fictionalists stoutly maintain, players and fans alike simply make believe that getting orange spheres through hoops really matters when they know it obviously does not.

The problem, however, is that fictionalists have misdescribed winning by confusing what Bernard Suits's in his classic account of sports calls the *prelusive* goal of sports with what he calls the *lusory* goal of sports.²⁶ By *prelusive* goal, Suits means the "specific achievable states of affairs" that players strive to achieve. The *prelusive* goal of basketball is of course precisely what Baron-Schmitt wrongly describes as winning a basketball game: one team gets an orange sphere more times through the hoop than the opposition. Or, as one would similarly and wrongly describe winning a footrace: crossing a finish line first. Suits calls these goals *prelusive* because they can be "described before, or independently of, any game in which [they] may be, or come to be a part."²⁷ It is because *prelusive* goals specify only the states of affairs players aim to accomplish that they can be detached from the means and manner by which they are realized, which is why it is possible to attain them aside from the games in which they figure—this is of course what cheaters do when they violate the rules in order to best their opponents.²⁸ What is more, as standalone ends, they are not by any stretch of the imagination hard to accomplish, since one can get an orange sphere through a hoop more times than someone else simply by using a ladder to stuff the ball through the hoop or can get a small ball into a hole in the ground by simply using one's hand to drop it in. By contrast, winning demands that players do more than simply achieve a specific state of

25 Baron-Schmitt, "Who Cares About Winning?" 248.

26 Suits, "The Elements of Sport." 40.

27 Suits, "The Elements of Sport," 40.

28 As Suits writes, when players break the central rules of a game, they "fail . . . to play the game at all" ("The Elements of Sport," 41).

affairs, which is why, as noted, Suits calls these the lusory goals of sports. For to realize the lusory goal of a sport, one must not only get an orange sphere through the hoop more times than the opposition or get a ball into holes in the ground but do so using only the means permitted by the rules. What Suits calls the *constitutive rules* of sports make the attainment of these otherwise simple and uncomplicated prelusory goals much more difficult and complex by prohibiting players from using more efficient means in favor of less efficient means. For example, in basketball, it is useful but prohibited to use a ladder to get the orange sphere through the hoop; similarly, it is useful but prohibited to use laser-guided balls in golf. So to win a basketball game, one must, among other things, get the orange sphere (the ball) through the hoop by launching it with one's hands without taking too many steps and shoving one's opponent aside; and to win a golf game, one must, among other things, stand at some considerable distance from the intended target and use a golf club to propel the ball into the hole in the ground. What for Suits so crucially distinguishes lusory goals from prelusory, standalone ones, then, is that the specification of the rules, means, and manners by which these states of affairs must be accomplished are themselves *intrinsic features of lusory goals*.²⁹

- 29 Baron-Schmitt's misdescription of winning is owed, I suggest, to the abstract manner in which he describes it, for he chooses to describe it by adopting the vantage point of an alien observer of Earth he calls Joe, who is trying both to understand what motivates earthlings to do the things they do and to make sense of what they do. Joe, he claims, is able to make sense of most of the things earthlings do but is flummoxed by why they care about "odd and unimportant things" like getting orange spheres through hoops. But I think Joe's bewilderment about such game outcomes has to do with the fact that from this maximally detached viewpoint, all he has to go on are the sheer physical actions that players execute, which seem to have something mystifyingly to do with the goal they are trying to realize. What such a detached observer has no way of accounting for are the social features that overlay these brute actions, which are conferred, as we have seen, by the rules that make the players' actions intelligible and give winning the normative force it has for them. These social features are the very ones Suits relies on to draw his distinction between the prelusory and lusory goals of sport. John Searle cautions us not to describe such social or what he calls institutional features of things like games in "purely brute terms" (*Speech Acts*). To illustrate his point, he imagines a group of trained observers who are tasked with describing American football using only brute facts. Unsurprisingly, all they are able to come up with, he writes, is that "at statistically regular intervals, organisms in like-colored shirts cluster together in roughly circular fashion (the huddle) ... followed by linear clustering (the teams line up for a play), followed by linear interpenetration" (52). Searle rightly notes that what they thus describe is not American football because they leave out institutional features such as touchdowns, offside, points, first downs, etc., and all the true statements about football that one can make using these concepts. In Joe's case, he has no way of accessing such institutional features of sports like football because of his detached vantage point. And it is safe to say that from this same lofty standpoint, Joe would

It is thus because fictionalists like Baron-Schmitt misdescribe winning that they run together the prelusory goals of sports with their lusory goals and, as a consequence, find it unfathomable why players pursue victory so wholeheartedly and why fans care so greatly about the success of their favorite teams. Once we correct for this mistake and rightly understand winning as the accomplishment of a *lusory* goal, which is an estimable goal that demands the great skill, effort, and ingenuity that Hurka and company argue are the marks of “capital A,” genuine achievements, any perplexity over players’ ardent pursuit of victory and fans’ ardent, passionate response to their winning ways should vanish.

