

THE NATURE OF SPORT UNDER CAPITALISM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE CAPITALIST LABOUR PROCESS

Bob Stewart

Footscray Institute of Technology

Modern sport is under siege. Social theorists and rank and file sports supporters have variously argued that modern sport is corrupt,¹ commodified and commercialised², a repository and promoter of repressive values³, and finally, that it is too much like work and too little like play.⁴ Whereas sport is supposed to be, and indeed for some, until recently was, a playful alternative to the world of work, it is now seen to be a mirror image of industrial capitalist society and its concomitant labour process. For example, Loguillaumie has suggested that:

The athlete is fabricated in the image of the worker, and the track in the image of the factory. Athletic activity has become a form of production,⁵ and takes on the characteristics of industrial production.⁵

In a similar vein, Vinnai claimed that:

Man becomes an interchangeable part on the playing field as in the office and the factory. Man becomes a kind of machine and his movements, controlled by apparatus, becomes mechanical.⁶

Indeed, a cursory glance at the back pages of our newspapers tends to reinforce these views. The Australian professional golfers Norman and Graham are frequently quoted as saying that they treat the game like a 'day at the office'. Journalists have copied them. *The*

Australian journalist, M. Kable, when previewing the Toohey's 1000 motor racing classic noted that:

Channel Seven intends to use a split-screen technique that will combine the system with a miniature, swivelling racecam showing Brock and Richards at work in their 260 km/h 'office'.⁷

The use of business vernacular to describe a sporting contest, however, in no way proves that sport is work. Indeed, if that was the case, then politicians who refer to their cabinet as a 'team', and implemented policy as 'runs on the board', could be accused of playing at politics. While sport and politics may be analogous to work and sport respectively, they are not necessarily replicas.

The nature of the relationship between sport and work cannot be established by referring only to anecdotal accounts of how either players describe their activities or journalists describe a sporting event. What is required is a detailed comparison of the structural characteristics and internal processes of industrial work and sporting activity. This Will be done in the following way. First, I will discuss the nature of work, and its relationship with leisure, play and sport. Secondly, I will identify the way that work is organised under industrial capitalism, using as a framework for analysis the conceptual models of Taylorism and Fordism. I will then identify the dominant characteristics of modern sport and finally I will examine the extent to which modern sport fits the Taylorist and Fordist models.

Work, Sport, Leisure and Play

Work is more than paid employment. It has been defined as 'coercive, purposeful behaviour ... directed to goals, toward success'⁸ and

‘a state in which activity is performed in order that something else be produced or accomplished’.⁹ Leisure on the other hand, is the antithesis of work. It is a ‘state of being in which activity is performed for its own sake, or as an end in itself’.¹⁰ Play has been variously described as:

a free activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life as being not serious, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly . . . connected with no material interest;...¹¹ [or]...voluntary, somehow pleasurable, and having a make believe or transcendental quality;...¹² [or]...a flow experience, and essential to enjoying work on one hand, and avoiding boredom and anxiety on the other.¹³

Sport, while easy to define, is not a concept which can be neatly excluded from, or included within the earlier concepts. It is generally accepted that sport comprises a contest or game, is conducted according to an agreed upon or codified set of rules, involves physical effort and prowess, and is directed to some outcome or result.¹⁴ Sport, then, can include elements of both play and work. On the one hand sport can be ‘fun’, provide for ‘flow’ and comprehensively engage someone’s total self in the ‘here and now’. On the other hand, it can be goal directed, where the need to win, and to gain status or prize money may be the dominant outcomes.

The current concern is that sport has become increasingly instrumental, or work oriented. Edwards suggests that ‘so far from being play, fun and games, or mere diversion, sports assume the character of occupational endeavour for participants’.¹⁵ Similarly, Rigauer notes that ‘sports have all too assiduously aped industrial society..., and that sports need to make room once more for the unplanned and spontaneous, for the joy of the moment, for true play’.¹⁶ The common criticism seems to

be that sport has become too purposeful, too goal directed, too serious; in other words, too much like work.

However this criticism constitutes insufficient evidence in itself to prove the claim that modern sport is just a replication of work. It is important to examine in detail the structural characteristics and processes of work in modern industrial society, by which the work-like aspects of sport can be identified and measured. In other words, before any significant comparison can be made between work and sport, it is necessary to identify the nature of both the labour and sports processes under industrial capitalism.

