**6 THE NATURE AND VALUE OF SPORT**

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In this paper[[1]](#footnote-1) I shall sketch an account of the nature and value of sport. I shall take as my foil the account of sport that emerges from Bernard Suits’s engaging book *The Grasshopper*.

Suits’s main aim in the book is to analyse the nature of games. In my view, he succeeds emphatically in this. He refutes those who say that it is impossible to lay down necessary and sufficient conditions for being a game, by doing precisely that.

My focus is on sports, not games. *The Grasshopper* treats sports as simply that sub-class of games that involve physical skills. I shall show that this is a mistake. While some sports are games, many are not.

Suits also offers an account of the value of games. Since Suits views sports as a special case of games, he takes it that sports have the same kind of value.

However, the existence of sports that are not games means that this cannot be right. The value of sport in general cannot derive from the value of games.

I shall offer my own account of the nature of sport, one which is consistent with the existence of sports which are not games. This leads naturally to an account of the value of sport that owes nothing to the fact that some sports are games.

I draw a further conclusion: Suits is wrong about the value of games in general, even if he is right about their nature. Those games that are sports are valuable because they facilitate sporting values, not because they are games. I generalize the point. All games are valuable because they facilitate things that are independently valuable, not because there is any value in playing games as such.

**The Nature of Games**

Let us start with Suits’s rightly celebrated analysis of games (from *The Grasshopper*):

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]. I also offer the following simpler and, so to speak, more portable version of the above: playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles. (1978, 41)

To illustrate, consider golf. The *prelusory goal* is to direct the ball into a succession of holes with as few shots as possible. The *lusory means* are that you must propel it only by clubs as licensed by the *constitutive* *rules* of golf. Golfers adopt the *lusory attitude* when they embrace these restrictive rules precisely because they wish to play golf.

I think that this is a wonderful account of games, and shall raise no objection to it. Wittgenstein held that there is no set of necessary and sufficient conditions for being a game. I take Suits’s account to refute him outright. It captures the essence of games perfectly. *The Grasshopper* is largely devoted to showing that there are no counterexamples to Suits’s analysis, and it succeeds admirably in this aim.

**Suits on the Value of Games**

Implicit in *The Grasshopper* is an account of the value of playing games, as well as their nature. Here I find Suits far less convincing.

Suits’s view of the value of game-playing comes out most clearly in his discussion of Utopia in the final sections of his book. He imagines a world in which all needs and desires can be satisfied on demand, where technology has developed to such a level that anything can be produced at the touch of a button. Suits argues that in such a world the only worthwhile activities left to us will be playing games. Since the pursuit of practical ends would be pointless, the only challenges worth meeting would be those set by games.

Suits concludes that no activity is essentially valuable, apart from playing games. In real life, we must work to provide the necessities of life. However, such work is never valuable in itself, but merely a means to an end. The only intrinsically worthwhile pursuits are the games we would continue to play in Utopia.

Suits argues that, when all ends are automatically granted, there can be value only in activities where “what is instrumental is inseparably combined with what is intrinsically valuable, and where the activity is not itself an instrument for some further end” (1978, 172). His thought seems to be that, while game-playing is not a means to some further end, it somehow bootstraps itself into having intrinsic value, since the lusory attitude confers instrumental value on the adoption of the lusory means.

I find Suits’s account of the value of games unconvincing. If the end specified by the game (the “prelusory” goal) is not already valuable, how can its pursuit be made valuable by setting it around with obstacles? Why is it a good thing to pursue some pointless end by arbitrarily by restricted means? I say that if something isn’t worth doing, it isn't worth doing even if it is made difficult.[[2]](#footnote-2)

One might well wonder why Suits feels compelled to think of valuable activities as having some instrumental component at all. An obvious alternative is to recognize that many people find pleasure and value in certain activities, not as instruments to anything, but simply in themselves, and would continue to do so even in Utopia.

In a moment I shall pursue this thought in connection specifically with sporting activities. But first let me address Suits’s claim that sports are a special case of games.