I should make clear, however, that in identifying winning as the locus of the intrinsic value of achievement in these complex competitive games and sports, I do not claim that *only* those players or teams that prevail over their opponents in such competitions can be said to have genuinely achieved something. I thus acknowledge that those players and teams that play well against evenly matched opponents and yet lose have achieved something of intrinsic value as well. Being able to give one’s opponents a good, well-played game regardless of the outcome ranks as a notable achievement on my account. What my focus on winning does suggest, however, is two things. First, while giving one’s opponent a good game is an achievement, it is a lesser one than winning, which is, after all, the goal of athletic contests. Second, if players or teams are able to play just well enough to push their opponents to excel but are never able to actually defeat them, then there is good reason to regard their lesser achievements in this regard as appreciably diminished, if not, in fact, over time, as failed non-achievements. This once again suggests that winning is an ineradicable feature of what counts as an achievement in the realm of sports and games like them.

As a first step in better understanding how the achievement value of winning figures in fans’ remarkable interest in and enthusiasm for such game outcomes, it is important to note an important difference in the relationship that obtains between producers (artists) of fictional works and their intended audiences and that between players’ performances and the audiences they attract. In the case of fictional works, artists churn out theatrical plays, films, and literary works that not only *depict* some fictional series of events but crucially *prescribe* a point of view, a perspective, on how their intended audiences should respond to these imaginary scenarios.³⁰ We have already noted how this works in the case of horror films, in which those responsible for their production create fictional characters and fictional situations that directly aim to elicit responses

be at a loss, *contra* Baron-Schmitt, to understand what motivates and gives sense to almost everything earthlings do in their ordinary lives with only these brute facts at his disposal.

30 Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics*, 230.

of fear and terror from their target audiences. The success or failure of their efforts in this regard completely hangs on whether they in fact get the audience to respond accordingly. The relationship between athletes' performances and their audiences is not like this at all. On the contrary, the actions that players take in a game are entirely devoted to winning rather than to prompting their audiences to respond in some particular way. In fact, nothing the players do in the game needs to and rarely does consider how spectators might react to or be affected by their actions. This is why those who play top-level sports, unlike their fictional counterparts, can and do readily accomplish what they set out to do even if there is nobody watching—notwithstanding the fact that it is precisely these expert players who draw the attention and interest of the greatest number of enthusiastic fans. As Walton correctly notes, “no one arranges the events of the game to best advantage for appreciation [by spectators]—at least no one is supposed to” (81).

What Walton is getting at is that while sports are staged affairs, unlike fictional works, they are not scripted ones. That means that although sports fans bear witness to what excellences are achieved in the game, they are not the intended targets of those excellences. Sports are of course well suited to such bearing witness on the part of spectators since, as we have seen, they are by design perfectionist affairs whose central purpose is to generate athletic excellence. So even though these complex games are not ostensibly played with the appreciation of the fans in mind, they invite and welcome such watching and appreciation given their perfectionist character. That is why watching them is not only socially acceptable but socially encouraged, indeed even called for, unlike private affairs in which watching is not only unacceptable but socially verboten. As Stephen Mumford notes, this is in part what distinguishes sports from things like work and sex, in which watching is typically considered decidedly inappropriate.³¹

The fact that the relationship between players and spectators of sports is quite unlike that between producers and spectators of fictional works is no minor matter: it allows us to see and isolate one paramount feature of the actions that take place in sports that markedly distinguish them from anything that goes on in the fictional worlds that artists dabble in—indeed that would be ruinous of those fictional worlds. That feature is what Stear describes as the *authenticity* of game agency, by which he means those who play sports must “really” try to win, and those who watch them must be cognizant of this ineradicable fact about players' agency if they are to have any understanding, let alone a well-informed one, of what they are seeing. By contrast, he remarks further,

