

# IS SPORT AN ART FORM?

**J Neville Turner**  
**Monash University**

The subject-matter of this paper was suggested by a quotation from the writings of the great writer and a music critic, Sir Neville Cardus:

Spoooner's cricket in spirit was kin with sweet music, and the wind that makes long grasses wave, and the singing of Elisabeth Schumann in Johann Strauss, and the poetry of Herrick. Why do we deny the art of a cricketer, and rank it lower than a vocalist's or a fiddler's? If anybody tells me that R.H. Spoooner did not compel a pleasure as aesthetic as any compelled by the most celebrated Italian tenor that ever lived I will write him down a purist and an ass.<sup>1</sup>

A recent critic of Cardus, Davis Birley, has condemned him for glorifying cricket in this way. In an essay entitled 'Cardus and the Aesthetic Fallacy', he takes Cardus to task for likening cricket to art. Birley claims that cricket is no more than a skill, and to classify it as an art is to give a romantic mystique inappropriate to a sport. In his view, the purpose of sport is to win at all costs, and aesthetics are totally irrelevant. 'For the player the best style is that which achieves its objective most effectively, and the objective must usually be winning'.<sup>2</sup> The dispute seems to embody a fundamental clash of philosophy about sport. The first is that sport is not an ennobling pursuit, and often brings out the worst rather than the most gracious qualities in its participants. The opposite, and perhaps nowadays the more heterodox, view is that sport is one of the graces of life, a source of infinite joy and productive of the finest cultural values.

In fact it seems generally accepted in Australia that there is a clear-cut distinction made between sport and art. The two are set poles

apart, and never shall meet. An Australian Rules Football fan must necessarily regard opera as an effete pursuit. An opera lover must conceive Australian football as a barbarous form of escapism. This distinction, however, is worthy of closer examination. It justifies an examination into precisely what is art. Can sport be classified as a form of art, or is excellence of sporting performance 'no more than a skill'.<sup>3</sup> Of course, to do complete justice to this topic requires a close semantic examination of the terms, 'art', 'sport' and 'skill'. Art was regarded by Tolstoy as the deepest purpose of human life. Browning put it thus:

It is the glory and the good of Art, That Art remains the one way possible of speaking truths, to mouths like mine at least.<sup>4</sup>

Profound examination of aesthetics was a preoccupation of Victorian scholars. Pooh-poohed today, the aesthetic movement was lampooned in its own day by Gilbert in 'Patience':

The meaning doesn't matter if it's only idle chatter of a transcendental kind.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, it produced in Ruskin and Pater two of the greatest prose stylists in the English language, and Oscar Wilde's views on aesthetics are very profound and highly readable.

We still tend to regard the Victorian age with some contempt. Yet, it was one of the greatest periods in English literature and letters. At the same time this period also saw the great burgeoning of organized, competitive sport. Rugby School itself, where Thomas Arnold introduced the concept of *mens sana in corpore sano*, produced artists of the highest calibre, including Thomas Arnold's own son, Matthew, one of the finest of Victorian poets. Indeed the pre-Raphaelite concentration on ancient and renaissance values echoes a congruence of sport and art. The ancient Olympics included poetry readings<sup>6</sup> and Leonardo da Vinci was, amongst many other things, a high-jumper!

Let us first look at the meaning of the term 'Art'. What is art? It is a protean word. One is tempted to say that art is like an elephant -

hard to define, but easy to recognize. It is however, more satisfactory to delineate the true character of art by contrasting it with other concepts.