**Sports and Games**

There are many sports that don’t conform naturally to *The Grasshopper*’s analysis of games: running, swimming, weightlifting, rowing, and so on.

If these sports were in fact games, that would be a problem for Suits’s analysis of games. But in truth it is clear that they are not games. Nobody competent with the notion of a game would say that the 100-metre sprint is a *game*, akin to tennis, or baseball, or snakes-and-ladders. The problem is not with Suits’s analysis of games, but with his further claim that all sports are games.

Suits tries to force activities like running races into the mould of his analysis. He says that the prelusory goal is to reach the finish line first, and that the activity of sprinting is constituted by rules that place unnecessary obstacles in the way of reaching this goal, such as that you cannot use a motorcycle, or trip up the other runners.

This analysis of running races is highly forced, however. As Mitchell Berman points out in his contribution to this volume, it would make much more sense to say that the prelusory goal is to run 100 metres as fast as one can, or faster than the other runners. After all, this is a goal that one might well have prior to any adoption of rules about how 100-metre races are to be run. Moreover, given this prelusory goal, it doesn’t seem that the rules for 100-metre sprinting, such as they are, “prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means.” Rather the rules simply ensure that the race does indeed measure what the participants are interested in, namely, how fast they can run.

Despite these points, some readers might still feel that running, along with swimming, weightlifting, rowing, and so on, can somehow be squeezed into Suits’s analysis of games. If so, consider such freeform activities as recreational surfing, sailboarding, hang-gliding, or mountaineering. Here there are simply no rules. You just go out and do it. But there seems little doubt that these are sports. When I was younger, I used to take my sailboard out every weekend in Essex and enjoy myself zooming around the Blackwater Estuary. I can remember my doctor once asking me whether I did any active sports. “Tennis, golf, cricket and recreational sailboarding,” I said. I doubt that it occurred to my doctor to object that “Solo sailboarding isn’t a *sport”*.

In some of his later work (1988, 1989), Suits came to admit that some sports are not games. He introduced the term “performances” for sports where success is measured by judges, like diving and gymnastics, as opposed to those where the result is built into the structure of the activity, such as running or tennis. And he qualified his original thought that all sports are games, by allowing that athletic performances assessed by judges are not games.

However, this doesn’t deal with the real difficulty facing Suits’s assimilation of sports to games. It is true that sports that rely on judges are not games. But these are not the only sports that are a problem for Suits. Running, rowing and weightlifting don’t have judges yet are not games, as we have seen.

The underlying problem for Suits is not that some sports rely on judges to evaluate success. Rather it is that in many sports the *rules* do not play the role required by Suits’s analysis of games. Suits holds, quite rightly, that in games the rules place more or less arbitrary restrictions on the achievement of some result, and thereby *constitute* certain activities – hitting a forehand, scoring a home run, sliding down a snake – that do not exist outside the context of conformity to those rules.

But many sports aren’t like this. Running, rowing, weightlifting, sailboarding, and hang-gliding, along with gymnastics and diving, and many other sports, are activities that people can do perfectly well even in contexts when their activity isn't regulated by any rules at all. Sometimes, when they want to test how well they are doing these things, they adopt rules to ensure that their various performances are commensurable. But these rules don't constitute new activities, as the rules of games do, but simply regulate activities that can also occur unregulated.

**The Value of Sport**

These last remarks point to the value that people find in sporting pursuits. It is simply the intrinsic value of exercising physical skills. Pride in physical performance is a deep-seated feature of human nature. Humans hone their physical abilities and take delight in exercising them. We devote long hours to improving our physical skills, and seek out opportunities to test them.

Humans do not just practice physical skills, but also celebrate them. Those who achieve the highest levels of physical skill are admired and applauded. Top-level sporting events are watched by millions, and the leading contestants are internationally renowned.

I say we are quite right to practice and celebrate physical prowess in these ways. Exercises of physical skills are among the good things in life, along with friendship, happiness, knowledge and artistic acheivement. To understand the value of sport, we need look no further than the way it provides a framework for physical skills.