31 Mumford, *Watching Sport*, 132.

actors in theater and film, and authors of fictional literary works “typically dissemble,” and the audiences they target must be cognizant of this ineradicable feature of fictional agency if they are to have any understanding, let alone a well-informed one, of what they are seeing or reading.³² That it is essential in sports that players really try to win is of course crucial to my argument that it is the achievement value of winning and not make-believe that accounts for fans’ enthrallment with game outcomes. For if trying to win were not an essential feature of sports agency, then the achievement value of winning would be null for both players and spectators alike. That is why, as Stear writes, “Where players feign effort . . . participant interest disappears or changes entirely.”³³ So too, it goes without saying, does spectator interest and, to boot, appreciation. If dissembling of this sort in baseball and football were a legitimate feature of complex games like these, players would either turn to other venues to try to achieve difficult goals or would begin to think of themselves as primarily entertainers in the same way, say, as the Harlem Globetrotters do, interested only in putting on a good show rather than in excellently exercising their athletic capacities. And perhaps most importantly for my alternative take on winning, if fictionalists are right that it is spectators’ make-believe that winning matters that explains their fixation on game outcomes, then authenticity would be “irrelevant to [their] ability to get behind a competitor.”³⁴

In fact, however, we know that enthusiastic fans do indeed regard the authenticity of gameplay as sacrosanct and, in turn, that nothing comparable to that authenticity is ordinarily at work in our enjoyment of traditional fictions.³⁵ That is because there is nothing that fans of this ilk detest more than when such

32 Stear, “Sport, Make-Believe, and Volatile Attitudes,” 282. Just to be clear, that it is crucial in sports that players really try to win rather than feigning to try in this regard does not mean that athletic contests are allergic to any kind of dissembling. On the contrary, an important part of such competitions is that players try to disguise their actions by, for example, feigning to go in one direction all the while intending to go in another direction in order to throw off their opponents’ efforts to stop them. Such deception and “trick” plays to mislead opponents are staples of all sports and are skills that are often pivotal to athletic success. The only dissembling that is anathema in sports is that concerning one’s intent to give one’s all to defeating the opposition.

33 Stear, “Sport, Make-Believe, and Volatile Attitudes,” 282.

34 Stear, “Sport, Make-Believe, and Volatile Attitudes,” 282.

35 Stear notes that sometimes actors are criticized for not giving their all to their portrayal of fictional characters, i.e., for “phoning in” their performances. But he insightfully points out that such cases of inauthentic performances differ from that of inauthentic gameplay. For the former, such inauthenticity has to do with their failure to convincingly convey the pretense called for rather than, as in the case of sports, not trying to win. As he writes, “it is one thing to criticize Sylvester Stallone for not playing Rocky ‘believably’, another for not trying to knock out Dolph Lundgren” (“Sport, Make-Believe, and Volatile Attitudes,” 282).

dissembling occurs in sports. That explains why, Stear observes, fans detest match fixing. That is why they further typically detest anything and everything that puts in question the authenticity of the action on the field, and they detest it all the more if it has some significant effect on the outcome of the game. Take, for example, the phenomenon of what is called “flopping” in sports like football, which involves pretending that one has been fouled by one’s opponent in order to draw a penalty from the referee. The writer John Lanchester comments on one such infamous example of this notorious tactic that incurred the immediate wrath of the spectators that took place in a quarterfinal football match between Italy and Belgium. An Italian player in that game, he writes, “collapsed with an apparently career-ending injury after being breathed on by a defender, only to bounce sheepishly back to his feet and trot off to join the celebration when Italy scored ten seconds later.”³⁶ The spectators, he comments further, howled in derision at the player’s resort to such fakery and bellowed in unison the choice word in their vernacular that they use to deride such misbehavior: “shithousery.”

What such examples vividly show, I argue, is that enthusiastic fans do indeed care deeply that players try their level best to win and everything else it entails (among other things, that they play fairly). And the main reason why they care so deeply that players wholeheartedly strive to win and respond so viscerally to inauthentic gameplay, I argue further, is that they firmly believe that winning is indeed an intrinsically valuable achievement. Make-believe seems not only to have nothing to do with their palpable enthusiasm for such game outcomes but to be anathema to their appreciation of almost every facet of the game. That is why I am persuaded the fictionalist claim that spectators could not emotionally engage in sports and their outcomes with the great intensity that they do unless they imaginatively inflate the value of winning is intelligible, let alone forceful, only if one is already in the grip of that theory.

III

I now want to consider three objections to my argument that it is the intrinsic achievement value of winning that accounts for why enthusiastic fans obsess over game outcomes. The first objection comes directly from the pen of the fictionalist Baron-Schmitt, while the remaining two are, I surmise, objections that fictionalists would most likely press against my achievement view.

