

## EDITORIAL

### Play and work: An introduction to sport and organization

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In recent decades, sport as a social practice has become relevant in many different fields: in health, economy, politics, education, work and leisure. The importance of sport transcends the confines of the sports field. Sport involves not only organization but also *organizing*. Sport is about organizing collective efforts and performance. Sport is about managing excellence, coaching and developing tactics as well as strategies. Sport also has its own mechanisms of organizing social differences. The competitive aspects of sport imply practices of in- and exclusion. These practices are enacted spatially on the sports field, dividing space between competing teams and individual sportsmen and sportswomen. In a broader sense, this theme touches upon the issue of access and socially marginalized identities. Sport deals with contradictions and paradoxes that exist in society at large. Sport is ‘contested terrain’ (Bourdieu 1988), an arena in which social and political differences are being played out.

Sport is often considered a popular and innocent endeavor that engages many people all over the world, both as amateur players and as enthusiastic audience. At the same time, however, professional and commercial sport inescapably is big business and an arena for political disputes. The economic and political dimensions often are intertwined, as in the recent doping scandal of Russian athletes where presumably actors on the highest level of Russian politics were involved (‘IAAF in Crisis’ 2016). From a different perspective, Sorek (2007), in his wonderful study of Arab soccer in Israel, underscores the political aspect of sport. He argues that soccer for Arabs provides ‘an opportunity for integration into Jewish-Israeli society’ as well as ‘a stage for promoting political protest’ (Sorek 2007, 7). The apparent contradiction here seems to be characteristic of sport in general (Spaaij 2011). Sport is not either good or bad. Gatz, Messner, and Ball-Rokeach (2002) prefer to talk about the ‘paradoxes of sport’. As an example they point to the fact that sport programs for youths may be set up as ‘violence prevention tools’ while at the same time ‘violence is an integral part of the sport world’ (Gatz et al. 2002, 1). In a seminal article about American sports the sociologist Gregory Stone (1955, 85) put it this way: ‘... because of their intrinsic agonistic character and the fact of their involvement in the “agony” of the larger society, sport and play are fraught with anomalies’.

#### Sport is play as well as work

The anomalous character of sport that Stone refers to is revealed in the tension of sport as both play and work (see also Hilliard 1998, 421). The tension between play and work

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is imperative for putting the contributions to this special issue in the proper perspective of a cultural view on organizations. The playfulness of sport forms its attractive side, as it emphasizes the activity itself, the pleasure of doing sport, and the joy and friendship it entails. Huizinga (1938 [1955]) argued that the ‘fun-element characterizes the essence of play. [ . . . ] Play cannot be denied’ (3). It is to this, undeniable, dimension of sport that policy makers appeal when referring to the social benefits of sport in terms of cohesion, health and citizenship (Fine 1987; Vermeulen 2011).

In organizations, managers increasingly point to the benefits of sport, play and game to enhance not only employees health, but also to stimulate commitment to and enjoyment of work and the organization (e.g. Costea, Crump, and Holm 2005; Fleming 2005), to increase organizational flexibility (Pors and Andersen 2015), and to promote corporate responsibility (Smith and Westerbeek 2007). We thus perceive the tendency to blur the boundaries of play and work (Goggin 2011). The workplace grows into a playground. Play becomes ‘serious business’ (Butler et al. 2011, 329). Sport as play has particularities that resonate symbolically with non-sporting organizational life. Organizations are replete with sporting metaphors that give meaning to their practices, such as competition, the notion of the arena, selection, excellence, talent and teamwork. Sports and games also offer us ways to rethink different forms of organizing. Games like chess or poker are employed as metaphors for organizational tactics and strategy. So are baseball, football and basketball (Keidel 1984). In that sense sport as play may be a vantage point to understand organizations and organizing differently.