Earlier I said that even in Utopia people would continue to find pleasure and value in certain activities, not as instruments to anything, but simply in themselves. I take sports to be a prime example of this. The value of sport is that it displays physical abilities. Exercises of physical prowess are valuable in themselves, quite independent of any results they lead to. People would have every reason to continue playing sports, even in Utopia.

The point is not peculiar to sporting activities. Even in Utopia, many carpenters would continue to make tables, many motor mechanics would continue to tune car engines, and many accountants would continue to balance spreadsheets. There would no longer be any utilitarian need for their efforts, but they would still take pride in their abilities and find it worthwhile to exercise them.

Suits argues that, if it makes sense for carpenters to continue making tables in Utopia, this can only be because they find value in game-playing. In his view, the carpenters will be voluntarily accepting unnecessary obstacles to the creation of tables. After all, they are setting themselves to make tables with planes and chisels, when they could more easily do so by pressing a button.

But Suits is wrong to think of Utopian carpentry as a means to the end of tables. What the carpenters will care about is their workmanship, not the production of tables as such. That’s why they will continue to work with plane and chisel in Utopia. It is the carpentry they will be after, not the tables.

Of course, it is also true that the carpentry skills in question are orientated towards making tables. It would be a poor carpenter who ended up with a botched piece of furniture. But that doesn’t mean that we should think of the activity as somehow instrumentally valuable, as worthwhile only because it is a means to tables. What matter to the Utopian carpenters is that they get to make a table using their skills with plane and chisel, not that they possess a table at the end of the process. After all, in Utopia tables can always be conjured into existence at the touch of a button.

**The Nature of Sport**

The points made in the last section suggest an obvious account of the nature of sport, as well as its value: *a sport is any activity the primary purpose of which is to facilitate the exercise of physical skills*.

This definition immediately accommodates the many sports that are not games. As we saw earlier, many sports involve activities that are already found in ordinary life – running, rowing, shooting, lifting, throwing. These ordinary activities turn into sports whenever people start performing them for their own sake and strive for excellence in their exercise.

It doesn’t take much for this to happen. Doggett’s Coat and Badge is the oldest rowing race in the world, first held in 1715 when the actor and impresario Thomas Doggett offered a prize for apprentice watermen to race from London Bridge to Chelsea. These young men earned their living ferrying passengers up and down the Thames. No doubt they took pride in their rowing abilities. Given this, they would no doubt have been eager to test themselves against each other. And at that point their rowing switched from a means of transporting passengers and became a sport. They were testing their skills as an end in itself, not as part of some wider utilitarian project.

In truth, the list of everyday activities that have been turned into sports is long. As well as rowing, running, shooting, lifting, and throwing, we have equestrianism, archery, motor racing, fencing, and sailing, not to mention bronco riding, medieval jousting, catfish noodling, competitive bricklaying ...

Of course, not all sports are regimentations of physical skills that are already employed in everyday life. This applies in particular to those sports that are also games, like tennis, cricket and baseball. There would be no such things as top-spin backhands, outswingers, or line drives, if it were not for the rules which constitute these sports.

But this does not alter the point that the primary purpose of even those sports that are games is to facilitate the exercise of the physical skills that they make possible. The point of playing tennis is precisely to execute the serves, backhands, and the other skillful shots that the game calls for. Other athletic games similarly exist in order to enable the exercise of the distinctive skills that they involve.

The fact that these skills do not exist outside games does not mean that they are any less worthwhile, qua physical skills, than those also found in everyday life. Roger Federer is no less great an athlete than Usain Bolt, just because he is playing a game where Bolt is not. Both of them are supreme exponents of the skills demanded by their respective sports. Their abilities are alike valuable because they are instances of physical prowess. And the contests they take part in are alike sports because they facilitate the exercise of these abilities.

**Competition**

Some theorists, including Mitchell Berman in this volume, regard *competition* as a constitutive element of sport.[[3]](#footnote-3) I am not at all sure about this. While it is certainly true that sport provides much opportunity for competition, I remain unpersuaded that competition is an integral feature of sport as such.