I begin with Baron-Schmitt’s objection that argues that even if the achievement account of winning is correct, it does not provide a solution to the puzzling

36 Lanchester, “How Bad Can It Be?” 4. This is just one example of many other instances of inauthentic gameplay (too many to recount here) that are typically met with fierce resistance and criticism by those watching.

behavior of fans like his hypothetical fan Daniel, who intensely care about winning. Although Baron-Schmitt grants that achievement might explain why players care about winning, he maintains that it does not and cannot explain at all why spectators care about winning given the fact they are “mere” observers of games. For as mere observers of what goes on in games, they are unable to contribute in any direct or significant way to the actions that their teams take to defeat the opposition. As he writes, “Daniel does not accomplish anything if the Cowboys win. He just sits there, doing nothing to contribute.”³⁷ So if winning matters because of its value as an achievement, he is persuaded fans would have “little or no reason to care about the outcomes of games, even if players do.”³⁸

The problem with this objection, however, is that it skirts the major question at issue here, which is why fans get so emotionally carried away by the on-the-field successes of the teams they follow. Rather than addressing this question head on, Baron-Schmitt instead poses the very different question of whether or not being a fan is itself a kind of achievement quite apart from what a fan’s favorite players and teams achieve by winning the actual game itself, which is what fans so enthusiastically celebrate. That fans care about their teams’ achievements even though they had nothing causally to do with those achievements is hardly surprising in itself, since we often care about other people’s achievements outside of sports, even if we have had no hand in them. So while querying whether fans accomplish anything themselves if their teams win is an interesting question, it is not the question before us that I and, for that matter, my fictionalist counterparts are grappling with as to why fans are so taken with game outcomes. Therefore, as an objection to my own argument in favor of the achievement view to explain fans’ preoccupation with game outcomes, it misses the mark.³⁹

The second objection to my argument is that enthusiastic fans, especially partisan ones, follow the players or teams they do for entirely arbitrary reasons that have little to nothing to do with achievement as such. According to fictionalists, such fans are drawn to particular players or teams not by how they fare with regard to general qualities like the complexity of the challenges they encounter but rather by specific contingent factors: for instance, that their friends follow a particular player or team, that they fancy the uniforms of certain players or teams, that they root for players or teams that represent the particular

37 Baron-Schmitt, “Who Cares About Winning?” 250.

38 Baron-Schmitt, “Who Cares About Winning?” 250.

39 It goes without saying, I think, that the different question Baron-Schmitt raises here does not do any favor for the preferred fictionalist solution to the puzzle of sport. For if, as fictionalists argue, it is make-believe that accounts for why fans care about whether their team wins, then asking whether being a fan is an achievement in itself does not and cannot bolster their make-believe solution to fans’ puzzling behavior because, again, it is not on point.

region of the country where they live, or countless other equally capricious considerations. Indeed, in many cases, being a sports fan, as Helfand suggests, is more like a heredity trait than it is a choice in that people are often fans of, say, the Philadelphia Eagles simply because their father grew up there, whereas “no one is a Bill Cosby fan because their father grew up in Philadelphia.”⁴⁰ It is because there is evidently no logic to being a partisan fan that Walton claims, “you are not getting anything wrong if you root for the Tigers instead of the Blue Jays” (80). It could scarcely be otherwise, since for fictionalists, there is nothing more to fans rooting for the particular players or teams that they do than the arbitrary preferences that are the basis of fans’ allegiance to them.

I do not think this objection is a forceful one for two reasons. For starters, it glosses over the already noted important fact that the great majority of enthusiastic fans follow only teams that have the requisite competence to achieve success in the relevant competition class to which they belong. To be sure, there are examples in which fans continue to follow teams despite their losing records, but they are clearly the exception rather than the rule.⁴¹ In arguing that fans mainly follow teams that have what it takes to win, however, I am not denying they have other arbitrary motives for getting behind their favorite teams. Indeed, one thing this objection has going for it is that it calls attention to the fact that partisans often have mixed motives in this regard. But the one motive and reason I argue that almost all of them crucially share in common is that the teams they follow must be able to play the games well enough so that success is potentially at least within their grasp. That does not mean their attachment to teams rises or falls depending on the outcome of a single game but rather that it depends on the outcomes of a series of games over an extended period of time. Just how successful they need to be in this regard cannot be precisely quantified if only because we have to factor into the equation how successful their teams’ competitors have been over the same period of time. Further, it

40 Helfand, “The Beautiful Mystery of Rooting for Aaron Rodgers,” 11. That is why, he further opines, when Cosby went to jail, his fans quickly and seamlessly picked another comedian to follow; by contrast, those who grew up as Eagle fans typically remain Eagle fans even when, as is inevitably the case in sports, the team falls upon hard times.