The Organisation of Work Under Industrial Capitalism

Management Control

The lynchpin around which the capitalist labour process revolves is capitalist ownership of the means of production, and the consequent drive to maximise profit. According to Marx:

The directing motive, the end aim of capitalist production, is to extract the greatest possible amount of surplus value, and to consequently exploit labour power to the fullest possible extent.¹⁷

An historical review of the labour process under capitalism shows clearly that labour power could be exploited best through increased management control, and pressure for greater individual effort and discipline.

According to Marglin, the drive for greater management control was instrumental in establishing two key characteristics of the capitalist labour process; first, specialisation, and second, the factory system. While

the traditional argument claims that specialisation and division and labour were necessary to increase efficiency, Marglin believes that the primary goal was to wrest control over the *product* from the worker. Similarly, Marglin argues that the development of the factory system was not so much the result of its technical superiority over the putting out, or contract system, but rather its capacity for greater discipline and supervision of workers by erasing their control over the work process.¹⁸

Taylorism

The capitalist labour process was further refined and formalised by the work of F.W. Taylor, who is commonly referred to as the father of scientific management. Taylor, an American Engineer, believed that much of industry was poorly organised, and that workers were consequently operating well below their potential. His model for the development of industry was detailed in his book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, in 1911.

According to Noble the emergence of scientific management was essential for the effective management control over the large scale enterprise of modern capitalism. It required not just the engineering of things, but also the engineering of people. Taylor believed that the engineering of people required the implementation of three principles, namely: the identification of the job requirements (by management) independently of the worker; the separation of the conception of a job (the planning) from its execution (the doing); and the use of management knowledge of the labour process to control its execution.

According to Taylor, the labourer will work at maximum efficiency only if led by management:

Perhaps the most single prominent element in modern scientific management is the task idea. The work of every workman is fully planned out by the management at least one day in advance, and each man receives in most cases complete written instructions, describing in detail the task which he is to accomplish, as well as the means to be used in doing the work. And the work planned in advance in this way constitutes a task which is to be solved, not by the workman alone, but by the joint effort of the workman and management.²⁰

Taylorism, however, is more than a set of work practices. While it clearly establishes planning, job measurement, work study, and standard operating procedures as important management tasks, it has become a methodology for management.²¹ It has both created an ideology of management prerogative, and weakened the authority of the workers.²²

Fordism

The large factory, employing many hundreds of largely unskilled workers and specialised machines to produce huge quantities of a single, standardised product is a relatively late creation in industrial society. Whereas in the 1870s and 1880s, when many large scale enterprises like Singer and Pullman used mainly skilled craft workers to produce sewing machines and railway sleeping cars respectively, by the second decade of the twentieth century the modern principles of mass production had been diffused throughout industry.

The culmination of these principles was the invention of the automobile assembly line at the Ford plant at Highland Park, Michigan, U.S.A. in 1913. The assembly line both complemented and extended the Taylorist model of the labour process. It involved a standardisation of

product and routinisation of the process. It provided for highly specialised tasks to be performed by relatively unskilled workers. Finally, it incorporated into machinery the skills which would have otherwise been done by labour. According to Webster and Robins, the assembly line was an important 'vehicle' for strengthening management control over labour, deskilling existing work, minimising worker initiative, increasing effort and consequently increasing productivity and profits.²³

Fordism is the name given to the imperatives of the assembly line, and it constitutes an intensification and deepening of the controls initiated by Taylor through its use of technical innovation. The Fordist ideology, like Taylorism places primary value on management prerogative, specialisation of task, discipline and supervision, the separation of manual and mental work, the need to increase the intensity of work, and finally, maximisation of the performance and productivity.

The Characteristics of Modern Sport

Achievement

The first thing to be said about modern sport is that it is, by definition goal directed. Being a physical contest, it encourages a competitive striving to win. To put it in more fashionable language, it involves a drive for mastery, and the pursuit of excellence. As I have indicated, work, particularly from a management perspective, also contains a strong performance dimension. In the business vernacular, job performance can be substituted for mastery, and productivity and profits for excellence.