After all, there are plenty of sports where competition just doesn’t come into it. These are those sports I mentioned earlier as lacking any kind of rules and so manifestly outside Suits’s assimilation of sports to games: recreational surfing, mountaineering, hang-gliding, sailboarding. Without any rules to regiment some precise measure of success, there is no question of competing with others. What would count as winning? Still, as I said before, nobody can seriously deny that recreational surfing or sailboarding are sports.

I would also argue that competition is incidental to many sporting events that do have a definite criterion of winning. Consider the 30,000 or so runners who enter the London marathon each year. It is clear enough what you have to do to win – breast the tape ahead of all the other runners. But only a very few among the runners are participating with this outcome in mind. The vast majority simply want to run as well as they can, and perhaps improve their personal best time. What matters for them is running well, not victory.

Or take golf. In a normal golfing event, you might suppose, the player with the lowest score wins. Up to a point. In fact nearly every non-professional golfing contest is played on a “handicap” basis. The less skillful golfers are given a head start, being allowed extra shots on harder holes, and the scores that are compared are the net scores after these shots have been deducted. If I, playing off my handicap of 15, shoot a net score of 74, while you, off yours of 21, shoot 70, I will feel, as would any normal golfer, that you have done better than me, indeed “beaten” me – and that’s what the results posted on the club noticeboard will show.

But in truth, of course, I have done better than you, going round in 89, where you took 91. Even so, that’s not how we think about it. You’re the one who will feel relatively pleased, whereas I will be disappointed. And the reason is that we aren’t really competing with each other. Instead, we are aiming to do as well as we can, to score well by our own standards. If we can do that, we count it as a success. The scoring system is designed accordingly, measuring players against their own yardsticks, rather than against each other.

In the face of examples like these, those who hold sport to be essentially competitive sometimes suggest that amateur marathon runners, club golfers and other recreational athletes are “competing against themselves.” The idea is that they are still trying to beat their own scores, even if not those of other athletes. Well, no doubt this is often an element, especially in sports where achievement can be measured against a convenient yardstick. But the point can scarcely be upheld across the board. If trying to do as well as I can is always a matter of competition, then an implausible range of single-person activities outside the world of sport will have to be counted as competitive too.

Having said this, some sports unquestionably have competition built into their structure. If you aren’t trying to beat your opponents when you are playing tennis, or baseball, or many other such sports, then you aren’t really playing at all. Still, even in these cases I doubt that most participants are motivated by the competitive element, rather than a simple concern with physical skill. After all, if people got nothing out of matches they lost, it is hard to see why most contests would take place. Among my regular tennis opponents are some I rarely, if ever, beat. But it doesn’t occur to me to stop playing them on this account. It is enough that I measure up to my own standards. I don’t need to be better than everyone else.[[4]](#footnote-4)

None of this is to deny that many people are very competitive, and so will express their competitive inclinations in sport as elsewhere. But this doesn't make sport constitutionally competitive. People who want to compete will find ways of doing so in many different contexts.

Some readers might remember a speech by the fictional Lawrence Garfield, played by Danny DeVito, from the film *Other People’s Money*. The corporate financier Garfield urges his more scrupulous younger colleague to learn to “play the game.” What game, she asks?

“The best game in the world. I’ll teach you. It’s easy. You make as much money as you can for as long as you can.”

“And then what?”

“And then what? Whoever has the most money when he dies – wins.”

I have no doubt that many corporate financiers are competitively motivated in just this way. But this doesn’t mean that Garfield’s competition is essential to the activity of corporate finance. It’s just that many financiers happen to be competitive people. Similarly, we can recognize that many athletes like to compete, without drawing the conclusion that sports are constitutionally competitive.

Perhaps there is something essentially competitive about sporting *fandom*. If you don’t feel pleased when your side beats their rivals, and cast down when they lose, then you aren’t really a fan. But that’s a rather different issue.