41 And even some of these examples prove not to be the exceptions that they are often touted to be. Take, for example, the professional baseball team the Chicago Cubs, who are frequently mentioned in this light because for a time, they were known more for their failures than for their successes, but whose fans nevertheless stuck by them. As it turns out, however, the losing seasons they suffered through were just a small blip on their longstanding overall record, during which they achieved their fair share of success and even occasional dominance. In fact, to this very day, they “still hold the record for most wins by a major league club over any 10-year period” and are presently in contention for a playoff spot (Baker, *The New York Game*, 140).

goes without saying that given the highly competitive environment in which players of this exceptional caliber perform, no team, no matter how talented, is capable of dominating their opponents for very long. So long, however, as a team is able to maintain their competitiveness over the long haul, the best empirical evidence available to us strongly suggests that their fans will continue to support them, barring some egregious immoral or unjust offense on the part of the players and/or their major sponsors (athletic departments, professional sports owners, etc.).

The second reason why I do not find this objection persuasive is that there is nothing unusual or otherwise extraordinary about the fact that fans' initial attachment to teams is owed in part to arbitrary considerations rather than fully vetted rational ones. That is because many of our most valuable and cherished projects have similar arbitrary origins. For example, a common story that many successful and accomplished professionals, artists, university professors, and the like tell about themselves is how they started on their respective paths by sheer accident. It might have been, say, that they took a class in science or philosophy in college only because it happened to fit their schedules or because their friend did, but they subsequently fell in love with the subject matter and went on to pursue a career in medicine or university teaching themselves. The same narrative befits many sports fans who, as we have seen, might have begun to root for certain players and teams quite innocently because their parents did but subsequently fell in love with the team and began to follow them religiously. The moral of all these stories is clear: what begins with an arbitrary preference or desire to do or follow something more often than we might care to admit turns into our lifelong passions to play and/or listen to music or to engage in politics and/or write about it or to play sports and/or devotedly follow them. The fact that all of these life paths, which not incidentally bear all the marks of potential genuine achievements in their own right, can come to be by happenstance is no knock against them. Indeed, the idea that we care about the things that we do from the ground up on purely rational grounds is, as Harry Frankfurt avers, a "pan-rationalist fantasy."⁴²

The third objection that fictionalists might plausibly raise against my account of the achievement value of winning concerns something that I have repeatedly emphasized as a cardinal feature of being an enthusiastic fan: such fans are nothing if not partial to the achievements and successes of players and teams they root for and typically indifferent to the achievements and successes of players and teams they do not root for. What fictionalists are likely to find problematic about such hard-to-miss partiality for certain players and teams is

42 Frankfurt, *The Reasons of Love*, 28.

that partisan fans are not ideal or even good fans but rather “epistemologically compromised” ones—unable and/or unwilling to value and appreciate the athletic achievements of the players they do not support. Since such engrained partiality is evidently, according to this criticism, a constitutive feature of being a fan of this kind, that means “believing without justification is just what it is to be” such a fan.⁴³

Fictionalists might further argue in this same vein that if it is the achievement value of winning, as I suggest, that drives fans’ over-the-top fixation on game outcomes, then it is impartial fans I should be singing the praises of, since they are open to and appreciative of whatever teams achieve the highest levels of athletic excellence. Instead of singling out partisan fans in this regard, I should single out two other types of fans that pass this impartial litmus test with flying colors—namely, so-called fair-weather fans and purist fans. Fair-weather fans, like partisan ones, root for and support particular players and teams, but unlike partisan fans, they root for and support only those players and teams that are presently playing the best. That is why they constantly shift their allegiances depending on who is winning at the moment. They are thus impartial in the sense that it is apparently athletic excellence alone that dictates their ever-shifting allegiance to particular players or teams. Loyalty and similar such features are simply not part of their normative vocabularies. However, purist fans do them one better on the impartial scale in that they are not even fans of particular players or teams who happen to be on a winning streak but rather fans of the sports themselves. As such, they differ from fair-weather fans in that they have no allegiance to any player or team but rather care only about the level of excellence achieved in the game itself. Purists are thus interested in athletic excellence *tout court*, which is why they “simply don’t see the point of confining their sphere of care to one single club” that may after all not play well in the games they observe.⁴⁴ That is why, as Mumford argues, purists’ perceptions and judgments of what is going on in a game and on its outcome are “far more trustworthy than that of partisans, which is, of course, why referees should always be neutrals.”⁴⁵ That is further why Mumford thinks purists should eschew a competitive approach in favor of an aesthetic one in watching athletic contests, not caring about who wins but only about who plays the game in the most beautiful way possible. This gives purists, to his mind, a “gentler, less frenetic” appreciation of games in comparison to not only partisans but

