Since many of you reading this introduction are probably athletes yourselves or at least avid fans of sports, the question What is sport? may seem untoward or even absurd. Take some time, however, to reflect seriously on the matter, perhaps even enter into a discussion with a willing friend, and you will see that this question is not easily answered. Still the fact that you have seriously entertained such a minimally question shows a rudimentary interest in philosophy of sport.

Philosophy of sport begins with questions about the nature of sport. Some philosophers have argued that sport has a particular nature or “essence,” and we can grasp this essence through examining the practice of sport over time. Others counter that sport evolves over time and the very question of the nature of sport is ill-conceived. Sport is roughly what athletes do, they say. Still others, like myself, concede that there is no fixed nature of sport, but argue that we do need to arrive at a rational consensus concerning how sport ought to be practiced.

From here, philosophers have gone on to begin grappling with a host of engaging philosophical issues as they relate to sport. There are, for instance, social and political, ethical, metaphysical, and esthetical issues, many of which you yourselves, as sports enthusiasts, feverishly debate every so often. Some typical questions are:

- What separates sport from other forms of play or entertainment?
- Are many sports too violent?
- Are women athletes of the same rank as men?
- Does sport affect or merely reflect social mores and values?
- Should certain drugs be banned from sport?
- Do promoters of sporting events exploit minorities?
Are athletes heroes?

Just what place does winning have in sport?

To illustrate, let me look briefly at the last question. We are obsessed with winning today. How many of us can watch and enjoy a sporting event without trying to decide who we want to win in advance? As a philosopher and lifetime athlete, I strongly believe that success in athletic competition is not a matter of winning. Sport, like all other activities that humans engage in, is imbued with human values. Athletes with a philosophic view of sport acquire a greater understanding of self, other, and even sport itself. They learn how to excel as individuals, how to function and contribute as a part of a team, and how to respect the accomplishments of others against whom they are competing. In short, I believe that success in sport is a matter of development of character. Other philosophers, of course, disagree.

Overall, there is one issue on which few philosophic opinions differ. With the tremendous interest in sport these days, there is a corresponding need for young athletes to be exposed to philosophic thinking as regards vital issues in sport.

Before ending, let me say something about the historical development of philosophy of sport. Philosophy of sport began to flourish first in the 1970s. Since then and with the appearance of the Journal for the Philosophy of Sport in 1974, many scholars have begun to make significant contributions to the discipline. Nonetheless, serious critical analysis of sport sufficiently lags behind its burgeoning practice and the enthusiasm of its mavens today. It is my ardent hope that what I have accomplished with this module will contribute honestly toward philosophic understanding of the proper place of sport in human society.

Suggested Further Reading


*See also* *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport (JSP)* for other essays.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING (SECONDARY INTEREST):**


Overman, Steven J. *The Influence of the Protestant Ethic on Sport and Recreation.* Brookfield, Vt.: Avebury, 1997.