Taylorism explicitly provides for both management and individual worker achievement. In discussing the fundamentals of scientific management Taylor noted:

The principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employee. The words 'maximum prosperity' are used, in their broad sense, to mean not only large dividends for the company or owner, but the development of every branch of the business to its highest state of excellence, so that the prosperity may be permanent. In the same way, maximum prosperity for each employee means not only higher wages than are usually received by men of his class, but, of more importance still, it also means the development of each man to his state of maximum efficiency, so that he may be able to do, generally speaking, the highest grade of work for which his natural abilities fit him.²⁴

Maximum prosperity in work is replicated in the drive coaches and athletes have to improve performance and break records. The application of biological and physical science principles to sport, the professionalisation of sports administrators, coaches and athletes, and the increasing sports watcher's preference for elite international sporting competitions over lower 'quality' local and regional contests, all reflect the emphasis that modern sport gives to record breaking performance.²⁵

Quantification

Another characteristic of modern sport is the emphasis given to quantification and measurement. Team Games like baseball, cricket and the various codes of football provide for win-loss ratios, batting and bowling averages, strike rates and the like, while in the more individual games like track and field, swimming, diving and gymnastics,

performance is measured in either terms of metres, kilograms and seconds, or by the construction of a point score system. Indeed, sports which are not 'ratable' are vulnerable. For instance, at the 1896 Olympics, it was noted that gymnastics were not especially popular because 'they were not real athletic contests amenable to precise measurement'.²⁶

The emphasis on quantification is very Taylorist. The need to precisely measure work rates and performance levels constitutes a core part of Taylorism, since the objective of scientific management is, by systematic planning and design, to achieve measurable increases in output and productivity. The application of Taylorism to the clerical field has created a comprehensive system of time and motion standards. In one clerical time standards manual, a list of unit time values were established for basic activities like opening and closing drawers and cabinets, and chair movement.²⁷

The time standards of the office have their sports counterpart in the development of 'scientific' coaching. Coaches can obtain advice from physiologists on oxygen uptake, recovery rates and blood lactate levels, from biomechanists on proper technique and power to weight ratios, and from psychologists on stress factors and optimal arousal levels. Standards are developed by which subsequent athletic performance, either in training, or competition, can be evaluated.

Specialisation

Specialisation is a significant characteristic of modern sport at a number of levels. As a result of the growing dominance of the ideology of excellence or achievement, most aspiring athletes are required to

choose a single sport, since the training demands do not usually allow comprehensive participation in other activities. There has also been a growing degree of specialisation within a sport. The best, and most perverse example of this phenomena is American football and its “dual platoon” system of offensive and defensive teams. American baseball, by alternating a designated hitter (when batting) with a pitcher (when fielding), has also developed an increase in intra-team specialisation.

The significant growth in specialist sport staff in many sporting fields provides illustration of a third level of specialisation. The coach, athletes and manager are now supported by a myriad of trainers, advisors and functional specialists like tacticians, doctors, physiotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, physiologists, biomechanists and designated skills coaches. In each of these cases, the objective is to improve individual skill levels in an increasingly narrow band of activities, with a view to maximising overall team performance.

The Taylorist and Fordist models also incorporate division of labour and specialisation as important mechanisms for the achievement of greater performance and productivity. The result of course, for the worker was the creation of tasks which were routine, repetitive, and narrow, and loss of control over the final product.

Many sports participants are faced with similar outcomes. Separated from the planning of tasks, (which is the province of the manager and coach) the athletes and the functional specialists like physiotherapists, trainers and dieticians relinquish control over the sports product, that is, the game, or contest. They are required to play or advise in the appropriate manner, and while their contribution to the final athletic performance is valuable, their job is to do (i.e. execute the

skills) rather than plan, conceive or organise.

Rationalisation

Like specialisation, rationalisation is a process that operates in sport at a number of levels. At the most obvious level, and in the most obvious ways, sport has been rationalised through the development of rules. Sport, by definition, is bound by regulation and rules that establish the form it will take, and appropriate codes of behaviour. Moreover, most sports have become codified. That is, the rules have become universally accepted. Rugby Union is played in the same way in Great Britain as it is played in Argentina and Australia. Rules can be changed only by the governing body for the sport. All modern sports therefore have a consistency and Continuity to them. In the words of Fordism, they have become standardised.