43 Slater, “Epistemic Partialism in Sports Fandom,” 7. Although Slater airs this line of attack against partisan fans in his essay, it should be noted that he ultimately rejects it.

44 Mumford, *Watching Sport*, 14.

45 Mumford, *Watching Sport*, 13.

fair-weather fans as well, which calls on what Hume calls our “calmer passions” but passions all the same.⁴⁶

Now, there are two plausible ways to understand this objection. On the first, it is alleged that a partisan fan’s partiality for the achievements of a certain team so skews their evaluative judgments of the achievements of the teams they do not favor that they cannot even begin to see their way to celebrating their successes. On the second, although a partisan fan’s partiality for a certain team is not presumed to entail their complete indifference to or total lack of appreciation for the achievements of the teams they do not support, it is alleged that in light of the key role I assign to achievement in accounting for such fans’ one-sided allegiance to particular teams, it is inexplicable why they are not instead impartial fans who are disposed to celebrate the achievements of *any* team. Suffice to say, if fictionalists can make either version of this objection stick, they expose an explanatory gap in the achievement view I peddle—one that can be effectively closed by swapping out my achievement theory for their make-believe theory. However, I do not think either version of this objection succeeds.

Let us start with the first version of this objection. The fictionalist gripe here, as noted, is that partisans’ favoritism for certain teams runs so deep that it would be a wonder if they even noticed anything that opposing teams accomplish on the field, let alone applauded those athletic triumphs. But this criticism is exaggerated to say the least because it paints a false picture of partisans’ actual beliefs and attitudes about the achievements of teams that are not their favorites.⁴⁷ It is of course incontrovertible that partisan fans want their teams to win. But it is a non sequitur to suppose that that disposes them to be indifferent to or to have false or distorted beliefs about the accomplishments of the teams they do not favor. We can see why this is so, curiously enough, by

46 Mumford, *Watching Sport*, 17.

47 It should also not go unremarked that the impartiality of fair-weather fans and purists is not as praiseworthy as it might at first blush appear. Though I do not have the space to go into greater detail here, there are at least two things I can and should say in this regard. First, fair-weather fans’ fondness for winners may have less to do with their achievements and more to do with their own hedonistic mindset. That is because, as Glasgow writes, “there’s more pleasure if your team always wins” (“The Real Fan,” 7). By always being on the winning side, fair-weather fans conveniently manage to avoid all the heartbreaks and disappointments that partisan fans suffer when their teams lose. Second, while purist fans’ aesthetic take on games is genuine enough, it is not at all clear that they can wholly eschew the partisans’ competitive take on games that they decry. That is because what counts as a relevant aesthetic action on the field is one that is instrumental to the team’s primary goal of winning. For example, a footballer’s dazzling dribbling skills that lead to a successful shot on goal are rightly aesthetically lauded. By contrast, a footballer’s dazzling display of dribbling skills that is superfluous to or even impedes her team’s efforts to score a goal is rightly disparaged on both aesthetic and practical grounds.

considering how partisans view the gameplay of the teams they do support. For in this instance too, their obvious desire for their team to win does not cloud their critical judgment regarding their team's actual performance on the field. That is, it does not incline them to uncritically extol whatever actions their team execute during the game when such praise is unwarranted, to go easy on them when they play badly. On the contrary, partisans are acutely aware of and attuned to the limitations and weaknesses of their favorites. If anything, they tend to be hypercritical of them. That is why it is uncharacteristic for such ardent fans to hold back or soften their criticisms when their teams' play is less than stellar or to excuse any losses they incur because of their inferior play—by attributing them instead to bad luck or to biased and/or incompetent referees, or by making other such exculpating rationalizations. And it is because they are so critically disposed towards the teams they support that we should not be surprised that they are not in fact indifferent to or unappreciative of teams who defeat theirs. For when opposing teams outplay their favorites, partisans are given not only to criticizing the gameplay of their teams but also to grant, if only grudgingly, that the opposing teams were the better ones and deserved to win. As Kadlac avers, "the most resolute partisans among us can still appreciate a well-played game, even when their favorite teams lose."⁴⁸