Art is not synonymous with religion, though art and religion have this in common - that both transcend the rational limits of the human mind. As Plato expressed it: 'In both art and religion man can feel himself to be in communication with the inexpressible infinite.'<sup>7</sup> And art and religion were intertwined in the era of the Christian schoolmen. St. Augustine saw the beauty of finite things as stemming from God and as apt to raise the mind of the beholder to the contemplation of God. So that by the time of the Renaissance, art was profoundly influenced by the Christian insistence on the dignity of man - indeed was regarded as part of man's effort to vindicate himself in the sight of God. This, however, brings into focus the clearly perceived distinction between art and nature. W.S. Gilbert nicely makes the contrast in 'The Mikado', as he described the preparation for the adornment of a girl about to be married. 'Art and nature thus allied, go to make a pretty bride.' Art is a creature of *man*, though its subject matter may be a natural one, a landscape, fruit or flowers, or a nude woman. Aristotle argued that art imitates nature - that is, it is a craftsmanship employed to attain a grasp of the operation of nature.

Art is also to be contrasted with science. Both are a form of knowledge, but art goes beyond science in that it is ordered to produce something creative apart from knowledge itself. In fact, both the ancient Greeks and the Hebrews seem to have regarded the purpose of art to be to produce something which is both useful and has the quality of beauty in it. Today, of the fine arts, architecture would seem most closely to embody this ideal.

In Roman times, however, a more precise classification of art led to a distinction between liberal and servile arts. There were three liberal arts, arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy (the quadrivium). From the Renaissance on, art was divided into 'useful' and 'fine'. This led

gradually to a restriction of the term to non-useful activity - *L'art pour l'art*<sup>8</sup> - art for art's sake.

A multitude of German philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries pondered long and deeply over the meaning of art. They included the supposed founder of aesthetics, Baumgarten,<sup>9</sup> and weighty scholars such as Winckelmann, Kant, Schiller, Hegal and Schopenhauer. They differed in their approaches, and especially on whether aesthetic qualities were capable of objective classification or were only susceptible of a subjective response. But nevertheless all agreed that the quintessence of art was beauty (die Schönheit). Fichte put it this way- 'Art is the manifestation of the beautiful soul - the whole man'. And Schelling:-'Beauty is the perception of the infinite in the finite.' Usefulness was perceived as irrelevant to, indeed as distinct from, artistic excellence. Schopenhauer said:- 'Objects are often beautiful which express nothing at all'.<sup>10</sup>

The emphasis on beauty of form on structural order, characterized the classical era. '*Le style, c'est l'homme*', said Buffon: 'Style is the man himself.' In music, Haydn developed, though he did not invent, sonata form.<sup>11</sup> Mozart refined it. Elegance of form was the first desideratum of art. But Rousseau, and later Goethe, while remaining true to a classical tradition introduced an element of passion - the *Sturm und Drang*<sup>12</sup> - which spread to other arts. Some of the symphonies of Haydn's middle period, and some Mozart's herald romanticism, but in music it does not achieve full fruition until Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn and the other romantics.

Between the classical and the romantic ideals is the eternal argument, symbolized on the one hand, by the neo-classical Brahms (championed by the waspish Viennese critic, Hanslich) and, on the other hand, Hanslich's *bete noire*, Richard Wagner.<sup>13</sup> That argument was: whether beauty in music exists in itself alone, or whether music can portray emotion and/or impressions. But the whole artistic debate was conducted within a rarefield classification of the arts, limited to the fine

arts. Literature, music, painting, sculpture were admitted. The pre-Raphaelites and the aesthetic movement headed by Pater and Wilde essentially confined themselves to a narrow, rarefield, esoteric compendium of fine arts. Art appreciation was a precious pursuit, by 'miminy-piminy, Francesca di Rimini, *je ne sais quoi* young men'.<sup>14</sup>

This narrow delimiting of art was vigorously attacked by Tolstoy, in a work that may be regarded as the broadest and one of the profoundest examinations of art in the whole of literature.<sup>15</sup> Tolstoy lambasted what he called an 'art canon' - a sort of pre-conceived jury verdict that regarded everything written, painted or composed by Sophocles, Raphael, Bach, etc., as necessary art - and nothing else. Especially did Tolstoy query the conceptions of beauty and pleasure as essential criteria of art. Tolstoy replaced these narrow concepts by a broad, wide-ranging definition of art - 'Art is the means of intercourse between man and man'.<sup>16</sup> It is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man, consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by those feelings, and also experience them.

