"On Winning and Athletic Superiority"

Dixon

Quiz

• Is the winner the superior athlete/team? Why, why not?

• What makes a superior athlete/team?
  • In other words, is being a superior athlete/team only about one's physical performance, namely winning?

• What types of events could keep the best team from winning?

• Does the playoff system (like what is seen in the US) indicate the best team or athlete?

• Is it unjust if the best team does not win?
Strategy

- Dixon’s strategy is to answer the question of what makes for the superior athlete/team
- In doing so, he examines the qualities that make for a superior athlete/team
- He also examines whether the US playoff system really indicates the better team

Types of Events Preventing the Best Team from Winning

1. Refereeing errors
2. Cheating (saving for Leaman)
3. Gamesmanship
4. Bad luck
5. Inferior performances
1. Referee Errors

- Case: a referee makes a bad call that leads to the “inferior” team winning the game
- In cases where refereeing errors lead to undeserved victories, Dixon thinks these are failed athletic contests
- Two assumptions of athletic competition:
  1. In competitive sport, an athlete/team attempts to win within the constitutive of rules of the game (from Simon)
  2. An athletic contest is a test of skill and a mutual quest for excellence (from Simon)
- Given these two assumptions, refereeing errors are cases of failed athletic contests

Referee Error Argument

1. If a refereeing error leads to an undeserved victory, then this sporting event is a failed sporting event.
2. In sporting event S, refereeing call R led to an undeserved victory for team T.
3. Therefore, S is a failed sporting event.
Counterargument: Referee's Word Is Final

- Counterargument: Even if the referee is wrong, the referee's word is final
- Dixon: While the referee followed the correct procedures, that does not mean that the referee’s call is correct
  - A referee's call can be unjust

Counterargument: Great Teams Always Prevail

- Counterargument: Great teams should be able to overcome bad referee calls. The failure to overcome a bad call is a sign that the team is not great.
- Dixon: In part, Dixon agrees that great teams should be able to overcome bad calls
  - However, Dixon is not arguing about great teams but about what makes for the better team
  - Bad refereeing calls can prevent the "better" team from prevailing
Counterargument: No Team Wins When There's a Bad Refereeing Call

- Counterargument: A sporting victory gained from bad referee calls is nullified by the rules of the game which have been violated
  - Suits makes this argument and has parallels to natural law theory's treatment of unjust laws
  - M.L. King Jr.: "An unjust law is no law at all."

Dixon: No Team Wins When There's a Bad Refereeing Call

- Dixon's view of this argument is that it stipulates a solution without arguing for it
- In contrast, Dixon considers legal positivism: What makes a legal statute a legitimate law depends on whether it was enacted in accordance with the Constitution
  - Whether a law is morally justifiable is independent of the legitimacy of the law's formation
    - "a bad law is still a law"
    - What should be contested is the law's moral justification
- Likewise, instead of debating whether winning a game due to a bad refereeing call is a game at all, one should debate the moral injustice of a victory due to a bad refereeing call.
3. Gamesmanship

- Gamesmanship is a means of gaining competitive advantage without explicitly intending to violate the rules undetected
  - Examples: trash talking, intentionally slowing the game, professional fouls, etc.
- Dixon's problem with gamesmanship is that its use may result in victory and yet not indicate who "deserves" to win
  - "Gamesmanship, then, provides another category of situations in which athletic contests can fail in their aim of accurately determining athletic superiority." (170)

Gamesmanship Argument

1. The better team/player is the team/player that deserves to win.
2. The team/player that deserves to win is the team/player which is athletically superior and whose superior performance is executed within the rules of the game.
3. Sometimes, gamesmanship is used successfully by an inferior team/player to overcome an athletically superior team/opponent.
4. Therefore, sometimes gamesmanship "subverts the goal of measuring the relative athletic ability of the contestants." (170)
Professional or "Strategic" Fouling

• Dixon's soccer example on page 170

• Strategic fouling violates the "spirit" of the game by exploiting what is permissible under the rules

• One's perspective on strategic fouls may depend upon the impact to the game's outcome
  • In basketball, strategic fouling has a relatively small impact because basketball is a high-scoring game
  • In soccer, strategic fouling has a relatively large impact because soccer is a low-scoring game

Psychological Tricks

• Athletic superiority includes more than physical strength and skill

• Psychological factors (e.g., coolness under pressure) also play a role in athletic superiority
  • The ability to endure an opponent’s psychological tricks (trash talking, game delays, etc.) is a sign of psychological toughness and athletic superiority
  • "According to the uncontroversial view that the primary purpose of competitive sport is to determine which team or player has superior athletic skill (understood as including both physical ability and astute strategy as permitted by the game's rules), players who use this kind of gamesmanship [psychological tricks] to win do not appear to deserve their victory." (171)
Counterargument: Gamesmanship is Legit

- Counterargument: If gamesmanship is permissible and part of athletic excellence, then the athlete who becomes rattled by an opponent's tricks is not the superior athlete.