At another level, sport is rational in the sense that individual athletes and teams seek to maximise their performance by making best use of the available talents and abilities. For example coaches may seek the assistance of biomechanists in working out the most efficient paddling, throwing or kicking technique. The physiologist may be asked to advise on training regimes that produce the optimum level of stress, recovery time and blood lactate levels. The Common aim is to 'maximise outcome with a given expenditure of effort'.²⁸

However the area of sport in which the rationalisation principle is most overtly practiced is 'practice' itself. For example, a commonly used form of athletic training known as interval training is based around the principle of systematic alternation of work and recovery. A detailed plan is established which indicates the duration of the work period (e.g. 30

seconds), the work to be done (e.g. 200m run), the recovery time (e.g. 60 seconds), and the number of repetitions (e.g. ten).

Other training regimes that reflect the rationalisation concept are circuit training (which involves athletes undertaking specific exercises at a number of ‘stations’, with designated recovery periods, and then repeating the circuit), and drill training for team sports like football (which involves complex, highly structured activities which are repeated until they can be performed at an acceptable level).

Rationalisation is an essential component of both the Taylorist and Fordist models. Taylor’s task idea, for example, requires the worker to perform his job in the manner designated by the manager:

it specifies not only what is to be done, but how it is to be done, and the exact time allowed for doing it.²⁹

Interval training and Taylor’s task idea are clearly based in the common principle of rationalised, routine work practices. Similarly, the Fordist requirement that assembly line products be standardised sits neatly beside the expectation that codified sports will exhibit the same form irrespective of where they are played.

However, there is also a more fundamental, if less obvious similarity between sport and work that results from the application of the rationalisation concept. It is the separation of conception from execution. Under Taylorism the worker is required only to perform the physical, or manual act of work. The mental part of the job is performed by the planner or manager. In sport, the picture is similar. The coach and manager take the decision on matters like recruitment, the organisation of training, the deployment of functional specialists, and team and player tactics. The player’s job is performed within the parameters set by the

planners. According to Regauer:

The complex work process has been atomised. The worker can no longer dispose of his skills. His room for choice has been reduced to a minimum. The rational planning of athletic behaviour dominates . . . Goals are broken down into individual parts and phases, which are then carried out separately, of in small sequences.³⁰

Technology and Bureaucracy

Sport also shares other characteristics with work. Increasingly it has used new technology to both assist in improving the performance levels of existing sports and create new sporting activities. The development of fibre-glass vaulting poles, aerodynamic bicycles, lightweight rowing shells, physiological and biomechanical testing apparatus, and even performance enhancing drugs have all assisted in the establishment of record breaking achievements. The invention of new products like hang gliders and sailboards have led to the introduction of additional sporting competitions and infrastructures.

Sport has established a complex bureaucracy to ensure that competitions are run properly in accordance with an agreed upon set of rules, and to facilitate the provision of different levels of competition; ranging from club based contests, to large scale events like the Soccer World Cup and the Olympic games.

The athlete therefore operates within an organisational and technical environment that is similar to that of the industrial worker. In the same way that a new technology introduced into the workplace will impact on a worker's skill requirements and job security, so too athletes

are vulnerable to new sports technologies. Design improvements made to racing bicycles in one country, will, if not comprehensively diffused, threaten the future performance of athletes from other competing countries.

For both the athlete and the worker, bureaucracy acts to formalise relationships between administrator and administered, and as such it tends to reinforce the principles and effects of rationalisation and specialisation. According to Rigauer:

The result is that bureaucracy constantly narrows the individual's room for choice ... every arbitrary and spontaneously carried out athletic activity is constricted to fit the training plan.³¹

Taylor's view of bureaucratized work practices are couched in similar terms. 'Up to now, personality came first, from now on, organisation and system take over'.³²

Discussion

Both conceptually and empirically, it is clear that sport shares many characteristics with work. The organisation and process of sport overlaps with many of the Taylorist and Fordist arrangements that dominate the labour process in industrial capitalism. Like the industrial structure, sport entails the drive to quantification, specialisation, rationalisation, mechanisation and bureaucratisation. At the same time, there has been a Taylorist and Fordist tendency for athletes to become subordinate to the demands and expectations of managers and coaches.