That seems to me the most complete and comprehensive definition of art. Tolstoy said, 'We are accustomed to understand art to be only what we see in theatres, concerts and exhibitions, together with buildings, statues, poems, novels. But all this is but the smallest part of the art by which we communicate with each other in life.'<sup>17</sup>

### **Sport as the Subject Matter of Art**

Now, if this wide conception of art is accepted, it will be readily seen that a great variety of human activity can be capable of transmitting itself into art. And indeed we speak, not facetiously, of the art of cooking, the art of stamp-collecting. We might, indeed, admit that housekeeping can be an art. In George Herbert's lovely words,

Who sweeps a room as for they laws  
Makes that and the actions fine.<sup>18</sup>

If this is accepted, it seems apparent that the distinction between skill and art is so fine as to be virtually illusory. What, according to Tolstoy, distinguishes art from skill is the communication or infection of some feeling or sentiment.

Clearly, sport thus becomes a vehicle capable of such infection of feelings. It must surely be acknowledged that sport has provided the subject matter, and indeed, the inspiration, of many fine artists. This of itself does not make it an art-form, but it could be argued that the quantity of art-works with a sporting theme or motive renders sport so inspirational that it must possess some intrinsic or innate quality over and above everyday activity. There is indeed a considerable quantity of paintings, sculptures and *objects d'art* with a sporting theme. Breugel painted ice-skating, Goya a bull-fight. It is interesting to note that the congruence of sport and the visual arts dates back to the age of Pericles (who was a great patron of the arts). The frieze on the Parthenon represented the solemn procession that took place at the end of the festival known as the Panathenaea, which was celebrated every four years by all sorts of sports such as running, discus throwing and chariot racing.

It would need an encyclopaedia to detail the amount of literature written about sport. The literature of cricket alone runs to thousands of volumes. Apart from its fine specialist literature, this beautiful game has attracted generalist writers of the highest calibre, both in prose and in verse - writers as diverse as J.M. Barrie, Dickens, Hughes (of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*), P.G. Wodehouse, Francis Thompson, L.P. Hartley, E.V. Lucas, Siegfried Sassoon, C.P. Snow and Tim Rice. The list is endless. Hunting, angling, horse racing, golf and chess have attracted special literary attention. Boxing is mentioned in the *Iliad* and in Virgil's *Aeneid*, and has attracted authors as diverse as Hemingway, David Garnett, H.E. Bates, Brian Glanville and Norman Mailer.

Bernard Malamud's novel, *The Natural*, is an Authurian legend with a twentieth century baseball setting. Nabakov's novel, *The Defence* is about an emotionally stunted chess-player. Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem about fox hunting rather cynically entitled, *The Fox Meditates*. Turgenev's novella, *A Sportsman's Sketches* deals with hunting. Bullfighting has attracted much literature, notably, in English, by Hemingway and D.H. Lawrence. The first few chapters of Lawrence's Mexican novel, *The Plumed Serpent*, are a vivid depiction of a prissy Englishwoman's horror at the Mexican crowd's thirst for blood at a bullfight.

The Spanish do not use the term, 'bullfighting'. It is in Spanish called a *corrida de toros* - a running ring for bulls! Bullfighting features in Prosper Merimee's novel, *Carmen*, set as an opera by the French composer, Bizet. And the death of a bullfighter, who, incidentally, was a painter and writer himself, inspired one of the great poems of the century, *El Llanto de Ignacio Sanchez Mejias*, by the *torero's* friend, Garcia Lorca. A classical elegy, it has recently been set to music by the French composer, Ohana. The power of its imagery is apparent in this brief excerpt from the first of the tetralogy of poems, *A las cinco de la tarde*, in which classical hendecasyllables alternate with the octosyllabic refrain *a las cinco de la tarde* - (At five o'clock in the afternoon).