My focus in this paper is on playing sport, not on being a fan of a team.

Still, while we are on this, even if committed fandom is essentially competitive, it by no means follows that all sports spectatorship requires a competitive attitude. Many people watch sporting contests purely in order to appreciate the accomplishments of the participants, without feeling the need to root for one side over the other. In his *Watching Sport* Stephen Mumford argues convincingly that the pleasures available to the disinterested spectator outstrip the blinkered enthusiasms of the partisan fan.

**The Value of Games**

I have argued, contra Suits, that some sports are not games. It is also true, though this is certainly not something Suits denied, that many games are not sports. These are all those many games that do not involve any physical skills, such as bridge, chess, ludo, monopoly, baccarat, poker, and so on.

I have argued that those sports that happen to be games don’t derive their value from their status as games; rather they are valuable because they enable something that is independently valuable, namely the exercise of physical skills.

In my view, this point generalizes. Any game that is worth playing facilitates something that is independently valuable, in the sense of having a kind of value that also exists outside games. It is because of these independently valuable features that good games are worth playing, not because there is anything valuable about game playing as such.

Thus there are games that are worthwhile because of the mental powers they demand. Bridge and chess are the obvious examples. Anybody familiar with chess will be aware of the otherworldly brilliance often displayed by the grandmasters. And I myself can testify, as someone who played county-level bridge when young, that top bridge competitors regularly perform prodigious mental feats of inference and ingenuity.

Then there are those games that call for no real skill but engender anticipation and excitement. Many children’s games played with dice are like this, for example, ludo or snakes-and-ladders. With adults, money generally needs to be involved for games of pure luck to engender excitement. The value of entirely chancy games like roulette or craps, such as it is, derives from the heightened emotions that hinge on winning or losing money.

Many games combine both intellectual skill and the excitement engendered when money is hazarded on chance throws or deals: backgammon, gin rummy, cribbage. In the best such games, the two elements are tightly intertwined. Poker is a highly skillful pastime, but at the same time it is essential that it be played for serious money. While backgammon, for example, can be played for fun yet still fully engage the skills of the contestants, poker played for insignificant sums is a trivial and tiresome pursuit. At first sight, this might suggest that the skill doesn’t really matter in poker, and it’s only the money that makes it interesting. But this would be the wrong diagnosis. The real reason poker has to be played for proper money is that it calls for a very particular skill, namely the ability to dupe your opponents into false moves specifically when significant amounts of money are at risk.

**The Boundaries of Sport**

I said that sport is *any activity the primary purpose of which is to facilitate the exercise of physical skills*. It might seem that this account is overly inclusive.

For a start, what about dancing? The stars of ballet and modern dance are certainly distinguished by their exceptional physical skills, and spend much of their lives developing and improving them. So shouldn’t they be counted as athletes, on my theory?

Well, some forms of dance are indeed sports. Ice dancing is one of the major disciplines at the Winter Olympics. Rhythmic gymnastics, in which the competitors perform routines accompanied by music, has been part of the Summer Olympics since 1984. Competitive ballroom dancing is nowadays called “dancesport” by its practitioners, and has been recognized by the International Olympic Committee as an eligible sport.

Even so, I agree that it would be odd to count ballet and modern dance as sports. But these activities are different, While they undoubtedly involve physical skills, the exercise of these skills is not their *primary* *purpose*. Balletomanes and other dance enthusiasts look to the dancers to entertain, to interpret the music, and to otherwise edify. The physical skills of the dancers are only a small part of what the fans find to admire in the dance.

What about video gaming? Many young men spend inordinate amounts of time hunched in front of a screen trying to outshoot the virtual competition. It looks as if this should count as sport on my account. After all, the whole point of these games is the digital skill, with their levels and time limits designed specifically to elicit higher and higher levels of dexterity.

I am happy to accept this consequence. ESports are a growing pastime. In 2015 a capacity crowd of 20,000 filled Madison Square Garden to watch the top two American teams vie for a spot in the *League of Legends* World Championship. *League of Legends* and similar games support a large community of professional athletes and coaches. I see no reason not to count video gaming as a sport.