We understand the relationship between play and work in sport as the distinction between ‘expressive flow versus structured patterning of activity’ (Fine 1987, 41). Play and work in sport are always present in an unstable relationship that runs the risk of losing its balance. Indeed, as Fine continues, ‘flow in games and sport is eroded as these activities are organized and made efficient’ (42). Thus, rules (as a way of organizing the sports game) and extrinsic awards (as opposed to sports’ intrinsic value) put the playfulness of sport under pressure. This resonates with Huizinga’s view on sport: ‘In the case of sport we have an activity nominally known as play but raised to such a pitch of technical organization and scientific thoroughness that the real play-spirit is threatened with extinction’ (Huizinga [1938 [1955]], 199). In sport as work we find organizational aspects of regulation and control; the rules of various competitions, drug testing, scrutiny of sporting organizations’ finances and so on. In this way, the interweaving of sport and organization entails substantial oversight and management. In addition, evidently, events such as the Olympic Games, the football World Cup and the Tour de France not only demand huge amounts of organization in and of themselves but also have immense economic, social and political impact (the ‘extrinsic awards’) prior to, during and after these competitions. Sport is, further, entangled with issues of bribery and corruption, politics and the role of the state.

### **Introducing the articles**

All contributions to this special issue demonstrate how sport is organized. Sport has its own procedures, rules and regulations. Sport has its workers, its management and its strategies. If we put it like this, the organization of sport seems to be just like any other kind of organization. However, we argue, there is something unique about the organization of sport. What makes organizing sports different from other organizing

processes? The articles in this collection demonstrate that sport always has a playful dimension. Sport may be institutionalized, commodified and confined to particular rules and spaces, yet it cannot exist without its play and playfulness. *Daniel Torchia's* article shows how football fans of Manchester United, who agitated against the commercialization and commodification of their club, succeeded in organizing the foundation of a new football club that is built upon playful notions of community and friendship, the FC United of Manchester. Focusing on the new organization that is based on love for sport as play, Torchia contributes to recent studies of 'utopian' models of management and work. His analysis explores whether such an alternative organization forms a genuine alternative to standard business models. The articles by *Marianne Dortants* and *Annelies Knoppers* and by *Andrew Manley*, *Roderick Martin* and *Andrew Parker* center upon the relation between sport as play on the one hand and sport as work, regulation and control on the other hand. Analyzing the relationship between controlling, managing and disciplining sport and its players on the one hand and the pleasure and cheerfulness of practicing it on the other hand, their articles contribute to understanding sports as an unstable balance between play and work. Dortants and Knoppers studied the regulation of gender diversity in a boxing club. Analyzing power relations and the governing of sameness and difference in boxing, their article shows how different rationalities regulate the participation of women in this male-dominated sport. Manley/Martin/Parker) demonstrate the working of disciplinary mechanisms that regulate, control and silence players in professional football organizations. The article shows how institutional norms impact the social construction of self of young professional footballers and contributes to understanding the fragility of the interplay between play and control. *Martin Wood's* article problematizes the distinction between play and work in his analysis on rock climbing as 'serious leisure'. He depicts the latter, in the case of rock climbing, in terms of creativity, energy and freedom from dominant societal values. However, Wood concludes his analysis suggesting that the work-like character of these activities tend to dominate. He writes: 'Currently, the rationalised society appears to keep serious leisure participants integrated within the dominant value patterns through their capacity as consumers of leisure'. The article helps us understand the dynamic of play and work in the context of contemporary capitalistic societies.

The articles in this special issue all point towards the alternation between play and work that is present in the organization and organizing of sports. Where discipline, regulation and surveillance, commercialization and commodification start to play a key role in sport, we tend to lose sight of the playful element of the game. Hence, as sport and formal organization grow closer, work will prevail in the activities of sport at the expense of play. Even in working contexts where work is camouflaged as play. Sport gets instrumental for the goals of the organization. As sport gets organized, the focus will be less on the flow of the activity and the pleasure that derives from that. The focus of attention shifts to mechanisms of discipline (Dortants/Knoppers), the economic value of being a skillful and talented player (Manley/Martin/Parker). On the other hand the focus on emotional commitment to sport, of pleasure, of fanship (Torchia) led to the taking up of alternative forms of organizing. And activities of doing sport and experiencing serious leisure as collective action (Wood) may help people to explore alternative identities and lifestyles. In whichever direction sport is pulled – towards play or towards work – the organization of sport provides us with a distinctive window on the social issues of our time.

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