A las cinco de la tarde  
 Eran las cinco en puntio de la tarde  
 Un nino trajo la blanca sabana  
 A las cinco de la tarde  
 Una espuerta de col ya prevenida  
 A las cinco de la tarde  
 Lo demas era muerte y solo muerte  
 A las cinco de la tarde.

At five in the afternoon  
 It was five o'clock exactly  
 A boy brought out the white sheet  
 At five on the afternoon

A basket of lime had already been prepared  
 At five in the afternoon  
 The rest was death - only death  
 At five in the afternoon.

- Garcia Lorca  
 Lament for I.S. Mejias

The literature of sport is infinite, but what may be a surprise is the considerable amount of music with a sporting theme. Music, according to Walter Pater, is the greatest of all arts - the art to which all other arts aspire.<sup>19</sup> Or as Hermann Hesse put it, '*So begierig ich auf manchen anderen Wegen nach Erosung nach Vergessen und Befelung suchte, so sehr ich nach Go, nach Erkenntnis und Frieden durstete, gefunden habe ich das alles nur in der Musik*'.<sup>20</sup> And, as it happens to be the art form which I know best, I thought it would be interesting to compile a brief list of musical works that have a sporting theme. I am not thinking of songs and calypsos, such as those which celebrated Don Bradman's early success as a cricketer, or the West Indies' 1950 victory at Lords, but rather works by acknowledged musical masters. There is, for instance, the wonderfully romantic opera by Weber, *Der Freischutz*, which centres around a *Schutzenfest*. Janacek's vivid orchestrated work, '*Sinfonietta*', was composed for an athletic festival. Khachaturian's ballet, *Spartacus*, depicts a gladiatorial contest. Erik Satie wrote a piano work entitled, *Sporks et Diversions*, in which twenty different sports and pastimes are described. Lutoslavski wrote a work entitled *Venetian Games*. Honegger composed a so-called *Symphonic Movement* describing a rugby match. One of the most vivid of ballet scores of this century is entitled *Jeux* written by that master of impression, Debussy. It is a tale of romance on the tennis court.

It is hard to imagine how a card game could give rise to action-filled musical drama, but in fact Samuel Barber, in 1959, wrote an opera entitled, *A Hand of Bridge*, and Pushkin's remarkable poem, *The*

*Queen of Spades* was set as an opera by Tchaikovsky. Nor would one expect that chess would provide much visual or aural drama, but the English composer, Arthur Bliss, scored a ballet, entitled *Checkmate*. Hunting, perhaps because of the musical association with the hunting horn, has inspired much music - including Cesar Franck's tone-poem, *Le Chasseur Maudit*, Haydn's Symphony no. 73 in D major (nicknamed *La Chasse*) and a song cycle of Benjamin Britten, entitled *Our Hunting Fathers*.

There are two operas name *The Gambler* and *The Gamblers*, both by Russian masters, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, and both are based on Dostoevsky's novella of that name. And Aaron Copeland composed a most descriptive and appealing ballet, *Rodeo*.

Finally, it is worth making the point that art need not be in permanent form. Jazz is an essentially ephemeral art - each improvisation is unique in itself, never to be repeated. The cricket writer, Benny Green, is also an outstanding jazz musician and writer on jazz, and one English captain, Maurice Allom, was an influential jazz figure in London. Indeed, the creative, unexpected element of improvisation in jazz is surely akin in artistic or aesthetic satisfaction to the unrehearsed creativity of sport - one never knows in advance what the outcome will be. The similarity between jazz and sport lies in this - that each allows for improvised creativity within a structured framework - in jazz, an ordered chord sequence stated initially - in sport, the rules.

### **Sport As An Art Form**

Sufficient examples of sport used by masters of acknowledged fine arts have been provided to demonstrate its character as an inspirational subject matter. It could well be argued that this of itself bespeaks some aesthetic quality in some sports, at least, but now, must be considered whether sporting activities can be regarded as art *per se*.