Nowadays you can follow the competitive barbecuing circuit on the lower reaches of the cable channels. This is a big business, especially in the United States, and its followers tout it as a fast-growing “sport.” Here I go the other way. I don’t count barbecuing as a sport. The competitors do need some physical skills, but that’s not the focus of the competition. The judges aren't interested in the competitors’ skills per se, but rather in how the meat is cooked.

I’d say that this focus on product rather than process excludes a number of other competitions that involve physical skills. Baking, pottery, and sewing all currently feature in popular British televised competitions – the annual final of the “Great British Bake-Off” regularly attracts over 10 million viewers – and all of them demand physical competence. But again it is the product that is judged, not the physical skill. The same point applies to musical performances, which demand physical ability all right, but are appreciated for the sounds produced, not the dexterity behind them.

Suppose there were carpentry competitions in Utopia. I say that these wouldn’t count as sporting events, because we wouldn’t directly judge the levels of skill employed, but rather the quality of their tables. I did say earlier that the Utopian carpenters want to *make* tables, rather than possess them. But this doesn’t mean that we can’t measure the success of their efforts by the quality of their products.

Perhaps there are cases and cases. I earlier mentioned competitive bricklaying. In these contests, bricklayers typically vie to see who can build a respectable wall in the fastest time. I’d say that competitive bricklaying falls on the side of sport. What differentiates the contestants is the speed with which they can manipulate the bricks, not the comparative elegance of their walls.

We could imagine carpentry (or baking, sewing, and pottery) moving in a similar direction. Suppose that the competitors were judged on how fast they can make a mortice and tenon joint, not on the excellence of their tables. We might imagine coaches training the carpenters to adjust their wrist movements, rather than improve the proportions of their table legs. In that case, I would be happy to count competitive carpentry as a sport. The same would go for baking, sewing and pottery, if the issue was how fast the contestants can dice a carrot, or stitch a hem, or throw a vase, rather than the evaluation of some complex product.

**Sport Is Serious**

I say that sport is valuable because it facilitates one of the good things in life, the exercise of physical prowess. Some will object that this fails to account for one of the defining features of sport, the way in which it involves play, leisure, unseriousness, the opposite of work.

On Suits’s account of sports as games, this feature is basic to sports. For Suits, sport is “the unnecessary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles”: it’s what you do when the serious business of life can be put to one side, when you take time out. By contrast, my account of sport seems to cast no light on this apparent difference between lusory sport and real life.

My response to this objection is to deny the premise. I do not agree that sport has a different kind of value from other things. As far as the ultimate value of things goes, I would place the performance of physical skills pretty high. But in any case that is more than I need to argue here. Maybe physical skills are less important than purity of character or artistic creativity. The more basic point is that they are valuable in just the same serious way as other things. Someone who devotes their life to high-jumping or baseball is no less serious a person than someone who devotes it to the ballet, say, or the environment. There is nothing intrinsically dilettante about sports compared with other walks of life. (True, gymnastics and baseball don’t appeal to everyone. But neither does the ballet.)

No doubt some physical skills are more worthwhile than others. I would rate the artistry of a cover drive by Gary Sobers rather higher that a score of 180 in three darts by Phil Taylor. And, at the limit, some physical skills are arguably so trivial that we might doubt that they constitute sporting activities at all.

Some take this attitude to darts or snooker. As someone who has tried both sports, I think that this is a mistake. The levels of expertise displayed by the top professionals in these sports is certainly something to admire, even if they are eclipsed by the talent of Gary Sobers. But even I would not want to make a serious case for tiddlywinks as a sport, say, or Jenga. While activities like these do involve a certain level of physical skill, they are too simple and one-dimensional to warrant sustained devotion.