However, it is not obvious that sport is dehumanising, degrading and repressive to the same degree that work frequently is. Sport has not

been completely overwhelmed by, or submerged by Taylorist and Fordist principles. While the ideologies of 'Management prerogative' and 'Performance maximisation' have been appropriated by much of the sports industry, their effects on the sports process has been tempered by the special structural characteristics of sport. Nevertheless sporting and work experiences are also different in important respects.

Sporting practices can be broken into two parts, the preparatory or training phase, on one hand, and the contest or game, on the other. A large part of training combines many Taylorist and Fordist features. It is frequently regimented, routine, repetitive, and denies the athlete autonomy and creativity. This can be equally true of small scale local or suburban sport as it is of large scale, elite, commercialised sport.

The sports contest or performance, however, can be quite different. Whether at the elite or club level, whether it happens to be football, tennis or hockey, the dominant characteristic of the contest is a display of skill, talent, creativity and problem solving. Within the limits imposed by the rules, strategic game plans and opponents, the athlete is free to demonstrate a range of skills and tactical responses. The contest can be exhilarating for both the spectator and the athlete. Very often in sporting contest, it is the need to make so many decisions so quickly that imposes pressures on athletes. Repetition and routine are rarely a source of concern to athletes during a contest. As Hargreaves notes:

the evidence suggests that on the whole, there is far more opportunity to exhibit and develop skills (through sport). ... Professional sport is one of the few types of work with a high physical component where the instinct of craftsmanship can be satisfied to a significant extent.³³

Hargreaves goes on to make the point that it is difficult to see how sports contests could be as deskilled or standardised as in industry. Whereas high levels of industrial production under Taylorist and Fordist conditions require a compliant, docile workforce undertaking routine, specialised tasks, the sports contest, particularly if it involves public entertainment, will maximise its appeal only if it enables displays of highly skilled, creative, athletic energy.³⁴

If we compare industrial workers with that sporting group that most closely approximates them, the professional players, some interesting contrasts emerge. There is evidence to suggest that the professional players enjoy greater satisfaction from their jobs than the average industrial worker.³⁵ This should not be surprising in view of the opportunities professional players have to enhance their prestige, and to acquire and exhibit a wide range of skills in competition.

Furthermore, some research in the area of occupational mobility shows that a professional career in sport is an effective means of upward social mobility. Hargreaves claims that in Great Britain, football, rugby league and speedway racing are Common, but not foolproof vehicles for social mobility.³⁶ Similarly Semyonov found that in Israel, the degree of social mobility amongst professional soccer players was greater than for the population as a whole.³⁷

Conclusion

Modern sport has been significantly influenced by capitalist and industrialist structures. Sport is not a world separate from the ideologies of Fordism and Taylorism, but rather it has adopted many of their principles and practices. It has both aimed to 'maximise prosperity' for

the athlete, spectator, coach and manager, and to provide for the 'engineering of people'.

While all sport, has to a lesser or greater extent been rationalised, bureaucratised and commercialised, it does not follow that the play element has been crowded out. Play can occur at any level of activity, be it a spontaneously arranged game of marbles, a professional basketball match, or the shuffling of paper in an accountants office. Therefore, even where sport takes on work like characteristics, it does not necessarily deny the opportunity for play to emerge.

Furthermore, while an increasingly commercialised sports world tends to more closely replicate the characteristics of the industrial workplace, it will always be sufficiently different from 'work' to enable its practitioners, the athletes, to achieve those precious moments of 'flow' and creativity. As Guttman notes:

Athletes can be trusted, when they insist, as most of them do, that participation in top level sport is a form of play, an assertion of their human freedom to do what they choose, an experience of self actualisation quite unlike the routine experience of work.³⁸

The process of industrialisation and its impact on work has been succinctly documented by Kumar:

Industrialisation entails the drive toward even greater scale, centralisation, mecharrisation, specialisation and bureaucratisation - in a word, rationalisation.

The triumphs of industrialism were premised on the degree to which these tendencies prevailed. But precisely to that degree there were correspondingly involved a progressive decline in the skills, competence, autonomy, and responsibility³⁹ of the bulk of the population in industrial societies.

The first paragraph of Kumar's statement can equally apply to the development of modern sport. However, as I have attempted to show the second does not satisfactorily explain the current status of modern sport. Sport because of its special characteristics, has been able to insulate itself from the more repressive implications of Taylorism and Fordism. The paradox of sport is that it is both work and play. Work and play are not mutually exclusive.

NOTES

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