Some sports have more obvious artistic characteristics than others. Indeed, it seems difficult in some cases to classify an activity as a sport, a game or an art. An example is bullfighting, which is regarded in Hispanic countries as art. 'Bullfighting' indeed is a misnomer. The matador does not seek to fight the bull but to subdue it and ultimately kill it by skill. *El arte de torren*, has many elements of drama and indeed opera. Bull's horns are phallic symbols, and bulls were worshipped in antiquity. The ritual, the pageantry, and the colour and flamboyance of bullfighting seem to me to raise it beyond the level of a sporting contest.

Hunting too, mentioned by Xenophon and Herodotus, was in antiquity regarded as a good training for war, but also perceived by Plato in *The Republic* as a gentleman's diversion. Again, whatever one's view of blood sports, they have in them a ritual and ambience which makes it different to classify them as mere sport. An even clearer case of ambivalent classification is billiards and kindred pool games. The learned editor of the *International Dictionary of Sports and Games* regards billiards as 'one of the most beautiful and soothing games ever devised, and aesthetically satisfying. It is [he continues] almost an art form'.<sup>21</sup> Mentioned in *Antony and Cleopatra*,<sup>22</sup> it calls for exquisite calculations.

Activities such as skating and ice-skating are so equivocally classifiable that they often feature in ballets and musical shows. Samuel Pepys referred to ice-skating as an art.<sup>23</sup> Jackson Haines, the *soi-disant* 'father of figure skating', was a ballet master. And skaters such as Olga Protopow and Ludmilla Belousova were ballet dancers. Sonja Henje, an Olympic champion, appeared in films and 'Holiday on Ice' shows. Gymnastics too has a special ethos, it seems, providing an aesthetic joy to competitors over and above the mere striving for victory and the satisfaction of winning. In an article *The International Gymnast*, Eric Hannum speaks of 'the feel of the momentum in a giant swing, the centripetal forces and torques of fast rotations, the adrenal surge during the most critical and hazardous moments - the sheer excitement of

unrestricted motion, the physical pleasure of swing'.<sup>24</sup> These sensations are, it seems to me, not unlike the satisfaction that a jazz musician enjoys when playing in a band that 'swings'.

Sports such as mountaineering, hang-gliding and scuba diving hold the macabre fascination of flirting with death. All these diverse so-called sports seem to embody sensations and aspirations far beyond the mere satisfaction of victory. Perhaps a clearer case could be made for the several Asian activities known, significantly, as Martial Arts. Is Karate a sport or an art? Arising from Zen Buddhism, it is a form of unarmed combat calling for meditative techniques, breath control, perfect timing, poise and economy of effort. Its aims, so it appears, are more transcendental than the mere achieving of victory.

One could continue to inspect individual sports and games, but is it possible to argue generically that all sporting activity is capable of being art? I believe that it is accepting the Tolstoyan conception of art as being the sincere sharing of an emotion that moved the person who expresses it. The congruence between sport and the dance is inconvertible. For what more blatant way is there to share an emotion than through human movement? John Martin, in his *Introduction to the Dance*, says:-

The dance antedates all other forms of art because it employs no instrument but the body itself - which everyone has always with him and which, in the final analysis, is the most eloquent and responsible of all instruments.<sup>25</sup>

Ballet, whose ideals are beauty of line, grace and purity of execution, is accepted without cavil as a *bona fide* art form. In effect, are not these ideals precisely those that a sportsperson seeks to perfect?

It seems to me undeniable that every sport is a vehicle well capable of providing that harmony of form, idea and expression that Winckelmann regarded as the aim of art. On the other hand, the supposed common denominator of sporting activity - competition - is not entirely unknown in the world of fine art. Poetry readings were a feature of the Greek Olympic Games. Mozart and Clementi held a famous

piano-playing contest. Jazz players often seek to out-play each other. International vocal and instrumental competitions are as intensely fought as any sporting contest.

## **Lessons**

If this thesis is correct, it seems to have some significant lessons for society. First, it should serve to nullify that pose of intellectual superiority over the sportsman that the artist often presumes.