One of the factors that make some physical skills more worthwhile than others is their level of difficulty. Batting well at cricket is more of an accomplishment than proficiency at tiddlywinks precisely because it is so hard to do it well. At first sight, this point might remind us of Suits, and his contention that games derive their value by placing unnecessary obstacles in the way of prelusory ends. But in truth the present point owes nothing to Suits. Other things being equal, physical skills are no doubt more admirable the harder they are. But this difficulty doesn’t have to arise from the unnecessary obstacles that are constitutive of games; it can simply be integral to the activity per se. Wave surfing, downhill skiing, and marathon running are difficult all right, and their champions therefore rightly admired. But their difficulty owes nothing to rules that set extra challenges. It is just that these activities are intrinsically difficult.

Throughout this paper I have been emphasizing the way that sport constitutively involves *physical* skills. But I have not intended to imply by this that sport does not also demand mental powers. I have written elsewhere about the mental focus and equilibrium required for successful sporting performance, and how serious athletes need to guard against such psychological perils as “choking” and “the yips” (Papineau 2013, 2015). This is one of the elements that makes sports so difficult. Top athletes are distinguished not just by their physical skills, but also by their exceptional powers of concentration and application.

Let me go back to sport’s place in the overall scheme of things. I am fond of this quote from *Chinaman*, Shehan Karunatilaka’s wonderfully scurrilous novel about the world of Sri Lankan cricket:

I have been told by members of my own family that there is no use or value in sports. I only agree with the first part. I may be drunk but I am not stupid. Of course there is little point to sports. But, at the risk of depressing you, let me add two more cents. THERE IS LITTLE POINT TO ANYTHING. In a thousand years, grass will have grown over all our cities. Nothing of anything will matter.

Note that Karunatilaka is not here agreeing that there is no value in sports. (“I only agree with the first part.”) His point is rather that sports are no less important than anything else. Of course if we set the bar of significance too high – surviving the passage of millennia – then sport will fall short. But so too will the other things that matter – family, friends, prosperity, prizes.

If there is something peculiar about sport, perhaps it lies in the point that Karunatilaka does concede to his family – there is no use in sports. It is true that sport doesn’t connect up with other aspects of life. For most practitioners, sport is disconnected from financial welfare, personal relationships, social life or political developments. Sport does not edify or inform, still less explore and transform our perceptions of the world. And by its nature it is ephemeral – unlike other hobbies, sport leads to no lasting products, not even a garden or a stamp collection.

So perhaps sport is special in this sense. It forms a self-enclosed realm, isolated from the rest of life. (Perhaps this is one of the reasons why people can find sport absorbing and relaxing.) But I see no reason to accord sport less importance on this account. Even if it forms a self-enclosed realm, insulated from the rest of life, this does not mean that it lacks intrinsic worth. As we have seen throughout, people celebrate sporting achievement as a self-standing virtue. They hone their skills as participants, and applaud their champions as spectators. From their perspective, sport is a matter of seriousness and concern, not a flippant holiday from real life.

It is tempting to confuse the insulation of sports with a lack of significance. We are too quick to conclude, just because sport is not significant to other things, that it is not significant at all. But this doesn’t follow. Even if sporting achievements are cut off from the rest of life, they are still worth striving for. Success on the sports field might not advance your career or influence the course of world history. But this doesn’t mean that it is not important and valuable in its own right.

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2. Here I disagree with Thomas Hurka (2006), who argues in defence of Suits that overcoming difficulties is valuable in itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. True, Berman only counts competition as one of the elements in the “cluster” of features that characterize sports, and allows that some sports in good standing may fail to display all these features. This makes room for him to include such non-competitive activities as mountain climbing among sports. Still, I see no reason to be so cagey. I take the definition I offer at the beginning of the previous section to provide a necessary and sufficient condition for sport, and so hold that competition per se is no part of the nature of sport, not even as one element in a cluster of features. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In chapter 8 of *The Grasshopper*, Suits (1978) observes that there is no inconsistency in both aiming to have a companionable game and aiming to win. I am making the further point that, even if trying to win is essential to many games, taking yourself to have a genuine prospect of success is by no means a precondition of wholehearted participation. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)