- Dixon: Dixon fails to respond to this counterargument because he leaves unresolved the question of whether psychological toughness is essential to athletic excellence
  
  - Instead, he defers the issue to the final section of the paper

4. Bad Luck

- There are cases in which the athletically superior team loses due to bad luck (and not to referee mistakes or player misconduct)

- The impact of bad luck on athletic superiority depends on whether games are high-scoring or low-scoring
  
  - In high-scoring games, a few strokes of bad luck likely will not impact the outcome
  
  - In low-scoring games, a few strokes of bad luck likely will impact the outcome

  "Unlucky losers appear, therefore, to provide another category of failed athletic contests." (172)
Counterarguments to Bad Luck

- Counterargument 1: Great teams overcome bad luck
  - Dixon: Dixon isn't concerned with great teams but with "better" teams
- Counterargument 2: A team loses not from a single stroke of bad luck but from the failure to score goals
  - The failure to score goals reflects the lack of a killer instinct or poor strategy
  - Dixon: Sometimes the superior team loses because of bad luck

Another Counterargument to Bad Luck

- Counterargument: If a team fails to score then it doesn't deserve to win, regardless of how many times it got close to scoring
  - The team that wins on a "freakish" goal deserves to win
  - Dixon: Dixon thinks that this counterargument doesn't explain the role of bad luck but stipulates it away
  - Dixon thinks this response simply begs the question–the best team is the team that scores the most points
Operational Definition

- Operationally defined, the superior athlete is one who wins most of the time
- An operational definition provides clear, objective criteria for concepts which are or can be complex and ambiguous
- Dixon does not have a problem with this operational definition, since in many cases the better athlete is the winner
- But, he does not think this operational definition always leads to the correct judgment
- By analogy, just as a guilty person may be legally acquitted so too the inferior athlete may win the game

Bad Days and Superior Athletes

- Dixon considers cases where a superior athlete loses because she or he is having a bad day
  - "… an athletic contest can result in an inaccurate measure of athletic excellence: The winning player can deserve to win and yet still be an inferior athlete." (174)
  - Part of the assumption of these types of cases is that what constitutes athletic excellent is the ability to perform well under pressure
  - Ultimately, Dixon wants to use cases of inferior performances by superior athletes to argue against the US playoff system
Superior Performance and Athletic Excellence

- There are two criteria that can be used to determine athletic excellence
  1. Performance over an extended period of time (season)
  2. Performance during a tournament or playoff
- Generally, the best teams/players during the season are those that triumph in playoff situations
- However, during a playoff game the superior team/player may not triumph and may lose the title of being "the best"

Psychological Toughness

- How much emphasis should be placed on psychological toughness in determining and assessing athletic excellence?
- Psychological Toughness Argument
  1. Psychological toughness is an essential ingredient in competitive sport.
  2. The ability to perform well under pressure is a sign of psychological toughness.
  3. Therefore, the ability to perform well under pressure is an essential ingredient in competitive sport.
Not Much

- Dixon does not think psychological toughness should have an oversized role in determining and assessing athletic superiority
- Dixon emphasizes a more balanced assessment of athletic superiority
- Supreme skill, strategy and psychological toughness over an entire season (multiple performances) is a better means of assessing and determining the best team
- Dixon does not think that a playoff series does a better job of determining athletic superiority

Problems with Playoff Series

1. Gives a skewed sense of athletic superiority
2. Places a premium on high-pressure performances instead of long-term excellence
   - Undermines the view that the most accurate measure of athletic excellence is performance against rivals over an entire season
3. Accentuates the impact of refereeing errors, cheating, gamesmanship, and luck
   - Any of these might be decisive in the playoffs and minimized in season-long evaluations
4. Over-emphasizes winning
   - The obsession with winning leads to cheating and unnecessary gamesmanship
Claims To Be the Best

• "My objections have been directed solely at the view that insists that the winning team or athlete in a playoff or a similar tournament is by definition the best one, not just on the day but for the entire season or year. My point has been that a subpar performance resulting in a loss, whether due to nerves, insufficient motivation, or some other psychological factor, does not necessarily negate an athlete's or a team's claim to be the best. … The best way to measure relative ability and domestic professional sport is [to award a championship]… to the team with the best record after an entire season of play. This system minimizes the impact of unjust results in individual games due to such factors as poor refereeing, cheating, gamesmanship, and bad luck." (177)