Furthermore, there is nothing about being a partisan fan that stands in the way of taking an interest in the athletic accomplishments of other teams and other players they heretofore had no interest in or even were unaware of. David Papineau's own experience as a sports fan is instructive in this regard. As an admitted partisan fan of several sports teams, he relates that his experience of following and admiring their athletic exploits is what sparked his interest in watching other sports he did not regularly follow, owing to the possibility that he might get to see other impressive athletic performances. This is, he tells us, what drew him to watch the one-hundred meter men's sprint finals in the 2008 Olympic Games even though he had no personal allegiance to any of the competitors. Nonetheless, the powerful running style of one of the runners, the justly famous Usain Bolt, quickly caught his attention, and he was overcome with joy when Bolt went on to win the event by a stunningly wide margin. Papineau's inability to take his eyes off Bolt and his great delight over Bolt's amazing victory were not because he followed Bolt—as noted, he did not—but rather, as he writes, "simply because excellence had prevailed."⁴⁹ And to allay any doubt as to either the tentativeness or soundness of his evaluative judgment of Bolt, he quickly adds, "any right-minded person would have felt the same."

48 Kadlac, *The Ethics of Sports Fandom*, 51.

49 Papineau, *Knowing the Score*, 99.

The second, less radical version of this fictionalist objection is not so easily disproved. In fact, my argument above that partisan fans are not only receptive to and appreciative of the achievements of at least some of the teams they do not support but even curious about and celebratory of the achievements of players and teams not previously on their radar makes this second criticism that much harder to disprove. For if, as I argue, achievement is key to explaining why partisan fans cheer as passionately as they do for the successes of their favorites and mourn their failures, then it is baffling why they do not respond in the same highly emotive way to the successes and failures of teams that they do not support, to include teams that outplay theirs.

This objection falls short, however, because there is in fact a very good reason why on my achievement account, partisan fans are partial to the successes of certain teams and not others. That reason has to do with the fact that no one becomes a dedicated partisan fan overnight. It is rather a process—to be sure, a longer one for some and a shorter one for others—but a process all the same. Remarkably, fictionalists have had little to say on this score, no doubt because they maintain the arbitrary preferences that attract people to teams in the first place cannot be rationalized but only fictionalized. That is why Walton maintains that the arbitrary preferences that lead people to “pick which teams or players to ‘like’” come to seem to them actual and good reasons for picking them only by pretending they are such (76). But becoming a dedicated fan is not anything like the imaginative makeover that Walton envisions it to be. It is rather, again, a plausibly rational process that should be familiar to anyone who has ever become a fan of any worthwhile human undertaking. Walton is right, however, that people’s initial attraction to a team, as noted and seconded in my response to the second objection above, often turns on something as random and parochial as “I watch the Dodgers because they play in the city in which I live.” But from this inauspicious beginning, such an attraction then tends to develop over time (though of course not all those initially interested in a team continue to follow it), resulting in a special affinity for that team and undivided attention to the actions of the team’s players during games and especially to how their performances competitively stack up against those of other teams. What draws sports fans closer and closer to their favorite players and teams at this stage are typically performance-related factors such as their style of play, their tenacity, their resilience when the chips are down, or their strategic ingenuity—all factors that attest to their team’s capacity and resolve to excel on the field. From there, it is typically a short step to a fan’s actual identification with the fortunes of that team, whereby it not only becomes the object of their intense focus and affection but an integral part of what Christine Korsgaard calls their practical identity—that is, an integral part of how fans see and think about

themselves and what they find and regard to be valuable about their lives.⁵⁰ At the culmination of this process of closely following their team's every move and getting more intimately acquainted with its players and how they perform as a collective unit, what were heretofore more or less arbitrary preferences for "picking" that team to watch morphs into what Stear rightly opines "look like *actual* [rather than inchoate or feigned] reasons for caring about [that] team and not another."⁵¹ They look like actual reasons because they are in fact genuine reasons for caring more about the achievements of that team over others.