Secondly, this thesis seems to require that a concentrated effort be made to preserve aesthetic elements in sport. Ritual, dress and pageantry all have their role on the spectacle. The 'winning at all costs' philosophy should be seriously queried. One of the most beautiful of sports, cricket, has suffered in recent years from a considerable decline in its artistic qualities. The rise of the one-day game, with its ludicrous clothing, its artificial rules, its encouragement of defensive bowling and crude slogging, is a most deplorable trend. Perhaps even more insidious is the tolerance of fast, short-pitched bowling, which deprives batsmen of the capacity to display their arts to the full. The demise of spin-bowling is of itself a deplorable deprivation, for that is one of the greatest art forms of any sport. Would it not be wonderful to return to an age when a leg-spinner like Tich Freeman could take 3,700 wickets in a 15-year career, and when stumpings accounted for almost as many wicket-keepers' victims as catchings, as was the case with Les Ames? I speak of cricket alone: The case of other sports may be different, although I certainly do not believe that I am showing the crotchiness of advancing years when I declare that the artistry of soccer players of my boyhood days (such as Stanley Matthews, Tom Finney and Len Shackleton) has been sacrificed to the 'total commitment' - without wingers - demanded by today's coaches in the interest of winning - or rather not losing!

In sum, I can do no better than cite Walter Pater and urge that the ideal he expressed be the touchstone, pervading modern sport.

To burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.<sup>26</sup>

## NOTES

1. Cardus N., 'Batmanship of Manners', *Good Days* (W. Collins Ltd, 1956) pc. 76. See J. Neville Turner, 'Sir Neville Cardus: His Stature as a Music Critic and Cricket Writer', *Australian Cricket Journal* 7 (1989).
2. Birley D., *The Willow Wand - Some Myths Explored* (1979) Chapter 11 'Cardus and the Aesthetic Fallacy'.
3. *ibid.*
4. Browning R., *The Ring and the Book*, Book 12, 842.
5. W.S. Gilbert, *Patience*, Act 1.
6. See J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston, 1950).
7. Plato, *The Republic*.
8. This phrase appears to have been coined by the French writer, Theophile Gautier, *L'Art*
9. Alexandar Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762) is often regarded as the first to recognize Aesthetics as a discrete branch of philosophy. See L. Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, Chapter 3.
10. The above quotations are to be found in Tolstoy, *op. cit.*, Chapter 3.
11. The sonata, ternary form (Exposition, Development, Recapitulation) emerged from the *Da Capo* aria. It was certainly brought to perfection by Haydn, but only after considerable refinement by composers working in Vienna, Mannheim and other cities in the early eighteenth century.
12. This phrase ('Storm and Stress') was the title of a play by Fredrich von Klinger (1752-1831). It is used to describe a heightened sense of emotion, in contrast to the cool rationality of the Aufklarung, in both the music and the literature of the late eighteenth century.
13. See E. Hanslich, *Die Schonheit in Musik*. Richard Wagner lampooned Hanslich, his arch-enemy, in the character of Beckmesser in *Die Meistersinger*.
14. W.S. Gilbert, *Patience* Act 1.
15. See L. Tolstoy, *What is Art?* *passim*.
16. *ibid.*, Chapter 2.
17. *ibid.*
18. G. Herbert, *Temple*, The Elixir.
19. W. Pater, 'The Renaissance', *Gingione*.
20. Translation: 'As eagerly as I searched for many other ways towards relief escape and freedom, much as I thirsted after God, knowledge and peace, I have found all that only in music'.
21. J.A. Lidden (ed.), *International dictionary of Sports and Games* (Schoken Books, 1980), 'Billiards'.

22. W. Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act II, Scene 5, line 3.
23. S. Pepys, *Diary*.
24. E. Hannum, *International Gymnast*, October 1981, p. 57.
25. J. Martin, *Introduction to the Dance*, (Brooklyn, N.Y. 1965), pp. 14, 15.
26. W. Pater, *The Renaissance*, Conclusion.