Stear goes on to argue that these "actual" reasons for caring more about one team over another are "comparable to reasons for preferring that one's own child win a prize over another's." And if quizzed why a parent has a reason to prize the achievements of their own child over another's, Stear insists, "It's my child! counts as good a reason as any."⁵² He claims the same comparable answer—"It's my team!"—counts as good a reason as any for why partisan fans prize the achievements of their favorites over others. I think he is right about the first bit but wrong about the second. It is certainly true that a partisan fan's partiality for the achievements of a certain team and not others is analogous, *ceteris paribus*, to a parent's partiality for the achievements of their own child and not someone else's child. I think he is also right that it is not only perfectly acceptable and above board but as well entirely expected that a partisan fan roots for a particular team to outperform another, just as parents root for their own children to outperform others in some respectable pursuits. But where I split the difference with Stear is that while a parent's reason for prizing their own child's achievement over another's ("It's my child!") is no doubt as good as any other, a partisan fan's reason for prizing their own team's outperforming another ("It's my team!") is not as good as any other. That is because the indelible bond between a parent and child does not ultimately depend upon what my child accomplishes but simply on the fact "It's my child," full stop. That explains why most parents never truly stop loving and caring about their children even if those children never achieve anything or, worse, turn out to be huge disappointments. In stark contrast, however, a partisan fan's strong bond with their team does ultimately depend upon the team's competitive viability, on their favorite players' facility to prove their athletic mettle on the playing field. That is not to say such an enthusiastic fan's attachment to a team is not personal, but it is to say it is never *just* personal. It is also, as I argue, inescapably predicated on how *their own* team measures up to the opposition. Perhaps the clearest evidence, not to mention the textbook

50 Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 101.

51 Stear, "Sport, Make-Believe, and Volatile Attitudes," 282.

52 Stear, "Sport, Make-Believe, and Volatile Attitudes," 282.

illustration, of the indissoluble relationship between a partisan fan's affective ties to their team and their estimate of their team's capacity for athletic excellence is the Florida Marlins baseball club, who in the span of one year (1997–98) went from a National League championship team with a large and passionate fan base to a “cellar dweller” with a rapidly shrinking and utterly demoralized fan base. The reason for their striking fall from grace was not a mystery, for their owner, Wayne Huizenga, sold off most of the members of the highly successful 1997 team to recoup financial losses that he had incurred over several years. Unsurprisingly, the 1998 Marlins compiled a dismal 54–108 win-loss record, and as noted, their fans abandoned the team in droves, leading to a precipitous decline in numbers for both their live games and television audiences.

Finally, I want to underscore something I commented on only in passing regarding what I describe as the rational process by which someone becomes a partisan fan of a certain team and, as a result, cares greatly about the team's achievements but not about those of other teams: the strikingly similarity with the rational process by which one becomes a devoted fan of and comes to care greatly about the achievements of a particular performer or performers but not those of others of some worthwhile endeavor. For just as people who, often on a whim, become initially interested in a baseball team like the Dodgers because they play in a city in which they live but then go on to become partisan fans of the team's athletic exploits, armed with actual reasons for rooting for them over, say, the Yankees, so the same goes for people who, often on a whim, go to a concert or an art gallery but are taken by what they hear or see and then become passionate fans of, say, the Beatles but not Bach or, say, of Picasso's abstract expressionist paintings but not Warhol's commercial or celebrity reproductions. If there is anything to be said for our plainly observable partiality for such widely different kinds of human achievements, it is surely that there is not something peculiar or rationally muddled or otherwise confounding about why some people end up being dedicated fans of the Dodgers but not of the Yankees, any more than that there is something rationally off or otherwise bewildering about why some people end up being fans of the Beatles but not of Bach, or of Picasso but not of Warhol. Lastly, if there is anything further to be said about why we humans care about some forms of human achievement but not others, it is surely that we finite humans are just not constitutionally equipped to care about everything worth caring about.

IV

To sum up, I argue that it is the intrinsic achievement value of winning that at bottom, explains why athletes pursue it so wholeheartedly and why enthusiastic

sports fans so tenaciously and passionately follow and support their efforts in this regard. For when all is said and done, sports are paradigm examples of human achievement that require the excellent exercise of our basic human capacities, especially of our bodily capacities and the remarkable things we are able to do and accomplish with our bodies in the carefully designed and demarcated spaces that sports provide for us. If I am right, then the fictionalist so-called puzzle of sports is in fact no puzzle at all and thus needs no solution, fictional or otherwise. Far from solving the puzzle of sports by providing a make-believe answer, fictionalists instead, I argue, merely beg the central question at issue here regarding just what players and fans see in sports and winning that explains why they take them so seriously and *play* and *attend* to them with such intensity and passion they seldom exhibit in their everyday lives.⁵³

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53 I want to acknowledge and thank the many helpful suggestions provided by the associate editor and the anonymous reviewers of this journal to a previous draft of this article.

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